

Catechesis and Liturgy - Jacquelyne M. Witter

(from NCCL "Evangelizing Catechesis" resource)

Introduction

The Gospel of Luke tells the story of two disciples on the first Easter who are joined by a stranger as they walk to Emmaus. As this stranger listens to them and talks with them about their recent experiences, he breaks open the Scriptures for them. Later he joins them for a meal at which he takes the bread, blesses it, breaks it, and gives it to those assembled around the table. With this, their eyes are opened so that they recognize the stranger for who he is: the Lord. The disciples return to Jerusalem to announce what they witnessed and to tell how they came to recognize the Lord in the breaking of the bread (Luke 24:13-35).

This Gospel story provides insights into the close relationship between catechesis and liturgy: The disciples who have been initiated into faith are led to deeper faith and to praise and thanksgiving as they:

- recount and reflect on their experiences
- encounter the risen Lord
- are helped to explore the meaning of the Scriptures
- gather around the table for the blessing, breaking, and sharing of the bread
- profess their faith in the risen Lord
- go forth to tell others what they have come to know and understand (General Directory for Catechesis [GDC], #53-54)

It would be difficult to overestimate the important relationship between catechesis and liturgy (#122). Pope John Paul II's Apostolic exhortation *On Catechesis in Our Time* (*Catechesi Tradendae* CT) notes their intimate connection: "Catechesis is intrinsically bound to every liturgical and sacramental action" (#23). Catechesis, "a school of faith, an initiation and apprenticeship in the entire Christian life" (GDC, #30), flows from and leads to liturgy, "the outstanding means whereby the faithful may express in their lives and manifest to others the mystery of Christ and the real nature of the true Church" (Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy [*Sacrosanctum Concilium*, SC], #2). The great works of proclaiming the Gospel and converting to a life in Christ accomplished through evangelization and catechesis are essential precursors to liturgy: "Before people can come to liturgy they must be called to faith and conversion" (SC, #9).

The Nature of Liturgy

The word "liturgy" comes from the Greek word *leitourgia*, which means "work of the people." It originally referred to public works of service done for the good of the people, such as the building of a bridge. As time went on, it also came to refer to religious service. By the end of the apostolic period, it was used to describe service of God and service of the community. Gradually, the Church adopted the word to describe all of Christian worship. Today the word refers to the official public worship of the Church. Specifically, liturgy includes Mass, the sacraments, the Liturgy of the Hours (the daily prayer of the Church), rites of installation and ordination for service in the Church, and occasional liturgies such as religious profession or the dedication of a church. The Church, the Body of Christ, joins Christ in prayer and worship in liturgy (SC, #7).

Liturgy celebrates the central mystery of our faith: the life, suffering, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. As the Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy states: "As Christ was sent by the Father, he himself also sent the apostles, filled with the Holy Spirit. Their mission was, first, by preaching the Gospel to every creature, to proclaim that by his death and resurrection Christ has freed us from Satan's grip and brought us into the Father's kingdom. By the work they preached they were also to bring into effect through the sacrifice and the sacraments, the center of the whole liturgical life" (emphasis added, SC, #6).

Theological Foundations of Liturgy

In liturgy the Church expresses its fundamental beliefs whose sources are Scripture, Tradition, and the Magisterium (GDC, #96). Liturgy is Trinitarian. Christians are baptized "in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit." This fundamental belief in three persons in one God is clearly expressed in Baptism and in all aspects of liturgy. The Church always prays to the Father, through the Son, in the Holy Spirit (GDC, #82; SC, #6).

Liturgy is Christ-centered (GDC, #98; SC, #7). The Church is the Body of Christ called to continue Christ's saving work. The Church participates in the saving work of Christ in and through the liturgy by which it is empowered to fulfill its mission: Go, therefore, and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you (Matthew 28:19-20).

Liturgy is the Church's response to God's initiative. From the time of creation, God has reached out to human beings to make God's love and presence known. In the fullness of time, God became human in Jesus Christ to bring salvation to all humankind. God's saving work for us in redemption is a gift from God freely given to us in and through Christ. In liturgy, the Church responds with praise and thanksgiving to God's ongoing gift of salvation (GDC, #101; SC, #5).

Liturgy is an action of the Church as Church (GDC, #105-106; SC, #26). The Church is the community of the baptized. Liturgy is the prayer of this ecclesia, the assembly gathered around the Lord. Liturgy is not private, personal prayer or public group prayer. It is ecclesial prayer.

Liturgy is incarnational and ritual prayer (GDC, #207; SC, #61). God is present and acts in creation and human life, most significantly in the incarnation of Jesus Christ. Liturgy involves words, actions, and symbols that engage the whole person.

Liturgy sanctifies human beings and human life. The liturgy recalls and makes present salvation history in Word and sacrament. The daily, weekly, and yearly rhythms of the prayer of the Church consecrate human beings in the daily, weekly, and yearly rhythms of life (GDC, #117; SC, #1021).

Catechesis and Liturgy

One of the fundamental tasks of catechesis is liturgical education. Liturgical education, according to the GDC, "along with promoting a knowledge of the meaning of the liturgy and the sacraments, must also educate the disciples of Jesus Christ, 'for prayer, for thanksgiving, for repentance, for praying

with confidence, for community spirit, for understanding correctly the meaning of the creeds" (DCG, [1971] #25b), as a of "this is necessary for a true liturgical life" (GDC, #85).

What are the pastoral implications of this statement? First, there must be an underlying understanding that "the definitive aim of catechesis is to put people not only in touch, but also in communion and intimacy, with Jesus Christ" (CT, #5). The liturgy is the means by which Christians express and experience intimacy with Jesus Christ. As SC states:

Evangelization, conversion and faith find their ultimate expression in the liturgy, which, in turn, is the source of all holiness. At the same time, liturgical participation commits one to a life of faithful discipleship. (SC, #5)

Catechesis for liturgy enables people to participate fully in the liturgy. Catechesis from liturgy--reflection on liturgical experience--serves to deepen people's understanding of the mysteries celebrated in liturgy.

The second pastoral implication is that both catechesis for liturgy and catechesis from liturgy must be grounded in the theological foundations of liturgy.

The final pastoral implication is that all catechesis needs to be done with a "liturgical lens." This means that catechetical leaders must understand the integral relationship of catechesis and liturgy and approach their ministry from this perspective. Viewing catechesis through this "liturgical lens" will lead to catechesis that intentionally and systematically:

- incorporates the Word of God (GDC, #95)
- is inspired by the catechumenate as a model of catechetical activity (#91)
- draws upon and makes use of liturgical rites and symbols
- accentuates the liturgical year, especially the Sunday Eucharist (SC, #102)
- integrates ongoing liturgical and sacramental catechesis;
- underscores the relationship between liturgy and justice

The essential mutuality of catechesis and liturgy must characterize all catechesis. As SC states: "Catechesis is fundamental if the community is to be fully aware of what it is doing, actively engaged in the rite and enriched by its effects" (SC, #7). The GDC concurs when it notes that: the Church ardently desires that all the Christian faithful be brought to that full, conscious and active participation which is required by the very nature of the liturgy (see CSL, #14) and the dignity of the baptismal priesthood (GDC, #85).

The challenge for catechetical leaders today is to provide for catechesis that leads to conversion to, and communion with, Christ. This is the vision set forth in the Gospel story of the journey to Emmaus and articulated in the GDC. It is a vision to which we should dedicate ourselves both as Christians and catechists.