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Liturgical Catechesis
by Linda L. Gaupin, CDP

(Part 1 of 4)

What is “Liturgical Catechesis”?

Several years ago, someone asked me “Does your parish do liturgical catechesis?” I was not sure how to answer this question. What does it mean to “do” liturgical catechesis? Was the person asking if my parish had catechesis for people on the liturgy of the church? Was the question if we had special catechetical programs for the reception of sacraments, or was it an inquiry about how various liturgical celebrations form people? The fact of the matter is that “liturgical catechesis” oftentimes means different things to different people.

“Liturgical catechesis” refers to a wide range of activities that realize the intimate relationship between catechesis and liturgy in the church. Although the phrase has become popular today, many are unaware or have forgotten that our post-Vatican II catechetical and liturgical documents have long promoted this relationship.

Liturgical catechesis can take various forms and structures. For purposes of clarity, I will organize these into three general categories: catechesis “on” liturgy, catechesis “for” liturgy and liturgy “as” catechesis.

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(Part 2 of 4)

Catechesis “on” Liturgy

Chapter I, part II of the *Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy (CSL)* is entitled “Promotion of Liturgical Instruction and Active Participation.” Long ago, the conciliar fathers recognized the reform and promotion of the liturgy and that the aim of full and active participation could not be realized without catechesis on the liturgy for everyone (#14–20). This is why the newly revised *General Directory for Catechesis (GDC)* lists liturgical education as one of the fundamental tasks of catechesis (#85).

The goal of catechesis “on” liturgy is to promote a knowledge of the meaning of the liturgy and the sacraments. It is not for the sake of education itself, but so “that all the Christian faithful [can] be brought to that full, conscious and active participation which is required by the very nature of the liturgy and the dignity of the baptismal priesthood” (*GDC*, #85).

Unfortunately, there has been a “disconnect” on the pastoral level between catechesis and liturgy and/or catechists and liturgists. When catechetical leaders looked back over the past 30 years, one of the major problems they discovered in catechetical formation concerned the relationship between catechesis and liturgy. The *GDC* states: “Catechesis is intrinsically bound to every liturgical and sacramental action. Frequently, however, the practice of catechetics testifies to a weak and fragmentary link with the liturgy: limited attention to liturgical symbols and rites, scant use of the liturgical fonts, catechetical courses with little or no connection with the liturgical year; the marginalization of liturgical celebrations in catechetical programs” (*GDC*, #30).

Although this paragraph critiques a major weakness in catechetical formation, it nevertheless provides us with an excellent direction for restoring the relationship of catechesis and liturgy in catechetical programs. It highlights the need for catechetical formation to make better use of the primary liturgical symbols of the church that identify and form us as a people. These include the assembly, water, light, cross, oil, laying on of hands, white garment, and bread and wine. These symbols need to be taught, reflected upon, and explored in terms of their many levels of meaning. They need to be used as an integral part of the environment of our catechetical spaces.

When the *GDC* questions the limited attention given to liturgical rites and scant use of liturgical fonts in catechetical programs, it seeks to point out the importance of explaining and celebrating the rich treasury of liturgical prayer we have in the church and the need to form all people into its liturgical life. If we are to restore the fragmentary link between catechesis and liturgy, then our catechetical programs should respect the liturgical year in terms of topics we teach, scheduled activities, and other formational events and liturgical or sacramental celebrations. When catechesis contradicts liturgy, our best intentions to form in the faith are rendered futile. The *GDC* recognizes catechesis has not taken advantage of the formative power of liturgical prayer in catechetical programs. Within this context, liturgical prayer is much more than the way we begin our catechesis; it is the first source of formation.

Lastly, catechesis “on” liturgy is critically important if we are to keep alive the liturgical reforms and spirit of liturgical renewal inaugurated by the Second Vatican Council. Upon the reception of the McManus Award at the San Antonio meeting of the Federation of Diocesan Liturgical Commissions in October 2003, Bishop Trautman challenged the group with these words: “We must continue to *teach, teach, teach* the liturgical principles of Vatican II.”

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Catechesis “for” Liturgy

One of the most important things we do as a church is prepare people to celebrate the sacraments. The *General Directory for Catechesis (GDC)* acknowledges this unique form of catechesis. It states: “Certain situations and circumstances require special forms of catechesis,” especially for sacramental moments when “people are more disposed to seek out the true meaning of life” (*GDC*, #176).

Sacramental preparation is unique because it seeks to initiate people into the mystery of Christ. For this reason, the *GDC* calls it an “eminent kind of catechesis” (#71). Sacramental catechesis seeks to promote a deeper understanding and experience of a sacrament, explains the contents of the prayers, and educates about active participation, contemplation, and silence. But more than this, sacramental catechesis seeks conversion; its goal is to form and transform people into the sacramental mystery they are about to celebrate. All too often, this element is missing from our sacramental programs. We seek to explain and instruct, but we fail to convert. We confuse sacramental catechesis with religious education. We make people “earn” sacraments rather than converting them into sacramental life.

How do we initiate people into the mystery of Christ? The *Catechism of the Catholic Church (CCC)* states we should begin “by proceeding from the visible to the invisible, from the sign to the thing signified, from the ‘sacraments’ to the ‘mysteries’” (#1075). We catechize “for” sacraments by delving deeply into the meaning of the symbols, gestures, and prayers of the sacramental rites. For example, leading people to celebrate the sacrament of reconciliation requires more than learning an act of contrition and knowing how to “go” to the sacrament. It is a privileged time when we lead people to “metanoia” to see how God’s love for us is so awesome and how to experience true sorrow for failing against this love (contrition). It is a privileged time when we lead people to experience true knowledge of self before God and to, thus, be able to name the ways we have failed in our relationship with God (confession). It is a privileged time when we lead people to experience a change of heart so much so that they want to sin no more and show, by acts of penance, they truly want to be cured of sin (penance). It is a privileged time when we lead people to know the God who grants pardon to those who manifest their change of heart (absolution). (See the *Rite of Penance*, #6:a, b, c, d.) If we have done these things in sacramental catechesis, we have led people into the mystery of the reconciling Christ, enabled them to participate more fully with the reconciling community, and empowered them to live as a reconciling people in the world.

In these ways, sacramental catechesis opens people’s hearts so they are not only put in touch with, but also put into, a communion and intimacy with Christ. At the same time, it is a process that seeks to transform them so they are able to live the sacramental life in the world.

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(Part 4 of 4)

Liturgy “as” Catechesis

Liturgy “as” catechesis acknowledges the tremendous power of our liturgical celebrations to shape and transform us as a people. The *Catechism of the Catholic Church (CCC)* sums up what many of our catechetical and liturgical documents have expressed over the past several decades about the formative power of liturgy. It states: “the liturgy is the summit toward which the activity of the Church is directed; it is also the font from which all her power flows. It is therefore the *privileged place* for catechizing the People of God” (CCC, #1074).

Liturgy is the privileged place for catechizing the people of God because it uses a language more powerful than words to form faith. It uses the language of ritual, the language of symbols and gestures, music and space, sacred words and silence.

When the symbols of our liturgy are magnificent, our gestures deliberate and reverent, our music animating, our space captivating, our words sacred, and our silence overpowering, liturgy’s power to form and transform us is unleashed. Through the language of ritual we give praise and thanks to God and become what we pray. This is why so much care must be given to preparing liturgical celebrations. Preparation is about letting the language of our liturgy speak so powerfully that the liturgy can exert its own inherent power to form all present into the paschal mystery.

None of these categories (catechesis “on” liturgy, catechesis “for” liturgy, and liturgy “as” catechesis) is mutually exclusive, nor can any be if we believe in the intimate union between catechesis and liturgy. This brings us back to the initial question, “Does your parish do liturgical catechesis?” This answer is “Yes, because this is what we do as a church; this is who we are as a church.” We form in the faith; we lead others to Christ; we celebrate the faith.

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