Catechesis, an essential moment in the process of evangelisation

A talk to the gathering of diocesan catechists, Maryvale Institute, 17th April 2016

Welcome and thanks to all for attending.

Maryvale as a place of formation for catechists and education in faith.

I want to talk today about the relationship between catechesis and evangelisation, and in particular how that connection is presented to us in the documents of the Church since the 2nd Vatican Council – in order to highlight how the church understands them not as two separate activities but as two closely interconnected elements that are part of an ongoing process – and one that is at the heart of the Church’s self-understanding and of her mission – to lead people to become disciples of Christ.

These are the documents I shall be looking at are these:

- Vatican II (1965) Ad Gentes Decree on the Missionary Activity of the Church
- Pope Paul VI (1975) Evangelii Nuntiandi
- Pope John Paul II (1979) Catechesi Tradendae
- The General Directory for Catechesis (1997)
- Pope Francis (2013) Evangelii Gaudium

As catechists you should, I hope, already be familiar with these – or at least have heard about them – because, along with the Catechism, they contain the key teaching of the Church on mission, evangelisation and catechesis as it has developed and been presented to us since the Council.

Important for catechists to have sound knowledge and understanding of Church teaching – in all areas. You teach in the name of the Church; catechist is a true ecclesial ministry – exercised on behalf of the Bishop – the chief catechist of the diocese. Look briefly at these documents in order.
In broad terms, before Vatican II, it would be true to say that the church had a view of mission which consisted of missionaries going out (usually from Europe) to non-Christian territories and converting the people who lived here. The focus of that mission was on establishing the institution of the Church – planting churches – setting up structures – parishes – schools and so on rather than on personal conversion of individuals – calling people to become disciples – which is what we would today associate with the idea of evangelisation. In fact the word evangelisation wasn’t even used – the Church referred exclusively to “mission” in that traditional, institutional sense of the word.

That new way of looking at Evangelisation and Catechesis began with the council itself. One of the final documents was the decree on the Church’s missionary activity *Ad Gentes*, and the GDC says this about it:

The conciliar decree *Ad Gentes* clarifies well the dynamic of the process of evangelization:

- Christian witness, dialogue and presence in charity;
- the proclamation of the Gospel and the call to conversion
- the catechumenate and Christian Initiation
- the formation of the Christian communities through and by means of the sacraments and their ministers

GDC 47

So *Ad Gentes* introduces the idea of evangelisation as a process – albeit a rather linear process – proclamation – catechesis – formation of communities. The document sometimes gives the impression that evangelisation is still principally associated with that institutional notion of planting churches:

The proper purpose of this missionary activity is evangelization, and the planting of the Church among those peoples and groups where it has not yet taken root

*Ad Gentes* 6
But on the other hand Ad Gentes doesn’t neglect the aspect of personal conversion – we also see there the idea that evangelisation is a transformative process through which a person is:

“...led into the mystery of God’s love, who invites him to establish a personal relationship with him in Christ. Under the movement of divine grace ... he passes from the old man to the new man who has been made perfect in Christ” (AG 13).

That reference to a personal relationship with God in Christ has a very contemporary ring to it; and even though the use of the word evangelisation is rather tentative in Ad Gentes, and its meaning is rather ambiguous - the change of language from mission to evangelisation is significant because it reflects a change of understanding of the nature of the Church’s nature and its purpose – and that continued to develop in the decades after the council. Quote from Avery Dulles – a significant American theologian – created a cardinal - written extensively on the Church

A shift in focus; From “Mission” to “Evangelisation”
Vatican I ... 1869-1870 ... used the term gospel (evangelium) only once and never used the terms evangelize and evangelization. Less than a century later, Vatican II mentioned the gospel 157 times and used the verb evangelize eighteen times and the noun evangelization thirty-one times."

(Cardinal Avery Dulles, John Paul II and the New Evangelization: What does it Mean?, 2006)

Just to give you an idea of how the idea of evangelisation has really taken off in that time – some more figures that show how that trend has continued:

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Now move onto those other key documents of the Church since the Council and see how that vision of evangelisation has developed and how more and more the Church understands evangelisation as a multi-faceted process of which catechesis is an essential element.

**Evangelii Nuntiandi**

First one is *Evangelii Nuntiandi*, Apostolic Exhortation by Pope Paul VI (1975) – issued 10 years after Ad Gentes and end of Council. It was in fact a post-synodal exhortation – following the 3rd session of the Synod of Bishops in 1974 on *Evangelization in the Modern World*.

Includes deservedly famous statement

> The Church exists in order to evangelise, that is, to preach and teach, to be the channel of the gift of grace” (EN 14)

Notice there – preach and to teach – Pope Paul’s description of evangelisation includes both proclamation (preaching) and catechesis (teaching) – already seeing that broadening of the Church’s understanding. Pope Paul VI is insistent that we must avoid a reductive or incomplete definition of what evangelisation is.

In the Church’s evangelizing activity there are of course certain elements and aspects to be specially insisted on. Some of them are so important that there will be a tendency simply to identify them with evangelization. Thus it has been possible to define evangelization in terms of proclaiming Christ to those who do not know Him, of preaching, of catechesis, of conferring Baptism and the other sacraments.

Any partial and fragmentary definition which attempts to render the reality of evangelization in all its richness, complexity and dynamism does so only at the risk of impoverishing it and even of distorting it. It is impossible to grasp the concept of evangelization unless one tries to keep in view all its essential elements. (EN 17)
At the 1974 Synod which gave rise to *Evangelii Nuntiandi* another issue was whether evangelisation still included the old missionary idea of going out to convert the pagans. During discussions of bishops at the 1974 Synod—different views of what evangelisation is. Traditional missionary idea of going out to unconverted people and bringing the Christian faith. But Vatican II had opened up a new discussion of what was necessary to be saved – is it still necessary to explicitly accept Jesus Christ in order to be saved – Vatican II had said that elements of truth and grace are to be found in other religions. Was that enough? Did we still need to go and convert people – or should the Church’s mission concentrate on providing for social needs – welfare, education etc. A certain amount of confusion among missionary orders – what was their role. Thrust of *EN* is that not case of choosing one or the other – announcing Christ and calling people to conversion and a concern for their welfare. It is both of those. Both are an essential element of proclaiming message of Christ – What Pope Paul VI called “evangelisation of culture”.

“... evangelization would not be complete if it did not take account of the unceasing interplay of the *Gospel and of man's concrete life, both personal and social*. *EN* 29

But not just about social action – has to include the full message of the Gospel – proclaimed not just by “witness of life but also by the word of life”.

The Good News proclaimed by the witness of life sooner or later has to be proclaimed by the word of life. There is no true evangelization if the name, the teaching, the life, the promises, the kingdom and the mystery of Jesus of Nazareth, the Son of God are not proclaimed. *EN* 22

“...name, the teaching, the life, the promises, the kingdom and the mystery of Jesus of Nazareth, the Son of God” these are all the subject of CATECHESIS.

Pope Paul VI in *Evangelii Nuntiandi* also makes the point that effective catechesis is necessary to complete the work of evangelisation – lead someone to a living faith.
Evangelisation more than sacramentalisation (an approach we still sometime see)
Reception of the sacrament not an end in itself – about building up Christian life –
relationship with Christ

“a certain way of administering the sacraments, without the solid support of catechesis .... could end up by depriving them of their effectiveness to a great extent. The role of evangelization is precisely to educate people in the faith in such a way as to lead each individual Christian to live the sacraments as true sacraments of faith -- and not to receive them passively or reluctantly.” (Evangelii Nuntiandi 47)

Before moving on – some of the tributes from Pope Francis to EN – from which he quotes extensively in EG. Continuity in the development from one Pope to another;

Pope Francis speaks about Evangelii Nuntiandi
“words that “are as timely as if they had been written yesterday”
“a very full text that has lost nothing of its timeliness”
“that basic point of reference which remains relevant.”
“to my mind the greatest pastoral document that has ever been written to this day”

Catechesi Tradendae

Four years after Evangelii Nuntiandi. John Paul II’s first Synod – and his first exhortation. Forms a pair with Paul VI’s document – evangelisation and catechesis.

“...evangelisation ... is a rich, complex and dynamic reality, made up of elements, or one could say moments, that are essential and different from each other...
Catechesis is one of these moments – a very remarkable one – in the whole process of evangelization.” (CT 18)

“Let us first of all recall that there is no separation or opposition between catechesis and evangelization. Nor can the two be simply identified with each other. Instead, they have close links whereby they integrate and complement each other.” (CT 18)
Next we come to the *General Directory for Catechesis* (GDC) which draws together teaching from the various documents of the council and the popes as well as the catechism. Issued by the Congregation for the Clergy (1997), provides norms and guidelines for catechesis in all its forms. Very useful; like “instruction manual for catechists” and also practical approaches. Part One of the Directory is called Catechesis in the *Church’s Mission of Evangelisation*, and that develops – in considerable detail – the understanding of evangelisation as a dynamic process in which Catechesis plays a key part:

“The process of evangelization, consequently, is structured in stages or "essential moments":

missionary activity directed toward non-believers and those who live in religious indifference;

initial catechetical activity for those who choose the Gospel and for those who need to complete or modify their initiation;

pastoral activity directed toward the Christian faithful of mature faith in the bosom of the Christian community.

These moments, however, are not unique: they may be repeated, if necessary, as they give evangelical nourishment in proportion to the spiritual growth of each person or of the entire community.” (GDC 49)

In fact the title of this talk is a quote from the General Directory for Catechesis, it is the heading of section 63 of that document – which you will find in Chapter 2 of that first part which is entitled “Catechesis in the process of evangelisation”.

Primary proclamation is addressed to non-believers and those living in religious indifference. Its functions are to proclaim the Gospel and to call to conversion. Catechesis, "distinct from the primary proclamation of the Gospel", promotes and matures initial conversion, educates the convert in the faith and incorporates him into the Christian community. The relationship between these two forms of the ministry of the word is, therefore, a relationship of complementary distinction. ...
Both activities are essential and mutually complementary: go and welcome, proclaim and educate, call and incorporate.

Nevertheless in pastoral practice it is not always easy to define the boundaries of these activities. Frequently, many who present themselves for catechesis truly require genuine conversion. Because of this the Church usually desires that the first stage in the catechetical process be dedicated to ensuring conversion ... Only by starting with conversion...can catechesis, strictly speaking, fulfil its proper task of education in the faith. (GDC 61-62)

In summary the GDC describes Catechesis as the process in its entirety of transmitting the Gospel.

"Catechesis is nothing other than the process of transmitting the Gospel, as the Christian community has received it, understands it, celebrates it, lives it and communicates it in many ways." (General Directory for Catechesis 105)

**Pope Benedict XVI**

Pope Benedict also emphasises the link between Catechesis and Evangelisation

On 16th Jan 2013 Pope Benedict XVI signed a motu proprio called *Fides per doctrinam*, in which he transferred responsibility for catechesis in the church from the Congregation for the Clergy (ref GDC), to the new Pontifical Council for Promoting the New Evangelization – a relatively new department or dicastery of the Holy See which he himself established in 2010. His reasons were:

"The Council's teachings and the subsequent Magisterium, as interpreters of the Church's great tradition in this field, have connected the Catechism ever more closely to the process of evangelisation."

The new Pontifical Council was to have the task of:

“...caring for, on behalf of the Roman Pontiff, the relevant instrument of evangelisation that the Catechism, along with catechetical teaching in all its diverse forms, represents for the Church in order to bring about a more organic
and effective pastoral outreach. This new pontifical council will be able to provide
the local churches and the diocesan bishops an appropriate service in this area."

“The Catechism, therefore, ... represents a significant step in the daily life of the
Church, **announcing and communicating** the Word of God in a living and effective
manner, so that it might reach all and that believers might be **trained and**
educated in Christ to build his body, which is the Church.”

(Benedict XVI, *Fides per Doctrinam*, 2013)

So Pope Benedict there saying that Catechism itself is a tool for evangelisation
(evangelisation – announcing and communicating) catechesis (train and educate)

Finally come to Pope Francis and I want to highlight just one paragraph of that
document when Pope Francis speaks about catechesis, and he too, like all his
predecessors, is clear that catechesis is not somehow separate from evanglisation
– it is not a sequence of two self-contained activities, and here in particular he
reiterates the need to keep the kerygma - initial proclamation at the heart of all
our endeavours. Para 164 – heart of the document.

In catechesis too, we have rediscovered the fundamental role of the **first**
announcement or kerygma, which needs to be the centre of all evangelizing
activity and all efforts at Church renewal. ... 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. For this reason too, “**the priest – like every other member of the**
Church – ought to grow in awareness that he himself is continually in need of
being evangelized”.
We must not think that in catechesis the kerygma gives way to a supposedly more “solid” formation. Nothing is more solid, profound, secure, meaningful and wisdom-filled than that initial proclamation. All Christian formation consists of entering more deeply into the kerygma, which is reflected in and constantly illumines, the work of catechesis (EG 164-165)

In May last year the Pope spoke to a plenary assembly of the Pontifical Council for Promoting the New Evangelisation on this very subject: “The Relationship Between Evangelization and Catechesis” and in his address Pope Francis said this:

“...the question of how we are educating in faith is not rhetorical, it is essential ... Catechesis, as a component of the process of evangelization, needs to go beyond the sphere of the school, in order to educate believers, even as children, to encounter Christ, living and working in his Church. It is the encounter with him that gives rise to the desire to know him better and thus to follow Him to become his disciples.

The challenge for the new evangelization and for catechesis, therefore, is played out precisely on this fundamental point: how to encounter Jesus, where is the most consistent place to find him and to follow him?”

(Address of Pope Francis to Participants in The Plenary Assembly of the Pontifical Council for Promoting the New Evangelization, 29 May 2015)

That phrase of Pope Francis “Catechesis as a component of the process of evangelisation” Francis is taking up that same theme which we have seen develop over the last 50 years since the Council. According to Francis, Catechesis is so much more than education or instruction in the faith; He is reminding us not to limit our ideas of catechesis simply to the passing on information, or communicating facts. The teaching of the Church cannot be thought of only, or even mainly, as a series of facts or propositions. The Pope speaks of educating believers to encounter Christ because it is from that encounter that the desire comes to know him better and to become his disciple. In other words, what is taught in catechesis is fundamentally faith in a person – the person of Jesus Christ – before it becomes faith in the teaching of the Church. What Pope Francis is saying is this: it is the encounter with the person of Jesus that opens the believer
to the teaching – and the more someone gets to know the person of Jesus Christ, the more open, and the more receptive that person becomes to the truth that he teaches through the Church. Those of course are not different things – the teaching of the Church is the teaching of Christ who is the Word of God and the revelation of the Father.

That’s a key theme of Francis – encounter with Christ – enter into a personal relationship with Christ. For Francis that is the goal of evangelisation. In *Evangelii Gaudium* Pope Francis writes about the Kerygma – essential heart of the Christian message – the first proclamation – the one that leads to conversion and opens someone to that relationship with Christ – proclamation that needs to be repeated over and over – lifelong process of ongoing conversion – conversion is not a single moment.

Pope Francis to Catechists’ Conference at the Vatican Sept 2014

Pope Francis, *Address to The Pastoral Project of Evangelii Gaudium Conference, 19 September 2014*

Let us not pursue the voice of the sirens who call us to perform pastoral care in a disjointed series of initiatives, without managing to grasp the essential commitment of evangelization. At times it seems that we are more concerned with redoubling activities than with being attentive to the people and their encounter with God.

Let us not forget to do as Jesus did with his disciples: after they had gone into the villages to spread the message of the Gospel, they returned happy about their success; but Jesus took them aside, to a lonely place to stay with them for a while (cf. Mk 6:31). *Pastoral care without prayer and contemplation can never reach the heart of the people.*

Your role as catechists must include understanding that you are also evangelisers – importance of kerygma continuing conversion – so much more than education – focus on “encounter with God” - formation of disciples of Jesus Christ – not about
“projects” or “activities” or “schemes” – must be rooted in own lives of faith – nourished by prayer.