

UNFOLDING THE FAITH

On Not Using Lectionary-Based Catechesis as the Primary Method to Determine the Order of Teachings in the RCIA Process

This article appears as an appendix in the newly-published RCIA Catechist's Manual, which is a product of the Association for Catechumenal Ministry (ACM). The introduction to this Catechist's Manual contextualizes the subject of this article, answering the question that this article implies but does not directly address: If you don't use a Lectionary-based method to determine the order of teachings in the RCIA process, then what method do you use? This question was also treated in two previous issues of The Sower (see July-September and October-December 2004).

Liturgical Catechesis

The *General Directory for Catechesis* defines liturgical catechesis as preparing "for the sacraments by promoting a deeper understanding and experience of the liturgy. This explains the contents of the prayers, the meaning of the signs and gestures, educates to active participation, contemplation and silence" (GDC 71; see CT 23; GDC 117). In the mind of the Church, the Christian initiation process is intended to be fundamentally liturgical, and RCIA catechesis is to be wholly ordered to the conversion of the hearts and minds of participants (GDC 80, 88; CCC 1248). Liturgical catechesis, and more fully the liturgy itself, is an indispensable means of conversion directed to an intimate union with Christ and his Church:

Thus considered, the liturgy appears as the principal means of the Church for causing her view of the world to penetrate vitally into the minds of the faithful, even if, in its complexus, it is a means of communication of doctrine less direct, less conceptually precise, and less intellectual than the other means which the Magisterium habitually uses. It is the principal means in the sense that it is more vitally effective,

more continual, more intuitive, and penetrating, more popular and universal (Cyprian Vagaggini, O.S.B., *Theological Dimensions of the Liturgy*, 4th Edition, The Liturgical Press, 1976, p. 518).

To have the full power of the liturgy bear upon the lives of RCIA participants, it is the task of liturgical catechesis to suitably prepare them: "sacramental life is impoverished and very soon turns into hollow ritualism if it is not based on serious knowledge of the meaning of the sacraments" (CT 23). The Second Vatican Council stressed the connection between the liturgical life and the teaching necessary to foster it:

In the restoration and promotion of the sacred liturgy, this full and active participation by all the people is the aim to be considered before all else; for it is the primary and indispensable source from which the faithful are to derive the true Christian spirit; and therefore pastors of souls must zealously strive to achieve it, by means of the necessary instruction, in all their pastoral work (SC 14).

The concepts of liturgical formation and liturgical catechesis, as presented in Sections Two and Five of the *RCIA Catechist's Manual* (2005, Association for

Catechumenal Ministry), emphasize their fundamental role in fostering this “full and active participation” in the liturgy. This focus does not, however, imply a Lectionary-based model of catechesis as the means to determine the *order of teachings* for the RCIA process.

The Lectionary

The premise of the Lectionary is to make God’s love audible. As the primary author of Scripture, God anticipated the need of every generation to hear his voice as both immanent and transcendent — in the personal moment of grace and in continuity with prior and future believers. As the Incarnate God, Jesus is both immanent and transcendent, and it is the Church’s intention that the liturgical use of Scripture reflect this reality: “When the Sacred Scriptures are read in the Church, God himself speaks to his people, and Christ, present in his own word, proclaims the Gospel” (GIRM 29). To deepen this connection between Jesus and Scripture, the Church places the various canonical writings into the pattern of Jesus’ own life, following the Gospel accounts:

In the course of the year, [the Church] unfolds the whole mystery of Christ from the Incarnation and nativity to the Ascension, to Pentecost and the expectation of the blessed hope of the coming of the Lord (SC 102).

In this manner, the transcendent quality of Scripture’s divine authorship is ordered to a more immanent goal — that of bringing Christ forth from the Gospel pages to each listener through a more profound encounter with Scripture as a whole. The homily then rightly seeks to further solidify this encounter. As the voice of the Holy Spirit, the Lectionary informs the worship of the faithful by connecting them to their Jewish and Christian heritage and their eschatological inheritance. As with all things in the Mass, the connection between things old and things new is the living Person of Christ: “In the Liturgy of the Word the Holy Spirit ‘recalls’ to the assembly all that Christ has done for us” (CCC 1103). This *narratio* is dependent upon an implied relationship between the two Testaments. The Lectionary’s window on the Person of Christ brings a clarity that is often elusive when seen only through the dark glass of Old Testament prophecy. Through the seemingly simple act of pairing and relating verses from different times and sources in a certain order and structure, the Church works to form its people into the image of the Word Incarnate. The Lectionary is, in this way, the written and proclaimed version of the fifth-century Canon of St. Vincent of Lerins: that is to be held as true which has been taught everywhere in the Church, held by all in the Church, from the very beginning of the Church in the teaching of Jesus’ apostles.

Within this context, the *Lectionary for Mass*, the key

ecclesial document expounding upon the rationale behind the Lectionary’s design, states:

The present Order of Readings for Mass, then, is an arrangement of biblical readings that provides the faithful with a knowledge of the whole of God’s Word, in a pattern suited to the purpose. Throughout the liturgical year, but above all during the seasons of Easter, Lent, and Advent, the choice and sequence of readings are aimed at giving Christ’s faithful an ever-deepening perception of the faith they profess and of the history of salvation.¹ Accordingly, the Order of Readings corresponds to the requirements and interests of the Christian people. The celebration of the Liturgy is not in itself simply a form of catechesis, but it does contain an element of teaching. The Lectionary of the Roman Missal brings this out² and therefore deserves to be regarded as a pedagogical resource aiding catechesis (LFM 60-61).

While declaring that the Lectionary aims to provide “an ever-deepening perception of the faith they profess and of the history of salvation,” this magisterial document concludes the point by asserting the Lectionary’s role as a “pedagogical resource aiding catechesis.” This stops short of recommending the order of Sunday readings as the *primary* principle upon which to accomplish systematic and organic catechesis. Why would this be so? Put another way, if systematic and organic aspects of catechesis are important, and the Lectionary offers a good model of organizing the faith to accomplish these ends, then why does not the Church suggest this very thing? To narrow the focus onto RCIA, the following paragraphs suggest three reasons that magisterial documents do not put forward the Sunday Lectionary as an appropriate curriculum for all periods of the catechumenal process.

Reason One: Lectionary-based catechesis is redundant with other expositions of the Sunday readings

The Lectionary plays a central role in what many parishes call “Breaking Open the Word.” Breaking Open the Word is an element of the RCIA process separate from the catechetical session (see RCIA 81-84). It has an important role that is primarily liturgical instead of didactic, flowing from the proclamation at the Sunday Mass, following the dismissal at the end of the Liturgy of the Word. This is, of course, Lectionary-based, but without a direct systematic intent, which is by design here. It is separate from the kind of structured formation normally found in catechetical sessions. Breaking Open the Word certainly provides a reasonable

opportunity to “reflect more deeply” on the content of the Sunday Lectionary (RCIA 67).

This occasion to relate to the Lectionary readings is in addition to what the homilist himself has to offer, which is the privileged locus of exposition of the meaning and application of the Word proclaimed. Although it is not possible to dwell too much on any portion of Sacred Scripture, for participants at the weekly RCIA catechetical session to dwell for a *third* time on these same Sunday readings (the homily and Breaking Open the Word being the first two) subordinates the importance of systematic methodology and the need for flexibility in the order of teachings. Nor is this idea supported by a careful reading of paragraphs 81-87 of the RCIA ritual book, which encourages three forms of a celebration of the Word, only one of which (RCIA 83) is to be explicitly based on the Sunday readings.

Reason Two: Lectionary-based catechesis cannot be assumed in references to liturgical catechesis

RCIA 75.1 calls for a catechesis that is “accommodated to the liturgical year, and solidly supported by celebrations of the word.” This certainly calls for liturgical catechesis of the kind discussed above, but cannot be made synonymous with Lectionary-based catechesis, which does not allow for the “thoroughly comprehensive catechesis” (RCIA Appendix III, National Statutes for the Catechumenate 7) or the “orderly and systematic initiation”³ (GDC 66) envisioned by the Church. At no point in discussing the need for catechesis to be hierarchical, systematic, organic, coherent, and comprehensive does the GDC or the RCIA ritual book go on to declare that the Sunday Lectionary readings meet these criteria for the purpose of exposition of the Deposit of Faith.

The idea that the terms *liturgical catechesis* and *Lectionary-based catechesis* (outside of the context of the homily) are interchangeable is not found in the RCIA ritual book or the catechetical documents in use since the Second Vatican Council’s directive to revise the Lectionary (see SC 35, 51). This is significant in light of the above quotation from the *Lectionary for Mass*. This document remarks that the Lectionary is an “arrangement of biblical readings that provides the faithful with a knowledge of the whole of God’s Word, in a pattern suited to the purpose” (LFM 60). If this “pattern” were to mean that the Lectionary provides an adequate systematic catechesis (see GDC 66), then why does no post-conciliar catechetical document make that connection? Only in the context of encouraging a stronger catechetical element in inculturation for “so great a part of the people of God”

as is accessible on Sundays does the GDC specifically mention that the Lectionary should be “valued afresh” (GDC 207). Otherwise, the Lectionary is not mentioned again in any part of the GDC, while other principles for determining how to accomplish systematic and organic catechesis are discussed in detail (and summarized in Sections Five and Six of ACM’s *Catechist’s Manual*). But even in paragraph 207 of the GDC, the *Lectionary* and the *liturgical year* are noted separately, and are not simply treated as synonymous. Many practitioners of Lectionary-based catechesis in RCIA assume that these terms are synonymous, and thus may conclude that every magisterial reference to the relationship between catechesis and the liturgical year (see GDC 30, 135, 176; ACCC 61; RCIA 16, 75) is a direct indication that the Lectionary readings should be the source for the doctrinal content of RCIA catechetical sessions. However, the complete absence of direct magisterial recommendation of Lectionary-based catechesis indicates that this conclusion is incorrect.

Reason Three: Lectionary-based catechesis does not suit the demands of systematic catechesis

Regarding the Catechumenate period specifically, the RCIA ritual book stipulates that readings for celebrations of the Word should be “chosen for their relevance to the formation of the catechumens” (RCIA 87). This statement makes little sense if the ritual book were assuming the use of the Sunday Lectionary readings in catechetical sessions for this long period.

In the United States, paragraph 6 of the RCIA ritual book’s Appendix III, National Statutes for the Catechumenate, directs that the Catechumenate period and the period of Purification and Enlightenment should together “extend for at least one year of formation.” This is sometimes interpreted as indicating the use of Lectionary-based catechesis during this entire time, but is instead simply ensuring the opportunity for catechumens and candidates to be exposed to a full liturgical cycle, which can certainly occur without the order of the content of the *catechetical* sessions during that year being based upon the Lectionary. The only stated rationale for this extended timeframe is “for the conversion and faith of the catechumens to become strong” (RCIA 76). This does not by any means point to a call for a year of Lectionary-based catechesis as the reason behind the recommended duration, especially in light of paragraph 87 noted above.

If the Lectionary readings were assumed in the catechetical documents to be suitably systematic, then much in these same documents that discusses *flexibility* in forming a systematic and organic presentation of

the faith would be contradicted (see CT 31; GDC 118; ACCC 30, 56; DCG 76). Determining the order of teachings by the Sunday Lectionary can produce a sense of being “locked in” to teaching certain aspects of the faith independent of all other pastoral circumstances. A catechist might teach on the Trinity using the compelling readings for the Solemnity of the Holy Trinity (which occurs in the summertime) at another more appropriate time. Three more detailed examples are given below, but the same could be said for any set of Lectionary readings that may suit the proclamation of the basic Gospel or the gradual unfolding of the Deposit of Faith by being used at another time. Paragraph 87 of the ritual text is, however, suggesting more than shifting around sets of Lectionary readings for the purpose of catechetical sessions; it simply gives license to select any relevant combination of “one or more” readings from Sacred Scripture.

✠ *The Eucharist:* A catechist may have reason to want to use the powerful passages in the sixth chapter of John’s Gospel on the Real Presence of Jesus in the Eucharist at some other time than the short section used for the Solemnity of the Body and Blood of Christ (Corpus Christi) in Year A, or the five-week late-summer stretch of Ordinary Time in Year B. Year C does not use this catechetically critical chapter at any point in the cycle. If a catechist wants to teach on the Eucharist without using John 6, the obvious choices would be the institution narratives of the Last Supper in the synoptic Gospels, or perhaps Paul’s recounting of those words in 1 Cor 11:23-26. Using Lectionary-based catechesis, these readings are available only on Palm Sunday (Years A, B, C), Holy Thursday (Years A, B, C) or Corpus Christi (Years B, C). Since two of these feasts occur immediately prior to the Easter Vigil, and the third in the early summertime, this limited availability can seem somewhat hobbling to catechists desiring to bring up the “source and summit of the Christian life” (LG 11) at times that might be more suited to a group of inquirers or those in other stages of the process.

✠ *The Moral Life:* To teach the Ten Commandments a catechist would normally favor one of the two lists in the Old Testament (Ex 20:1-17 or Dt 5:6-21), or the portion of the Sermon on the Mount that interprets the Commandments (Mt 5:17-43). The Lectionary uses only the first part (not the full Decalogue) of the passage in Deuteronomy in Year B alone, on the ninth Sunday of Ordinary Time, which is usually shortly after Pentecost. Otherwise, the Ten Commandments are not read in the Sunday Lectionary at all. The

passage from Matthew’s Gospel is read in Year A only, usually just before Lent. If a catechist instead desires to use the Beatitudes to address the moral life, there are two New Testament lists to choose from (Mt 5:1-12 or Lk 6:17-23). In the Lectionary, however, the classic list in Matthew’s Gospel is used only in Year A, just after Christmas, and the shorter version in Luke’s Gospel only in Year C, two weeks later in Ordinary Time.

✠ *Social Teachings:* There are numerous Scripture passages that are relevant to this area of the Church’s teaching. One of the best passages is the discourse in which Jesus declares that, “as you did it to one of the least of these, my brethren, you did it to me” (Mt 25:31-46). This essential text occurs in the Sunday Lectionary only on the Solemnity of Christ the King in Year A, where the liturgical theme is Christ’s kingship, not the exposition of social doctrine. A catechist would have nothing as fully suitable in Years B and C.

The point of these examples is not to suggest any deficiencies in the Lectionary *per se*, but to point out its inadequacy as the primary source of deciding *what to teach when*, especially since the catechumenal process in the United States rarely extends through the full three-year cycle of the Sunday Lectionary in any parish. Obviously, a catechist could choose to use any of the above Scripture passages to elaborate upon the pre-set Lectionary texts. The problem here is not a restricted sense of the *choice* of readings, but an unsystematic *sequence* from week to week that makes Lectionary-based catechesis “topical.”

Using the Sunday Lectionary as an organizing principle creates in Lectionary-based catechesis a sense of “jumping around” that seriously impairs the systematic unfolding of the faith. A catechist may be talking about one doctrine one Sunday and then a totally different aspect of the faith the next Sunday. Depending on when participants enter the RCIA process, using the Lectionary to order the teachings could potentially leave them trying to make sense, for example, of the call to self-denial and the embrace of the cross without first understanding themselves as being created in God’s image or having discussed the place of evil and death in God’s redemptive plan. Presenting truths of the faith in an unsystematic manner can create the false impression that the doctrines of the Church are simply a collection of facts from which the catechist pulls a new topic each week, leaving the catechumens and candidates struggling to grasp the coherence of the faith. This misuse of the Lectionary relative to the catechumenal process makes demonstrating tight cohesion among

doctrines (the organic unity) stilted or forced, if it can even be attempted at all within such a context. Very frequently, the result is that RCIA participants do not end up getting a firm grasp on the faith, leaving them vulnerable to a culture quick to demand compromise on Catholicism's "hard sayings" and hobbled by a profound inability to think with the mind of the Church, that is, the mind of Christ.

Although the Lectionary is not specifically designed to provide a systematic, gradual unfolding of the faith for *every part* of the RCIA process (certainly not during the Precatechumenate and Catechumenate periods), Lectionary-based catechesis, using the Year A readings, is specifically called for as a foundation for *systematic* catechesis during the period of Mystagogy. In this case, the Lectionary readings have specifically been chosen to provide a focused exploration of the sacramental life during this time (see RCIA 247; this is also the case for the readings relating to the Penitential Rite and the Year A readings relating to the three Scrutinies during Lent, where a clear theme of self-searching and repentance exists specifically with the intent of the catechumenal process for this period in mind; see RCIA 146, 462). The ritual book's call for Lectionary-based catechesis at these times helps clarify that the Church's official RCIA guidelines are not operating by *implicitly* calling for general application of Lectionary-based catechesis, but instead *explicitly* calling for this method only when appropriate. Those are the only occasions when there is a stated agreement between the Lectionary and systematic methodology.

In summary, the Lectionary is an important resource and has catechetical aspects in its own right, but is not the determinative factor in devising a curriculum, outside of those areas noted above. The Lectionary is designed to produce an "ever-deepening perception of the faith" (LFM 60) — the traditional understanding of *mystagogical* catechesis. *Initiatory* catechesis, however, requires not only a deepening, but also a gradual and incremental unfolding of the faith (see GDC 85, 88-89) which the Lectionary is not designed to accomplish.

The overall theme of the Lectionary is to walk through the life of Christ and the major events prefiguring him and flowing from his time on earth. This theme is not, however, a *systematic* principle when the readings are used in a catechetical session *outside* the context of the rest of the liturgy of the Mass. This is one reason why the Bible itself, specifically the life of Christ recorded in the four Gospels, does not stand alone in the Tradition or function as a catechism. Since early times, the creedal formulas and successively more developed catechisms sought to order the teaching of the apostles in a systematic way, while maintaining a profound Christocentric focus:

In the message of salvation there is a certain hierarchy of truths, which the Church has always recognized when it composed creeds or summaries of the truths of faith⁴. ... On all levels catechesis should take account of this hierarchy of the truths of faith (DCG 43).

The Lectionary does not follow the hierarchy of truths from Sunday to Sunday. In fact, the Lectionary itself can only be understood properly *in terms of* the hierarchy of truths (see GDC 114; DCG 47-48). The universal Church's choice of Sunday readings was not intended, and should not be made to serve, a regional or local catechism's role, nor supplant the parish RCIA leader's effort to "deduce the order" which is "most appropriate to the circumstances" (GDC 118).

A Final Note

In an address titled "The New Catechism: An Overview", delivered on February 7, 1994 at a symposium on the new Catechism of the Catholic Church by the then-Archbishop of San Francisco William J. Levada, and now the Cardinal Prefect of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, the issue of Lectionary-based catechesis was raised in the context of discussing its inability to accomplish a catechesis that is "both systematic and comprehensive". This address, and the relevant subsection titled "Theological Import", can be found on the website of the USCCB <http://www.usccb.org/catechism/resource/lev94art.htm#import>.

(Endnotes)

¹ Cf. Pope Paul VI, Apostolic Constitution, *Missale Romanum: in Missale Romanum ex Decreto Sacrosancti Oecumenici Concilii Vaticani II instauratum auctoritate Pauli VI promulgatum* (Typis Polyglottis Vaticanis 1975), p. 15, quoted in *Missale Romanum ex Decreto Sacrosancti Oecumenici Concilii Vaticani II instauratum auctoritate Pauli VI promulgatum, Ordo lectionum Missae*, editio typica altera (Typis Polyglottis Vaticanis, 1981), p. XXXI.

² Cf. Second Vatican Council, Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy, *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, nn. 9 and 33; Sacred Congregation of Rites, Instruction, *Inter Oecumenici*, 26 September 1964, n. 7: AAS 56 (1964) 878; John Paul II, Apostolic Exhortation, *Catechesi Trendendae*, 16 October 1979, n. 23: AAS 71 (1979) 1296-1297.

³ CT 22. Cf. CT 21b, 18d.

⁴ Cf. UR 11.

Abbreviations for Magisterial Documents Used in the Article

- ACCC* *Adult Catechesis in the Christian Community*, International Council for Catechesis, Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1990.
- CCC* *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1994, second edition, 1997.
- CT* *Catechesi Tradendae*, On Catechesis in Our Time, John Paul II, Apostolic Exhortation, 1979.
- DCG* *General Catechetical Directory*, Sacred Congregation for the Clergy, 1971.
- GDC* *General Directory for Catechesis*, Sacred Congregation for the Clergy, 1997.
- GIRM* *General Instruction of the Roman Missal*, Sacred Congregation for Divine Worship and the Discipline of the Sacraments, 2003.
- LFM* *Lectionary for Mass*, Sacred Congregation for Divine Worship and the Discipline of the Sacraments, 1997.
- RCIA* *Ordo Initiationis Christianae Adultorum*, Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults, Editio Typica, Typis Polyglottis Vaticanis, 1972.
- SC* *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy, Second Vatican Council, 1963.
- UR* *Unitatis Redintegratio*, Decree on Ecumenism, Second Vatican Council, 1964.

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