“Keep On Teaching”

Its Evolution and Journey

Therese Wilson Favors

The author offers a personal testimony to the development and implementation of an Africentric catechesis in the Archdiocese of Baltimore.

Keep on Teaching is a catechetical ministry established twenty years ago in the Archdiocese of Baltimore to engage catechists who serve in the African American Catholic community. Its emphasis is to inspire and encourage catechists to factor culture (both Black and Catholic) and its deep roots into their catechetical planning and implementation.

The theme of Keep on Teaching is derived from Scripture, particularly from Paul’s powerful and provocative story found in Acts 20:7-12: “On the first day of the week when we gathered to break bread, Paul spoke to them because he was going to leave on the next day, and he kept on speaking (teaching and preaching) until midnight” (NAB). The story continues, filled with rich insights regarding faith formation and including a bit of drama. All through the night, Paul maintains a marathon of catechetical and evangelical discourse. As Paul taught, a young man named Eutychus who was seated on a windowsill went sound asleep and fell from the third story to the ground. The lesson was disrupted while the crowd of listeners rushed to gather around Eutychus who was thought dead. Then, Paul went down, threw himself upon him, and said as he embraced him, “Don’t be alarmed; there is life in him.” Yes, Paul had hugged that man back to life again. Then they reassembled, broke bread, and after a long conversation that lasted until daybreak, Paul departed. And they took the boy away alive and were immeasurably comforted.

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Catechist and preacher, Paul was faced with some of the same challenges that catechists of today encounter: even the faithful fall asleep in our sessions, and we face time constraints with our programming. Who has enough time to share the unending story of redemption and liberation that our “God makes a way out of no way”? Additionally, faith formation warrants a “transformative experience,” and conversion may need to be a recurring faith building activity and aim of catechesis. Thus, the mission to “Keep on Teaching” has as its end goal to have people transformed. Alive in faith, they come to know “who they are” and “whose they are,” even if it means spiritually and culturally hugging our people back to life again.

For twenty years now, the Nahimah Catechists (creators of “Keep on Teaching” ministry) of the Archdiocese of Baltimore have been strengthened and inspired through the grace of God to keep teaching in ways that factor in culture. It is our humble way of following Pope John Paul II’s call for inculturation in catechesis:

Catechesis is called to bring the power of the Gospel into the very heart of culture and cultures. . . . Catechesis will seek to know these cultures and their essential components, it will learn their significant expressions . . . and help them bring forth from their own living traditions original expressions of Christian life, celebration and thought. (Catechesi Tradendae, no. 53)

In pursuing the task of inculturation within the catechetical arena, “Keep on Teaching” became both a movement and a resource that respects Black and Catholic ways of perceiving, conceptualizing, and sharing the story of God’s love for humankind. This was and continues to be achieved by offering and developing forums/workshops and resource booklets to assist catechists who yearn to strengthen their faith formation opportunities by incorporating insights from an Africentric and Catholic perspective.

Through the Keep on Teaching forums, Black Catholic scholars and practitioners from across the nation were engaged to explore topics that have great relevance to catechists, always blending into their presentation insights from an African and American perspective. These scholars and practitioners included: Dr. Harolyn Belcher; Dr. Janice Hale Benson; Mr. Richard Cheri; Rev. Dr. Giles Conwill; Dr. Chris Nwaka Egbulem; Dr. Toinette Eugene; Mr. Arnoldo Gbenyon; Rev. Raymond Harris; Mr. Leon Henderson; Mrs. Charlene Howard; Sr. Dr. Eva Marie Lumas, S.S.S.; Rev. Dr. Paul M. Marshall, S.M.; Sr. Dr. Eva Regina Martin, S.S.F.; Dr. Edwin Nichols; Sr. Dr. Jamie T. Phelps, O.P.; Dr. Cyprian Lamar Rowe; Ms. Valerie Shields; Rev. Dr. Donald A. Sterling; and Dr. C. Vanessa White.

Imagine studying and growing in understanding of the sacraments with the inclusion and contributions of the great teachers of the church out of Africa or learning new insights on Catholic prayer and ritual that had roots connecting to Africa. Minds and hearts were transformed through the discovery of the African presence in Sacred Scripture. Faith was deepened through the study of Jesus in
the writings and preaching of noted Black religious leaders. Enhancing the catechist’s relationship with Jesus is always a bonus blessing! We have journeyed with Matthew, Mark, Luke, John, and Paul as well as many prophets and saints. Other forums brought new knowledge from research discussing effective learning styles for African American children and youth that were rooted in Black spirituality. The forums brought forth broad discussions and presentations exploring the impact of culture on one’s perspective and life, Catholic identity and the relationship between catechesis and evangelization. Last but not least was the deep delving into the *General Directory for Catechesis*, providing a context for study, discussion, and conversations surrounding implications for its implementation.

This has become the story of *Keep on Teaching*. Yet its evolution was precipitated through a transformative defining moment.

**The Transformative Defining Moment**

In every transformative experience, the point of “awakening” is always powerful and often unforgettable. In 1989, through the vision and ministry of the Office of African American Catholic Ministries and the Division of Religious Education, a new adventure of inculturating catechesis was forged. At that time, Most Rev. John H. Ricard, S.S.J., was urban vicar for the Archdiocese of Baltimore. He secured financial and archdiocesan support for this new adventure. Bishop Ricard even joined the forty men and women from predominantly African American parishes as they were invited to undergo an immersion process, being plunged into the deep insights of catechesis from an Africentric and Catholic perspective. The program was titled *Mariama*, an intensive formation process for catechists deriving from the Institute of Black Catholic Studies’ Imani Program. It was time intensive and study intensive. It required strong commitment from the participants and a willingness to become transformed from old ways of thinking and pursuing catechesis into a “new way of being and perceiving.” This was a conversion process of sorts—one not for the faint-hearted. The instructors, Sr. Eva Marie Lumas, S.S.S., and Sr. Oralisa Martin, S.S.F., were travelling around the country sharing their insights on this topic while completing doctoral studies at Howard University in Washington, D.C. Baltimore was one site on the circuit. These women were charged with inspiration, energy, knowledge, and faith. Our “awakenings” were phenomenal and long lasting.

Participants grappled with theory and discerned important questions such as: How does Africentricity impact and challenge our current methods of catechizing towards Christian formation? What are the benefits of an Africentric perspective and how are our people harmed without one? What are the nature and goals of an Africentric Catholic–based religious education curriculum? What contributions have Africans and African Americans made to our understanding of sacraments, formation and catechesis? What are the non-negotiables in the teaching/learning
process with African American adults, youth and children? Where should our resources in African American parishes be spent and what resources are most effective for, with, and among African Americans? What is an effective teaching/learning methodology to be employed in our communities? What are the necessities for catechist formation for those who serve in the African American community?

Sr. Eva and Sr. Oralisa were interactive teachers with enormous resources, research, and insights. Our minds and hearts were twisted with long hours spent in exploring the above questions. Prayer was deep and soul-filled. Excellent resources were provided as well as a methodology for meaningful instruction and formation. As a result of these new “awakenings,” lesson plans were crafted and critiqued. It was an explosion of newness. Change was coming!

**Embedded in a Season of Change**

It took months for the participants to dissect all that was gleaned from our immersion experience. We underwent a conversion. We gathered immediately after the immersion process to debrief our awakening, articulate new insights gained, define pastoral implications and determine an avenue to implement this inculturated style of catechesis in Baltimore. A fresh new way of catechizing was embedded in our spirit, and thus everything we hoped for warranted a newness, a change in season.

We met monthly and had conversations with pastoral leaders as a means of gaining support for a “change of season” that was needed. During our monthly debriefing sessions each catechist would share something that was Africentric that could be used in a catechetical session. That ‘something’ became poems, additional theological or historical research, music, proverbs, religious articles, artifacts, drawings, arts, and crafts. The aim here was to build a collective “treasure chest” of Africentric resources for catechetical and faith formation sessions that all of us could use. After a year of monthly meetings, we created a forum through an all day workshop inviting other catechists who were not able to attend the immersion process. Its purpose was to explore related topics and issues as stated above. This was coupled with a resource booklet. Both the forum/workshop and resource were titled *Keep on Teaching.*

**Warning:**

**New Construction of Catechetical Resources Ahead**

After being transformed the catechists acquired a critical eye and a holy boldness to become catechetical engineers. These strong catechists (*Nahimah*) began to evaluate the print resources available, searching for insights, pictures,
and teachings that factored culture into the catechetical process. We discovered that little was present and that God was calling us, who had our own “burning bush” experience, to construct new resources from an Africentric perspective. This “construction of a new catechetical resource” was a means of “letting our people go” to a land of milk and honey where they could see themselves prosper and grow in the faith.

Construction was tedious because even though we had a holy boldness and new ideas that made sense to us, passing it on to others through written words was another challenge. We made a blueprint from our learning sessions, thinking . . . what were the non-negotiables in relating to others the nature and goals of Africentric catechesis? Here the research rendered by Dr. Toinette Eugene became a focal point. Whatever we constructed must incorporate Dr. Eugene’s wisdom and prophetic discernment, commonly called LACES. In short LACES encourages that every session experienced by African American adults, youth, and children should be one that

• Provides a Liberating experience for our people. Fashioning into the catechetical experience an encounter that calls to mind that God can still rescue from the fiery furnace and Jesus can still make house calls to heal the sin-sick soul. God can liberate you from that which shackles you.

• Affirms Blackness. In a society that too often negates and devalues our Blackness, it is important to raise consciousness with the outcome of promoting self-esteem.

• Aims for Conversion. That’s what we signed up for in the enterprise of catechesis. Catechists tell the story of Jesus so that others may come to know him for themselves so that a “turn around” may be internalized (conversion). Scripture tells that Jesus was with the apostles for long periods of time, yet they were in need of being converted over and over again. The same can be said for us today. You cannot come to the Father unless through Jesus.

• Evangelizes the people. The ministry of evangelization brings hope to the people: Help is on its way and his name is Jesus Christ, the Redeemer.

• Synthesizes the sacred and the secular. God is at work in the world and all can be sacred. Therefore, in our teaching we should incorporate spiritual gleanings from movies, music, poems and literature, paintings, dance, and the arts.

LACES, therefore, is an acronym that means that catechesis in the African American community is Liberative, Affirmative, has a Conversion component, Evangelizes and Synthesizes the sacred and secular.

LACES became a blueprint/template for those who were constructing the “newly inculturated” catechetical resources, showcasing a variety of lessons/sessions. Discernment before construction ensued. We discussed: Where would we begin?
What should be a focus for the *Keep On Teaching* booklets? We went to our people and asked them what catechetical subject matter we should explore as we showcased how to implement LACES. And our people answered one by one, year after year: sacraments; the Mass and great prayers of the church; christology; saints and holy people; scripture including the power of the parables, miracle stories, and the prophets. Additionally, questions were raised about the impact of culture on catechesis and learning styles.

Thus, the Nahimah catechists met to construct. After determining a theme, a format was designed. In the beginning most people teamed up with another in crafting a lesson/session for each topic. Catechetical engineers then put to paper a lesson using LACES and providing resources on a self-selected segment of the theme within the *Keep On Teaching* booklet. This required prayer, research, and collective work among us. Our editor supplied resources, and we took to heart the collective sharing that took place in building our “treasure chests.” Deadlines were set, and for the most part people stuck to them for they understood that they were part of something bigger than themselves. We evaluated everything and we also celebrated.

We ask our people to share through written evaluation forms their wisdom and their thoughts as we move from one theme to another from one year to another. New catechists are invited into the construction circle only after being mentored by one who underwent the “immersion” process. During the Christmas season, we gather to evaluate and to celebrate the special season so important for our ministry: “In the beginning was the Word and the Word became flesh and dwelt among us” (John 1:1). For the past twenty years, we have carefully read the evaluations generated from our September *Keep On Teaching* forum (always the week before the national celebration of Catechetical Sunday). We have discussed the written thoughts of the participants. Gathering together for evaluation, celebration, and invitation helped us to stay fresh and provided focus and new energy to begin again to “construct a new resource ahead” in the future.

*A Set Up for God to Show Up*

As with many catechetical formation endeavors, *Keep on Teaching* has been an adventure of spiritual surprises. When we began the ministry we did not know that lives would be re-built in faith. Not because of what we did, but because we recognized how God was working in our midst and we joined God in the endeavor. When we began, we were not fully aware of who we were culturally, but now cultural identity has been discovered and continues to be unfurled by many and re-built by others. The wave of God's Spirit permeated that discovery as well as we yearned to be renewed by the Holy Spirit. “Since we live in the Spirit let us keep in step with the Spirit” (Gal 5:25).
The collective work of the Nahimah Catechists continues to fortify this ministry. For twenty years it has been sustained by the grace of God and nourished by men and women of faith who draw strength from the Lord. These are the ones who don’t leave to chance the passing on of the faith in the Catholic tradition. You may recognize them for they continue to Keep on Teaching . . .

Most Rev. John H. Ricard, S.S.J.; Rev. Maurice J. Blackwell; Margaret Booker; Vera Boone; Joyce Bennett-Norwood; Jacqueline Campbell; Beverly A. Carroll; Mary G. Clayton; Russia Drones*; Barbara Ferguson*; Dr. Kirk P. Gaddy; Joan Green; Scarlett Haskins; Delores Hawthorne; Uklin Homer; Sr. Magdala Marie Gilbert, O.S.P.; Florine Day James*; Janet E. Jones*; Brian K. Johnson; Ella F. Johnson*; Jacqueline Johnson; Kirk Johnson; Anna Marie Joyner; Vashti Jackson Lemmuel; Joyce Logan; Zada Malachi*; Sharon Gibson McClain; Sr. Marian Joseph Martin, O.S.P. *; Natalie Mercer; Shirley Page; Dorothy Porter*; Sr. Clarice Proctor, O.S.P.; Edith Pumphrey; Muriel Rice; Howard W. Roberts; Sr. Anita Smith, O.S.F.; Bro. Martin de Porres Smith, C.Ss.R.; Randolph Smith; Rose Smith; Charlotte Sullivan*; Rev. Donald A. Sterling; Laura Thomas; Patricia A. Waddell; Patricia West; Beverly C. White; and Sharon H. Winchester. The illustrative and graphic artists in residence include: Julee Dickerson Thompson and Aziza A. Cooper.

*Deceased

Keep on Teaching has been a work in progress as well as a collaborative effort. It has been sustained by the hard work and prayers of the community. Looking back over the past twenty years, I am thankful for the contributions and gifts of the scholars and ministers who have contributed to the Keep on Teaching process. To God be the glory!