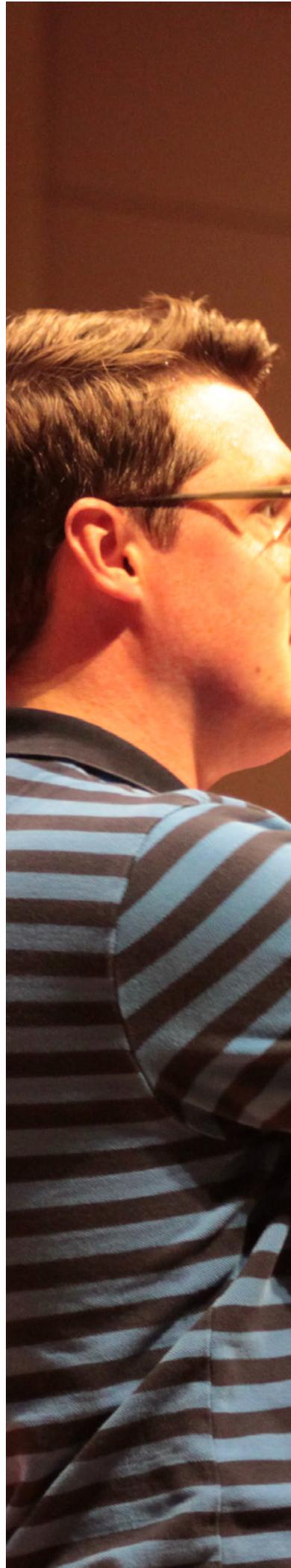


CATECHETICAL THEOLOGY

BY TIMOTHY P. O'MALLEY

THE
SELF-EMPTYING
POVERTY
OF THE
CATECHIST'S ART





Andrew Hoyt speaks to 400 high school students about the theology of vocation during Notre Dame Vision

Photo: MayaJoy Thodé (2014). Courtesy of Notre Dame Vision

In the first edition of this column, I presented an image of the catechist as a poet of divine love, one who invites his or her students toward an encounter with the Word made flesh. The danger of this admittedly idealistic vision of catechesis, of course, is that the reality of teaching Christian faith is often more complicated. My involvement in passing on a religious tradition has generally felt more like a chaotic and improvised piece of performance art instead of a well-formed poem. Indeed, I wish that I could present the fullness of the narrative of divine love to this sixth grader, but he seems intent upon jumping out the window. I long to articulate the Eucharistic life of the Church to this Confirmation retreat but a lack of participation in Sunday Mass means that this group of tenth graders are loath to admit the gift of the sacrament. I hope to communicate to young couples the grace of married life but the all-consuming details of wedding planning often make it difficult to invite these women and men to reflect upon the nuptial mystery.

Indeed, we are not the first catechists in the history of the Church to experience our powerlessness in unfolding the mystery of salvation. In Augustine's *De catechizandis rudibus* (*Instructing Beginners in Faith*), the bishop of Hippo addresses the deacon Deogratias' concern about the ineffectiveness of his own speech in explicating the kerygma to those seeking to enter the order of catechumens. Deogratias asks Augustine for a model speech that he might use in such contexts. Augustine, after all, is a renowned rhetorician, able to provide a scintillating text that Deogratias might memorize. In essence, Deogratias is asking for a program, a series of best practices that might make the onerous task of instructing beginners easier on his own psyche. After all, constantly proclaiming the same narrative of salvation to women and men, who grow increasingly uninterested in one's lesson, can be debilitating for the catechist's whole being.

Augustine, never one to respond directly to what anyone asks, offers instead an invitation for Deogratias to reconsider his own vocation as catechist. Augustine writes:

Indeed the most significant complaint that I have heard you make is that you found your own address, when you were giving people their initial grounding in Christian faith, to be so trifling and dull. But this is caused, I am aware, not so much by any defect in your knowledge of what needs to be said . . . nor by any lack of eloquence on your part, but by a feeling of inner aversion.¹

That is, the fundamental problem is not the onerous nature of the task of catechesis but the interior disposition of the catechist. Anyone who has served as a catechist for a significant period of time has come to know the desolation of an ineffective lesson, one in which students merely count away the minutes before they depart from class. Such catechists know what it is like to feel utterly unprepared after a week in which the busyness of daily life interrupted every occasion that one had to prepare this week's lesson. Master catechists have encountered the boredom that results from following the well-trod paths of years of teaching the same seven sacraments, the same virtues, the same biblical narratives. At times, catechists enter the class deeply aware of sorrow in their own lives, such that the words of divine love taste bitter to them.

In the midst of sorrow, of busyness, of boredom, how is the catechist to respond? Augustine reminds Deogratias that the source of teaching Christianity is not simply the power of persuasion but instead the self-emptying love of the God-man, Jesus Christ:

For do we find any pleasure, except at love's urging, in murmuring unfinished and mutilated words? And yet people wish to have little children to whom they may speak like this;

and, for a mother, there is more enjoyment in chewing food into tiny pieces and spitting them into her little son's mouth than in chewing and gulping down larger portions herself. Nor should we forget the image of the mother hen who covers her tender brood with soft feathers and calls her peeping chicks to her side with anxious clucking. . . ."²

The catechist who experiences the poverty of the human condition in the midst of proclaiming the narrative of divine love is not to escape this poverty. Instead, he or she is to enter ever more deeply into the poverty of divine love itself. The act of teaching faith is not an occasion for the catechist to feel good about his or her pedagogical savvy. The art of catechesis is necessarily a formation, on the part of the catechist, into the self-emptying love of the Cross. If God, the creator of the cosmos and the spouse of Israel, could humbly descend even to the point of total solidarity with humanity, then the catechist too must learn the pedagogy of self-emptying love. We do not work simply with ideas, with grand pedagogical plans, but with embodied human beings.

Thus, the catechist cannot escape the messiness of teaching Christian faith. The chaos of the classroom, the boredom of the student, and the apathy of the couple in marriage preparation are the very places where humanity is redeemed in Christ. The goal of the catechist is not to move beyond these concrete human desires, away from the messiness of the human condition to the "ideal" of the lesson being carried out. Only when the catechist loves his or her students in the same way that the triune God loves men and women can we measure the "effectiveness" of our teaching.

For this reason, we should not expect that a poetic articulation of catechesis takes away from the earthy,

chaotic, human gift of love that takes place between the catechist and the one seeking instruction in Christian faith. For it is precisely in the messiness of the classroom, the complications of the pastoral interview, and in the adolescent drama of the youth group meeting that God has decided to save humanity. Rather than retreat from this messiness, the well-formed catechist will see such chaos as an occasion to let the drama of the Paschal mystery unfold through the art of patient, self-giving teaching. The good catechist has "mastered" the art of self-emptying love.



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NOTES

1 Augustine, *Instructing Beginners in Faith*, trans. Raymond Canning (New York: New City Press, 2006), I.10.14.

2 Ibid., I.10.15