

James Tissot, *Jesus Teaches the People by the Sea* (Jésus enseigne le peuple près de la mer) (1886-96).

Image courtesy of the Brooklyn Museum.





CATECHETICAL THEOLOGY
BY TIMOTHY O'MALLEY, PH.D.

THE THIRD WAY OF LOVE



Catechesis is not simply a formation into the principles of faith, whether one places the emphasis on “doctrinal” education or an apprenticeship into right action. Instead, catechesis is a participation in the very act of divine revelation. The *General Directory for Catechesis* notes:

Catechesis . . . transmits the words and deeds of Revelation; it is obliged to proclaim and narrate them and, at the same time, to make clear the profound mysteries they contain. Moreover, since Revelation is a source of light for the human person, catechesis not only recalls the marvels worked by God in the past, but also, in the light of the same Revelation, it interprets the signs of the time and the present life of man, since it is in these that the plan of God for the salvation of the world is realized (§39).

The *GDC* makes clear that the catechist is not simply finding a sufficient methodology to relay faith content to a passive receiver. Instead, the catechist is performing a human action of communication, one that invites the Christian to “experience” a moment of memory in which the mystery of divine revelation in the past re-constitutes what it means to be a man or woman living in the present. Familiarity with what God has accomplished in the past illuminates the present contours of both collective and individual history. For this reason, the catechist is not merely an elementary teacher of the mores of religion. Rather, the catechist is a necessary instrument in God’s plan for the salvation of the world.

Of course, this presumes that the catechist knows how to present the narrative of revelation without reducing it either to objective or subjective reason alone. Objective reason treats what is revealed in the Scriptures as equivalent to general human truths. Under the aegis of objective reason, the doctrine of the Trinity is reduced to the model for the perfect human community. Jesus’ multiplication of the loaves and the fishes is not revealing of God’s formation of the new people of Israel but an “educational moment” in which God teaches us the power of generosity. Subjective reason, on the other hand, sublimates the “truth claims” of what is revealed to the effect that it has upon the receiver. The “objective” nature of Christ’s Eucharistic presence is de-emphasized at the expense of the subject’s feeling regarding Christ’s presence throughout the world. Christ’s invitation to enter into the self-emptying salvation of the Cross is reduced to moral maxims that are more attuned to the comfortable life of the twenty-first century American Catholic. In each instance, it is no longer the mystery of God that is revealed to the one being catechized—revelation is reduced to either the logic of the world accessible by reason alone or the affective sentiments of an individual or social group.

How then might the catechist approach the task of participating in the act of revelation? Hans Urs von Balthasar’s *Love Alone is Credible* offers one such possibility. Avoiding the Scylla and Charybdis of objective and subjective reason, Balthasar proposes the third way of love (59). The third way of love is described using an analogy drawn from aesthetics. Imagine turning the corner of the Art Institute of Chicago and encountering George Seurat’s *A Sunday on La Grande Jatte*. It would be highly inappropriate to analyze the painting (at least upon initial viewing) by seeking to treat what pointillism as a technique reveals about forms of knowledge in the late nineteenth century. Likewise, it would be a reduction of the painting to judge it solely depending upon whether one “likes” it or not. The painting is, of course, a feast for the eyes that invites the viewer to an encounter with the play of light and darkness incarnate on the canvas. The painting bestows itself to the viewer as a gift (a massive one at that!). To interrupt the initial encounter by reducing it immediately to the question of meaning or “how it makes me feel” is to prematurely interrupt the revelatory moment.

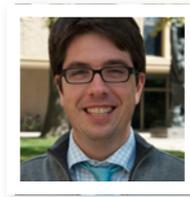
What then is the catechist to do? According to Balthasar, the one who initially encounters revelation is not to immediately seek out philosophical wisdom or maxims for the moral life. Instead, he or she is to recognize the majesty of love as the “form” of the text. He writes:

The majesty of absolute Love that approaches man in revelation goes out to meet him, invites him, and elevates him to an inconceivable intimacy. It allows the finite spirit to understand for the first time what it really means to say that God is the Wholly-Other, that he is ‘in reality and in essence, distinct from the world, supremely happy in himself and from himself, and inexpressibly loftier than anything besides

himself which either exists or can be imagined' . . . once we see that the figure of revelation remains unintelligible unless it is interpreted in light of God's love, then the Wholly-Other and Ever-Greater *appears* tangibly and surprises us in the ultimate and unsurpassable incomprehensibility of divine love (58).

Our encounter with revelation is not about something that we can entirely understand using reason alone. For what is revealed is not a theological doctrine, a liturgical rite, a series of moral maxims, or even a way of prayer. What is revealed is the terrifying gift of a divine love that is so "giving," so "loving," that every human conception of gift and love is a shadow in comparison to this gift.

Therefore, catechesis is not simply an initiation into ideas, rites, or moral practices. It is a slow formation of the Christian so that he or she may perceive in revelation the utter gift of divine love. The catechist is a kind of poet of the possible, revealing to humanity through the mediation of human speech and gesture that God's love alone is defining of human existence. Every time that the catechist forms the imagination of the student in the doctrine of the Trinity, in the power of the Eucharistic presence of Christ, in the path of following Christ, in the well-trod words of the Our Father, the catechist must invite the students to gaze upon the form of love revealed in the Tradition. How can I do this through the limitations of human speech? How can I do this when I myself am only beginning to grasp the depths of divine love? These questions necessitate a keen awareness of one's own poverty before this task. For this reason, the catechist is first and foremost not only a person who knows information. Instead, he or she must first become a lover of the God who first loved us, a poor handmaiden of the Word made flesh.



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