

“Confessions of a Catechumenate Junkie: Reflections on the Adoption and Teaching of the Catechumenate”

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Presentation 1

The thesis for all three presentations is that the teaching *of* the catechumenate — teaching *about* the catechumenate to seminarians and potential parish practitioners — needs to reflect the nature of teaching *within* the catechumenate (normally called catechesis or formation). Just as Christians are made, not born, so catechumenate practitioners are made, not born. Indeed, Ruth asserted, we have much to learn about how to teach about the catechumenate from what we have been saying about teaching within the catechumenate.

In the first presentation, Ruth reflected on his experience as a student learning the catechumenate in the 1980s. This reminiscing became the springboard for considering certain fundamental aspects of catechesis presumed in catechumenal literature:

- The goal is conversion, not just information.
- The desire is advancement in the 3 B's: a sense of belonging, appropriate Christian behavior, as well as belief.
- There is respect for and use of the prior experience of the catechumen/learner.
- The learning is communal rather than just individual (the whole community, not just a single instructor; and the value of interacting with other catechumens).
- Instruction as journey rather than event (not just a matter of sitting in a class for a set length of time with it all being over at “graduation”).
- Teaching in the catechumenate must involve more than talking and listening; imitation, practice, and “apprenticeship” are important.

After reviewing these catechumenal traits briefly, Ruth then provided an overview of the general pedagogical authors whose material he brought into conversation with these fundamental traits. He introduced Parker Palmer, Mary Hess, and Jane Vella, promising to provide more details on each in the following two presentations.

Presentation 2

The second presentation began with a discussion of Parker Palmer's notion of a subject-centered classroom (in contrast to a teacher-centered or learner-centered) and its parallel with the catechumenal desire for learning as communal. Ruth discussed the danger he had

faced in previous attempts to teach about the catechumenate of creating a teacher-centered classroom through either expertise or excessive zeal. He suggested that a teacher of the catechumenate should not predigest all the information about the catechumenate and then regurgitate it with either expertise or zeal for the potential practitioner. A journey of discovering what the catechumenate is about should be part of the learning experience.

This notion became the point of entry for exploring Palmer's notion of "great things" and contemplating what the "great things" of the catechumenate really are. Ruth suggested that it was these "great things" and not a specific ecumenical "packaging" of the catechumenate with standardized terms that is the crucial matter in teaching about the catechumenate. To draw the parallel to the typical traits of catechumenal catechesis, Ruth suggested further that teaching about the catechumenate must involve a well-rounded "conversion" of the potential practitioner, not just the absorption of information about the catechumenate. He raised the possibility that introducing potential practitioners to standardized terminology about the catechumenate, a standard form of the catechumenate, and catechumenate history early in the learning process might not be the best way to teach about the catechumenate. In contrast he advocated the approach he now uses in classrooms: extended student contemplation of the interrogations in baptismal rites. What would it take to lead someone to be able to answer these questions with integrity? That becomes the launching point for discussing the catechumenate.

To conclude the second presentation Ruth introduced Palmer's suggestion that teaching best occurs when teaching from the microcosm: Teach less but do so more deeply. Dive into particularity because it can lead to an understanding of the whole. Exploring an example from Palmer of a medical school that had adapted its curriculum so that students began their studies working with actual sick in groups under the guide of a mentor, Ruth sought ways to draw a parallel to teaching about the catechumenate. Would it be possible to start with potential practitioners' natural desire to be helpful to those with soul "sickness" and then ask how the various dimensions of the catechumenate might truly be "conversion therapy" as Aidan Kavanagh expressed it.

Presentation 3

In the last presentation Ruth explored the parallels from the pedagogical writings of Mary Hess and Jane Vella to typical teaching emphases in catechumenal literature. After drawing out the parallels, he discussed various implications for them.

With respect to Hess, Ruth discussed her notion of the tri-fold nature of real learning occurring in ideas, feelings, and actions. Ruth saw parallels in how catechumenal literature discusses the well-rounded goals of reformed catechesis. Ruth applauded the multiple dimensions he had often seen in events planned by others and bemoaned his prior approach to excessively emphasize ideas/concepts about the catechumenate in his own teaching.

This retrospective became the opportunity to discuss the various dimensions of real, enduring understanding: being able to explain, to interpret, to apply, to have perspective, to empathize with contrary perspectives, and to have self-knowledge (from Grant Wiggins and Jay McTighe's book, *Understanding by Design*). Ruth suggested that just as teaching within the catechumenate requires time to achieve so does teaching about the catechumenate. In particular time must be taken to create enduring understanding not only about the catechumenate itself but issues of implementation.

Ruth also examined the role of apprenticeship in learning the catechumenate in ideas, feelings, and actions. He investigated various possibilities by which the catechumenate could be learned by students or parishes participating in it, perhaps by "apprenticeship" to a "master" congregation or by real or electronic field placement.

Ruth concluded the final presentation by looking at Jane Vella's emphasis on teaching taking place within dialog, including the creation of a safe environment and the teacher's hearing the student's learning aims. Ruth drew the parallel to several of the standard features of catechumenal teaching. He concluded the presentation by exploring the dangerous quality to the catechumenate and how it might actually be repulsive to some students on initial introduction. He contrasted the initial hesitation of one student with the eager grasping by several others, contemplating that the creation of an initial frustration with the status quo might be an important first step in creating desire within a student to learn about the catechumenate more fully.

Bibliography

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