



**ADDRESS OF HOLY FATHER FRANCIS
TO PARTICIPANTS IN THE PILGRIMAGE OF CATECHISTS
ON THE OCCASION OF THE YEAR OF FAITH AND
OF THE INTERNATIONAL CONGRESS ON CATECHESIS**

*Paul VI Audience Hall
Friday, 27 September 2013*

*Dear Catechists,
Good evening!*

I am pleased that this meeting was organized for the Year of Faith. Catechesis is a pillar of faith education and we need good catechists! Thank you for your service to the Church and in the Church. Even if at times it may be difficult and require a great deal of work, and although the results are not always what we hope for, teaching the faith is something beautiful! It is perhaps the best legacy we can pass on: the faith! To educate in the faith, to make it grow. To help children, young people and adults to know and love the Lord more and more is one of the most exciting aspects of education. It builds up the Church! To “be” catechists! Not to “work” as catechists: this will not do. I work as a catechist because I like to teach... But unless you “are” a catechist, it is no good! You will not be successful ... you will not bear fruit! Catechesis is a vocation: “being a catechist”, this is the vocation, not working as a catechist. So keep this in mind: I didn’t say to do the “work” of catechists, but to “be” catechists, because this is something that embraces our whole life. It means leading people to encounter Christ by our words and our lives, by giving witness. Remember what Benedict XVI said: “The Church does not grow by proselytizing; she grows by attracting others”. And what attracts is our witness. Being a catechist means witnessing to the faith, being consistent in our personal life. This is not easy! We help, we lead others to Jesus with our words and our lives, with our witness. I like to recall what Saint Francis of Assisi used to say to his friars: “Preach the Gospel at all times; if necessary, use words”. Words come... but witness comes first: people should see the Gospel, read the Gospel, in our lives. To “be” a catechist requires love, an ever stronger love for Christ, a love for his holy people. And this love can’t be bought in stores, even in Rome. This love comes from Christ! It is Christ’s gift! And if it comes from Christ, it also starts with Christ, and we too need to start anew with Christ, from the love he gives us. What does this *starting anew* from Christ mean for a catechist? For you, but also for me, since I am a catechist too? What does it mean?

I am going to speak about three things: one, two, three, the way the old-fashioned Jesuits did... one, two, three!

1. First of all, to start anew from Christ means *being close to him*, being close to Jesus. Jesus stresses the importance of this with the disciples at the Last Supper, as he prepared to give us his own greatest gift of love, his sacrifice on the Cross. Jesus uses the image of the vine and the branches and says: Abide in my love, remain attached to me, as the branch is attached to the vine. If we are joined to him, then we are able to bear fruit. This is what it means to be close to Christ. Abide in Jesus! This means remaining attached to him, in him, with him, talking to him. Abide in Jesus!

The first thing for a disciple is to be with the Master, to listen to him and to learn from him. This is always true, and it is true at every moment of our lives. I remember, in the diocese, the other diocese I had first, how I would often see catechists finish their training courses and say: “I have the title of catechist!” This means nothing, you have nothing, you took a little journey. What good will it do you? But one thing is true. Being a catechist is not a title, it is an attitude: abiding with him, and it lasts for a lifetime! It means abiding in the Lord’s presence and letting ourselves be led by him. I ask you: How do you abide in the presence of the Lord? When you visit the Lord, when you look at the tabernacle, what do you do? Without speaking... “But I speak, I talk, I think, I meditate, I listen...” Very good! But do you let yourself be looked at by the Lord?

Letting ourselves be gazed upon by the Lord. He looks at us and this is itself a way of praying. Do you yourselves be gazed upon by the Lord? But how do you do this? You look at the tabernacle and you let yourselves be looked at... it is simple! "It is a bit boring, I fall asleep". Fall asleep then, sleep! He is still looking at you. But know for sure that he is looking at you! This is much more important than having the title of catechist. It is part of "being" a catechist. This warms the heart, igniting the fire of friendship with the Lord, making you feel that he truly sees you, that he is close to you and loves you. In one of my visits here in Rome, at a Mass, a fairly young man came up to me and said: "Father, it is nice to meet you, but I don't believe in anything! I don't have the gift of faith!" He understood that faith is a gift. "I don't have the gift of faith! What do you have to say to me?" "Don't be discouraged. God loves you. Let yourself be gazed upon by him! Nothing else". And this is the same thing I would say to you: Let yourselves be gazed at by the Lord! I understand that for you it is not so easy; especially for those who are married and have children, it is difficult to find a long period of quiet time. Yet, thanks be to God, it is not necessary for everyone to do this in the same way. In the Church, there are a variety of vocations and a variety of spiritualities. What is important is to find the way best suited for you to be with the Lord, and this everyone can do; it is possible for every state of life. Now each one of you could ask: how am I experiencing "being" with Jesus? This is a question I leave you: "How do I experience this remaining with Jesus, abiding in Jesus? Do I find time to remain in his presence, in silence, to be looked upon by him? Do I let his fire warm my heart? If the warmth of God, of his love, of his tenderness is not in our own hearts, then how can we, who are poor sinners, warm the heart of others? Think about it!

2. The second – two! – element is this: *starting anew with Christ* means *imitating him by leaving ourselves behind and going out to encounter others*. This is a beautiful experience, and yet a paradox. Why? Because when we put Christ at the centre of our life, we ourselves don't become the centre! The more that you unite yourself to Christ and he becomes the centre of your life, the more he leads you out of yourself, leads you from making yourself the centre and opens you to others. This is the true dynamism of love, this is the movement of God himself! God is the centre, but he is always self-gift, relationship, love that gives itself away . . . and this is what we will become if we remain united to Christ. He will draw us into this dynamism of love. Where there is true life in Christ, there follows an openness to others, and so a going out from oneself to encounter others in the name of Christ. And this is the job of the catechist: constantly to go forth to others out of love, to bear witness to Jesus and to talk about Jesus, to proclaim Jesus. This is important because the Lord does it: it is the Lord himself who impels us to go forth.

The heart of a catechist always beats with this systolic and diastolic movement: union with Christ – encounter with others. Both of these: I am one with Jesus and I go forth to encounter others. If one of these movements is missing, the heart no longer beats, it can no longer live. The heart of the catechist receives the gift of the kerygma, and in turn offers it to others as a gift. What a little word: "gift"! The catechist is conscious of having received a gift, the gift of faith, and he or she then gives that gift in turn to others. This is something beautiful. We don't keep a percentage for ourselves! Whatever we receive, we give! This is not commerce! It is not a business! It is pure gift: a gift received and a gift given. And the catechist is right there, at the centre of this exchange of gifts. That is the nature itself of the kerygma: it is a gift that generates mission, that compels us to go beyond ourselves. Saint Paul says that "the love of Christ compels us", but this "compels us" can also be translated as "possesses us". And so it is: love attracts us and sends us; it draws us in and gives us to others. This tension marks the beating of the heart of the Christian, especially the heart of the catechist. Let us all ask ourselves: Is this what causes my heart to beat as a catechist, union with Christ and encounter with others? With this movement of "systole and diastole"? Are we being fed by our relationship with the Lord, so that we can bring him to others, and not to keep it for ourselves? I'll tell you, I don't understand how a catechist can remain stationary, without this movement. I don't understand!

3. The third element – three! – is along these lines: *starting anew with Christ* means *not being afraid to go with him to the outskirts*. Here I think of the story of Jonah, a really interesting figure, especially for these times of great change and uncertainty. Jonah is a devout man, with a tranquil and ordered life, which causes him to have a clear-cut way of seeing things and to judge everything and everyone accordingly. He has it all figured out: this is the truth! He is rigid! So, when the Lord called him and told him to go and preach to Nineveh, the great pagan city, Jonah doesn't like it. "Go there? But I have the whole truth here!" He doesn't like it. Nineveh is outside his comfort zone; it is on the outskirts of his world. So he escapes, he sets off for Spain; he runs away and boards a ship that will take him there. Go and re-read the Book of Jonah! It is short, but it is a very instructive parable, especially for those of us in the Church.

What does all this teach us? It teaches us not to be afraid to pass beyond our comfort zone and to follow God, because God is always pushing, pressing forward. But do you know something? God is not afraid! Do you realize this? He isn't afraid. He is always bigger than our little way of seeing things! God is not afraid of the outskirts. If you go to the outskirts, you will find him there. God is always faithful and creative. But, really, is there such a thing as a catechist who is not creative? Creativity is what sustains us as catechists. God is creative, he is not closed, and so he is never inflexible. God is not rigid! He welcomes us; he meets us; he understands us. To be faithful, to be creative; we need to be able to change. To change! And why must I change? So that I can adapt to the situations in which I must proclaim the Gospel. To stay close to God, we need to know how to set out, we must not be afraid to set out. If a catechist gives in to fear, then he or she is a coward. If a catechist has an easy time of it, he or she will end up being a statue in a museum. We have a lot of these! Please, no more statues in the museum! If a catechist is rigid, he or she will dry up and wither. I ask you: does any of you want to be a coward, a statue in a museum, dried up and withered? Is that what you want to be? [the catechists reply: No!] No? Are you sure? Good! I am now going to say something I have already said many times before, but it comes from the heart. Whenever we Christians are enclosed in our groups, our movements, our parishes, in our little worlds, we remain closed, and the same thing happens to us that happens to anything closed: when a room is closed, it begins to get dank. If a person is closed up in that room, he or she becomes ill! Whenever Christians are enclosed in their groups, parishes, movements, they take ill. If a Christian goes to the streets, or to the outskirts, he or she may risk the same thing that can happen to anyone out there: an accident. How often have we seen accidents on the road! But I am telling you: I would prefer a thousand times over a bruised Church than an ill Church! A Church, a catechist, with the courage to risk going out, and not a catechist who is studious, knows everything, but is always closed: such a person is not well. And sometimes he is not well in the head....

But careful! Jesus does not say: Go off and do things on your own. No! That is not what he is saying. Jesus says: Go, for I am with you! This is what is so beautiful for us; it is what guides us. If we go out to bring his Gospel with love, with a true apostolic spirit, with *parrhesia*, he walks with us, he goes ahead of us, he gets there first. As we say in Spanish, *primerea*. By now you know what I mean by this. It is the same thing that the Bible tells us. In the Bible, the Lord says: I am like the flower of the almond. Why? Because that is the first flower to blossom in the spring. He is always the first! This is fundamental for us: God is always ahead of us! When we think about going far away, to an extreme outskirt, we may be a bit afraid, but in fact God is already there. Jesus is waiting for us in the hearts of our brothers and sisters, in their wounded bodies, in their hardships, in their lack of faith. But can I tell you about one of the "outskirts" which breaks my heart? I saw it in my first diocese. It is children who don't even know how to make the sign of the cross. In Buenos Aires there are many children who can't make the sign of the cross. This is one of the "outskirts"! And Jesus is there, waiting for you to help that child to make the sign of the cross. He's always there first.

Dear catechists, I have made my three points. Always start anew from Christ! I thank you for everything that you do, but above all, because you are part of the Church, the pilgrim People of God, and you accompany God's People on that pilgrimage. Let us remain with Christ – abiding in Christ – and let us always try to be one with him. Let us follow him, let us imitate him in his movement of love, in his going forth to meet humanity. Let us go forth and open doors. Let us have the audacity to mark out new paths for proclaiming the Gospel.

May the Lord bless you and the Blessed Mother be always at your side. Thank you!

Mary is our Mother,
Mary always leads us to Jesus!

Let us say a prayers for one another to Our Lady.

[Hail Mary]

[Blessing]

Thank you very much!

children and founding schools for the poor. He formed his companions into a Religious Congregation, and this caused him many hardships. He died at Rouen in 1719.

From the Common of Pastors, p 350*, or of Men Saints: Educators, p 469*.

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THE SECOND READING

Meditation 201

A reading from the meditations of St John Baptist de la Salle

Let the love of God drive you on

Turn over in your mind what the words of the apostle Paul say, that God appointed in the Church, apostles, prophets and teachers; and you will be persuaded that he has placed you in your work as well. The same saint gives you proof of this when he says that there are varieties of service, and varieties of working, but that it is the same Holy Spirit manifested in each of these gifts for the common good, that is, the good of the Church.

You should be in no doubt that the grace which has been given you to teach children, to announce the gospel to them, and instil in them the spirit of religion, is a great gift of God, who has called you to this holy service.

In everything you do as teachers, let the children who are entrusted to your care see you as the servants of God as you go about your work with genuine love and real diligence. What commits you even more to your work is that you are not only ministers of God, but also of Jesus Christ and of the Church.

This is what Saint Paul says, urging that all who proclaim the gospel should be thought of as servants of Christ. So too should all those who write the letter dictated by Christ and written not with ink, but with the Spirit of

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the living God; not on tablets of stone, but on the tablets of human hearts, which are the hearts of the children.

Because of this, let the love of God drive you on. Jesus Christ died for all men, so that even those who live, live not for themselves, but for him who died for them and rose again. So, let your pupils be moved by your hard-working perseverance, and let them feel as though God were exhorting them through you, since you are ambassadors for Christ.

Moreover, you should show the Church your fervent love for her, and give her proof of it by your spirit of hard work. For it is through the Church, which is the body of Christ, that you are working. Show by your zeal that you love those whom God has handed over to you, just as Christ loved the Church.

Make sure that the children are really built into the structure of this house of God, and make such progress as to be able, one day, to stand glorious, without spot or blemish or any such thing, before the judgment seat of Jesus Christ. Work so the riches of God's grace which he has given them may be made manifest to succeeding generations. He extends his help in his teaching, and to you when you teach and educate them, so that they may receive their inheritance in the kingdom of God and of Jesus Christ our Lord.

RESPONSORY

R. The people were bringing little children to Jesus, for him to touch them. The disciples turned them away, but when Jesus saw this, he said to them, * Let the children come to me; do not stop them, for it is to such as these that the kingdom of God belongs (alleluia).

V. Anyone who welcomes a little child like this in my name welcomes me. * Let the children come to me . . .

The concluding prayer as at Morning Prayer.