

Chapter 1

Protestants and Roman Catholics Together

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A number of years ago I penned an article for the *Catechist*.¹ It raised the question: Why is it that Protestants and Roman Catholics, when it comes to educational change, keep passing each other in the night? I described what I believed to be the common educational dilemma faced by both Protestants and Roman Catholics. And then I questioned why it was that we have each tended to recommend solutions for our educational problems that the other has already demonstrated as inadequate. Finally, I put forth the challenge that we plan together for an alternative future. Numerous readers agreed, but none of us seemed to know where to begin. The editor of the *Catechist* asked me for an article that would suggest a new approach for our educational ministries. I couldn't respond because I wasn't sure what to say. But now I have a proposal, thanks to an action by the Roman Catholic hierarchy, an action stimulated by the Second Vatican Council (perhaps the most significant event in the history of the ecumenical movement).

This action was the preparation of a General Catechetical Directory. Although the Second Vatican Council adjourned in 1965, its work is not yet completed. Gradually specific measures of reform or renewal prescribed by the council are being implemented. As one response, the General Catechetical Directory has been issued.² Published in June 1971, the directory's aim is to promote renewal in catechesis, a pastoral activity of the church—a renewal which concerns "religious education" but is importantly understood as an integral part of the church's total

renewal. My introduction to the General Catechetical Directory came through *Catechetics in Context*,³ a commentary on the directory by Berard L. Marthaler of Catholic University. The important issues raised by this book have been more stimulating to me than almost anything else I have read on religious education in recent years.⁴

In a closing paragraph of "A Protestant Response to the General Catechetical Directory," C. Ellis Nelson remarked:

I think there are profound possibilities for a new start in religious education for all Christians if we can probe the possibilities of community for nurture. The most radical idea of all would be to conceive of a local church so working and worshipping together that they need very little formal systematic study. But that may be just the subliminal dream of a Protestant who believes that the New Testament forms some sort of norm for life in the church, as well as her theology. I would commend the idea of community, to the group planning the American Catechetical Directory, as a way to think about catechesis which may be more natural for a church than the notion of a school.⁵

With those words Nelson offers a veiled invitation to the Catholic community in America to look seriously at the concept of the church community as a possible alternative or at least a supplement to their present schooling models. I've made the same invitation to the Protestant community in *Values for Tomorrow's Children*⁶ and in my essays within *A Colloquy on Christian Education*.⁷ Now I'm suggesting that the General Catechetical Directory offers both Protestants and Roman Catholics a place to begin our rethinking of religious education together.

That suggestion is rooted in the historical fact that both Protestants and Catholics have, in recent history, placed most all their religious education efforts in one sort of schooling or another. And despite diverse histories, both communities today are facing somewhat identical crises—a mistrust in schooling to reach the educational ends for which they were established and a failure to have adequately educated their parishioners in the Christian faith and life. To say that a new start is called for is, I believe, to belabor the obvious. I assume there is a need to frame an alternative to our present educational programs. What

I'm recommending, therefore, is a new point of departure. That point would begin by studying the process of cultural transmission or socialization. Such a study would help us gain a new perspective on religious education or catechetics.

Such an approach is not, of course, entirely original. Some Catholic and Protestant educators are already experimenting with community models of education. Sometimes it's been called "total religious education." I have often referred to it as "holistic education" or "community-of-faith education."

My friend, Fr. Mark Heath, O.P. (whose thoughts influenced this essay), suggests that one of the most fundamental changes introduced into Catholic church life by the Vatican Council came in the form of an idea or concept. While not revolutionary, it is quite radical in the true sense of that word. The council affirmed that the local parish church is and ought to be understood as a community of love. This is a *new* emphasis. For a long time the parish church has been thought of as a service center, a place where necessary religious services (such as the sacraments and instruction) were offered to the faithful by persons who were granted the authority to offer them. It is true, of course, that many parishes, especially those with a strong ethnic identity, were in fact social communities. But, as Father Heath points out, in the ways in which Catholic life was expressed and parish functions executed, even these churches were far from actualizing true religious community.

What the Vatican Council appears to have done, without attacking the organizational structure of the church, is to reintroduce and emphasize the theological idea or concept of the people or the family of God. The result has been a new emphasis on the equality and shared responsibilities of all members of the church, lay and clerical. Speaking of the pastor, Vatican II's "Decree on the Ministry and the Life of Priests" said, "The office of the pastor is not confined to the care of the individual faithful but also properly extended to the formation of genuine Christian community."⁸

Such radical ideas establish an entirely new foundation for religious education. No longer is religious education to be primarily the authoritative declaration and teaching of those truths and laws which God has revealed for salvation. Now religious education is to focus upon the communication of faith

by and through a community of believers who transmit its beliefs, attitudes, and values through the myriad ways by which they live their common life together in the world. Obviously the work of catechetics can no longer be understood as primarily the responsibility of a school. Now it must become the responsibility and work of the whole Christian community. No longer can education be primarily concerned about the teaching of beliefs and morals or even learning the contents of the scriptures. Now it is to be centered on the life and work of the community of faith.

Whether it was a conscious decision or not, I do not know. But it appears significant that the Catechetical Directory was mandated to be a decree from the pastoral office of bishops and not a declaration from the congregation for Christian education. For too long religious educators have been assigned to and accepted a limited and confining understanding of their responsibility. Catechetics was, therefore, also limited and confining. But no longer. By assigning the Catechetical Directory to those with broad pastoral concerns, everything seems to have been changed. This alone should give everyone concerned for change in religious education a reason for pause. For too long educators have tended to exclude themselves from the life of the church by permitting themselves to plan for learning primarily in the context of schooling. Thus in many churches the pastor has not been significantly involved in religious education. There were always others—religious educators—to worry about it. In Protestantism we made a like sort of error. We professionalized religious educators and granted them degrees which the clergy often felt were inferior to their own. Then the church relegated such persons to directing Sunday church schools. Usually women, they remained secondary members of the church's professional leadership, with little responsibility for the life of the faith community or its cultus. Yet because these educators existed, parish ministers typically neglected the study of religious education in seminary. When, therefore, they assumed responsibility for a parish, they often gave education a low personal priority. If they couldn't afford a trained director of religious education, a lay person would do. The clergy seemed to have concluded that religious education was someone else's responsibility. So it was that religious educators ended up directing church schools and pastors ignored religious education.

A like phenomenon seems to have occurred in the Roman Catholic Church. A religious educator is responsible for either parochial schools or some other sort of schooling (CCD) for those who do not attend parochial school. Pastors, in general, do not make religious education a primary personal aspect of their ministry. Their responsibility is to make sure catechetics is not forgotten. Most often they have responded by turning the responsibility for religious education over to others, mostly women (nuns) who have little or no responsibility or say in the general life of the parish. But all that will change if the General Catechetical Directory is taken seriously. Nuns, parish priests, and the laity will join together in rethinking religious education in the context of parish life and community. Religious education will begin to focus upon intentional religious socialization. Catechetics as the work of the whole church will find its content in the total life of the church. Pope Paul VI encouraged such an understanding when he addressed the International Catechetical Congress at Rome in September 1971:

Catechesis is a teaching that requires, more than any other teaching, the intervention of the persons concerned. It requires the living and direct work of the whole community of the church. Catechesis can be considered a testimony of faith. Now every believer is obliged to render this testimony, by professing his own faith, in deed, by example, and by words.⁹

The Catechetical Directory emphasizes an identical understanding:

The content of catechetics is found in God's word, written or handed down; it is more deeply understood and developed by the people exercising their faith under the guidance of the Magisterium, which alone teaches authentically; it is celebrated in the liturgy; it shines forth in the life of the Church, especially in the just and in the saints; and in some way it is known too from those genuine moral values which, by divine providence, are found in human society.¹⁰

Catechetics, therefore, includes helping people understand, deepen, and exercise their faith by participation in the community of faith, a community acting out its faith in the world. It

involves participation in the liturgy; it includes observing, discovering, and enhancing the faith in the total life and work of the church; and it is concerned with uncovering the faith in the moral values of society.

The directory makes clear that catechetics—which obviously should encourage personal experience of faith and reflection on religious matters—is not complete, however, unless it results in Christian action. Christian catechesis should educate persons to assume the responsibilities of faith. And such learning, it confesses, can only take place in a community which is facing the issues of worldly Christian life by becoming involved in actual human struggles. Thus the parish life of fellowship with its tensions and disagreements, the communal facing of moral issues, personal and social, and parish action aimed at addressing such issues are the proper locus of religious education.

Continually the Catechetical Directory affirms that catechesis is not limited to a few professionals but is the task of the entire church community. But perhaps even more radical is its stand that catechesis is not just for children but in fact principally for adults, for it is through the life and action of the adult community that faith is transmitted to the next generation.

There are other important points in the directory. For example, it establishes the ritual life of the church as an essential aspect of religious education (an aspect of socialization we Protestants have almost totally ignored in our recent history). What emerges from the directory's understanding of "religious education" is an emphasis on the church as a worshipping, learning, and witnessing community of faith.

Catechesis is to be directly related to all pastoral activities: worship, parish life and fellowship, social action and service. Although it is careful not to make education into everything that happens in the life of the parish, it suggests that educators need to focus their efforts on all aspects of the church's life.¹¹

In a major address to the International Catechetical Congress at Rome in September 1971, John Cardinal Wright said:

Any catechetical activity that is isolated from the ecclesial context in which it exists is destined to be inefficacious. Not parochial catechesis, catechetics in school, family instruction, conferences for special groups of believers, nor any other kind of catechetics, can

be efficacious by itself. Consequently, it is unthinkable that catechetical activity be developed without connection and collaboration with other ecclesial activity. It is especially underlined that it is necessary that every catechetical activity be related to a concrete community of the faithful which lives the faith effectively.¹²

To think about or plan education from this perspective will not be an easy task for Roman Catholics or Protestants. It is unfamiliar territory for us both. Yet I see no other way for us to proceed. Education must be carried on by the total parish community, for the aim of "religious education" is for both individual growth in the faith and for the building up of the community of faith. Accomplishing this aim will be a long, slow, and perhaps painful task, but one which I recommend to all of us who desire an alternative future for the Christian community and an alternative future for religious education. It is a road we can—and, indeed, ought to—travel together. I further suggest that the place for us to begin is with Berard Marthaler's commentary on the General Catechetical Directory, *Catechetics in Context*.

Neither of us can assume that the church as it exists is the way it ought to be. Inducting persons into its life or training them only to be active members is not enough. Reform and renewal of the church is essential. Perhaps the challenge which lies before us is not primarily one of instructing children; it may well be one of converting adults. And for that end, religious education is surely not an academic enterprise. But neither is it a new task.

Berard Marthaler writes:

There is a marked difference between the catechetical activity of the early church and that of the modern church. Until the Sixth or Seventh Century catechesis was directed to adults who, having heard the gospel message, knowingly or willingly asked to join the Christian community. The time of preparation for baptism, the catechumenate, lasted several years through a period of "conversion." Later, when the practice of infant baptism became universal, the focus of catechesis began to shift to children.

The lament is not that infants and children are baptized and instructed in the faith, but that catechesis came to focus primarily if not solely on children and adolescents. Consequently, the main

thrust of catechetical activity centered on the school, question-answer methods and "initiation" into the Church. The point of the Directory is that the paradigm—"the chief form"—must rather be adult catechesis. "Maturity of faith" is the goal of catechesis. Thus catechizing youngsters is not the main task but simply a prelude to the principal movement.¹³

I agree. I'd like to make conversion a major concern of religious education. Yet I know that conversion will never alone be satisfactory. As Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann in their book, *The Social Construction of Reality*, put it:

It is only within the religious community, the *ecclesia*, that the conversion can be effectively maintained as plausible. . . . To have a conversion experience is nothing much. The real thing is to be able to keep on taking it seriously; to retain a sense of its plausibility. *This* is where the religious community comes in. It provides the indispensable plausibility structure for the new reality. In other words, Saul may have become Paul in the aloneness of religious ecstasy, but he could *remain* Paul only in the context of the Christian community that recognized him as such and confirmed the "new being" in which he now located this identity. This relationship of conversion and community is not a peculiarly Christian phenomenon. . . . One cannot remain a Muslim outside the *'umma* of Islam, a Buddhist outside the *sangha*, and probably not a Hindu anywhere outside India. Religion requires a religious community, and to live in a religious world requires affiliation with that community.¹⁴

The directory places an emphasis on active, conscious, genuine participation in the life of a Christian community—a Christian community of converts who live and act in the world as the faithful people of God. That's where it belongs! And that conviction implies a shift in our focus as educators to what I'd like to call "religious socialization."

Although the directory does not use that term, the educational role it attributes to the church community is in effect a description of "intentional socialization." From one point of view, all education is socialization—that is to say, a process by which an individual is initiated into a particular community, educated to its values and ideals, and led at some point—the threshold of

maturity—to internalize them and adopt them for his own. And it is likewise the process by which that community sustains its understanding and way of life—that is, keeps itself faithful.

I've had a suspicion that was true for some time. The directory has reinforced and focused my suspicion. And so I now recommend that Protestants and Roman Catholics join together in considering "religious socialization" as their point of departure for planning religious education. Obviously I hope others will agree, for the most difficult part of the task remains. My hope is that the essays in this volume will help us to get started.