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Nancy Bauer O.S.B.

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So That the Living Faith Becomes Manifest and Active: Catechetical Instruction According to the Code of Canon Law

NANCY BAUER, OSB

If one were to ask catechetical directors which church documents they consult when preparing faith formation programs they would no doubt mention, for example, the documents of Vatican Council II, the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, the *General Directory for Catechesis*, and, in the United States, the *National Directory for Catechesis*. But how many would mention the Code of Canon Law? The code, the primary (but not only) source of church law, devotes the third of its seven books to the “Teaching Function of the Church” which includes canons specific to catechetical instruction.¹ In addition to Book III, other books of the code contain norms relevant to catechesis, including several canons that assert the rights and obligations of the Christian faithful regarding education in the faith.

The code addresses the purposes and contents of catechetical instruction, who is responsible for providing it, for whom, and by what means. This paper will begin with a brief background on the Code of Canon Law for those who are unfamiliar with it. Then it will explain what it means that the Christian faithful have canonical rights regarding faith formation, followed by an introduction to Book III of the code. Finally, the paper will focus on the canons specific to catechetical instruction.²

1. The official text of the code is referenced as *Codex Iuris Canonici auctoritate Ioannis Pauli PP. II promulgatus* (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1983) [hereafter 1983 CIC]. English translation of canons of this code is from *Code of Canon Law, Latin-English Edition: New English Translation* (Washington, DC: CLSA, 2017).

2. This paper is limited to a study of the canons on catechetical instruction in the code for the Latin Church, *Codex Iuris Canonici*, and does not address the comparable canons (cc. 617–626) in *Codex Canonum Ecclesiarum Orientalium* (*Code of Canons of the Eastern Churches*).

The 1983 Code of Canon Law

Law has existed in the Church since the earliest Christian communities began to organize themselves. The ancient church orders, such as the *Didache*, *Didascalia Apostolorum*, and the *Canons of Hippolytus*, provided norms on qualifications of bishops, presbyters, and deacons; how to administer baptism; formation of catechumens; how to conduct liturgies; and various moral questions. Norms in the church orders were based on Sacred Scripture and the customary practices of the local Christian communities.³

By the fourth century, bishops meeting in local church councils, such as the Councils of Elvira (c. 305), Ancyra (314), Arles (314), Gangra (340), and Laodicia (364), issued canons addressing marriage, sexual morality, usury, heresies, liturgical practices, the Lord's Day, the dating of Easter, the role of bishops, and whether or not to readmit "*lapsi*," those who apostatized during persecutions. Canons and decrees have also been issued at most of the ecumenical councils of the Church, beginning with Nicea (325) which produced twenty canons on such matters as the selection of bishops and excommunication. Also by the fourth century, the bishops of Rome were writing letters called "decretals," in which they responded to questions from other bishops on matters of ecclesiastical discipline. The responses contained decrees that were considered normative for the territories that received them, but also began to be observed as church law in surrounding locations.

At various periods of church history, the number of laws accumulated to the point that they were unwieldy and sometimes contradictory. Canonists made collections of ecclesiastical laws to make them more accessible. The most famous collection was the "*Concordia Discordantium Canonum*" (*The Concordance of Discordant Canons*) made by a man named Gratian in about 1140. Known more simply as *Gratian's Decretum*, this systematized assemblage of more than 3,500 legal texts, although never officially promulgated, served as a major source of church law. In the sixteenth century, the *Decretum* was published together with five later collections of papal decretals in a volume called the *Corpus Iuris Canonici* (*The Body of Canon Law*) which, along with decrees and canons of the Council of Trent, comprised the bulk of canon law up to the twentieth century.

3. Custom was one of the earliest sources of church law and the current code in canons 23–28 still provides for the possibility of Christian communities, such as dioceses and parishes, to establish customs that obtain the force of law.

At the First Vatican Council (1869–70), bishops from around the world complained that the Church was once again drowning in laws. Pope Pius X commissioned a group of cardinals to revise the whole system of canon law into codified form which resulted in the church's first Code of Canon Law, promulgated in 1917 by Pope Benedict XV.⁴ The 1917 code consisted of five books: 1) *Normae Generales* (General Norms), which contained the general principles of law; 2) *De Personis* (On Persons), which contained canons on clerics, religious, and laity; 3) *De Rebus* (On Things), which addressed the sacraments, sacred places and times, the ecclesiastical magisterium, and temporal goods of the Church; 4) *De Processibus* (On Procedures), with canons on processes used in church tribunals; and 5) *De Delictis et Poenis* (On Delicts and Penalties), canons on “crimes” that warranted penalties. Catechetical instruction was covered in canons 1329–1336 in Book II in the section on ecclesiastical magisterium.

When Pope John XXIII announced in 1959 that he would convene an ecumenical council, he also announced that the Code of Canon Law would be revised. Revision of the code got underway after Vatican Council II was concluded so that the new code could reflect conciliar teaching. The new code was promulgated by Pope John Paul II in 1983. Comprised of seven books, the 1983 code is organized, as far as possible, according to theological principles emphasized at Vatican II. The first book, *De Normis Generalibus* (General Norms), again contains basic legal principles necessary for the proper interpretation of the rest of the code. The second book, *De Populi Dei* (The People of God) begins with introductory canons on the Christian faithful derived primarily from Vatican II documents, especially the Dogmatic Constitution on the Church *Lumen gentium*. It then identifies obligations and rights of all the Christian faithful, plus obligations and rights of the lay faithful. The remainder of this book addresses clerics, associations of the faithful, the hierarchical constitution of the Church, and the various forms of consecrated life and societies of apostolic life. The third and fourth books of the code are titled according to the functions or “*munere*” of Christ as prophet and priest. Book III, *De Ecclesiae Munere Docendi* (The Teaching Function of the Church), reflects the Church's extension of Christ's prophetic function. Book IV, *De Ecclesiae Munere Sanctificandi*

4. Before canon law was codified, individual laws were often embedded in the stories or cases which gave rise to the law. In the process of codification, each law was extracted from its context and restated in a concise canon.

(The Sanctifying Function of the Church), reflects the Church's continuation of Christ's priestly function and contains canons on the sacraments and other acts of divine worship. Book V contains norms on *De Bonis Ecclesiae Temporalibus* (Temporal Goods of the Church). Book VI on *De Sanctionibus in Ecclesia* (Sanctions in the Church), addresses violations and the application of penalties and Book VII, *De Processibus* (Processes), contains canons on tribunal personnel and procedures. Even when canons of the 1983 code are identical to canons of the 1917 code, they must be interpreted in light of the conciliar and postconciliar documents, as well as more recent church documents.

Rights and Obligations of the Christian Faithful Regarding Catechetical Instruction

It is necessary to begin this section by stating certain principles regarding rights and obligations in the Code of Canon Law. Canon 18, in the first book of the code, states a significant legal principle that applies to rights: "Laws which . . . restrict the free exercise of rights . . . are subject to strict interpretation."⁵ Ecclesiastical laws are interpreted either broadly or strictly. Strict interpretation "limits the law's application to the minimum stated in the law," while "broad interpretation widens the application of the law to all possible cases that can fall within its meaning."⁶ Broad interpretation is applied to "favorable" laws, while strict interpretation is applied to "odious" laws, such as laws that limit or prohibit someone's exercise of a right. For example, by canon 213, the Christian faithful have the right to the sacraments, but canon 843 §1 limits the exercise of this right to those who request the sacraments at the appropriate time, are properly disposed, and not prohibited by law from receiving them. Canon 843 §1 must be interpreted strictly so the sacraments are not denied unnecessarily or arbitrarily.

Another principle is that there is a reciprocal relationship between rights and obligations. When one person has a right, there is often an obligation on the part of another person to do or provide something so the right can be fulfilled and, vice versa, when one person has an obligation, there is often a right on the part of another person that the obli-

5. 1983 CIC, c. 18: "Leges quae . . . liberum iurium exercitium . . . strictae subsunt interpretationi."

6. John M. Huels, "Ecclesiastical Laws," in *New Commentary on the Code of Canon Law*, ed. John P. Beal et al. (New York/Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 2000) [hereafter *New Commentary*] 75.

gation is met. For example, when a parishioner, exercising the right to the sacraments, is properly disposed and asks at the right time for the sacrament of penance, the pastor has the obligation to provide that sacrament. Several canons state the obligation and right of parents to provide for the education of their children (cc. 226 §2; 793 §1; 1136), giving rise to a right on the part of those children to be educated.

How do these principles regarding rights and obligations apply to catechesis? Book II of the code contains sixteen canons (cc. 208–223) on “The Obligations and Rights of All the Christian Faithful,” plus eight canons (cc. 224–231) on “The Obligations and Rights of the Lay Christian Faithful.” Several of these canons explicitly affirm the right to catechetical instruction. Canon 213, which states the right of the faithful to the sacraments, also states their right to “the word of God.”⁷ In the code, the ministry of the word of God refers primarily to preaching and catechetical instruction (c. 761). According to canon 217, the Christian faithful “have the right to a Christian education by which they are to be instructed properly to strive for the maturity of the human person and at the same time to know and live the mystery of salvation.”⁸ “Christian education” includes religious instruction, but also extends to the complete formation of the human person, not only for the sake of seeking eternal salvation, but to be able to participate actively in society as a mature citizen (c. 795). According to Canon 229 §1, lay persons specifically are “bound by the obligation and possess the right to acquire knowledge of Christian doctrine appropriate to the capacity and condition of each in order for them to live according to this doctrine, announce it themselves, defend it if necessary, and take their part in exercising the apostolate.”⁹

A number of the canons on obligations and rights implicitly affirm the right to catechesis. For example, the duty and right of all the faithful to evangelize, that is, “to work so that the divine message of salvation more and more reaches all people in every age and in every

7. 1983 *CIC*, c. 213: “Ius est christifidelibus ut ex spiritualibus Ecclesiae bonis, praesertim ex verbo Dei et sacramentis, adiumenta a sacris Pastoribus accipiant.”

8. 1983 *CIC*, c. 217: “Christifideles, quippe qui baptismo ad vitam doctrinae evangelicae congruentem ducendam vocentur, ius habent ad educationem christianam, qua ad maturitatem humanae personae prosequendam atque simul ad mysterium salutis cognoscendum et vivendum rite instruuntur.”

9. 1983 *CIC*, c. 229 §1: “Laici, ut secundum doctrinam christianam vivere valeant, eandemque et ipsi enuntiare atque, si opus sit, defendere possint, utque in apostolatu exercendo partem suam habere queant, obligatione tenentur et iure gaudent acquirendi eiusdem doctrinae cognitionem, propriae uniuscuiusque capacitati et conditioni aptatam.”

land,”¹⁰ implies that they receive the necessary formation to fulfill this duty and right. The lay faithful, as individuals or gathered in associations, are bound by the general obligation and possess the right to evangelize, especially “in those circumstances in which only through them can people hear the gospel and know Christ.”¹¹ All the faithful are required to follow with Christian obedience the teachings of the church’s magisterium (c. 212 §1) which, again, implies that they know those teachings. Similarly, the following obligations and rights imply that the faithful receive integral catechetical instruction: the right to undertake apostolic works (c. 216); the obligation to promote social justice (c. 222 §2); and for the lay faithful, the duty to bring the spirit of the gospel to temporal affairs (c. 225 §2).

The obligations and rights regarding catechesis, and reasons for these obligations and rights, are stated in conciliar and post conciliar documents which are either sources for the canons mentioned or resources for interpreting those canons. *Gravissimum Educationis*, the Vatican II declaration on Christian education, states the following:

All Christians . . . have a right to a Christian education. Such an education not only develops the maturity of the human person . . . but is especially directed toward ensuring that those who have been baptized, as they are gradually introduced to a knowledge of the mystery of salvation, become daily more appreciative of the gift of faith which they have received. They should learn to adore God the Father in spirit and in truth (Jn 4:23), especially through the liturgy. They should be trained to live their own lives in the new self, justified and sanctified through the truth (Eph. 4: 22–24). Thus, they should truly develop as persons, proportioned to the completed growth of Christ (see Eph 4:13), and make their contribution to the growth of the Mystical Body. Moreover, conscious of their vocation they should learn to give witness to the hope that is in them (see 1 Peter 3:15) and to promote the Christian concept of the world whereby the natural values, assimilated into the full

10. 1983 *CIC*, c. 211: “Omnes christifideles officium habent et ius allaborandi ut divinum salutis nuntium ad universos homines omnium temporum ac totius orbis magis magisque perveniat.”

11. 1983 *CIC*, c. 225 §1: “Laici, quippe qui uti omnes christifideles ad apostolatam a Deo per baptismum et confirmationem deputentur, generali obligatione tenentur et iure gaudent, sive singuli sive in consociationibus coniuncti, allaborandi ut divinum salutis nuntium ab universis hominibus ubique terrarum cognoscatur et accipiat; quae obligatio eo vel magis urget iis in adiunctis, in quibus nonnisi per ipsos Evangelium audire et Christum cognoscere homines possunt.”

understanding of humanity redeemed by Christ, may contribute to the good of society as a whole.¹²

Pope John Paul II in his 1979 apostolic exhortation *Catechesi Tradendae* notes that “every baptized person . . . has the right to receive from the Church instruction and education enabling him or her to enter on a truly Christian life.”¹³ The right of the faithful to receive a Christian education gives rise to an obligation on the part of the Church to provide such education. According to *Gravissimum Educationis*, “The church as a mother is under an obligation, therefore, to provide for its children an education by virtue of which their whole lives may be inspired by the spirit of Christ.”¹⁴

Book III: The Teaching Function of the Church (cc. 747–833)

The teaching function of the Church is associated with the Church’s prophetic mission and based on the “Great Commission,” that is,

12. Vatican Council II, Declaration on Christian Education, *Gravissimum Educationis* 2, October 28, 1965, AAS 58 (1966) 730: “Omnibus christianis . . . ius est ad educationem christianam. Quae quidem non solum maturitatem humanae personae modo descriptam prosequitur, sed eo principaliter spectat ut baptizati dum in cognitionem mysterii salutis gradatim introducuntur, accepti fidei doni in dies magis conscii fiant; Deum Patrem in spiritu et veritate adorare (cfr. *Io.* 4, 23) praeprimis in actione liturgica addiscant, ad propriam vitam secundum novum hominem in iustitia et sanctitate veritatis (cfr. *Eph.* 4, 22–24) gerendam conformentur; ita quidem occurrant in virum perfectum, in aetatem plenitudinis Christi (cfr. *Eph.* 4, 13) et augmento corporis mystici operam praestent. Iidem insuper suae vocationis conscii tum spei quae in eis est (cfr. *1 Petr.* 3, 15), testimonium exhibere tum christianam mundi conformationem adiuvere consuescant, qua naturales valores in completa hominis a Christo redempti consideratione assumpti, ad totius societatis bonum conferant.” English translation from *Vatican Council II: The Basic Sixteen Documents: Constitutions, Decrees, Declarations*, Austin Flannery, ed. (Northport, NY: Costello Publishing Company, Inc., 1996) [hereafter *Flannery*] 577–578.

13. John Paul II, apostolic exhortation *Catechesi Tradendae* 14, October 16, 1969, AAS 71 (1979) 1288: “quisque baptizatus . . . habet acquabiliter ius recipiendae ab Ecclesia institutionis et educationis, quae eum iuvet, ut ad veram christianam vitam perveniat.” English from John Paul II, *Apostolic Exhortation Catechesi Tradendae of His Holiness Pope John Paul II to the Episcopate, the Clergy, and the Faithful of the Entire Catholic Church on Catechesis in Our Time* (Vatican: The Vatican Polyglot Press, 1979) [hereafter *Apostolic Exhortation CT*] 20.

14. *GE* 3, AAS 58 (1966) 732: “His igitur filiis suis tanquam Mater eam praestare Ecclesia tenetur educationem, qua tota eorum vita spiritu Christi imbuatur.” *Flannery*, 579–580.

Christ's mandate to make disciples of all nations, teaching them everything he commanded.¹⁵ The third book of the code, on the *munus docendi*, begins with nine introductory canons, the first of which asserts that, because Christ entrusted the deposit of faith to the Church, the Church has the duty and innate right, independent of any human power whatsoever, to preach the gospel to all peoples (c. 747 §1). This assertion is directed primarily at political entities that might try to prohibit the Church's effort to evangelize and teach. The second paragraph of the opening canon asserts the Church's competence to announce moral principles, even about the social order, and to judge human affairs that affect human rights or the salvation of souls (c. 747 §2). This indicates that preaching and catechesis must focus not only on the essential credal elements of the faith, but also on the moral and social teaching of the Church, so the faithful can indeed imbue the temporal order with the spirit of the gospel, as is their obligation. The second introductory canon asserts that all people have the obligation to seek the truth about God and his Church and, by divine law, are bound to observe the truth they have come to know (c. 748 §1). Nonetheless, no one is ever to be coerced to embrace the Catholic faith against their conscience (c. 748 §2). The third introductory canon (c. 749) addresses infallibility. Most of the rest of the introductory canons address the varying levels of magisterial teachings.

Following the introductory canons, Book III consists of five titles: 1) *De Divini Verbi Ministerio* (The Ministry of the Divine Word); 2) *De Actione Ecclesiae Missionali* (The Missionary Action of the Church); 3) *De Educatione Catholica* (Catholic Education); 4) *De Instrumentis Communicationis Socialis et in Specie de Libris* (Instruments of Social Communication and Books in Particular); and 5) *De Fidei Professione* (The Profession of Faith). It is within the first title that catechesis is addressed.

Canons on Catechetical Instruction (*De Catechetica Institutione*)

Title I of Book III addresses the two primary forms of the ministry of the divine word: preaching and catechetical instruction. It begins with

15. John M. Huels, *The Teaching Office of the Catholic Church: A Commentary on Book III of the Code of Canon Law* (Ottawa: Saint Paul University, 2017) 1. See also, James A. Coriden, "Introduction to Book III," in *New Commentary*, 911." *Lumen gentium* 3 discusses evangelization and magisterial teaching in relation to Christ, the "great prophet."

six introductory canons applicable to both forms of the ministry of the word, followed by nine canons specific to preaching and eight specific to catechetical instruction. The introductory canons address the question of who is responsible for the ministry of the word and the short answer is: everybody. All the Christian faithful have a role in preaching and catechesis, but those roles vary according to each one's canonical condition. It is for the supreme authority of the Church, that is, the Roman Pontiff and the college of bishops, to proclaim the gospel on the universal level (c. 756 §1). The diocesan bishop oversees the entire ministry of the word on the diocesan level (c. 756 §2). Presbyters, especially pastors of parishes, proclaim the gospel to the faithful committed to them, while deacons exercise the ministry of the word in collaboration with the bishop and presbyters (c. 757). Members of institutes of consecrated life, which includes religious and secular institutes, witness to the gospel by their way of life and can be called upon by the bishop to assist more directly in preaching and catechesis (c. 758). Canon 759 addresses the function of lay persons who, by virtue of baptism and confirmation, "are witnesses of the gospel message by word and the example of a Christian life."¹⁶ Like religious, they can also be "called upon to cooperate with the bishop and presbyters in the exercise of the ministry of the word."¹⁷

Canon 760 expresses the scope and sources of the ministry of the word: "The mystery of Christ is to be set forth completely and faithfully in the ministry of the word, which must be based upon sacred scripture, tradition, liturgy, the magisterium, and the life of the Church."¹⁸ This canon is especially important for the ministry of catechesis. In *Catechesi Tradendae*, Pope John Paul II explains what it means to set forth the mystery of Christ "completely and faithfully." Above all, catechesis is Christocentric, which means transmitting, not one's own teaching, but that of Jesus Christ: "We must therefore say that in catechesis it is Christ, the Incarnate Word and Son of God, who is taught—everything else is taught with reference to him."¹⁹ Consequently, catechists will not pres-

16. 1983 CIC, c. 759: "Christifideles laici, vi baptismatis et confirmationis, verbo et vitae christianae exemplo evangelici nuntii sunt testes."

17. 1983 CIC, c. 759: "vocari etiam possunt ut in exercitio ministerii verbi cum Episcopo et presbyteris cooperentur."

18. 1983 CIC, c. 760: "In ministerio verbi, quod sacra Scriptura, Traditione, liturgia, magisterio vitaeque Ecclesiae innitatur oportet, Christi mysterium integre ac fideliter proponatur."

19. CT6, AAS71 (1979) 1281: "Affirmari ergo oportet in catechesi Christum, Verbum incarnatum et Filium Dei, institutione tradi, cetera autem prout ad eum referantur." *Apostolic Exhortation CT*, 9–10.

ent their personal opinions as if they represent Christ's teaching.²⁰ Furthermore, catechesis must be systematic, not improvised; it must deal with essentials; it must be complete, not stopping with the initial proclamation; and it must be integral, open to all facets of Christian life.²¹ Regarding "integrity of content," the Christian faithful have "the right to receive 'the word of faith' not in mutilated, falsified or diminished form but whole and entire, in all its rigour and vigour . . . Thus, no true catechist can lawfully, on his own initiative, make a selection of what he considers important in the deposit of faith as opposed to what he considers unimportant, so as to teach the one and reject the other."²²

Regarding the sources of catechesis mentioned in canon 760, the *National Directory for Catechesis* in the United States explains the relationship between scripture, tradition, and magisterium:

To refer to the word of God in Sacred Scripture and Sacred Tradition as the principal source of catechesis means, on the one hand, that catechesis must be primarily based on the thought, spirit, and perspective of the Old and New Testament. On the other, it means that the biblical texts from which catechesis proceeds must be read from within the Church's two-thousand-year experience of faith and life. The Church, guided by the Holy Spirit in every age, must interpret the word of God. The Church performs this function authoritatively through her living, teaching office, the Magisterium. . . . Thus, the word of God, contained and transmitted in Sacred Scripture and Sacred Tradition and interpreted by the Magisterium, is the principal means of catechesis.²³

20. CT 6, AAS 71 (1979) 1281. *Apostolic Exhortation CT*, 10.

21. CT 21, AAS 71 (1979) 1294–1295. *Apostolic Exhortation CT*, 30.

22. CT 30, AAS 71 (1979) 1302–1303: "ius recipiendi 'verbum fidei,' non mutilum nec adulteratum nec mancum, sed plenum et integrum omni in suo rigore suoque vigore. . . . Numquam igitur ulli licebit veri nominis catechistae proprio arbitratu seligere ipso in fidei deposito inter ea, quae momenti esse et quae sine momento esse censet, ut illa doceat, haec praetereat." *Apostolic Exhortation CT*, 42–43. The 1997 *General Directory for Catechesis* 30 identifies specific problems in contemporary catechesis, including emphasis on the humanity of Jesus without explicit reference to his divinity; *lacunae* regarding the doctrines on sin, grace and eschatology; not enough emphasis on moral formation, church history, and the Church's social teaching; and "a weak and fragmentary link with the liturgy." Congregation for the Clergy, *General Directory for Catechesis* (Washington, DC: USCC, 1997) [hereafter *GDC*] 26.

23. United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, *National Directory for Catechesis* 18 (United States Conference of Catholic Bishops: Washington, DC, 2005) [hereafter, *NDC*].

According to the U.S. national directory, the “life of the Church” as a source of catechesis includes “the lives of the saints and . . . the Christian witness of the faithful.”²⁴

The final introductory canon on the ministry of the word notes that preaching and catechesis are the principal means of proclaiming Christian doctrine, but also recommends schools, academies, conferences, meetings, and the instruments of social communications as means of disseminating church teaching (c. 761).

Catechetical instruction itself is addressed in canons 773–780. Each canon will be quoted and followed by commentary.

Can. 773 It is a proper and grave duty especially of pastors of souls to take care of the catechesis of the Christian people so that the living faith of the faithful becomes manifest and active through doctrinal instruction and the experience of Christian life.²⁵

The first canon on catechesis addresses three things: the role of pastors (*pastores*) of souls, the purpose of catechesis, and the general means of catechetical formation. *Pastores* who have the care of souls (*cura animarum*) include, for example, diocesan bishops and their equivalent²⁶ and presbyters who have the care of Christian communities such as territorial or personal parishes. Seeing that catechesis is provided to the members of the faithful under their care is “proper” to *pastores*; it is a constitutive component of *cura animarum*. *Pastores* have a grave duty to fulfill this function, but the duty is to see that catechesis is provided, not to impart every bit of it themselves. The responsibilities of diocesan bishops and other *pastores* are explicated more fully in canons of Book II on the hierarchical constitution of the Church which addresses dioceses and parishes. According to canon 386 §1, the diocesan bishop is “to take care that the precepts of the canons on the ministry of the word, especially those on the homily and catechetical instruction, are carefully observed so that the whole Christian doctrine is handed on to

24. Ibid.

25. 1983 *CIC*, c. 773: “Proprium et grave officium pastorum praesertim animarum est catechesim populi christiani curare, ut fidelium fides, per doctrinae institutionem et vitae christianae experientiam, viva fiat explicita atque operosa.”

26. Those equivalent to diocesan bishops are those who have the care of particular churches other than dioceses which are territorial prelatures, territorial abbeys, apostolic vicariates, apostolic prefectures, and apostolic administrations erected in a stable manner (c. 368).

all.”²⁷ The catechetical obligation of pastors of parishes will be discussed below as it is addressed more specifically in canons 776 and 777.

According to canon 773, the purpose of catechetical instruction is so that “the living faith of the faithful becomes manifest and active.” This indicates that catechesis, although part of the process of evangelization, is not the initial moment of proclamation of the gospel.²⁸ Rather, it presupposes that persons to be catechized already have faith, living faith. Catechetical instruction is directed to catechumens who, although not yet baptized, have manifested the seed of faith by formally indicating their desire for baptism and, of course, it is provided for baptized Catholics of all ages. The purpose is to make sure their faith does not become dormant, but is activated and informs how they live their lives. Catechetical instruction “illumines and strengthens the faith, develops a life in harmony with the spirit of Christ, stimulates a conscious and fervent participation in the liturgical mystery and encourages people to take an active part in the apostolate.”²⁹

Catechesis is provided through doctrinal instruction and the experience of Christian life, in other words, formally and informally. To rephrase a popular expression, faith is taught *and* caught. It is taught by word and caught by example. It is taught in comprehensive, structured, systematic faith formation programs³⁰ and caught in day-to-day life encounters with other Christians. “The witness of the Christian community—particularly the parish, family, parents, and catechists—is an important element in catechetical methodology. The effectiveness of catechesis depends to a great extent on the vitality of the Christian community in which it is given.”³¹

27. 1983 *CIC*, c. 386 §1: “curet etiam ut praescripta canonum de ministerio verbi, de homilia praesertim et catechetica institutione sedulo servantur, ita ut universa doctrina christiana omnibus tradatur.”

28. *GDC* 61: “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.”

29. *GE* 4, *AAS* 58 (1966) 732: “quae fidem illuminat et roborat, vitam secundum spiritum Christi nutrit, ad mysterii liturgici consociam et actuosam participationem conducit atque ad actionem apostolicam excitat.” *Flannery*, 580.

30. On the necessity of systematic catechesis, see, for example, *CT* 21 and *GDC* 67.

31. *NDC* 29.

Can. 774 §1. Under the direction of legitimate ecclesiastical authority, solicitude for catechesis belongs to all members of the Church according to each one's role.

§2. Parents above others are obliged to form their children by word and example in faith and in the practice of Christian life; sponsors and those who take the place of parents are bound by an equal obligation.³²

The first paragraph of canon 774 affirms that all the faithful are responsible for faith formation, but not all have the same function. Those in authority in the Church, at the universal, diocesan, and parish levels, have the function of overseeing catechesis. Their role will be addressed further in the following canons. The second paragraph of this canon asserts the primacy of parents in the Christian education of their children. The significant contribution of parents in the Church's *munus docendi* is stated in several other canons. According to canon 226 §2, parents "have a most grave obligation and possess the right" to educate their children since they have given life to them.³³ This obligation and right is repeated in canon 793 §1 in relation to Catholic education and in canon 1136 in relation to the effects of marriage. Furthermore, parents, along with pastors, are to see that their children are properly instructed to receive the sacraments of confirmation (c. 890) and Eucharist (c. 914) and that they are educated in the importance of fasting and abstinence (c. 1252). Canon 774 says parents educate their children by word and example. "It is therefore the duty of parents to create a family atmosphere inspired by love and devotion to God and humanity which will promote an integrated, personal and social education of their children. . . . It is therefore, above all, in the Christian family . . . that children should be taught to know and worship God and to love their neighbor."³⁴ However, children also catechize parents: "Parents not only

32. 1983 *CIC*, c. 774: "§1. Sollicitudo catechesis, sub moderamine legitimæ ecclesiasticæ auctoritatis, ad omnia Ecclesiæ membra pro sua cuiusque parte pertinet. §2. Præ ceteris parentes obligatione tenentur verbo et exemplo filios in fide et vitæ christianæ praxi efformandi; pari obligatione adstringuntur, qui parentum locum tenent atque patrini."

33. 1983 *CIC*, c. 226 §2: "Parentes, cum vitam filiis contulerint, gravissima obligatione tenentur et iure gaudent eos educandi."

34. *GE* 3, *AAS* 58 (1966) 731: "Parentum enim est talem familiæ ambitum amore, pietate erga Deum et homines animatum creare qui integræ filiorum educationi personali et sociali faveat. . . . Maxime vero in christiana familia . . . Deum percipere et colere atque proximum diligere doceantur oportet." *Flannery*, 728.

communicate the Gospel to their children, but they receive from them the same Gospel as it is deeply lived by them.”³⁵ Canon 774 §2 adds that sponsors (godparents) and those who take the place of parents, such as guardians or foster parents, have the same obligation as parents to educate the children under their care.

Can. 775 §1. Having observed the prescripts issued by the Apostolic See, it is for the diocesan bishop to issue norms for catechetics, to make provision that suitable instruments of catechesis are available, even by preparing a catechism if it seems opportune, and to foster and coordinate catechetical endeavors.

§2. If it seems useful, it is for the conference of bishops to take care that catechisms are issued for its territory, with the previous approval of the Apostolic See.

§3. The conference of bishops can establish a catechetical office whose primary function is to assist individual dioceses in catechetical matters.³⁶

Canon 775 §1 spells out in greater detail the role of the diocesan bishop regarding catechetical instruction in his diocese. In accord with the prescripts issued by the Holy See, he may issue norms regarding catechesis. Such norms could specify the curriculum and textbooks for various ages in religious education programs, and requirements for sacramental preparation, youth ministry, formation of catechists, and adult faith formation. It is for the diocesan bishop to see that suitable instruments of catechesis are available, such as books, videos, and other forms of media. He can even prepare a catechism for his diocese.³⁷ In

35. Paul VI, apostolic exhortation *Evangelii nuntiandi* 71, December 8, 1975, AAS 68 (1976) 5: “Parentes non tantum communicant cum filiis Evangelium, sed ab ipsis possunt recipere idem Evangelium penitus vita expressum.”

36. 1983 *CIC*, c. 775: “§1. Servatis praescriptis ab Apostolica Sede latis, Episcopi dioecesani est normas de re catechetica edicere itemque prospicere ut apta catechesis instrumenta praesto sint, catechismum etiam parando, si opportunum id videatur, necnon incepta catechetica fovere atque coordinare. §2. Episcoporum conferentiae est, si utile videatur, curare ut catechismi pro suo territorio, praevia Sedis Apostolicae approbatione, edantur. §3. Apud Episcoporum conferentiam institui potest officium catechetikum, cuius praecipuum munus sit singulis dioecesibus in re catechetica auxilium praebere.”

37. Diocesan bishops may prepare local catechisms that inculcate the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*. Prologue 24 to the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* states: “By design, this Catechism does not set out to provide the adaptation of doctrinal presentations and catechetical methods required by the differences of culture,

general, he promotes and oversees all of the catechetical efforts, but can rely on a diocesan office of religious education to carry out the details. According to *Catechesi Tradendae*, the role of bishops is “to bring about and maintain in your Churches a real passion for catechesis, a passion embodied in a pertinent and effective organization, putting into operation the necessary personnel, means and equipment, and also financial resources.”³⁸

The second and third paragraphs of canon 775 indicate ways in which a conference of bishops can assist dioceses in providing catechesis. A bishops’ conference can prepare a national catechism which, unlike those prepared by diocesan bishops, requires approbation by the Holy See before publication. In 2006, the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops issued the *United States Catholic Catechism for Adults*. A bishops’ conference can also establish a national catechetical office to assist the dioceses in its territory. The United States Conference of Catholic Bishops has an Office of Evangelization and Catechesis which produces resources for catechetical instruction and for parish celebrations of the annual Catechetical Sunday. The Canadian Conference of Catholic Bishops has an Episcopal Commission for Evangelization and Catechesis.

Canons 776 and 777 must be considered together since they both address the role in catechesis of the pastor of a parish.

Can. 776 By virtue of his function, a pastor is bound to take care of the catechetical formation of adults, youth, and children, to which

age, spiritual maturity, and social and ecclesial condition among all those to whom it is addressed. Such indispensable adaptations are the responsibility of particular catechisms and, even more, of those who instruct the faithful.” *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 2nd ed. (Washington, DC: USCC, 1997) [hereafter CCC] 11. Likewise, Pope John Paul II in his 1992 Apostolic Constitution *Fidei Depositum* introducing the universal catechism noted its usefulness as an authentic reference for preparing local catechisms. According to *Fidei Depositum* 3, in CCC 6: “This catechism is not intended to replace the local catechisms duly approved by the ecclesiastical authorities, the diocesan Bishops and the Episcopal Conferences, especially if they have been approved by the Apostolic See. It is meant to encourage and assist in the writing of new local catechisms, which take into account various situations and cultures, while carefully preserving the unity of faith and fidelity to catholic doctrine.” For more on the relationship between the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* and local catechisms, see GDC 119–136.

38. CT 63, AAS 71 (1979) 1329: “Munus vestrum praeipuum est in dioecesis vestris verum ardorem ad catechesim spectantem excitare et servare, ardorem dicimus, qui in compagem accommodatam et efficacem inseratur, quae homines, subsidia et instrumenta atque etiam necessarias opes complectatur et promoveat.” *Apostolic Exhortation CT*, 83–84.

purpose he is to use the help of the clerics attached to the parish, of members of institutes of consecrated life and of societies of apostolic life, taking into account the character of each institute, and of lay members of the Christian faithful, especially of catechists. None of these are to refuse to offer their help willingly unless they are legitimately impeded. The pastor is to promote and foster the function of parents in the family catechesis mentioned in can. 774, §2.³⁹

Can. 777 Attentive to the norms established by the diocesan bishop, a pastor is to take care in a special way:

1° that suitable catechesis is imparted for the celebration of the sacraments;

2° that through catechetical instruction imparted for an appropriate period of time children are prepared properly for the first reception of the sacraments of penance and the Most Holy Eucharist and for the sacrament of confirmation;

3° that having received first communion, these children are enriched more fully and deeply through catechetical formation;

4° that catechetical instruction is given also to those who are physically or mentally impeded, insofar as their condition permits;

5° that the faith of youth and adults is strengthened, enlightened, and developed through various means and endeavors.⁴⁰

Canon 773 addresses the catechetical obligation of all pastors (*pastores*) of souls which includes all diocesan bishops and presbyters who have the care of some community of the Christian faithful. Canons 776 and 777 specifically address the catechetical obligations of a pastor (*par-*

39. 1983 *CIC*, c. 776: “Parochus, vi sui muneris, catechetica efformationem adutorum, iuvenum et puerorum curare tenetur, quem in finem sociam sibi operam adhibeat clericorum paroeciae addictorum, sodalium institutorum vitae consecratae necnon societatum vitae apostolicae, habita ratione indolis uniuscuiusque instituti, necnon christifidelium laicorum, praesertim catechistarum; hi omnes, nisi legitime impediti, operam suam libenter praestare ne renuant. Munus parentum, in catechesi familiari, de quo in can. 774, § 2, promoveat et foveat.”

40. 1983 *CIC*, c. 777: “Peculiari modo parochus, attentis normis ab Episcopo dioecesano statutis, curet: 1° ut apta catechesis impertiatur pro sacramentorum celebratione; 2° ut pueri, ope catecheticae institutionis per congruum tempus impertitae, rite praeparentur ad primam receptionem sacramentorum poenitentiae et sanctissimae Eucharistiae necnon ad sacramentum confirmationis; 3° ut iidem, prima communione recepta, uberius ac profundius catechetica efformatione excolantur; 4° ut catechetica institutio iis etiam tradatur, quantum eorum condicio sinat, qui corpore vel mente sint praepediti; 5° ut iuvenum et adutorum fides, variis formis et inceptis, muniatur, illuminetur atque evolvatur.”

ochus) of a parish.⁴¹ The catechetical role of a *parochus* is already made known in canon 528 §1, which states that he “is to take care that the lay members of the Christian faithful are instructed in the truths of the faith, especially by giving a homily on Sundays and holy days of obligation and by offering catechetical instruction.”⁴² According to the same canon, he has a particular responsibility for the Catholic education of children and youth. By canon 776, a *parochus* is obligated to make sure that catechetical instruction is provided for all age groups within the parish and adults are mentioned first and children last. However, the real purpose of the canon is to point out the necessity for the *parochus* to call on the rest of the Christian faithful for assistance in providing integral catechetical instruction in the parish. He is to rely on other presbyters who are assigned to the parish, such as parochial vicars. He may request the help of members of religious and secular institutes and societies of apostolic life and he may call on lay members of the parish, especially trained catechists. Those who are asked to assist are not to refuse without legitimate reason—something for parishioners to keep in mind the next time the *parochus* tries to recruit religious education teachers! Canon 776 concludes by noting the pastor’s responsibility to uphold parents in their role of catechesis within the family.

Canon 777 points out that the pastor of a parish, observing norms given by the bishop, is to give special attention to certain aspects of catechesis. Five items are listed, two of which involve sacraments and three of which involve specific categories of people. First, he is to see that suitable catechesis is provided for celebration of the sacraments in general. This is reinforced in Book IV on the sanctifying function of the Church which states that pastors “have the duty to take care that those who seek the sacraments are prepared to receive them by proper evangelization and catechetical instruction.”⁴³ The pastor is to

41. A parish is defined in the code as “a certain community of the Christian faithful stably constituted in a particular church, whose pastoral care is entrusted to a pastor (*parochus*) as its proper pastor (*pastor*) under the authority of the diocesan bishop.” The Latin term “*parochus*” refers specifically to a priest who has the pastoral care of a parish. The Latin term “*pastor*” applies more broadly to all bishops and presbyters who “shepherd” a community of the Christian faithful, which may be a parish, but also a diocese or other form of community.

42. 1983 *CIC*, c. 528 §1: “curet ut christifideles laici in fidei veritatibus edoceantur, praesertim homilia diebus dominicis et festis de praecepto habenda necnon catechetica institutione tradenda.”

43. 1983 *CIC*, c. 843 §2: “Animarum pastores ceterique christifideles, pro suo quisque ecclesiastico munere, officium habent curandi ut qui sacramenta

see that parents are instructed when they bring an infant for baptism (c. 851, 2°) and that catechumens are instructed before they receive the sacraments of initiation (c. 851, 1°). He is to take care that the Christian faithful are catechized regarding the sacrament of marriage (c. 1063, 1°).

The second number of canon 777 requires the pastor to take special care that children are prepared for their first reception of the sacraments of penance and Eucharist, as well as for confirmation. Again, Book IV reinforces this obligation. It is primarily the duty of parents and pastors to make sure children who have reached the use of reason are prepared properly for sacramental confession and Holy Communion (c. 914), and it is for parents and pastors to see to the instruction of young people preparing for confirmation (c. 890).

The third number of canon 777 calls on the pastor to provide continuing catechetical formation for children after they have received their first Communion. The fourth requires catechetical instruction for the faithful who have physical or intellectual disabilities, as far as their condition permits. For this purpose, The United States Conference of Catholic Bishops offers *Guidelines for the Celebration of the Sacraments with Persons with Disabilities*, which states, “Pastors are responsible to provide evangelization, catechetical formation, and sacramental preparation for parishioners with disabilities.”⁴⁴ Finally, canon 777 calls for ongoing catechesis of youth and adults. Youth include adolescents and young adults, that is, persons in their late teens, twenties, and thirties, members of the faithful who are making important decisions about their vocations, careers, and choice of spouse.⁴⁵ “Catechesis with young adults should form them in Christ, helping them to make moral decisions in light of the teachings of Christ and the Church.”⁴⁶ Catechesis for adults should vary according to whether they are catechumens, have been baptized but not sufficiently catechized, or have been consistently living their

petunt debita evangelizatione necnon catechetica institutione ad eadem recipienda praeparantur.”

44. United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, *Guidelines for the Celebration of the Sacraments with Persons with Disabilities* 5, revised edition approved June 15, 2017. The *Guidelines* note that parish catechetical and sacramental preparation programs “may need to be adapted for some parishioners with disabilities, though, as much as possible, persons with disabilities should be integrated into the ordinary programs.” *Guidelines* accessed at <http://www.usccb.org/about/divine-worship/policies/guidelines-sacraments-persons-with-disabilities.cfm>.

45. *NDC* 48.

46. *Ibid.*

faith and desire to deepen it.⁴⁷ Because growth in faith is a lifelong journey, special catechesis is recommended for the elderly.⁴⁸

Can. 778 Religious superiors and superiors of societies of apostolic life are to take care that catechetical instruction is imparted diligently in their churches, schools, and other works entrusted to them in any way.⁴⁹

The canons on religious institutes distinguish between “works proper to them” and “works entrusted to them” (cc. 677 §1, 681). Works proper to an institute are those for which the institute was founded or that the institute developed over time in accord with its charism and for which they take responsibility. These works include churches, schools and other entities owned, operated, or sponsored by the institute. Works entrusted to an institute are diocesan entities, such as diocesan parishes or schools, that the bishop commits to the care of an institute or society of apostolic life. While individual religious have traditionally been employed in catechesis on diocesan and parish levels, canon 778 is not addressed to them, but to superiors and specifically regarding works proper and entrusted to their institutes as a whole. The point of the canon is that superiors have the responsibility to ensure that integral catechesis is provided in all of these works.

Can. 779 Catechetical instruction is to be given by using all helps, teaching aids, and instruments of social communication which seem more effective so that the faithful, in a manner adapted to their character, capabilities and age, and conditions of life, are able to learn Catholic doctrine more fully and put it into practice more suitably.⁵⁰

Canon 779 is a “no-brainer.” Moses came down the mountain with the Ten Commandments carved in stone. Jesus opened a scroll and read

47. *GDC* 172.

48. *GDC* 186-188; *NDC* 48.

49. 1983 *CIC*, c. 778: “Curent Superiores religiosi et societatum vitae apostolicae ut in suis ecclesiis, scholis aliisque operibus sibi quoquo modo concredit, catechetica institutio sedulo impertiatur.”

50. 1983 *CIC*, c. 779: “Institutio catechetica tradatur omnibus adhibitis auxiliis, subsidiis didacticis et communicationis socialis instrumentis, quae efficaciora videantur ut fideles, ratione eorum indoli facultatibus et aetati necnon vitae condicionibus aptata, plenius catholicam doctrinam ediscere eamque aptius in praxim deducere valeant.”

from it. Medieval monks and nuns hand-lettered the scriptures and writings of the Church Fathers on parchment or vellum, while artists decorated churches with stained glass windows that relayed Bible stories to the illiterate. From the sixteenth century forward, the Church relied on printed books as educational tools. In the twentieth century, Archbishop Fulton J. Sheen instructed Catholic audiences through the medium of television. Catholic schools have passed through the stage of opaque and overhead projectors, mimeographs, and film strips. When the 1983 code was promulgated, most people were just beginning to learn about the Internet; “social media” was unknown. What the code calls “instruments of social communication,” refers primarily to books, newspapers, magazines, radio, and television. Today, the Internet is the preferred means for many people to access information, including the magisterial teachings of the Church which are available on the Holy See’s website. The Church has always presented the message of salvation using whatever “helps, teaching aids, and instruments” have been available. The canon advocates the continuation of this pattern.

Nonetheless, canons on the instruments of social communication regulate written materials used for catechetical instruction. Canon 827 “requires an *imprimatur* for three distinct categories of books: (1) catechisms and other catechetical instructional writings, (2) textbooks in areas related to scripture, theology, and other sacred disciplines, and (3) writings on religion or morality which are displayed, sold, or given away in church.”⁵¹ The category of “other catechetical instructional writings” includes, for example, workbooks and teachers’ manuals, “but not writings about catechetics or the teaching of religion.”⁵² “Textbooks are those written and used for classroom instruction; they outline the course and provide the written material upon which it is based.”⁵³ Despite the effort to ensure the suitability of catechetical materials, the Church is at the mercy of new forms of social media that defy regulation.

The catechetical directory for the United States identifies the Internet and other forms of media as challenges to catechesis because young people now expect learning experiences to be entertaining and reject whatever bores them.⁵⁴ “Catechesis has to investigate new possibilities offered by the existence of the new technologies and imagine whole new

51. James A. Coriden, “Instruments of Social Communication and Books in Particular,” in *New Commentary*, 982.

52. *Ibid.*

53. *Ibid.*

54. *NDC* 4.

models and systems if the Gospel message is to penetrate the culture, make sense to the next generation of Catholics, and bring about a response of faith.”⁵⁵

Can. 780 Local ordinaries are to take care that catechists are duly prepared to fulfill their function properly, namely, that continuing formation is made available to them, that they understand the doctrine of the Church appropriately, and that they learn in theory and in practice the methods proper to the teaching disciplines.⁵⁶

The final canon on catechetical instruction addresses the formation of catechists. The onus is on local ordinaries to make sure catechists are properly trained and have access to ongoing education in the doctrine of the Church and in effective pedagogical methods.⁵⁷ The *General Directory for Catechesis* says more about the importance of formation of catechists, especially lay catechists. The purpose of their formation is to make them capable of communicating the gospel message in the name of the Church.⁵⁸ Their training must include biblico-theological formation,⁵⁹ as well as background in the social sciences, including psychology, so they have “an awareness of the socio-cultural context in which man lives and by which he is strongly influenced.”⁶⁰ Finally they must be trained in pedagogical technique or “know-how.”⁶¹ Training takes place through formative activities within their own Christian communities and, more systematically, in schools for catechists.⁶²

Conclusion

The Code of Canon Law provides a context and norms for one aspect of the prophetic function of the Church—catechetical instruction. Catechesis and preaching form the primary components of the ministry

55. Ibid.

56. 1983 *CIC*, c. 780: “Curent locorum Ordinarii ut catechistae ad munus suum rite explendum debite praeparentur, ut nempe continua formatio ipsis praebetur, iidemque Ecclesiae doctrinam apte cognoscant atque normas disciplinis paedagogicis proprias theoretice ac practice addiscant.”

57. Local ordinaries in a diocese are the diocesan bishop, vicar(s) general, and episcopal vicars (c. 134).

58. *GDC* 235.

59. *GDC* 240–241.

60. *GDC* 242.

61. *GDC* 244.

62. *GDC* 246–251.

of the word of God. It is a ministry carried out, by right and by obligation, by all the Christian faithful. And all the Christian faithful possess the right and obligation to receive integral catechesis so their living faith becomes and remains manifest and active. Basic principles and ecclesiastical laws on catechesis are contained in Book III of the code on the teaching function of the Church, particularly in the six introductory canons to Title I on the ministry of the divine word and in the eight canons specific to catechetical instruction. These canons must be interpreted through the documents of Vatican Council II and subsequent church documents, including *Catechesi Tradendae* which affirms that “the definitive aim of catechesis is to put people not only in touch but in communion, in intimacy, with Jesus Christ.”⁶³

Nancy Bauer, O.S.B. is on the faculty of the School of Canon Law of The Catholic University of America. Email: bauer@cua.edu.

63. CT 5, AAS 71 (1979) 1281: “catechesis terminali ratione eo pertinet, ut quis non solum Iesus Christum contingat, sed etiam ad communionem cum eo, immo ad intimam familiaritatem perveniat.” *Apostolic Exhortation CT*, 9.