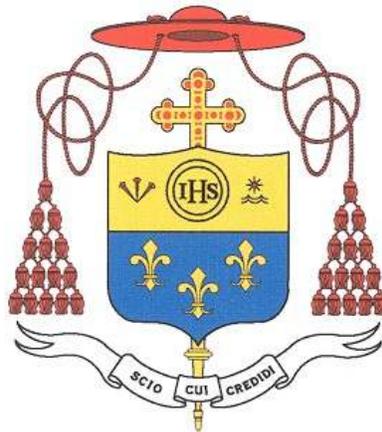


# MODELS OF CATECHESIS



## Avery Cardinal Dulles, S.J.

Diocesan Catechetical Day

Lansing - Ann Arbor

October 20 - 21, 2007

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Office of Catechesis, Catholic Diocese of Lansing,

300 West Ottawa Street, Lansing, MI

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Avery Cardinal Dulles, S.J.

I have never been personally involved in the work of catechesis or elementary religious education. My field of specialization is, and has been, theology, and as a teacher of theology I have conducted classes for seminarians and graduate students whose basic familiarity with, and acceptance of, the Christian message could be taken for granted. All of my students would have been evangelized and catechized long before coming to my classes. Thus I cannot come to you as a practitioner of your trade.

I nevertheless accepted the invitation with alacrity because the catechetical process interests me and appears to me to be extremely important for the future of the Church in this country and all over the world. We face enormous difficulties in transmitting the Catholic faith to new generations in the present atmosphere of secularism, relativism, and postmodernism.

In the course of my adult life I have observed a succession of radical changes in the methods of religious instruction. In the days before Vatican II the primary instrument was a printed text such as the *Baltimore Catechism*, which encapsulated the dogmatic teaching of the Church in question-and-answer format. But complaints were already being heard at that time that the approach failed to elicit real personal assent from the students. In Western Europe some theologians devised a new proclamatory (or "kerygmatic") style of theology that could be used as an alternative for the reigning Scholastic approach. This new theology took as its paradigm the sermons of Peter and Paul in the early chapters of Acts, which confidently proclaimed the great deeds of God in salvation history and called for a response of praise and worship.

In the late 1950s Catholics were inclined to structure religious education around salvation history, emphasizing prophetically interpreted events rather than eternal truths and doctrinal propositions, as the older catechisms had done. In many cases this style was combined with a liturgical approach that emphasized the actualization of the mysteries of faith in the Church's worship. The historical-liturgical approach had hardly gotten underway when it was overtaken in the mid-sixties by a new experiential approach, which encouraged students to reflect on their own experiences as places they could best find God. Since the mid-1970s the experiential model has been yielding to a so-called praxis model, which uses the gospel to engage in social criticism.

The efforts to produce new and revolutionary catechisms in some cases led to excesses. Cardinal Ratzinger, reflecting on the situation in 1985, complained: "The new texts, with their hasty *aggiornamento*, had themselves already begun to look dated; it is inevitable that whoever binds himself too rashly to today already looks old-fashioned tomorrow. ... As a matter of fact, the real result of this process of ever-new adaptations was an emptying-out of catechesis." Some of the current catechesis, he said, had almost no content but simply revolved around itself. The power and beauty of the Christian message were almost lost from view.<sup>1</sup>

The Synod of Bishops in 1985, noting the confusion in current catechesis, reported: "Very many have expressed the desire that a catechism or compendium of all Catholic doctrine regarding both faith and morals be composed, that it might be, as it were, a point of reference for the catechisms that are prepared for the various regions. The presentation of doctrine must be biblical and liturgical. It must be sound doctrine suited to the present life of Christians"<sup>2</sup> The result was the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, which was completed in its first edition in 1992. The Church is now producing a new crop of catechisms and textbooks for various nations, age groups, and language groups that are

being scrutinized by the bishops for their conformity with the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*.

The United States Conference of Catholic Bishops have set up an Ad Hoc Committee to Oversee the Use of the Catechism. Under the direction of this committee a *United States Catholic Catechism for Adults* has already been produced. The committee has also been conducting a review of catechetical materials in use in our country on the high school level. In the judgment of this committee many of the current texts are seriously deficient from a doctrinal point of view.<sup>3</sup>

While intended as a point of reference, the universal catechism does not purport to establish the structure and style of catechetical programs and religion textbooks. Educators are free to organize the materials in different ways for different groups of students. To indicate the various ways in which this has been done, I thought it might be useful to present some models that seem to show up in the literature familiar to me. My five models will be ideal types. Most religious educators, I am aware, combine two or more of the models.

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The first model is the doctrinal, which is exemplified by practically all of the approved Catholic catechisms published between the Council of Trent and the Second Vatican Council. The most familiar example for most of us might be the *Baltimore Catechism*, which was in use in the United States for seventy years before Vatican II. It focuses on the teaching of popes and councils concerning faith and morals and is designed to arm the student against Protestant errors.

The doctrinal model relies heavily on the authority of Scripture and the Magisterium of the Church, but it usually includes an apologetical ingredient, which seeks to show that the teachings of the Church are worthy of belief. In its moral teaching, this approach

makes use of natural reason as well as Christian revelation. Much of the Church's moral teaching is accessible through the natural law as knowable by reason.

The objective of religious education in this approach is to produce Christians who are confident and orthodox in their Catholic faith and well equipped to answer Protestant objections. It is hoped that their understanding of pure doctrine will motivate them to conduct themselves virtuously.

This first approach produced generations of Catholics who were familiar with the basic contents of the faith. The question-and-answer format gave them a well-stocked memory of important truths that they could later come to appreciate. Yet the system had its critics. They complained that everything was taught on the same level as though common opinions of theologians stood on the same level as defined dogmas. Memory, they said, was emphasized more than understanding. For many students the content was too abstract; their emotions and imagination were left untouched. The method presupposed that the students had previously been evangelized, but often this was not the case. The system therefore produced not a few unevangelized but well catechized Catholics.

The new *Catechism of the Catholic Church* sought to remedy many of these defects. In the spirit of Vatican II, it strove to recover the hierarchy of revealed truths, not all of which are equally fundamental. It accorded primacy to the mysteries of the Trinity and the Incarnation. It made extensive use of Holy Scripture and dropped the polemical stance of post-Tridentine catechisms. Not content to supply the bare bones of doctrine, it included inspiring quotations from the Fathers, the liturgy, and the writings of the saints. After treating fundamental beliefs according to the sequence of the creed, the Catechism of the Catholic Church in later sections gave corresponding attention to sacramental worship, the Christian life, and prayer, treating these last three topics for their own sake, rather than

reducing them to doctrine.<sup>4</sup> The Catechism of the Catholic Church therefore gives a compendium of Christian doctrine that retains the merits of previous doctrinal catechisms but opens the way for other approaches.

The second model came into Catholic theology between the two world wars. I have already mentioned the kerygmatic movement. It originated in Austria with Josef A. Jungmann and was widely publicized by Johannes Hofinger among others. Cardinal Valerian Gracias summarized the decisive influence of Jungmann's book *The Good News and Our Proclamation of the Faith* as follows:

Since the publication of this book in 1936, catechesis has been directed toward this central theme. Our religion is an organic unit, in which we must discern a fundamental core which we have to proclaim emphatically (*kerysso*—to proclaim). This core is the message of Christ, “the mystery which hath been hidden from ages and generations but now is manifested to his saints” (Col 1:26). Our way back to the Father is in union with Christ, through the working of the Holy Spirit. All the other truths of our religion have to be explained from this standpoint and with this perspective. What we have to preach is the gospel—the good news that Christ is among us.<sup>5</sup>

This second approach received a measure of support from Vatican II's Constitution on Divine Revelation, which opened with a summons to proclaim of the word of God confidently (DV 1). In its first chapter it traced the main lines of biblical salvation history, which culminated in the death and resurrection of Christ and the sending of the Spirit of truth (DV 4). It defined faith as an act by which we entrust our whole selves to God (DV 5).

In this second model the approach was concrete rather than abstract, narrative

rather than doctrinal. Its proclamatory style was well suited to elicit acts of personal faith. By its clear focus on the Paschal mystery, kerygmatic catechesis spared the student from becoming burdened by a seemingly endless catalogue of truths to be believed. All this was accomplished without falling into subjectivism. Like the first model, the second recognized that faith was a response to God's free self-revelation. Though primarily focused on the biblical events, the kerygmatic model could easily be extended to include a consideration of the Church as it developed over the centuries from the Christ-event through a dramatic series of historical challenges.

Notwithstanding these and other merits, the kerygmatic model in pure form did not satisfy every need. Peter and Paul, in their early sermons in Acts, were preaching to Jews who already accepted the reality of God and were alert to detect signs of his action in salvation history. Applied today, the model seemed to require a considerable process of pre-evangelization that would dispose students to respond to the Christian kerygma.<sup>6</sup> Many of them needed to be rescued from a secularist worldview that left no place for a God who speaks and acts. Besides, the whole corpus of Catholic doctrine could not easily be fitted into the framework of the kerygma. The creed seemed to offer a more adequate outline.

The evangelistic style of the kerygmatic model took proper cognizance of the fact that faith is normally transmitted by the testimony of committed believers. But religious instruction is often conducted in the classroom or other settings in which proclamation seems inappropriate. Many teachers are understandably reluctant to assume the role of preachers. Knowledge can be tested in examinations; personal faith cannot.

Compared with the doctrinal model, the kerygmatic had the advantage of a narrative style, which many students find more interesting. The story of the great deeds of God in history, moreover, is richer and more vivid than the doctrines that can be distilled out of it.

Many students, however, felt that by locating revelation so far in the past, salvation history was alienating. They yearned to encounter the God who transforms and saves us today.

The second model therefore called for completion by a third, which I call the liturgical or mystagogical. The celebration of the sacraments brings the past events of salvation history, including the Paschal mystery, into the here-and-now. The presence of God in the celebration calls for a personal response that is authentically religious. By encountering the Holy in the liturgy the student has the experience of entering the realm of the divine. The third model was not difficult to combine with the second because the founders of kerygmatic catechesis (men like Jungmann and Hofinger) were also liturgical theologians.

Worship is often depicted as the primary cradle of doctrine. The fifth-century theologian Prosper of Aquitaine formulated the principle, "The law of prayer establishes the law of believing." Pius XII, however, pointed out in his encyclical *Mediator Dei* that the priorities are mutual. While right worship is the school of right belief, right belief gives rise to correct worship.

As Edward Yarnold explains in his helpful book, *The Awe-Inspiring Rites of Initiation*, bishops who preached catechetical and mystagogical sermons in patristic times, such as Cyril of Jerusalem and Ambrose of Milan, made extensive use of the symbolism of the rites of initiation, including the ceremonies of baptism, confirmation, and the Eucharist.<sup>7</sup> The catechumenate, which was timed to reach its climax in Holy Week, contained numerous blessings, exorcisms, anointings, vigils, and penitential rites that were rich in symbolism. Baptism was conducted in the dead of night, with total immersion in the font, followed by the donning of new white garments and the presentation of a lighted candle to each candidate. These and other ceremonies provided occasions for instruction packed with

biblical references and doctrinal reflections. Because the candidates were required to recite the creed and the Lord's Prayer, and to know the Ten Commandments, these texts likewise became central to prebaptismal catechesis. The threefold immersion of the baptized in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit called attention to the salvific importance of the mystery of the Trinity.

The restoration of the catechumenate in 1972 led to a revival of the mystagogical style of instruction. The Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults uses communal worship as the recommended setting for the instruction of adult converts. For younger students who are being brought up in the Catholic faith, the liturgy likewise provides a very suitable context for catechesis. Liturgical vestments, church architecture, the structure of the Mass, the various rites of the Church, and the seasons and feasts of the liturgical year can serve as reference points.

This liturgical context has the advantage of inducing a religious frame of mind in the students, evoking an attitude of reverent hearing. Unlike abstract doctrine, it speaks to them directly, evoking their present relationship to God. Unlike the kerygmatic model, the sacramental goes beyond the contingent facts of history to facilitate an encounter with God himself, the source and end of all creation. The sacraments, as signs imbued with the power of what they signify, have a pedagogical force that surpasses mere words.

The liturgical model of catechesis, for all its merits, fails to provide a total answer to the problems of religious education. With its emphasis on sacred history, sacred places, and sacred ceremonies, it could easily lead to a neglect of the secular. The Second Vatican Council, in its Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World, mentioned the separation between faith and daily life as one of the more serious errors of our age (GS 43). During the 1960s many young students felt themselves irresistibly drawn to the secular world with all its enticements and its possibilities for good. The extraordinary

popularity of Harvey Cox's *The Secular City* is a convenient symbol of the triumph of the secular over the sacred that many people took to be a sign of the times.

Catholic religious educators accommodated themselves in various degrees to this new situation. Seeking to build on what was positive in it, they developed a fourth model of religious instruction. Marcel van Caster, in his 1964 work *The Structure of Catechetics*, noted that because God speaks through the signs of the times, catechesis ought to search into the Christian significance of secular events. But he cautioned that secular events are not to be taken as direct revelations of God; they need to be interpreted in light of the revelation already given in Christ.<sup>8</sup> In a book published in 1968, translated under the title *Experiential Catechetics*, he wrote more extensively on this theme. Revelation, he explained, could be mediated in two ways - the sacred and the profane. Men and women of our day, he believed, are more responsive to the second because they think in terms of experience. Catechetics must therefore help them to develop their understanding of experience in the light of Christian revelation. Instruction that sets forth God's word as found in the biblical message and the liturgy, he maintained, needs to be complemented by instruction that interprets the present situation and relates it to Christ.<sup>9</sup> Van Caster insisted, however, that the religious meaning of present events could not be reliably discerned except in light of Christ and the gospel. Experiential catechetics required students already familiar with the good news of God's revelation in Christ as taught in more traditional forms of catechesis - notably the kerygmatic and the liturgical.

There were many varieties of experiential catechesis. Pierre Babin took the genre in a psychological direction, taking account of the age of students and recommending a pedagogy of discovery in place of transmission. For such a pedagogy, he wrote, "it is absolutely necessary that our students experience the faith as a kingdom, a promised land, as salvation for themselves today."<sup>10</sup> In the United States, Gabriel Moran contended that

experience itself is revelational.<sup>11</sup> Instead of searching for the revealed word in ancient sources, Moran maintained, students should be taught to discover the meaning of their own lives as religious. In place of Christian catechesis—a term that smacked too much of indoctrination--Moran preferred to speak of religious education, a process that would dispose students to make free and intelligent decisions in a world that offered a great variety of religious options.<sup>12</sup>

James Michael Lee asserts, like Moran, that theology has little to contribute to religious education. Opposing the tendency to make catechesis a head trip, he advocates greater attention to the affections and to the body. "The task of the religion class," he writes, "is so to structure and recast the learner's experience that God's ongoing revelation is consciously, meaningfully, and affectively incorporated into the person's self-system and behavioral patterns of action."<sup>13</sup> According to Lee the classroom should be made into "a laboratory and a workshop for Christian living where students learn Christian living by engaging in Christian living in the here-and-now learning situation."<sup>14</sup>

During the 1970s this experiential trend was carried to great lengths in many classrooms. Finding little response to other approaches, religion teachers focused on contemporary experience, allowing their students to remain ignorant of the basic facts of sacred history and the primary articles of the creed. To judge from what I have been told by experts in the field, textbooks fell out of use; the students themselves became the primary text. Their teachers asked them to express their feelings about life, and the students felt bored.

New winds from Latin America seem to have roused religious education out of its introspective phase. Liberation theology shared with experiential catechesis a preoccupation with the topical and the secular, but it added an element of social consciousness that could claim to have strong roots in Catholic tradition. Many theologians

in Central and South America were concerned by the abject poverty of the masses. They felt that religious education in the past had been too exclusively theoretical, meaning by this that it had unduly separated knowledge from action. Borrowing some insights from Hegel and Marx, they contended that we know best by doing and that orthopraxis was the proper route to orthodoxy.

The Brazilian Paulo Freire gave powerful expression to the educational implications of this new theology in his influential work, *The Pedagogy of the Oppressed*.<sup>15</sup> He protests against what he calls the "banking model" of education, in which the teacher deposits knowledge into the minds of the students, who receive it passively. Freire recommended a problem-posing model of education in which teachers and students together reflect on their actual life-situations with a critical eye. The aim was to raise the students' consciousness to the point where they would be able to engage in corrective action leading to social change.

Although Freire did not work explicitly in the field of religious education, religious educators were not slow to profit from his ideas. Many of them considered that catechesis had been too individualistic, too indifferent to social injustices, and too neglectful of the future. Christians, they felt, should be formed in ways that would incite them to build a new world, to taking part in the growth of the Kingdom of God here on earth. Praxis in this model predominated over mere theory.

In the United States the most prominent representative of this new form of religious pedagogy is Thomas Groome, who promotes "shared Christian praxis." He describes his method as "a group of Christians sharing in dialogue their critical reflection in light of the Christian Story and its Vision toward the end of lived Christian faith."<sup>16</sup> In this definition the object of critical reflection is not so much a sacred text as the reality of present action. In order that the resulting knowledge may be our own, and not simply a report of what others

say, the action must be one in which we ourselves participate. But the action is not a solitary one; it is a communal enterprise performed by a group of Christians. They are to be in dialogue, respectfully listening to one another and ready to learn from their partners. The dialogue is to be a critical one, in which the participants try to discern what ought to be retained and what ought to be changed in the existing situation. The criterion is twofold: the Christian Story and the Christian Vision. The Story is the biblical narrative and the history of the Church, consisting of all the lives and events that have occurred as believers have attempted to live in obedience to the precepts and example of Jesus Christ. The Story, Groome insists, is not a mere fable; it consists of actual historical events. The Vision is the promised Kingdom of God that is the calling and the hope of all Christians.

In comparison with the other models we have examined, Groome's position is inclusive. He does not set praxis in opposition to theoria, since he recognizes that praxis must take the Christian story and the Christian vision as its standards. He accepts the necessity of doctrine. Magisterial teaching, he states, is needed to keep the Church faithful to her apostolic origins as she develops in the course of centuries. In the absence of a magisterium, Groome remarks, "theology is a maze of conflicting opinions and different schools of thought and by itself a confusing ground for decisions of faith."<sup>17</sup> He remarks, however, that the magisterium must inform itself of the findings of the scholarly community and must seek to express consensus positions.

In agreement with the kerygmatic school, Groome acknowledges the centrality of the biblical story culminating in the death and resurrection of Christ and the sending of the Holy Spirit. He objects, however, that the Catholic kerygmatic theologians, like their Protestant neo-orthodox counterparts, give little place to the students' lived experience.<sup>18</sup>

Groome's observations on the experiential model are of interest. He shares with the experiential school a desire to take account of the lived experience of the student. He

insists, however, that present experience be subjected to critical reflection. It must be held in critical correlation with the Story and the Vision, which can be imparted most effectively, he believes, by his method of shared Christian praxis.<sup>19</sup>

In Groome's praxis model the liturgical or mystagogical element receives some, but relatively little, attention. He speaks of liturgy as a remembrance and embodiment of the Christian story. In the Eucharist, he writes, our recalling of God's saving intervention in Jesus Christ becomes for us a saving event today.<sup>20</sup> His approach could be strengthened by exploiting the pedagogical potentialities of the restored catechumenate and the Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults.

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The five models of catechesis I have presented all have their merits, inasmuch as they represent valid dimensions of integral Christian formation. It will be the task of religious educators, who know the needs, capacities, and limitations of their students, to structure the curriculum and make the necessary adaptations.

The entire process, I believe, may profitably take guidance from the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, which felicitously combines the various components. Since religious education characteristically takes place in academic settings, the doctrinal element will normally be prominent. Its importance is evident from the definition given in the *Catechism*:

Catechesis is an education in the faith of children, young people, and adults which includes especially the teaching of Christian doctrine imparted, generally speaking, in an organic and systematic way, with a view to initiating the hearers into the fullness of Christian life. (CCC 5)

Doctrine should be taught with an emphasis on the great deeds of God in salvation history and with what God continues to do in the sacraments today. The kerygmatic and mystagogical elements should therefore be integrated into the doctrinal. Christian praxis may be incorporated as opportunity arises, especially for adult students who are socially involved. At every age level, account should be taken of the students' moral and religious experience. Teachers should make them conscious of the desire for the divine that God has implanted in every human heart and should build on the further experiences that faith itself engenders. In this connection the religious educator may draw inspiration from the final part of the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, which deals with the life of prayer.

While seeking to keep informed of the changing theories of religious education, Christian catechists will take care not to allow their preoccupation with the latest methods and techniques to overshadow the abiding content of Christian faith. Presented in its organic unity, the Christian message has unceasing power to excite the enthusiasm of students and transform their lives.

Catechists are called to be privileged instruments through whom God continues his saving work today. The success of their efforts will depend not on themselves alone but more crucially on the grace of God and the freely given response of the students. When the seed falls on fertile ground, a rich harvest may come forth. The evangelist may sow the seed; the catechist may water the growing plant, but only God can give the increase.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup>Joseph Ratzinger, *Introduction to Catechism of the Catholic Church* (San Francisco: Ignatius, 1994), 12-14.

<sup>2</sup>Synod of Bishops, Extraordinary Assembly of 1985, "Final Report," IIB4; *Origins* 15 (December 19, 1985): 444-50, at 448.

<sup>3</sup>Archbishop Alfred Hughes, "The State of High School Catechetical Texts," *Origins* 33 (November 20, 2003): 417-20.

<sup>4</sup>The Roman Catechism had already been structured according to the headings of the Twelve Articles of the Creed, the Seven Sacraments, the Ten Commandments, and the Seven Petitions of the Lord's Prayer, but the emphasis remained on doctrine throughout.

<sup>5</sup>Cardinal Valerian Gracias, "Modern Catechetical Renewal and the Missions," in *Teaching All Nations*, ed. Johannes Hofinger (New York: Herder and Herder, 1961), 13.

<sup>6</sup>The Study Week on Mission Catechesis held at Bangkok in 1962 recommended a process consisting of three phases: pre-evangelization, the kerygma, and catechesis proper. See Alfonso M. Nebreda, *Kerygma in Crisis?* (Chicago: Loyola University Press, 1965).

<sup>7</sup>Edward Yarnold, *The Awe-Inspiring Rites of Initiation: The Origins of the R.C.I.A.*, 2nd ed. (Collegeville, Minn.: Liturgical Press, 1994).

<sup>8</sup>Marcel van Caster, *The Structure of Catechetics* (New York: Herder and Herder, 1965), 84-89. The original edition of this work was published in Bruges in 1964.

<sup>9</sup>Jean Le Du and Marcel van Caster, *Experiential Catechetics* (Paramus, N.J.: Newman, 1969), 154. The original edition of this work was published in Bruges in 1968.

<sup>10</sup>Pierre Babin, *Options: Approaches for the Religious Education of Adolescents* (New York: Herder and Herder, 1967), 29.

<sup>11</sup>Gabriel Moran, *The Present Revelation* (New York, Herder and Herder, 1972), 222-29.

<sup>12</sup>Gabriel Moran, *Religious Body* (New York: Seabury, 1974), 149-54. See the discussion of "Religious Education and Gabriel Moran" in Mary Boys, *Educating in Faith: Maps and Visions* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1989), 126-28.

<sup>13</sup>James Michael Lee, *The Shape of Religious Instruction* (Dayton, Ohio: Pflaum, 1971), 16.

<sup>14</sup>*Ibid.*, 19.

<sup>15</sup>Paolo Freire, *The Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (New York: Seabury, 1970); original Portuguese edition, 1968.

<sup>16</sup>Thomas H. Groome, *Christian Religious Education* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1980), 184.

<sup>17</sup>*Ibid.*, 200.

<sup>18</sup>*Ibid.*, 148.

<sup>19</sup>*Ibid.*, 149.

<sup>20</sup>*Ibid.*, 192.