An Accidental Catechist

by Armand D. Alcazar, F.S.C.

Pre-Vatican II

The Catechists

I have never thought of myself as a catechist. As a typical Catholic baby-boomer, I was baptized as an infant. My formal faith formation was through the Sisters of Providence in grade school, followed by the De Lasalle Christian Brothers in high school. Faith formation was all around me, and those women and men who wore religious habits were the ones who were in charge of this catechizing. Of course, learning the catechism was one way I was formed. However, the relationship with the sisters, brothers, and priests in our very Catholic neighborhood was a less obvious but equally compelling piece of my Catholic formation. Speaking of being less aware of my Catholic formation, I should mention my home life. I lived within an extended family, and my grandmother was my religious mentor in the organic sense: she lived her faith. I saw her pray the rosary or from her prayer book; heard her speak positively and fondly; and experienced her love through her attention, warmth, and cooking every day. Her example of living life was also my faith formation. Naturally, all of the religious and priests, the more formal catechists, were themselves educated and formed within the faith. But some of them were quite young and sometimes experts in fields other than Religious Education. Regardless, nearly every nun and brother taught religion.

The Catechumens

As a child and young adult, I probably met less than a handful of people who were not baptized. Just about everyone in the neighborhood I grew up in was Catholic and just about all of the Catholic kids went to Catholic schools. For the one or two who did not attend Catholic school, there was CCD on Wednesday afternoons. We all learned the basics about the Church and God through the recitation and memorization of the Baltimore Catechism. Since we, as Catholics, practiced infant baptism, the training was preparing not for baptism but for Eucharist, then for Confirmation, and, ultimately, salvation. In many regions of the United States, the Catholic school system was im-

---

1 The Confraternity of Christian Doctrine (CCD) organization was formed to provide the systematic presentation of the Catholic Faith in catechetical form to children, youth, and adults.

---

Brother Armand is a De Lasalle Christian Brother and professor in the Theology Department at Lewis University in Romeoville, IL. His interests lie in spirituality, the Catholic intellectual tradition, and Lasallian themes. Each year he presents at the International Association of Lasallian Universities in Rome, Italy.
pressive. “US Catholic school enrollment reached its peak during the early 1960s when there were more than 5.2 million students in almost thirteen thousand schools across the nation.”

The Catechism

The catechism was straightforward, secure, and sure. There was no gray area or wishy-washy waffling. The instruction was the instruction for everyone, no matter the circumstances. A typical lesson looked like this:

**Question:** Who made us?

**Answer:** God made us.

**Question:** Why did God make us?

**Answer:** God made us to show forth His goodness and to share with us His everlasting happiness in heaven.

The *Baltimore Catechism* had three parts, thirty-eight sub-categories, and 499 questions and answers in all. The catechism was taught in grade school religion class, and we were quizzed and even had contests to see who could stand up the longest answering correctly, much like a spelling bee.

In high school we studied religion from the tried and true *Living with Christ* series from St. Mary's Press that was widely used by Catholic high schools throughout the country. There was one book for each year in high school. Basically, this was the catechism through story form. Again, we all knew what was required and were all taught the same material. What it meant to be Catholic was very clear. Then, along came the Council of Vatican II.

National Events Influencing the U.S. Culture

As noteworthy as the Council was, it was given credit or blame for huge shifts in the entire Catholic culture in the United States. But there were other events that moved the culture: the birth control pill was approved by the FDA; the Berlin Wall was built; Andy Warhol, the Beatles, Peter, Paul and Mary, Woodstock, and the musical *Hair* influenced the arts; we landed on the moon; JFK, Bobby Kennedy, and MLK were assassinated; we engaged in both the Vietnam War and mass draft protests; the civil rights bill was passed; and the sexual revolution was born.

After Vatican II

The Catechists

Unaware of the exodus from religious life and the priesthood soon to come, *Lumen Gentium* acknowledged the laity:

> These faithful are by baptism made one body with Christ and are constituted among the People of God; they are in their own way made sharers in the priestly, prophetical, and kingly functions of Christ; and they carry out for their own part the mission of the whole Christian people in the Church and in the world.\(^3\)

When in grade school in the ‘50s and ‘60s, I had only three lay women as teachers: in second grade, Ms. Henley came into our classroom for spelling as our home teacher, Sr. Mary Pauline, S.P., went into Ms. Henley's class to teach religion. In third and sixth grade I had laywomen teachers, but a sister came into class to teach us religion. Similarly, while in high school, there were nearly forty De Lasalle Christian Brothers who each taught religion

---


the first period of the day. In contrast, today Catholic elementary and secondary schools combined have a total of 3.3% of the faculty members who are nuns, brothers, or priests. The laity, the “People of God,” are now doing the catechizing, and many of them are degree in theology, though not all. In some schools, religion is still taught by “good Catholics,” whereas positions in other disciplines require a degree.

Nevertheless, the laity has responded to the call to step forward to help in the leadership of the Church. For example, in my own order, we went from a glut of vocations to the brotherhood in 1965 with ninety-one postulants in our district alone to zero entrants by 1980. By the mid-eighties other countries had begun with some leadership training sessions for the laity around the life of our founder, the patron of teachers, St. John Baptiste De Lasalle. Cautionously, perhaps skeptically, we in the United States began offering such programs by the late 80s. Much to our surprise, lay people poured in to learn of the history, educational principles, and spiritual life of our founder. These graduates went on not only to be teachers and catechists but also to be the leaders of our institutions as principals and presidents. These new vocations or new responses to old calls, quadrupled the numbers who joined the Brotherhood in the 1960s from nearly 20,000 Brothers world-wide to nearly 88,000 Lasallians worldwide today.

**The Catechumens**

How does one determine who is a Catholic? Because of its measurability, oftentimes Mass attendance seems to be the criteria for determining Catholicity. The Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate (CARA) indicates that in 2012, 24% of Catholics self-identify as going to Mass weekly, whereas Mass attendance was at its height in the mid-50s at around 75% attendance.4

In 1975, 3.5 million students attended Catholic schools in the United States. In 2012 that number became 2.1 million. During that same time period, the percent of non-Catholics who attended Catholic schools went from 2.7% to 15.4%. From the year 2000 to 2012, enrollment in Catholic schools up through senior year decreased by 24%.

I show these statistics to point out that fewer and fewer Catholic youth are engaged in some type of formal religious education.

My own classroom enrollment reflects the above statistics. In a typical class of twenty-five, fourteen might say they are Roman Catholic; four are from differing Protestant affiliations; three are from non-Christian faiths such as Hinduism, Islam, Bahai, or Judaism; and four identify themselves as either agnostic or atheist. But these numbers don’t tell the whole story. Of the fourteen or so who say they were baptized Catholic, only five say that they are practicing Catholics; the other nine neither attend Mass nor engage in any practices they would identify as Catholic. This seems to lend credence to the statistic that the second largest denomination in the United States is former Roman Catholic. Although the above numbers are anecdotal, Pew Research reports that over one third (34%) of those between the ages of 18-24 are religiously unaffiliated.6

**Soul Searching** is a study of the religious knowledge and spiritual practices of US teens. One of its conclusions is: “The greater the supply of religiously grounded relationships, activities, programs, opportunities, and challenges available to teenagers, other things being equal, the more likely teenagers will be religiously engaged and invested.”7 Catholic teens scored very low in this study; so low that the authors dedicated an entire chapter to

---

Catholic teens. One reason given for low Catholic scores was that “simply put, the U.S. Catholic Church appears in its institutional infrastructure to invest fewer resources into youth ministry and education than do many other Christian traditions and denominations in the United States.”

Finally, the study indicates that most teens have a difficult to impossible time explaining what it is that they believe. “It seems that when the engagement and education of youth by their religious communities is weak, then the faith of teenagers in those traditions tends to degenerate into Moralistic Therapeutic Deism.” There is a lengthy description and listing about what entails Moralistic Therapeutic Deism. Basically, it is that a nice God created a nice world. If we're nice now, when we die we'll go to heaven, where it's very nice.

Anecdotally, I find all of the above findings true. By and large the students that I have in my undergraduate classes admit to a lack of church attendance and a lack of formal religious education. I am recognizing that a good percentage of the new catechumenate are now in undergraduate Catholic universities. I began this article saying that I never considered myself a catechist. But now, after teaching for over forty years, I understand what our founder meant when he said, “The Brothers are catechists by vocation.” Many of the new catechumens are now college age.

**The Catechism**

The Catholic school system worked. Millions were educated to such an extent that their children and their children's children would require more than memorized answers to their questions about the “great questions” surrounding birth, death, love, conscience, sin, joy, forgiveness, and suffering. Unless the faith relates to real life of the believer, there does not seem to be much tolerance, let alone interest, in today's believers. In the words of the Mission Congress of Bangkok in 1962, “How can we speak about salvation to people who feel no real consciousness of a need for salvation?” This congress shifted “…to a serious theological study of the relation of human conditions to the Gospel message.” Gabriel Moran, a leading catechetical writer during Vatican II, put it another way: “Catechists are and have to be concerned primarily with people. We start and end with people because that is where God is.”

Before Vatican II, some described the catechism more as a litmus test for orthodoxy than a window into the heart of Jesus. On the one hand, familiarity with the catechism did not necessarily lead to a familiarity with Jesus. Catholics rarely invoked the name Jesus. As a participant observer at the Bishops Synod, Brother Alvaro Echeverria, F.S.C., Superior General of the De Lasalle Christian Brothers, offered this intervention:

> The New Evangelization for our youth and for those who accompany them must be a call to return to the Gospel and to discover that the central nucleus of our faith is a personal encounter with Jesus Christ which leads us to become a community of disciples. Our mission with regard to the young is that of being companions in the search, humble guides who help them to discover a journey and give meaning to their lives. Rather than masters who teach from on high or judges who judge or condemn from the outside, we are called to be brothers and sisters who accompany from within.

---

9 Smith and Denton, *Soul Searching*, 261.
On the other hand, the catechism somehow seemed more alongside life without necessarily being a part of everyday living. Again, Brother Alvaro wrote:

> It is important to begin with life, so that the young will not lose interest in the Christian message because it has been presented to their intellect as an ideology imposed upon them in an authoritarian way or, inferentially, has originated from principles that have no relation to their real life. This is why our principal role is to help every young person feel loved, appreciated, blessed, important and necessary for others.\(^\text{13}\)

Vatican II moved us to want *To Teach as Jesus Did*, the title of the American Bishops’ Pastoral of 1972. If we are teaching the catechism meaningfully today, our students will echo the disciples on the road to Emmaus: “Were not our hearts burning within us while he spoke to us on the way and opened the scriptures to us?” Or, to quote the patron of teachers, St. John Baptist de Lasalle, “To touch the hearts of your students is the greatest miracle you can perform.” Perhaps, when any of us touch the hearts of students at any age, then, indeed, we are catechists.\(^\text{14}\)

---

\(^{13}\) Echeverria, “Summary: Vatican.