

I love words. Since I was young I have been fascinated by their power, grandeur, and multiple meanings. As a child I remember trying to impress my brothers and sister by working into our conversations big words I had just learned; as siblings are not easily impressed by such behavior, my attempts were occasionally met with blank stares or laughter. In college an English professor of mine encouraged students to carry around in our backpacks a pocket dictionary and thesaurus so that during our study of poetry, we could, at any time, pause to look up deeper and additional meanings. While this suggestion may have been received with limited enthusiasm by some, I welcomed the opportunity to further my love affair with the written word. As a teacher and parent, I have tried to pass on this love of words, but even more so, encourage the respectful and careful use of the English language. (I do not claim great skill as a writer – just a deep appreciation for language and those who can touch hearts and expand minds with it.) Words have power; they can heal and inspire, or they can alienate and bewilder. Language can be a gateway to understanding, or a roadblock to knowledge.

It is this deep respect for the power of words that leads me to assert one of the distinguishing and essential elements of effective adolescent catechesis and evangelization today is accessible language. In order to

achieve “communion with Jesus Christ” (USCCB 55), the primary objective of Catholic catechesis, catechists must, and more specifically catechetical texts must, use language that engages adolescents and invites them to explore and grow in their faith in Jesus. Words have power; they can heal and inspire, or they can alienate and bewilder. Language in catechetical resources can and should be a gateway to understanding of the Gospel of Jesus, not a roadblock to knowledge and a deepening faith.

Lasallian educators have a rich tradition of catechizing and evangelizing in language that is accessible to students. Since the time of the early Christian schools in 17th century France, Lasallians have pursued a style of catechesis that engages both the mind and the heart, and factors in the student’s lived experience. It is well known among contemporary Lasallians that John Baptist de La Salle taught his students in the vernacular. Using the common language was a means by which he and his teachers could establish meaningful relationships with them. These positive student-teacher relationships were then – and remain today – the key to successful learning experiences for youth. “Lasallian spirituality stresses that it is mainly in the relationship to students and colleagues that the presence and love of God manifested in Jesus Christ is to shine through words and actions” (Rummery 4). By establishing healthy, loving

relationships with students, De La Salle sought the salvation of their souls and encouraged learning in the practical subjects of the day.

Lasallians in the Third Millennium, inspired by the spirituality and charism of De La Salle, continue to catechize and evangelize adolescents by establishing personal relationships with them and by maintaining a heightened awareness of the power of catechetical language. While it is necessary for teachers today to keep strict and clear boundaries with students because of contemporary issues such as child sex abuse and sexual harassment, it is possible for teachers and catechists to effectively engage students in the learning process and touch their hearts at the same time. Without establishing these personal relationships, without using language that is understandable to the youth entrusted to their care, Lasallian teachers cannot fulfill their role and duty as teachers of the faith and ministers of Christ. De La Salle's words still set the standard for educators today: "You are engaged in a ministry wherein you are obliged to touch hearts." (Meditation 43.3)

One of the tools teachers use in establishing these strong learning relationships with students is excellent catechetical resources – textbooks, prayer books, teacher manuals. Several experienced Lasallian catechists with whom I met recently expressed frustration with the quality of catechetical resources in general, but specifically with some selections on

the current list of ad hoc approved texts. Their observation of and experience with some catechetical resources designed for use with teens today is that the texts do not balance orthodoxy with praxis. These educators want high school catechetical materials that conform to the *Catechism* but also present information in a way that engages the mind, enlivens the hearts and deepens the faith of students.

Matthew, a former Christian Brother and Religion teacher for thirty years, recommends catechetical resources use age-appropriate vocabulary for adolescents. Often, he finds, the vocabulary in high school texts is too advanced for teens and the content assumes knowledge students do not possess. Additionally, he suggests greater consideration be given to adolescent social and cognitive development when catechetical materials are created. Attention must be paid not only to the presentation of the faith as complete and authentic, but also to the methodology of instruction. How will the students be invited to interact with the teachings of the faith? How will their lived experience and their needs as youth be considered and valued?

Peter, a Religion teacher for thirty-two years, is not sure the latest scientific research on adolescent brain development is considered by all publishers in the development of catechetical materials. What we now know about how children learn cannot be ignored in the creation of

catechetical texts. Like his colleague Matthew, Peter also stresses a desire to have catechetical resources employ common language that is appealing and accessible to adolescents. It is his fear that the dense language of the *Catechism* may discourage both cognitive and affective engagement by adolescents.

Joanna, a Religion teacher for six years, recommends catechetical resources heed the directive in the *National Directory for Catechesis* to “utilize the life experiences of adolescents, fostering a shared dialogue between the life of the adolescent – with his or her joys, struggles, questions, and hopes – and the wisdom of the Catholic Church” (USCCB 201). Too few texts, she believes, respect the complexities of adolescent social and moral development. In what better environment than with their parents or with a trained catechist can students explore their questions, fears, and struggles of faith? How better to deepen the faith of students than to accept them for where they are developmentally and minister to them within their unique cultural and social context? “One central guiding principle that the church has been telling us repeatedly since Vatican II is to pay attention to context. Adolescents always must be viewed in the context of their relationships including with family members, the Christian community and their cultural milieu. (Hagarty 48) In the end, what Joanna would find helpful in future catechetical

resources is supplementary student materials that respect adolescent development as they offer large group, individual, and family activities that encourage reflection and stimulate dialogue.

Comments from these three catechists are consistent with the educational tradition of John Baptist de La Salle that asks teachers to make a student's education practical and accessible. Recent Institute documents also discuss the important role of the catechist in Lasallian ministries and emphasize the need for strong catechesis which uses language youth can understand. In Brother John Johnston's 2000 Pastoral Letter, he reminds Brothers of the Institute's duty to catechize and evangelize. He writes:

Despite the difficulties in communicating the faith today, 'we do not renounce in any way our determination to proclaim Jesus Christ.' To be a *catechist by vocation* is to love and respect our young people as distinct human persons. It is to accept them 'as they are' and to take them seriously. It is to walk side by side with them, permitting them to share openly their perplexities and questions about the meaning of life and about religious faith. To be a catechist by vocation is to share with young people what we see, think and believe, without trying to impose our faith on them" (23).

The documents from the 43rd General Chapter on the topic of evangelization of youth observe that "if true dialogue is to take place, we

must know more about these young people, and use language and forms of expression they understand” (Circular 447).

The United States Catholic Bishops, aware of the power of language in the promotion of the faith, seek to unify all people in the process of catechesis by fostering a common language. The goal of a common language of faith is that the Christian message will be “proclaimed, celebrated, lived, and prayed in words familiar to all the faithful” (USCCB 86). A common language of faith, while appealing in its potential for unity, also raises the following questions for adolescent catechesis: “How do we balance the value of common wording with the value of translating the message into terms young people can understand? At what point do either uniformity of wording or new expressions and language begin to impede the church’s efforts to make disciples?” (Hagarty 48). Is uniform wording a gateway to understanding the Gospel of Jesus, or a roadblock to knowledge and a deepening faith?

A Lasallian vision of Catholic catechesis and evangelization in the U.S. today must emphasize the importance of accessible language in proclaiming the Gospel to young people. The wisdom of the Lasallian charism entrusted to our care for the service of the church, as well as the lived experiences and written documents of Lasallians for the past 350 years, teach us of its necessity. As catechists and teachers, we know that

our Lasallian spirituality is “lived out in an educational relationship that is earthed in all the difficulties and contradictions of life....this tension in itself becomes creative when true Lasallians find strength and solace in trying to see as God sees and...in doing whatever is judged for the good of those whom they see as ‘confided in their care’” (Rummery 6). The very difficulties and contradictions experienced by Lasallians in the current climate of catechetical publishing and teaching in the U.S., especially with regard to accessible language, should not discourage catechists in passing on the faith, but rather inspire them and their students to greater fidelity and greater creativity.

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