

Implications for catechetics, homiletics and pastoral practice

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I have given myself the task of seeing how some of what we have been talking about applies to what we do in catechetics, religious education, homilies, pastoral practice, etc. Our overarching purpose this week has been to reflect on how we might make the Church, and specifically the Church's teachings, more credible (which is not necessarily the same as more "relevant"). And so the question is: how might we make the message we proclaim more credible?

I take it for granted that we already accept the need for *ourselves* to be credible. One thinks of Pope Paul VI's memorable comment that people listen more willingly to witnesses than to teachers. One also thinks of our Lord's dramatic prayer that his disciples "might be one – so that the world can believe he had been sent by the Father". The credibility of his own mission was at stake on what we ourselves are like. Similarly, our ability to be "ambassadors of reconciliation".

What we are addressing here is the credibility of the message itself. We have already acknowledged that there are many people both inside and outside the Church for whom there are serious credibility gaps, including gaps between what the Church teaches and what the Catholic people actually believe.

I believe the credibility issue has a lot to do with that disjunction between religious faith and ordinary life which the Second Vatican Council described as "one of the worst errors of our time" (*GS*, p. 43). This disjunction shows up in the convenient claim that is often made in political and commercial circles that the Church should confine itself to the pulpit. This is easily traced back to a certain privatisation of religious faith for which evangelical Protestantism must take some responsibility. It is also traceable back to the individualism that is characteristic of secular culture.

This disjunction also began to show up when the modernist movement (early 20th century) in order to safeguard faith against the claims of science and reason relegated faith to a more subjective sphere. The disjunction shows up also in that false dualism between body and spirit, world and God, which has plagued all the Christian churches, and on which some of our ascetical practices have been based. And, this disjunction between religious faith and real life has also showed up in the Church's slowness sometimes to accept human rights which ultimately have their roots in the gospel itself.

Whatever the manifestations or the causes, the result of this has been that religious faith is perceived as a kind of "add-on". It is there for those who need it or want it, but one can also leave it and still have a life. It is in no way intrinsically related to what it means to be fully human.

I think the key to overcoming this disjunction, and addressing the credibility issue, is to explore what it actually means to be authentically human. We are of course talking about a revealed anthropology because it is based on the incarnation, and in this sense is specific to us as Christians. At the same time, it gives us common ground with all those who love humanity, and a wonderful new opportunity for dialogue with them.

I believe Pope John Paul had his finger right on all this when he said recurringly through several of his encyclicals that

The human person is the primary route the Church must travel in fulfilling its mission: the primary and fundamental way for the Church, the way traced out by Christ himself. (RH, p 14).

In other words, if God's agenda in the work of creation and in the course of salvation history is about human persons, which includes their relationships and their habitat, then the Church's agenda must be the same. This gives us a way for overcoming the disjunction between religious faith and ordinary life which I have suggested is at the root of the credibility problems.

All this is fundamental to what we are about in catechesis, religious education, homiletics and pastoral practices.

I find it helpful to reflect on why Pope John Paul II was so credible with the young – which, when you think about it, was an unlikely prospect. I used to wonder whether it was part of his acting skill, or his skill with the media, or a pastoral strategy, or his emphasis on the need for clear teaching. I believe it was all these things, but much more. I believe he was leading them on a journey of discovery, tapping into the questions they themselves asked.

He picked up the question “who am I in this world?”, and connected it with the question “why?”. The two questions are intrinsically related because we can hardly be secure about who we are if we don't know why.

The “why” question goes back to the mystery of God's freedom. It presupposes that fundamental statement that we can each make about our self, namely that I might never have existed. We don't even begin to understand ourselves, let alone God, until we are living existentially out of an awareness that our existence was not owed to us. This is not a negative statement; it is a positive statement because it means that we who might never have existed do so because of a choice God made; we were wanted, and it was personal to each of us. Our existence is pure gift. On this basis, it is possible to say (which is what young people feel they need to be able to say) “yes, I am meant to be”; “yes, my life matters”; “yes, I matter”; “yes, there is a reason for my being”.

These affirmations lead to wonder and amazement in the sense of Psalm 8: who are we that God should care so much? Who are we that God would want us at all? This wonder and amazement intensifies in the light of the incarnation and redemption. And because God does care so much, those affirmations also generate a deep reassurance, and the possibility of trusting. They also lead to thanksgiving, because life perceived as a gift can only be received in the manner a gift is received, that is with thanksgiving. And, these affirmations lead beyond religion perceived as a duty, into the realms of desire and delight.

My point is: this is where all good catechesis, religious education, homilies and pastoral practices need to lead – to wonder, amazement, assurance, trust, hope, thanksgiving, desire and delight, and willing self-giving that results from these. I would even say that there is something wrong with our catechesis, our homilies, our pastoral practices, and

even our teaching of theology if they do not lead into wonder, joy, thanksgiving.... I think this is what would make a difference to the credibility of the Church's teaching, and I believe it is the reason why Pope John Paul himself was so credible with the young. I am fond of saying that the difference between a sermon and a homily is that a sermon tells people what they should do, while a homily helps them to see what *God is doing* in their lives. Against the backdrop of the scriptures where we recognise God's presence in people's lives, God's style, God's surprises etc, people can more easily perceive the same God present in their own personal histories.

I am not overlooking the difficulties; I am claiming that when our personal existence and the whole of life is perceived as a gift, then we have a whole new way of seeing everything, including God. In the very presence of the gift we find ourselves in the presence of one who gives existence. I believe this is what St Ireneus meant when he told us that "the glory of God is the human being fully alive – and becoming fully alive results from seeing God".

Down the 2000 years, the way the Church's message has been proclaimed has undergone massive shifts of focus. Right at the beginning, it was entirely focused around the person of Christ, and resulted in people being able to receive the message with power, conviction and joy (cf 1 Thessalonians). During the Patristic era, the focus was on the wonderful things God had done in history; this was intended to inspire wonder, faith and thanksgiving, and it is easy to see why when we look at the Psalms and the Prophets. It was being pointed out of course, that God is still doing the same things and that this is ultimately the meaning of liturgy as an event.

In the Middle Ages, when the great summas were being written, the focus was more on providing information and answers. This intensified following the Councils of Trent and Vatican I. But eventually people realised that providing information was not enough to touch people's hearts and change their lives. This led to the development of the kerygmatic catechesis in which, once again, the focus was on proclaiming the wonderful things God had done. But by now, the Church had Catholic schools, where the children eventually pointed out that they "had had Abraham up to here, and crossing the Red Sea was not their problem". And so it began to be realised that whatever we say about God's wonderful involvement in history has to connect with our deepest human aspirations – with what is already going on in us, including our deep yearning for love, belonging, meaning, freedom, participation etc. (Not in the sense that God is there to meet our needs – that would not be God), but in the sense that John Dew intended when he said that on the road to Emmaus, Christ first asked what they had been talking about, before he revealed himself. What I am saying with this synopsis of the history of catechesis, is that the good news itself goes nowhere if it doesn't make a connection between God is doing and our own deep human yearnings.

There is risk in all this, because it can be interpreted in an individualistic way. To obviate this risk, it helps to remember

- 1) Having our origin in the mystery of God's freedom is common ground with the whole of creation. We are intrinsically related to all that might not have existed, and are all included in the choice God made.

- 2) Our Christian faith is essentially corporate. We are so used to interpreting both sin and redemption in an individualistic way, that Richard Rohr believes we virtually disqualify ourselves from even understanding St Paul who was not thinking of sin and redemption in that way, but in an essentially corporate way. It occurred to me when Neil Vaney addressed us that we also tend to try to resolve our pastoral problems within an individualistic perspective. For example, the problem of not including some at the Eucharistic table. Is this to be resolved by the desire of the individual, or by the needs of the community? For example, if the Archbishop of Harare forbade Robert Mugabe from going to Holy Communion, he would be protecting the identity of the Christian community; or, is the desire of the individual, because he thinks he's doing the right thing, what counts?

- 3) An individualistic interpretation is also obviated by the fact that if our very being is itself gift, then we can only be true to ourselves by "being gift" i.e. being for others – which is the very antithesis of individualism and narcissism. And of course, this is also the point of Eucharist. As Augustine said, we become what we receive, i.e. we become the body given up for others, and the blood/life poured out for others. This is what undergirds that "sending" that Neil Darragh so rightly emphasised. It is not an appendage to the Mass, it belongs essentially to being eucharistic. Isn't it interesting, that we find right at the very heart of Catholic/Christian faith the most profound connection between religious faith and the rest of life!

Finally, all this needs to be Christ-centred. All creation is creation in Christ and salvation history the process of becoming one with him, so that belonging to him, we belong to God. Even though this mystery of "Christ among us" is prior to any consideration of sin and redemption, nevertheless, it is the mystery of sin and redemption that highlights how God brings about our union with Christ. I find it helpful to contrast Genesis ch. 3 and the Christian hymn recorded by Paul at the beginning of his letter to Philippians. Instead of just accepting their existence as pure gift, and joyfully and gratefully trusting in the Giver, it seems that those who represented all of us preferred instead to try to lay claim to human existence, to secure and to own it as if they were on the same footing as God. The problem with this is that whatever is pure gift cannot be treated as it were ours as of right. In other words, sin is essentially that distortion. In Philippians, Christ is shown reversing that process: he who did have the right to equality with God, did not cling to it, but chose to abase himself, becoming as we are, even accepting death and an unjust death at that; and in this way showing that God can be absolutely trusted no matter what happens.

Paul goes on in the same letter to say that our calling is to "reproduce in our lives the pattern of Christ's life". This is what constitutes authentic Christian asceticism. We practise the fact that our salvation doesn't depend on being able to prove ourselves right, to justify ourselves, to deny sin etc. It is okay to acknowledge our dependence on God and our need for mercy, *because God's love can be totally trusted*. If this is Christian asceticism, there is simply no need for any kind of dualism between spirit and matter. I love Karl Rahner's saying that "love for God and love for the world are not in inverse proportion to each other, but in direct proportion"!

On that premise, I am saying that genuine love for all that is human, and showing how the gospel is ultimately about what it means to be genuinely human, is the very basis for enhancing the credibility of our message.

