

**MARY
AS MODEL
CATECHIST FOR
PARENTS**

- We do not usually talk about Mary as a catechist and we do not commonly think of her as a model for those who catechize. But the Blessed Virgin Mary is not only a pattern, she is a perfect model of what every catechist in the Catholic Church should be.
- Before we go more deeply into our subject, it may be well to ask ourselves, "What is a catechist?" A catechist is one who instructs others in the one, true faith. Notice, we are saying two things: A catechist instructs others, which means teaches others by enlightening the mind to inspire the will. A catechist never merely teaches to instruct the mind, but always to enlighten the mind in order to inspire the will.

- **Moreover, a catechist is one who instructs others in the one, true faith. There are many faiths. There really is no one who is a non-believer. Everyone believes, but not everyone believes in the one, true faith. This instructing others in the one true faith is the faith professed by the Church founded by Jesus Christ.**

•We say that Mary is the perfect model of what every Catholic catechist should be. In saying this, we affirm what may not be obvious — that Mary was a catechist. She did instruct others in the one, true Faith. And she did it so admirably that we may legitimately call her the Mother of Catechists.

- **This brings us to the fundamental question we should ask: "How is Mary the perfect Catechist?" And "How can we learn from her to instruct others in the Catholic religion?"**
- **The answer lies in understanding what were the main qualities of the Blessed Virgin that we should try to imitate in our own catechetical lives. By following the example of Mary, we can become more like her who was the perfect communicator of the revelation of her divine Son.**

- I would identify these qualities especially, as three:
 - Mary's clear and understanding faith,
 - Mary's union in prayer with the Heart of her Son,
 - Mary's plain and courageous living out of the will of God in her life.

• Given these qualities in the Blessed Virgin, we have the bedrock of Mary's qualifications as the model of catechists. Why? Because the essence of catechesis is not in what is said. The essence consists in what is communicated. In order to communicate the truth, a person must have clear faith, a deep union with God in prayer and courageously live in conformity with the will of God. No one else, I don't say, is a perfect catechist; no one else is even a real catechist.

•These three, therefore, are not only the basis of all authentic catechesis. They are, in my estimation, its soul. Without them, instruction in the Catholic religion is just that — the instruction of academic pedagogy, but lifeless. Not everyone who talks religion is catechizing.

• **THE FAITH OF MARY**

- **To speak of Mary as a model of catechists, we begin where her spiritual life began, with her deep and unquestioning faith. That adjective, "unquestioning," is of the essence of a true faith. Faith, we know, is the acceptance by the mind of what God reveals. It means believing without a shadow of a doubt in everything which God tells us is true. Why? Because He can neither deceive nor be deceived.**

- **Mary had this kind of faith. At the Annunciation, she believed what the angel told her — that the Child she was to conceive would be the Son of the Most High. Hers was a prudent faith. After she asked how would this be, since she had consecrated her virginity to God, the angel assured her that the Holy Spirit would make the humanly impossible possible. She believed. That's faith. What is humanly impossible that God makes possible? That a virgin should conceive.**

•Mary knew what the prophets had foretold about the sufferings of the Messiah. She had no illusion of what being the Messiah's Mother would cost her. But she did not hesitate. She told the angel, "Be it done to me according to your word." That preposition "to" is one of the most important words in the

New Testament.

- **True faith is ready to believe not only in God, not only in what He can do for us. True faith includes also what God can do to us and He can do plenty! It can be painful, and yet we believe that the One causing the pain loves us. To see God's will amid the trials of life is the proof of a clear and understanding faith.**

• Faced with the dilemma that her being with-child placed her in, and seeing the struggle of Joseph, who knew she was innocent, Mary's faith did not weaken. She remained silent — silent under the humiliation. Then God worked the miracle of sending the same angel to tell Joseph to accept Mary as his espoused wife. Humanly speaking, we are dumfounded. Why did He not tell Joseph first? Not God.

• Mary's faith sustained her during her thirty years with Jesus at Nazareth and the three years of His public ministry. But it was especially her faith, from Calvary to Easter Sunday, that the Church has been commemorating since the first century. Every Saturday is appropriately called the day of faith. Mary alone had absolutely no doubt that her son, though crucified and buried, would rise from the dead. Talk about believing in the humanly impossible.

•Speaking of catechists, there is nothing more fundamental, nothing more necessary in their work than a share in the unquestioning and understanding faith of Mary. Only those who believe, teach the faith, no one else does. Unbelief does not teach the faith.

•Unbelief can undermine the faith. Faith alone inspires; unbelief does not. Faith alone is used by God to communicate the faith to others. Everyone must admit, "The reason I believe is because someone who had the faith first shared it with me." There are no exceptions.

•Unbelief, no matter how learned or erudite, cannot give others what it does not have. Academic knowledge is useful; faith is indispensable. Pedagogy is an asset provided it is built on faith. But without faith, pedagogy is not only a liability, it becomes seduction. Like Mary, a catechist teaches almost without catechizing.

• Our Lady did not conduct classes and the number of her spoken words recorded in the Gospels is very small. Yet St. Augustine does not hesitate calling Mary a living catechism, Catechisms vivens. Why? Because that is what she was. Catechisms are not cold print. Real catechisms are living, believing human beings. All catechists, since Mary's day, teach only in so far as — like her — they really, really believe.

• **THE PRAYER OF MARY**

- **The Blessed Virgin prayed. Tradition tells us she was at prayer when the Angel appeared to her to tell her she was chosen to become the Mother of God. At the Visitation, she prayed. We can say she sang the Magnificat. At Bethlehem, there is not a single word of Mary's conversation with other people, not a single recorded syllable from her lips.**

• We are merely told that when the shepherds had seen, "they understood what had been told them concerning this Child. And all who heard marveled at the things told them by the shepherds. But — on the Mother's part, there were no speeches — "Mary kept in mind all these things, pondering them in her heart."

•How this needs saying! Mary's principal prayer was prayer of the heart, prayer in the heart, prayer with the heart. In a word, Mary prayed in the depths of her being, uniting herself with Jesus, who she knew was at once her Creator and her Child.

• Again, at the Presentation, not a single word quoting Mary in conversation with the priest in the temple or with Simeon or with Anna. Simeon spoke to Mary. We are not told whether or what she spoke with him. She was, we know, rapt in prayer. At the Finding in the Temple, after Joseph and Mary found Jesus, His Mother asked Him why He had done what He did.

• His answer was that He had to be about His real heavenly Father's business. So the second time, St. Luke tells us that His Mother kept all these things carefully in her heart. This is the only recorded statement of what Mary did during the long years that she lived with her Son at Nazareth. He was always on her mind. He was always in her heart.

• Now the prayer of catechists. As with faith, so with prayer. It is impossible to really catechize unless the catechist really prays. Call it vocal prayer or meditation; call it mental prayer or the liturgy; call them aspirations or quiet moments with God. By whatever name, prayer is the soul of religious instruction.

•A person will be only as supernaturally successful as a catechist, as the person is a man or woman of prayer. Forty years in the priesthood have taught me many things that I will never publish. This is one thing. Those who pray, communicate what they have learned from communication with God.

- **We touch on the heart of catechetics when we say that a catechist must pray. There are many reasons for this, but especially two: Prayer is the ordinary source of grace to enlighten our minds, and prayer is the ordinary source of grace for moving our wills.**
- **On reflection, we see there are two minds and two wills involved, and both need the grace that in God's ordinary providence comes only through prayer.**

- **1. There is first of all the mind of the catechist. Rote knowledge of the Church's teaching or even the most extensive study of theology of itself cannot give that personal awareness of revealed truths which only divine grace can provide. "*Lord, that I may see,*" should be the prayer of every catechist who is serious about sharing with others his own deeply interior insights into God's revelation. We need grace, and the first, most fundamental grace is light for the mind.**

- **Not only is prayer necessary to really know the meaning of what, as a catechist, I am teaching. Prayer is also needed to know how I am to teach.** Adaptation to different ages and abilities is assumed, but this is much more. *Only God who reads the heart of people knows how best I can teach and reach the hearts of others, and He will tell me on one condition: That I have the wisdom and humility to ask Him to enlighten me.*

- **2. As a catechist, I also need to have my will inspired by God's grace so He may use me as His channel to inspire those whom I teach. There is such a thing as wanting to teach others the faith. This is not only a willingness to instruct others. It is the deep desire to bring others closer to God by what I teach them. But I will have this desire only in the measure that I am a person who prays.**

• There is also such thing as being a teacher without being an apostle. Whereas every true catechist should be an apostolic teacher. A catechist has a sense of mission, as one who is sent by Christ, not unlike the first Apostles were sent by the Master to share with others the revealed Truth which they had first received from Him.

• *Catechesis is not an employment; it is not a job. It is not even, in the popular sense of the word, a profession. Catechesis is an apostolate. What we have said so far is only half the reason why catechists must pray: to obtain divine grace for themselves. Those whom they catechize must also receive grace. Here too the prayer of the catechist is a reservoir of grace — for those who are being catechized.*

• They need grace to grasp what they are being taught. It must "make sense" to them.

• They must be clear in seeing what their faith is telling them, and absolutely certain that what they are told to believe is true.

- **They must be able to defend the truth they receive, even though persons all around them either do not believe, or believe as firmly, or may even oppose the believer for holding on to what some educated people say is out-model or pre-conciliar, or fundamentalist, or out-of-touch with the times.**
- **To believe in this way, they will need all the light they can receive from God. Catechists will obtain this light for those whom they are teaching by praying for them.**

•The persons who are being instructed in the faith will also need superhuman strength for their wills. The mysteries of the faith we say are naturally inconceivable to human reason; but they are also naturally impossible to put into practice by the solitary human will.

- **Without an abundance of supernatural grace, to be obtained through prayer, the beautiful truths of faith will remain just that: beautiful ideals to admire. To be lived out, not only once or occasionally but for a lifetime; a lifetime of divine help is required. The principal font of divine assistance is the grace of God. And the principal way to obtain this grace is by prayer — here the prayer of the catechists for those under their care.**

•To be apostolic and effective catechists, therefore, we must, like the Queen of Apostles, be persons who pray. I do not hesitate to say that, like Mary, we must always be pondering prayerfully in our hearts, even while we are speaking to others.

- **Like Mary, the spiritual life of catechists is the principal textbook from which they instruct the children, adolescents or adults under their care. This is where Mary is more than just a role model for us to imitate. She is, in the deepest sense, the divinely chosen guide. Remember, that Mary, unlike her divine Son, had to believe and hope in God. Her spiritual life, therefore, was based on the same two fundamental virtues that all other catechists must possess.**

- **In the measure in which their lives are built like Mary's, on faith and trust in God, God will use them not only to catechize but to convert; and not only to convert souls, but — how I like to say this — to see miracles of conversion. In today's world, a catechist should expect God to work miracles of grace in favor of those who are being taught the true faith.**

•Pope John Paul II assures us that Mary was the first of Christ's disciples. She was the first in time, because even when she found her adolescent Son in the temple, she received from Him lessons that she kept in her heart. No only was she the first of Christ's disciples, she was the greatest. No one else had been taught by him to such depth as the Mother who lived with Him for most of His earthly years.

She was both Mother and disciple and if we may dare say, "her discipleship was more important than her motherhood." That is why the Vicar of Christ also did not hesitate to call Mary "the Mother and model of catechists." How is she our Mother and our model? In the measure that, like her, we are catechists who believe, catechists who pray and catechists who live what we pray for

and believe