



Stamford Eparchy Sobor
The Vibrant Parish – a place to encounter the living Christ
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Very Rev. Andrew T. Onuferko, S.Th.D.

The Word of God and Catechesis

Friday, April 19, Session 1

I thought that I would begin my session on the **Word of God and Catechesis** with this delightful short film based on the **Parable of the Hidden Treasure**. I think you understand why:

1. It's based on **Scripture** (it is, in fact, among the shortest parables in the Gospel), all of one verse: **"The kingdom of heaven is like treasure hidden in a field, which a man found and covered up. Then in his joy he goes and sells all that he has and buys that field"** (Mt 13:44).
2. It tells a **Simple Story**, but provides an amazing source of reflection on:
 - the immense **value** of the kingdom
 - the great **joy** of discovering the kingdom
 - the only appropriate **response** of one, who discovers the kingdom.

While the focus of the parable is the **Kingdom of heaven** (which is the way our Lord expresses the establishment of God's rule in the world and in our lives), we can apply that focus to **our Christian faith in all its dimensions** as something so precious, that it is worth investing EVERYTHING into acquiring it.

So let's see whether the lessons of the parable might be applied to our topic: **The Word of God and Catechesis**.

1. The BIBLE as OUR STORY and as MY STORY.

Story is a powerful thing in human society. Very often we observe how politicians use people and their personal stories to promote a particular program or agenda. These might be stories of challenge and triumph, of suffering and victimization. A story helps us relate to the particular point or focus that the politician is trying to promote. It can be used both for good and for evil. It can inspire people to generosity and positive change, but it can also move people to anger and revolution. A story can unite a people around a common purpose and goal, but it can also divide, alienate and destroy.

My academic background is in Scripture, and I frequently find myself amazed at how the Bible does such a masterful job of telling stories that move people's hearts and inspire them to change. For that to happen, it is important to **look at Scripture as OUR STORY**.

I remember when I taught Old Testament in Ukraine, I would begin my first class by reading *in full* the Matthew genealogy of Jesus (which in our tradition we read before Christmas):

Abraham was the father of Isaac, and Isaac the father of Jacob, and Jacob the father of Judah and his brothers, and Judah the father of Perez and Zerah by Tamar, and Perez the father of Hezron, and Hezron the father of Ram... (Mat 1:2-3 ESV)

Of course, once we got past David and Solomon to the kings of Judah, most minds would turn off and the students would become quickly bored, being unfamiliar with the many names (much like most of us on the Sunday before Christmas).

Then I would invite the students to listen to a different list:

Riuryk was the father of Ihor, and Ihor was the father of Sviatoslav by Olha, who ruled until he came of age, and Sviatoslav was the father of Yaropolk and his brother Volodymyr, and Volodymyr was the father of Yaroslav, called the Wise...

For obvious reasons, this second list spoke to my students on a more personal level, because they were able to identify with it as a part of **their history**, i.e. their story. And I explained that the goal of my course was to help them know the historical books of the Old Testament in such a way, that they would truly see it as their story as well.

Now there are many pieces of literature from antiquity which have survived the years. What makes the Bible different is that it presents the **story of human history, i.e. OUR story**, but seen through the lens of a People chosen by God for a particular relationship, a purpose and mission. Not only does God become part of our story, the Bible helps us understand that **God has ALWAYS been a part of our story**, indeed has always been at the center of our story. And what may have been written long ago from the perspective of a People remembering their past and the role God played in it, becomes **the story of God's plan for humanity** and the role we are called to play in not our, but God's plan. Even more remarkable is how tradition has understood that while this sacred book, or, more precisely, this library of books collected in Sacred Scriptures, may have **many human authors**, its true value is in its having **one Divine Author, the Holy Spirit**, who inspires the human **authors** to write, the **editors** to edit and arrange, and the **community** to receive.

Jesus was a **master storyteller**. The parable we watched in our short film represents just one of close to 50 parable stories and similes found in the Gospels. Who can find a more powerful story about God's love than the **Parable of the Prodigal Son** (Lk 15:11-32)? Or how can you better express God's generosity than through the **Parable of the Workers in the**

Vineyard (Mt 20:1-16)? It makes no difference whether we're dealing with a teaching story or actual history, the Scriptures of the Old and New Testament offer powerful narratives that express **who we are** and **who we are called to be**, both as individuals and as a People of God.

For us Christians, of course, **the story of Jesus**, his miraculous birth (the Word of God became flesh!), his ministry and his salvific death and resurrection stand at the center of who we are as a People. And so it is not surprising that **the four Gospels** (Matthew, Mark, Luke and John) are central for us and for our faith. Being a disciple of our Lord is to **follow Him and live according to His Good News**. We read and cherish the **Old Testament**, because it prepares for the coming of our Lord and is full of God's wisdom. We rely on **Acts and the other writings of the New Testament** for divinely-inspired instruction on how the Christian Church is called to grow in light of the Gospel of our Lord. And because we believe in a God who loves us, who chooses to reveal Himself to us and continues to invite us into a personal and community relationship with Him, we understand that the Bible in its entirety is **not just some old historical book**, but the Word of the Living God, written down "for our sake and our salvation."

Thus the History of Salvation is **the story of OUR salvation and MY salvation**.

Naturally, the Bible is more than just story and history, it is **prayer**, it is **prophecy**, it is **teaching**, it is **warning** and **encouragement**; it expresses **God's invitation** and the **terms of our relationship** with Him and with one another. It is truly **a gift from God**, given for the nourishment of his People. And so, it is not surprising that all Christians, from generation to generation, have considered **personal and community reading and study** of the Scriptures to be an essential part of Christian life.

2. The ACT OF FAITH and the CONTENT OF OUR FAITH

In this Year of Faith it is important to remind ourselves that knowledge and study of Scripture is not a mere academic exercise, even though scholars can and certainly do contribute to the understanding of Scripture. We should be ever mindful of **the purpose or goal of Scripture**, which is always the same as that **of the Church**, and indeed **of the Holy tradition** of our faith: **to lead us to God**, pure and simple.

What we believe and in Whom we believe are two inseparable aspects of our faith. In his Apostolic Letter on the Year of Faith, *Porta Fidei* ("The Door of Faith") Pope Benedict XVI wrote the following:

10. At this point I would like to sketch a path intended to help us understand more profoundly not only the content of the faith, but also **the act by which we choose to entrust ourselves fully to God**, in complete freedom. In fact, there exists a profound unity between the act by which we believe and the content to which we give our assent.

The act of believing, of giving our *assent* to Christ, goes hand-in-hand with the **responsibility to nourish ourselves** with the content of that faith, as Pope Benedict continues:

Evidently, **knowledge of the content of faith is essential** for giving one's own *assent*, that is to say for adhering fully with intellect and will to what the Church proposes. Knowledge of faith opens a door into the fullness of the saving mystery revealed by God. The giving of assent implies that, when we believe, **we freely accept the whole mystery of faith**, because the guarantor of its truth is God who reveals himself and allows us to know his mystery of love.

When we speak of the content of our faith, this includes not only the Sacred Scriptures, which hold a primary place in the Tradition of the Church, but also the other sources of our faith. In our **liturgical texts** what we believe in manifested in how we pray (*lex orandi, lex credendi*). In the **canons of the Ecumenical Councils** and the **writings of the Fathers of the Church** we find expression of the fundamental truths of the catechism. In the **iconography of the Church** we find a theology of color and symbol in paint and on wood, which expresses our faith in the Incarnation, a God of Spirit and Light made present for us in flesh and blood. What we believe is also expressed in the **various canons and prescriptions of the Church**, the rules governing Christian community and life.

This is the **treasure of great value** hidden in plain sight. The question is, therefore, what must we do **to joyfully respond** to its presence in our midst.

3. Our COMMITMENT to CHRISTIAN LEARNING AND TEACHING

All of our parishes engage in preparing our children for First Confession and the reception of Holy Communion. If our children go to a Catholic school, we can assume that they are receiving some form of religious instruction, although history has proven over the last four decades that this instruction is **woefully inadequate to respond to the idolatry and emptiness of popular culture**. By the time our children reach the end of high school, there is little to sustain them in their faith or protect them from the secular and antireligious environment of university life. It is for this reason that in his Pastoral Letter, Patriarch Sviatoslav challenges each and every parish in our Church:

When we speak of catechesis, we understand this to be **a continuous process of entering into the mystery of the Church**, to be applied not only to children who are preparing to receive the Holy Mysteries (Sacraments). **Permanent and continuous formation for various age groups** – children, youth, adults, and the elderly – is an essential component of the vibrant parish.

In our parishes there are so many ways to read and study Scripture. Every pastor, first of all, whenever the Scriptures are proclaimed, is called to explain how the written Word of God must be **fulfilled “here, today, for us”** and bear fruit in our community. That is the primary purpose of the **homily**, so that we can **partake of the Word of God** in a manner similar to communion in the Holy Eucharist, and **be transformed by it**. As the Book of Deuteronomy says, “...man does not live by bread alone, but man lives by every word that comes from the mouth of the LORD” (Deu 8:3 ESV).

But beyond the homily and Scripture readings during liturgical services, we **MUST** as Christians find **other ways to study and explore its depths**. Parish Bible Study is certainly one way, as are book clubs and discussion groups. As His Beatitude Sviatoslav writes in his Pastoral Letter, we should make a special effort to ensure that a copy of the Bible is found in each Ukrainian Catholic home to be read attentively and with great joy. Meditation on the Scriptures (*lectio divina*) should be part of our daily routine.

As for the various other sources for the content of our faith, every parish, in accordance with its own capabilities and need, has a **broad variety of possibilities**: teaching catechism to children of all ages, organizing various youth programs, programs for young parents, courses and lectures for adults (reading the Fathers of the Church, explaining the Liturgy and its symbolism, the symbolism of Eastern icons, courses of icon painting), emphasis on pre-sacramental catechesis for children **AND** parents (before Baptism and Confirmation, First Confession and Solemn Holy Communion, Matrimony, and even Anointing of the Sick), establishment of a parish religious bookstore, parish library or reading room, etc. Some of you may have good experience with a wonderful program entitled: "*Generations of Faith*".

Our Church has recently prepared a wonderful handbook in order that we may understand the basic truths of the Christian faith, and that is ***The Catechism of the Ukrainian Greek-Catholic Church: CHRIST – OUR PASCHA***. In this Catechism we find beautifully presented what we believe, how we should pray and how we should live as good Christians. That is why His Beatitude Sviatoslav encourages each family to acquire a copy of this Catechism and to benefit from it, so as to grow in the faith. As soon as the English translation is made available, parishes will have an opportunity to explore and study this wonderful resource together.

As we prepare to break into Discussion Groups, I would like you to keep in the back of your mind the following **FOOD FOR THOUGHT QUESTIONS**:

- 1) What **value** does the Word of God and the Teaching of the Church have for me personally and for us, as a parish community and as an Eparchy?
- 2) Can I recognize in myself and in my community **the joy** of one, who has discovered a great and precious treasure in the Word of God and in the Patrimony of our Faith?
- 3) How can I personally and we as a parish community **respond** to acquire (and keep acquiring) this treasure for our lives?

If our parish communities are called to be a "Vibrant Parish," then let us turn our attention to everything which relates to understanding the Word of God and the truths of the Christian life. Let us call to mind the closing image in the short film, "The Hidden Treasure": that baby sitting in the high chair. It is for the future that we must preserve this sacred treasure, this living patrimony of our faith, this sacred trust, this gift from God, to be acquired and cherished, and handed down to the next generation in all its fullness and richness.

Thank you for your kind attention. Christ is Risen!