

EXPLORING JESUS' CATECHESIS:
METANOIA THROUGH QUESTIONS

Introduction:

God sent his only son, Jesus to the world so that through the teachings of his son, people may know him as their Father, “Father, the Almighty, Creator of heaven and earth”¹. The Second Vatican Council Dogmatic Constitution says, “It was for this purpose that God sent His Son, whom He appointed heir of all things, that he might be teacher, king and priest of all, the head of the new and universal people of the sons of God”². Jesus Christ was indeed the ultimate divine teacher who taught his disciples and followers about the Father, “The Lord Jesus, the Divine Teacher and Model of all perfection, preached holiness of life to each and everyone of His disciples of every condition. He Himself stands as the author and consumator of this holiness of life: ‘Be you therefore perfect, even as your heavenly Father is perfect’”³. After Jesus’ earthly ministry, the early church propagated under the guidance of the Holy Spirit through the teachings of the apostles, who not only handed down the teachings of Jesus but also emulated Jesus’ methodology of teaching. “And he gave some as apostles, others as prophets, others as evangelists, others as pastors and teachers, to equip the holy ones for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ” (Eph 4: 11-12, NABRE). Likewise, baptized followers of Christ are called to be missionaries of Christ (Mark 16:15-16). The call to be a missionary is a personal call and can vary among each person according to the gifts of the Holy Spirit bestowed on an individual, “There are different kinds of spiritual gifts but the same Spirit; there are different forms of service but the same Lord; there are different workings but the same God who produces all of them in everyone. To one is given through the Spirit the expression of wisdom; to another the expression of knowledge according to the same

¹ Catechism of the Catholic Church, no. 240.

² Vatican II, *Lumen Gentium*, no. 13

³ *Lumen Gentium*, no. 40

Spirit;” (1Cor 12:4-6, 8). The role of the lay people in catechizing correlates to the priestly character of their vocation by virtue of Baptism, “The baptized, by regeneration and the anointing of the Holy Spirit, are consecrated as a spiritual house and a holy priesthood”⁴ and thereby, is a reiteration of the mission of teaching as a task entrusted to all baptized, “And if by the will of Christ some are made teachers, pastors and dispensers of mysteries on behalf of others, yet all share a true equality with regard to the dignity and to the activity common to all the faithful for the building up of the Body of Christ.”⁵ Hence, the Apostolic tradition of teaching has been handed down the generations, and today, lay catechists play an extremely important role in teaching the doctrines of the Church to the faithful.

The following was recently published regarding the ministry of catechesis by the laity:

Through their presence in the world, the laity offer a valuable service to evangelization: their very life as disciples of Christ is a form of proclamation of the Gospel. They share in all the forms of occupation with other people, infusing temporal realities with the spirit of the Gospel: evangelization “takes on a specific quality and a special force in that it is carried out in the ordinary surroundings of the world” (LG 35). The laity, in bearing witness to the Gospel in different contexts. Have the opportunity to give a Christian interpretation to the realities of life, to speak of Christ and of Christian values, to present the reasons for their choices. This catechesis which is spontaneous and unpremeditated so to speak, is of great importance because it is immediately connected to their witness of life.⁶

Pope Francis, in his Apostolic Exhortation says, “There has been a growing awareness of the identity and mission of the laity in the Church. We can count on many lay persons, although still not nearly enough, who have a deeply-rooted sense of community and great fidelity to the tasks of charity, catechesis and the celebration of the faith.”⁷

⁴ Vatican II, *Lumen Gentium*, no. 10

⁵ *Lumen Gentium*, no. 32

⁶ USCCB, *Directory for Catechesis*, 2020, no. 121

⁷ Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium*, no. 102

Catechists are called to be missionaries and mystagogues in their ministry of teaching, “By virtues of faith and baptismal anointing, in collaboration with the Magisterium of Christ and as a servant of the action of the Holy Spirit, the Catechist is a teacher and mystagogue who introduces others to the mystery of God revealed in the paschal mystery of Christ; as an icon of Jesus the teacher, the Catechist has the two-fold task of transmitting the content of faith and leading others into the mystery of the faith itself.”⁸

A catechist need not look far to emulate a lesson plan or a pedagogical method, “The Gospel accounts present the features of Jesus’ educational approach and inspire the pedagogical action of the Church”.⁹ “Catechesis is therefore, the pedagogy of faith in action, together with initiation, education and teaching, always having clear the unity between content and the way in which it is transmitted. The Church is aware that in catechesis, the Holy Spirit is at work: this presence makes catechesis an original pedagogy of faith.”¹⁰

Divine Pedagogy of Jesus:

Jesus, the divine pedagogue used several exceptional methodologies for teaching, and to elaborate on all of them would be beyond the scope of this research paper. However, I would like to highlight one methodology, which I believe would help me in my ministry as a catechist. During his ministry, Jesus was confronted by many questions from various people who had an encounter with him during his earthly life. Some of these questions were genuine questions, some were questions to trap him, some were to understand his authority, while several of these questions were

⁸ USCCB, *Directory for Catechesis*, 2020, no. 113 (b)

⁹ *Directory for Catechesis*, 2020, no. 164

¹⁰ *Directory for Catechesis*, 2020, no. 166

asked by his own disciples and friends. In this paper, I would like to elaborate on how Jesus used the questions that he was asked, as a tool for teaching not only the enquirer, but also his disciples.

I will elucidate four types of questions, namely genuine questions of faith, questions to trap Jesus, questions to challenge Jesus' authority and questions from Jesus' apostles, disciples and friends. I hope to illustrate the genius of Jesus' pedagogy in his responses when he was faced with questions asked by people either out of general curiosity about their faith, hatred towards his authority, ignorance, as well as questions asked by his followers to understand him better, and further, how Jesus transformed these delicate instances into teaching moments. In all these instances, Jesus' objective was to bring about a metanoia in the people who stood around listening to his answers. The words of Jesus even today, bring about a metanoia in the readers of the Bible.

I hope to emulate Jesus' pedagogy in my role as a catechist to High School teenagers. Teenagers are often seen to be exploring their beliefs and values, and many are ambiguous about their faith. Additionally, some may be hostile towards the teachings of the Church, while some may be seeking answers to ascertain their faith in Christ. The methodology that Jesus uses while tackling a large array of all kinds of questions is an excellent resource for me in my ministry as a catechist to educate skeptical teenagers about Christ, as well as to guide them in the Christian faith and way of life.

Questions of faith for transformation:

During his earthly ministry, Jesus was asked questions of genuine faith from people who were in much need of a transformation. He was once asked, what one must do to inherit eternal life? (Matt 19:16; Mark 10:17; Luke 18:18;). Although the gospels of Matthew, Mark and Luke describe the person asking this question differently, they all agree that he was a person of affluence,

and one who followed all the Jewish laws diligently. Here, Jesus uses this opportunity to teach not only the rich man, but also his disciples, that true discipleship comes not only from obeying the law, but also from self-sacrifice (i.e., detachment from worldly things), and following Christ – one without the other is meaningless. This teaching shocks his disciples and they follow up with, “Then who can be saved?” (Matt 19:25; Mark 10:26; Luke 18:26). To this Jesus replies, “What is impossible with men is possible with God” (Matt 26:26; Mark 10:27; Luke 18:27), another powerful lesson, which conveys to all that eternal life cannot be achieved by human efforts alone.

The gospel of John portrays an influential teacher-student dialog in the narration of Jesus and the Samaritan woman at the well. The Samaritan woman’s questions are reminiscent of a tenacious teenager answering back to her teacher. Her first question, “How can you, a Jew, ask me, a Samaritan woman, for a drink?” (John 4:10), was not only difficult, but rather uncomfortable for a Jew, given the long-standing antagonism between Jews and Samaritans¹¹. Her latter questions were brazen, bordering on impertinence, “Sir, you do not even have a bucket and the well is deep; where then can you get this living water?”, “Are you greater than our father Jacob, who gave us this well and drank from it himself with his children and his flocks?” (John 4:11-13), Jesus’ patient yet authoritative responses to all her questions make her realize that she is in the presence of a great prophet and the Messiah (John 4:26). That brief encounter with Jesus changes her life, and she eventually becomes an evangelist, “Many of the Samaritans of that town began to believe in him because of the word of the woman who testified, ‘He told me everything I have done’” (John 4:39). This pedagogy of Jesus is one to be emulated by catechists, echoed by Pope Emeritus Benedict XVI, who writes about the fundamental task of the catechetical mission of the Church,

¹¹ Knoppers, Gary N., *Jews and Samaritans*, 1-3

“Being a Christian is not the result of an ethical choice or a lofty idea, but the encounter with an event, a person, which gives life a new horizon and a decisive direction.”¹²

Questions to trap Jesus:

With the rising fame of Jesus’ miracles and his authoritative new teachings throughout Israel, it was only a matter of time before animosity rose up against him. The Pharisees and teachers of the law watched for opportunities to trap Jesus in his own words (Matt 22:15, Luke 11:54, Luke 20:20). On one instance, when Jesus was in the district of Judea, large crowds gathered around him and he healed many people. The Pharisees found it opportune to test him about the Mosaic Law of divorce, “Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife for any cause whatever?” (Matt 19:4), and “why did Moses command that the man give the woman a bill of divorce and dismiss [her]?” (Matt 19:7). Often when Jesus was confronted by Pharisees to trap him with questions about the law, he pointed them back to the Torah to imply how myopic the Pharisees were with regard to the Mosaic Laws. Instead of interpreting the laws to include the big picture of the whole Torah, they were cherry-picking the laws to suit their lifestyle as Jesus pointed out “Because of the hardness of your hearts Moses allowed you to divorce your wives, but from the beginning it was not so.” (Matt 19:8). And further, by saying “what God has joined together, no human being must separate” (Matt 19:6), and “I say to you, whoever divorces his wife (unless the marriage is unlawful) and marries another commits adultery” (Matt 19:9), Jesus lays down the fundamental doctrine of Christian Marriage, while showing the Pharisees the fallacy of their interpretations of the law. With regard to these verses, Chrysostom makes an insightful observation about how Jesus’ ministry was a blend of action and teaching, “the Lord is not either ever delivering doctrine, or

¹² Benedict XVI, *Deus Caritas Est*, no. 1

ever working miracles, but one while does this, again turns to that”¹³ so that by his miracles, faith might be given and by his teaching, the profit of his work may be understood.

Jesus used some of the indignant questions that were thrown at him by chief priests to draw their attention to what was written about him in the Scriptures (Matt 21:15). When the children of Jerusalem sang “Hosanna to the Son of David” (Matt 21:15), the chief priests were angry with their praises and asked Jesus, “do you hear what they are saying?” (Matt 21:16), and Jesus defended their actions quoting scripture verses, “Out of the mouths of infants, you have brought forth praise” (Matt 21:16). One might think that quoting the scripture at that particular instance may have been futile, infuriating the chief priests even further, but Jesus used that precise moment to draw the attention of his disciples to the scriptures, who likely were as confused as the chief priests about the singing. In a subtle way, Matthew points to his readers how Jesus taught the disciples that he was the fulfillment of the scriptures.

The Pharisees and Sadducees who opposed each other in their beliefs, took turns to trap Jesus with their deceptive questions. One time the Pharisees send their disciples and Herodians with carefully disguised questions that was sugar-coated with praises, “Teacher, we know that you are a truthful man and that you teach the way of God in accordance with the truth. And you are not concerned with anyone’s opinion, for you do not regard a person’s status. Tell us, then, what is your opinion: Is it lawful to pay the census tax to Caesar or not?” (Matt 22:15-17) However, Jesus uses this malicious question to teach an authoritative lesson not only about the lawfulness of paying taxes, but also that, human beings who reflect the image of God, belong to God, “and [repay] to God what belongs to God.” (Matt 22:21)

¹³ Aquinas, *Catena Aurea*, Vol. 1, 531

Following the Pharisees, came the Sadducees to question him about resurrection saying, “Teacher, Moses said, ‘If a man dies without children, his brother shall marry his wife . . . whose wife will she be?’” (Matt 22:24-28). Jesus rebukes their lack of knowledge of the Scriptures and the power of God, and delivers a teaching about his Father in heaven, as one who is a living God, by quoting to them from scripture that was familiar to them. Here, it is noteworthy how Jesus’ pedagogical intuition is remarkably perceptive of his audience, as he carefully quotes only from the Pentateuch, which the Sadducees accept as valid scripture, “have you not read what was said to you by God, ‘I am the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob’?” (Matt 23:33), instead of quoting from the prophets (Isaiah, Ezekiel or Daniel), who also talk about resurrection, but which the Sadducees do not consider as valid scripture.

The Pharisees yet again question him to trap him – this time about the greatest commandment among all. This was indeed a tricky question because there were about 613 Jewish laws, and they wondered which one he would pick. However, Jesus uses this moment to teach them that all the laws can be consummated into two main laws, “You shall love the Lord, your God, with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind. This is the greatest and the first commandment. The second is like it: You shall love your neighbor as yourself. The whole law and the prophets depend on these two commandments.” (Matt 22:37-40).

Snaring questions about healing on the sabbath were also asked (Matt 12:10, Mark 2:24). Chrysostom’s commentary on this question is insightful, “they do not ask that they may learn, but that, they may accuse him;”¹⁴. However, Jesus employed a realistic example of the sheep falling into the well on a sabbath day, to show them how shallow their question was. If it was lawful to rescue a sheep on sabbath, how much more should one save a human being on sabbath (Matt 12:10-

¹⁴ Aquinas, *Catena Aurea*, Vol. 1, 364

12), thus, drawing their attention to the essence of the Mosaic law of sabbath – the sabbath was made for man, not man for the sabbath (Mark 2:28). The pedagogical method used by Jesus to tackle tricky situations are simple yet profound, and something to be assimilated by catechists in their teaching methods – a sound knowledge of the Scripture is key to address such issues.

Questions to challenge Jesus’ authority:

The chief priests were tormented with jealousy because they had witnessed Jesus’ glorious entry into Jerusalem (Matt 21), and the cleansing of the Temple (Matt 22), and hence they ask him, “By what authority are you doing these things? And who gave you this authority?” (Matt 22:23). Jesus does not answer this question directly, but poses another question to them, which humbles them as they understood that by answering the counter-question, they would fall into their own trap (Matt 22:24-27). Jesus the master pedagogue shows us that all questions need not be answered directly. Some questions that are deliberately challenging can be countered, not to demean the questioner, but to effectively drive home a point.

John’s gospel follows a different pattern in preaching about Jesus “he uses certain basic ideas, which he develops in the course of his gospel – like the New Testament taking the place of the Old; the themes of life, of the Bread of Life, of the light, truth, love etc.; and the gradual and dramatic manifestation of Jesus as the Messiah and Son of God, contrasting with the growing blindness of those Jews who reject him, until the high point comes, the “hour” of Jesus and of the power of darkness.”¹⁵ In this respect, John eloquently describes the spiritual blindness and the growing hostility of the chief priests, Pharisees, and Jewish people towards Jesus’ teachings, particularly the concept of the *truth* and “the truth will set you free” (John 8:32). The Jews retort “We are descendants of Abraham and have never been enslaved to anyone. How can you say, ‘You

¹⁵ *The Navarre Bible: St. John’s Gospel*, 20-21

will become free’?” (John 8:34) to which Jesus asserts the truth that he was the Son of God sent by the Father to do the will of the Father, yet because of their sinfulness and spiritual blindness they were not willing to accept this truth to see beyond their earthly father Abraham, hence being slaves of sin. They continue to argue in stubbornness with illogical questions, “Are we not right in saying that you are a Samaritan and are possessed?” (John 8:48) “Are you greater than our father Abraham, who died? Or the prophets, who died? Who do you make yourself out to be?” (John 8:53). Jesus unwearingly yet firmly states the truth that he is indeed greater than Abraham because he is the eternal “I AM” (John 8:58), which they are unable to accept, and attempt to stone him to death (John 8:59). The bold affirmations of Jesus and his resolute stance on stating the truth is a lesson for all catechists who struggle to emulate this pedagogy – a catechist should boldly and firmly state the truth, no matter how uncomfortable it is, particularly when faced with difficult questions regarding the hard teachings of the Church (e.g., about abortion, contraception, divorce and euthanasia), which may not be tolerable to the general public.

The final challenging questions regarding Jesus’ authority was during his trial, when Pilate asks him a series of questions “Are you the King of the Jews?” (John 18:33) and “What have you done?” (John 18:35) Jesus, the divine pedagogue, even in the final moments just before he is sentenced to death, does not let go of the opportunity to teach the world that his kingdom is not of this earth, and that he came to earth only to testify the truth, thus circling back to the topic of the *truth*. John ends the dialog with Pilate asking, “What is truth?” (John 8:38), a question best left unanswered at that point.

Questions from Jesus’ Apostles, disciples and friends:

During Jesus' ministry on earth, he appointed twelve apostles who followed him closely (Mark 3:16; Luke 6:13). Besides these twelve men, a large number of followers called disciples, which also included women (Luke 10:1; 8:2-3) as well as other friends who honored him, accompanied Jesus (John 12: 1-3; Luke 10:38). To understand Jesus' teachings better, the gospels have recorded many questions asked by the apostles, of which, Peter's seems to be predominant. Peter's questions opened channels to many fundamental teachings of Jesus regarding Christian discipleship, and in particular, about the reward kept for those who detach themselves from the world to follow Jesus (Matt 19:27), about forgiveness (Matt 18:21), and the virtue of humble service to others (John 13:6-7). In addition, Peter's questions also allowed Jesus to teach them about his second coming, and to be focused on one's own discipleship until then (John 21:22). Through Peter's question, Jesus also teaches and validates the grace attained through sacraments, particularly of Baptism and Reconciliation (John 13:8-10).

Thomas the Apostle's question, "Master, we do not know where you are going; how can we know the way?" allows Jesus to impart the very core of his identity to the world - "I am the way and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me." (John 14:6) Further, through his apostles' questions, Jesus is also able to reveal the mysteries of the Kingdom of heaven, "Why do you speak to them in parables?" (Matt 13:10) and "Who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?" (Matt 18:1). Jesus uses these questions to teach about the Kingdom of heaven for those who yearn for this knowledge, as well as for the humble at heart.

I will close with an endearing question, one that all can relate to, asked in despair by one of Jesus' closest friends, Martha, "Lord, do you not care that my sister has left me by myself to do the serving? Tell her to help me." (Luke 10:40). Here, Jesus lovingly conveys to Martha that her exaggerated anxiety about serving the human Jesus was preventing her from enjoying the presence

of the divine Lord in her house – nothing should take away the priority of sitting at the feet of her Master and listening to his teachings. Jesus asserts that the cares of world are many, but when the hour demands, one should put away all distractions and give priority to the divine teacher. This teaching of Jesus is something that, I believe, will benefit catechists who are faced with situations where students find themselves overwhelmed with homework or exams, and skip Church and Sunday School or just do not find time to pray. Sometimes, all it takes is a reminder about the big picture to help them prioritize their tasks, and organize their daily routine to include prayer in their lives.

Conclusion:

Catechesis is a journey of faith, that one takes with the people entrusted to their spiritual care. Mary E. Moore says, “the word “pedagogy” comes from two Greek roots: *pais* (child) and *pedon* (ground). The latter is related to *pes* (foot). These roots suggest two perspectives. As a combination of *pais* and *agein* (to lead), the word “pedagogy” is understood as the act of leading a child. Knowledgeable people teach the young in the knowledge they need”¹⁶. In my journey being a catechist to teenagers, I have often been accosted with various questions, some of them being genuine, out of curiosity about the faith, while others being tricky and challenging to see how I fare in answering them. I have been successful several times, however, I have also failed a few times, either being impatient with the questions asked, or out of ignorance about the matter. The pedagogical methods that Jesus employs, including teaching with authority, and sound knowledge of the Scriptures are lessons for me to cherish and revisit each time I teach my students

¹⁶ Moore, *Teaching as a sacramental ACT*, 12

and to help them to live a better Christian life. Jesus the divine pedagogue is my ultimate teacher as I strive to emulate Jesus' pedagogy in my ministry as a catechist.

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