

A NEW PENTECOST FOR CATECHESIS

Bob Rice



'There is a temptation which perennially besets every spiritual journey and pastoral work: that of thinking that the results depend on our ability to act and to plan. God, of course, asks us really to cooperate with his grace, and therefore invites us to invest all our resources of intelligence and energy in serving the cause of the Kingdom.'

John Paul II, *Apostolic Letter Novo Millennio Ineunte*, 38

As they gathered together in the upper room, the Apostles knew the Truth. They knew Jesus was the Son of God, the Word who became flesh. They knew that He had suffered, died, rose from the dead, and ascended into heaven. Jesus had explained to the disciples what the Scriptures meant and how He fulfilled them. He had been recognized in the breaking of the bread. And He commanded them to 'Go, therefore, and make disciples of all nations...'

But their next course of action, as chronicled in the Book of Acts, is one that should give us pause. We do not see them huddled around a table with a large map, sectioning out areas for each one of them to reach. Nor do we see them break into different committees to discuss which course of action would be most effective to impact their audience. And we certainly don't read about the apostle who suggested that maybe the best way to start is to put an announcement in the bulletin to see if anybody would be interested in helping them.

No. They were *praying* and *waiting* for the coming of the Holy Spirit.

Why did God need them to *wait*? Could not Christ have risen and the Spirit descended in the same moment? The answer is 'yes', but because that *didn't* happen we must realize that God is trying to teach us something. God, in his beautiful and perfect pedagogy, wanted to show us what the Church looked like before the Holy Spirit arrived, lest we think that the success of the early Church was based solely on the Apostles' effort and experience. And it teaches us a fundamental truth: if we are to truly pass on the faith, we *need* the Holy Spirit. The Apostles understood this, and so they waited until He came.

Catechesis in Spirit and in Truth

Jesus told the Samaritan woman that 'the hour is coming- indeed is already here- when true worshippers will worship the Father in Spirit and truth: this is the kind of worshipper the Father seeks.' (John 4:23) Spirit *and* truth. We need both to become the kind of worshipper the Father seeks. Yet many times in catechesis we hope that if we have the truth, then the Spirit will follow. We put the cart before the horse, and go nowhere.

To know what is true is not enough. 'You believe in the one God - that is creditable enough, but even the demons have the same belief, and they tremble with fear.' (James 2:19) There is a difference between

We do not see the Apostles breaking into small groups to discuss which course of action would be the most effective

passing on *information*, and providing an environment for *transformation*. The difference is the Holy Spirit. The *General Catechetical Directory* tells us that the catechist 'is responsible for choosing and creating conditions which are necessary for the Christian message to be sought, accepted, and more profoundly investigated. This is the point to which the catechist extends- and there it stops. For adherence on the part of those to be taught is a fruit of grace and freedom, and does not depend on the catechist; and catechetical action, therefore, should be accompanied by prayer.' (GCD 71)

What freedom there is in this! We cannot change hearts, and we do not have to. What we are called to do is to provide an environment for the Holy Spirit to work. The Church is not asking us to use the Holy Spirit as a source of power to help us succeed, but that we would allow the Holy Spirit *to use us* for the greater glory of God. The Holy Spirit is not a tool, but a *person* that we invite into our lives and our catechetical situations so that

the definitive aim of catechesis- intimacy with Christ - can occur. 'To be in touch with Christ, we must first have been touched by the Holy Spirit.' (CCC 683)

Prayer

'Catechetical action, therefore, should be accompanied by prayer.' (GDC 71) To accompany our catechesis with prayer means more than starting and ending our sessions with an *Our Father* and a *Hail Mary*. It means that in our *preparation*, we wait upon the Holy Spirit in prayer, and ask Him what direction He would like us to go. And *while* we are catechizing, we can seek to be constantly in touch with the Spirit by a prayerful, listening attitude of the heart.

I remember the first time I encountered a catechist who did this. She was speaking about the Eucharist, and reflected on how at every moment, somewhere in the world, the Eucharist was being celebrated. Maybe it was in an affluent American suburban parish, a small village in Africa, a large gothic European cathedral, or a secret meeting place in China. *At this moment*, she told

us, *Christ was becoming present*. Then she closed her eyes and invited us into a moment of prayer, adoring Christ in the Eucharist wherever He may be. Suddenly, we were no longer talking about a topic or an idea. We were invited into a real moment of grace. As we opened our eyes, the session took on new meaning for us. More than a decade later, I still remember that moment. She later told me that she hadn't planned to do that, but had listened to the Spirit.

We are invited to do the same. The concept is simple - but not easy. A world of distractions is unleashed upon anyone who seeks to become more intimate with God in prayer, and the catechist is no exception. Difficult relationships with other catechists, tangential questions from students, time restrictions, poor textbooks, disruptive behavior, personal issues that distract from ministry, or falling behind on your curriculum and feeling rushed to 'catch up' are just a few of the things catechists can face on a regular basis. We can often fall back onto the settled conviction that we can't think about going deeper in our catechetical ministry - we're just trying to survive it.

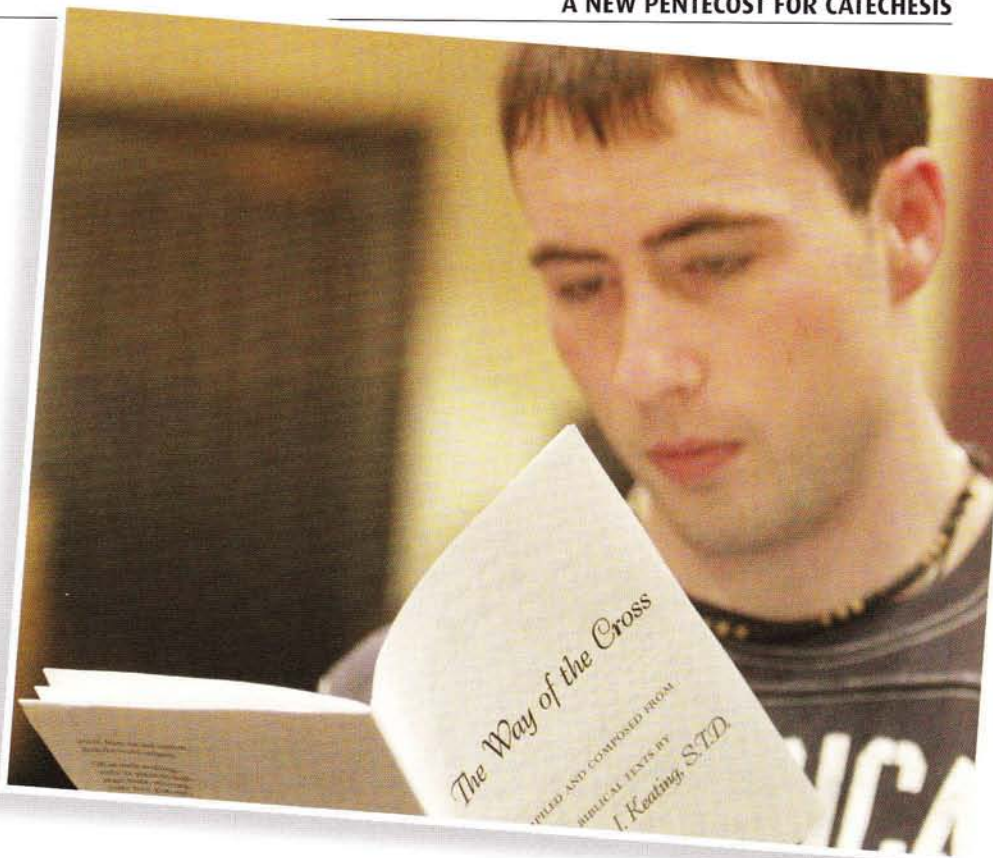
Invited To Be His Vessel

Alternatively, when I find myself in these situations I can let them serve as a reminder to me that I am not in charge, and this is not my work. It is the Holy Spirit's. This transforms difficult times into moments of grace.

Catechesis is 'a work of the Holy Spirit, a work that he alone can initiate and sustain in the Church.' (*Catechesi Tradendae* 72) We could put it like this: the Holy Spirit starts it and keeps it going. The fire of our own effort burns us up and leaves us with ashes. But the fire of the Spirit purifies us, renews us, fulfills us, and never goes out.

So how can you tell whether you are working by your own power, or in submission to the Holy Spirit? As with many things, 'You will be able to tell them by their fruits.' (Matt. 7:16) Without the Spirit, you can still make great flyers promoting your event. You can coordinate snacks and beverages for a successful 'getting to know you' night. You can teach information about the Faith, and have a large number of students pass the test. You can have what others would consider a 'successful' ministry. Most dangerous of all, you can even fake your own holiness.

With the Spirit, catechetical ministry results in conversions. Lives change and hearts are transformed. It sees a flourish of vocations - not only in priesthood and religious life,



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but also people who embrace the call for pure marriages by living chaste relationships with others. With the Spirit there is an increased zeal for the work we are doing, a *peace* that the world cannot give, and a *joy* surpassing all understanding.

But it's not always enjoyable. With the presence of the Holy Spirit, we also face persecutions. In fact, I would tell those I ministered with that if we weren't being persecuted, we were playing it too safe and were probably doing something wrong. Jesus told his Apostles, 'My choice of you has drawn you out of the world, that is why the world hates you... If they persecuted me, they will persecute you, too.' (John 15:19-20) But He also gave them words of great hope: 'In the world you will have hardship, but be courageous: I have conquered the world.' (John 16:33)

Catechists can have an unwavering hope in this promise of Jesus, especially as we carry God's light into a world of darkness. 'You will receive the power of the Holy Spirit which will come on you,' Jesus said to the Apostles, 'and you will be my witnesses not only in the Jerusalem but throughout Judea and Samaria, and indeed to earth's remotest end.' (Acts 1:8)

And so the Apostles waited and prayed for the fulfillment of this promise.

John Paul II wrote, 'Like the apostles after Christ's Ascension, the Church must gather in the Upper Room 'together with Mary, the Mother of Jesus' (Acts 1:14), in order to pray for the Spirit and to gain strength and courage to carry out the missionary mandate. We, too, like the apostles, need to be transformed and guided by the Spirit.' (*Redemptoris Missio* 92) Only the Holy Spirit can bring about spiritual transformation through intimacy with Christ. It is *His* ministry, not ours.

• I invoke on the catechizing Church this Spirit of the Father and the Son, and I beg him to renew catechetical dynamism in the Church. • (CT 72)

Let us all call upon the Spirit that we may be transformed and guided by Him, and that we can be His vessel for a renewed proclamation of the Good News in this new millennium.

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