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The Catechumenate as Inspiration of all Catechesis

by

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Your Excellencies!

Dear Brother Bishops!

Dear sisters and brothers in Christ!

On behalf of the Pro-Prefect of the first section of our Dicastery for Evangelization, Archbishop Reno Fisichella, I wish to greet you all. Our Pro-Prefect and we all at our dicastery are very grateful about your networking as being engaged in proclaiming our faith. Especially your ministry as being engaged in looking for appropriate ways for a fruitful catechesis in our time has become so important for the church and at the same time it creates a new attention on transmitting the faith in post-modern - or better let's say - secularized times

I Memories and Images

I cannot begin this talk without first remembering the priest of the Archdiocese of Chicago who sadly died far too young. Father Ron Lewinski brought me into contact with the RCIA as the former director of the Office for Divine Worship here in Chicago. His passion was the liturgy and later, as pastor of Saint Mary Fremont Center and also as a lecturer here in Mundelein, he understood how to think theologically from the catechumenate and to see in it a pastoral paradigm for the transmission of the

faith. Because it is worthwhile, especially in secularized times, to follow this original path in practice and to reflect on it theologically, as is now expressed in the Directory for Catechesis, any future catechesis in the Church cannot avoid looking back to the future, as it were.

Let me approach this topic with a second memory. It was also 35 years ago this year that, as part of my doctoral studies for the RCIA, I was able to participate in the rite of election for catechumens at the Chicago Cathedral on the first Sunday of Lent in 1990, which was so moving. Wilton Gregory, now retired Archbishop of Washington and former president of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops, presided as Auxiliary-bishop of the Archdiocese of Chicago over that celebration in such a fine way. When the catechumens were invited to come forward, the bishop went to meet them and I could see how some of the participants' faces brightened, their postures relaxed, and they walked toward the bishop with a sense of elation; he looked at them and this liturgical encounter led to a human revival. What power the liturgy of the Church has! It transforms efforts into liberation, burden into salvation, static into dynamic.

When my home bishop in Germany later encouraged me to establish the catechumenate in my home diocese after completing my dissertation on the RCIA in the US, I was able to establish it later with a small number of applicants. It taught me something that seems to be the outspread of American pragmatism and encourages to a mentality that also leads to this conference: "*Just do it!*" Not to gather first those, who have concerns, but those, who dare to risk something new. This access fostered in me a confidence in the profound power of the liturgy. What I experienced then, we now find in a condensed way in the new Directory on Catechesis.

II Inspirations and Impulses

When we began to work on this new Directory in our Dicastery in 2017, we initially only considered a revision of the previous catechetical document from 1997. In this Directory, which at that time was still the responsibility of the Congregation for the Clergy in the Vatican, the catechumen-

ate had already been emphasized as the paradigm for introducing and deepening the faith.

However, the idea of updating this document was rejected by us in the dicastery when five renowned theologians and experts in catechesis from all five continents were asked to make suggestions as to what could be taken out of the previous text and what current additions should be made instead, in view of the text passages made available to them. It turned out that all the experts only wanted to remove a few things, but wanted to include the main points of their respective theology and writings. As a result, it would hardly have been possible to present a booklet, but instead it would probably have been a whole library. In the meantime, we also realized how much the foundations for the catechetical directorate of 1997 were less and less given and instead the increasing digital challenge everywhere - as you are trying to take up – brought with it a new need to reassure catechetical paths.

Your presentation of a catechetical institute at the spring plenary assembly of the USCCB in Orlando two years ago particularly appealed to us in Rome in this regard and aroused our attention. Today we in the Vatican can say: If the catechetical directory of 2020 inspires the steps that you are so courageously taking here, we gratefully understand its relevance. The extent to which the path from the RCIA to the OICA in the USA has already inspired the catechumenal paradigm as an example for every catechesis of the Church and thus led to concrete impulses will be recalled by means of the following six suggestions from the RCIA and OICA, as they are contained and intended in the new Directory for Catechesis of 2020.

Perspectives of thought that arise from American practice can therefore hardly be dissected from the socio-cultural horizon of origin. In the sense of a theological systematization of the life contexts from which the suggestions of the American example arise, and as an encouragement to actively perceive them in the new Directory for Catechesis of 2020, the following aspects should now be named in more detail.

- **The biographical context**

The revival of the liturgy as a primary catechetical venue in American communities is the result of a pronounced awareness of the course of life in the USA. This manifests itself concretely in a pronounced need for communication in smaller groups. This phenomenon, in turn, appears to be one aspect of so-called expressive individualism in the USA, which has given rise to a therapeutic movement of its own in this society. The exchange of personal life experiences in smaller groups has a therapeutic function in terms of individual and social psychology within the "elbow society" experienced. As critical as such tendencies that primarily propagate the individual's sense of well-being ("what makes you feel well") are on the one hand, they are at the same time a helpful exercise in biographically reconstructed communication.

In this socio-cultural fluidum, American developmental psychology and pedagogy have paid new attention to the connection between the course of life and faith development. The catechumenate in the USA not only draws on these pre-conditions, but in its first pre-catechumenal phase has also profiled communication about one's own "life story" within the catechumenate group as a catechetical principle in its own right. It assumes that each participant has their own "story" and is competent to talk about it.

The next step is to find one's own biography in the "stories" of the Bible and church tradition. The specific liturgical-catechetical dimension of this approach consists above all in the integration of this "sharing" practice (sharing life - sharing faith) in liturgies of the word at the level of the pre-catechumenate or catechumenate group. From the beginning of the catechumenal journey, this leads to the formation of a catechesis based on life history and closely interwoven with appropriate liturgical acts of expression.

A biographically anchored catechesis inspired by an awareness of the course of life, with all the associated ruptures and crises, thus changes the liturgy that correlates with it in that the ritual is freed from a static misun-

derstanding and rites of passage are experienced here more as a realization of what has grown "along the way". This dynamization of liturgy already points to a further stimulus complex of catechumenal practice in the USA.

- **The process-oriented context**

The catechumenate in American parishes usually lasts between one and three years. Its content is explicitly related to the church year. This already makes it clear that this RCIA/OICA is not just any new action program. Rather, the aim here is a holistic learning process. It is precisely the networking of growth phases and confirmatory rites of passage that shows how the formation of a new faith identity goes beyond "merely" deductive instruction in the faith.

The liturgy of the church year becomes the catechumenal curriculum par excellence, in that the proclamation, interpretation and sharing of Scripture take place in the salvific dynamics of the Lord's feasts and Lord's days in such a way that it reflects one's own life and faith dynamics. The questions and the "material" for a catechesis arise from life in the respective biographical context, which introduce the basic statements of the Christian-church creed in orientation to the reading order of the church year (scripture-based catechesis).

In this way, the catechumens "experience" how the creed of the Church undergoes a process of consolidation of the search for and expression of faith, which they carry out in an analogous way in their own life story with all its ruptures and conflicts in the catechumenate. The catechumenal rites of passage of the Scriptures upon admission to the catechumenate and the presentation of the Creed or the Lord's Prayer after the celebration of admission to baptism express this process dynamic liturgically. They also illustrate the great importance of Scripture in the catechumenate, which at this point inspired a further suggestive context of the "American example" for the 2020 Directory for Catechesis.

- **The biblical context**

A look at the specific conditions that favored the revival of the early Christian catechumenate in the USA can hardly be understood without the phenomenon of denominational migration. The Bible-oriented context of the catechumenate in the USA owes much to such conditions, as the large number of applicants from other Christian denominations of origin in the catechumenate has always led to the originally more Protestant emphasis on the importance of Scripture also being more strongly claimed in the Catholic Church.

The outlined pastoral-liturgical process of the RCIA/OCIA in the USA has made it clear how the practice of sharing Scripture has been able to develop into a liturgical catechetical method of its own, which is referred to here as "breaking open the word". The described catechetical approach of finding oneself with one's own "life-story" in the "stories" of Scripture has made the Bible itself the catechetical book of the parishes. The direct assignment of Scripture to the liturgy has helped American congregations to rediscover the liturgy as the original place of learning about the Christian faith in the church.

- **The liturgical context**

The old theological axiom "*lex orandi - lex credendi*", i.e. what we celebrate shows what we believe, has experienced an even more differentiated development in the catechumenal practice of the USA.

Accordingly, it should also be said: *How* we celebrate shows *how* we believe. More than eloquent sermons, the liturgy has an identity-forming effect on faith. Whether we move and how we sit shows the extent to which we take what we celebrate seriously.

In this sense, the catechumenate in the USA has taken up the liturgical mystagogical principle of the early church again. It is based on the assumption that what is celebrated only becomes an inner experience that "takes root" in the subsequent shared interpretation. It is not a preceding

cognitive explanation alone that helps to open up the liturgy, but only the exchange about the experience allows the signs, the space and all movements to become an awareness of faith. Such a liturgical catechesis is mystagogical in two senses:

1. In accordance with the mystagogical catecheses of the Church Fathers (especially Cyril of Jerusalem), deepening takes place here through the interweaving of signs and words and, in addition, in American practice through the subsequent exchange of experiences between the participants.
2. According to the mystagogical understanding of theologian Karl Rahner, people thus find the mystery of their own lives by understanding God as the one who was previously and always present in their own biography.

Where the liturgical assembly of the congregation on the Lord's Day becomes a place of faith learning in this context, this step critically questions some practices elsewhere. Experiences from the USA also show that such catechetical paths in the midst of the liturgical assembly trigger a movement in all areas of parish life. For what appears paradigmatically in the catechumenate in the USA as a path of conversion for individuals in the congregation leads many to their second conversion.

- **The context of an "ongoing conversion"**

The conversion phenomenon in the United States is socioculturally colored, especially in its pastoral and liturgical character. In addition, it is also characterized here by the context of denominational revivalist movements. "Conversion" is thus understood more as a one-off, spectacular revival experience and is characterized as an experience of "being born again".

In contrast, the American catechumenate is based on a contrary understanding of conversion due to its processual nature. Conversion in the biblical sense of "metanoia" is practiced in the catechumenate and, in the

mystagogical context described above, is perceived as a lasting vocation beyond baptism.

However, the fact that the newly baptized and fully initiated carry such experiences into all areas and groups of the local church means that this renewal movement encompasses all the baptized. What is theologically referred to as ecclesigenesis (as the continual bringing forth of the church) is described by the Americans in a contrasting sense as "being born again and again and again... ."

The extent to which this pastoral movement has also been illustrated and further developed in liturgical form and dynamics can be seen in the revival of the early church bus rite in the USA as the "Re-Membering Church Process". The catechumenal practice described above and its ecclesio-genetic effect in the American local parishes outlined here has prompted the Church there, after the catechumens and candidates for full initiation, to also consider those who were once received into full sacramental communion through baptism, first communion and confirmation as children, but who later separated from the Church.

In a separate adaptation step, the Americans have succeeded - comparable to the catechumenal phases and stages - in structuring their own path of "remembering the church and becoming a member of the church again = Re-Membering Church". Traditional elements of a penitential practice in the midst of the congregation have thus been reinculturated. The rite of welcome here follows a phase comparable to the pre-catechumenate of an initial, more non-binding orientation and opportunity to come to terms with one's own history of wounding. As in the catechumenate, the following, more catechetizing period is based on the church year and accordingly pursues the goal of relating one's own "story" to scriptural pericopes of conversion. The beginning of the Easter penitential period on Ash Wednesday marks another turning point in this process. In connection with the Act of Contrition, the penitents and their "companions" (comparable to the sponsors in the RCIA/OICA) declare their willingness to repent before the congregation. They also deepen this spiritually in weekly vespers services and scripture discussions.

After the individual confession at the beginning of Holy Week, the sacramental absolution is granted personally with the laying on of hands by the priest. At the same time, this becomes public - after the penitential act of the liturgy of the Lord's Supper - the re-admission into the sacramental Eucharistic community of the Church. Like the catechumens, the reconciled also take part in the washing of the feet, as they exemplify the sacramental symbolism of reconciliation for the whole congregation. Accordingly, they lead the offertory procession within the Eucharistic celebration, help to prepare the altar and are the first to receive the Eucharist. Thus, the American practice mentioned encourages us to create pastoral-liturgical forums that help to clarify the spiritual identity of potential re-entrants in a pre-catechumenal sense.

The revival of the early church catechumenate in the USA - especially in the midst of liturgical assemblies in parishes - has shown the importance of the category of illustration. In this sense, the practice that the new Directory for Catechesis has taken up from the experiences of the US and French local churches is an encouragement to at least venture pilot projects elsewhere. Exactly: "*Just do it!*"

III. Conclusions and Modeling

If we now relate these five suggestions of the RCIA to the new Catechetical Directory, it is noticeable that they form the background, as it were, on which the new document sets out its understanding of catechesis. Article (Art.) 55 states: "*Catechesis is aimed at making the proclamation of Easter constantly resound in the heart of every person so that his life may be transformed.*" This fundamental introductory remark already expresses a catechumenal character. The rest of the new document also draws on catechumenal experiences such as those made in the US and perhaps still in French local churches when it states in Art. 56: "*As a prominent stage of the evangelization process, catechesis is generally addressed to people who have already received the first proclamation and in whose innermost being it promotes processes of initiation, growth and maturation in faith.*"

This fundamentally catechumenal profile is then extended by the new Directory for Catechesis in the sense that, across all catechumenal phases, it must be about a proclamation of faith that does not focus first on formal caesuras, but on the kerygma. Art. 57 continues: *"This need, which the Church must respond to today, emphasizes the need for a catechesis that can be consistently described as kerygmatic, i.e. that is intended to be a catechesis. It should be a deepening of the kerygma, which is increasingly and better assimilated"*

Especially against the backdrop of the profiled American experience of a development from the RCIA to the OICA, which has meanwhile also taken place, the question arises as to what the kerygma should be as an instruction of faith, which is understood equally in all phases of learning the faith. Just as in other catechetical traditions, for example, there is talk of elementarization, this expression seems to me personally to help in what the new Directory for Catechesis promotes as a proclamation of faith to which the Church - as it says in Art. 57 - must respond today. Where people take less and less time to learn the whole of the Christian faith in (catechumenal) steps, it is important to learn the whole of the faith in all phases, through a scriptural pericope, an image or even a song, a statement of the creed and much more.

Where the kerygma is more than just a phase in the process of faith, it contributes to "generating faith itself and can make it possible to discover its greatness and credibility. Accordingly, proclamation is no longer understood as a stage, but as a constitutive moment of each individual moment in catechesis (cf. DC, Art. 57).

If the kerygma is intended to reach individuals directly as a "fire of the Spirit", it is understood to be both the act and the content of proclamation. In the kerygma, Jesus Christ himself acts, just as he always remains the agent in catechesis. What is new about this expanded understanding of the kerygma is the reference to current events, when it says in Art. 58 of the Directory: *"The Church must embody the kerygma for the needs of her contemporaries (with reference to various initial situations of the New Testament) by working for and encouraging that on the lips of the cate-*

chists (cf. Rom 10:8-10) from the fullness of their hearts (cf. Mt 12:43), from a mutual dynamic of listening and dialog (cf. Lk 24:13-35), credible proclamations, living confessions of faith and new Christological hymns blossom." As criteria for evaluating the kerygma, the new Directory states in Art. 59: *"it must express the redeeming love of God and must not impose the truth; it should be joyfully inspiring and lively and offer a harmonious overall view."* The offer character and voluntariness of acceptance, profession of faith and the right attitude towards relationships as well as social orientation are also mentioned.

The fact that this explanation and expansion of ecclesial catechesis to include the significance of the kerygma is followed in Articles 61 to 65 by the exemplification of the *"catechumenate as a source of inspiration for catechesis"* shows at the very least that every new conceptual creation or modulation can do without a historically founded and socially developed resonance framework.

In this sense, the initiative and intervention of the kerygma should also be considered as a completed adaptation in the following.

IV. Adaptations and Challenges

The emphasis on the importance of the kerygma for catechesis can only be understood against the background of catechumenal practice as it was developed above all in the USA. The reflection on this development, which was carried out a few years ago in the magazine "Catechumenate", shows the development from the RCIA to the now fully approved OICA. The expansion of the catechumenate to include candidates from other denominations, whose baptism has been recognized by the Catholic Church as a valid sacrament, is probably the most significant adaptation with regard to the universal Church: theologically consistent and practically oriented as well as profiled.

The adaptation to the kerygma takes up the socially and individually changed situation of faith learning in this period, although it can only be properly understood and categorized if it can refer to existing catechume-

nal forms of learning. In this context, it seems very worthwhile to recall theses that the then young theologian Joseph Ratzinger (and later Pope Benedict XVI) made more than 65 years ago in his essay *"Church - Sign among the Nations"* in an almost prophetic prediction.

Even under completely different social living conditions, Joseph Ratzinger noted as early as 1958 that for most Christians, faith is a familiar convention. In this context, he gives food for thought: *"In the long run, the Church will not be spared the need to gradually shed the appearance of its congruence with the world and return to being what it is: a community of believers. In fact, its missionary strength can only grow through such external losses. (...) This is a process that will take place with or without the help of the Church."* With regard to the sacramental practice of the Church, the theologian Ratzinger already saw the danger at that time: *"By not only giving sacraments away, but also making them a thing of the past, they are deeply devalued."*

Joseph Ratzinger's great sympathy for the catechumenate can already be read from this emphatic plea: Learning to believe is not possible without a dynamic structure, which ultimately marks the words of St. Augustine, often quoted by Joseph Ratzinger, as the goal for today. It is about *"being a Christian out of insight and decision!"*

Outlook

In this context, the thesis of the young German pastoral theologian Jan Loffeld attracts particular attention when he states that *"nothing is missing when God is missing"*. He analyzes that more and more people are not asking what the Gospel answers. While it was previously largely assumed that religious life would become more diverse and individualized, current studies show that only a few people are switching between denominations; however, more and more (over 25 percent) have left religious communities. Other solid theologians draw the following conclusion from this study: *"Neither a hardened traditionalism that attempts to present itself as an alternative to the secular world in a regressive departure from it, nor*

a chameleon-like eagerness to adapt, which hones its own profile in the name of connectivity, are appropriate responses to the shift in the religious field."

Where in this development an ever greater plurality of civilization is to be expected in the future, it is therefore all the more important to practice the *"art of spiritual discernment"*. Where in this development an ever greater plurality of civilization is to be expected in the future, it is therefore all the more important to practice the *"art of spiritual discernment"*. That actually means what already a father of the church - Origenes - has said: *"Fiunt - non nascuntur Christiani!"* What means literally translated: *"Christians are made and not born!"*

Thank you so much for your great attention and patience!