

**“MY VOCATION AS A CATECHIST”
THE LIFE-LONG EXPERIENCE OF A BISHOP IN HANDING ON THE FAITH**

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I was ordained a priest in 1966. At the time there was much excitement about the Second Vatican Council. One of the things about which we were excited was the emphasis on the ministry of the Word, due in great part to the *Constitution on Divine Revelation*, one of the greatest achievements of the Council. The *Constitution* was an emphatic affirmation of the Catholic biblical movement given impetus by Pope Pius XII with his encyclical, *Divino Afflante Spiritu* written in 1943. Pius XII gave credit to his predecessors Leo XIII and Pius X for their contributions to Catholic biblical scholarship. Leo XIII established the Biblical Commission and praised and approved the school for biblical studies, the *École Pratique d'Études Bibliques* at the site of St. Stephen's martyrdom, Jerusalem, Jordan, founded by the Order of Preachers. He also wrote the first encyclical on biblical studies *Providentissimus Deus*. Pius X founded the Pontifical Biblical Institute, and Benedict XV wrote his encyclical on biblical studies, *Spiritus Paraclitus*. Some of you are much more knowledgeable than I of the problems that the early years of the biblical movement in the Catholic Church had. Nonetheless Pius XII did open the door wider for the advancement of the Biblical movement.

From Fr. John Linskens, biblical scholar at the Mexican American Cultural Center, we learned how the encyclical of Pius XII may have come about. Father Linskens was in Rome around the time the encyclical was written. Cardinal Augustin Bea, SJ, was the confessor for Pius XII, and every Saturday afternoon, he would go to the Vatican to hear the Pope's confession. People noticed that the cardinal spent the whole afternoon with the Pope and wondered if the Pope had many sins. Cardinal Bea, being a biblical scholar, was probably sharing his ideas on biblical scholarship with Pope Pius XII, and those visits were what led to the writing of the encyclical. It is thought that Cardinal Bea had a hand in what is written in the encyclical.

Other things were happening that lay the groundwork to the renewal of the Church in our day. The liturgical movement was making headway in the decades preceding the Second Vatican Council, especially with European pioneers among the Benedictines and others. The catechetical movement was in ferment too. One person who gathered liturgists and catechists at conferences throughout the world was Fr. Johannes Hofinger, S.J., who had been a student of Fr. Josef Jungmann, S.J., who taught and wrote prolifically at Innsbruck, Austria, on catechetics and homiletics. Father Jungmann's contribution to the catechetical movement was his emphasis on kerygmatic catechesis. It was a call for us to teach what the Apostles had taught in the first preaching of Jesus Christ as the *kerygma*.

Father Hofinger, who became a friend and co-worker with our catechetical team in Tehuacán, Puebla, Mexico, organized conferences in Germany, France,

Belgium, Italy, Austria, the Philippines, Colombia and in the United States. The Biblical, liturgical and catechetical movements makes one conclude that the Second Vatican Council did not happen all of a sudden, but was decades in preparation by pioneers in those fields.

In 1966 catechetics was being given great attention, and since I have been attracted to the ministry of the Word by way of teaching and preaching, I decided to make catechetics my specialty. In 1967 I accepted a scholarship to the Pius XII Religious Education Center in Detroit. This center was affiliated with the prestigious center of religious education, *Lumen Vitae* in Belgium. The program was connected also with the University of Detroit from which I received my Master's Degree.

Where did the interest in catechetics begin for me? Allow me to share with you my journey of faith and the people and events that led to my attraction to catechesis. I was born and raised in Bay City, Texas. There, my Catholic faith began and was nurtured.

The first church that our small Mexican community in Bay City had was an old discarded railroad passenger car. It was bought for us by the "Anglo" parish on the other side of town because, as it was explained to me later, the parishioners there did not want the Mexicans around. When my grandparents and family arrived in Bay City, they were not allowed in the church and had to attend Mass looking through the windows. Later they were allowed to enter the church but had to use the back pews. It was in that railroad passenger car that I was prepared for my first communion.

The catechist for my first communion was Daría Acosta. I don't remember much about her nor what she taught us besides the prayers, but I do recall that she was well liked and respected by everyone. She is still regarded that way in her senior years. When I became a priest she was proud that she had taught me, and when I became a bishop, there was no prouder person in town next to my mother. Daría was called to be a catechist, together with millions of others who have shared in the mission to hand on the faith over the two thousand years of the Church's existence.

Before my first communion preparation there had been my grandmother, Isidora Padrón Espinosa; we called her Doña Lolita. I think she at least bordered on heresy. She taught me that God was watching me, so I had better behave. He was 'up there,' behind the clouds, looking down on me to see how I behaved. I pictured him as taking note of all my good and bad actions. At the end of my life he would judge me according to my behavior. He would send me either to heaven or to hell. It was a God to be feared.

Doña Lolita told us that we should stay away from Don Cecilio, our next door neighbor, and not let the ball with which we were playing go into his yard. He was tall, very dark, and had a big mustache. He was a veritable Mexican Silas Marner. We asked our grandmother, "Why is Don Cecilio such a bad man?" Her answer was, "He does three things that are bad: first, he plays cards (since he was a bachelor, he probably played solitaire); secondly, he drinks wine, and thirdly, he reads the Bible!"

I always tell the people that those are three things I learned in the seminary, especially of course, to read the Bible.

As a priest one of my first assignments was to the Diocese of Tehuacán, Puebla, Mexico. I was part of a very creative team composed of a brother Basilian priest and six women religious who belong to the Missionary Catechists of the Sacred Hearts of Jesus and Mary. They were popularly referred to as *Las Violetas*, a name they acquired when they were founded. The priest was Father William Max Murphy, C.S.B., the priest who had figured significantly in my early childhood.

My first direct experience with Fr. Max was one warm summer afternoon as my brother, Pete, and I waited for catechism to start. Fr. Max came up to me and said, “I need you tonight to serve at rosary and benediction.” Of course I was there. I remember spilling the lit piece of charcoal on the carpet in the sanctuary. (The hole in the carpet would remain there for years to remind me of my initiation as an altar server.) I did not return, at least not right away. Two weeks later Fr. Max asked, “Why haven’t you been coming to help me?” I answered by saying that I thought he wanted me only that one evening. He said, “I need you ALL the time!” I now interpret those words as God’s call. It was the beginning of my vocation. From then on I was at the mission church as often as I could. It became my second home.

The *Violeta* sisters had been my catechists. I was captivated by their beautiful Spanish, their deep spirituality and their skill in presenting the Gospel message in examples and stories.

In Tehuacán our family catechetical program, which I will describe later, produced hundreds of catechists of parents. They had to have a name; so we asked them what they wanted to call themselves. They chose to call themselves *apóstoles* or apostles. They understood that they shared the mission and function of the first twelve apostles. They too were called as the first twelve. I remember the joy and enthusiasm that should characterize those who carry the Good News.

It is altogether right and fitting that the task of a catechist be addressed as a “vocation.” A month from now I will be celebrating my fortieth anniversary as a priest and my twenty-fifth as a bishop. Throughout those years I have considered my teaching role and the preaching of the Word as paramount in my priestly and episcopal vocation. From the vantage point of the first catechist of a diocese and I can assure you that those who are involved in passing on the faith to others are very special people in the Church. Almost every parish that I serve has among their parishioners the most respected members of the parish, and these are usually women who have been catechists most of their lives.

In 1971 the first International Catechetical Congress in Rome was held. It was convoked by the Vatican through the Congregation of the Clergy headed by Cardinal John Wright. I was invited to be part of the delegation from Mexico. What I distinctly remember is that I was not too enthusiastic about the closing session with Pope Paul VI. I confess that I had this bias regarding the hierarchy. I no longer have that bias. I decided to go to the audience with catechists from throughout the world,

and when the Pope came out and spoke to us, I changed my attitude towards Paul VI because he was so affirming of the catechists. He started out by saying that we were among his most favorite people in the world and that he valued us enormously. He related the story of what happened at the end of the Council. A venerable old cardinal went up to him and said, “Now, Your Holiness, we must start with a catechism of Vatican II, as there was one from the Council of Trent.” Pope Paul VI replied, “No, Your Eminence, there will not be a catechism of the Council for the whole Church. The catechism of Vatican II will come from the catechists of the world.” He then stretched his arms towards us and said, “The catechism of Vatican II will come from you. I will be waiting to see what you create.” It was around the time of the 1971 Congress that the first universal directory on catechesis was published by the Vatican. Not long after that, work began in the United States for our own directory on religious education.

It was around that time that a catechetical team consisting of Fr. Max Murphy, C.S.B., and a group of six *Violeta* sisters began the creation of the program *Catequesis Familiar*.

What were the reasons behind the concepts of this program? The Basilian Fathers, to which I belong, had gone to Mexico City to work one of the poorest *barrios* in the outskirts of the city. Father Murphy was one of those priests. During the first years in the parish, San Juan Crisóstomo in San Juan de Aragón, catechism for first communion was conducted in the traditional manner. Twice a year, hundreds

would make their first communion. It did not take long for the priests and sisters to be completely frustrated with the fact that 90 percent of these children never returned for any kind of instruction. The parish, it appeared, was simply a first communion factory.

Father Murphy was reminded by the sisters that their charism had been to work with mothers in the faith formation of their children. “Why not involve the mothers in the first communion preparation of their children?” asked Fr. Murphy. It was not too long after that the team concluded that not just the mothers but also the fathers needed to be involved.

Two things then happened. The Basilians and the *Violeta* sisters were invited to the newly-established Diocese of Tehuacán in the state of Puebla by Bishop Rafael y Ayala. Around this time the Canadian Catechism had been published. It was also called the “Come to the Father” series. This program came as a result of intense collaboration among religious educators, theologians, child psychologists, and biblical scholars. What was unique about the program besides its emphasis on the Bible was the inclusion of parental involvement in the faith formation of their children. This is exactly what Fr. Murphy was looking for. He looked at the first three years of the Canadian Catechism and concluded that this would be an excellent way to form people in the faith. He saw that this program, originally intended for children, could be adapted for adults. The team went to Tehuacán in 1969. I was asked to join them

the following year. I was about to begin the most exciting years in my work in evangelization.

What was the content of *Catechesis Familiar*? The first year concentrated on the Three Persons of the Trinity, the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Each Person was described in terms of their function and how they relate to us. It also explained how each of the three Persons were related among themselves. For example, the Son reveals the Father, and God the Father and his Son, Jesus, send the Holy Spirit.

The second year focused on the sacraments, especially baptism, Eucharist, and penance. It was during this year that parents became involved in the immediate preparation of their children for the sacraments of penance and first eucharist.

The third year was on the “Church united in love with the Father and the Son through the Holy Spirit.” This year concentrated on the presence of the Holy Spirit in the Church. It also dwelled on how the disciples of Jesus live their lives. It emphasized the Christian life lived in love and charity. In a simple way it explained how we are called to continuous conversion and to grow in our love for one another. I think what was especially new for many of the people that we served was the emphasis on the Risen Lord. This third year prepared people to become involved in evangelization and invited them to share what they had learned and lived in the past three years.

What was the method used? I strongly believe that the method that was used was as effective and as creative as the content. First of all and foremost, it was a way

of showing people especially how to meditate on the Word of God. In fact, the word, “meditate,” was used instead of the words “class” or “lessons.” The people said among themselves, “We are going to meditate on the Word of God.” They were told early on that the Word of God had to be lived and it could not remain on the printed page alone. The word on the printed page is dead, it has no life of its own. It comes alive when we put it into practice. The gathering of groups of parents was held in private homes. There was no food or drinks served except perhaps water.

The gatherings had this format: First there was a spontaneous prayer that everyone would come and that they all would be open to receive God’s Word. They then began sharing as to how they had meditated and lived out the previous week’s theme. They also shared as to how they were able to impart and reflect the Word with their children or with others. They referred to these as *experiencias*. After sharing their *experiencias*, they began the reflection on the theme for the following week. They were given simply-worded leaflets of about four pages each. They were expected to memorize the biblical passage associated with each theme.

One of the things that help make the program effective was the team itself. We would meet every morning during the week to study the themes we were to conduct with the people. We did our own praying and sharing. We also devoted quite a bit of time to the study of Vatican II documents, particularly those on divine revelation and the liturgy.

After we had established a good number of groups of parents, we would devote the afternoons and evenings to visit the groups to see how they were doing.

The program had a holistic aspect to it. I have already mentioned the learning of biblical texts, meditation and reflection, prayer, and sharing the Word. In addition to these, there was also the liturgical component. The themes were so basic and general that we were able to incorporate into our preaching something from the theme of the week. Many of the churches where our people worshiped made banners with the text of the week so the people would be reminded of the scriptures for the week.

At some point we recognized the dynamics of the Word of God: the Word of God is proclaimed, meditated, lived out, shared, and celebrated. When we presented the program in other dioceses, we would share this holistic approach.

How did we begin the program in a given community? At the invitation of a pastor, we would go to a parish and preach a week-long mission. This would involve visiting homes during the day, and celebrating the Mass and preaching in the evenings. At the end of the week we would announce that we would return to the parish but this time would visit homes where groups of parents and other adults would gather. It began with the first theme and immediately we were asked, "How long is this going to last?" Our answer was, "As long as you want it." It seemed that the more we went, the more they wanted to participate. What was happening was that they were gaining a very simple but profound understanding of the elements of their faith. It was, indeed, as St. Anselm put it, "Faith seeking understanding."

If there was any one truth that may have been completely new to the people was the resurrection of Our Lord. On the Day of the Dead and on Good Friday, death seemed to be where we are all headed, once they began to understand the resurrection of Jesus and how we are resurrected in Him, there seemed to be the joy and hope that comes from those who hear the Word of God as Gospel or as Good News. One house in particular had had the tradition of erecting and decorating a huge *altar* for the dead, decorated with marigolds, fruit, bread of the dead, and other food to welcome the souls of the dead that supposedly come on All Souls' Day. We visited this home one All Souls' Day and found that there was no altar. We asked the lady of the house, "Why?" She answered, "I think it is silly to think that the poor souls come down here to eat what we have prepared for them. They are risen, they are in the house of God, they are enjoying the heavenly banquet. Why would they want to come down and eat our stale bread and dried up oranges?" It was very satisfying to us when we visited the cemeteries on All Souls' Day and found the biblical texts we had taught them such as, "He is not here. He is risen." Another source of great satisfaction the way they began celebrating the Triduum with its culminating celebration on Easter.

There are several things that we, the team learned from the people themselves:

1. The first is the principle of evangelization. I experienced evangelization in my own life. It was true, I learned, evangelization is the coming together of the Christ that I bring and the Christ that is already in the minds and hearts of the people I was serving. They served me. We served each other.

2. There is much that we learned from the way that God reveals himself is the way in which we can reveal God to others. God reveals himself, as a friend (*Constitution on Divine Revelation*, No. 2). The person of the catechist has to present not only the message in an attractive manner but must himself or herself project the kindness and love of God.

3. In the process of catechesis, there are three entities: God, the catechist, and the one being catechized. The catechist is presenting God to the catechized, and the catechized to God. In order to be qualified to make that introduction, that catechist must know God and he must know the person being catechized. The catechist must develop a strong relationship, usually through prayer and meditation, with the Divine Persons. It also, of course, includes the intellectual discipline of study.

4. In the history of salvation, God reveals himself through events and experiences. After the People of God, both in the Old and the New Testaments, have their experiences, they will remember and reflect on those experiences and arrive at the message that God wanted to give them through those events. Similarly, God speaks to me in my own personal experiences. The people with whom we worked shared their experiences with the Word, experiences through which they discovered God speaks.

I recall the experience shared by a father of a young boy. They were at the beginning of the program when God the Father is presented as Creator and Protector. The themes they had reflected on were: “Creation reveals the power and love of God, our Father,” which included the biblical text from a psalm, “Lord, how great and how

wonderful you are!” The second theme was “God is greater than everything that exists.” This week they were reflecting on the theme, “God our Father is Always With Us,” and the biblical text was “Do not be afraid, I am always with you.” The father shared that he was walking with his son to a place where they would gather wood. The dad wondered how he would use the occasion to remind his son that he need not be afraid, that God was always with him. He asked the son, “If I asked you to come back tomorrow for wood, would you come by yourself?” The son thought for a moment and then responded, “I can come by myself, dad, and I won’t be afraid as long as I remember the words, ‘Do not be afraid, I am always with you.’” They kept on walking and came upon a large tree that had burst with flowers. Both father and son stood in awe of this beautiful tree. The dad noticed that the son was amazed and asked him, “Son, what do we say when we see something beautiful from God our Father?” The son closed his eyes, placed his hands with palms upraised and said, “My God, how great and how wonderful you are!”

5. When we catechize we create memories and plant seeds. The harvest that comes as a result of planting, we may not see, “Those who plant do not reap.” It could be that for the time being the Word of God is not seen as effective. Later in life, however, when people undergo crises in their lives, they may recall the Word of God that was planted in their hearts ears before, and then the Word of God begins to bear fruit. It is like what happens in my part of the world. We live in a desert land where it does not usually rain very much. For years the desert remains barren and desolate.

Then all of a sudden, after heavy spring rains, the desert blooms. The seeds were there all the time, even in the barren years; they were lying dormant, waiting for nature to give them life and then share the glory of God's creation.

6. The reflecting and meditating that I have tried to describe implies listening, real listening. This listening doesn't just have to do with our ears but also with our heart and attitude. Listening to God's Word means the willingness to respond to it. In the scriptures we have example after example of people who heard. There was little Samuel who answered with the answer that God wants from all of us, "Speak, Lord. Your servant is listening." There are others: Mary and Joseph of Nazareth, Zacchaeus, Sts. Peter and Paul, and Mary Magdalene.

7. With regards to the sacraments, the catechetical process is of the essence. We must lead people to commitment with every sacrament or ritual. As Fr. Hofinger would say, "You can have commitment without ritual, but you cannot have ritual without commitment."

8. Together with what I just stated, is the way in which we present what we might require before a sacrament or a ritual is celebrated. If we make a requirement that people have to come to a certain number of classes or sessions to prepare for a sacrament, we had better make sure that what we require them to do is worthwhile.

9. In my life long experience as a catechist, I have become more and more convinced of the Aristotelian pedagogical principle: "The question is the universal instrument of all good teaching." I am not just referring to the method commonly

used that asked the question: “What do you think?” The questions have to make people think and elicit from them basic questions of our faith.

10. I have learned that to consult with people in writing pastoral letters. Presently I am writing a letter on “Handing on the Faith” and have involved parents, grandparents, catechists, pastors, religious and young people. I am getting some very useful input.

When I became bishop in 1981 in San Antonio, Texas, Archbishop Flores told me that my life would change radically. Little did I know just how radical that change would be. What had prepared me for the administration of a diocese was having been the executive vice president of the Mexican American Cultural Center. The title meant, in practical terms, that Fr. Virgil Elizondo, the president, would come in from a trip, fill us with new ideas about programs and activities, and then take off again. It was up to me, the executive vice president, to see that things happened. Thanks a lot, Fr. Virgil!

What prepared me for being the first catechist of the diocese was not only the privileged experience of having taught at MACC but also and mostly from my teaching and preaching in Mexico with the *Catequesis Familiar* program. I arrived in Las Cruces, New Mexico, to start the new diocese on October 18, 1982. It was the Feast of St. Luke, the Apostle. I purposely chose that date to remind me of my function as successor to the Apostles and of my function as teacher of the Word of God. There are many things in my episcopal ministry that I enjoy, some things more

than others. But what I really enjoy is sharing the Word of God. This task does not come easy for me, especially the preparation that this function entails. The question I always ask myself is, “If Jesus were coming to this place and time, what would he say?” Involved in answering this question is consideration to the particular needs and signs of the times that confront this or that particular congregation.

I am often called to speak to pastoral musicians, and I tell them that they must think of the words that they are singing and to put their whole heart and soul into their music. I say the same thing to myself when I preach: “If you believe it, then preach it,” because what we truly believe will come out in a convincing way to the hearers of the Word. If we preachers are not convinced, how can we expect others to be convinced?

The function of the bishop is not only for himself to preach and teach but to enable others to develop their own teaching and preaching skills. Therefore, I see as one of my main functions to train catechists, directors of religious education, seminarians, and deacons, as well as to encourage priests to develop their preaching.

Presently in the Diocese of Las Cruces we are preparing for our 25th anniversary and beyond. Our theme, “Handing on the Faith,” will necessitate a prolonged follow-up. You and I know of the crisis that the Catholic Church faces in our country these days. Many thousands have left the Church, and many of those who remain are not able to articulate even the basic teachings of our Church, including

such concepts as the Trinity, the Incarnation, the Eucharist, the resurrection, and even the concept of the Church itself.

The Protestant Evangelicals seem to be more attractive to many of our young people than is the Catholic Church. We are told that 50 percent of Catholics do not marry Catholics, but those of other faiths. Social justice and peace have a long-standing tradition and are consistent themes in the life of the Church. Nonetheless, when bishops and priests preach the social message of the gospel, there can be strong expressions of dissent from even practicing Catholics.

We have conducted an extensive consultation for the writing of a pastoral letter on "Handing on the Faith." What comes across over and over again is that God speaks to us through others. People owe their faith to parents, grandparents, a friend, a priest, or a woman religious. It appears that it is not so much a convincing argument that draws them to Christ and his Church but the witness of an individual or group of individuals.

What will the Church be like 50 or 100 years from now? These are questions that we must all ask. The answer is obvious, the way the Church will be then depends on what we do now. Each generation of believers is handed a bright burning torch, the torch of faith. It is up to us to keep it burning and to hand it on to forthcoming generations. The challenge is not only for ourselves to be convinced of the Gospel, but to convince others through our words, and especially through the way we live our lives. The proof of whether we are really convinced about the Gospel is that we have

a passion to pass it on to others. With St. Paul we should all be able to say with a firm conviction, “Woe to me if I do not preach” (1 Cor. 9:16).