

CATECHESIS

November 22, 1979

My dear sisters and brothers.

I am happy that in our country, but more specifically in these two dioceses, the movement of the Holy Spirit is flourishing¹. In your name I give thanks to God because you have been chosen for this mission in our country: the renovation of an institution that is intimately linked to our evangelization but one that, because of historical difficulties, had lost some of its strength. Through the renewal of the Second Vatican Council the catechumenate has been restored to its place of honor, a place that it has always had in the process of evangelization because the catechumenate and catechesis are part of our evangelizing mission.

Thus in order to leave you with some message during my visit with you, I invite you to live this catechesis, this catechumenate in the way that the Church proposes. You know that two years ago the Synod of Bishops met in Rome to discuss the theme of catechesis. The Pope has recently published the results of that synodal consultation with a document on catechesis.² I believe this document should be for all of you a document of primary importance that you must assimilate. The Pope says that the meaning of catechesis supposes these connections:

1. Catechesis and Kerygma

As you already know, *kerygma* is the first proclamation of Christ's message that touches the heart of an individual and brings about conversion so that this person hands his/her life over to Christ. It is the first proclamation: *come and follow me* (1), but later this first fervor is not enough. Catechesis must follow so that one is formed in the faith that has led one to be baptized and make a commitment to follow Jesus. The bishops who gathered together in Rome said that in many countries and especially here in Latin America, people have lost the connection between that first call that is heard by an individual and that leads one to follow Christ (*kerygma*) and the need to know Jesus and his message more profoundly (catechesis and catechumenate).

Therefore the bishops proposed that since there was no catechumenate that prepared people for this following of Christ and since many people were baptized and have lived their lives without having heard the *kerygma* and thus have lived out their baptism as though they were non-believers, it is now necessary and urgent to supply this call that people have not experienced through the establishment of a catechumenate that leads people to a true encounter with Christ.

We are not going to deny the sad fact that many people have not heard the first call of the *kerygma* and have been baptized because it was customary to do so and thus have received a rite but do not understand the meaning of what they have received. It is for this reason that we insist in our Archdiocese that people be prepared for the sacrament of Baptism by participating in a series of talks and discussions. We cannot presume that people are going to participate in the catechumenate after their Baptism.

But thanks to God we are recovering something that should be reversed. It is never too late to know the Lord and to repair, with a more devout life, those things that we did not do before. We had not followed the Lord, we had not known the Lord nor had we heard the *kerygma*, but now the catechumenate offers us an opportunity not to simply hear the *kerygma* but rather offers us the

opportunity for a formation that is at the same time an encounter and a *Kerygma*. I believe that the Neo-Catechumenate Movement is fulfilling our desire to provide people with the proclamation of the gospel that before we had not given enough attention to and at the same time to provide people with a systematic formation that we can call catechesis.

Catechesis and Sacraments

This is something that is urgent in our pastoral ministry and evangelization. The practice of receiving sacraments without a proper catechesis creates a ritual emptiness. For so many people the sacrament of Baptism is nothing more than a social ceremony in which godparents have to be found and a *fiesta* prepared, but so few are aware of the fact that Baptism signifies the incorporation of their child into the life of Christ, into the death and resurrection of Christ. The same could be said of the other sacraments. How many persons marry without understanding the meaning of the profound union of Christ with the Church that becomes present in the union of a man and woman in matrimony?

Catechesis has to lead to the sacraments because the reverse, that is, catechesis without sacraments, would result in mere speculation and rationalization --- nothing more. But when catechesis is linked with the sacraments then catechesis prepares people to receive a sign that leads them to encounter God. How powerful then is this catechumenate, this catechesis that leads us to the effective signs of God's presence and grace --- that leads us to this encounter with God.

You, then, are very important instruments, for as Father has already mentioned, you are called to revitalize in your parishes the process of catechesis so that it does not simply consist of reflection and learning certain truths by rote. Rather you are called to put in place a catechesis that orients people toward the sacraments so that these sacraments can be received with a full awareness of what is happening, with respect, and with devotion to the Lord who is encountered in these sacramental signs. We cannot have evangelization on the one hand and sacramentalization on the other. This is now something from a former era. Today, evangelization and sacramentalization are intimately bound together. True evangelization leads to this encounter with Christ in the signs of his Church and in the signs of the sacraments.

Another relationship that I want to speak about with you is the relationship between catechesis and community.

Catechesis and Community

It is not enough to live an individual religious life but rather we must live our life in community. Before, the catechumenate prepared people to live together as a Christian community and thanks to God we are returning to this practice. Father mentioned before how Christians are living together in parishes and dioceses. It is the community that presents itself to her children and these people saw the beauty of the Church that seemed to be like the Virgin who continued to be a virgin, yet always fertile. For indeed the Church continues to give birth to new children in the sacrament of Baptism. The celebration of the Easter Vigil is the enlightenment of the Church, virgin and mother, for through Baptism she is enriched with a new generation, with new children.

The Church, like the community or the parish or the diocese, feels an obligation to provide for the faith of these children that have been born and feels a need to provide them with the warmth of a home so that they can live their faith and live together as a Christian community. The Church must be concerned about the formation of Christian communities and must see to it that this community

grows deeper in faith and extends itself to other people, that is, becomes missionary. The Church must continue to be dissatisfied as long as she sees so many people who are baptized and yet have not understood the rich meaning of their baptism. The Church must continue to be faithful to the apostles who spoke about carrying this treasure in fragile vessels and extending this treasure through creating new communities and by living together in community.

Today we urgently need the community sense in our country. At times there is confusion between the Christian community and political groups. People do not know how to distinguish between these two because the members of the Christian community have not deepened their faith and so there is confusion. In my Pastoral Letter³ I said that many times people, especially young people, have achieved political maturity more quickly than Christian maturity. They have given their lives a political dimension --- as though this were the only dimension of life --- and so there is no time to cultivate the Christian dimension of their lives. When the opposite is operative, then the Christian dimension is primary and from this Christian perspective one seeks one's place in society, the vocation that God has given to one. If God has given one a political vocation, then one lives this vocation as a Christian. In this way we will have the women and men that we need --- people who are maturing in a Christian community, maturing in the gospel, in their faith, in their commitment to Christ and in their following of the Lord. Indeed, they are maturing in such a way that they will never betray the Lord in the laws or customs of our country, that is, in political life. They are maturing and becoming agents of transformation that our country needs now more than ever before. Yes, our country needs people who are deeply committed to Christ and deeply committed to this community, to this People of God --- so committed that as the Bible says they become like a light that shines brightly on a mountain top. (2) Today when there is so much confusion and so many groups making so many different demands, the Christian community ought to experience herself as one which is able to enlighten all these realities that can occur in our midst.

I assure you and with all my heart I ask you as Pastor, there wherever you go, in whatever parishes you are living, please be concerned about making the catechumenate a part of the Christian life of the people of that area. This catechumenate should consist of Biblical reflection, a sense of the sacraments, a Christian commitment to build community, but not a community that is closed in upon itself or comfortable with its own life but rather a community that is Church and that leads people to Jesus Christ --- a community that exists to serve the world, a community that enlightens itself with the light of Christ in order to share this same light with the surrounding community, a community that is each day more committed to Christ, more committed to the redemption of Christ that becomes present in the midst of people and the world.

These are the three syntheses that I want to communicate to you as a strong recommendation, for they correspond to the Neo-Catechumenate Movement.

First, there is a bond between catechesis and kerigma (that is, conversion), between the encounter with Christ and catechetical formation and the deepening of one's faith (a systematically ordered catechesis).

In the second place there is a bond between the catechumenate and sacraments. A catechumenate should never be far from the sacramental life, from that encounter with Christ in the Eucharist or Reconciliation or from all of the other holy sacraments. Many of you have received the sacrament of Matrimony and therefore may you know how to live your lives as husband and wife so that your formation in the catechumenate might be life giving and lead you to the fullness of the sacramental life.

And finally there is a bond between catechesis, the catechumenate and community. Community must always be at the service of society, community-light, community-leaven, community-salt of the earth, community-light of the world. (3)

We are going to live these realities together with Jesus Christ, for here we encounter the center of our lives in the Eucharist and the words of Jesus become real: *those who lose their lives....* Yes, let us lose our lives in order to give life to this world that is so much in need, to this world that is so cold because it lacks Christ. Indeed it is our mission to hand our lives over in this way.

¹ This homily was given to the members of the Neo-Catechetical Movement of the Dioceses of San Salvador and Santiago de Maria, gathered in the Instituto Rinaldi, Los Planes de Renderos, from November 23 to 25 1979. The original recording is not available. This is based on the transcription of the Arzobispado of San Salvador. See *Mons. Oscar A Romero, Su pensamiento*, Arzobispado de San Salvador, San Salvador, 1989, Vol. VIII, pp. 7-11.

² See *Catechesi tradendae*, Apostolic Exhortation of John Paul II on catechesis in our day, 1979.

³ See *Misión de la Iglesia en medio de la crisis del país* (6 August 1979), 49.

Marginal References (1) Mt 19,21; (2) Mt 5,14; (3) Mt 5,13-14.