

Catechesis in Contemporary Culture Unbelief and Religious Indifference Brian Pizzalato

In 2004 the Pontifical Council for Culture published, *Where is Your God? Responding to the Challenge of Unbelief and Religious Indifference Today*. This document deals primarily with unbelief and religious indifference which have secularism as their cause, and a new subjective, emotive religiosity as its consequence. In this article we will explore the problem of unbelief and religious indifference. In following issue of *The Sower* we will deal with this new emotive religiosity.

The phenomenon of unbelief in current culture is different than the militant atheism, and atheistic regimes, of the past. It is different in the sense that ‘often one becomes a non-believer not through choice at the end of a long inner struggle, but it just happens *de facto*, because “that’s what everybody else does” ’ (*Where is Your God?* I.1).

The Council identifies different causes of this new kind of unbelief and religious indifference.

The first cause mentioned is the **rise of scientism**, with its ‘vision of the world without any reference to God...’ (I.2.1). Notice, however, that the document does not say that the problem is the rise of science, but scientism.

A second cause is connected with the **atheism of the past**. The atheistic regimes have fallen, but ‘the underlying anthropological model has not disappeared, indeed it has become stronger taking on the philosophy inherited from the enlightenment’. John Paul II said there is an

‘attempt to promote a vision of man apart from God and apart from Christ... consider[ing] [man] as “the absolute center of reality, a view which makes him occupy – falsely – the place of God and which forgets that it is not man who creates God, but rather God who creates man” ’ (*Ecclesia in Europa* 9).

Related to this is subjectivism, ‘a type of “profession of faith” in the absolute subjectivity of the individual, disguised as humanism, it is actually self-centered, egoistic narcissistic...’ (I.2.2).

A third cause of unbelief and religious indifference is **the problem of evil**. ‘This rebellion comes from the non-acceptance of the sense of the freedom of man, who is capable of doing both good and evil’ (I.2.3). Mass media helps to promote this, causing ‘evil to echo ever louder...the rejection and denial of God feed on the continual diffusion of this inhumane spectacle beamed around the world’ (*ibid.*).

A fourth cause identified by the Council is ‘the apparent **absence of a spiritual life** in some priests and religious’ (I.2.4). We could also apply this to catechists as well. Lack of a spiritual life and scandalous, immoral behavior never aid people in belief. Unbelief and religious indifference can result from a ‘growing number of teachers devoid of commitment and a solid formation’ (I.2.5).

A fifth important cause recognized has to do **directly with catechesis**. ‘There is a real problem in the handing on of the faith within traditionally Christian families...’ (*ibid.*). *Where is Your God?* goes on to different causes for this:

‘the rhythm and pace of work, the fact that both parents often work long hours away from the home...children spend little time in the family home as they spend long hours at school and in extra curricular activities...at home they are often immersed in and isolated by the computer, by video-games, and by the television leaving little space for constructive dialogue with their parents’ (*ibid*).

‘Television might steal the time necessary for interpersonal relationships that are so important for the handing on of the faith’ (II.2.3). Also, ‘if the parents have no living faith, what will they hand over to their children in an environment that has become indifferent to the Gospel values and, as it were, deaf to the proclamation of the saving message?’ (I.2.5).

A sixth cause, and one of the main causes, of unbelief and indifference, also connected to catechesis, is **ignorance**. God said, through the prophet Hosea, ‘My people are destroyed for lack of knowledge’ (4:6). Every opportunity must be taken to catechize, bringing people from ignorance to understanding and belief.

A seventh cause has to do with the **globalization of behavior**, amplified by the mass media. ‘Western materialism has projected a lifestyle characterized by success, money, unrestricted competition, individual pleasure, etc., creating many practical atheists and leaving neither time nor desire for something deeper than the immediate satisfaction of every craving’ (I.2.5).

The effects of unbelief and religious indifference in catechesis

How does all of this affect catechesis? Of course, the goals of catechesis are belief and conversion of life, the precise opposites of unbelief and religious indifference. So, unbelief and religious indifference are bound to affect catechesis in many ways.

First, with the exaltation of man apart from God, ‘The Church is no longer accepted as a doctrinal and moral authority’ (I.2.2). Radical individualism and relativism see things only in the realm of opinion, therefore when we try to declare the truths of the faith as true, period, there is a tendency for a response of ‘Well, that’s what the Church thinks, but I think...’

Second, the challenge of unbelief and religious indifference is encountered ‘when the sacraments of Christian initiation are requested from within the families of non-believers or the indifferent’ (II.1.2). This is an issue many of us run into frequently. The parents do not believe, yet they want baptism, first reconciliation, first Eucharist, or confirmation for their children. Related to this is the situation of a non-believing Catholic who wants to get married in the Church.

Third, catechists are the recipients of children whose parents do not believe, or practice the faith, yet send them for catechetical instruction. The children spend their days immersed in worldly affairs, and catechists are supposed to hand on the faith to children whose minds are filled with images from television, video games, etc. Recipients of children who come from families that never talk about the faith, rarely, if ever, go to Mass, always put extra curricular activities before matter of faith, etc. Nevertheless, there they are in front of us each day or week.

Fourth, unbelief and religious indifference affect catechesis because of the absence of a spiritual life, unbelief and indifference on the part of clergy, religious and catechists. Unbelief on the part of the catechist is not as infrequent as we might think. More often it is perhaps the phenomenon of partial belief in this or that teaching, but not others. Catechists often eat at the cafeteria of doctrinal truth, picking and choosing what they agree with and leaving aside what

they do not. This only accomplishes the exact opposite of what catechesis is all about. It causes more unbelief and religious indifference.

Responding to unbelief and religious indifference

So, then, how might we respond to unbelief in catechesis? Gratefully, the Pontifical Council for Culture aids us in this by giving us concrete proposals for responding.

First, we must deal with the issue on the side of the catechist, clergy and religious who are supposed to be handing on the fullness of the faith. Catechist formation must have a component of discernment to see if the catechist will only be promoting more unbelief and indifference, or belief and conversion to Christ.

Second, we do well to take the advice that we are addressing *persons* who are non-believers and religiously indifferent, we are not addressing the topics of unbelief and religious indifference (cf. II.1). We are not out to win arguments, but to win persons to Christ. We must approach it in a way that is ‘personal, patient, respectful, loving, [and] sustained by prayer...’ (*ibid.*).

Third, we need to take into account the full integrity of the human person, in particular ‘...the inextinguishable need...for peace, reconciliation and forgiveness present in every human person. Our mission is to meet this person...but without pretending to create an ideal according to our needs and desires, to then pretend to be the guides for a perfect humanity’ (II.1.2).

Fourth, the Council notes that ‘suffering is...an anthropological meeting ground’ (*ibid.*). Suffering ‘...makes space for the search for a word, a face, someone capable of offering a ray of light in the depths of darkness’ (II.1.2). Non-believers and religiously indifferent need to hear and experience the Gospel of suffering that Christ offers. Christ is the only one that can help them find that meaning they are looking for in the midst of anguish.

Fifth, with regard to non-believers and indifferent who seek the sacraments there is a prime opportunity to draw them closer to the Lord. We must take full advantage of these opportunities to proclaim the truths of the Gospel, and giving our witness of love, even if it may only occur in one or two meetings.

Sixth, in connection with the family, ‘...It is important to dedicate more time to family life’ (II.2.3). Also we must encourage parents who live ‘in an image-driven culture, [that] it is important to educate the children to control their use of the television, to watch it together with them, discuss its content and answer their questions with availability and love’ (*ibid.*).

Seventh, with regard to the rise of scientism the Council recommends ‘programs and course teaching the complementary relationship of science and religion...’ (I.2.1). This can certainly be accomplished in Catholic Schools, in catechist formation and parish catechesis.

Eighth, the Council recognizes that ‘Beauty is one of the privileged pathways to bring people nearer to God and to quench their spiritual thirst. Beauty “puts joy in hearts...”’ (II.2.4). I once heard two men talking while standing in St. Peter’s Basilica in Rome, and one said to the other, ‘Wow, it makes you want to become Catholic, doesn’t it!’ He was merely commenting on the sheer beauty of that holy place. Beauty speaks the truth. In catechesis we must expose our students to the beauty of the faith.

Finally, the Council makes clear, that the way of love cannot be dispensed with. ‘“What does most to reveal God’s presence, however, is the *brotherly charity of the faithful* who are united in spirit as they work together for the faith of the gospel and who prove themselves a sign of unity.’ The witness of charity is the most convincing argument to prove the existence of God...’ (II. 3).