

# Professional Concerns

By Dan Miller

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## Prayer and the Religious Educator

This article concerns the role of prayer in the life and ministry of the religious educator<sup>1</sup> and explores the teacher's task in relationship to the liturgy of the church, especially the Sunday Eucharist. In particular, I want to consider the religious educator *as pray-er*. My concern is the spirit of prayerfulness that forms us and informs all that we do as catechists. I believe that by viewing the catechist through this particular lens, we will better understand five issues at the heart of catechesis: the identity, central task, and witness of catechists; the connection between catechesis and liturgy; and the goal of catechesis.

### Who We Are and What We Do

**Identity:** When catechists recognize themselves as pray-ers they acknowledge and claim their truest identity as human beings and as Catholic Christians. Doing so accentuates the unique dignity of their calling and emphasizes the special charge that is given to them. To name oneself pray-er is to locate oneself explicitly in relationship to God. Before it is anything else, prayer is the humble acknowledgment that it is in God that "we live and move and have our being"(Acts 17:28). To pray is to be intimately and consciously connected to God, "to be open to every impulse of grace which is to be found in the world,"<sup>2</sup> and to respond wholeheartedly to a God who in Jesus is disclosed as extravagantly gracious. Put simply, to pray is to be in love with God, to be alive and grateful to a God who is madly, deeply, and passionately in love with us and with all of creation. In the first place, then, catechists are those who pray.

**Central Task:** As pray-ers, catechists are called to give form to the dual revelation of who God is and of who they - and those entrusted to them - are in the eye of God. Gifted catechists are those who continue to grow in their awareness and acceptance of the profound truth stated by Thomas Merton: "To say that I am made in the image and likeness of God is to say that love is the reason for my existence, for God is love. Love is my true identity. Selflessness is my true self. Love is my true character. Love is my name."<sup>3</sup>

In prayer, personal and liturgical, we discover our real identity and learn the awesome benediction of our name. To conceive of the religious educator as pray-er reminds them that their central vocation is to help others discover that God cherishes them and that, consequently, love is the reason for their existence, that love is their authentic, original name. The most effective catechists are those who develop the ability to invite others into the truth of this mystery. It is this truth of God's prodigal love and of our belovedness that Jesus lived proclaiming, died embodying, rose from the dead affirming, and ascended into heaven insuring. This is the good news catechists are charged to pass on. To be a pray-er is to be a lover. To be a lover is to respond gratefully to God and kindly toward others. The purpose of our ministry as religious educators is not to graduate students but to cultivate and commission Christians, that is, passionate and compassionate lovers.

**Witness:** When it comes to catechesis, the best way to send a message is to become that message. Such teachers' self-identity is integrally and necessarily related to what they do and how they do it. It is as pray-ers that catechists learn the essential content, method, and chief end of their calling: to be sacraments of love. Maria Harris stresses that "teaching is the *incarnation* of subject matter."<sup>4</sup> This means dressing-in-our-flesh the subject in which we partake, and for Christians - especially Christian catechists - that subject is always one thing: love.

In 1975 Pope Paul VI asserted that people are more willing to listen to witnesses than to teachers, and that when they do listen to teachers it is because they are witnesses.<sup>5</sup> The eminent Rabbi Abraham Heschel insists that it is *textpeople*, not *textbooks*, that make the deepest impression on learners.<sup>6</sup> More memorable than specific content and longer lasting than the best curriculum is the teacher whose passionate presence conveys that God is love, whose way of being convinces every person that he or she is the fruit and object of that love, and whose example confirms that faith is the response to the knowledge and acceptance of our belovedness.

## Making Connections

The connection between catechesis and liturgy is engagement. Vietnamese monk Thich Nhat Hanh coined the term "engaged Buddhism" when the monks used their spiritual practices to confront the injustices in their country in the 1960s. The aim of Catholic catechesis is "engaged Catholicism," though this is a redundancy. To be a follower of Jesus requires engagement. The often quoted trinity of adjectives - "full, active, and conscious" - signals the central liturgical shift from spectating to participating that characterizes not only the vision of Vatican II but the core truth of Christian discipleship. When catechists recall their identity as pray-ers, they avoid reducing learners to mere receptacles of information and remember instead that they are also pray-ers and participants. Four ways catechists can engender pray-ers and participants and connect catechesis with liturgy are the practices of silence, wonder, gratefulness, and compassion.

**Silence:** American culture devalues silence. Calls to "Be quiet!" and "Shut up!" and statements like "children are meant to be seen, not heard" all belie an underlying antipathy toward silence. Public and parochial schools offer courses in speech and communication, but who fosters the love of silence, the capacity to listen deeply? Who introduces others to the world of communion? What about that place "too deep for words" where we hear not only the song of the mockingbird and the green movement of the wind in the trees but also the still small voice of God? As pray-ers, catechists are charged with teaching others to listen. Only catechists who themselves have found the pearl of great price in God's plea, "Be still and know that I am God," (Ps. 46:11), can hope to cultivate prayerful silence in others. When we take the time to offer people opportunities for prayerful silence, the eventual results are attentiveness, peacefulness, and reverence.

**Wonder:** Catechists should remember the warning of Rabbi Heschel: Humankind "will not perish for want of information; but only for want of appreciation. The beginning of our happiness lies in the understanding that life without wonder is not worth living."<sup>7</sup> Catholic catechists especially have the responsibility to be witnesses for wonder and to teach others that everything bears within it the capacity to evoke awe and to offer a hint of the Holy. Any activity thoughtfully prepared that invites people to look, listen, smell, taste, and touch with care encourages a sacramental view and experience of life.

Wonder is the primal quality of the religious person. Because it is not an emotion that appears unpredictably, but a willing and conscious response to a given reality, wonder can be cultivated and learned. It is rooted in a posture of humility and childlike delight. The pedagogical logic, as poet Mary Oliver knows, lies in the fact that "if you notice anything/ it leads you to notice/ more/ and more."<sup>8</sup> For persons of faith, looking leads to noticing, noticing leads to beholding, beholding leads to wonder, and wonder is the gateway to gratefulness and praise.

**Gratefulness:** Catechists invite gratefulness. The attitude most foreign to authentic human living is that of taking things for granted. Therefore, catechists are charged with cultivating gratefulness. Authentic living happens when we learn what to do with wonder and awe. When moved to wonder by the slow elegance of a moonrise or the story told in the hand of an old woman, when in the reverent response of awe the sense of mystery is experienced as the presence of God, when consumed by the precious giftedness of all life we realize that the gifts shower forth from a *giver*, then a sense of indebtedness manifests itself as grateful worship, as eucharist, as praise.

**Compassion:** Images of God as judgmental, punitive, or distant help to create people who are fearful, angry, begrudgingly dutiful, and apathetic. Conversely, when we imagine God as freely engaged and compassionately involved with humanity and creation, when we come to know and experience the passionate love of God incarnate in Jesus, the appropriate response is to extend that care to others. Love evokes love. It is the catechists' task not only to show forth this God of compassion and concern but also to encourage and practice the fitting response: loving sympathy and active care toward others. Like silence, wonder, and gratefulness, compassion must be practiced in order to be learned, and learned in order to live as Jesus commanded: "Love one another" (John 13:34).

## Doxology, Not Doctrine

"The goal of catechesis is doxology not doctrine."<sup>9</sup> When religious educators envision themselves foremost as those who pray, they naturally understand the relationship between catechesis and liturgy. They understand their charge is to form pray-ers, not merely to instruct students. The assertion of Nathan Mitchell quoted at the beginning of this paragraph should be engraved over the door of every room where religious education occurs and engraved on the heart (or, if you fancy the vogue, tattooed on the arm) of every catechist. What distinguishes *Catholicism 01* at the university from the catechesis that occurs in parishes or other faith communities is precisely the presence of faith and the community of believers who "gather regularly to praise and thank God, to remember and make present God's great deeds, to offer common prayer, [and] to realize and celebrate the kingdom of peace and justice."<sup>10</sup>

Catechesis both presumes faith and nurtures and stimulates faith. Rooted in the awareness of being loved unconditionally, faith has the innate inclination to move toward its source. Praise is the fullest expression of our movement toward our God of love. The trajectory of evangelization and catechesis naturally propels us toward liturgy, that is, toward thanks and praise. Worship is the result of experiencing the deep, dizzy-making love of God and of realizing that the nobility of our lives resides in the fullness of our response. Since "to praise is to feel God's concern" and to make those concerns our own, true praise never deteriorates into a private affair but instead compels us to take the liturgy to the world in the form of prophetic sympathy and compassion.<sup>11</sup>

## The Greatest Downfall

Some commentators claim that contemporary catechesis flounders because it is all warm fuzzies and construction paper instead of a systematic instruction in the tradition. But the greatest downfall of our catechesis is simply the failure to communicate clearly with conviction, to young and old alike, the depth of God's love, that Jesus is the fullest expression of that love, and that our response to that love gives meaning, dignity, and life to our existence. The actualization of our humanness as Christians lies in our willingness to wonder, to give thanks and praise, to extend mercy to others, and to re-create the world with God. The catechetical challenge is a microcosm of the universal human predicament: to decrease the incongruity between the divine gratuity of being and the paucity of the human response, to learn to live in a way that is compatible with the gift of abundant life. When catechists evaluate themselves they should ask, "Am I creating an apprenticeship in wonder and awe, gratefulness and praise, sympathy and justice, creativity and communion?"

In the end, the quality of our catechesis and the effectiveness of our teaching will be measured not by how many students we have informed well but by how many Christians we have formed well as people of praise, not by how many experts we produce but by how many lovers we give to the world.

### Notes

1. In this paper I use the terms religious educator, catechist, and teacher synonymously. Similarly, although aware of the differences, I use the terms religious education, catechesis, and faith formation interchangeably.
2. Lawrence S. Cunningham, *The Catholic Faith: An Introduction* (New York, NY: Paulist Press, 1987), 14.
3. Thomas Merton, *New Seeds of Contemplation* (New York, NY: New Directions Books, 1961), 60.
4. Maria Harris, *Teaching and Religious Imagination: An Essay in the Theology of Teaching* (San Francisco, CA: Harper Collins Publishers, 1987), 41.
5. Pope Paul VI, *Evangelii nuntiandi: On Evangelization in the Modern World*, (1975), no. 41.
6. Abraham Joshua Heschel, *The Insecurity of Freedom: Essays on Human Existence* (New York, NY: Schocken Books, 1966), 237.
7. Abraham Joshua Heschel, *God in Search of Man: A Philosophy of Judaism* (New York, NY: The Noonday Press - Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1955), 46.
8. Mary Oliver, "The Moths" in *New and Selected Poems* (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, reprint edition, 1993), 132.
9. Nathan Mitchell, conversation with the author, July 18, 2001.
10. "Environment and Art in Catholic Worship," no. 9, in *The Liturgy Documents: A Parish Resource* (Chicago, IL: Liturgical Training Publications, 1991).
11. Abraham Joshua Heschel, *Quest for God: Studies in Prayer and Symbolism* (New York, NY: Crossroad, 1986), 18.