

Current Tensions in the Review of High School Texts by the Ad Hoc Committee to Oversee the Use of the Catechism; A Lasallian Perspective

I wish to reflect on the experience of Saint Mary's Press and the textbook review process undertaken by the Ad Hoc Committee to Oversee the Use of the Catechism of the USCCB (hereafter referred to as the ad hoc committee). In particular, I submit that the Lasallian perspective on the role of religious education in the life of young people, especially methods of evangelization and catechesis, is at stark odds with the desires of the ad hoc committee for the renewal of catechesis in the U.S. today.

I would like to address four points.

1. I want to take a moment to situate our experience in the broader context of the ad hoc committee's desire to renew catechesis in the Church, specifically by examining core underlying assumptions of two distinct approaches to catechesis that coexist within the Church—perhaps, since the earliest forms of the church.
2. I want to articulate our sense of the valuable contribution to catechesis the Lasallian charism offers the Church, to which Saint Mary's Press remains faithful.
3. I want to offer three practical examples that illustrate the existing tensions and disagreements between the ad hoc committee's preferred catechetical method and our Lasallian approach.
4. Finally, I want to articulate our hope for the future of catechesis.

The Renewal of Catechesis: It's Broad Context

For those of you not familiar with the ad hoc committee, let me say a brief word about their purpose. The ad hoc committee was established shortly following the publication of the English edition of the universal *Catechism of the Catholic Church*. One of the ad hoc committee's principal mandates has been to review catechetical materials as to their conformity with the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*. The ad hoc committee's review process is considered voluntary. When a publisher does submit a text for review, the review may result in a "declaration of conformity," which means that the ad hoc committee has judged the text to conform to the *Catechism*. The established protocols and standards for this process reflect the ad hoc committee's concern that texts treat doctrinal topics in a manner that is both complete and authentic. A text that is judged insufficient for a declaration of conformity must be substantially revised or completely rewritten, if the publisher wishes it to be declared in conformity.

It is critical, I believe, to examine the operative subtexts of two distinct catechetical worldviews that exist within the Church. Members of the committee have made frequent reference to the desire for the "renewal of catechesis" or "a new moment for catechesis." Underlying their desire for "renewed catechesis" are fundamental assumptions that shape the ad hoc committee's criteria for good catechesis. Unfortunately, these operative assumptions have been seen to be in conflict with other existing catechetical approaches, particularly with regard to

assumptions about the primary tasks of catechesis and appropriate catechetical methods.

It is not surprising that in a time of great energy for the “renewal of catechesis” that conflict or struggle exists. The contemporary experience of this is not unprecedented in the life of the Church—a study of Church history, particularly the history of catechesis in the Church, will show the Church’s struggle with and dance between two distinct, if not separate, catechetical worldviews for the past 1,400 years, if not from the dawn of the early Church. I recommend you read a wonderful synthesis of the historical development of catechesis in a small book titled *Catechesis Revisited: Handing On Faith Today*, by Liam Kelly (Paulist Press, ©2000).

Allow me to illuminate this point with the reflections from two contemporary faithful Churchmen that illustrate these distinct worldviews:

The first:

“God is to be sought and found not just in the religious sphere, but in every part of human life. The mission of the Church in education, I believe, has to be seen in this broad way. The Church’s concern is not simply with the teaching of religious truths. Rather it is in the fostering and nourishment of all that makes for fully human life. The aim is to produce young people who are ‘more alive’ human beings because they have been

taught and experienced something of the love of God, and sense that there is an inner meaning and coherence in life and in all creation.”

—Cardinal Basil Hume, OSB, *Recapturing the Vision*
Head of the Catholic Church in England and Wales
(deceased 1999)

Now, the second:

“Catechesis in our schools and in our parishes is to assist our youth, . . . to live [their] call to holiness by motivating [them] to embrace the truth of Christ’s revelation and the wisdom of the Church’s teaching. A basic knowledge of our faith is a pressing need of [our youth].”

—Archbishop Daniel Buechlien, OSB,
Proper Catechesis Helps Us Live Our Call to Holiness (May 2005)
Chairman of the Committee on Catechesis, USCCB

These two faithful servants of the Church represent no small difference in worldviews—catechetical worldviews that co-exist in the Church, each with fundamentally different starting points, primary emphasis, and assumptions, especially with respect to the importance accorded the role of human experience.

Cardinal Hume reflects a catechetical worldview that is often referred to as *anthropological/experiential catechesis*. The contemporary expression of this catechetical worldview began to emerge in the early 1900s and has certainly been dominant in our approaches to religious education in Catholic schools and

parishes for the past 20 to 30 years. This catechetical worldview was validated and legitimized, if not directly, then indirectly, through the promulgations and spirit of the Second Vatican Council, and more so through post-conciliar catechetical projects, catechetical directories, and apostolic exhortations. This approach to catechesis recognizes that human experience and Divine Revelation are integrated: the lived human experience of both the individual and the community are illuminated by the light of the Gospel and Tradition. In this view, objective Revealed Truths give meaning to human experience and allow it to be properly interpreted. The approach often stresses the “proposing” of Truth rather than the “imposing” of Truth, since “the act of faith of its very nature is a free act” (see Vatican II document, *On Religious Freedom*, Flannery, ed., 1996, no. 10). This approach emphasizes sending the catechized out into the world “to carry forward the work of Christ under the lead of the befriending Spirit” (Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World, no. 3).

In contrast, Archbishop Buechlien’s remarks reflect the emergence—or, more accurately, the re-emergence—of a distinct catechetical worldview that is often referred to as an *essentialist approach* derived from traditional scholasticism. The publication of the universal *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, English Edition (1994)ⁱ has served as a catalyzing force for proponents of this worldview. For some bishops and catechists, the *Catechism* has been seen as the remedy to great and grave errors perpetrated by the form and methods of the anthropological/experiential approach. The ad hoc committee and the

subsequent establishment of the Committee on Catechesis has served as a practical means to advance this “renewal of catechetics” in the U.S. Church by way of the conformity review process and the encouragement of bishops to allow only books with the declaration of conformity to be used in Catholic schools and parishes.

Bishop John J. Meyers, then bishop of Peoria, offered these remarks in his pastoral letter on the “renewal of catechesis” in 1993. His remarks reflect a striking foreshadowing of the renewal efforts that began to be embodied in the conformity review process of the ad hoc committee in the subsequent years.

“Certain errors and imbalances in catechetical theory did contribute to or at least exacerbate the general decline in religious education [since Vatican II]. These errors will have to be avoided or eliminated, and balance restored(12). . . . The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* will be a stabilizing force(20). . . . The first and best service that we as individuals and as a Church can render is a clear, concise proclamation of the authentic content of Revelation that has come down to us from the apostles(21). . . . Much of the teaching of the *Catechism* will demand the assent of faith(44). . . . [Young people] must learn, even with memorization, the core truths of our faith which stem from sacred scripture, liturgy, moral teaching and the Church’s basic piety. As one receives the content of revelation, one accepts and places faith in the revealer(5).”

The primary emphasis of the *essentialist* approach to catechesis is “to instruct in a body of doctrine.” The underlying assumption of this approach is that if young people are instructed in right doctrine, authentically and entirely proclaimed, using a common language of faith (in this case, as prescribed in the *Catechism*), they will assent to the Truth found wholly in the Church, thus their intellect, will, and moral lives will conform to the Truth.

This broad context is critical to understanding why many of the catechetical materials of Saint Mary’s Press have been judged to be deficient for a declaration of conformity by the ad hoc committee. I hope you can see that the issue is not about the presentation of sound doctrine in our texts. Catechetical materials of Saint Mary’s Press are faithful to the authentic teachings of the Catholic Church and are effective in touching the hearts of young people with the Good News of Jesus Christ. The issue is not about the *Catechism*. We receive the *Catechism*, along with the whole Church, as a “sure and authentic reference text for teaching Catholic doctrine and particularly for preparing local catechisms” (cf. John Paul II, Apostolic Constitution, *Fidei Depositum*, no. 3). The issue is not about respect for the teaching authority of the Magisterium. We hold proper respect for the teaching authority of Christ exercised by the bishops and pastors of the Church. We submit our texts to the rightful judgment of our local Ordinary, willing and ready to correct errors or deficiencies in our presentation of doctrine or in any other matters that might mislead young people in the right presentation of the

faith. The issue *is* about the tension and conflict caused by fundamentally distinct catechetical worldviews. The present tensions and conflicts are resolvable and reconcilable yet only through authentic dialogue and mutual respect.

The Contribution of the Lasallian Charism

Let me turn to the contribution of the Lasallian charism to the task of catechesis in the hope that we might better understand why the committee has struggled with our work. The principal difficulty with the ad hoc committee's reviews for Saint Mary's Press rests in the inability, to date, to fully resolve and reconcile two distinct catechetical worldviews—our fidelity to an experiential approach to catechesis and the committee's desire for the renewal of a traditional scholastic approach.

Obviously, as evidenced by our decision to suspend the development of new high school textbooks for the time being, this is a very serious matter for us. At stake is fidelity to how we interpret the Lasallian charism, entrusted to the Institute by the Church more than 300 years ago, and expressed through the Press's publications for the past 62 years.

The Institute's founder, Saint John Baptist de La Salle, was declared "special patron of all educators of the young" by Pius XII on May 15, 1950. Clearly, the Church recognizes in Saint La Salle's educational pedagogy God's grace. This was reaffirmed just a few years ago by Pope John Paul II while commemorating

a special event in the life of the Brothers and the Lasallian family when he remarked:

“The Lasallian educational works continue to be a providential resource for the good of youth, the Church, and society as a whole. Therefore, fidelity to the charism needs new inspiration and creativity more than ever in order to respond appropriately to the needs of today’s world.”

Fidelity to our charism can be summarized, I believe, in two recent Lasallian pastoral directives. First, in the words of our Brother Alvaro Rodriguez Echeverria, 26th Superior General of the Institute of the Christian Brothers:

“Throughout our Lasallian history the needs of the young have always awakened creative Lasallian responses. Therefore, the first condition for being innovative is to know and to love the reality in which we live—with its lights and shadows, its pluses and minuses. This contact with reality should then lead us to pass on a kind of knowledge which is not satisfied with content alone, but which gives priority to the ability to search for meaning. We are aware that it is more important to help young people find meaning in their lives than only to fill their heads with ideas. It is more important to have the ability to continue learning than it is only to know a lot of information. Finally, we should have the creativity to see to it that our students commit themselves to building a better world based on a deep

spirit of solidarity . . . which needs to be based on a solid Christian understanding of the person; and to an inter-religious and ecumenical dialogue, which of its nature is marked by respect and tolerance.”

The second is more succinctly stated in a Statement of the Brothers Visitor of the Americas in 2001. They say:

“In our experience, we have found that young people respond to catechetical programs that inspire not indoctrinate, include not separate, and affirm not condemn.”

So we stand firm in fidelity to the Lasallian charism, in developing catechetical resources that invite young people toward salvation in Christ through the Church while respecting where they are in their lived experience; we teach them the language and meaning of God revealed in the Scriptures and Tradition and invite them to name their experience of God; we teach them that there are absolute Truths while radically respecting the diversity of beliefs among the young people before us in the classroom.

Three Practical Examples

Let me rearticulate just three practical points that I first shared with religious educators throughout the U.S. in a letter sent May 2004 that addresses where our catechetical approach conflicts with the committee's desires.

1. We hold firmly to the principle that youth understand the Gospel when it is presented to them in language they can access. Our textbooks must “speak a language suited to today’s young people” (*General Directory on Catechesis [GDC]*, no. 208) without altering the essential meaning and existential importance of the doctrine. However, conformity reviews have stated objection to certain attempts at enculturating or rephrasing traditional formulae and technical language of faith. The desire of the committee is that texts prescriptively use the language of the *Catechism*, “without manipulation.”
2. We recognize that youth catechesis has a missionary dimension. Our textbooks are written to speak to students who are “believers” as well as to “those students who are searching, or who have religious doubts” or who are “non-believers” (*GDC*, nos. 75 and 185). However, conformity reviews seem to suggest that textbooks should be written with a presumption of belief among the students, that the Catholic high school religion classroom is a place where “faith speaks to faith.” This was reinforced in a face-to-face conversation with the committee chairman in 2003, where he expressed that our goal should be to “make every student a Catholic before they graduate from our Catholic school.”
3. We are committed to catechesis that helps students to reflect on their experiences, to evaluate them in the light of the Gospel, and to see God at work in life (see *GDC*, no. 152). Our textbooks are written to engage students in the content of faith through dialogue, questioning, use of the higher

cognitive skills, and reflection on their own life experience. However, conformity reviews have often directed us to remove questions for student reflection, especially questions that invite students to consider their lived experience in light of faith, and questions that invite students to offer their personal opinion on some matter. These methods are seen by the committee as opening the door to “relativism” and to leading young people to believe that one’s opinion is “equal to the teaching of the Church.” We have also been directed to remove references to typical teenage experiences out of a concern that such references could imply that experiences of this nature are condoned by the Church.

I am happy to report that we have reached accord with the committee on one key point, which I presented in my letter of May 2004. As you may recall, the committee had stated to us that because our textbooks used formulas of faith and phraseology such as “the Church teaches,” “the Church believes,” “the Church holds,” “Christians believe,” and the like, they could not be declared in conformity. We presented evidence that these are long-standing formulas in our faith Tradition and are used in the *Catechism* itself. After appealing for doctrinal clarification on the matter from the USCCB Committee on Doctrine, the committee has informed us that we are now free to use these formulas of faith.

I am also pleased to tell you that we have five student texts that have received the committee’s declaration of conformity: *Written on Our Hearts*, ©2002, *Living*

Justice and Peace, ©2002, *The Catholic Faith Handbook for Youth*, ©2004, and most recently, *Confirmed in a Faithful Community: Candidate's Handbook* (both our long-term program and our immediate preparation edition), ©2006. *The Catholic Faith Handbook* and the *Candidate's Handbooks* tend to be more of a straightforward exposition of the Church's teachings and therefore have not been seen in the same light as our textbooks that clearly express a more experiential, dialogical form and method. We will continue to submit student materials to the ad hoc committee for their review.

I want to state clearly that the conformity reviews have, at times, been a valuable resource for improving catechetical materials from Saint Mary's Press. For example, reviewers have urged a greater emphasis on the doctrine of original sin. Part of the Saint Mary's Press charism as a Lasallian publisher has been to emphasize grace—an emphasis we do not want to lose. But a deep appreciation of grace is undermined by a lack of appreciation for the reality of original sin. Greater emphasis on the doctrine of original sin actually enhances the theology of grace. The review process has challenged us to recover some of the deep riches of the Tradition; those riches, woven into a strong pastoral and pedagogical approach, have the potential to create truly outstanding catechetical materials.

Our Hope for the Future

I have expressed two distinct catechetical worldviews that have coexisted in the Church from its earliest days. It will be a grave disservice to the Church and to the young people entrusted to our care to see them as oppositional. Though clearly distinct in practice, they each bring certain value to the tasks of proclaiming the Good News and empowering young people for discipleship in Christ.. It is in the balance of these worldviews that we will find the fullest, most authentic, and complete education of the young. In the words of Saint John Baptist de La Salle, it will be a human and Christian education, one that gives priority to the ability to search for meaning and, at the same time, clearly proclaims the authentic content of Revelation.

We continue to cooperate with the ad hoc committee in the hope that the grace of our charism, entrusted to us by the Church, will contribute to this “new moment” in the “renewal of catechesis.” We will continue to share our charism with the committee and the Church, especially the young whose salvation is our ultimate concern—a concern shared by the committee as well. To the extent that the ad hoc committee accepts our charism as conforming to the letter and spirit of the *Catechism*, we will welcome their affirming judgment on future texts. And, so we pray,

Saint John Baptist de La Salle. Pray for us.

Live, Jesus, in our hearts. Forever!

ⁱ The publication of the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (1992) is only the second time in the Church's history there has been a worldwide, universal catechism—the first being the *Roman Catechism* promulgated at the Council of Trent in 1566. At Vatican I, it was hoped that the council would draft a new universal catechism, but as the council was interrupted prematurely, the task was never taken up and completed. In the meantime, a new catechetical worldview emerged and the Second Vatican Council saw no need for a centralized, universal catechism. Protagonists of a universal catechism persisted, and in 1985, following the Extraordinary Synod of Bishops, Pope John Paul II called for and commissioned a body of cardinals and bishops to undertake the task of preparing a new universal catechism.