

CATECHESIS: DEEPENING AND MATURATION OF FAITH

Albert Phiri, CSSp

Introduction

In this paper, we will: Justify the position that Catechesis is meant for the deepening and maturation of faith. To demonstrate our points, we will use the biological analogy of growth in humans and plants to signify deepening and maturation of faith through catechesis. To achieve our goal, we will illustrate maturation and deepening of faith from the sacramental view; maturity in understanding and experience of Jesus as the core of catechesis; and then a call to conversion as a sign of vivid realisation of faith in the newly born. Finally, we will indicate through an evaluation and conclusion the whole sense of the paper on maturity as bearing fruits of faith like love, peace and a life of prayer.

Catechesis and Faith

Sylvia Devillers wrote “catechesis is the term to be used for form of ecclesial action which leads both communities and individual member of the faith to maturity of faith”.¹ Catechesis, adds John Paul II, means evangelisation and teaching faith in Jesus to help maturation in the recipient.² It is an educative formation of mind and will for action focused on the life of Jesus.³ However, since it involves faith, the Roman Pontiff indicates that there must be willing application of the self to what is learned, to signify transformation and liberation from idols.⁴ It shows that catechesis is the responsibility of the Church; Also, there is a call for the recipient to willingly allow the process of maturation for growth;⁵ simply to let go of sin or our ways for Jesus.

The Sacramental Point of View

Maturation and deepening of faith is a life long journey of series of growth in a sense of development. As a matter of fact, we cannot talk about

i By recipient the word is meant to signify the catechumens also known as neophytes. That is beginners or learners in faith (Wedig et al. 598). In this research, recipient or catechumens or beginners will be used interchangeably.

growth in humans (or germination for plants) before child birth. Equally, in faith, conception of life and birth is through the sacrament of baptism. Holy Mother Church in her teaching, she indicates that: formation in faith is a gradual processⁱⁱ.⁶ This catechetical process is the hub of deepening and maturation of faith by growth. According to Roberto recounts, the stages of baptismal catechumenate are a formation, which schools the recipient through post-baptismal catechesis and deeply immerses the beginners into the essence of faith through rites in the community of faith.⁷ They are not mere rites but they confer the wisdom of faith by efficacious grace and instruction. The word “formation” indicates the element of building faith in the sense of deepening and maturation.

Baptism is the starting point of this life in Christ Jesus. By baptism, it's like catechesis itself is made flesh (incarnate) in the lives of the neophytes. For Christ's life is catechesis itself, thus by baptism the neophytes are configured to Christ.⁸ Those baptised die to their old life of sin in the death of Christ and are raised in His resurrection to new life (Roman 6:3-4). Thus, baptism and Church's teaching office are intimately united.

Catechesis is like fertilization, the starting point of the human life in the womb. Thus, comparable to natural birth, Jesus says: one to be of the Church, the kingdom or of Christ, they ought to be born anew in water and the Holy Spirit (John 3:16). Those born through baptism acquire the DNA of faith. The Church as mother, by Baptism she gives birth to sons and daughters for God.⁹ Thus: “through catechesis she feeds her children with her own faith and incorporates them as members into the ecclesial family. As a good mother she gives them the Gospel in all its authenticity and purity as appropriate food, culturally enriched and a response to the deepest aspirations of the human heart (GDC 79). Meaning, like a mother with children, the Church gives the beginners the ‘system of the faith’ and second she confers unto the beginner the ‘DNA of faith’ by regeneration in baptism.

ii“For example” Pauley maintained “RCIA catechetical work is not monolithic, it changes, in each of the four periods of process: pre-catechumenate, catechumenate, purification and enlightenment, and mystagogy. In these four periods, each stage has a different end for the catechesis” (205).

The newly born needs comfort, medications, and nourishments and emotional support to strengthen his or her personhood. Those born of faith through catechesis are nourished and helped by the community of faith to grow and mature. The Roman Pontiff confirms this when he observed: Parents, families and the community of faith are a symbol of faith of the Church to their children and young ones, hence they ought to transmit the faith. That is through vivid shared experience and tangible practise, she helps: “children gradually to mature in their own faith” (*Lumen Fidei* 53). Thus, the process to give birth to child in faith needs the help of the sacraments, the faith of community given through catechesis but the Church as Mother. Then maturity and deepening of the faith follows.

Understanding and Encountering the Mystery of Christ

According to Edmondson, the process of catechesis is designed to proficiently form the lives of the baptised into copies of Christ. The faith in which they were incorporated should mature through life experience.¹⁰ It is not just learning articles of faith but gain personal growth in the sense of willing responsibility of their faith (GDC 67). This denotes the end of Christian initiation, whereby those incorporated into the faith need to be helped by grace and thus freely respond to the call of God through his word.¹¹ Taking the same analogy, when a human person is born in a family, he needs to learn the language and the culture of the society but also how to be independent in life. In faith, this is the willing and docile responsibility which is a call at the heart of catechesis to deepening and maturation of faith through catechesis.

In this event, catechesis is the language and the culture that the newly born Christians assimilate in the sense of understanding. This language is the saving events of Christ. That the neophytes may appreciate and get rooted in the saving works of Christ by overcoming sin, death and benefit from the opened graces of Jesus (Wallac 87). Meaning, Catechesis must help develop the depth of “understanding of the mystery of Christ”. Then change the neophytes through the working of the grace into new creatures “to think like Him, to judge like Him” (CT 20). By “new creature”: a newly born child in the process of maturation begins to eat solid food

and attempts to walk in the sense of exhibiting lived catechesis. Following that, catechesis “lays the foundation of the spiritual edifice of the Christian, nurtures the roots of his life of faith and enables him to receive more solid nourishment in the ordinary life of the Christian community” (GDC 67). Scriptures says as new creatures born in Christ: “we too might walk in newness of life” (Romans 6:3). By “walking” this is what is meant by deepening of faith through catechesis, which is Christ formed within the newly born (Gal 4:19). That is living lives inspired and governed by the content of faith learned. They move catechesis from the head to real life or rather transpose it from the books into their encounter with the world.

Furthermore, catechesis helps the neophytes to deeply discover their noble calling in Christ. That is they ought to love God above all things but also how to love him above all things as their “sublime vocation” (GDC 116). Analogously, it is like the gradual process on installing software in an iPhone or computer. These gadgets first receive special apps and also their internal system in order to install take time to identify the app, then after confirm it and stage by stage, accept the app. Equally, the newly born souls in faith need to undergo a gradual growth in faith, knowing what is acceptable and unacceptable in the eyes of God as their sublime vocation. That is they learn and act to give impact to the world through their state of life and in their own condition (Can. 204 §1, 208). They serve as light of the world and salt to it by disseminating it with seeds of holy virtues (LG 40) and prayer life in the sense of participation in the liturgy. For participation in the live of the church as the body of Christ is the vivid sign of maturation and deepening of faith (1 Corinthians 12; Roberto 15).

Uniquely, they ought to be men and women of prayer to signify their growth in the virtue of holiness. “When catechesis is permeated by a climate of prayer, the assimilation of the entire Christian life reaches its summit. This climate is especially necessary when the catechumen and those to be catechized are confronted with the more demanding aspects of the Gospel and when they feel weak or when they discover the mysterious action of God in their lives” (GDC 85). Thus, in liturgy they learn to participate in the mystery of the person of Christ. It becomes their source of energy, nourishment and light in the process of maturation (Pauley 203).

By sharing in liturgy, they receive what catechesis promises.

Conversion: Transformation of Life

The moving from their world into the world of faith is the transformation growth that is accompanied by conversion. Conversion of life styles that catechesis prompts the newly born is like the transformation of a seed into a fruitful plant. Scriptures says, unless a seed falls on the ground and dies it will only remains a seed or not produce fruits (John 12:24, 1 Corinthians 15:36). Implicitly, death inferred, symbolises conversion in their day to day life. Explicitly, the letter to the Colossians 3:5 illustrates that those converted to faith in Christ must undergo a death: “therefore, consider the members of your earthly body as dead to immorality, impurity, passion, evil desires and greed, which amounts to idolatry”. Unless this is experienced, the newly born neophyte will remain on the periphery of faith in an immature sense. Thus, those who have accepted to grow fruits in faith must put to death through conversion of life the deeds of sinful ways as new creatures in Jesus (Romans 8:12-13). For example, if a person was a drunkard or unchaste person they should move from being their old life to a new faith in Jesus. This is maturation of faith by deepening the substance of the learned and experienced faith into their lives.

Moreover, conversion in “faith involves a change of lives [metanoia] that is a profound transformation of mind and heart; it causes the believer to live that conversion” (GDC 55). For instance, in a society that is tribalistic or ethnocentric, the change of mind demands maturity in the sense of looking at the binding love of Jesus without favouritism (1 John 4:8, John 33-35). Hence begin to judging others beyond tribal confinement but with love in Jesus. Thus, the Church transmits the faith like sowing seeds, so as to inform and form the lives of catechumens (GDC 78). Taking further the analogy of a seed, this deepening and maturation of faith, the seeds need to shoot and then begin to grow and take roots (GDC 67). Like what happened to Saul on his way to Damascus, he was transformed from being Saul to Paul or rather from being a killer of Christians into a preacher of the Christian faith (Acts 9:1-19). We may also think of the woman Jesus forgave her sins and she thus loved God much (Luke 7:36-50). This is a sign of growth and maturity expected, to bear visible fruits of love of God

but shown in giving up old life for new life.

However, these fruits must last in the life of faith in the sense of persistence in doing and being good (John 15:16). Taking it from the call of the parable of the sower, maturity of the neophytes needs to depose themselves as good soil (GDC 15). Equally, catechesis helps them to be good soil for the seed of eternal life to shoot and grow but mature and bear manifold fruits. It is catechesis that removes rocks from the soil of their lives (Matthew 13:23, 20-21). For it may hinder the Word from achieving its eternal maturity. It also helps them not to leave seeds of solvation on the surface of the road, for the birds of sin or vices will pick them away. Similarly, they should take away any thorny bushes within them, for it may chock the faith (Matthew 13:18, 22). In the same way, catechesis serves to remind them to take note of the good soil in that even good soil may lose fertility after a long time (GDC 15). Thus, they should use the following: retreats and recollections to care for the soil of faith from time to time. Improve it through the sacrament of conversion and nourish it by the scriptures and divine communion in Eucharist. For in the Eucharist, faith finds nourishment and intimacy with Jesus (Lumen Fidei 44).

Evaluation and conclusion

What we were saying is that, the aim of the teaching of catechesis is to lead the Christian to live lives like Jesus Christ. It invites the recipient to live lives that correspond to the DNA of the faith in Jesus. For faith is a personal encounter and commitment to Jesus, to think, judge and live like him (GDC 53). Unless this occurs in the whole life of the Christian, catechesis has not been deepened into maturity. Growth in faith is when those born in it develop virtues, morals, spiritual character and roots of conformity to the faith. Otherwise, catechesis ends up being lip service yet in truth empty of true depth (Isaiah 29:13-14).

The point is that, maturity means they ought to translate the Christian theories of faith into real life events. Initially, deepening the faith means they should discern the will of God in their interior disposition at all times in their lives. Then take part in the missionary task of the Church, thus baptised and send (Baptized and Sent). If they are married they should live

lives worth of a Christian union. Also execute their secular professions and other live duties with the light of faith (GDC 55). The point is that, the teaching of Christ and the life of Christ should then reflect in their own lives. For this reason, Victoria M. Tufano et al. say “the goal of initiation is not to ‘get the sacrament’ but to make disciples. If the pastoral practice of the infant baptism takes that goal seriously, it will look carefully to the pre-and post baptismal moments of the initiation process. Often overlooked in our practice is post-ritual formation” towards practical living of the faith.¹² This is maturity, when a child grows into a mature person; she or he takes duties and responsibilities at home, and so is the baptised sent.

In the light of spirituality, catechesis should bear mature human and spiritual fruits. This is the reason that, those affiliated to the faith will be recognised through the fruits of the Spirit they will produce in life (Matthew 7:16). Consequently, if this stage of fruits is not experienced by the believer or others, catechesis can be said to have been sterile. To show the demand of maturity through fruits Paul indicates that those who are in Christ Jesus must give out fruits of the Spirit: “love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control” (Gal 5:22-23).

The point is that, “catechesis, should bear fruits in the full flowering of the life lived in genuine conformity to the way of Christ. This is what John Paul II intended by Christian maturity as the goal of catechesis” says James C. Pauley.¹³ This is evident in the Book of Songs of Song, whereby the lover wishes to be more intimately close to his beloved. Each of the lover moves from her or his world of experience to the world of to other (3:1-15, 4:8-9). This retains the point of Christ: apart from me you cannot bear much fruit as branches of Jesus the Vine (John 15:5). This maturity is not only the work of catechesis, the content and the newly born but the help of God’s holy graces or his holy spirit.¹⁴ To conclude, Christian maturation and deepening of faith is an encounter with Jesus through the sacraments and the depositum fidei. This is to move from faith on the periphery of the soul or immature faith to deepening in the soul and maturation of the faith received in practical live.

¹ DeVillers Sylvania. *Lectionary-Based Catechesis for Children: A Catechist's Guide*. New York: Paulist Press, 1994. P. 19.

- ² John Paul II. *Catechesi Tradendae: On Catechesis in Our Time*. USA: Sophia Institute Press, 2014. n* 20.
- ³ Abba C. Joe-Barth et al. *Special Pastoral Formation for Youths in Africa in the 21st Century: The Nigerian Perspective: with Extra Focus on the Socio-Anthropological, Ethical, Theological, Psychological, and Societal Problems of Today's Youngsters*. New York: Peter Lang, 2009. P. 225.
- ⁴ Francis. *Encyclical Letter Lumen Fidei: To the Bishops Priests and Deacons Consecrated Persons and the Lay Faithful on Faith*. N* 13.
- ⁵ Darío Castrillón Hoyos. *Congregation for the Clergy: General Directory for Catechesis*. N* 88.
- ⁶ Idem.
- ⁷ Roberto John. *Generations of Faith Resource Manual: Lifelong Faith Formation for the Whole Parish Community, Volume 1*. London: Twenty-Third Publications, 2005. P. 15.
- ⁸ Wedig E. Mark et al. *The Liturgy Documents, Volume Four: Supplemental Documents For Parish: Supplemental Documents for Parish Worship, Devotions, Formation and Catechesis*. Chicago: Liturgy Training Publications, 2014. P. 598
- ⁹ Jensen M. Robin. *Baptismal Imagery in Early Christianity: Ritual, Visual, and Theological*. Michigan: Baker Books, 2012. P. 58.
- ¹⁰ Edmondson Stephen. *Liturgical Theology Revisited: Open Table, Baptism, Church*. Oregon: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2015. P. 58.
- ¹¹ Farey Caroline et al. *The Pedagogy of God: It's Centrality in Catechesis and Catechist Formation*. Steubenville, Ohio: Emmaus Road Publishing, 2011. P. 95.
- ¹² Victoria M. Tufano et al. *Catechesis and Mystagogy: Infant Baptism Liturgy*. Chicago: Training Publications, 1996. P. 55.
- ¹³ Pauley C. James. *Liturgical Catechesis in the 21st Century: A School of Discipleship*. Liturgy Training Publications, 2017. P. 20.
- ¹⁴ Farey Caroline et al. p. 39.