

“*Antiquum ministerium: the Vocation of the Catechist*” - Address at the Third International Congress on Catechesis, ‘The Catechist, Witness of the New Life in Christ’, at the Vatican, 8th September, 2022.

I am grateful to Archbishop Fisichella and his colleagues in the Dicastery for this opportunity to reflect a little on the Vocation of the Catechist in light of the issuing of the Holy Father’s *motu proprio*, entitled *Antiquum Ministerium*.¹

I would like to offer reflections in three areas - the Vision of this Vocation as identified by the Holy Father, the Discernment of this vocation, and the formation of those called to this Ministry.

Firstly, an apology. You will be aware that the Holy See expects each Bishop’s Conference to outline its own processes of discernment and formation for the Ministry. My reflections are inevitably limited by being framed from an Anglo-speaking, European context. It inevitably colours and limits perspective. It will be particularly helpful to hear other perspectives, from other contexts.

Vision.

Antiquum Ministerium was issued on 10th May 2021, and marks a further step in the general reflection on ecclesial ministries, following up on the *motu proprio Spiritus Domini*², issued four months earlier. You will know this modified Canon Law to ensure women’s access to the ministries of Lector and Acolyte. In this respect, *Antiquum Ministerium*, follows on from the earlier *motu proprio*. It clarifies that the nature of this ministry, is “a stable form of service rendered to the local Church”³. It is above all a ministry of lay men and women who are “called by virtue of their baptism to cooperate in the work of catechesis”⁴.

As can be seen from the title and opening sentence, the Holy Father describes this ministry of Catechist as Ancient. Indeed, he roots it in the New Testament experience, especially linked to St Paul’s writing to the community at Corinth. There, in Chapter 12, we see how St Paul highlights the service given to the community by the ‘teachers’ of the faith. This Chapter - Chapter 12 - is also the one which has the rich reflection on the spiritual gifts, present in each Christian community. The *motu proprio* quotes this passage of the Pauline letter extensively.⁵

¹ *Antiquum Ministerium* https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/motu_proprio/documents/papa-francesco-motu-proprio-20210510_antiquum-ministerium.html Henceforth AM

² *Spiritus Domini*, https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/motu_proprio/documents/papa-francesco-motu-proprio-20210110_spiritus-domini.html

³ AM par 8

⁴ AM 5 quoting Canon 225 of *The Code of Canon Law*

⁵ AM 1 and 2

The Holy Father links these two emphases of 1 Corinthians 12 – ie about teaching, and that this is one of the spiritual gifts given to the Church - to give us a rich summary of the Second Vatican Council's teaching⁶ on, the charismatic gifts, given to the baptised, both for the building up of the Church, and for her work of evangelisation.⁷ Indeed, it is no surprise, that the participation of all the baptised in the work of evangelisation is a theme which is again and again stressed in the document.⁸

What is made clear is that like any vocation, the Ministry of Catechist is first of all initiated in the heart of God. It is God who calls and we who respond. Whilst each person may feel drawn to a particular task, each one finds their response in the context of the life of faith lived in the *communio* of the Church, in which the local Bishop has a particular service of discernment.⁹

We could say, therefore, there is a twofold dynamic in the recognition of this ministry. One aspect of this dynamic gives proper priority and recognition to the central encounter with Christ, and His call, rooted in the living tradition of the Church. Secondly, is that force which pushes the Church to the peripheries, to the four corners of the earth, of all human experience, in evangelical witness to this encounter with Christ.

What Pope Francis indicates in the *motu proprio* is that this is not only what the Church is like, but it is also what the experience of vocation is like for each one of us. It pushes us inward, to go deeper, and it pushes outward. This dynamic is true of every vocation in the Church. We sometimes talk of these as the “centripetal force”, or the seeking of the centre, and the “centrifugal force”, a fleeing from the centre. Those of you who know anything about Isaac Newton's third law of motion, will know these terms refer to the different forces which act on objects as they journey around a single point.¹⁰ The centripetal force of gravity draws objects to the centre of the earth, ensuring that they do not fly off the planet into outer space. At the same time, the centrifugal force of the earth, caused by its rotation, pushes objects outwards from the centre. The ‘balance’ of these forces keeps them stable and secure on the earth.

These forces are mirrored in the spiritual realm, too, and in the life of the Church. I had a profound experience of this recently here in Rome as I came in June for the Feast of St Peter and St Paul, to receive the Pallium, as a new Archbishop. You will

⁶ Second Vatican Ecumenical Council, Dogmatic Constitution on the Church *Lumen Gentium*, 31

⁷ AM 2

⁸ AM 3, 4, 5, 7 and 8

⁹ AM 8

¹⁰ See “Centripetal and Centrifugal Forces” in *The Columbia Electronic Encyclopaedia*, 6th ed, Columbia University, 2022

know that the Mass takes place in St Peter's at the altar built over St Peter's tomb. It is always very moving to gather in St Peter's, as we will for Mass tomorrow, to renew our faith and to be in communion with one another and the successor of St Peter. Those who have visited the *scavi* beneath St Peter's will know that Peter's tomb is surrounded by circles of graves of other early Christians, buried as close to his tomb as possible. Successive altars and churches were built above this point, until we reach the great altar and dome of the basilica. We come and gather around that single point of unity to confess the one faith, too.

On that occasion in June, the *pallia*, which the new Archbishop's receive, has rested overnight on the tomb of St Peter. The new Archbishops receive this symbol of office direct from the hands of the successor of St Peter. Although we are to go to the far ends of the earth, we are one with the Successor of St Peter. This Petrine dynamic or principle¹¹ of the Church acts therefore as a centripetal force uniting us all in the faith, bringing us always to the centre, rooting us ever more deeply in the faith which we receive through apostolic succession. To fully live their vocation, Catechists have to root themselves in this dynamic, too, in order to fulfil their calling. This aspect in the life of the Church, and in the life of each Catechist, is that which roots them interiorly in the life of faith, and in the living encounter with Jesus. If this is not somehow at the centre of who we are, a fundamental aspect is missing.

At the same time, there is the centrifugal force, which pushes the Church, and each of us, outwards. On that Feast day in June, we also keep the memory of St Paul. The Holy Father always visits that great Basilica on the evening of the feast day. St Paul is commemorated not in the ancient city, but 'outside the walls'. Even in his death, there is the poignant, almost humorous tradition, that Paul's head bounced three times, and three springs of water emerged in the place now remembered as *Tre Fontane* – three fountains. Even in his death, it would appear, the apostle Paul wants to cover as much territory as possible! So here there is another dynamic at work in the life of the Church, in the life of each of us, in the life of each Catechist. This aspect pushes us outside, beyond, seeking to reach those who are furthest away. This is the Pauline dynamic, a centrifugal spiritual force in faith which urges the Catechist to reach out to those who do not yet know Christ that they might encounter Him.

So, when we speak of this ancient ministry as a vocation we need to recall this two-fold dynamic. We can go further and say that if one dominates over the other, there is an imbalance in the Catechist's role and work. If there is an over concentration on the centripetal force, then there is no evangelisation, but merely a 'holy huddle', a

¹¹ See work of Hans Urs von Balthasar, *The Christian State of Life*, (San Francisco: Ignatius, 1983). A good introduction is in A. Sicari, "Mary, Peter and John: Figures of the Church," in *Communio* 19 (Summer 1992), trans. Michael Waldstein, 191.

dry passing on of the faith, and no engagement or consideration of those who are 'outside'. When there is emphasis only on the centrifugal force, there is a danger of fragmentation, and division, of simply adopting the mores of the age and culture in which the Church exists, with little or no reference to that 'touchstone' of the living encounter with the Lord, rooted in the first apostolic experience.

This, it seems to me, is what it means to talk of this ministry of Catechist as a "Vocation". Each one is called to be more deeply and securely rooted in the life of faith, in the living personal encounter with the Lord as an event in my life, and at the same time each is propelled as a missionary disciple out, on to the highways and the byways, in order that others may encounter the living Lord in and through them.

Discernment

This brings us to the second set of reflections on the discernment of this vocation in different communities. The Rite of Institution of Catechists¹² was promulgated six months after the *Motu Proprio*, in December 2021. In a letter¹³, accompanying the publication of the *Editio typica*, Archbishop Arthur Roche - now Cardinal Roche - the Prefect of the Congregation for Divine Worship and the Discipline of the Sacraments, gives some very helpful indicators on the discernment of the vocation of Catechist.

To avoid misunderstandings, the Prefect of Divine Worship clarifies that the term "catechist" indicates different realities in differing ecclesial contexts. Catechists function differently in the Churches of long standing tradition to young Churches, and there are differences, too, depending on the size of the territory; the number of ordained ministers; the pastoral organisation, etc.¹⁴ In the great variety of forms, however, one can distinguish – "though not rigidly"¹⁵ – two main types, that is, catechists with the specific task of catechesis (teaching), and others who participate in the different forms of the apostolate, such as leading community prayer; assisting the sick; celebrating funerals; training other catechists; coordinating pastoral initiatives; and helping the poor. "The context of the ecclesial reality determines one or the other type."¹⁶

It would be helpful for us to hear from one another on this point as to how Catechists function in our countries. Like many dioceses in Europe, in the UK, we have priests working from different mission countries. They bring a great richness

¹² <https://press.vatican.va/content/salastampa/it/bollettino/pubblico/2021/12/13/0845/01772.html>

¹³ Roche, A <https://press.vatican.va/content/salastampa/en/bollettino/pubblico/2021/12/13/211213f.html>

¹⁴ Cf. Congregation for the Evangelisation of Peoples, *Guide for Catechists* (3 December 1993), n. 4

¹⁵ Roche. A <https://press.vatican.va/content/salastampa/en/bollettino/pubblico/2021/12/13/211213f.html> par 6

¹⁶ Ibid.

and vibrancy. Their experience of Catechist is very different to what they experience in our countries. Catechists in Africa, Latin America and parts of Asia go through a rigorous discernment and preparation, often taking three years of formation, full-time. Those of you from this context, I know, have significant profile in local Christian communities and you give of your time generously and with great dedication. I know you are well supported by local Christian communities, and lead liturgies, funerals, preside in the absence of a priest for services of Holy Communion, as well as oversee the teaching of the faith through catechesis and the preparation of local catechists.

In most of Europe and North America this is not the case, though things are developing in these countries, and the recognition of this ministry may help move things on, too. Generally, in these countries, Catechists tend to be confined to teaching the faith in catechetical programmes connected to the Sacraments. There is a significant task of discernment needed in these countries in order to develop appropriately the model of catechists at work in younger Churches. That discernment needs to be followed by a formation which is equally as rigorous and thorough, and has a significant commitment of resources, financial as well as in terms of accompaniment by local pastors.

In his letter, Cardinal Roche says that since this ministry has “a definite vocational aspect” which requires “due discernment” by the bishops¹⁷, not all those who are called “catechists” or who carry out a service of pastoral collaboration should be formally instituted in the ministry of catechists. In particular, he says, “it is preferable”¹⁸ that certain classes of people not be instituted as such. These include: candidates for the diaconate and the priesthood; men and women religious, regardless of whether they belong to Institutes whose charism is catechesis; teachers of religion in schools; and those who perform a service aimed exclusively at members of an ecclesial movement, to whom this “precious” function is entrusted by the leaders of the movements and not by the bishop.

As for those who accompany the initiation of children and adults they too do not necessarily have to be instituted in the specific ministry, but should receive at the beginning of each catechetical year “a public ecclesial mandate entrusting them with this important function.”¹⁹ However, this does not detract from the fact that some of them may be instituted as Catechists, on the basis of their pastoral abilities and local Church needs.

These comments suggest that we need to ‘set the bar’ rather high in terms of expectations, and who is Instituted into this Ministry of Catechist. In the proposals

¹⁷ Ibid par 7

¹⁸ Ibid. par 8

¹⁹ Ibid par 9

we are looking at in England and Wales, we foresee that whilst there may be several instituted in each Diocese, this should only happen after a thorough process of discernment and formation. This reflects what *Antiquum Ministerium* highlights when it says the ministry is open to men and women “of profound faith and human maturity active participants in the life of the Christian community, capable of welcoming others, being generous and living a life of fraternal communion,” with “suitable biblical, theological, pastoral and pedagogical formation.”²⁰

Formation.

This brings me to the final set of comments around formation. Here perhaps could be our most interesting set of discussions. I am very happy to share with you our draft paper in England and Wales, which puts forward a possible Curriculum of Formation for those to be instituted as Catechists in our countries. I am conscious that our contexts can be so different, and *Antiquum Ministerium* makes clear that it is up to individual Bishops’ Conferences to define suitable formation programmes for candidates, and to prepare their communities to understand the meaning of this ministry. Nevertheless, if you want to see where we have got to in England and Wales, thus far, then you are welcome. I must add, however, that our document is only in draft form, and has yet to be fully discussed and approved at the plenary of our bishops.

What I do want to do, however, is to outline why formation is so crucial for this Ministry. Interestingly enough, in many of the recent submissions for the Synodal process, the need and desire of formation is emphasised again and again. I must acknowledge, too, that I am speaking from the perspective of the kind of formation required in countries and cultures of longer standing Christian history, so desperately in need of the new evangelisation. These countries are transitioning from Christendom to a new Apostolic experience, to use the helpful phrase coined by Mgr James Shea recently²¹. By this, I mean that England and Wales, and so many other countries in Europe and other parts of the world, are transitioning from a place in which Christianity was the dominant cultural influence - “Christendom” - to one in which it is merely one influence among others, and in this sense similar to the “Apostolic age”.

The models and systems put in place for Christendom do not necessarily work in this new reality. The situation has been accentuated by the experience of the global pandemic. It has to be admitted, too, that COVID has not created issues, so much as it has revealed the issues that already there. There are several signs which we could

²⁰ AM 8

²¹ Shea, J. *From Christendom to Apostolic Mission: Pastoral Strategies for an Apostolic Age*, University of Mary, 2021

note, which I am sure many of us have reflected upon over these past two years. Among these is the absence of pain for some, during the extended time of Eucharistic fast. The experience has revealed the gap between the number of those attending Sunday Mass and those who are really engaged parishioners.

Our challenge is that our Church, and many of us who have to lead or teach in our communities, are still living as though we are in Christendom mode. The reality is, however, that the prevailing stream of culture is flowing against a predominantly Christian view of life. To know this, one simply needs to look at how we are dominated by TV and the Media culture of celebrity. Look at what is passing through national Parliaments in our countries, in terms of legislation regarding the beginning and end of life. What is happening in Schools, Colleges of Higher Education and Universities in respect of understandings of the human person and human sexuality. What a challenge there is, too, in Hospitals or Public Institutions, to maintain a specifically Christian vision.

I used to be a Trustee of a group called the Wintershall Trust. This is a Christian group of men and women who perform Christian plays in public spaces. Our most famous one is the *Passion Play* which is performed every Good Friday in Trafalgar Square in Central London. One year we were negotiating with the BBC, the national Television broadcasting Station, about a Nativity performance taking place in the public square outside their studios, in Central London. The Chair of our group was meeting with the head of outside broadcasting, a man in his thirties, and she was describing how Joseph and Mary would come from one part of the square on a donkey, how the shepherds with their sheep would be in another corner and the wise men, with a Camel, would come from another part. After some time, this young man said to her, "You keep talking about these characters, Mary and Joseph, but you need to realise I don't know what you're talking about. I don't know the story you're relaying. What interests me as an outside broadcaster is the fact that there's going to be a donkey, camel and sheep here on the streets, in the heart of London!"

Now we must recall that this young man had come through a British University system, he was well educated, and had a significant job in the heart of his nations public broadcasting operation. It is of course not his fault, but he and many, many people do not know the basics of the Christian narrative. Or if they do know anything they think Jesus is a kind of myth, a sort of superhero like in the Marvel franchise now playing in cinemas and among the most watched films of all time. Jesus is identified with one of these superheroes, His saving Death and Resurrection viewed as a kind made up story, fantastical, but not particularly relevant for modern living.

Some use the helpful analogy of a canoe in a river. In Christendom mode, when the flow of culture is with you, you may simply on occasion direct the canoe to go with the flow. It is gentle and straightforward. But in this new apostolic mode, we are canoeing upriver against the flow, for the 'direction' of the culture is often against us. To go where we want to go, we must use energetic strokes and hard work. And what happens when the rowing stops is quite different in each case. Those who think the current is going their way — when in fact it is against them — will be surprised to find themselves rushing along in a direction they did not intend.

Are things any better within the Church? Our vision is that every moment of teaching, of catechesis, is also a moment of evangelisation. We have catechised but have we really evangelised? So many go through our sacramental programmes but so few regularly partake in the most profound experience of our faith, the Eucharist. Do our people leave our catechetical programmes with a sense of having been called by Jesus, that they have truly encountered Him? He wants them to know how very close to them He actually is. We form people and send them forth in the faith but do they really have a sense of Jesus' personal call? Do they have a sense that they truly are His missionary disciples? As disciples, if we have not really had a sense that we are called by Jesus, that He desires us personally, then being formed and sent forth is like building on sand.

In parish life we have well-established ways of doing things, cycles of sacramental processes, which do not seem to lead to real conversion. These programmes have expected patterns and trajectories. It is sometimes very hard to challenge them. We can use outmoded strategies that were devised for a different context. These are unable to cope with what the current culture is throwing up and the tendency can be to 'go with the flow'. We ourselves are often compromised by the ruling vision of the wider culture. We too are part of the culture we live in, we breathe its air and inhabit its mores. It can be challenging to hold on to our authenticity in terms of witness, and prophetic proclamation in such a setting. We should face the fact that institutional and ecclesiastical strategies that were suited to Christendom do not work well in this new apostolic setting. Will we keep on doing the same thing in the hope that it will produce different results?

In this new apostolic age, Christians must find new ways to incarnate what is now a counter-cultural vision of the world. And part of this requires a serious and robust formation for Catechists. This formation invites a three-fold process of personal healing, of cultural "detoxing", and of intellectual conversion. Many come into their teens or adult life burdened. They need space and time for the inner work of the Holy Spirit to take root and heal them of personal wounds. We need to truly befriend Jesus as personal Lord and Saviour. This healing comes most effectively in befriending Him in silence, which we rightly understand as God's language of

disclosure. We need to sit with Him as He reveals Himself to us in His Word and to silently adore Him as he imparts His gentle fire in Eucharistic Adoration.

In this journey of healing and conversion, we are invited, too, to overcome and let go of some, of the more toxic elements of contemporary culture. This again takes time and requires good accompaniment, and it must be merciful. And then there is the need to form the mind and understanding, too. The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* and the new *Directory for Catechesis* are invaluable guides in this process.

With these challenges, we may well ask where will these Catechists come from? It is good to see so many of you here in these days for this gathering. It is a sign of the desire for good formation and accompaniment. I know, too, you represent many thousands of others engaged generously in our home countries. On behalf of all the pastors, I thank you for your dedication and commitment. We know we need one another in this task and we need to support one another.

I believe we can expect Catechists to emerge through the example of impressive personal witnesses: from some committed families, some core faithful older people whose faith has a rock-like character, some inspired and inspiring young people, a number of whom are committed to the outcast and who live generous lives of service of others with a vibrant faith. All of this is necessary today for this vocation to thrive in our countries.

I think, too, it is why our Holy Father, Pope Francis, stresses 'Primary proclamation' in his teaching, as he annually did in the letter he wrote to Catechists, whilst Archbishop of Buenos Aires, every 21 August, the Feast of St Pius X, who had produced a Catechism in 1908.

As you know, the reality of primary proclamation is at the heart of his text *Evangelii Gaudium*, where he states so very clearly: "On the lips of the catechist the first proclamation must ring out over and over: 'Jesus Christ loves you; he gave his life to save you; and now he is living at your side every day to enlighten, strengthen and free you.' This first proclamation is called 'first' not because it exists at the beginning and can then be forgotten or replaced by other more important things. It is first in a qualitative sense because it is the principal proclamation, the one which we must hear again and again in different ways, the one which we must announce one way or another throughout the process of catechesis, at every level and moment."²²

And so, at this moment when we gather in these grace-filled days to deepen our understanding and commitment to this vocation, we ask, too, for a strengthening of our own faith and witness. Jesus Christ is proclaimed to us, received by us, and we

²² *Evangelii Gaudium; the Joy of the Gospel* par 164

in turn must proclaim Him, offer Him, to others. This is what it means to be a missionary disciple, desirous to make other disciples, to truly be disciple-making disciples. We must come back to this truth again and again. Our inspiration and guides are Mary, Mother of the Lord whose memory we honour today and those Catechist saints who have gone before us. These remained close to Jesus and, at the same time, reached out to others that they too might know the beauty of encountering and following Him.

We ask Mary, Morning Star of the New Evangelisation to pray for us and we invoke, those men and women who have so generously lived this vocation:

St Charles Borromeo and St Robert Bellarmine, Patron Saints of Catechists...Pray for us.

St Pedro Calungsod, teenage Philippine Catechist, martyred in Guam...Pray for us.

You, Catechist martyrs of Korea... Pray for us

You, Catechist Martyrs of Japan... Pray for us

Blessed Juan Barrera Méndez and companions, Catechist martyrs of Guatemala... Pray for us....

Blessed Daudi Okelo and Blessed Jildo Irwa, Catechist Martyrs of Uganda.... Pray for us.

All holy Catechists, teachers and witnesses of the faith...Pray for us.

All Holy Men and Women...Pray for us!

Thank you for your attention.

+Mark O'Toole
Archbishop of Cardiff
Bishop of Menevia