



## **The Eucharist and Kerygmatic Catechesis**

### **By James Pauley**

This past June, the Church in the United States began an unprecedented initiative: a Eucharistic revival. We all agree, of course, that such a revival is needed today. And we know that we catechists will be vital to the revival's success.

Alongside the need for the Eucharistic revival, there is considerable enthusiasm these days for the idea that catechesis needs to become more evangelistic. Catechists today know that *merely explaining* the Faith is insufficient, considering the cultural challenges in which we live. The Church has, for nearly five decades, presented a new vision of catechesis: seeing it as a “means” or a “privileged stage” in evangelization (see GDC 46 and DC 56). Catechesis carried out in an evangelistic way centers our presentation of Christian doctrine on what is most important to the Christian life, the proclamation of the essential content of God's saving love (the kerygma). And such a proposal of the love of God is meant to stir up a response in each of us, a “yes” to God and to the call to conversion.

Let's consider this connection between receiving the love of God and the need to personally respond to that love in how we live: two helpful points of emphasis as we teach amidst the Eucharistic revival.

### **The Kerygma and Catechesis**

In 2013, Pope Francis called for the restoration of a “kerygmatic” approach to catechesis. Here are his exact words from *Evangelii Gaudium*:

In catechesis too, we have rediscovered the fundamental role of the first announcement or kerygma, which needs to be the center of all evangelizing activity and all efforts at Church renewal. This first proclamation is called “first” not because it exists at the beginning and can then be forgotten or replaced by other more important things. It is first in a qualitative sense because it is the principal proclamation, the one which we must hear again and again in different ways, the one which we must announce one way or another throughout the process of catechesis, at every level and moment. (164)

While this is a significant expression of the Church's catechetical vision, it is not at all a new idea. The 1997 *General Directory for Catechesis* had described the aim of catechesis to “present Christ and everything in relation to Him” (98). In the prologue to the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, we read that most important in the teaching of Christian doctrine is that “the love of our Lord must always be made accessible, so that anyone can see that all the works of perfect Christian virtue spring from love...” (25). And Pope St. John Paul II, in 1979, famously wrote of what is at the heart of catechesis: “the definitive aim of catechesis is to put people not only in touch but in communion, in intimacy, with Jesus Christ” (*On Catechesis in our Time*, 5). It's been

clear in the Church's vision for quite some time that catechesis must be carried out in ways that lead people to actually know Jesus and become his disciples.

But this insight goes back even further. It was in 1936 that Austrian Jesuit Josef Jungmann wrote about the need to restore the kerygma to the way that we formulate the content of the Faith. He argued that while Catholics knew lots of doctrine, they had lost a sense of the glad tidings of Christianity. After all, central to the Christian life is the reception of the Good News of Jesus and the need to personally respond to this exhortation. He wrote:

To restore the kerygma to its full power and clarity into one single message proclaiming with joy and love the beauty and promise of the kingdom of God is the task of the kerygmatic renewal. Its chief aim is to present the truths of Faith as an organic whole. The core is the *Good News* of our redemption in Christ. Its fruit should be our grateful and *loving response* to God's loving call.<sup>1</sup>

Notice that last sentence: the Christian life is about *receiving* the content of the Good News and, at the same time, *responding* to God's call. Both dimensions are integral. To leave one out is to turn away from something essential. We can't *only* talk about God's love and we can't *only* exhort people to a new way of living. We can remember here the second chapter in the book of Acts, which offers us a compelling example. After Peter stood up with the eleven and proclaimed the Good News of Christ crucified and risen, his hearers were "cut to the heart" and they responded, "what are we to do?" (Acts 2: 37) The 2020 *Directory for Catechesis* also describes this essential facet to the teaching style of Jesus: "In all the various means he employed to teach about who he was, Jesus evoked and elicited a personal response from his hearers" (161).

There is an opportunity for us catechists in this. If we struggle at times with unresponsive students, if we're not seeing as much fruit to our labors as we would like, it may be that a change of approach is our best way forward. Rather than seeing catechesis only as explanatory, what would happen if our catechesis were also exhortative? What if learners could perceive throughout catechesis the invitation to take steps forward in their life in Christ? A kerygmatic approach to catechesis proclaims the goodness of God and his extraordinary love for us and invites us to actually respond and change and become a disciple of Jesus.

Questions arise here—and these are so good for us to grapple with: how can we center our teaching in the kerygma and the call to conversion? How can we teach the Faith so that the love of God is clearly accessible to them, especially since every point of Catholic teaching has its origin in true Love? How can we also make clear the change of life that

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<sup>1</sup> Josef Jungmann, SJ, "Theology and Kerygmatic Teaching," *Lumen Vitae*, V (1950): 258, emphasis mine.

is the consequence of being loved by God? How can we allow space within catechesis for such a response of faith and a “yes” to Jesus?

### **The Eucharist and the Kerygma**

As we consider the kerygma, we remember that the Gospel Message is not just a concept, but is a person. The “it” is actually a “He.” John 3:16 tells us: “for God so loved the world that He gave his only son...” The gift of the Son is the most extraordinary gift ever given in the history of the world. And, in the Eucharist, He has made possible the “intimate communion” that is the very objective of catechesis. I frequently tell my students that the most important thing we can do as catechists is point our students to Jesus in the Eucharist. And this means not only teaching them about the Eucharist but also stirring up in them a desire to encounter Jesus and enter into Eucharistic communion with Him.

The theme for the Eucharistic revival is beautifully kerygmatic: “This is my body, given for you” (Lk 22:19). These words encapsulate so well the proposal which Jesus makes to each of us. He wishes to make a gift of himself, to give himself totally and without reservation to each of us. This is an invitation into a life of profound love, of mystery, and of deep challenge and adventure.

But notice how both the proclamation of the Gospel Message in catechesis and the giving of this life of Eucharistic communion with God are proposals. And, as with any proposal we might receive (big or small), a response is always required. Being a disciple is always a choice. To receive the Eucharist means that we are giving our “yes” to God’s gift of Himself. Consciously receiving this gift brings deep joy, knowing that we are this loved and that our dignity is this great. But there is also a second “yes” inherent to receiving the Eucharist. And this is the same “yes” that we give in receiving the kerygma: a “yes” to truly think and see and live like a disciple of Jesus. Receiving the Eucharist means that I am committing myself to live in alignment with this communion with Jesus that I enjoy. To God who gives himself so profoundly, I am invited to give myself in return. To live this way requires grace: and certainly receiving Jesus himself in the Eucharist gives us all that we need. But it does require our free response, our “yes” to truly live as a disciple.

This is the adventure of the Eucharistic life. Receiving the Eucharist is meant to change how we see the world, how we make moral decisions, how we treat other people, especially those who are most vulnerable, to include pregnant moms and their unborn children, and those living in poverty.

This is the Christian life. This is the life into which we are immersed when we receive the basic Christian message and when we receive the Eucharist. The life of following Jesus and living in Him is the adventure for which we were made. May the grace of Jesus in the Eucharist give each of us the desire and strength to respond to this invitation with joy, and with our full “yes.” And may our witness inspire and challenge those we teach.

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