

LIFE IN CHRIST
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THE RIGHT TO CATECHETICAL INSTRUCTION

“The law of God entrusted to the Church is taught to the faithful as the way of life and truth. The faithful therefore have the right to be instructed in the divine saving precepts that purify judgment and, with grace, heal wounded human reason.” (*Catechism of the Catholic Church*, §2037)

This is a pithy and powerful statement first about God’s trust of the Church and then the dynamism (“the way of life and truth”) of the content of God’s law. It is also a statement about the power of truth and grace to *heal and purify* human capacities, and finally it is a teaching about what is owed to the faithful regarding catechesis. *The Catechism of the Catholic Church* (CCC) constitutes the moral law as God’s “fatherly instruction” (§1950). When this instruction is lived out by Catholics, it results in their happiness. “Fatherly instruction” is an attractive description of the law as it expresses its *personal origins*. The law of moral truth, as revealed by Moses and Christ,



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Cosimo Rosselli and Piero di Cosimo,
*Sermon on the Mount and Healing
of the Leper, detail, 1482*
Sistine Chapel, Vatican

and detected dimly by wounded reason has its source in the Father's heart. God wants us to have the deepest communion with Him and so "labors" to reveal those behaviors and dispositions which will speed and secure that communion. Obviously the Catholic Church believes that there are some behaviors and dispositions that can threaten and destroy communion with the Holy Trinity—sin. The Church prompts those entrusted with the work of catechesis in moral truth to embrace their duty to teach only those things that can "[put] people in communion with Jesus Christ" (CCC §426, citing John Paul II's apostolic exhortation *Catechesi tradendae* (1979)). All parishioners, then, have a right to learn those truths that purify judgment and heal reason. This purification of judgment and this salving of reason happens within the arena of grace, within the security of the sacramental womb. Developing and wounded persons need security. Wounded ones ought not to be exposed to that which makes them weaker. Love wants to protect and not expose wounds to further injury.

I lived through the 1970s as a teenager and recall that my mind was not secured by catechists within the sacramental womb but basically opened and left exposed to "new ideas." These ideas did not originate within the sacramental womb, but in fact were born within the speculation of university professors. My catechist had read these professors' *latest* ideas and heard their *latest* lectures and mistook these for "fatherly instruction." I do not remember being "healed" or "purified" by these religious speculations. Later, I remember being embarrassed as an undergraduate when I spoke these ideas as if they were Church teaching and was gently corrected that such were simply the thoughts of **one** theologian. Whether one is a teenager or an adult in an RCIA class, it is his or her "right" to have instruction that expresses healing and purifying truths. Such is the nature of catechesis.

At the university level, all sorts of conversations occur as to the relationship between theology and catechesis. The conversation usually ends with university theologians concluding that they are not "catechists." So true. Ultimately I would say that theologians have a freedom (a "right") to "play." They are "owed" space within the Church to tinker and dabble and toy with ideas. Catechists simply do not have this right. Catechists, instead, transmit healing and purification by instructing those assembled in the ways of "fatherly" teaching. This teaching is one that is concerned with the student's **personal salvation**, the development of his or her moral conscience, his or her participation in the sacraments, and most vitally, the eventual public witness to which all laity are called as they advance the beauty and healing of the Catholic faith as a social good. It is a known fact that the speculations of university theologians can yield ideas that have been recognized by the Magisterium as having developed the Catholic "way of life and truth." Analogically, then, theologians are like children creating art in the family playroom. Occasionally one will come out of the playroom (research) and the mother will post his art on the refrigerator door (classroom lectures). All other "creations" will simply find their way into that place where our lost family socks go. Rarely, a child will emerge from the playroom with a piece of art that is truly remarkable; in this case, the mother might even frame the work and place it in the living room for all to see. The parents will then show this creation to visitors, discuss its origins, and relate how the art affects the family.

Closing the analogy, then, it is this art—the one hanging in the living room, not the one on the refrigerator—to which the faithful have a "right." It is this art over which those who usher others into beauty—catechists—ought to linger. It is this art which can heal when contemplated. It is this art which

is beautiful, which radiates goodness, and which furthers the “way of life and truth” of the family. It is this art which is both held by and passed on to generations of family members. Remarkably, it is not the child himself who makes the judgment that his art is worthy to be framed in the living room; only the parents make that judgment. The parish is our “living room.” There are other rooms (graduate schools) in the house (Church) within which much raucous play can be had, but the living room is where “fatherly instruction” occurs. This instruction is given with the personal salvation of each person **in mind**. It is given in a sacred manner: a manner which recognizes that what is being passed on has been acknowledged as “fatherly instruction” and is not simply the considered speculation of a university classroom. In this place, the parish, truth is owed because love is foremost. Catechetical instruction in moral living bears truth to the souls of us who need healing. When the doctrine is borne accurately and joyfully to parishioners, the Truth Himself also enters the heart to “purify judgment” and “heal wounded human reason.”

