

Family Catechesis in the Light of *Amoris Laetitia*

Dr Mary John

Any real catechesis can take place only in a community. We can assert that without community there is no catechesis, if we understand catechesis as a *process of faith formation* and not as a mere religious learning. Family is a right *locus* of catechesis as it is a nuclear community and a community par excellence. Therefore an interest in family catechesis has to be created.

The papal encyclical, *Amoris Laetitia* can shed enormous light on family catechesis, in its objective, content and methodology. This brief article is an effort influenced by this document, it is not explicitly mentioned often, and tries to explain how family catechesis can be in its light.

Basic Elements of Catechesis

Catechesis is understood as (1) ministry to the Word of God,¹ (2) faith education,² and (3) ecclesial act.³ These

three elements are to be present in any catechesis as also in family catechesis.

Catechesis as the Ministry to the Word of God

Word in the Sacred Scriptures

When one speaks of ministry to the Word of God, it has many layers of meaning. The plain meaning would be ministry to the Word as found in the Sacred Scriptures. In fact, the catechism lessons in formal catechesis take the Word of God (a biblical text) as its very important element. The anthropological method engages three steps, namely, (1) a sign taken from life experience, (2) listening to the Word of God and (3) response of the student. This method, widely engaged in today's catechesis, places the Word of God at the centre.

Hence it can be understood that ministry to the Word of God is in the first place to make the Sacred Scriptures known to the students – to hear the Word, to understand it, to apply it to the living situations and to practise what it implies for life here and now.

The Incarnate Word

The second layer of meaning of ministry to the Word of God can be that the Word is understood as the incarnate Word – Jesus. Catechesis takes upon itself the task of bringing the catechised to Jesus. The catechised come into close contact with Jesus through catechesis, listen to Him, understand Him and follow Him. Ministry to the

incarnate Word also means that the catechised will carry this Word – Jesus – to whomever they encounter.

Humanity and Nature

Humans and nature can also be understood as ‘word’ of God, in as much as they come into existence through the Word of God. In this sense catechesis is also a ministry to humans and nature. First, catechesis helps the catechised care for humans, society and nature. In other words catechesis makes one humanistic and eco-friendly.

As a ministry to humans catechesis helps them also listen and understand the Word of God, understand it, and also to speak it. The Word of God is not limited or exhausted with the Sacred Scriptures, but continues all through history. God continues to speak through various media incessantly. Catechesis trains humans to hear the Word of God that comes through various media and also helps humans to become the *media* of God’s Word. Any word that fosters life, encourages a disturbed heart, kindles hope in mind, can be taken as God’s Word. Humans can utter such words and then they become the media of God’s Word.

Catechesis as Faith Education

The simplest definition of catechesis is *faith education* or *faith formation*. Faith is understood as the response of humans to the revelation of God. Faith in God is ultimately faith in life. Faith that starts from childhood with humans – parents, siblings, friends and relatives – extends itself to

the things outside, that is to say, to nature, to oneself and ultimately to God. Trust in others, self-confidence and trust in the nature are all to be seen as extension of faith in God. A truly faithful person will necessarily express her/his trust and belief in the self, others and nature.

Catechesis helps one foster this comprehensive expression of faith. Faith normally involves certain stages. To mention some of them would be: knowledge, acceptance, surrender, commitment and action. When it comes to faith in God, one needs first to have at least a minimum knowledge of God; then she/he has to accept God in life; then she/he has to surrender to that known and accepted God. Then come the stages of commitment and action. One can remember here what James had to tell the early Christians: "... faith by itself, if it does not have works, is dead"(James 2:17).

Catechesis also trains the catechised the express and live the faith in God. It may be fitting here to quote D.S. Amalorpavadoss on what he has to say about the aim of catechesis:

[Catechesis] should give a new world view, a different hierarchy of values, cause a change of attitudes, form the whole [hu]man, educate his[her] liberty, guide him[her] towards Christian maturity, integrate him[her] in the Church-community, lead him[her] to commit him[her]self to the task of the society and integral development of [hu]man. This education of

faith will result in a new morality, a moral life growing from the very faith of conversion and commitment, a paschal life, a life of the one dead and risen with Christ, a life in the Spirit of the Risen Lord, a life of charity which is the fulfilment of the whole law.⁴

Catechesis as an Ecclesial act

Catechesis is a process that pertains to the very nature of the Church. It is a process through which the Church makes its own people. The Church cannot remain without catechising. Any setback in catechesis would mean derailing of the Church. The history of the Medieval Church bears witness to this fact. After the times of catechumenate there was a slow downfall in catechesis. The parents and the pastors were responsible for the faith formation of children which was in fact very sparse. The dark age of the history of the Church, thus, coincided with the downfall of catechesis. The revival of the Church after the Reformation also witnessed a revival of catechesis. The publication of a catechism by Martin Luther (1529) was followed by several catechetical works both by the reformers as well as the Catholic Church. The Council of Trent also gave much importance to catechesis. It insisted upon child catechesis and also brought out a catechetical work, *Catechismus Romanus* (1556). These instances bear ample witnesses to the fact that a right catechesis is a dire need for the Church to be authentic.

When we speak of catechesis is an ecclesial act we do not mean formal catechesis alone. On the contrary, if we understand catechesis as faith formation and faith in God as faith in life, every act of the Church has a catechetical motif. The liturgical celebrations, the social activities, other relational enterprises – all have potency to foster faith – faith in self, in the future, in life and ultimately in God. Thus catechising in every activity is the nature of the Church.

Forms of Catechesis

Catechesis takes place in three forms: they are formal, non-formal and informal.⁵ Formal catechesis is the one that is institutionalised and that takes place in a classroom with catechism books and catechism teachers.

In non-formal catechesis faith formation takes place in various activities that have some kind of 'faith building' as their objective. Liturgical celebrations, social upliftment programmes, prayer sessions, Basic Christian Community gatherings, other group gatherings, pilgrimages, etc, have different objectives. Yet all such activities are focused towards some kind of faith expression including faith in God and faith in life. Fostering friendship and group unity also contributes to faith in life. Therefore these activities can be considered as non-formal ways of catechising.

Informal catechesis takes place in every experience that infuses faith in life in any way, mostly indirectly. There

may not be any direct catechetical objective (that is, conscious faith formation) in the activity that creates the experience. A timely help at the time of a dire need, a mother caressing the child, and so on may not have any intention of increasing the faith. But they do have some influence on the faith aspect. This can be considered informal catechesis. In fact, faith is mostly infused, formed and brought to maturation in informal ways. Creating a catechetical ambience in the family or community contributes towards informal catechesis.

Catechetive Experiences in the Family

As mentioned in the beginning, family is the right place – *locus* – of catechesis because family is a community – ‘nuclear ecclesia’. The above mentioned elements can take place in family to a great extent.

Family is the prime locus of faith formation. “...the home must continue to be the place where we learn to appreciate the meaning and beauty of the faith, to pray and to serve our neighbour” (*Amoris Laetitia* [AL] 287).

Relational Experience

Faith is expressed as well as learned from the relationships that exist in the family. Evidently there are fourfold relationships in the family. They are the spousal relationship between the husband and wife, parent-children relationship, fraternal relationship among the siblings and the relationship between the grandparents and

grandchildren. Experience of these relationships comes in the first place in inducing and fostering faith. According to the renowned psychologist Erik Erikson the basic trust or mistrust is formed in a baby in the first year itself. This basic trust or mistrust depends on the nurturing relational experience in the family in which the baby finds itself. AL also affirms,

“Children, once born, begin to receive, along with nourishment and care, the spiritual gift of knowing with certainty that they are loved. This love is shown to them through the gift of their personal name, the sharing of language, looks of love and the brightness of a smile. In this way, they learn that the beauty of human relationships touches our soul, seeks our freedom, accepts the difference of others, recognizes and respects them as a partner in dialogue... Such is love, and it contains a spark of God’s love!” (172).⁶

It is this basic trust that is at the root of any trust or belief or confidence or the faith in the Divine. Therefore one can firmly say that the relational experience is also a catechetive experience. This relational catechetive experience may be formal, non-formal, but mostly informal.

Experience of Transcendence

Faith experience is basically an experience of the transcendence. Self-denying love and relations lead to self-transcendence. Children learn self-transcendence from their parents, grandparents and elder siblings. As babies

all are self-centred. It is natural and to a great extent needed for their growth. But as they grow they gradually learn to be altruistic. This is done through various exercises of formation and training.

Self-transcendence can be measured through the ability to cooperate with other members of the family as well as of the society. Fostering competitiveness from young age may prove to be a hindrance or challenge to altruism and self-transcendence.⁷ For competition always trains one to be selfish. It is in the dynamic of competition to strive to win by defeating others. 'I must win' and 'I must be the first' are the attitudes inculcated through competition, which in turn, turns one to be more self-centred, hindering all altruistic formations.

Self-transcendence can also be measured through the ability to extend oneself to others genuinely with open heart and open arms. It is expressed through generosity and sacrificial attitude.

Experience of self-transcendence is a catechetive experience as it is an experience of God Himself. We understand God as a self-transcending being and any form of self-transcendence can help one experience God.

Supportive and Challenging Experiences

The chapter on "The Experiences and Challenges of Families" in AL enumerates several supportive and challenging situations that prevail in families today. Sense

of greater freedom and the danger of growing individualism; relationship and mutual respect on the one hand and cultural decline that fails to promote love and self-giving on the other; a situation of young people postponing their marriage because they lack possibilities for the future; narcissistic affectivity that hinders maturity; pornography and commercialisation of body; decline in population due to a mentality against having children; the weakening of faith and religious practices; lack of dignified or affordable housing; children being born out of wedlock; sexual exploitation of children; migration and father away from the family; respect for the elderly on the one hand and seeing them as burden on the other; poverty; drug addiction and alcoholism; practice of polygamy in some parts; gender issues; etc, are some of the issues discussed in AL. The document is addressed to the whole world and the challenges discussed in it may not be applicable universally.

It would be fitting to review the situation of the family in Indian or Tamil context. Indian family system has certain differences from that of the West.

India, like most other less industrialized, traditional, eastern societies is a collectivist society that emphasizes family integrity, family loyalty, and family unity. C. Harry Hui and Harry C. Triandis (1986) defined collectivism, which is the opposite of individualism as, "a sense of harmony, interdependence and concern for others" (p. 244). More specifically, collectivism is reflected in greater

readiness to cooperate with family members and extended kin on decisions affecting most aspects of life, including career choice, mate selection, and marriage (Hui and Triandis 1986; Triandis et al. 1988).

With the advent of urbanization and modernization, younger generations are turning away from the joint family form. Some scholars specify that the *modified extended family* has replaced the traditional joint family, in that it does not demand geographical proximity or occupational involvement and does not have a hierarchal authority structure (Nandan and Eames 1980; Mullatti 1995; Shangle 1995). This new family form encourages frequent visits; financial assistance; aid and support in childcare and household chores; and involvement and participation in life-cycle events such as births, marriages, deaths, and festival celebrations. The familial and kinship bonds are thus maintained and sustained. Even in the more modern and nuclear families in contemporary India, many functional extensions of the traditional joint family have been retained (Nandan and Eames 1980), and the nuclear family is strongly embedded in the extended kinship matrix. In spite of the numerous changes and adaptations to a pseudo-Western culture and a move toward the nuclear family among the middle and upper classes, the modified extended family is preferred and continues to prevail in modern India (Chekki 1996; Mullatti 1995; Segal 1998).⁸

Opportunity for togetherness and deeper relationship is available in this family system. Coming together for food, prayer and recreation can foster deeper relationship.

Another positive element in Indian families is the stability, that is, there is less divorce or separation compared to the western countries. Whatever may be the causes, with all problems and difficulties the family stays together, united and stable.

One more positive element is that Indian families are blessed with more children than in the West. Families have an average of at least two children each. In a joint or extended family the number of children is still more.

Togetherness and deep loving relationships, stability, presence of many children, etc, can create supportive circumstances for family catechesis.

There are also many challenging experiences in Indian families. It would be sufficient only to mention some of them here because they are well known and need no elaboration. The situation of poverty, unemployment, lack of sufficient medical facility for to the poor, addiction of the youth to drugs and alcoholic products as well as to social media, addiction of the head of the family to alcohol, separation of the father for the sake of job opportunity, gender inequality, ignorance of the parents with regard to child rearing and ecological issues, and so on, pose great challenging experiences. All these experiences have to be converted into catechetive ones.

Objectives of Family Catechesis

Faith formation is the general objective of catechesis. We can derive the objectives of family catechesis from this general objective. Having this in mind, four areas are here highlighted to specify the objectives.

1. Integral faith formation of the family collectively and Individually

According to the enumeration of the aims of catechesis by D.S. Amalorpavadoss faith encompasses the whole being of a person. Therefore faith formation means the integral formation of the whole person. Faith influences a person's thinking, attitudes, expressions and actions. Catechesis also, as faith formation, works on all these areas. Family catechesis influences both the individuals as well as the whole family as a unit. It forms each member of the family in faith by initiating her/him in faith, leading her/him towards maturity in faith and helping her/him to express that faith properly. It helps to discern the will of God for the family as well as for each member and to commit themselves together to that will. It enables the members of the family to know and accept God and to commit to His tasks and to surrender to Him. Likewise, family catechesis also influences the discourses of the family as a group and guides the family in its formation of goals, defining and executing of action plans and so on. In short, family catechesis enables the family and its members to recognise

the revelation of God in their day to day life and to say 'yes' to Him.⁹

2. Fostering familial values

Family catechesis will foster familial values, such as, love, affection, sense of sacrifice, concern and care for others, helping others, cooperating with others, generosity, overcoming rivalry among siblings, unity among the members, right relationship with and concern for neighbours, etc. It will also try to inculcate personal values, such as, truthfulness, fidelity, accountability, responsibility, and so on that contribute towards the wellbeing of the individuals as well as of the family.

3. Preparing for special occasions

Special occasions and events like marriage, child birth, reception of sacraments, etc, come in the family. Family catechesis can help prepare the household participate in the occasion more meaningfully. Likewise, children can be prepared to begin their education and to face the examinations. Similarly, family catechesis has a role to play during and after calamities or losses to face them and afterwards to get out of them psychologically.

4. Helping to realise the presence of God in the family

It is believed that God is present everywhere but the problem is to realise that presence. Family catechesis has a role to play in helping the family members to realise that presence especially through the presence of the

members. People can be trained through catechesis to see God in other persons. Faith formation does that. On the other hand, the members of the family can be also trained to speak the language of God, which may be the language of love, of consolation, of affirmation – language that builds up and cares for. When such language is heard from every member of the family, it won't be hard to realise the presence of God. Catechesis of the family can strive to train the members to see God in others and also to see others as God sees them.

Methods of Family Catechesis

Anthropological method is the one that is employed widely to catechesis at present. That is, in fact, the most effective method too. Anthropological method starts from life experience, and proceeds to the reflection on the Word of God. Here, life experience and Word of God enlighten each other. Word of God is better understood in the light of experience and life is well grasped in the light of the Word. As this understanding is reached, then one can clearly hear the call of God and respond to it in an authentic manner.

Once the family life experience begins to be reflected upon in the light of the Word of God, there begins family catechesis. This reflection may be by an individual or by the whole family as a group. Reflection leads to action. Family members begin to act according to the call that arises from the experience and reflection.

This kind of family catechesis can take place in three forms, namely, formal, non-formal and informal.

Informal family catechesis

We shall start with informal method of family catechesis. Informal method presupposes an ambience of faith in the family. The faith of the parents and elders communicate faith in the younger ones (cf AL 287). The natural love and care especially of the parents towards the children and the elderly, the well-meaning attitudes of the siblings, etc, create a conducive ambience for faith formation. Love and care at the same time act also as a kind of *silent* Word of God because they communicate to their receivers that they are wanted, accepted and respected, and their presence is precious. This experience becomes catechetive because it instils faith in life which is a manifestation of faith in God.

Right relationship among the members of the family is also another factor that can create a catechetical ambience in the family. There may be differences of opinions, attitudes and convictions. If they were to create rift in relationship then catechetical ambience is lost. Learning to be cooperative than to be competitive seems to be more conducive for catechetical situation.

Fulfilment of rightful needs is yet another factor that has influence on catechetical ambience. Each member of the family has the obligation to help fulfil each other's needs

through sharing and striving together that can become a catechetive experience.

Non-formal family catechesis

There are several moments of non-formal catechesis in the family. Family prayer, celebrations, pilgrimages, tours, family get together and the likes can be great occasions of non-formal family catechesis.

Family prayers can go beyond the recitation of rosary and some vocal prayers or reading of a biblical passage. For instance, person-oriented prayers in which each one thanks for the other family members in the presence of God can take place on daily basis or at least once a week. Such prayers can also be conducted on the occasions of birthdays, first communions, marriages, etc.

Various celebrations take place in the family, such as, birthdays, marriages, festivals, reception of sacraments, and so on. These celebrations can become precious moments of family catechesis in so far as they instil happiness and faith in life. Proper information and guidance can be made available to help to convert such celebrations into moments of catechesis and catechetive experiences. The same can also be applied to pilgrimages and family get together.

Formal family catechesis

Formal family catechesis is an organised effort to get the family together and catechise itself. Texts for the family

session have to be prepared and made available to the families. This can be done in various ways. Family catechism text books can be published. Catechetical lessons for family catechesis can be published in journals which reach the people. Many parishes have bulletins which can also bear such lessons. The lessons should follow the anthropological method, starting from life experience. In the family session the head of the family or any other informed member can take the role of the animator.

Parish or school catechism students can be given questions to discuss in the family. The family can discuss the question together and start the catechetical session.

Anthropological method with ample chance to create experience in an interesting manner can attract all the members of the family to participate in the sessions.

Concluding Suggestions

- Sufficient attention has not been given to formal family catechesis so far. It has to be taken seriously because it has great potency to foster faith in a context where so many challenges are faced by families.
- The diocesan, regional and national catechetical commissions can prepare lessons for formal family catechesis and publish them as books or journals.

- *Amoris Laetitia* contains many themes that can be converted into catechetical lessons for the family. Catechetical commissions may constitute a permanent team to prepare lessons from such Church documents.
- At the parish level efforts can be made to initiate formal family catechesis and it should be included in the overall pastoral plan of the parish.
- A catechetical ambience in the families as well as in the parish community can be created through spiritual as well as social activities. There can be suitable structures like peace committee to settle the problems that disturb the catechetical ambience.

Dr R. Mary John
Parish Priest
Church of Sacred Heart of Jesus
Irudhayapuram
Kuzhicode 629 167
K.K.Dt.

Endnotes

¹Cf. Alberich, Emilio. *Catechesi e prassi ecclesiale*. (Leumann [Torino]: Editrice Elle Di Ci, 1987), 55-86.

²*Ibid.*, 90-128.

³*Ibid.*, 132-155.

⁴D.S. Amalorpavadass, *Theology of Catechesis* (Bangalore: NBCLC, 1973), 14.

⁵Cf. Stephen Alathara, *Introduction to Catechesis* (Bangalore: Asian Trading Corporation, 2005), 149-150; இரா. மேரி ஜாண், இறைநம்பிக்கையில் உருவாக: மறைக்கல்வி- ஓர் அறிமுகம் (ஓரியூர்: அருள் ஆனந்தா பதிப்பகம், 2012), 65-66.

⁶Quoted from "Catechesis" *L'Osservatore Romano*, 15 October 2015, p. 8.

⁷For the adverse effects of competition and the advantages of cooperation see Alfie Kohn, *No Contest: The Case against Competition* (Boston/New York: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1992).

⁸<http://family.jrank.org/pages/859/India-Family-Life-Family-Values.html>, accessed on 08.08.2017.

⁹Cf. *Dei Verbum*, 5.