

THE NEO-CATECHUMENAL WAY

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Introduction

The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* not only highlights a need for growing in baptismal grace but in view of this growth it also draws attention to a post-Baptismal *catechumenate*.¹ This has become even more relevant today in the face of growing desacralization, dechristianization and crisis of faith. In 2005 Cardinal Ratzinger highlighted the need of an “adult faith”² in today’s context of relativism, in which even the Church’s mission is considered with relativistic categories or is even opposed. As all the reforms in the Church have given rise to new initiatives inspired by the Holy Spirit, so also, after the Second Vatican Council many realities have been generated by the Holy Spirit. One such example is the Neo-Catechumenal way. With the original aim of making the sign of the missionary Church visible in parishes, through the renewal of Baptism in stages (using rites which belong to the *catechumenate*) lived in small communities, the Neo-Catechumenal Way has grown over the years and today is spread in over 120 countries with nearly 45,000 communities made up of brothers and sisters who are rediscovering their baptism. Baptism lived fully in this manner has continuously borne fruits of conversion in the form of Christian communities with adult faith in parishes (*ecclesia re-implantatio*), Christian families open

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¹CCC 1231. See also, Second Vatican Council, *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, 64; PAUL VI, *Evangelii Nuntiandi*, 44; JOHN PAUL II, *Catechesi Tradendæ*, 44; *Christifideles Laici*, 61; CIC 851 § 1.

²Card. Joseph Ratzinger, “Homily: *Misa Pro Eligendo Romano Pontifice*”, in *L’Osservatore Romano*, English Edition, 20 April 2005, p. 3.

to life, local catechists, itinerant catechists willing to go all over the world, families in mission involved in the *Missio ad Gentes* in desacralised areas or in areas where there is no Christian presence (*ecclesia implantatio*), and presbyters for the evangelization, etc.

1. Origins

The Initiators of the ways are Mr. Kiko Argüello a painter born in León (Spain) and Ms Carmen Hernandez a graduate in Chemistry and formed in the institute *Misioneras de Cristo Jesús*. After a strong experience of conversion and inspired by Charles de Foucauld (who had given the formula of living silently in the midst of the poor as a poor) and a speech of Pope John XXIII (in which he was speaking of a Church of the poor, that the renewal of the Church was to come about through the poor) Kiko went to live in the shanty town of Palomeras Altas. Here, among the poor, little by little, seeing the power of the Word of God in transforming the lives of people and in creating a community³ marked by its communion, and leading to a liturgy as a response to this Word that was listened to and welcomed, a Kerygmatic-catechetical synthesis began to take place. He was later joined by Carmen, who had been in contact with the renewal of the Second Vatican Council. She too went to live in the slums of Palomeras Altas, where she wanted to form a group to go and evangelize Bolivia and she met Kiko. "As a result of their collaboration, there began to take shape an itinerary of formation of a catechumenal type."⁴ Through Msgr. C. Murcillo the then Archbishop of Madrid (who had participated in the Council and had seen what was developing in Palomeras Altas as a fulfilment of the Council) the way drew attention of the hierarchy. "In 1972, the Neocatechumenate was studied in depth by the Congregation for Divine Worship, which was in the process of publishing the RCIA. [...] the name Neocatechumenate was agreed on with them [the Congregation for divine worship] to denote an itinerary of post-baptismal Christian formation."⁵

At the request of Msgr. Murcillo the Neo-Catechumenal Way moved to the parishes of Madrid. Subsequently, Kiko and Carmen were

³As Pope Benedict XVI says, speaking of the Word of God, that it "is not only 'informative' but 'performative.' That means: the Gospel is not merely a communication of things that can be known—it is one that makes things happen and is life-changing" (Pope Benedict XVI, *Spe Salvi*, 2).

⁴Giuseppe GENNARINI, "The Rediscovery of the Catechumenate in Karol Wojtyła and the Approval of the Neocatechumenal Way", in *Neocatechumenale Iter: Statuta*, Chirico Editore, Rome 2003, p. 149.

⁵Ezechiele PASOTTI, "Historical Note", in *Neocatechumenale Iter: Statuta*, Chirico Editore, Rome 2003, p. 125.

invited to Rome. Also here, they began their work in a slum of Rome among the poor before they moved to the Parishes with the blessing of Cardinal Angelo Dell'Acqua, the Vicar General of His Holiness for the city of Rome. Soon the way began to spread also in parishes of the diocese of Rome, the aim being to open a way of evangelization, forming small communities within the parish, centred on a tripod: Word, Liturgy and Community. Thus the way became a process of maturing in faith that rebuilds the Christian community, which in turn becomes a sign for the world and resisting the process of secularisation. In the midst of many miracles and fruits of conversion, several bishops, concerned about the situation of secularisation in many parishes, requested catechists from other cities or nations. This gave rise to the birth of itinerant catechists.⁶ Thus itinerant teams for the evangelization were formed, consisting of celibate men and women, or married couples and a priest who has the permission of his Bishop or religious superior. With this the Neo-Catechumenal Way began to spread in many countries. Little by little, faith lived in small communities began to produce more and more charisms such as these in the form of families willing to leave their cities, houses, jobs to evangelise as a family (families in mission), vocation to the presbyterate and vocations to religious life etc. This growth has also seen the birth of the *Redemptoris Mater* missionary seminaries in many dioceses, thanks to the prophetic vision of the initiators of the Neo-Catechumenal Way. "These seminaries are diocesan and Missionary."⁷

2. Structure of the Neo-Catechumenal Way

The Neo-Catechumenal Way, being an itinerary of Christian initiation is lived in the parish, the privileged place where the Church as mother and teacher brings to birth God's children in the baptismal font and "gestates" them to new life. The centre of the whole Neo-Catechumenal journey is a synthesis between Kerygmatic preaching, change in moral life and liturgy. This Kerygmatic preaching, developed among the poor, provides hermeneutical keys which are needed not only to listen and understand Scriptures but also to live fully the grace of the Sacraments beginning with one's own baptism. It thus illuminates the whole of Christian life.

Therefore, the Neo-Catechumenal Way begins in a parish at the request of the parish priest in communion with the bishop of the diocese. It consists of the initial catecheses (for which the faithful come freely following an invitation to all the faithful during Sunday

⁶Ezechiele PASOTTI, "Historical Note", p. 126.

⁷Ibid., p. 128.

Mass) followed by the Neo-Catechumenal itinerary organised according to the three phases of Christian initiation: pre-catechumenate, catechumenate and election. With those who come for the initial catecheses and express their desire to continue, during the convivence (a two day retreat) at the end of the initial catecheses, a community is formed that meets twice a week: 1. For a celebration of the Word of God, usually with four readings according to the themes indicated for each stage; 2. For a celebration of the Eucharist lived in the small communities so that they may be gradually initiated into full, conscious and active participation in the divine mysteries. In the three phases of Christian initiation of the Neo-Catechumenal itinerary, the objective is the renewal of Baptism in stages (using rites which belong to the *catechumenate*) lived in small communities. Attention is focussed on initiating the faithful in listening to the Word of God, participating actively in the divine mysteries, praying the prayer of the Church, participating in the Church's missionary endeavour, living and professing the Church's profession of faith etc. Special care is taken as regards the relationship with Mary till finally the baptismal promises are renewed.

Little by little, this community is introduced into the parish pastoral and they become involved in the various activities of the parish, at the same time growing in love for the Church and the mission of the Church many discover their vocation to the presbyterate or the vocation to evangelise as itinerant catechists (as celibate or as a family). Since 2005 the Way has also been involved in the *missio ad gentes*, where a team (comprising a priest, 3 families and some seminarians) are sent to an area devoid of Christian presence, to make the Church present there as a community, as a sacrament of salvation.

3. The Identity of the Neo-Catechumenal Way

The Neo-Catechumenal Way is an instrument for the Christian initiation of the adults and produces fruits of various nature: from the renewal of the parish, to the figure of the itinerant catechists and of the families in mission; from the formation of presbyters for the new evangelization in the seventy-five "*Redemptoris Mater*" diocesan Seminaries around the world, to the new experience of the *missio ad gentes* in Europe, Asia and America (which function as *sui iuris* parishes). It thus involves not only the lay faithful but priests, bishops, priestly formation, evangelization, catechesis, liturgy and above all Christian initiation. Pope John Paul II described it as "an itinerary of Catholic formation, valid for our society and our times."⁸

⁸John Paul, *Ogni Qualvolta*, in AAS 82(1990) 1515.

Considering the complexity of this reality, with so many aspects of the Church involved in it, it is difficult to call it a movement of the laity. In 1997, the process of the approval of the statutes of the Neo-Catechumenal Way began with the blessing of Pope John Paul II. After five years the statutes were approved *ad experimentum* for a limited period and the definitive approval of the Holy See came on Pentecost day 2008 (11-05-2008). Five dicasteries were involved in this process under the Pontifical Council for Laity. According to the decree of approval, the Neo-Catechumenal Way consists of 1. The Neocatechumenate or post-baptismal Catechumenate; 2. Permanent faith education; 3. The Catechumenate; 4. The service of catechesis.

4. The Neo-Catechumenal Way in Asia

In Asia the Neo-Catechumenal Way is present in Japan, Philippines, India, Pakistan, Sri Lanka, Bangkok, Thailand, Vietnam, Hong Kong, S. Korea, N. Korea Malaysia, Singapore, Taiwan, Nepal, Kuwait, Israel, Kazakhstan, and even mainland China. It is making visible a new way of evangelization in Asia, which, in spite of being a very religious continent, is already witnessing the beginning of secularization and desacralization with the changing economy of Asia. The first approach in Asia was that of doing the catechesis in the parishes to open the Neo Catechumenal Way in Parishes that asked for the Way since more than 35 years. Little by little, in many parishes in Asia the Christian initiation began to appear and produce the same fruits that it was producing in other parts of the world. Already in 1979 the first itinerant catechists were ready to leave for the evangelisation: they included priests (as itinerants), single men and women (as celibates) and even entire families. In 1988 the Holy Father John Paul II sent some Asian families as "families in mission" followed by another group of families in 1994. Today the fruits of their work are becoming visible. In the meanwhile, many vocations to the presbyterate have arisen from these communities. Many of them are already ordained presbyters and are in mission all over the world, though a good number of them are in mission in Asia itself. In 1991 the first *Redemptoris Mater* seminary in Asia was canonically erected in Bangalore, belonging to the diocese of Karwar (nevertheless the existence of the seminary began in 1987). Soon the Archdiocese of Takamatsu and the Archdiocese of Manila were to follow, the last seminary being the *Redemptoris Mater* seminary of Karachi in 2006. In the meanwhile also families from other parts of the world came to Asia as "Families in Mission." Today there are more than 65 families in mission all over Asia, who have dared to risk their lives, and the lives and education of their children at the cost of uprooting

themselves from their culture, language and comforts to plant themselves in a new culture and language completely foreign to them. These families began to evangelise first through their children, inviting people over to their houses for meals or parties and subsequently for catechesis where they announced the gospel to them. These catecheses were taking place in their houses giving rise to communities, sometimes made up of non Christians as well. These communities were later transferred to parishes where they are slowly completing their catechumenal journey either towards baptism or towards its renewal. Soon it was realised, that the main evangelisers were also the children themselves. These children are adults now and have got married with local youth and with them they themselves are continuing to evangelise in Asia. Many of these families have also been the cradle for vocations to religious life. Many children of these families today are either in seminaries or cloistered monasteries or already ordained priests. The presbyters ordained from the seminaries in Asia, mentioned above, are working as missionaries all over the world, although some of them are working as parish priests in their own diocese of incardination or as *fidei donum* priests. The most powerful of all these experiences is the work being done in China. In Asia we also have one of the first *missio ad gentes* centres. Though the first seven *missio ad gentes* began in France, Germany and Holland, the next three were in Asia, in India. These missions are made up of Asians themselves who feel the call to evangelise out of gratitude for what God has done in their life, which they are able to see thanks to the Christian initiation and the renewal of their baptism.

Conclusion

John Paul II desired that "just as in the first millennium the Cross was planted on the soil of Europe, and in the second on that of the Americas and Africa, we can pray that in the Third Christian Millennium a great harvest of faith will be reaped in this vast and vital continent." (*Ecclesia in Asia*, n.1). Asia is not only the most populous continent, but is also the continent with a greater number of people who do not yet know Christ. Being the cradle of many religions, today it is faced with a rapidly growing secularisation together with its growing economy, putting into crisis the sense of religiosity ubiquitously or rather as a fruit of the crisis of the major religions. The Neo-Catechumenal Way is thus an instrument also of new evangelization offered to diocesan bishops not only for the formation of faith of those already baptised, but also for the non baptised, who do not yet know Christ.