

Catechetical Thinking in the Face of Critical Theory: Developing a Marian Understanding

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Introduction

The development of a Marian understanding of catechesis offers the most adequate response to certain problematic trends, prominent in some catechetical thinking during the post-conciliar period, trends that draw from currents of thought associated with educationalists influenced by critical theory. “Critical theory” refers in the first place, of course, to the Frankfurt School and is associated with the works of Horkheimer and Adorno. As social and political theorists, they offered analyses of society in the light of what they perceived to be the potentially liberating and emancipating possibilities in institutions, structures and relationships. A number of educational theorists subsequently took up their work, viewing educational structures primarily through the lens of whether they lead to greater social transformation through action. Among these, Paulo Freire¹ has been especially important in the influence he has had on a whole generation of educationalists, especially those of a Marxist-Feminist persuasion – theorists such as Henry Giroux and Peter McLaren. Freire’s educational theory has been described as “virtually canonical” for radical and critical pedagogical theorists.² An important intersection between critical theory and catechesis lies in the influence of Freire on the work of Thomas Groome in the United States and on Marcel van Caster in Europe.³

To find in Mary the central inspiration for developing such a response is particularly appropriate since the academic discipline of catechetics focuses on what St

¹ The key works unpacking his educational philosophy are Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1972) and *Education for Critical Consciousness*, (New York: Herder and Herder, 1973).

² So Nicholas C. Burbules, “The Limits of Dialogue and a Critical Pedagogy,” in Peter Trifonas, *Revolutionary Pedagogies: Cultural Politics, Education, and Discourse of Theory* (London: Routledge Falmer, 2000), 255.

³ Van Caster set out his position immediately following Freire’s work, in Marcel Van Caster, “A Catechesis for Liberation,” *Lumen Vitae* 27, 2 (June 1972), 281–303. For Groome’s indebtedness, see his *Christian Religious Education: Sharing Our Story and Vision*, (New York: Harper and Row, 1981), 175–177, and his description of Freire as “likely the most prophetic voice on pedagogy of the twentieth century,” *Educating for Life: A Spiritual Vision for Every Teacher and Parent*, (Allen, Texas: Thomas More, RCL Company, 1988), 103.

John Paul II described as the “original pedagogy” of the faith,⁴ and by the use of this phrase John Paul was encouraging a sustained reflection on the doctrines of the faith for the sake of discerning implications for their transmission. John Paul was aware that the Second Vatican Council had described Mary precisely as the one who “mirrors” such a pedagogy, perfectly embodying God’s saving work through her response of faith.⁵ For this reason, he described Mary as a “living catechism”⁶—the mysteries of the Faith are made visible and accessible in Mary, while at the same time she protects the integrity of these same mysteries.

The recent magisterial documents on catechesis, then, help us to understand Mary’s pivotal role for catechetical pedagogy. The 1997 *General Directory for Catechesis* explains that if we study salvation history we can see the divine pedagogy in action: “The salvation of the person, which is the ultimate purpose of revelation, is shown as the fruit of an original and efficacious ‘pedagogy of God’ throughout history.”⁷

The “gradual stages” of this original pedagogy culminate in what the *Letter to the Hebrews* calls the “last days,” the time when God sent his Son.⁸ If this is the case then the original pedagogy of God is revealed most fully at the point of the sending of the Son, of the Incarnation. At the moment of the annunciation and the response of Mary’s *fiat* we have the account of the unique event of God’s Word taking flesh—the transmission of the fullness of God’s revelation. We see God’s pedagogy revealed in its fullness. At the Annunciation, the messenger of God appears, entrusted with “words of instruction and of catechesis,”⁹ to communicate the way in which the pedagogy of God throughout history has led to this moment of grace in the fullness of time, when the Word is to be handed over for the “whole fullness

⁴ See John Paul II. Apostolic Exhortation *Catechesi tradendae* (hereafter *CT*), 58; cf Congregation for the Clergy, *General Directory for Catechesis* (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1997; hereafter *GDC*), 137–147. For a recent collection analysing this original pedagogy see Caroline E. Farey, Walraud Linnig, and M. Johanna Paruch, FSGM (eds.), *The Pedagogy of God: Its centrality in Catechesis and Catechist Formation*. Steubenville: Emmaus Road Publishing, 2011. Such a reflection necessarily enters into dialogue with theories of development and of learning, at both philosophical and applied levels, for the sake of this original pedagogy, one of divine “condescension,” in which God’s revealing of himself takes place in and through human modes of communication. A helpful overview of some of these modes is provided in Joseph White, *The Way God Teaches: Catechesis and the Divine Pedagogy*. Huntington, IN: Our Sunday Visitor, 2014.

⁵ “Mary unites and mirrors within herself the greatest teachings of the faith” (*Lumen Gentium*, 65); cf *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (hereafter *CCC*) 148–149.

⁶ *CT*, 73. For a helpful analysis of the background of this latter title and the catechetical implications see Wisam Khadouri, *Mary, “Living Catechism” and “Mother and Model of Catechists,”* MA Thesis (Birmingham: Maryvale Institute, 2009).

⁷ *GDC*, 139.

⁸ See Heb 1:1–2; cf *CCC*, 65, following an account of the stages of the pedagogy in 54–64.

⁹ *GDC*, 139.

of deity” to dwell “bodily.”¹⁰ At this point in salvation history we can see how God unites human nature to himself, salvifically, no longer in “gradual stages,” but now fully and completely. A careful and contemplative analysis of the Gift at this moment, therefore, unveils the very heart of God’s pedagogy. It also allows us to understand, by analogy, the way in which the living Word can be received by every mind and will and through this assent and adherence “impregnate” the whole of a person’s life.¹¹ The conception of the Word in Mary takes place through the agency of the Holy Spirit: “The Holy Spirit will come upon you,” and it is here that we see, historically and archetypically, the mode of the transmission of the Word as it is handed on for the accomplishing of God’s redemptive mission.¹² In the light of these considerations, then, it seems appropriate to describe God’s pedagogy as a “Marian Pedagogy,” and for an understanding of the fullness of this pedagogy to focus especially on the narrative of the annunciation, since a sympathetic analysis here enables us to investigate the pedagogy at its moment of greatest fullness. The recent magisterium appears to be pointing us towards Mary as the one through whom we can most deeply understand the craft of the transmission of the faith.¹³

Critical theory: problems with transmission

How, then, might this Marian pedagogy assist us in offering a response to the difficulties raised by critical theory, especially in the area of didactic modes of education? Pedagogies of transmission involving didactic elements are suspected of being merely “banking” models, whereby one who has something of value “deposits” the learning in the one lacking it.¹⁴ Such pedagogies are seen as “infantilising” adult learners, treating the recipients of education as passive receptacles of learning. The idea of “transmission” is thought to involve overthrowing a mutuality which should be at the heart of education—or at least of adult education. “Transmission”

¹⁰ Col 2:9.

¹¹ The metaphor belongs to John Paul: see *CT*, 20: “Catechesis aims therefore at developing understanding of the mystery of Christ in the light of God’s word, so that the whole of a person’s humanity is impregnated by that word.”

¹² See *GDC*, 140. In the Greek text, neither of the two words, “come upon” (ἐπέρχομαι) and “overshadow” (ἐπισκιάζω), used by the angel to Mary have, in fact, any particular connotation of conception: the point here, which is especially pertinent for understanding the annunciation as the model for the ongoing transmission of the Word, is that both *emphasise the divine agency in this transmission*. See D.T.Lundry, “Narrative Logic in the Annunciation to Mary (Lk 1:26-38),” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 114.1 (1995), 66.

¹³ By way of further confirmation we also see Pope Francis speaking of a particular Marian “style” that he wishes to see adopted in all evangelization. See Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii Gaudium*, 18, 288, 284.

¹⁴ The phrase comes originally from Freire, *The Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, 57ff.

appears to be problematic in that it places the catechist in the position of a “giver” and the learner in the position of a “receiver,” of one who is taught.

At the close of his apostolic exhortation on catechesis John Paul specifically asks for Mary’s intercession since “no one has been ‘taught by God’ (cf. Jn 6:45) to such depth.”¹⁵ John Paul’s comment highlights both the difficulty with catechesis from the point of view of critical theorists and at the same time the significantly different understanding of learning and of the human person proposed by the Church in her magisterial teaching.

The problem, on closer examination, has to do with critical theory’s valuing of activity over receptivity: the teacher in didactic mode is seen as one who is superior to the learner, for the latter merely “receives” what the teacher gives. In this case, to understand the process of catechesis as a “handing on,” or of a “transmission” from teacher to learner, or from “master” to “disciple” is seen as problematic since it appears to involve a relationship of superior to inferior, with the dignity of the learner being threatened or impugned. The question begins to crystallise around the question: how is human dignity related to the necessary receptivity involved in being taught?

Critical theory interprets “being taught” as a problem because of an implied superiority of the position of the teacher, the giver. This general concern about a transmission model is intensified in so far as there is also any attempt to take up a position on behalf of an “authority” which one represents: this is seen as even more of a self-arrogation of the teacher beyond those being taught. So, for example, Roger Simon worries that teachers, “forgetting our own limitations and speaking as if we were the mouthpiece of the universal,”¹⁶ can unleash terrible expressions of the Nietzschean will to power.

There seems to be a twofold aspect to this concern. The first is that there is a potentially unlimited movement, under a dynamism of personal arrogance, that would tend in the direction of the catechist seeking to achieve absolute hegemony. The catechist, speaking on behalf of the Transcendent, would seek increasing power over the learner, unless this movement towards transcendence was curtailed. This, then, is essentially a worry about power and its abuse.

The second worry appears to be about the effect of the movement towards transcendence on the catechist’s perspective on teaching and learning, and especially on the view taken of the dignity of the learner. The catechist, who must indeed

¹⁵ *CT*, 73.

¹⁶ Roger I. Simon, *Teaching against the Grain: Texts for a Pedagogy of Possibility*, (New York: Bergin and Garvey, 1992), 72.

speak the “word from above,”¹⁷ seeking to speak adequately with regard to the transcendent Source of his message, is seen as necessarily identifying himself more and more with the transcendent position, to the extent that he comes to see himself as the centre of the learning and teaching environment, thereby reducing the learners to the status of objects. As the catechist’s subjectivity moves more to the fore, the subjectivity of the learners recedes and the world the catechist faces is increasingly a world of pure objects. With a Midas-touch, the catechist is left facing a world emptied of subjectivity.

Because of the reluctance to accept a clear place for the activity of *teaching* in catechesis one tendency among those educationalists influenced by critical theory is to play down the importance of any systematic transmission of the faith. Attention is drawn instead to the informal contexts available for supporting the development of the Christian through the different stages of formation. However, due attention is no longer given to the central importance of the organic, comprehensive and systematic catechesis which all magisterial documents insist should lie at the heart of the transmission of the faith.¹⁸

A more radical response to concerns over the use of an educational model of teaching to incarnate a hegemony of power in favour of the teacher has been to reconceive of education as the place where questions are asked rather than answers provided. Representative of this position is the Jewish educationalist, Alan Block, who displays a love for this questions-without-answers approach. “My students, I remember, have been taught to demand answers,” he laments, and proposes rather: “The truth would never set us free, but perhaps, the pursuit of truth might approximate the exercise of a freedom great philosophers have only described.”¹⁹ Answers are cheap, he believes, whereas questions are costly; answers are easily given, whereas the proposing of questions is challenging. Mutuality is achieved by reducing the educational process to that of a common pursuit with no possibility of conclusion.

This last position is clearly an unworkable understanding of education. The notion of “questions but no answers” conceals the necessary interdependence that actually exists between two. John Paul’s observations in *Fides et ratio* are surely correct: he asks for a “primacy of philosophical enquiry,”²⁰ and argues that in fact

¹⁷ Jn 3:31; cf. 1 Thess 2:13. Thus: “We do not think up faith on our own. It does not come *from* us as an idea of ours but *to* us as a word from outside.” Joseph Ratzinger, *Gospel, Catechesis, Catechism*, (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1997), 30.

¹⁸ See, for example, *CT*, 21–22; *GDC*, 67; *CCC*, 5.

¹⁹ Alan A. Block, *Pedagogy, Religion and Practice: Reflections on Ethics and Teaching* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2007), 87.

²⁰ John Paul II, Encyclical Letter *Fides et ratio* (hereafter *FR*), 4.

questioning gradually ceases once it is acknowledged that no answers can be forthcoming. It is the depth of the possible *answers* that determines the depth of the questions that can be put to Being.²¹ Faced with the silence of Being we, like Hume, must turn to billiards or, with Wittgenstein, take up gardening, since “nobody aims at what he thinks he cannot attain.”²² The silencing of the answer is also the silencing of the question. The so-called “pursuit of truth” becomes the pursuit of the necessarily always-elusive. An education proposing an interest in questions with no answers very quickly ceases to be an education with any interest in significant questions.²³ Thus, one cannot maintain the dignity of those involved in catechesis merely by removing “answers” from the transmission of the Faith. Mary’s questions to Gabriel received responses.

Developing a Marian response

How might one begin to respond to the earlier points from a Marian perspective? It must be accepted, of course, that if Mary is seen as the one who is the focus for our understanding precisely because she has been incomparably *taught* then catechesis necessarily involves the role of a *teacher*. However, we should immediately note the strangeness of the accolade being awarded to Mary, from the point of view of critical theory. *Being taught* has become unaccountably a position of the highest dignity and merit. As we shall see, the Tradition considers God himself as the primary Teacher, and this fact is certainly part of the explanation; nonetheless, for now we should also note that this Teacher shares his role with others—originally the apostles and then all those authorised to teach with their authority. Within the Church’s understanding of the original pedagogy of God there is clearly a teaching role for the catechist. At the archetypal moment of the annunciation, when the Word was fully transmitted in history, this didactic role was served by the angel “sent from God.”²⁴ There can be no doubt, then, that direct teaching plays a central part in catechesis. As Kevane has convincingly argued, no one can read the great catecheses of the fourth century by Augustine, Ambrose, Cyril of Jerusalem

²¹ Where subjectivism and relativism about questions of truth are dominant, so that “the hope that philosophy might be able to provide definitive answers,” John Paul argues that “people rest content with partial and provisional truths, no longer seeking to ask radical questions about the meaning and ultimate foundation of human, personal and social existence” (FR, 5).

²² Aristotle, *Rhetoric* 1378b4.

²³ This argument has been made, wittily and at length, by Allan Bloom, *The Closing of the American Mind*, (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books), 1988.

²⁴ Lk 1:26.

and John Chrysostom and think anything other than that the style was essentially a didactic one. These bishops *taught* their catechumens.²⁵

At the same time, the figure of Mary in fact helps us to come to an appropriate appreciation for the place of *dialogue* in the process of the transmission of the faith. Alongside the didactic mode there is surely also a place for the dialogical. Luke's narrative of the annunciation seems, in fact, to accord a prominent place to dialogue. Magisterial documents on catechesis, also, speak of God's "dialogue of salvation"²⁶ being at the very heart of catechesis, so that the "wonderful dialogue that God undertakes with every person becomes its inspiration and norm."²⁷ And again: a catechesis inspired by the pedagogy of God "makes its own the process of dialogue."²⁸ God reveals to man the plan he is to accomplish and calls for a response in faith to that Revelation.²⁹

Within critical theory dialogue is typically seen as a more suitable and more "democratic" mode of education, enabling a range of views to be heard and considered within a relationship of mutual give and take; it seems to be respectful of the learner, speaking "with" rather than "to" the person, allowing the "other" into the teaching which is taking place. Indeed, in most teaching and learning models, dialogue is held to be of value, as an aid to developing the learner's potential, while encouraging the development of critical and intellectual skills through a mutual and shared engagement with questions. Champions of dialogue in teaching, such as Buber and Gadamer, also emphasise the value of dialogue as offering a learning and teaching context which is valuable, not only as a means of gaining greater knowledge and understanding, but also for the relational benefits it provides.

Still, it is generally accepted that these relational benefits do not appear automatically with the adoption of dialogue in teaching. Elizabeth Ellsworth sensibly notes that the value of dialogue in relation to personal values such as mutuality depends upon the teacher-learner relationship in the first place. Dialogue cannot achieve such a mutuality but rather *reflects* the character of the existing relationship.³⁰ There needs to be, in other words, an *already existing commitment* to an equality

²⁵ Eugene Kevane, *Catechesis in Augustine* (Villanova: Villanova University Press, 1989), 25–34.

²⁶ *GDC*, 143.

²⁷ *GDC*, 144.

²⁸ *GDC*, 143.

²⁹ This is the pattern of the prophetic call in the Old Testament. See, for example, the pattern of prophetic call-and-response for Abram (Gen 15:1–6), Moses (Ex 3:1–14), and Samuel (1 Sam 3:1–19). Sofia Cavalletti therefore rightly emphasises that there is a call here to "be attentive to the dialogue that is concretized in the covenant." *History's Golden Thread: The History of Salvation* (Chicago: Catechesis of the Good Shepherd Publications, 1999), 1.

³⁰ See Elizabeth Ellsworth, *Teaching Positions: Difference, Pedagogy and the Power of Address* (New York: Teachers College Press, 1997), 15–16. Dialogue is a "mode of address" that places

between catechist and learner for dialogue to take on this character. The adoption of dialogue as a mode of transmission will not, by itself, achieve a state of mutuality.³¹

Dialogue, though, is clearly an important dimension in the transmission of the faith, although it needs to be properly understood. Among the several forms³² that dialogue in teaching and learning can take, it is not to be thought of, for example, that the Faith could be “constructed” through dialogue. That would be to conflate the concept of teaching and learning by dialogue with something quite different: a theology of on-going Revelation. Dialogue can never become a tool for the revision of the doctrine of the Faith.³³ Dialogue in catechesis is unsuitable, therefore, for deriving definitions of the Faith, for discovering the content of the Faith, or for elaborating or seeking to develop the content of the Faith.³⁴

Moreover, we should notice at this point that in the annunciation narrative *it is God's dialogue with Mary* that is served by the angelic-human dialogue. It is the *Divine-human dialogue* of salvation which catechesis serves. Any dialogue style between catechist and learners serves this more fundamental dialogue. This entails the catechist knowing when to stand back from direct dialogue with the learner so that the freedom of the learner and the freedom of God can meet. The catechist “leaves” the learner at the conclusion of the dialogue: freedom is the hallmark of true catechesis.

teacher and learner in a particular relationship, depending upon the actual circumstances of their lives. Burbules makes a similar point, drawing attention to possible difficulties in the relationship between teachers and learners which a pedagogy of dialogue can conceal. See Nicholas C. Burbules, “The Limits of Dialogue and a Critical Pedagogy,” in *Revolutionary Pedagogies: Cultural Politics, Education, and Discourse of Theory*, Peter Trifonas, ed. (London: Routledge Falmer, 2000), 251–273.

³¹ Something like John Paul II's advocacy of friendship as the most fitting and appropriate context for learning is needed in order to allow the positive advantages of dialogue to truly flourish. See *FR*, 31–33 for his comments on the social environment needed for learning, for the development of a pedagogy of trust in a community of learners, and for the value of friendship in learning.

³² For example, Burbules, in a study of dialogue in teaching, distinguished between four major “types,” each with varying styles and aims: conversation, enquiry, instruction and debate. *Dialogue in Teaching: Theory and Practice* (New York: Teachers College Press, 1993).

³³ One's point of guidance here remains the teaching of Vatican I in *Dei Filius*, Ch.4: “For the teaching of faith, which God has revealed, has not been proposed as a philosophical discovery to be perfected by human ingenuity, but as a divine deposit handed over to the Spouse of Christ to be guarded faithfully and to be explained infallibly. Hence the meaning of sacred dogmas must perpetually be retained which Holy Mother Church has once declared.” Translated by J.F. Broderick, S.J., *Documents of Vatican Council I* (Collegeville: The Liturgical Press, 1971), 48. Cf. *DS* 3020.

³⁴ In this respect its role in catechesis is to be distinguished from that found in the classic Socratic method, where dialogue is often used as a means of uncovering definitions through shared enquiry into a subject.

We will need to return to this point, but it is already apparent that, with regard to the question of mutuality and equality, we can say that, if the catechist were to fall into a position of transcendent hubris his perspective would clearly be a false one because not recognising the primacy of God's position as Teacher. Precisely because it would be a false perspective, it would also be harmful to the catechist, and therefore offend against the catechist's own dignity. In fact, though, it is impossible to sustain a view of others as mere objects, and not implicate oneself—unless one were to embrace a fully-fledged Gnostic separation of the human spirit from the world—for, “If He is absent from the Universe, He is absent from yourselves, and you can have nothing to tell about Him or the powers that come from Him.”³⁵

But in any case, for a catechist to understand himself as an agent transmitting a transcendent Deposit of Faith, or representing a transcendent Teacher, does not in fact imply that one is placed in a false position. It simply need not involve hubris, but is rather a matter for humility. The involvement of the catechist in the teaching of divine Truth must first of all be understood to be simply an *affirmation of the dignity of the human person*. Considered in the broadest sense, this is a uniting of human with divine agency, a uniting that follows the dogmatic principle enunciated by Karl Stern who wrote of “the unutterable mystery of the ‘and’”: thus the Catholic faith speaks of God *and* his creatures, of God's plan *and* of man's free will, of man *and* woman, of Christ *and* the Church, and so on³⁶—and in the case of the “original pedagogy” of the faith it involves the uniting of God's action with the activity of the human person. God, as First Cause, is the First Teacher; and he uses human persons as secondary instruments, to teach on his behalf. God grants to his creatures “the dignity of acting on their own, of being causes and principles for each other.”³⁷ “The condition of man would be lowered if God had not wished to have man supply His word to men.”³⁸ So the catechist's dignity is not threatened.

But what about the dignity of the learner? Is the learner being placed in the unenviable position of an inferior partner in the educational process through being taught? Not necessarily. Even *if* we were to accept a simple view that saw the catechist as the provider of knowledge and understanding to one who lacks these, it is

³⁵ So Plotinus, *Enneads*, Stephen MacKenna, trans. (London: Faber and Faber 1969), II.9.16.

³⁶ Karl Stern, *The Flight From Woman* (New York: Farrar, Strauss and Giroux, 1965), 273.

³⁷ See *CCC*, 306–308. For illustrations of this general principle in different aspects of the Christian life see, for instance: *CCC*, 1071 (liturgy); *CCC*, 1695 (the moral life); *CCC*, 2564 (prayer). For this principle in general applied to catechesis see also Pierre De Cointet, Barbara Morgan, and Petroc Willey, *The Catechism of the Catholic Church and the Craft of Catechesis* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2008), 22–23.

³⁸ Augustine, *De Doctrina Christiana*, Durant W. Robertson, Jr., trans. (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill Educational Publishing, 1958), *Prolog.* 6.

not necessarily the case that the giver in such a relationship be seen as the superior figure. After all, gifts are normally given as a part of a relationship in which the *receiver* of the gift is understood to be the greater. Far from demonstrating the superiority of the catechist, if we are to think of a superior and an inferior, this picture of catechesis as transmission would reverse this way of thinking.

But such a model of giver and receiver is in any case inadequate for an understanding of teaching. When one teaches one does not lose what is taught. Augustine succinctly expresses the difference between the material and spiritual dimensions of life: “Everything which does not decrease on being given away is not properly owned when it is owned and not given.”³⁹ The catechist-learner relationship does not imply a “giving away,” so much as a sharing and imparting of what is present to the mind of the catechist and which is not thereby lost to the catechist on being shared. In fact the reverse is true, that teaching supports learning: the handing on of what one knows is also a consolidation of that knowledge. Augustine thus reassures the teacher: “it is not to be feared that He will cease giving me more when I have begun to use what he has already given me.”⁴⁰ Knowledge and understanding are not private possessions, such that where one mind holds an idea it must do so exclusively. Individual minds do not exist in isolation from one another: each belongs to a common world, which is the condition of knowledge of that world.

Indeed, full ownership in the realm of the spiritual consists in a handing on of that which is known; it consists in transmission. Truth is allied to love in this respect: there is an impetus towards communion within it. This is why teaching, says Augustine, provides an occasion for charity.⁴¹ The mind’s happiness lies in contemplating the entire order of the world, the community of all things. In the spiritual sphere of mind, it is the common world shared by all minds which is sought: *transmission is an enabling of communion.*

The truth that God is the principal Agent, in any case, places a clear boundary on possible human hubris. It is a common classical position that the idea of an action exists in the mind of the person who would accomplish it before the action itself is realised. In other words, our effects, before existing in themselves as effects, exist in us as causes.⁴² And we are causes, are agents, only derivatively, for God is the First Cause. All things are his effects, and all things exist first in him as

³⁹ *De Doctrina Christiana*, I, I, 1.

⁴⁰ *De Doctrina Christiana*, *Ibid.*

⁴¹ *De Doctrina Christiana*, Prol.6.

⁴² Cf. Plato, *Philebus* 27a.

Cause before they exist in themselves as effects. I am a secondary agent.⁴³ No human being can elevate himself into a position of absolute agency because he, too, is an effect, owing his being to God.⁴⁴

Moreover, the concern that any presumption to speak on behalf of a “universal perspective” is to be thought of as a possible threat to those one is teaching, as though one would then be forgetful of particular beings, is misplaced. The opposite is the case: the very universality of the message and the mission which the catechist presents, is actually a safeguard for all participants, grounding the mutual worth of all in the catechetical process. The message is for all, and that means that it is for the one who is *teaching* as well as for those being taught: there is no distinction.⁴⁵ The catechist never ceases to be also a learner in the school of faith: he is both teacher and learner.

Let us examine further how this sharing in God’s teaching takes place, because by doing so we shall see that not only is the dignity of the one catechising affirmed, but that the dignity of the one learning is also guarded. Augustine and Aquinas are two significant representatives of the central Christian tradition on learning, providing accounts of how learning takes place which draw especially from the Platonic and Aristotelian perspectives respectively. While their positions are not identical, they share certain important points in common. Most importantly they share the view that God is *the* Teacher, but that this understanding does not rule out a secondary human agency in teaching. Aquinas’s views in this area can be traced from an early position, in *II Sentences* 9 and 28, in which his understanding remains close to that of Augustine, to that held in *Questiones disputatae de veritate* 11 and then finally in the *Summa Theologica* 1a q.117, where he is strongly influenced by Aristotle’s understanding of potency and act and interior and exterior causality.⁴⁶ Essentially, however, for both Augustine and Aquinas, the educational process is seen as depending principally upon the engagement of the learner. The human teacher is important, but *always in a supporting*, rather than in the lead role. One way of describing this relationship between learner and teacher, which we find in Augustine and in the early Aquinas, is that for understanding one needs two things. The first is a clear presentation, so that an object might be made intelligible to the learner. This

⁴³ For a striking meditation on this fact of secondary agency, see Thomas Traherne, *Centuries* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1960), I, 38.

⁴⁴ Cf. Plato, *Phaedo* 61.

⁴⁵ As Aquinas notes, all human minds are of the same intrinsic value: “all human intellects are of one grade in the natural order” (*STb* I q.117 a. 1).

⁴⁶ For an analysis of the progression in Aquinas’s thinking on teaching and learning, see Vivian Boland, O.P., *St. Thomas Aquinas* (London: Continuum, 2007), 41–58, and for a detailed comparison of Aquinas and Augustine see Joseph M. Colleran, *The Treatises “De Magistro” of Saint Augustine and Saint Thomas* (New York: The Paulist Press, 1945).

might be a fairly simple matter in the case of things which are immediately intelligible so that they just need to be put before a person without explanation. Or it might be a more complex matter in the case of objects difficult to “see,” in which case the learner will need to be “led” to see it, moving by way of things already understood. The role of the teacher here is to present an object for understanding, or to guide a learner so that the learner can move towards this understanding. The teacher assists the learner in this way towards the truth by providing signs, usually in the form of words, that point to the truth that needs to be seen. The second thing needed for understanding is an interior light by which we understand. The teacher cannot provide this. The teacher, providing signs, is as it were using his finger to point to something. But the learner has actually to see that to which the finger points. No one can see for him. Thus, for instance, if a teacher were to say to me, “The tree sheds its leaves in autumn,” I know what this sentence means if and only if I know the realities to which these words refer: the words of the teacher are like signs, prompting me to look within myself, either by presenting images or pointing me to past images (i.e. memories). I do not learn directly from the teacher; he is the one who prompts me to learn from reality. We can certainly *believe* the teacher on the basis of the signs he gives to us. But *knowledge* is different—this requires contact with the real, and the opening of the understanding.

For Augustine, it is God alone who supplies the light for this understanding; he “illuminates” the mind so that it can see. He is the one who opens the mind to see and to understand. Aquinas, especially in his later work, places more emphasis on the potential of the learner with regard to this gaining of understanding. He uses an analogy with the human body and its need for healing. The body has within itself the potential for healing, although it sometimes needs assistance in the form of medicine. So the mind has the potential for understanding, although it, too, sometimes needs assistance from the teacher. In both cases, however, it is a matter of the doctor or teacher *assisting* the patient or learner. The doctor’s medicine helps nature to heal the body. The teacher helps the learner’s mind to reach and discover the truth. God is still the principal teacher, for it is he who has placed the power to understand within us, just as he is the Creator and Sustainer of nature.⁴⁷

In matters of faith, of course, we move to a new dimension of teaching and learning. Here we are not only speaking of God as the one who supplies the light of the intellect. God provides the *light of grace*, the prophetic light, whereby a person can assent with the will to what is proposed by the catechist. God affects us interi-

⁴⁷ Aquinas argues in the *Summa*, “As stated above, the teacher only brings exterior help, as the physician who heals: but just as the interior nature is the principal cause of the healing, so the interior light of the intellect is the principal cause of knowledge. But both of these are from God.” (*STB*. I, q.117, a.2, ad.1)

only, enabling us to respond in faith to that which is presented. Here Aquinas speaks of the Holy Spirit as the one who enables us to discover heavenly Wisdom by making us friends with God.⁴⁸ The gifts of the Holy Spirit are crucial for this movement towards God because they attune us to the action of God and allow us to be sensitive to his leading of us. St Thomas put it like this:

Now it is evident that whatever is moved must be proportionate to its mover: and the perfection of the mobile as such, consists in a disposition whereby it is disposed to be well moved by its mover. Hence the more exalted the mover, the more perfect must be the disposition whereby the mobile is made proportionate to its mover: thus we see that a disciple needs a more perfect disposition in order to receive a higher teaching from his master Consequently man needs yet higher perfections, whereby to be disposed to be moved by God.⁴⁹

The gifts of the Holy Spirit are given in order to provide us with the disposition needed to be docile. Because the journey we are following takes us beyond our natural human resources we need the supernatural aids of God to assist us, and this assistance consists in making us teachable and responsive to God's action in us. St Thomas quotes Isaiah: "The Lord . . . has opened my ear, and I do not resist."⁵⁰ What is called for from the learner is not so much activity as a *responsive disposition*, a willingness to be led.

Let us return now to the way in which a Marian-inspired view of catechesis can respond to catechetical views that are influenced by critical theory. Henry Giroux explains that any understanding of the educational process that is inspired by critical pedagogy "attempts to expand the capacities necessary for human agency."⁵¹ The focus lies on human agency understood in terms of *activity*. The crucial insight that Christianity can offer, especially in the person and example of Mary, is that *receptivity can itself be the highest form of agency*. We see the truth above all, of course, in the Person of Christ himself: salvation is made available principally through his *Passion*, through his capacity *to receive and to bear* all that belongs to the human condi-

⁴⁸ See the helpful exposition by Michael Sherwin, "Christ the Teacher in St Thomas's Commentary on the Gospel of John," in *Reading John with St. Thomas Aquinas: Theological Exegesis and Speculative Theology*, Michael Dauphinais and Matthew Levering, eds. (Washington: Catholic University of America Press, 2005), 173–193.

⁴⁹ *STh.* I-II q.68, a.1.

⁵⁰ Is 50:5.

⁵¹ Henry Giroux, "Democracy, Education, and the Politics of Critical Pedagogy," in *Critical Pedagogy: where are we now?* Peter McLaren and Joe L.Kincheloe, eds. (New York: Peter Lang, 2007), 2.

tion, including the consequences of sin—which is why St Paul exhorts members of the Body of Christ to imitate the Master and “bear one another’s burdens and so fulfil the law of Christ.”⁵²

It is significant, then, that Mary stands at the foot of the Cross, identifying with Christ in the hour of his passion, and receiving from him *there* her motherhood of the members of his body in the representative form of the beloved disciple. The teaching of the Second Vatican Council carefully notes the close links in the transmission of the faith between Mary’s motherhood and the motherhood of the Church: “the Church indeed ... by receiving the word of God in faith becomes herself a mother. By preaching and Baptism she brings forth sons, who are conceived by the Holy Spirit and born of God, to a new and immortal life.”⁵³

Mary’s sharing in the passion, and in the work of saving receptivity, began at the annunciation. As we have seen, the narrative of the annunciation is accorded so central a place in catechesis since “For the first time in the plan of salvation and because his Spirit had prepared her, the Father found the dwelling-place where his Son and his Spirit could dwell among men.”⁵⁴

Remembering that the perfection of Revelation is essentially the fulfilment of *the capacity to receive the gift of God*, we have at the Incarnation the fulfilling of Revelation in history in the person of Mary, prepared and made ready for the reception of the divine Son This is why the historical moment of the Annunciation is the living source for understanding the heart of catechesis.⁵⁵

⁵² Gal 6:2. For a good treatment of receptivity as agency see Carol McMillan, *Woman, Reason and Nature* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1980), and for an insightful treatment of the Passion of Christ as a bearing of reality see William H. Vanstone, *The Stature of Waiting* (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1981). This understanding requires an anthropology which gives due weight to the passions, and studies such as that by Pinckaers are important for providing a positive account of the passions in the light of rationalist and voluntarist tendencies that have been suspicious of the place of emotions in the moral life. See Servais Pinckaers, “Re-appropriating Aquinas’ Account of the Passions,” in *The Pinckaers Reader: Renewing Catholic Moral Theology*, John Berkman and Craig S. Titus, eds. (Washington: The Catholic University of America Press, 2005). Within the notion of *passio* as receptivity, St. Thomas makes room not only for an affective passivity as a capacity for exchange, but also *passio* as receptivity of *being*, characterising both feeling and intelligence (see *STh.*, I, q.22, a.1–2). For a discussion of Aquinas’s understanding of the passions in Christ’s life, and in our own insofar as we are called to participate in Christ’s life, see also Craig S. Titus, “Passions in Christ: Spontaneity, Development and Virtue,” *The Thomist* 73.1 (2009), 53–87.

⁵³ *LG*, 64.

⁵⁴ *CCC*, 721.

⁵⁵ Petroc Willey, “The Pedagogue and the Teacher,” in *The Pedagogy of God: Its Centrality in Catechesis and Catechist Formation*, 44–45.

In Mary the “Mother of the living”⁵⁶ standing at the Cross, we see the beginning of the Church, “the school of the word of God” in which “the disciple, thanks to the gift of the Holy Spirit, grows like his Teacher.”⁵⁷ In the on-going drama of the reception of the Divine Word in the Church, the teacher is certainly dignified with a participation in a divinely-governed process, but there is no question of any position of hegemony. The teacher is at the service of the “Marian dimension” of the Church, learning this service ultimately from the Queen herself, the Mother of God and the model of receptive learning of the faith.

⁵⁶ *CCC*, 494, referencing *LG*, 56.

⁵⁷ *GDC*, 142.

