

Re-contextualization of Christian Dogmas on God, Christ and Grace: Implications to Catholic Religious Education

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Abstract –*This paper discusses the significance of “re-contextualization” of Christian dogmas on God, Christ and Grace which has implications to Catholic religious education. The Catholic Church has been faithful in adhering to dogmas because they are really based on the personal and communal experiences of the people of God. The paper utilized qualitative research methods to content analyze the Church documents and other publications about dogmas. Findings revealed that dogmas form part of the Catholic Church’s life. However, implications for Catholic religious education are strategies on how to teach dogmas in the context of students so that they may live a full Christian life of doctrine, morals, and worship. Hence, it can be concluded that Christian dogmas must always be the center of Catholic religious education.*

Keywords –*Catholic religious education, Christ, Christian dogma, God, Grace*

INTRODUCTION

Christian Dogma is one of the beautiful products of man’s capacity to search for God. Since the Catholic Church has the teaching authority to disseminate beliefs and practices leading to God, Catholics must be guided by these dogmas to see and experience God more concretely in their spiritual life. The Catholic Church firmly believes that “There is an organic connection between our spiritual life and the dogmas. Dogmas are lights along the path of faith; they illuminate it and make it secure. Conversely, if our life is upright, our intellect and heart will be open to welcome the light shed by the dogmas of faith” [1].

A Christian is not separated from the Christian dogma that he believes in. His life must be a manifestation of dogma wherein God has become an integral part of his being. Consequently, “the glory of God is man fully alive” as mentioned by St. Irenaus. Learning about dogma is discovering the beauty of faith. Bacani explains “while faith is a gift of God, the act of faith under grace is a free human act” [2]. Through ones understanding of the dogma, it may lead to a reflective insight that God really exists and he is the one that is true, good and beautiful.

OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

It is the attempt of this paper to fully grasp the significance of Christian Dogma in ones faith and

practice in the field of Catholic Religious Education. Dogmas about God, Christ and Grace are but beautiful and significant reflections of a God who really work on man’s destiny for eternity. Through these dogmas, students of Catholic religious education may gain deeper understanding of the importance of Divine intervention in their faith life especially nowadays that they are highly influenced by post modernity and commercialism.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

The paper employed qualitative research methods in looking into the re-contextualization of the Christian Dogmas in the present time. A literature review was done to gather pertinent information about Christian Dogmas coming from Catholic Church teachings, books and internet resources. The search for literature was facilitated by accessing electronic databases such as Ebscohost, ProQuest Online and Google Scholar as well as internet sources at the Vatican website. Terms used to search for the materials were Dogma, God, Trinity, Christ and grace. The search was not limited to specific publication years of materials to include all inputs of authors coming from the various era of the Church which could provide an integrative perspective in explaining Dogmas. Data were sourced out mainly from 8 Catholic Church documents coming from the Catechism of the Catholic Church including the

teachings of Popes and 7 books published by theologians and verses from the Bible. Content analysis was employed in analysing the data and engaged the findings with the concepts of Catholic Religious Education.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Dogma on God

In this highly secularized postmodern times, some people are questioning the very existence of God, the Supreme and Absolute Being. This quest about the discovery of God in one's life existence is a form of revelation where one tends to formulate his own theology. As a result, one's beliefs on God are translated into concrete theological reflections whereby they are founded on the very tenets of particular dogmas. Dogma on the nature of God and the Trinity in the Catholic faith are products of spiritual and theological reflections of the forefathers of the faith like the first disciples, the early Church fathers like St. Augustine, St. Thomas Aquinas and many among others. Through their endless quest to understand who God really is, they were able to develop the theology or way to understand God and eventually became the very foundation of our Christian dogma. Hence, the kind of theology that a person has is but a product of his own understanding and interpretation of dogmas.

After learning the different realities about dogma, a Catholic religious educator may tend to realize his own theological understanding of God and how to arrive at certain point of integration. He may realize that what he believes are but anchored with the dogmas of the faith. Thus, theological reflections are anchored with the dogmas on the nature of God. To understand dogma is to discover the beauty of theology to find concrete and unfolding explanations of one's religious experience in light of God's revelation. To grasp the nature of God, there is a need to go back to what theology means especially when one teaches students of Catholic religious education.

Theology has been given a traditional definition as the study of God and His Divine revelation to man. Our capacity to recognize God in our lives is but a reality of theological anthropology because man has been created in His own image and likeness. Lavin points out that "this image is built upon the self-disclosure of a loving and personal God"[3].

In Catholic thought, God is the Trinity. This dogma of the Trinity is one of the most sought after theological and doctrinal issues being thrown to the

Catholic Church. For Catholics, they believe that there is one God with three divine persons, the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. The doctrine of Christianity summarizes the central truth of Christianity: we are saved by God, through Jesus Christ, by the power of the Holy Spirit. Lavin claims that "Yet the Trinity is also one of the most incomprehensible of Christian teachings"[3]. Christians must attune their life with the trinity in doctrine, morals and even in worship.

In the worship of the Church, "God the Father is the source and goal of the liturgy. In the liturgy of the Church, it is principally his own Paschal mystery that Christ signifies and makes present" [1]. In the liturgy, the Holy Spirit is teacher of the faith of the People of God and artisan of "God's masterpieces," the sacraments of the New Covenant. The desire and work of the Spirit in the heart of the Church is that we may live from the life of the risen Christ. "When the Spirit encounters in us the response of faith which he has aroused in us, he brings about genuine cooperation. Through it, the liturgy becomes the common work of the Holy Spirit and the Church"[1].

As Christians, it is significant to give emphasis on the sacredness and profundity of the mystery of the Trinity. It is through the Trinity that teaches of a kind of community of love. Pope Benedict XVI explains, in one of his Angelus reflections, that the Trinity is like a family, "It is called to be a community of love and life where differences must contribute to forming a parable of communion"[4].

Dogma on God: Implications to Catholic Religious Education

Catholic religious education is an important means to develop and enhance one's own concept and understanding of theology to lead students in their encounter with God. Therefore, it is the task of Catholic religious educators to bring about God in all the pedagogy and learning activities that they do with students. Moreover, Catholic religious education should also rekindle in each student that he is an "imago Dei" an image of God. In this post modern time, the young are corrupted with their belief systems and sometimes they even get away with the notion of God. Catholic religious education can be of help so that the young may receive proper guidance and be able to realize that God is present in the depths of their daily experiences. In addition, Pope Benedict XVI said "Teachers and administrators, whether in universities or schools, have the duty and privilege to ensure that students receive instruction in Catholic

doctrine and practice”[5]. Catholic religious educators must also develop a kind of spirituality that is attuned to the fundamental convictions of God. One can never preach what he does not practice. Same is true with religious education because a Catholic religious educator cannot really teach about God if he himself does not believe.

Catholic religious education can also be an avenue to strengthen the conviction of the young towards the nature of the Trinity. Religious educators must always incorporate the Trinity in every activity like prayers so that the students may imbibe the Trinitarian spirituality that every Catholic Christian shall adhere to.

Dogma on Christ

Emmanuel – God with us. This is the very reality of the nature of Jesus Christ. Through the Incarnation, the humanization of God took place by the power of the Holy Spirit. In the Incarnation, “God sent his Son thus culminating many other partial and various ways in which God manifested himself to humanity” (Hb. 1:1)[6]. Christ is One who enabled us to encounter God in visible way. In his humanity, Christ was the Father’s sacrament to the world. In humanity, “he revealed the Father whom no man had ever seen” (Jn. 1:18)[6]. “The Father was present in him, so that anyone who saw him saw the Father” (Jn. 14:8-9)[6], for he as Son was the “eikon” (image) of the Father” (Col. 1:15)[6]. Jesus revealed the Father through his preaching of the word, through his miracles wherein the power and glory of the Father were manifested, and through his death on the cross.

Jesus the Christ is both divine and human. He became like us except from sin. As mentioned by Lavin, “It can be said that there is an intimate connection between Jesus and humanity, and between Jesus’ humanity and our humanity” [3]. The Catholic Church as a human institution clings to the belief in the name of Jesus Christ. Therefore, Barron explains that “the Church is a mission to evangelize as he mentioned that in its theology, formal structure, practices, internal organization, sacraments, liturgy, and preaching, the church is above all God’s means of announcing the lordship of Jesus Christ”[7].

Consequently, Christians are members of the mystical body of Christ, the Church and they are challenged to proclaim the lordship of Christ in every aspect of their lives like in work, relationships, personal beliefs and aspirations. Christians bear the name “Christ” which means they are “followers of

Christ.” They are not just followers of Christ rather they are “co-journeymen of Christ” here on earth. Co-journeymen means Christ is always there in their struggles, joys, happiness, pain, frustrations and tribulations that they encounter in their existence. He is a God who is always ready to support us in our endeavors.

As co-journeymen of Christ, we are also witnesses. The first Disciples of Christ became witnesses not just in words but also in deeds. They even offered their own lives to stand witness to the truth of announcing the Lordship of Christ. To stand witness to someone is to know him personally. How can a person know Jesus because he did see him face-to-face? It is possible because one can still know Jesus today. Anyone can still have a personal experience of him through faith. Bacani said that “In fact it is only by faith that we can have a true personal experience of him today”[2]. Those who truly believe in Jesus know him personally. As the scripture says, “It is no longer I who live but Christ who lives in me” (Gal. 2:20)[6]. A true Christian let Christ transform his life in accordance to the will of the Father.

Another reality about Christ is that he is our mediator to the Father. “Christ came down to bring humanity up with him” (Jn. 3:15)[6] by his death and resurrection. Therefore, he is Mediator, One through whom we go to the Father. In one’s belief that Christ is the mediator, he holds on to him like branches of the vine. For Christ connects us with the Father. Even in the liturgy, Christ takes us up to the Father (Sacrosanctum concilium 7)[8]. Apparently, Christ is our only mediator to the Father. The Father is the total orientation of Christ, because the Father is the ultimate source of existence. Therefore, it is to the Father alone that one also must return. There is only one Mediator to lead us to the Father and that is Christ. As followers of Christ, Christians firmly believe that he is the perfect manifestation of the Father and through his examples they are also called to live a life of holiness. The “mediatorship” of Christ to the Father for humanity was concretized in his passion, death and resurrection. His paschal mystery shows to us the readiness of Christ to give his all for the salvation of mankind. Through the sacrifice of Christ on the cross, reconciliation between God and man was actualized. Truly, to be a Christian calls for self-transcendence because Christ himself taught us to be selfless.

Lastly, Christians are called to be bearers of the Good News. Barron cites “Evangelization- the

proclamation of the good news, the gospel, the euangelion – has to do with the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead”[7]. Christianity begun with the Easter proclamation telling the whole world that Jesus has risen from the dead, that he is the Christ, who overpowered even death. Tagle once said that “We do not seek to have a theory about the Resurrection but rather, we ask for the grace to be able to enter its mystery” [9]. Christians are proclaimers of the Good News. Christians must be convinced the Jesus Christ has risen from the dead. This is what makes Christian faith different from other ideologies and beliefs. This is what Christians proclaim in announcing the Lordship of Jesus over all the earth. Tagle points out, “The Good News of the Resurrection is a sign of our hope. We are an Easter people! This is our Christian vocation to be messengers of hope”[9]. And in proclaiming the Good news, we are reminded by Pope Francis in his Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii gaudium* that “The joy of the gospel fills the hearts and lives of all who encounter Jesus”[10].

Dogma on Christ: Implications to Catholic Religious Education

The centrality of Catholic religious education is the Good News. Hence, it is the task of Catholic religious education to ensure that students receive this Good News and be able to instill among them the truths about our faith in Christ. Religious educators must lead students to announce the Lordship of Jesus in their own lives as Christ is the Emmanuel-God with us even in their contemporary life. The challenge among the youth of today is that they tend to create other ‘lords’ that govern their very selves. Among them is the social media. The postmodern youth are so called the “digital natives”[11]. Through the social media, the youth can express themselves especially their emotions, thoughts and even their actions.

Nonetheless, there is also a great harm if the youth will not use the social media properly especially the proliferation of dating websites, pornographic materials in the net, scams and many others. Furthermore, human interaction is also needed in using the social media. But on the other hand, Jesus Christ must be proclaimed even in social media because he is the Emmanuel. Catholic religious educators shall take advantage of using the social media to show that God really is with us as the Emmanuel.

As mentioned earlier, there is a need to evangelize the culture. To evangelize, then, is to proclaim

precisely this lordship of the risen Jesus [7]. The Church has the mission to use possible forms of evangelization like the social media especially the use of the internet. Social media is but a human and divine gift from God. Likewise, Jesus Christ, both human and divine, wants to dwell with us even in social media. Cuyos mentions “To optimize the use of social media, we need to fundamentally rethink our methods of evangelization” [12]. In the light of the Catholic faith as a Catholic religious educator, one can also bring Christ in the social media especially to the young ones. Social media has its power to influence a greater number of audiences. As a reminder, “We need to find the right methods and approaches to digital evangelization as well as the high quality tools and skills to support and maintain them” [12].

Catholic religious education therefore has to cope up with the fast changing landscape of new evangelization like the social media. More so, Catholic religious educators must be aggressive in finding various ways and means to catch the attention of the students to learn about Christ and his Good News. Furthermore, Catholic religious education can also use social media to teach about the mediatorship of Christ. Social media can also be used a medium to educate young people on the passion, death and resurrection of Christ.

Dogma on Grace

Throughout salvation history, God has never failed to outpour His unending grace to humanity. God’s grace refers to God’s goodness, graciousness, and benevolence [13]. Looking back at the Hebrew word which clearly influenced the Christian Scriptures on grace is “hanan” which means to be gracious, to have mercy on someone [14]. It is through the magnanimity of God that we humans are living in this world. The mercy of God towards us is the manifestation of the grace He has given in the past, He is giving in the present and He will be giving in the future to us. He is a compassionate God who knows the situation of His people.

Filipinos always reflect upon the graciousness of God which is “*Sa awa ng Diyos*” (mercy of God). Filipinos cling to the belief that God gives His mercy so that they may live and endure life’s problems and difficulties. It is our capacity to rely on God despite the situations that sometimes we are not in control. Grace is what sustains them to continue in life and be able to hold on with faith. Without grace, a believer cannot also see the beauty of our faith.

Primarily, "Faith is our response to the God who loves us first" as stated by Pope Benedict XVI in his Encyclical letter "Deus caritas est" [15].

Moreover, Pope Francis reminds each and everyone to be merciful like the Father is also an acknowledgement of God's grace. He stated that "We need constantly to contemplate the mystery of mercy. It is a wellspring of joy, serenity, and peace. Our salvation depends on it. Mercy: the word reveals the very mystery of the Most Holy Trinity. Mercy: the ultimate and supreme act by which God comes to meet us. Mercy: the fundamental law that dwells in the heart of every person who looks sincerely into the eyes of his brothers and sisters on the path of life. Mercy: the bridge that connects God and man, opening our hearts to the hope of being loved forever despite our sinfulness" [16]. As Catholics, they are encouraged to perform acts of mercy towards the needy because we are also bestowed with the mercy of God.

Furthermore, grace is the ability to recognize our gratitude to God. Another Greek term for grace is "charis" which also means gratitude in response to the gracious giver [14]. Gratitude or being thankful is the recognition that a person has received so much more than what he has expected. As one look back with one's life, he can consider a lot of graces that God has bestowed upon him and his loved ones. No words can even equate his gratitude to Him because He never left us in times of trials and tribulations. God is so good that he even sends people to become His emissary of grace to show to me that He really cares. Hence, Grace is God's love for human existence[13].

Grace is also one's hope for salvation. In one's journey here on earth, there is no certainty. Man never hold on to things, events, people and places permanently. Time will come that everyone shall leave this world with nothing except the believer's inclination that through God's grace he may attain salvation. The effect of grace is salvation. The Christian undergoes a spiritual rebirth, becomes a child of God, or is adopted by God. The Christian receives the gift of the Spirit and experiences God as Spirit in his or her life. [13].

As children of God, we are given the gift of salvation and we shall also do our part and cooperate with the plan of God for us. The Spirit of Grace is indeed the manifestation of grace that we receive in our baptism and other sacraments. It is the same Spirit which calls to do good with ones brethren. Therefore, grace is already in every believer by the power of the

Spirit. It is up to him on how he may sustain that Spirit to lead one into the path of faith, hope and love.

Lastly, grace is also expressed in ones capacity to love one another. Roger Haight as cited in Schussler Fiorenza and Galvin, suggests that "viewed in terms of Augustine, God's prior grace liberates human existence from the bondage of egoism and opens up freedom by an impulse to love, pushing or drawing freedom toward self-transcending values and, through faith toward God"[13]. It is also through ones capacity to love that he distinguishes grace that is given to him freely by God. One's expressions of love constitute the ability to share his own graciousness to the other. To love is to self-transcend and ready to sacrifice one's life for the one he loves. Experiences of love are but experiences of grace. One can be liberated from self-centeredness to other-centeredness because of love. Therefore, love is a way to see grace beyond self determination.

Dogma on Grace: Implications to Catholic Religious Education

The Dogma of Grace is a very fundamental reality that is to be incorporated in Catholic religious education. In anyhow, what one does with regards to his faith are all gearing towards the grace of God freely given to him. It is therefore the task of Catholic religious educators to guide students that they may recognize the grace of God in their life experiences. Nowadays, young people tend to complain with so many things because sometimes they feel like they are deprived of something without noticing that they are so blessed so many things. Catholic religious education in schools must harness the capability of students to be acquainted with grace. Their talents and other potentials are gifts that lead to the realization of graces they receive from God.

This is also the same observation of the Congregation for Catholic Education with their Circular Letter to the Presidents of Bishops' Conferences on Religious Education in Schools that "Children and young people must be guaranteed the possibility of developing harmoniously their own physical, moral, intellectual and spiritual gifts, and they must also be helped to develop their sense of responsibility, learn the correct use of freedom, and participate actively in social life" [17].

Catholic religious education activities must be experiences of grace such as prayers, group and individual processing, journal writing, art making, film viewing, role playing and the like. These

strategies shall underlie their very foundation of grace. After all, these activities are possible religious experiences which in turn may become encounters of grace. Catholic religious educators shall innovate ways on how to incorporate strategies that will best enhance to sensitivity of students to see God's grace in their day-to-day encounter. After all everything is grace.

CONCLUSION

After dealing with the various dogmas on God, Christ and Grace, a Catholic religious educator can realize the beauty of the Christian faith so as to be taught in Catholic religious education. Throughout the history of the Catholic Church, these doctrines remain steadfast because they are really based on the personal and communal experiences of the people of God. These set of doctrines are not merely lessons to be kept in books but rather they must be applied in one's life, prayer and dealings with others. After all, dogmas are guide to live a full Christian life of doctrine, morals and worship.

On the one hand, the limitation of the paper is anchored with the basis of providing general recommendations on how Christian dogmas of God, Christ, and Grace can be taught in Catholic religious education because specific strategies are not provided. The paper serves as a reminder that every Catholic religious educator shall decipher appropriate and effective strategies sensible to the context of students so as to strengthen their convictions on the Christian dogmas.

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