

CATECHETICAL THEOLOGY

BY TIMOTHY P. O'MALLEY

# MORE THAN MERE MEMORIZATION



Among those involved in the ministry of catechesis, memorization is often treated as a necessary evil. Indeed, few catechists today would *entirely* dismiss the art of memory from catechesis. After all, St. John Paul II writes in *Catechesis Tradendae* (in a passage taken up in *The General Directory for Catechesis*):

A certain memorization of the words of Jesus, of important Bible passages, of the Ten Commandments, of the formulas of the profession of the faith, of the liturgical texts, of the essential prayers, of key doctrinal ideas, etc., far from being opposed to the dignity of young Christians, or constituting an obstacle to personal dialogue with the Lord, is a real need. . . . We must be realists. The blossoms, if we may call them that, of faith and piety do not grow in the desert places of a memory-less catechesis. What is essential is that the texts that are memorized must at the same time be taken in and gradually understood in depth, in order to become a source of Christian life on the personal level and the community level. (§55)



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*The wonderful works of God* 617

<sup>3</sup> Glory in his holy name;  
let the hearts of those who seek the  
LORD rejoice!

<sup>4</sup> Seek the LORD and his strength,  
seek his presence continually!

<sup>5</sup> Remember the wonderful works that  
he has done,  
his miracles, and the judgments he  
uttered,

<sup>6</sup> O offspring of Abraham his servant  
sons of Jacob, his chosen ones!

<sup>7</sup> He is the LORD our God;  
his judgments are in all the  
earth.

<sup>8</sup> He is mindful of his covenant  
of the word that he  
swore for a thousand generations  
for a covenant which he made  
with Abraham,

as sworn promise to Is-  
aac, confirmed to Ja-  
cob, as an ever-  
lasting covenant. I will

Nonetheless, the way that memory is spoken about among those involved in catechesis often fails to capture the encounter with Christ made possible through the art of memory. Memory enables one to know the truths of the faith, a necessary task of catechesis. But, the emphasis upon memory is treated as separate from that deeper spiritual formation, which is integral to catechesis as a whole. In this way, memorization is dismissed as a pedagogical precursor to that authentic encounter with Christ that is the final goal of catechesis.

Of course, such an approach to memory is deeply modern. To speak of mere memory presumes a culture in which written texts and Google searches are ubiquitous. Further, it presumes that the text (whether a sonnet from Shakespeare or a doctrinal formula) is fundamentally nothing more than a conveyer of certain ideas or truths to a receiver. Such assumptions ignore the way that memorization is itself an act of reading, of interpretation, in which an ancient text becomes internalized in the embodied life of the memorizer. As Mary Carruthers writes in her magisterial *The Book of Memory: A Study of Memory in Medieval Culture*:

*Memoria* also signifies the process by which a work of literature becomes institutionalized—internalized within the language and pedagogy of a group. . . .

A work is not truly read until one has made it part of oneself—that process constitutes a necessary stage of its textualization. Merely running one's eyes over the written pages is not reading at all, for the writing must be transferred into memory, from graphemes on parchment or papyrus or paper to images written in one's brain by emotion and sense.<sup>1</sup>

To memorize a text is not simply to be able to reproduce in one's self the information that was encoded within the letters of this text. Rather, authentic memorization is necessarily transformative of the text itself. Written words upon a page become attached to images within

our minds, to desires within our hearts. The text becomes living as it is “transferred” from the page (or Kindle screen) to our very self. Genuine memorization involves a transformation of the identity of the one memorizing the text.

Thus, the problem with previous pedagogical approaches to catechesis was not that they required memorization. Rather, some of these pedagogies treated memorization as if it was simply a recalling of information. True memorization of the Scriptures, for example, is never merely remembering words. The act of memorizing the Scriptures will involve us in the construction of desire, a formation of our hearts to love God. For example, my own memorization of the Psalms was not a conscious decision upon my part to learn every jot and tittle of the text. Rather, through the Liturgy of the Hours, the Psalms and Canticles (many of which I did memorize over the course of a year) took flesh in my heart. The longing for God expressed in Psalm 63 was no longer words written upon the page of a breviary but became attached to my own inexpressible desire to muse upon God's love through the night. The self-emptying love of Christ is not something that I contemplate in the abstract but recall in an embodied way through remembering the Philippians hymn.

Memorization is therefore not simply one possible pedagogical instrument in carrying out the ministry of catechesis. Rather, forming the memory of women and men throughout time is itself part and parcel of the evangelization of the world. The narrative of salvation, sacramentally embodied in words, becomes part of the interior landscape of our heart. Through emphasizing this form of memory, catechesis assumes a Eucharistic character, the human being becomes a living and breathing *eucharistia* of what God has accomplished in Jesus Christ. Those who learn the art of memory in catechesis do so not simply in order to recall what has taken place in the past but to open up a space of hope

for an unfolding future. As Jean-Louis Chrétien writes:

Faith is essentially remembrance, but remembrance of God's promises, and it thus constitutes the place where remembrance is transfigured into hope, passing through the fire of forgetting—a fire which burns and consumes every memory of our own in us. . . . When we remember an event from sacred history, such as the Nativity, this memory hopes, because it also calls and awaits the Christ born in our hearts. But he can be born only in a heart as poor as a manger, a heart that is empty and dispossessing, and this memory thus also asks for forgetting, forgetting of self as offering.<sup>2</sup>

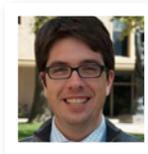
To learn to remember well the narrative of salvation is to open up a space in the human heart for the newness of the Gospel to reconstruct our hopes, to reshape our desires. When catechesis employs memorization, we are not simply introducing Christians to the basic narrative that will enable a future encounter with Christ. Rather, we are inviting these Christians to begin this encounter not simply through the written words of a page but in the contours of the human heart.



## NOTES

1 Mary Carruthers, *The Book of Memory: A Study of Memory in Medieval Culture*, 2nd ed. (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 11.

2 Jean-Louis Chrétien, *The Unforgettable and the Unhoped For*, trans. Jeffrey Bloech (New York: Fordham University Press, 2002), 92–93.



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