

The Catechist Witnesses to a Living Tradition of Faith

Friday 29th April 2022

Your Excellency Msgr Grušas

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Reverend Fathers and Delegates for Catechesis,

Greeting

As we are still celebrating Easter, the greatest feast of our faith, I would like to greet you with the same words that our Lord used when greeting the apostles on Easter Sunday: "Peace be with you!" (Luke 24,36). This is indeed a greeting that encourages us because we know that the Lord is always with us. For us members of the Society of Christian Doctrine this is a greeting very close to our hearts because this is how we greet one another whenever we meet.

I would like to share with you 3 points:

1. "In all things, give thanks." (1 Thessalonians 5, 18)
2. "Impart what you have heard from me to those who can teach" (2 Timothy 2, 2)
3. The Catechist witnesses to a living Tradition of faith

1. “In all things, give thanks.” (1 Thessalonians 5, 18)

It is fitting to start with a word of thanksgiving to our Lord for calling us to be catechists and messengers of his Word. As we confess that all good things come from God and that all is from God, all is through God and all is for God, how can we fail to be grateful? Let us never lose the grace to be grateful to God because this attitude is so fundamental and basic not only to our apostolate but also to our spiritual life. Let us constantly ask God for the grace to be attentive (and not alienated) so that we can notice and grasp God’s blessings and works in our life. God works silently, slowly and surprisingly and therefore we need to have this disposition to be attentive and to always be grateful.

Unfortunately the alternative of not being thankful is harmful and can make us acutely sterile. If we lose the ability to be grateful we can become bitter, demanding, selfish and always dissatisfied. Satan wants us to be ungrateful because this leads to the loss of joy and hope which are indispensable to our calling. Satan urgently needs to be rebuked and this is done when we, in spite of everything, we continue believing, hoping and loving.

Today in particular we thank God for this *Antiquum Ministerium* (ancient ministry) in the Church and for “Bishops, priests and deacons, who together with many men and women in the consecrated life (and countless lay men and women), devoted their lives to catechetical instruction so that the faith might be an effective support for the life of every human being.”¹ Let us not forget to thank God for calling us here present to be catechists. It is a privilege to be a catechist because it allows us to serve humbly and hiddenly. Being a catechist gives us the opportunity to give our lives in love and to devote ourselves to the education of children, young people and adults.²

I humbly thank you for giving me this opportunity to share some thoughts on the theme: *The Catechist Witnesses to the Living Tradition of Faith*. The Society of which I am a member of has been involved in catechesis and the formation in faith for many decades not only in Malta but also overseas.

¹ Pope Francis, *Antiquum Ministerium*, 3

² Pope Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium*, 76.

2. “Impart what you have heard from me to those who can teach” (2 Tim 2, 2)

The theme chosen for this meeting: “Impart what you have heard from me to those who can teach” (2 Timothy 2, 2) is the same Biblical verse that inspired the Founder, St. George Preca (1880-1962) to establish the Society of Christian Doctrine at the dawn of the 20th century. The situation of catechesis and faith formation in Malta left much to be desired. Although there were some sporadic initiatives, the teaching of religion was so sadly lacking. The Maltese, who generally speaking, were very religious, pious and devotional, urgently needed to be instructed in their faith.

Dun Ġorġ was very much aware of these circumstances. After being ordained a priest in December 1906, he spent the first couple of months in prayer and meditation. He himself narrated: “This is how the SDC started. When I became a priest, I had no other thought, absolutely no other interest, than to wait for the morning and celebrate Mass. After Mass, I always went straight home. Our house was not big. We had a room to the roof. I would go up there to pray the breviary. During the stillness, one morning, I had an inspiration from God, yes an inspiration that came to me from God that I should choose some young people and teach them so that they would be able to give religious formation to others.”

Dun Ġorġ thought deeply about this inspiration and realised that those who teach should be themselves well formed in the Catholic faith. It occurred to him to gather some young men whom he could form and train so that they would be able to teach catechism to others. Thus the Society of Christian Doctrine (MUSEUM - Master may the whole world follow your Gospel.) was founded in March 1907 with a two-fold aim expressed in the Rule of life that we live by once we become incorporated members in the Society.

1. Holiness of its members (Christ Crucified – Virtues of humility and meekness). He urged members to sanctify ourselves (to let God make us holy) and he will do great things through us.
2. To help the bishops (those mainly responsible for the teaching of faith) by proclaiming the teachings of the Catholic Church among children, youths and adults.

During these last 115 years the Society has grown and spread its apostolate throughout Malta and Gozo by opening Centres in towns and villages where members welcome all those who want to receive catechism and faith formation. In collaboration with the Ordinary and with parish priests our members prepare the young ones and youth for the reception of the sacraments of Holy Communion and Confirmation. They don't just come to our Centres to get a service. An SDC centre is not a school. Our members through their being and their apostolate try to create a communal environment so that the centre continues to be a place of God, a place of love, a place of good instruction (learning community), a place of peace.

Apart from this, members offer faith formation that continues after confirmation. These groups of adolescents and youths are like precious stones because we can accompany them in all aspects of their life. It is encouraging to see young people who on a daily basis are present in our centres. **Why do they come?**

- I don't think that they essentially come for the activities that are organized.
- They come to learn about Jesus and God.
- They come to learn how to pray.
- They come because they enjoy the company of their fellow friends and the company of the SDC members.
- I want to believe that they come to seek God.

The Society is also blessed with centres overseas that do enrich us because these missions help us to widen our vision as the members immerse themselves in various realities of the Church.

The Founder himself sent and blessed the first members who emigrated to Australia and founded the SDC. 40 years ago, the SDC started sending members in the so-called missionary countries and today we are present in Kenya, Peru, Cuba, Albania, Poland and UK. The Founder died 60 years ago (1962) but his charism lives on in the members of the SDC. "Good instruction is the source of all well-being."

3. The Catechist Witnesses to a Living Tradition of Faith

Faith is Alive

Faith in Christ is something alive and has the power to bring life in those who receive and treasure it. Eventually it must be transmitted so that it continues to bring life in others. This reminds me of the seed that bears fruit and the same fruit produces the seed that can in its own time bear more fruit. This natural process guarantees the continuous existence of both the seed and the fruit.

The Encounter with the Living Christ

When we speak about Faith, we are essentially referring to the encounter (a relationship) between Jesus and the follower who becomes a believer in the Holy Trinity. The first disciples who met Jesus, came to know him, were attracted by him. Jesus taught them and told them that he is the Son of God and that they too were the beloved children of the loving Father (The Good News – God loves us).

God Initiates the Encounter

The first disciples were attracted by Jesus and although they had their shortcomings and limitations, he did not give up on them and through his life and teachings he persuaded them that they were eternally loved by the merciful Father. There is no genuine and authentic faith, hope and love if we forget that everything comes from God and that he always takes the initiative. As St. Paul wrote: “I planted the seed and Apollos watered it, but **God made it grow.**” (1 Corinthians 3,6). “The true protagonist of all authentic catechesis is however the Holy Spirit.”³

This reminds me of a sentiment and a confession by the soon to be canonized, Blessed Charles de Foucauld: “As soon as I came to believe there was God, I understood that I could not do otherwise than to live only for him.”

³ *Directory for Catechesis* 2020, 112

Faith Must be Shared

Faith implies a commitment. It cannot be passive because it is something alive. In the beginning of Mark's Gospel we read: "and he appointed twelve, they were **to be his companions** and **to be sent out** to proclaim the message." (Mark 3,14). They first became his friends and eventually this companionship led to the going forth. We can speak of the "a living tradition of faith" because of this dynamic that Pope Francis summarizes in the term "Missionary-Disciples". As we read in *Christifidelis Laici* and later in *Evangelii Gaudium*: "communion and mission are profoundly interconnected."⁴ Thus the Church (the community of believers) can continue to grow like the seeds that bear multitudes of good fruit.

Thus, faith that started by an attraction opens the believer to his neighbours. This relationship implies the sharing of what one has received. Unlike an earthly treasure or a precious gift that should be kept safely so that no one steals it away from us, our precious treasure of faith should be seen, shared, spread with others so that they too may come to encounter Jesus. Catechesis gives us this opportunity. The good news is that although we are sharing it, we never risk of losing our faith. On the other hand, shared faith in the community, leads to a more profound, deeper, stronger and more authentic faith in the one who has committed himself for such a task. In simpler words: one way of confirming and strengthening one's faith in Jesus Christ is by going out and happily share it in ordinary ways.

In his homily on Saturday 25th April 2020 (feast of St. Mark) Pope Francis spoke of the missionary dimension of faith: "Either faith has a missionary dimension, or it is not faith. Faith is not something only for myself, so that I may grow with faith: this is a gnostic heresy. Faith always leads you to come out of yourself, to go out. The transmission of faith; faith must be transmitted, it must be offered, above all by witness. Go so that people see how you live."

⁴ *Directory for Catechesis* 2020, 50.

The Contribution of Catechesis

We thank God that this has been happening for these last two thousand years. It happened to us too. From whom did you receive your faith in Jesus Christ? How did you receive it? Catechesis has contributed too so that this living tradition of faith continued in spite of all the struggles that the Church had to face. Catechesis has contributed to keep faith alive. Quoting *Ad Gentes*, in *Antiquum Ministerium* Pope Francis emphasizes “the outstanding and absolutely necessary contribution to the spread of the faith”⁵ by catechists. In order for this contribution to continue, we must be “faithful to the past and responsible for the present as these are necessary conditions for the Church to carry out her mission in the world.”⁶

Goals and Tasks of Catechesis

I was very happy to read the goals and tasks of catechesis in the Directory of Catechesis because these are urgently needed so that we don't miss the whole point and end up involving ourselves in a lot of wonderful and well-organized activities without reaching and fulfilling the main goals of catechesis. We need directions because we can easily be deceived like when for example a catechist ends up preaching his own ideas and thoughts rather than preaching the Gospel of Jesus. Another deception could be when a catechist leads the children, youths or adults to herself (to befriend her/him) rather than to lead them to Jesus. There is also the danger that catechism becomes “catechist-centered” or a process that ends up being “all about me - the catechist”. Catechism should always be Christ-centered and all about Jesus and his Church.

Section 3 of chapter 2 in part 1 of the Directory of Catechesis can direct us in a very clear way: “At the centre of every process of catechesis is the living encounter with Christ.”⁷ Some other quotes that I would like to highlight from this same section:

- Communion with Christ is the centre of the Christian Life, and as a result the centre of catechetical action. (Par. 75)

⁵ Pope Francis, *Antiquum Ministerium*, 4

⁶ Pope Francis, *Antiquum Ministerium*, 5

⁷ *Directory for Catechesis*, 75.

- The encounter with Christ involves the person in his totality: heart, mind, senses. (Par. 76)
- Catechesis makes the initial conversion ripen and helps Christians to give a complete meaning to their existence, educating them in a mentality of faith in keeping them with the Gospel. (Par. 77)

A Privilege

With these clear goals in mind let us believe in the important contribution of catechesis so that through our humble work we may facilitate this encounter of faith between Jesus and those who thirst for the living water. How wonderful it is that the merciful Jesus comes to quench the thirst of those who seek him and how marvellous it is that somehow we as catechists can contribute for such a meeting to take place.

Transmission by Example

Sometimes catechists (who teach children and young people) are worried on how they should transmit faith or on how they should be witnesses of this living tradition of faith. I would like to emphasize that the catechist's good example is indispensable for the transmission of faith. The most fruitful way of witnessing is by example. People, especially children, watch us and they notice a lot. Words are important but people are more struck by our behaviour rather than by our teachings. I don't remember what my catechists taught me but I do remember their smile, their joy, their generosity. I accepted what they were saying because they were holy people and they belonged to Jesus. St. George Preca used to repeat the adage: "No one gives from what he doesn't have."

Important Qualities

Joy, courage and enthusiasm that come from living in Christ are important qualities for those who undertake this mission of being catechists. We are blessed with a Pope who teaches us and stresses the vitality of being joyful evangelizers. How can we spread the joy of the Gospel if we haven't yet really had a personal encounter with the risen Lord who brings the true light in our hearts? "The joy of the Gospel fills the hearts and lives of all who encounter Jesus" reminds us Pope Francis in his first sentence of the

Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii Gaudium*. He later adds: “May the world of our time, which is searching, sometimes with anguish, sometimes with hope, be enabled to receive the good news not from evangelizers who are dejected, discouraged, impatient or anxious, but from ministers of the Gospel whose lives glow with fervour, who have first received the joy of Christ.”⁸

The Catechist is a Witness of Christ

We may face difficult and challenging times but let us be encouraged by St. Peter’s words: “No one can hurt you if you are determined to do only what is right; and blessed are you if you have to suffer for being upright. Have no dread of them; have no fear. Simply proclaim the Lord Christ holy in your hearts, and always have your answer ready for people who ask you the reason for the hope that you have.” (1 Peter 3, 13-16) People sometimes are marvelled by authentic witnesses of Christ. “Why are you so joyful? Why are you so generous? Don’t you have problems like other people? May we all take these opportunities to express that Christ is the reason for all this.

⁸ Pope Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium*, 10.

Conclusion

The Cistercian monk Thomas Merton gave his last lecture in Bangkok just before he died, electrocuted in the shower. After the lecture he spoke with a religious sister who asked why he had not tried to convert his hearers to Christianity. His last known words were: "I think today it is more important for us to let God live in us in such a way that others may feel God and come to believe in God because they feel how God lives in us." This was in 1968 and I believe that it is still relevant for us catechists in this day and age.

We need to believe in what we do because God trusts us. He can work wonders through our humble work. Who knows what will happen and how God will work in those people who come to us for catechism. "You can find out how many seeds are there in a fruit, but you cannot know how many fruit can be produced by the seed."

When discouraged let us recall that Jesus is always with us and as Saint Teresa of Calcutta said: "I know that God will not give me anything I can't handle. I just wish he didn't trust me that much!"

Peace be with you