

WHAT WE CAN LEARN FROM THE CATECHESIS OF THE PAST

BY GEORGIE NORMAND, M.A.

Be sober, be watchful. Your adversary the devil prowls around like a roaring lion, seeking some one to devour. (1 Peter 5:8)

This was spoken to people who were already Christians. There was an urgency about staying vigilant ... to guard our souls.



Truth hasn't changed. We've changed. Catechesis at the parish level has changed. It is no longer like the North Star. Compare this to the catechesis of past centuries. In those early writings of the Church Fathers and in the catechisms that followed, the tendency was to treat the Christian life as though we had a true enemy as described by the Apostle Peter

THE SCRIPTURAL BALANCE OF NURTURE AND ADMONITION

If the teachings of the Lord and His Holy Apostles included warnings about the work of the devil against us, why are there so few catechetical references to the spiritual warfare we all experience? Why are there so few homilies devoted to spiritual combat? In preparing for the Sacrament of Confirmation, there is some teaching directed at this warfare, but recent decades of catechesis have not emphasized the

consequences of the Fall that necessitate a proactive engagement in the battle. Awareness of this warfare makes us far more appreciative of the power of prayer (especially the Rosary) and the sacraments to deliver us from temptation. We ourselves may not sense or pass on to our children the gravity of the call to holiness and the many warnings we are given in Holy Scriptures.

For example, the following verse, often translated as a command to bring children up in both the nurture and admonition of the Lord, balances the negative command with the positive command of transmitting both the discipline of, and instruction in the Faith to our children.

Fathers, do not provoke your children to anger, but bring them up in the discipline and instruction of the Lord. (Ephesians 6:4)

Additional admonitions include the following few (of many):

When the Lord was asked, “Lord, will those who are saved be few?” Jesus answered, “Strive to enter in by the narrow door; for many I tell you, will seek to enter and will not be able ...” (Luke 13:23-24)

... work out your own salvation with fear and trembling; (Phillipians 2:12)

For if we sin deliberately after receiving the knowledge of the truth, there no longer remains a sacrifice for sins, but a fearful prospect of judgment, and a fury of fire which will consume the adversaries. (Hebrews 10:26-27)

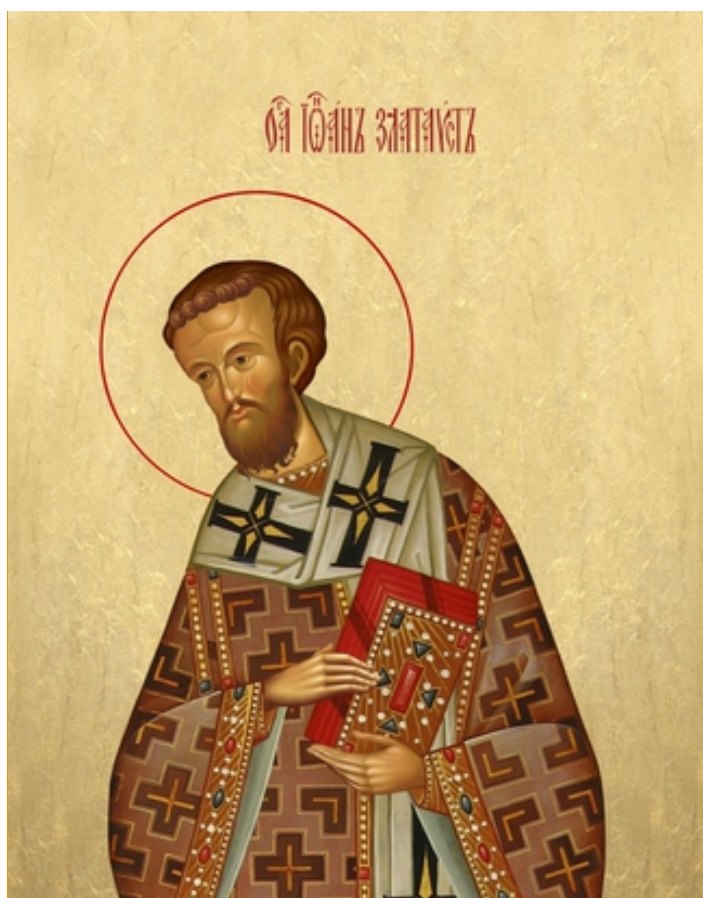
And although God's mercy and longsuffering towards all of us teaches us that as long as we are cooperating with His grace, we will not fall into this state, it is a sobering possibility. Even the Apostle Paul mentioned the possibility that he himself could become disqualified, sometimes translated as “a castaway.” (1 Corinthians 9:27)

Turning our attention to these particular verses may suggest an imbalance away from God's love and mercy in favor of promoting a greater emphasis on our responsibilities to love and obey Him. This is because there has been a real imbalance for many years, and this is directly connected with the lack of emphasis on our personal and collective condition after the Fall. “Working out our own salvation” has been largely obscured and replaced with a call to secular social justice efforts. Social justice is certainly contained in the Gospel. But like Martha and Mary, it is not either-or, but both.

THE EARLY CHURCH

Are we wiser than the early Church? The early Christians were known throughout the world for their love for each other, not to mention that their fervent love for Christ often took them all the way to martyrdom. Without reading any of the writings of the early Church, it is impossible to see just how lukewarm catechesis has become.

St. John Chryostom (fourth century), one of the greatest Church Fathers, had this to say about the importance of early catechesis.



Wherefore, I exhort you, when we receive children from the nurse, let us not accustom to old wives' stories, but let them learn from their first youth that there is a Judgment, that there is a punishment; let it be infixed in their minds. This fear being rooted in them produces great good effects. For a soul that has learnt from its first youth to be subdued by this expectation, will not soon shake off this fear. But like a horse obedient to the bridle, having the thought of hell seated upon it, walking orderly, it will both speak and utter things profitable; and neither youth nor riches, not an orphan state, not any other thing, will be able to injure it, having its reason so firm and able to hold out against everything.

Homilies on 2 Thessalonians, Homily 2.

CATECHISM OF THE COUNCIL OF TRENT (1566)

The stated purpose of the Catechism of Trent was to ensure “that the faithful may approach the Sacraments with greater devotion...” As in our time, there was a weak catechesis that resulted in a general questioning of the necessity of the Sacraments, a diminishing reverence for the Church in general, and a period of confusion and falling away from the Catholic Church.

To establish the absolute need for the sacraments, the Catechism presented them as the remedy for our condition. In the discussion on Baptism, the Catechism states, “... there remains, after baptism, a severe conflict of the flesh against the spirit ...” Modern catechesis has not emphasized the urgency of our situation or our need of the Church to help us in this spiritual combat.



Chrystostom is teaching parents that early in their children's lives, they should be given a spiritual framework built around the universal truth of the Fall, our condition, the need for redemption, and the coming Judgment. Notice the head-on positioning of our condition after the Fall. In our genteel age, we find this approach to helping children understand their need for salvation offensive, harsh, and so very unnecessary and un-modern. Even as Catholics we often think of ourselves as “respectable” sinners and pass this viewpoint on to our children. Our goal is often to keep them from all anxiety. But the Holy Scriptures tell us

The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom, and the knowledge of the Holy One is insight. (PROVERBS 9:10)

This, of course, is not referring to a slavish and irrational fear, but a healthy fear based on revealed Truth. It's meant to guide us into righteousness. What better way to implant a love for Christ and the redemption He offers us. What better way to implant a love for the Church as the spiritual hospital we all need. If you don't think you are a fallen creature or can fall, you won't pack a parachute.

St. Cyril of Jerusalem (4th century) in Catechetical Lecture 12, says of the consequences of the Fall, “very great was the wound of man's nature.” He establishes this wound as the foundation for the Incarnation. When the wound is barely acknowledged in catechesis, the fruits of Christ's Sacrifice are not fully appreciated.

Consequently, there is no love for Christ, no fear of hell, no urgency about overcoming sin through the sacraments, prayer, the intercessions of the Blessed Mother and the saints. Instead, urgency is replaced with a focus on this life here and now. Like ocean fish who live in a salty environment and yet do not taste salty, we are called to influence those around us rather than allowing the accepted sins of the world to corrupt us. (JAMES 1:26)

WHERE DO WE GO FROM HERE?

We must recapture the urgency of salvation. There can no longer be a blurred distinction between mortal and venial sin and a nonchalant view of venial sin. We only need to turn to God's warning to Cain before he murdered Abel. Yielding to any sin deliberately leads us to destruction.

There is a Midrash about this progression of sin that goes like this:

“Sin is at first like a passing visitor, then like a guest who lingers on, then like the master of the house.”

Catechesis must balance God's love with God's warnings. And we must acknowledge that God shows His love for us through the sacrificial death of His Son, through the fruits of that Sacrifice (the Church and the sacraments), and yes, through His warnings.



ABOUT GEORGIE NORMAND, M.A.

GEORGIE NORMAND, M.A. is an educator, longtime catechist, founder of Red Sea Catechetics™, and author of the upcoming book *Every Child a Theologian* and the *It's a Journey™* Sacramental Preparation Program for First Reconciliation and First Eucharist. She spent more than a decade as a second-grade sacramental preparation catechist at St. Matthew's Catholic Church in Jacksonville, Florida (Diocese of St. Augustine). Georgie is an educator who believes that the study of theology is important for all ages and that it can and should be digested by the youngest children with the help of visual teaching aids – in other words by “teaching up.” Her goal is to deepen today's catechesis of the young to help them better understand the Faith and to preempt the false idea that the Church is man's idea.

HER WORK IN THE FIELD OF LITERACY

As an educator, Georgie is best known for her efforts in the field of literacy. She turned her concern about the low reading scores in the US into solutions for teachers and students. After earning a master's degree in Reading Education, she developed a literacy screener that accurately identifies students in PreK-2 who are at risk for reading failure. She created an early literacy curriculum and PreK-12 intervention designed to prevent and address fluency deficits and other problems common in struggling readers - including those with dyslexia. To support teachers and tutors who work with these students, she also developed a comprehensive professional development program. Her many articles on dyslexia have been featured in *Exceptional Parent Magazine*.