Toward an Imaginal Catechesis

by Richard E. McCarron

In an article that appeared in the Jesuit-sponsored weekly America in 2010, Robert Brancatelli challenged the state of catechesis in the United States.1 While there have been many gains from the standardization and professionalization of catechetical ministry, catechesis, he argues, has become too closely aligned with the US education system — adopting a language of outcomes and competency, strategic plans and best practices, and making sure no child is left behind.2 In short, catechesis has suffered from an institutionalization that has fixated on the acquisition of knowledge and seems to have forgotten the vision and aims of catechesis from the foundational catechetical documents of the twentieth century. Brancatelli calls for a recovery of imagination and a recovery of the emphasis on kerygma — the proclamation of the Good News of Christ in a way that resonates with contemporary people.

As we approach the Year of Faith (October 11, 2012–November 24, 2013), the church will give fresh attention to the new evangelization in the United States. As the General Directory for Catechesis develops, catechesis will have a vital role in the Church’s “mission of evangelization” (no. 77).3 As we recover the proclamation of the Good News in word and deed, we would do well to heed Brancatelli’s singling out of imagination for effective catechesis today.

Nature of Catechesis

It is important to stress the holistic vision of catechesis in the General Directory for Catechesis (GDC). Catechesis is an ecclesial act with the fundamental tasks of helping believers “to know, to celebrate, and to contemplate the mystery of Christ” (no. 85). Catechesis goes hand in hand with fostering ongoing conversion in believers, aiming for “integral formation rather than mere information” (no. 29). Such “integral formation” aims for a transformation of mind, heart, and action. Thus, the GDC stresses, “The definitive aim of catechesis is to put people not only in touch, but also in communion and intimacy, with Jesus Christ” (no. 80, citing Catechesi Tradendae, no. 5).

Capacity of Imagining

It is precisely because of this vision of transformation of human being and acting that imagination becomes so crucial. To speak of imagination is not calling for more creative catechetical sessions. Imagination is a vital component

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2 Brancatelli, 18.
of human perception, recognition, interpretation, and knowing. Philosopher Richard Kearney has offered detailed studies and genealogies of the imagination in the western tradition. Central to Kearney’s work is the conviction that “imagination lies at the very heart of our existence. So much so that we would not be human without it. But precisely because imagining is such an immediate and inextricable part feature of our experience it is easy to take for granted, to assume it as a given.”

There are three helpful ways of interpreting the human capacity to imagine: seeing-as, imagining-that, and imagining-how. The function of seeing-as refers to the human person’s ability to fashion and map images and sense experiences from our perception and memory to recognize the meaning of objects and actions in the world. The seeing-as function of imagination is productive. By mapping images of something dissimilar to something similar, something concrete to something abstract, we come to new insights. This is precisely the strategy the parables of Jesus use: the reign of God is like a mustard seed, a widow looking for a coin. . . . It is at work in our creed and liturgy—Christ is consubstantial with the Father.

Imagining-that and imagining-how move us from the poetic to the ethical dimension of human imagination. Imagining-that offers us a vision for a new state of affairs in our daily life. We might take the beatitudes as an example. Jesus’s teaching imagines that there can be a new order, a just order, an experience of hope and change in the reign of God. So, too, in our liturgy we imagine a world where God will:

   Bring us to share . . . the unending banquet of unity
   in a new heaven and a new earth,
   where the fullness of your peace will shine forth.

Imagining-how touches on our potential for action: how do we live and move and have our being (see Acts 17:28) in the new state of affairs we have imagined-that? Imagination allows us to enter into the possibilities and live and act in the new vision they offer. Richard Kearney speaks of the “ethical powers” of the imagination. The first power he names utopian. Here imagination “provides a sense of common purpose for meaningful social practices.” For Kearney the ethical powers include a testimonial capacity that can bear witness to the marginalized, the forgotten, the structures that keep some people excluded. The testimonial summons us to be sure the social practices we imagine are liberative. Kearney names a third ethical power of the imagination: empathic. Here we imagine—how about ourselves not in isolation, but rather always in a position of recognition and receptivity of the other person in our midst. When we talk about how to live out our faith, give witness in our daily life, and allow the conversion and transformation of catechesis to bear fruit, we need to imagine-how we can work together as Catholic Christians to allow the little stories of the daily lives of the marginalized to be heard. How can we make space for the stranger who asks for a drink of water, unsettle our grand visions, and ground our hope that a bit more of the values of the reign of God will take root in our neighborhoods and cities?

5 For a helpful synthesis of the literature, see Richard Eslinger, Narrative Imagination: Preaching the Worlds that Shape Us (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1995). “Seeing-as” is drawn from Mary Warnock; “imagining-that” and “imagining-how” come from Edward Casey.
8 Kearney, 226.
9 Kearney, 232.
Evocative Engagement

The GDC never uses the word *imagination* in its presentation of catechesis. However, it does highlight the role of "mystagogical catechesis" that helped early Christians to "interiorize . . . and to savour the experience of configuration to Christ and of communion with him" (GDC, no. 129). We can glean some insight from fourth-century mystagogy, even if it has limitations for contemporary times. Those preachers sought to engage the imagination of the newly baptized and of the people present. For example, Ambrose seeks to extend the experience of his listeners by expanding their liturgical imaginary, their seeing-as and imagining-that:

> You came into the baptistery; you saw the water; you saw the bishop, you saw the levite. And if anyone should perhaps be thinking of saying, “Is that all?” I say, indeed that is all. There truly is all, where there is all innocence, all devotion, all grace, all sanctification. You saw all you could see with the yes of the body, all that is open to human sight. You saw what is seen, but not what is done. What is unseen is much greater than what is seen: “because the things that are seen are transient, but things that are unseen are eternal” [2 Cor 4:18].

A strong engagement with the capacity of imagination of transform insight can learn from the classical mystagogues’ strategies that “retutored new Christians in ways to ‘re-perceive,’” that is, to hone the ‘eyes of the heart’ or the ‘eyes of faith’ to “map the path to the divine through detailed tracking of sense experience.” This process requires not just “image-making” culled from reports of observation, but also the “image-breaking” and “image-relocation” that came from the mystagogues’ seasoned spiritual and theological habitus.

As Georgia Frank explains, “. . . the catechists taught new Christians to recognize physical perception and reshape those perceptions through mental imagery.” Those perceptions, in our contemporary time, can include not only liturgical symbols, space, words, and actions, but can also extend to our perception of the world and creation as well. This imaginal catechesis creates a space and is a strategic practice that gradually shapes imaginal bodies mediating the values of the reign of God.

As we engage in catechetical ministry in relation to conversion, communion, and transformation of the baptized, attending to the role and strategies of imagination can help catechesis engage the whole human person in a way that touches head and heart. Catechists can help people to read the signs of the times, “declare . . . what we have seen and heard” so that all might have fellowship with the Triune God and one another (1 John 1:3), and imagine—how hope, forgiveness, peace, and love might reign in our hearts and world.

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12 Frank, 642.
13 Frank, 642.
14 Frank notes this relationship of space and imaginal bodies with regard to the Eucharist; 643.