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## **Catechesis in the Church's Dialogue with the World**

### *Kateheza pri dialogu Cerkve s svetom*

*Abstract:* The Church is fulfilling her salvific mission in the world entrusted to her by Christ. She is sent to proclaim the Gospel of Jesus Christ, man's only Saviour. Through her presence in the world, the Church enters into dialogue with it. The Second Vatican Council stressed the need for the Church's dialogical presence in the world. The main issue of this article is the search for an answer to whether catechesis itself has a dialogical structure and whether it is a place of dialogue between the Church and the world. The study first shows the dialogue of salvation as a relationship between God and man. Then it presents the Church's relationship with the world, which is a relationship of dialogue. Since catechesis is at the service of God's dialogue of salvation and is an ecclesial ministry, it is therefore also dialogical and can, in a sense, be a place for the Church's dialogue with the world. There is, however, a particular specificity of this dialogue, which is based on the spirituality of dialogue. The vision of catechesis is contained in the new Vatican Directory for Catechesis, which describes it as a 'laboratory for dialogue'.

*Keywords:* Church, world, catechesis, dialogue, a spirituality of dialogue

*Povzetek:* Cerkev v svetu uresničuje svoje odrešensko poslanstvo, ki ji ga je zaupal Kristus. Poslana je oznanjevati evangelij Jezusa Kristusa, edinega človekovega odrešenika. Prek svoje navzočnosti v svetu Cerkev z njim stopa v dialog. Drugi vatikanski koncil je poudaril potrebo dialoške navzočnosti Cerkve v svetu. Glavna tema našega članka je iskanje odgovora, ali ima kateheza sama po sebi dialoško strukturo in ali je prostor dialoga med Cerkvijo in svetom. Raziskava najprej pokaže na dialog odrešenja kot odnos med Bogom in človekom. Nato predstavi odnos Cerkve do sveta, ki je odnos dialoga. Ker je kateheza v službi božjega odrešenskega dialoga in ker je del cerkvenega poslanstva, je obenem dialoška in je lahko nekako prostor dialoga Cerkve s svetom. Ta dialog je resda specifičen, saj temelji na duhovnosti dialoga. Pogled na katehezo je vsebovan v novem vatikanskem Katehetskem direktoriju, ki jo opredeljuje kot 'laboratorij dialoga'.

*Ključne besede:* Cerkev, svet, kateheza, dialog, duhovnost dialoga

## 1. Introduction

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Jesus established the Church in order to proclaim the Gospel to the world. Those who received it were incorporated into the community through the sacraments of Christian initiation. Living in the Church community, they participated in catechesis to deepen and develop their faith. One of the traditional definitions of catechesis says that it is »education of children, young people and adults in the faith, which includes especially the teaching of Christian doctrine imparted, generally speaking, organically and systematically, to initiate the hearers into the fullness of Christian life« (CT 18). The Church conducts catechesis in a specific cultural, social and religious context (Vodičar and Stala 2019, 1090–1091). Therefore, its understanding, forms and methods are adapted to these diverse contexts. The Directory for Catechesis (DC), published in 2000 by the Pontifical Council for Promoting the New Evangelization, presents catechesis as a dialogical event. This does not contradict the current understanding of catechesis. However, more than it has been the case in the Church's teaching so far, it emphasises the importance of dialogue in catechesis, no longer as one of the possibilities of conducting it, but as a principle that determines its identity. This article will first formulate two prerequisites that condition dialogue in Catechesis: Catechesis is at the service of God's dialogue of salvation and that the Church's presence in the world is dialogical. Then the specificity of the catechetical dialogue will be outlined and the meaning of the spirituality of dialogue will be presented. This spirituality determines the importance of catechesis in the Church's dialogue with the world.

## 2. God's Dialogue of Salvation

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The necessity of dialogue in catechesis arises first of all from the dialogical relationship between God and man. In the Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation, the Second Vatican Council states: »It pleased God, in His goodness and wisdom, to reveal himself and to make known the mystery of his will /... /. Through this revelation, the invisible God, out of the abundance of His love, speaks to men as friends.« (DV 2) Revelation is, therefore, an encounter and dialogue between God and man.

Faith, being a response to God's revelation, is also dialogical. »Faith is a gift of God and a supernatural virtue that can be born in the depths of the soul as a fruit of grace and a free response to the call of the Holy Spirit, who moves the heart to conversion and directs it to God /... /« (DC 19) Faith is ultimately expressed in the dialogue of love to which God enables. »Jesus, in giving himself totally faithfully to the fulfilment of the Father's will, reorients humanity back to God. Christ restores humanity to the glory of the Father since in him and through him the human being receives God's gift that makes him able to respond to divine love with the loving surrender of his own existence.« (Brugarolas 2020, 561)

This unique relationship between God and man is the basis of the pastoral principle known as the dialogue of salvation. God plays the leading role in this

dialogue because He saves and sanctifies (Polak 2012, 241–245). Catechetical dialogue serves only to help deepen or discover the dialogical redemptive relationship between man and God. Its basis is God, who imparts Himself unconditionally and a man who, in his freedom, can take up or reject God's initiative (Stegu 2020, 429–430).

The dialogue of salvation is a specific type of conversation that God the Father initiated and established with man through Jesus Christ in the Holy Spirit (ES 71). Including the principle of the dialogue of salvation in catechesis is primarily expressed in an appropriate pastoral attitude (Dajczak 2001, 40–41). It is manifested by the availability of a catechist, creating appropriate opportunities for interpersonal communication, shaping an atmosphere of trust, and the ability to listen correctly, consisting in reaching the other person without fear and in freedom and offering complete disposal. As Pope Francis teaches: »Only through such respectful and compassionate listening can we enter on the paths of true growth and awaken a yearning for the Christian ideal: the desire to respond fully to God's love and to bring to fruition what He has sown in our lives.« (EG 171) Equally important is patience and gradualness, and the awareness that the fruits of a pastoral encounter are ultimately God's grace. In this context, Francis speaks of an appropriate ,openness of heart' which, in communication with another man, enables closeness »without which genuine spiritual encounter cannot occur« (EG 171). The family plays an essential role in shaping such an attitude of dialogue (Slatinek 2017, 328–330).

In Jesus' attitude, we discover that the thought of forcing anyone to enter into the dialogue of salvation was something utterly alien to Him. He directed an ,appeal' toward man which, »true, imposed a serious obligation on those toward whom it was directed, but it left them free to respond to it or to reject it« (ES 75). Every person has their own story of life with God, and their experience of God is a deeply personal event into which a catechist can introduce man. A catechist can help experience this event but eventually must withdraw to let God speak and grow in this event. This kind of a catechetical (pastoral) dialogue is defined by Francis as a certain ,art of accompaniment', into which the Church will have to initiate priests, religious and laity, and »which teaches us to remove our sandals before the sacred other« (Exod 3:5) (EG 169). The above principle is fundamental in the context of contemporary cultural and social trends that characterise deep individualistic tendencies: »The culture of individualism is reflected in the characteristic of the dominant trends of contemporary Western society such as consumerism, popular culture: mass society goes hand in hand with individualism.« (Bahovec 2015, 339)

Therefore, catechesis is a dialogical event because it is at the service of the dialogue of salvation God conducts with man. The Directory for Catechesis formulates this thesis as follows: »catechesis is inspired by the pedagogy of God already described here. As a result, it becomes a pedagogical activity at the service of *the dialogue of salvation* between God and man.« (DC 165)

### 3. Dialogical Presence of the Church in the World

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Pope Paul VI, in his encyclical *Ecclesiam suam*, indicated a great variety of ways in which relationships between the Church and the world could be effective.

He stated:

»The Church could perhaps justifiably reduce such contacts to a minimum, on the plea that it wishes to isolate itself from secular society. It might content itself with conducting an inquiry into the evils current in secular society, condemning them publicly, and fighting a crusade against them. On the other hand, it might approach secular society with a view to exercising a preponderant influence over it and subjecting it to a theocratic power. But it seems to us that the sort of relationship for the Church to establish with the world should be more in the nature of a dialogue, though theoretically other methods are not excluded.« (ES 78)

Pope Paul VI's statement expresses the message of dialogue sent to the world by the Second Vatican Council (Bahovec 2015, 341). The new Directory for Catechesis, apparently without any doubt or caution, indicates dialogue to fulfil the evangelising mission of the Church. It says: »In the process of evangelisation, the Church /.../ approaches everyone in the attitude of solidarity, sharing and dialogue, thus *bearing witness* to a new way of life.« (DC 31)

God's dialogue of salvation determines the nature of the Church's presence in the world. We read in the Directory for Catechesis: »In the school of the miraculous *dialogue of salvation*, which is a revelation, the Church understands herself better and better as the one called to dialogue with people of her time. The Church should enter into dialogue with the society in which she lives. Thus, the Church takes the form of the word, message and dialogue.« (DC 53) The Church's dialogical relationship with the world is rooted in the Mystery of the Incarnation in which »Jesus enters into an inner dialogue with man, and it is from this dialogue that it assumes its form, taking on its qualities« (DC 53).

The above statement applies to the relationship between the Church and the world. Does it, however, also apply to catechesis? There is no doubt about it. Catechetical activity is one of the forms of the Church's presence globally, its dialogical presence. The Directory for Catechesis puts it in this way: »At the time of new evangelisation, the Church wishes catechesis to emphasise this *dialogical style*, in order to show the face of the Son who, as in the case of the Samaritan woman at the well, stops to talk to each person and gently lead him to discover the living water (Jn 4:5-42) .« (DC 54)

### 4. The Specificity of a Catechetical Dialogue

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Catechesis is, therefore, a space for dialogue. It is true that »the very etymology of the term catechesis indicates the necessity to enter into dialogue between

a catechist and the catechised. This conversation is both an attempt to discover the truth of salvation in front of the catechised, and also serves a catechist to penetrate better the mysteries of faith« (Tomasik 2009, 62), and »the instruction, which is catechesis, is not only one-sided as a lecture but is also realised through dialogue, asking questions and providing answers« (John Paul II 1987, 13–14). Hence, catechesis cannot impose the truth but should refer to freedom (DC 59).

However, it is in catechesis that the truth is preached. The purpose of the proclamation of the truth is a conversion from sin and leading to communion with Christ and the Church. For this reason, dialogue can never replace or weaken the preaching of the truth. Genuine dialogue serves the purpose of transmitting this truth and realising it through the measures left by Christ to the Church in pastoral care (Przybyłowski 2009, 48). Dialogue in catechesis is supposed to convey the truth. However, it also does not exclude seeking it in dialogue because »the truth reveals itself as an interpersonal event among people who open up to each other, to the world, to God. This openness triggers the ability to perceive oneself, others and culture from a different perspective and to evaluate - oneself, others, and culture - according to various criteria« (Kawecki 2009, 269).

Truth and dialogue are not mutually exclusive, although dialogical communication does not always lead to the ultimate discovery of the truth. Becoming sensitive to the truth, the sincere desire to discover the truth, the will to adhere to it, and the willingness to serve it are great lessons in preparing for dialogue. The very pursuit of the truth is, in a sense, a way of discovering it. Therefore, it is essential to shape an openness and arouse the desire to get to know the truth in conducting a catechetical dialogue. A unique role in this respect is to be played by the school, a ‚sacred space‘ of seeking answers to the meaning of life and its secrets (Polak 2015, 414–416).

However, catechesis cannot be understood solely as a dialogue that expresses an attitude of constant search. We read in the adhortation *Catechesi tradendae*: »Certain contemporary philosophical schools, which seem to be exercising a strong influence on some theological currents and, through them, on pastoral practice, like to emphasise that the fundamental human attitude is that of seeking the infinite, seeking that never attains its object. In theology, this view of things will state very categorically that faith is not a certainty but questioning, not clarity but a leap in the dark.« (CT 60)

Taking into account the above relationships between dialogue and catechesis, it can be stated that both school teaching of religion and catechesis constitute an appropriate place of education for the attitude of dialogue because

»/... / teaching religion and catechesis are a very important and essential place of education for this attitude. First, they provide a proper environment for shaping the awareness of one's own identity. They also provide important information in the range of knowledge about cultural and religious diversity, about the need for interreligious and interfaith dialogue. Increasingly frequent contacts with followers of other religions or

denominations are becoming an opportunity to acquire the skills of dialogue and tolerance. Education for dialogue and tolerance is, after all, an essential element of the education of young people carried out at school, especially during religion lessons or catechesis.« (Bagrowicz 2006, 247)

School and parish catechesis are, therefore, a kind of ‚laboratory of dialogue‘. We read in the Directory for Catechesis:

»Church catechesis is an authentic ‚laboratory‘ of dialogue because, in the depths of each person, it encounters vitality and complexity, desires and searches, limitations and sometimes errors of societies and cultures of the contemporary world. Therefore, catechesis should also engage in a pastoral dialogue without relativisms, a dialogue that does not negotiate its Christian identity but wishes to reach the heart of another person, other people who are different from us and sow the seeds of the Gospel there.« (DC 54)

A particular space of this ‚laboratory of dialogue‘ can be constituted by teaching religion at school. Since both student believers, students who are lukewarm in their faith and student non-believers usually participate, it opens up broad perspectives for dialogue in religion lessons. A religious lesson reflects the diversity of personal, cultural and religious attitudes representative of society. Thus, it becomes a meeting place, an opportunity to initiate and deepen a multidimensional dialogue that does not contradict the necessity to achieve the primary goal of catechesis, which is to inspire confidence in faith. Dialogue during religion lessons at school is possible and necessary, although it is not its primary goal (Tomasik 2009, 66).

## 5. Catechetical Spirituality of Dialogue

In a dialogue in catechesis, the spirituality (culture) of dialogue should be given primacy over the methods or techniques of dialogue. Knowing or even mastering the methods and techniques of dialogue will not ensure the formation of an attitude of dialogue as this requires an authentic spirituality, mentality, or culture of dialogue, because »a culture of genuine dialogue is a way that enables genuine encounters between people and cultures, encourages creativity and thus empowers people« (Bahovec 2020, 890). What is also valid with dialogue is the principle formulated by John Paul II in the Apostolic letter *Novo millennio ineunte* in the context of promoting the communion character of church communities. Concerning the culture of dialogue, it can be described as follows: Before we start planning specific educational undertakings, a new culture or a spirituality of dialogue should be promoted, emphasising its importance as an educational principle wherever a person and a Christian are formed, where altar ministers, priests and consecrated persons are trained, wherever families and communities are being

built up. Let us have no illusions: without such a culture (spirituality) of dialogue, new educational programmes or various methods and means of dialogue will not achieve much. Dialogue with their help will serve a minimal purpose (NMI 43).

The necessary condition for applying the method of dialogue is to adopt the attitude of dialogue. It is expressed in readiness to open up to understanding, closeness, and cooperation concerning the environment and each person, regardless of age, origin, nationality, race, or religion (Dziekoński 2009, 75). The catechetical task is to shape the spirituality or culture of dialogue. It is a challenge closely related to the attitude of a catechist. Only a catechist who shapes the culture or spirituality of dialogue in him/herself and introduces its principles into the catechetical process and meeting can shape the dialogue in the catechised. Authentic dialogue is the principle of the meeting:

»An authentic contact requires true dialogue! The dialogue can occur when people recognise our interconnectivity (personal principle) and the merits of the cultural communities. So, we can say that the quest for dialogue is at the same time a striving for a real personal principle and personalisation (not individualisation) and developing true mutual *Gemeinschaftlike* interpersonal relationships, not merely a contractual society, but a communal spirituality and a culture of fraternity.« (Bahovec 2015, 344)

Shaping the culture of dialogue is a slow process and requires a great deal of educational work because it is not about acquiring competencies or skills, but about changing mentality:

»One cannot change the mentality and deeply entrenched attitudes by some ordinance or administrative injunction. This requires fundamental organic work which, through education not only in the family and school but also through the proper atmosphere of social life, shapes appropriate attitudes and organises the hierarchy of values.« (Bagrowicz 2006, 231)

Besides the proper attitude, catechesis educates people to adopt dialogue by shaping appropriate intellectual and moral competencies. Appropriate intellectual and moral dispositions are the basis of the culture of dialogue. The following dispositions are critical here: honesty, sincerity, truthfulness, patience, prudence, reliability and gentleness. They require self-abnegation, life asceticism and work on oneself, values that do not always characterise a young person's attitude. Human limitations also hamper dialogue not only in moral but also in intellectual and emotional spheres. It is mainly about dogmatism, relativism and shyness, suspicion, and distrust. These limitations constitute a severe obstacle in dialogue (Polak 2015, 418–419).

The proper educational concept that enables dialogue in catechesis is the pedagogy of dialogue. It wants to open up space for a man to shape a proper worldview and life in a pluralist society. Indeed, catechesis, especially for adults, »should support the formation of the distinguishing features of a Christian who is mature

in faith, a disciple of the Lord Jesus, in the bosom of a Christian community capable of going outward, that is, incorporated into the social and cultural reality in order to exercise faith and build the kingdom of God« (DC 261).

## 6. Conclusion

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Thanks to the dialogue conducted in it, catechesis wants to educate people for tolerance without imposing any worldview on others. It also wants to lead to actions to create a fraternal society to make the world space for thinking and living. The pedagogy of dialogue leads to the strengthening of personal identity. It promotes ‚dialogical teaching‘, emphasises the great importance of a good atmosphere during catechesis (atmosphere of dialogue, climate of dialogue), shows the fundamental importance of the teacher’s attitude, supports the formation of conscience focused on action and promotes dialogue with contemporary culture (Bagrowicz 2006, 239–243).

However, dialogue with contemporary culture is certainly not easy. In liberal democratic societies, which are pluralistic, many social, cultural, and religious groups have very different values and sometimes conflict with each other. In this context, a critical task is to look for an appropriate language of dialogue, which would express certain neutrality towards the views of others while at the same time shifting one’s views. This opens up a space for an ‚engaged dialogue model‘, a part of presenting one’s values and beliefs. Dialogue cannot be neutral but should encourage parties to engage (Strahovnik 2017, 271–274; Prijatelj 2017, 304–305).

The premises presented above, formulated in individual parts of the thesis, allow for the conclusion that catechesis fulfils a significant function in shaping the dialogical attitude of the Church towards the world. It is both a space for the intra-church dialogue and the Church’s dialogue with the world, a specific ‚laboratory of dialogue‘.

## Abbreviations

- CT** – John Paul II 1979 [Exhortation *Catechesi tradendae*].
- DC** – The Pontifical Council for Promoting the New Evangelization 2020 [Directory for Catechesis].
- DV** – Second Vatican Council 1964 [*Dei verbum*].
- EG** – Francis 2013 [*Evangelii Gaudium*].
- ES** – Paul VI 1964 [*Ecclesiam suam*].
- NMI** – John Paul II 2001 [*Novo millennio ineunte*].



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