

## Francis' message to catechists: "An injured Church is better than a closed Church"



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In his audience with participants of the International Conference on Catechesis for the Year of Faith, the Pope said: "Don't be afraid to go with Christ to the peripheries"

"Catechesis is a pillar for education in the faith and it needs good catechists!" Being a good catechist "begins with Christ" which means not being "afraid to go with Christ to the peripheries." These were Pope Francis' words to participants of the International Conference on Catechesis (which kicked off yesterday in the Paul VI Hall in the Vatican) held as part of the Year of Faith initiative. 1600 catechists, pastoral workers, professors and experts from various educational institutions are attending the Conference on the theme "Catechist: A Witness of Faith".

The Pope thanked catechists for their service "to the Church and in the Church. It's a beautiful experience educating others in the faith, even though it can be difficult, it requires a lot of work and you don't always see the results you hoped for! Helping children, young people and adults to get to know and love God more and more deeply, is one of the most beautiful educational adventures you can have." Francis then stressed the importance of "being" catechists!" Speaking off the cuff, he said: "It's not proselytism that makes the Church grow, it's testimony." He said this quoting Benedict XVI. A catechist's work is not a job: "Careful. I did not say "working as" a catechist, I said "being" a catechist, because it is to do with life. A person guides others towards by Jesus through their words, life and testimony. "Being" catechists requires love, an ever stronger love for Christ, love for his holy people." And this love necessarily "begins with Christ".

The Pope focused on the concept of beginning with Christ. "What does this mean for a catechist, for

you and for me? For I am also a catechist.” It means at least three things.

First of all, it means “familiarity with Him. Jesus continuously reminds disciples of this during the Last Supper, as he prepares to experience the highest gift of love, sacrifice on the Cross...” The Son of God refers to the image of the grapevine and the shoots and says: “Remain in my love, remain attached to me like a shoot is attached to the vine. When we are united in Him we can bear fruit and this is familiarity with Christ.” So the first thing a disciple must do “is stay with their Teacher, listen to Him and learn from Him. This is true always. It is a life-long journey!” Pope Francis who is reforming the Church with “normality” shared an experience from his “normal” daily life: “For me, for example, it’s very important to stand before the Tabernacle; you feel you are in the presence of the lord, allowing Him to look at you. And this warms the heart; it keeps the fire of friendship going; it makes you feel He is really looking at you, that he is by your side and loves you.” The Pope understands this is no simple task for catechists: “particularly for those who are married with children. It’s hard to find a long period of calm. But thanks to God, we don’t all have to respond to this task in the same way; there are so many different vocations within the Church and so many forms of spirituality; the important thing is to find a suitable way of being with the Lord; and this is possible at every stage of one’s life.”

The second meaning is this: to “begin with Christ” “means following his example, coming out of oneself and reaching out to others. “This is a beautiful experience, and a bit paradoxical,” he said. “Why? Because the person who puts Christ at the centre of his life is off-centre. The more you unite with Jesus and make Him the centre of your life, the more He makes you abandon yourself, decentralize yourself, and open yourself to others.” What the Pope “from the other side of the world” described is “the true power of love, this is God himself in action! God is the centre, but he always gives the gift of himself, he is a relationship, he is life which is passed on ... This is what we become is we stay united with Christ; He draws us into this vortex of love. When Christ is truly present in one’s life, a person opens up to others, they come out of themselves and reach out to others in the name of Christ.”

Finally, “beginning with Christ means not being afraid to go with Christ to the peripheries”. “Peripheries” is one of the key words of Francis’ pontificate. The reference is not just to geographical peripheries but to existential ones as well. The Pope mentioned “the story of Jonah, a very interesting character, especially in these modern times of change and uncertainty. Jonah is a pious man; he lives a peaceful and ordered life; this means he has everything figured out in his head and judges others using very strict and rigid criteria.” When the Lord calls him and tells him to go and preach in the pagan city of Nineveh, Jonah is reluctant. Nineveh doesn’t fit into his mind’s framework and is on the periphery of his world. So he escapes, he runs away and gets on a boat that takes him far away.” The Pope advised catechists to “re-read the Book of Jonah” It is a highly educational parable, particularly for

men of the Church. It teaches us not to be afraid to come out of our fixed mindsets and follow God; because God always goes beyond; God is not afraid of the peripheries.” “God is always faithful, he is always creative, never closed and this is why he is never rigid; he welcomes us, he reaches out to us, he understands us.” But to be faithful one must be creative, one must be able to change. To stay with God, one needs to be able to go out; not be afraid to go out.”

Francis then sent out a triple warning: “If a catechist allows themselves to be overcome by fear, they are cowards; if a catechist is too easy going, they end up looking like a statue in a museum; if a catechist is rigid they shrivel up and become sterile.” It is important to change and adapt according to the various contexts in which one is called to proclaim the Word of God, the Pope said. Sometimes, being in a Church community “is like being in a closed room. You get sick sooner or later. Of course, when you go out into the street accidents can happen, but I would far rather have an injured Church than a sick Church.”

Francis pointed out that no one is alone: “Jesus does not say: go, sort yourselves out! No! Jesus says: Go, I am here with you!” “This is our beauty and our strength: If we go, if we go out to bring his Gospel with love, with true apostolic spirit, with frankness, He walks with us, before us always [preceding] us.” When we are scared because “we are to go far away, to a remote periphery, He is in fact already there: Jesus waits for us in the heart of that brother, in his wounded flesh, in his oppressed life, in his faithless soul.” “There are so many children that don’t know how to make the sign of the Cross. And this is a periphery,” Francis said, recalling his own experience in Buenos Aires.

Francis’ final appeal was this: “Dear catechists, let us go out, open the doors and be bold enough to trace new paths for the proclamation of the Gospel.”

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