

Imitating Christ – A Catechetical Idea*

“It is not necessary (...) to search for a “new program”. The program already exists: the same as always contained in the Gospel and living Tradition. It is in fact focused on Christ Himself, whom we are to meet, love and imitate in order to live a Trinitarian life and change history with Him until fullness in the heavenly Jerusalem is reached. The program does not change despite the passage of time or the evolution of cultures. However, it takes into account both the epoch and culture so that a real dialogue and agreement can begin.”¹ This is the way John Paul II describes the tasks of the ministry of the word, even more broadly, of the entire evangelization in the new millennium of the Christian era. The program is focused on Christ, and also through Christ, it will penetrate catechesis. The issue of Christocentric catechesis demands deepening, as it is strongly emphasized in the catechetical documents. In the introduction to this study, I would like to refer, for example, to two of them that are most representative: the *Catechesi tradendae*, which sets new routes for catechesis, and the Polish Catechetical Directory, which outlines the concept of Polish catechesis.

In the exhortation *Catechesi tradendae*, John Paul II notes that the subject of catechesis is the mystery of Christ: “To catechize means, in a way, to lead someone to examine this mystery in all its aspects.”² Therefore, catechesis transmits the teachings of only Christ³. This teaching is inseparably connected with the saving works of Jesus.⁴ The general purpose of catechesis is also Christocentric, because it consists in “bringing someone not only to meet with Jesus, but to unite and even deepen intimacy with Him.”⁵ In this

* STV 40(2002)2.

¹ John Paul II, *Novo millennio ineunte*, 29.

² John Paul II, *Catechesi tradendae*, 5. Further abbreviation CT.

³ CT 6.

⁴ CT 9.

⁵ CT 5.

way, Christocentrism is defined in the document at two levels: objective and subjective⁶.

The newly issued Polish Catechetical Directory confirms this double dimensionality of Christocentrism, namely both its subjective and objective relation. The fact that the “ultimate goal of catechesis, which is subordinated to all the rest, is not only to meet Jesus, but also to unite and even deepen intimacy with Him” is implied by theocentricism, ecclesiocentrism and Christian personalism of catechesis⁷. The other part of the documents discusses catechesis as the proclamation of Christ in the Church.

Christocentrism is here included in all the richness of the message and work of Christ. Jesus Christ is the driving force of history. Also, He is the One who acts in catechesis⁸. At the same time, the Directory formulates a very important principle: Christocentrism does not mean that the Person of Christ is always the starting point of catechesis; however, catechesis should always lead to Christ. Not only does Christocentrism express the principle of fidelity to God who fully embraced Himself in Christ, but also to man⁹, “because it allows faith to join life and affirms the existential dimension, because thanks to Christ, one can actually know who a man is and what his or her destiny is.”¹⁰

Christocentric catechesis can be described as catechesis of Christ and catechesis with Christ. This means that it can represent two types of Christ’s preaching: biblical and doctrinal catechesis. Obviously, the biblical and theological dimension permeate, but it is necessary to show an idea that integrates both levels. It seems that such integration can take place within the framework of the already known concept of imitating Christ.

It is important to mention the catechetical dimension of the call to imitate Christ when compared to what Biblical theology and Christology have to say about this idea. In other words, the starting point for considerations is to analyze the term imitate and its place in the biblical tradition, as well as the correct approach to Christology. Thus, this article will discuss the problem

⁶ R. Murawski, *Katecheza jako głoszenie Chrystusa*, AK 129 (1997), 68-69. Cf. also: J. Bagrowicz, *Chrystocentryzm eklezjalny w katechezie*, in: *Jezus Chrystus – centrum katechizacji*, S. Kulpaczyński (ed.), Lublin 2000, 44.

⁷ Conference of the Polish Episcopate, *Catechetical Directory of the Catholic Church in Poland*, Warsaw 2001, 21. Further abbreviation PDK.

⁸ PDK 73. It is worth emphasizing and analyzing the link between the PDK point and the concept of Christocentrism of catechesis presented by R. Murowski in the quoted article *Katecheza jako głoszenie Chrystusa*.

⁹ The principle of fidelity to God and man is discussed in PDK 31.

¹⁰ PDK73.

of imitating God and the whole Christ as well as the existential relationship between the disciple and Christ so that the implications of the idea of imitating Christ can be shown – as conclusions – through the prism of the specific tasks of catechesis.

An Idea to Imitate God

According to J. Kudasiewicz, the main problems of the old-test theology to imitate God is the lack of technical terms referring to both imitation and the fact that understanding God in the Old Testament as Saint excludes imitation of Him by people.¹¹ The idea of imitation was expressed in the Old Testament by such terms like path, wandering, stepping.¹² The term to go for, however, referred both to following God and to idolatry, as well as to the relationship between the disciple – the servant and the teacher¹³. To follow God meant to show Him your submissiveness, attachment and obedience¹⁴, serve Yahweh¹⁵, follow the path set by His commandments.

The Old Testament uses the idea of imitating God in the context of the path, hence the notorious references to the time of Israel's journey through the desert. God was close to His people, and thus imitating Him, or following Him, was considered natural. In the prophets' books, the metaphor of God as the Betrothed and Shepherd often refers to this thread of the history of salvation. When recalling the image of God – Shepherd, the Old Testament reaches a very ancient expression to go before God¹⁶. The problem that is worth considering regards God's holiness. In the Hebrew Bible, the holiness of God is, on the one hand, a separation of God from all impurity¹⁷, while on the other hand, it connects His sublimity with the proximity of the world.

In this way, by analogy, holiness becomes *a trait of creatures: people, places and things*, which belong to God, in which God reveals Himself and which are

¹¹ J. Kudasiewicz, *Poznawanie Boga Ojca*, vol. 1, Kielce 2000, 325-326.

¹² *Ibid.*, 327.

¹³ X. Leon-Dufour, *Słownik Nowego Testamentu*, Poznań 1998, 416.

¹⁴ J. Kudasiewicz, *Naśladowanie Chrystusa*, in: *Słownik teologiczny*, A Zuberbier (ed.), Katowice 1998, 325.

¹⁵ C. Augrain, *Naśladować*, w: *Słownik teologii biblijnej*, X. Leon – Dufour (ed.), Poznań-Warsaw 1985, 527.

¹⁶ J. Kudasiewicz, *Poznawanie...*, op. cit., 326-332.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 333.

devoted to God. “This holiness flowing from God is also a call – a call to holiness, expressed both in the worship of God and in moral behavior: in things that make us approach God.”¹⁸ Perhaps, it would be better to speak about the sanctification of creatures in this case, thanks to the closeness of God who is the only source of holiness.¹⁹

An Idea to Imitate the Whole Christ

Jesus’ call to imitate is one of the ways of indirect Christology. Jesus, like many other teachers in Israel at the time, gathers disciples around Him. There is, however, too much difference between the fixed student-teacher scheme and the community that Jesus initiates. These are people that come to Him and ask to join the circle of disciples. Nevertheless, it is Jesus who chooses whom He wants.²⁰ Jesus’ disciples are not to become teachers after a time – they will always remain the disciples of the one Teacher-Christ. Jesus’ disciples create a community that shares the fate of both good and bad destiny. Whoever consents to imitating Christ must leave everything and risk their life.²¹ To imitate Christ means to become His disciple and follow Him. Based on the Old Test’s idea of the path, as an expression of imitation of God, Jesus’ declaration should be understood as: He is the Path. Saint Paul will add that those who follow Him walk in Him (Colossians 2, 6, Flp 3, 12).²²

We come to a very important moment for reflections on imitating Christ. He appears as the Path, and so the idea of imitation is at the same time strongly connected with the revelation of Christ. The revelation as Who? We would respond immediately – as God and as a human being. This is the only correct answer. What does it mean for this issue in question? Just as in the case of the holiness of God, a question arises, namely, what does it mean to imitate Christ as God? Apparently, such a separation of the issue is not entirely justified, though. The Christian exodus, stepping onto the Path, which is Christ, involves imitating the whole Christ, following Him into the Divine realm. When considering

¹⁸ M. Wojciechowski, *Jezus jako Święty w pismach Nowego Testamentu*, “Rozprawy i studia biblijne”, vol. 2, Warsaw 1996, 21.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 43.

²⁰ K. Romaniuk, *O naśladowaniu Jezusa (Mt 8:18-22; Lk 9:57-60)*, “Collectanea Theologica” 1 (1990), 11.

²¹ W. Kasper, *Bóg Jezusa Chrystusa*, Wrocław 1996, 215.

²² J. Kudasiewicz, *Naśladowanie...*, op. cit., 325-326.

Jesus only as a human pattern, and not being interested in His divine existence, diminishes the idea of imitation.²³

Obviously, Christ is a model in the idea of imitation, which cannot be underestimated. Nevertheless, He is the model first, as it is a measure of being for man, and from this follows the example of human life in which man can seek attitudes and types of behavior to put on Christ (Rom 13:14).²⁴ To imitate Christ – God and man – means to enter onto His path and let Him lead us. Just like God, He opens the path to us. By imitating Him, we approach the community of God.²⁵ That is why, Saint Gregory of Nyssa will not hesitate to say that Christianity is the imitation of the divine nature.²⁶

The Existential Relationship of Disciples with Christ in the Idea of Imitation

The above remarks on the necessity and the essence of imitating the whole Christ show the necessity of a summary that directly concerns human existence. Such an attempt was made by H.U. von Balthasar. When reflecting on who a Christian is, he noticed that the “Christian’s being lasts as long as they maintain a connection with the nature of Christ; they die when the Christian loses this relationship.”²⁷

In other words, the relationship with Christ that underlies the idea of imitation is a prerequisite for being a Christian. This existence of a Christian, which can be described as the intensity of imitation, contains three stages of the path²⁸:

- First, it is a call to give witness. To give witness is to go with Jesus.
- However, Jesus calls to go not only with Him, but also follow Him.

The follower is admitted into the Master’s inner world on this path and enters into a spiritual relationship with Him.

– But this is not the end. For to be with Christ, by entering the circle of the Paschal Mystery, they can become a being in Christ.

²³ J. Ratzinger, *Nowa pieśń dla Pana*, Kraków 1999, 16

²⁴ S. Góralczyk, *Jezus Chrystus normą moralności chrześcijańskiej*, “Communio” 2(1997), 111; cf. also J. Kudasiewicz, *Naśladowanie...*, op. cit., 326.

²⁵ J. Ratzinger, op. cit., 35.

²⁶ Grzegorz z Nyssy, *Co znaczy być chrześcijaninem*, 19, w: Grzegorz z Nyssy, *O naśladowaniu Boga. Pisma ascetyczne*, ed. J. Naurnowicz, “Biblioteka Ojców Kościoła”, vol. 15, Kraków 2001, 49.

²⁷ H. U. von Balthasar, *Kim jest chrześcijanin*, “Problemy teologiczne” vol. 6, Kraków 1999, 47.

²⁸ Ibid., 48-49.

Christ's call to imitate is directed both to disciples and all believers. In Luke's description, the addressees of this call are not only disciples, but also all people: the imitation of Christ thus covers all humanity of all times.²⁹ In contrast, as described by Matthew and Mark, it is the disciples who are the special addressees of this call. Jesus calls them to follow Him, and this means staying in closeness with Him, being with Him, accepting Him the way He is.³⁰ The call to imitate is presented in a gradual fashion. It is characterized by certain pedagogy. First, Christ calls to take the initial steps to enter the sphere of intimacy, sharing the fate with Him. When the disciples want to share this fate as a glorious fate, as a share in His triumph, Jesus calls for renunciation and shows that this closeness actually means carrying the cross. They learn about the necessity of sacrifice after the first steps. The value and necessity of sacrifice on the path of imitating Christ will reveal His cross and His Passion.³¹

In the Gospel of John and the texts of Paul, which refer to the discussed idea, imitating Christ after the resurrection means to be obedient like Christ in the Paschal Mystery. It also means not so much to follow Him, but to be in Him.³²

And what then is the specificity of the one who is the follower of Christ? The followers are supposed to be not spectators but companions on the Jesus' path and so they are to take part in His existence. The companions become a community of disciples, and their loyalty to Jesus is not only human attachment, but above all faith. On the other hand, it implies obedience up to the final consequences.³³ Imitation means not only to follow the example. Reducing the idea of imitating Christ only to the moral sphere would be a serious mistake. The imitation of Christ has deep Christological roots, which result in moral consequences. It is not man who sets a certain model of perfection, based on Jesus' preliminary instructions. It is Him, the Way, who is the creator of the whole Path.³⁴ To imitate Jesus is to be ready for self-denial and the cross, submit to the authority of the Kingdom of God, which is only in Jesus

²⁹ F. Grygiewicz, *Ewangelia według św. Łukasza. Wstęp – przekład z oryginału – komentarz*, w: *Pismo Święte Nowego Testamentu*, ed. E. Dąbrowski, F. Grygiewicz, vol. 3, 3, Poznań-Warszawa 1974, 194.

³⁰ C.M. Martini, *Być z Jezusem*, Kraków 1997, 76.

³¹ C. Augrain, *Naśladować*, op. cit., 527-528.

³² J. Kudasiewicz, *Naśladowanie...*, op. cit., 325-326; X. Leon-Dufour, *Słownik Nowego Testamentu*, op. cit., 417.

³³ H.U. von Balthasar, op. cit., 51-52.

³⁴ J. Ratzinger, op. cit., 34-35.

and claims the right to every man,³⁵ and at the same time to the entire life of every human being.³⁶

Catechetical Implications of the Idea to Imitate Christ

Considerations on following Christ were to lead to catechetical conclusions. It seems that this idea is able to enrich reflections on the fulfillment of specific tasks of catechesis described in the Church documents³⁷.

In the development of faith, the idea of imitating Christ is associated with a better understanding and adherence to Christ, God and man. When properly understood, the considerations on the subject of who Christ is and who we consider the Son of Man are not to delve into insignificant or irrelevant problems, but they touch the very foundations of our human existence

The idea of imitating Christ also implies adherence to Christ through the liturgy. To be in Christ means to immerse yourself in His Paschal Mystery which He realizes in the liturgy of the Church.³⁸ Thanks to the liturgy, the idea of imitation does not remain yesterday, but it becomes today that goes back to tomorrow and all eternity. Imitating Christ and the liturgy both need each other. In the moral formation, the correctly understood idea of imitating Christ protects us from the naturalistic understanding of moral life and gives it an eschatological dimension. For to imitate Jesus is to find in Him the final criterion and the concrete norm, the pattern and the gate of eternity. Teaching prayers is strongly related to what was emphasized in the catechesis of Christ undertaken in the process of educating His disciples. To make it more precise, Christ allowed His disciples moments of familiarity to experience closeness with the Father in prayers. Once again, it is worth repeating that “the prayer is the center of Jesus, so the participation in His prayer becomes a precondition to both know and understand Jesus.”³⁹

By calling for imitation, Jesus simultaneously gathers His followers in the Church. In this way, imitating Christ is to be a community of followers. Since

³⁵ K. Rahner, H. Vorgrimler, *Mały słownik teologiczny*, Warsaw 1987, col. 261.

³⁶ Cf. S. Góralczyk, art. cit., 108.

³⁷ Congregation for the Clergy, *Dyrektorium ogólne o katechizacji*, Rome 1997, n. 85-86; PDK 24-29.

³⁸ KKK 1085.

³⁹ J. Ratzinger, *Tajemnica Jezusa Chrystusa*, Kielce 1994, 23.

the neighbor is the mirror of Christ,⁴⁰ to imitate Him means to build ties with brothers and to actively show neighbor's love. Finally, imitating Christ introduces us to His mission. As noted above, the first layer of His follower's existence, the first stage of His path involves being a witness. On this witness, the community of being with Christ and staying in Christ is built.

Therefore, does imitating Christ mean to speak constantly of Him? Christocentrism is not a methodological principle, but a great inspiration for catechesis.⁴¹ To imitate Christ means to be faithful to Christ and to serve both truth and life. Christ in such catechesis will always be the starting point although He may even remain unrecognized on the way for some time⁴². The idea to imitate Christ is a sort of summarizing what is important for the Christocentrism of catechesis.

We can find some elements of Christ's catechesis and catechesis with Christ in it. This idea fully shows what it means that Christ is the Path. This path is special for every person and catechesis must apply to it. Following this path, some will recognize the features of Christ and can listen to Him and speak to Him directly; while others, in a dialogue with the Stranger, go toward their Emmaus to recognize Him when breaking Bread.

⁴⁰ S. Góralczyk, art. cit., 113.

⁴¹ PDK 73.

⁴² R. Murawski, art. cit., 71- 72.