

The Pedagogy of Jesus: Some Examples

BY KURT LICHTFUSS

“Catechists owe it to all to frame responses in terms of the truth. Then, once someone reveals the root of their misunderstanding, catechists can explain the truth at length, not expecting agreement on the spot, but trusting in the Holy Spirit to work in the person, as was the case of St. Nicodemus.”



AS CATECHISTS, WE OWE IT TO THOSE BEING CATECHIZED to be the best communicators of the content of the faith as possible. But to whom are we to look for the best example of how to achieve this end? Memories of our favorite teacher might help; perhaps, one of the myriad books on teaching techniques might aid us; but, given the importance of what we teach—the salvation of each member of mankind—should we not look just a little bit higher? Maybe even to the author of the material we are to impart?

To many who are hearing this for the first time, it could sound very presumptions. But really, what has God done throughout Revelation other than show us all the ways in which he teaches us through the three persons of the Trinity? Does this not become the



“source and model of the pedagogy of faith” and of God?¹ While each of the three persons of the Trinity have their own methods to impart, perhaps the most relatable of the three, for pedagogical purposes, is the one who took human form: the Son.

A brief survey of the Gospels shows many varied teaching techniques and methods. With the apostles, Jesus was “their only teacher,” a “patient and faithful friend,” someone who consistently taught them the truth throughout his whole life.² “He provoked them with questions”; he told them more than he told the masses; “he introduced them to prayer”; he sent them forth on missions with others; and “he promised them the Holy Spirit” (*DC* 160). Additionally, Christ “evoked

and elicited a personal response” in all who heard him (*DC* 161). And though this response of obedience and faith was deep-seated, because of sin it required “ongoing conversion,” which Christ provided (*DC* 161). Unfortunately, we oftentimes read right past Christ’s pedagogical methods and don’t learn how to teach from the divine teacher himself. There are five examples (out of many) I would like to propose that illustrate Christ’s teaching methods in Scripture that will be helpful for catechists.

Five Examples of Jesus’ Pedagogical Method

The first example is the story of the Pharisees and the adulterous woman in John 8:3–11. Coming upon a scene where a woman who

¹ United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, *National Directory for Catechesis* (United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, 2005), 90.

² Pontifical Council for the Promotion of the New Evangelization, *Directory for Catechesis* (United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, 2020), no. 160, hereafter cited in text as *DC*.

is guilty as charged and who is now to be, under the law, rightfully stoned to death, Jesus leans down and begins writing in the dirt, despite a barrage of questions from the Pharisees. He is quiet. He neither joins in the fray nor acts to quiet it. But finally, he stands and says, “Let him who is without sin among you be the first to throw a stone at her,” and then he kneels again and continues doodling in the dirt (vv. 7–8). It is notable that there are two distinct audiences here: the Pharisees and the woman. The Pharisees disappear one by one, as they know they are not without sin. Not one stays to talk to Jesus or cast a stone. Their response to Christ’s offer is distinctly negative. The woman, on the other hand, does not run away but stays, convicted but alive in front of Jesus. She is responding in the affirmative and thereby receives not just judgment and the subsequent admonition to “sin no more” but the forgiveness implicit in being let go . . . alive—saved—by her personal Savior.

We learn here many things about how Jesus teaches. We see the value of remaining silent at times during a catechetical session, letting those being catechized talk and how effective waiting until the right moment to teach something can be. We even can see how letting those who disregard the message of Christ leave can be good, along with the importance of welcoming those who are so obviously guilty.

A second example of Jesus’ pedagogy may be found in John 18:10–11. We read here of a situation in which Christ is quick to speak and to admonish, teaching much in just two phrases. Jesus has just been betrayed and seized by the authorities outside the Garden of Gethsemane. So, Peter draws his sword and cuts off the ear of the high priest’s slave. Immediately, Jesus tells Peter what to do—“Put your sword into its sheath”—and asks a question: “shall I not drink the chalice which the Father has given me?” The apostle must bear this rebuke, knowing that he both acted and thought wrongly in a key moment.

This shows us the continuing conversion of the Apostle Peter in light of his worldly and prideful sin. It is difficult, but Christ cannot let this teaching moment pass by. But there is another audience: namely, the officials present and those who plotted against Christ. Undoubtedly, whether they respond affirmatively or negatively, they hear the authoritative teaching to Peter of docility and obedience to the Son and the Father, as well as Jesus’ faith in and obedience to the Father. It is consistent teaching that does not fold, even in the

face of violence. It is a shining example of the full dependance upon providence for the one who has poverty of spirit.

This too is a challenging road to take as a catechist: trusting in God in the face of hostility and harm, reproving someone who may be very close to us, letting others be “right,” and relying on God to reach some people through the example of one’s own patient and quiet suffering. These are advanced realities to teach, not to mention live. They are, of course, countercultural today, just as they were in Jesus’ time. But the Christian life does not give way to what is popular in the world.³

A third example, from John 3:1–21, is a seemingly obvious one, since it is sometimes called the “Teaching of Nicodemus.” In this situation, the Pharisee Nicodemus seeks out Jesus, and the following conversation ensues:

Nicodemus: “Rabbi we know that you are a teacher come from God; for no one can do these signs that you do, unless God is with him.”

Jesus: “Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born anew, he cannot see the kingdom of God.”

Nicodemus: “How can a man be born when he is old? Can he enter a second time into his mother’s womb and be born?”

Jesus: “Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God.” (Jn 3:2–5)

And then Jesus explains what he has said in increasingly detailed manner, to which Nicodemus has no response of understanding.

Though the theological ramifications of this exchange are many, the catechetical implications, too, are not few. First, though Nicodemus comes “at night” (a notably odd hour), Jesus does not turn him away but instead easily engages. Second, Jesus meets Nicodemus’ seemingly complimentary words with an incongruous and provocative statement. Here Jesus shows that he knows

³ Congregation for the Clergy, *General Directory for Catechesis*, Vatican website, https://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cclergy/documents/rc_con_ccathed-uc_doc_17041998_directory-for-catechesis_en.html, 144: “Catechesis, which is therefore active pedagogy in faith, in accomplishing its tasks, cannot allow itself to be inspired by ideological considerations or purely human interests.”

Nicodemus' intellect and education, so he wastes no time coaxing Nicodemus toward understanding. This evokes misunderstanding on the part of Nicodemus and gives Jesus the opportunity to espouse exactly what Nicodemus needs to hear. Christ knows Nicodemus will not understand and convert on the spot, but later, after ruminating on Jesus's teaching. Later in the Gospel, we find Nicodemus reminding a group of Pharisees, upset with Jesus' teachings, that Jesus is entitled to a proper hearing under the law, which seems to deflate Nicodemus' infuriated peers (see Jn 7:50–51). And after the crucifixion, Nicodemus accompanies Joseph of Arimathea when taking Jesus' body to the tomb, bringing 100 pounds of myrrh and aloes to be used in the burial (Jn 19:38–39).

What do we learn here? First, as catechists, we may be approached any place at any time, and we should be ready to listen. Furthermore, catechists need to be ready to listen to and speak with even the most educated and, seemingly, most intelligent. When so approached, we do not have to accept the way in which the person asking a question frames an issue, especially when they are coming from a place of misunderstanding. Catechists owe it to all to frame responses in terms of the truth. Then, once someone reveals the root of their misunderstanding, catechists can explain the truth at length, not expecting agreement on the spot, but trusting in the Holy Spirit to work in the person, as was the case of St. Nicodemus.⁴

Yet another example of the teaching style of Jesus is found in the widow's offering found in Mark 12:41–44. Here we find Jesus, alone, just sitting and watching people give their tithes. Once he sees the example for which he is looking, he calls over the disciples, who were seemingly close since they would have seen the event as well. Jesus uses paradox as a way of teaching when he points out that the poor woman has given so much more than the rich, even though the amount of money she gave was small.

There is much to be gleaned here. Often, those we catechize have a bias toward Catholics, which can promote the idea that everything outside of Mass, church facilities, and Catholic gatherings is "bad." To combat this, catechists can assign an exercise wherein students are tasked with finding saintly behavior out in the

⁴ C.f., Theresa Doyle-Nelson, "St. Nicodemus—A Pharisee Who Risked His Reputation for Jesus," *National Catholic Register*, accessed February 3, 2024, <https://www.ncregister.com/blog/st-nicodemus-a-pharisee-who-risked-his-reputation-for-jesus>.

world during their daily lives. This helps engender the idea that God is constantly working out in the world—even in unexpected places.

The last example I'd like to offer is another apparently simple instance of a catechetical method of teaching given to us by Christ. It is the blessing of the children in Mark 10:13–16. When those closest to Jesus tried to keep children away from him, he rebuked them and commanded that they let the children come to him, saying, “Truly, I say to you, whoever does not receive the kingdom of God like a child shall not enter it” (v. 15). Then Christ “took them in his arms and blessed them” (v. 16).

Again, we have a learning moment for the disciples. They were getting a little too happy with themselves and were inventing hierarchies that are completely upside down in the kingdom of God. They were overconfident in themselves, despite their obvious lack of understanding, and underconfident in others. Too often this happens in catechetical situations, when those who are teaching fall prey to their pride, feeling superior or more “holy” than others. Perhaps we can keep this verse at the ready to remind ourselves and those catechized who and what we are striving to be.

The teaching style of Jesus is readily available in most everything Christ did or said. All that we, as catechists, have to do is identify his pedagogy, acknowledge its validity, and do our best to put it into practice in the right place and the right time.

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