

The Challenge of Catechesis Today: One Bishop's Perspective

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There are many aspects to the teaching office of the bishop. In this talk I have chosen to cover only one of them: the task of catechesis. What is more, I have also decided to approach this topic not so much from an academic standing point, but much more from the perspective of my experience over the last few years.

In this reflection I try to understand a little more clearly some of the challenges facing a bishop who wants to take initiatives in this field of teaching, as well as some of the opportunities that may come along, sometimes unexpectedly. I also try to delve a little more deeply at some of the qualities that have emerged on reflection.

A number of events in the last six months suggested themselves as starting points. One has been the circulation of the report *On the Way to Life*, prepared by the Heythrop Institute for Religion, Ethics and Public Life for the Bishops' Conference. The Report is substantial and, for the likes of me, not an easy read. The purpose of the Report was to cast light on the current cultural context of the Church's task of religious education and catechesis, the task of teaching. So it is very relevant. The Report gives sociological and philosophical perspectives on some key aspects of contemporary culture: an analysis of secularisation, of the 'turn to subject', of post-modernity and the contemporary search for meaning. It explores the relationship between spirituality and religion and begins an examination of how faith, as content and experience, is transmitted.

Already this Report is provoking considerable discussion, not all of it positive in tone as is to be expected. There is to be a formal launch of the Report, with responses, on 3 October and, I hope, a period of real debate about how we should more deeply understand the context of our catechetical task, the resources that we have, both from Vatican II and from the considerable corpus of Church teaching since then (which does not feature as it could have done in this Report), and the strategies and activities we ought to develop.

Interestingly, some of Pope Benedict's early comments have touched on this task. Speaking of the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, and of the Compendium that has just been published, he said:

We wrote it (The Catechism) in the awareness that the journey from this Catechism to concrete catechesis would not be an easy one. We understood that the linguistic, cultural and social situations are very different in the various countries, and even within the same country in different social classes; hence it is the task of the bishops and of the catechists themselves to undertake this final stage in the journey.

This is a task that will be helped, I believe, by a thorough discussion of this Report.

But the starting points I want to take are rather less academic than this Report and more personal.

It was over eight years ago that I signed up to provide the BBC commentary for the Funeral Mass on John Paul II and for the Mass of Inauguration of his successor. At that time I had no idea of the impact these events would have, on me, on the BBC staff, on people across the world. I was simply happy to know I would have to be in Rome and have an opportunity to make a contribution.

You do not need me to describe the impact of those days and weeks. From the point of view of this talk, one thing is worth saying: the commentaries were the most effective pieces of catechesis in which I have been involved. And that was neither foreseen, nor intended. Yet even now, five months later, I still receive comments about how much those broadcasts helped Catholics to understand their faith more deeply, and those not members of the Church to share in events of profound emotional and spiritual significance. That the broadcasts were covering liturgical events is, of course, no coincidence in their catechetical effectiveness, for the full mystery of faith is expressed and explored in liturgical events, even if they then lend themselves to further exposition. And these particular liturgical events explored and expressed faith in moments of an intense human drama: a drama that was at once both deeply personal and yet globally public.

Many have sought to offer explanatory commentaries on why these events were so compelling. Let me add my own perspective, even if briefly.

One of the perks of my position was that during the days of the lying-in-state of the body of Pope John Paul II, I was able to enter St Peter's by the side door and spend time alongside his body. I did so twice. On the first visit I found myself, my prayers and reflections caught up with the man. I kept recalling my meetings with him, those deep-set penetrative eyes, the vitality that was so much at his core. I thought: now, after that titanic struggle, he is free, free in spirit to return to the mountains and forests that spoke so eloquently to him of their creator.

On my second visit my attention was drawn elsewhere: to the slow-moving procession of people, filing past his body. I was increasingly in awe of what was taking place: literally millions of people, making

their way to Rome, moving slowly through its street for 10, 15, 20 hours in a kind of pilgrimage, so that they could ‘pay their respects’ to the Pope. I watched as, in the 15 seconds they had at the end of their long, long journey, they made the sign of the cross, said a prayer, held up their children, took a photograph and blew a kiss – in one order or another. There was no fuss, no tension, just dignified grief, solidarity and love. It was an unforgettable and profound experience.

Why did this take place? What was it about this man that evoked such a response? Yes, as a poet he showed how much he cared passionately about the human spirit and all its longing and searching. As a pastor he had the incredible gift of being able to reach out – seemingly personally – to all who came in contact with him. In words and in deeds he was an exponent of the truth of the human person, right down to his last acts, those silent appearances and blessings. In them he expressed both the truth of the dignity of the person, in sickness and incapacity, and the bond of love and mutual belonging that gives that dignity its deepest meaning. What the people were saying was that this man, this Pope, had managed to give them a deeper belief in themselves, in their faith, in life. If catechesis is correctly defined as “a dialogue of faith between believers”, then his was catechesis like it has never been seen before.

Universal Father is the title of a biography of John Paul II by Garry O’Connor.¹ It’s a fascinating read, despite being full of small errors, because it is about John Paul II seen through the eyes of a man of theatre. Garry O’Connor’s other biographies have been about Alec Guinness, Peggy Ashcroft, Paul Scofield, William Shakespeare, Ralph Richardson, Laurence Olivier and Vivian Leigh.

The assertion that he makes throughout the biography is that this Pope, as boy and man, was committed to the exploration of freedom, not in the somewhat superficial sense that we are surrounded with, but in the most profound sense. His approach is well expressed in this view:

A pope’s main and ultimate power is as a spiritual leader to be followed. The church may prescribe and exhort, the pope may pronounce, but it is up to each individual what he or she does, and no one else is in charge of the navigation of his or her own soul. John Paul’s supreme achievement is that he has made this more clear and more evident to more people on the globe than it is conceivable to imagine any one human being could. Over and over again he said – whether it be of a nation or of a group or a single person – that destiny lies in the hands of each human being, to be worked out in relation to man’s God-given freedom. His detractors have been to the ones who argue against the human person as being deeply worthy of respect and capable of responsibility. They believe for a variety of reasons

¹ G O’Connor, *Universal Father: A Life of John Paul II*, Bloomsbury, London 2005

(eg socialism, communism, imperialism, fascism, utilitarianism, natural selection, situationalism, determinism, scientism, etc) that mankind is not capable of responsible choice. John Paul's assertion is that the spiritual rights of mankind come only from the spiritual stature of man derived from and created by God.'(p 354f.)

The search for freedom, and the exercise of freedom, is therefore, fundamentally spiritual. The foundations of freedom are in the realm of the spirit.

Now this, it seems to me, is the critical realm of catechesis today. The dialogue of faith we need is one which not only recognises the real foundations of our nature, but directly addresses those foundations. If a person is not, somehow, spiritual then they will not be truly alive. If a person can be helped in that spiritual dimension of their being, then a dialogue of faith can begin. If words, images, moments can be identified which help to evoke an awareness of this spiritual dimension, with its needs and longings, then catechesis begins to take shape: a genuine exploring and sharing together of all that gives life its deepest shape and values.

Spirituality is, of course, a notoriously elastic concept and quest. It is, perhaps, understood as 'an inner strength', one which bears fruit in integrity of life and action. What John Paul II did, not only in his writings but especially in his actions, was to give human spirituality its true dimensions: that it is rooted in God; that it finds its Truth in Christ; that it is lived best in the community of the Catholic Church. In this framework of revealed truth, the human quest finds not only its allies, but indeed its salvation.

To switch back, for a moment, to the more explicitly philosophical. I was taken by some of the points made by Laurence Hemming in his short book on Benedict XVI.² He tells us of a dialogue which took place in 2004, between the now Benedict and the philosopher Jürgen Habermas. Habermas, I learned, has spoken of the 'post-secular status of Europe', by which he means the collapse of most endeavour in favour of a rather colourless drive for economic development, of itself unable to provide wider meaning. In contrast he asserts that. 'Christianity, and nothing else, is the ultimate foundation of liberty, conscience, human rights, and democracy, the benchmarks of Western civilisation.'

These values are, of course, what people long for today. To recognise their rootedness in the spiritual dimension of life is to identify the real battleground of each person's life. These are the values I am prepared to struggle for in personal relationships, in bringing up children, as an educator, as a business partner, as a work colleague: liberty, conscience, human rights, democracy and the search for truth. And their foundation is spiritual.

² L Hemming, *Benedict XVI, Fellow Worker for Truth*, Burns & Oates, London 2005

The innate presence of these values is still to be seen even where the 'spiritual' seems to have been lost or distorted. Think of the appeal recently, of the professional footballer, Joey Barton, to his brother, Michael, to return to England to face the murder enquiry into the death of young Anthony Walker. He simply said that to return was, in conscience, the right thing to do. Or think of the readiness of the Liverpool man to step forward and admit that it was he who struck the barman in Bulgaria with the lump of concrete and not the young lad, Michael Shields, at present imprisoned for that crime.

Equally, the absence of such values, and of the means for reaching them, has its own drama. In the last few weeks we heard of Kelly Taylor, starving herself to death because her physical disabilities made life unbearable. She decided on her course of action when she realised she would never be able to go into the sea with her husband while on holiday. In fact, she later gave up her starvation fast because that also was too painful. This, philosophically, can be described as a symptom of the disenchantment and enfeebled reason which add urgency to our task of catechesis today.

But how does catechesis engage the whole person? How can teaching address this spiritual dimension of ourselves? How can catechesis make its contribution to the daily human struggle for the quality of life for which we long?

Let me give two examples of catechesis which may just cast a little light on these enduring questions, and then try to bring out some consequences. They are examples which catch up some of the important requirements of catechesis: they engage the spiritual dimension; they break down isolation and enhance the community of faith; they support the participants in living their faith in daily life, and they are examples of how a bishop can exercise his role of chief catechist. But they also suggest more.

In July 2005 a Eucharistic Congress took place in the Midlands. It was supported by the dioceses of Nottingham, Northampton and Birmingham. Three days of the four-day event took place at Newman College; the fourth at Oscott College. It was well attended: 600 on the opening afternoon and evening; 800 all day Friday; over 1000 on Saturday; upwards of 4000 on the Sunday. It was a catechetical celebration.

What the organisers realised was that the model of the Eucharistic Congress had a great deal to offer. It provided the mutual encouragement and support of an event, breaking down that pervading sense of isolation we can easily feel. It offered times and varieties of intensive prayer and contemplation, tapping into that inner need, that desire for depth that we recognise in ourselves. It included sound talks, lectures, presentations, listened to intensely and deeply related to lived faith. It was brought together in carefully prepared liturgies: evening prayer, Eucharistic adoration, the celebration of

Mass. Despite weaknesses and difficulties, the event was deeply encouraging and life-giving. It was genuinely ecclesial: a celebration of faith which enhanced our human love and striving and which was centred on the presence and saving mystery of the Lord. It was an event of genuine catechesis.

A second example I would like to give is that of the 'Walk with Me' booklets which have been produced for each Advent and Lent for the past few years. Some of you may have seen them: simple in concept, excellent in presentation, generally sound in content, with some inevitably better than others. They offer a guide to prayer, a focus on the day's Scripture, and a 'teaching text' on which to reflect. Last Lent almost 250,000 copies were distributed. They are widely used and appreciated.

These booklets have a simple purpose: by encouraging personal prayer they provide an opportunity for people to add to their daily routines a dimension of thoughtful reflection on the themes of faith, which they may well share with others.

There are many stories of the effectiveness of this initiative. One woman wrote to tell me of how she happened to leave the booklet on the kitchen table. Her husband of twenty-five years saw it and asked about it. To her amazement, for he had shown no interest in her Catholic faith at all, he then went upstairs and came back with a Bible – his mother's – from the bottom of the cupboard. From that day on they looked up the Scripture readings together and followed the reflection. 'It has transformed my marriage', she said.

But other accounts come in, too. We all know of the predominance over daily life exercised by the economic order. Some say, convincingly to me, that this economic order shapes our political realities. So these realities also need addressing and penetrating by the Gospel. One way in which this is done is to encourage people to recognise and address that same realm of the spirit in the context of their work and economic enterprise. So it has been pleasing to know that the 'Walk with Me' booklets appear in doctors surgeries, that office staff have used them together in their lunch breaks and that in times of tension members of different faiths working together have used them as a point of sharing and quiet reflection together.

From this I conclude that catechesis or teaching which has a direct and personal appeal to the dimension of the spiritual, especially in the form of prayer and interiority, and which builds up community, addresses, even unknowingly, some of the neuralgic points of our contemporary culture.

But here is a deeper point emerges.

One of the Catholic secondary schools in Birmingham has an impressive and well travelled Gospel-choir. They sing with gusto and precision. Recently they were in the Cathedral and I listened, entranced, as they sang:

He is the fairest of 10,000
 He is the brightest morning star
 He is the lily of the valley
 Everybody ought to know.

It seems to me that these words express the deeper quality of the catechetical moments I have described. In each, and in different ways, there is a kind of wholeness, a roundness. They have appealed to both heart and head. They have contained elements that have brought about a satisfaction, both of the senses and of the mind. In a word, these catechetical activities have had a certain quality of beauty. In that lies a great deal of their effectiveness.

Much has been written about the importance and appeal of beauty in the life of faith. Many try to explore how that appeal meets contemporary needs: a need for meaning that appeals to the whole person; a need for a rekindling of imagination; a need for symbols and images that gather us together; a need for ways of expressing our continuity, our continuing identity and beliefs, and passing them on from generation to generation.

In order to explore this a little more I want to make use of material gleaned from two articles: one by Bruno Forte, an address entitled *'The Trinitarian Holiness of the Priest'* given last October in Malta at an international retreat for priests, and the other an address by the then Cardinal Ratzinger given in 2002 and entitled: *'The Feeling of Things, the Contemplation of Beauty'*.³

Early in his address, Cardinal Ratzinger, with references to von Balthasar, puts his practical point very clearly: *"Pastoral life has to foster a personal encounter with the beauty of faith."* That, to me, is certainly a key element in catechesis.

Nor is it new. One of the delights in coming to the Archdiocese of Birmingham is to see the number of truly beautiful churches there are. That is much to the credit of Archbishop Maurice Couve de Murville. He insisted on the care of church buildings, on the careful and costly restoration of some of the older parish churches. He has established a tradition which I trust is continuing, as the appeal of a beautiful church, attentiveness to the beauty of a church, is not to be underestimated. It evokes and supports prayer; it requires careful liturgy; it helps a sense of reverence; it can draw people into the ambit of the explicitly sacred and begin in them a dialogue of faith. This 'selfless beauty' which, as I say, is costly, is also a coherent witness to an underlying sense of purpose, of design in life, which is so easily lost today.

But beauty operates at a deeper level, too. These articles by Forte and Ratzinger explore the links between beauty and truth, between knowledge and the beauty of faith: their coherence and symmetry.

³ www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/documents/rc_con_faith_doc_20020824_rattinger_d_rimini_en

They explore how the appeal of beauty authenticates what we perceive and accept. An artistic or iconic expression of a truth of faith or a moment of salvation can often do more to underline or enhance the intellectual grasp of the proposition than even the finest exposition of it, no matter how laced with humour or cleverness that may be.

The appeal of one person to another is of course the primary realm in which the appeal of truth, goodness, love and beauty come together. Beauty, in the end, is seen in a person's life, in his or her being and actions. The Gospel injunction: 'Let your good deeds so shine before others that they give glory to your father in heaven' (Mt 5.16) can also be translated as 'your beautiful deeds', shining, harmonious revelations of a personal depth, a personal spirituality. Mother Teresa's expression 'doing something beautiful for God' has abiding relevance. It also explains why the lives of the saints can be right there among our most powerful catechetical resources.

Christ himself is, of course, the 'fairest of 10,000' and the Good Shepherd – the beautiful shepherd, the one who acts, even laying down his life. Genesis, too, first presents the Creator through his good works and describes that work as 'good', or 'beautiful'. Bruno Forte writes:

The Hebrew term 'tov' ('good' or 'beautiful') is a constant refrain in the divine commentary throughout the six days of creation and tells us that the goodness and beauty of creation are inseparable in the eyes of our Creator. In describing God's eight works, the same term is repeated seven times: according to rabbinic tradition it is not mentioned with respect to the second day's work because, on that day, God separated water from water, and land from sky. This means that beauty is found in unity and not in separating: it is a request to be united with God. Beauty is what fuels our longing for the lost Eternal, by building bridges towards Him by whom we have been created.

These two articles explore both Augustine's and Aquinas' understanding of beauty. What is particularly helpful to me is the exploration of Aquinas' assertion that 'Beauty is proper to the Son' for in him dwells not only the wholeness of the truth and not only with harmony but also with great light, great clarity, shining in darkness and a darkness that does not comprehend. It is 'wholeness in a fragment', and the fragment held in relationship with the whole.

This Christological dimension of beauty – so briefly expressed here yet so much requiring rich exploration – is crucial for catechetics in two particular ways. First, it shows the depth of the catechetical invitation, how it is never exhausted, how it calls forth endless creativity and new avenues. Secondly, it shows its costliness.

As a church, at least in my lifetime, we have never settled 'the catechetical question': method, content, starting point, etc. I daresay we never will. This is because what really lies at the heart of catechesis is the exploration of the beauty of Christ: the wholeness of his revelation of the loving providence of the Father and the unfolding

of the endless creative gift of the Holy Spirit. This heart of catechesis tells us, fairly exactly, what we should be dealing with above all else (and often we don't), but it does leave great latitude of method.

Perhaps the real challenge of catechesis, and its limitless potential, is best expressed in a poem by R S Thomas, quoted by Rod Strange in our diocesan clergy retreat in July, entitled 'Nuclear: . . .' in which the poet suggests that God doesn't seem to speak to us, or does so in ways we don't recognise as speech. So Thomas refers to the eloquence of God's silence and the endlessness of its fallout.⁴ Catechesis is the exploration of the 'endless fallout' of God's speech. It is, therefore, difficult to encapsulate, always escaping beyond us and intriguing in its appeal. Boxed off catechetical programmes leave me uneasy.

But then secondly the costliness of it all. This surely comes in two phases, though maybe they are one and the same.

The appeal of beauty, I have suggested, lies in the overcoming of separation. Certainly separation from a loved one, the one I hold to be beautiful, creates a painful longing to be together again. So too does the beauty of the Lord, for he draws us back to where we belong, setting up within us resonances of a nostalgia, a calling home, that often we barely recognise. This call can unsettle us and wound us too. Most unsettlingly, the search for this beauty (as with every beauty) requires of us a separation from other things, good in themselves, yet now to be put aside in search for the truly beautiful one.

To put this another way: the object of Christian living is holiness, which, simply put, can be described as the search for wholeness before God. I want to stand before the Lord, in his light, and know that I am whole, entire, accepted, loved and at peace. The aim of catechesis, then, must be to serve this quest, to serve the holiness of the believer. Yet holiness requires us to be separated from all that does not serve this purpose. The call of the eternal means we turn our back on other things, lesser beauties included. This, too, must be served by genuine catechesis. The question is: does our catechesis today so enhance our love and desire for the Lord that it supports our self-forgetfulness in other things? Does it serve genuine renunciation and self-sacrifice?

But this dynamic of gain through loss cuts far deeper and brings us immediately to the most profound mystery of beauty, well explored in the articles referred to previously. How is it that he who 'is the fairest of 10,000' is also he who 'had neither beauty nor majesty, nothing to attract our eyes, no grace to make us delight in him, a man despised and rejected.' (Is 53.2)

The beauty of the crucified saviour is at the heart of the mystery we explore. It is, in the imagery used by Harold Vanstone, a little like the transforming beauty that comes to a dead tree when, covered with

⁴ R S Thomas, *Collected Poems 1945–1990*, Phoenix, London 1993

hard frost, it is etched against a clear, blue winter sky. Held before our gaze the crucified Christ, seen against the background of the Father's creative and redemptive love, takes on its salvific beauty.

But the issues of faith that arise at this point are immense. Catechesis has to address them, for in our daily living we have to confront them, too.

What is true beauty? Is the crucified Christ truly beautiful? If this is true beauty, then it has to compete with all the alternative versions of beauty with which we are constantly presented. The classic test of true beauty is whether it evokes in the beholder a response of generosity, of deeper belief in the goodness of self and others, a readiness for sacrifice. A lesser or false beauty will stir up the desire, the will, for possession, ownership and pleasure. We live in a "must have" culture. This is one of our greatest challenges. Catechesis has to help us distinguish, discern, the truth of what is presented to us as beautiful. Catechesis can help us to recognise true beauty and our response to it, to reflect on its nature, its appeal, its origin, its purpose. In this, catechesis will always be centred on the mystery of Christ and on the mystery of sacrificial love. This is a daunting task, yet even in this, catechesis will find powerful allies in the 'inner sense' for the truth that permeates all true human loving and in the readiness for self-sacrifice which is still to be found in so much of our experience.

Then there is a second question posed by the claim of the beauty of the crucifix. The question is not simply 'Is this true beauty?' but 'Is this beauty true?' Is it true that, in the end, the love of God, which evokes such a response as that seen in the crucifix, is really the truth about life, about my life? Is there in life a dependable sense of purpose that supersedes this, and every, horror. Or is the true narrative of life the one of nihilism, or the one that says that reality is, in fact, basically evil?

Ratzinger writes:

The appearance of beauty has received new depth and new realism. The One who is the Beauty itself, let himself be slapped in the face, spat upon, crowned with thorns, The Shroud of Turin can help us to imagine this in a realistic way. However, in his Face, that is so disfigured, there appears the genuine, extreme beauty: the beauty of love that goes 'to the very end'. For this reason it is revealed as greater than falsehood and violence. Whoever has perceived this beauty knows that truth, and not falsehood, is the real aspiration of the world. It is not the false that is 'true' but indeed the Truth.

There is no doubt that the faces of falsehood and evil are well-known in our world. Our familiarity with it, whether in the form of personal deceit, political corruption, self-promotion and greed, drunken obscenity or angry terrorism, is an everyday reality. So, too, we must recognise its corrosive influence on the project of Christian faith. But this reflection suggests that evil and falsehood can be

countered only by the means given to us by the Father himself: that truth and beauty are to be found beyond celebrity, beyond ugliness, beyond decay, beyond horror, indeed beyond death.

This means that the full truth of the crucified saviour needs to be central to our catechesis. It is, indeed, an image, a truth, that goes beyond our experience. But it must never be set aside for that reason. It is a truth that goes beyond our comfort or our reassurance, yet salvation never comes from within our familiar ambit and cannot be built with the bricks of our own achievement

Perhaps in much of our catechesis we have shielded our eyes from Him who alone offers us life, preferring easier vistas and more superficial beauty. But the gift of salvation is clearly given here, from his wounded side. And it is this we must explore in our sacramental imagination and in all the rigour of its terrible beauty. This, I'm sure, is the deepest challenge of catechesis and of teaching the faith today, for here, and only here, is the face of God revealed. This face demonstrates the true nature of God, the God without whom we will never build a civilisation of love.

In his book on Benedict XVI, Laurence Hemming also refers to Cardinal Ratzinger's last publication before his election. It is called *Values in Times of Radical Change*. In it he meditates on the trial of Jesus before Pilate and on the relationship between the exercise of political power or responsibility and the truth, especially in democracies. Indeed he goes on to affirm that the real unity of power and truth is known only in God, and that this unity of power and truth is most visible in the Crucified One, the one who offers himself for the sake of the world.

This reminds us, as Laurence Hemming says, that today, as in every age, the Christian who knows God in Christ personally, this Christian in his public life is the real doer of the truth. The Christian is the one who can understand what is good and right and can explain it. The Christian is, then, no less than 'the world's capability of knowing life and truth itself, life in its fullness, eternal life in its truth.'

So catechesis, wherever it takes place, is about faith as it is lived. It is crucially intertwined with the spiritual quest for holiness. It is served by, and is in the service of, the beauty of faith, a beauty expressed in the person of Christ, in his living and in his dying. Catechesis, of this kind, is the springboard of true hope and therefore gives fresh life to its participants.

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