

# Culture Is the Key: Context and Target of Catechesis

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*Editor's Note: The following is a handout that Fr. Allan Deck used for his presentation at the National Symposium on Adolescent Catechesis. It provides an excellent synopsis of the spirit and content of Fr. Deck's presentation.*

These are the main points I wish to share with the panel regarding culture and adolescent catechesis:

The materials provided for input were excellent and, as Thomas Groome points out, they demonstrate a growing consensus regarding the critical issues facing adolescent catechesis. In reviewing the articles, nevertheless, some concerns come to mind for me:

## Evangelization

While considerable progress has been made in finally assimilating the vision of evangelization as understood in the Magisterium since Vatican II as the framework for understanding the Catholic Church's identity and mission and, within that, the role of catechesis, there continues to be a lack of recognition regarding the central function of culture in all of this as both the context and the target of the church's evangelizing (and catechizing) efforts. One way to say this is that catechesis has to start with life (what's there) and become life. This is not to discount deductive approaches based on the content of the faith and Catholic identity but rather to live up to the both/and approach Groome highlighted. One side of the equation (content) has to be balanced with the other side (experience, life) as information becomes performance, as Pope Benedict XVI has



framed the question in his incisive talks during his April 2008 visit to the U.S.

## Evangelization of Hispanic Adolescents

While some recognition is given to demographics, by any reasonable scale of evaluation the fundamental issue—the evangelization of Hispanic adolescents—is still somewhat tangential. How can this be? Researcher Robert Putnam refers to Hispanics as the “leading indicators of the Catholic Church's future in the United States.” This is an urgent matter therefore that deserves everyone's attention. Yet ideas, resources, programs and institutions targeted just on Hispanics (who happen to be the overwhelming majority) are appallingly few.

## Cultural Context of Catechesis

The conclusions drawn by Christian Smith in *Soul Searching* suggests that the issue is not really catechesis at all, but rather the larger cultural context that renders all efforts at catechesis sterile and ineffective. I agree with this. But is not this precisely what Pope Benedict XVI was talking about in his words at the National Shrine of the Basilica of the Immaculate Conception in Washington when he said that a “new evangelization” is needed. Once again the critical issue here is culture, those areas of U.S. culture listed by Smith and others that do not reflect Gospel values, or worse, systematically undermine them.

## Cultural Discernment

What the above suggests to me is that no kind of catechesis in the U.S., for adolescents or any other group, can produce the desired results without church leadership undergoing a serious, in depth process of conversion undergirded by cultural discernment. *Nemo dat quod non habet*. Teachers,

preachers cannot give what they do not have. People, especially North Americans, are quite unfamiliar with and reluctant to engage in this kind of discernment. Teachers and preachers are generally not trained for this. So it barely happens.

### **Balance between Content and Methodology**

There needs to be much more balance between content of the faith and methodologies whereby the content is communicated and transformed into culture. For Hispanics (and many other non-European groups) the approach to learning of all kinds must be relational as was pointed out by Michael Theisen. A big challenge here in my view is a certain academic culture still highly influenced by my generation of Vatican II Catholics who are too often stuck in late modernity with its discomfort with affectivity on the one hand and fascination with rationality and the cognitive on the other. A much better balance needs to be attained between affect and reason. In this, some of the evangelical Protestant efforts may be showing the way.

### **Adolescents At Risk**

I am concerned about the lack of reference to the adolescents most at risk.

I mean the gang related youth who according to Instituto Fe y Vida may be as many as 15 percent of the Hispanic youth. Also, what about the specific situation of African American teenagers? Each situation demands critical analysis.

### **Diversity**

That brings me to one final observation: *The approach to ministry of every form including catechesis, in my view, must be differentiated in an age of growing diversity.* One conclusion about adolescent catechesis to be drawn is that to be relevant today, it must be highly diversified. There must be several adolescent catecheses since the “one-shoe fits all” mentality is not appropriate here. Yet ministers in the church for some reason seem to gravitate to univocal thinking. Such thinking in my view is inconsistent with the spirit of true catholicity.

### **About the Author**

Father Allan Figueroa Deck, S.J., is the first executive director of the Office for Cultural Diversity in the Church at the USCCB. He entered the Jesuit order in the California Province on September 7, 1963 and was ordained March 27, 1976. Father Deck earned a B.A. in philosophy a Ph.D. in Spanish and Latin American studies at Saint Louis University. He received a master of divinity degree at the Jesuit School of Theology at Berkeley, a Licentiate in Sacred Theology, Pontifical Gregorian University, and a doctorate in sacred theology from the Gregorian. He is a member of the Catholic Theological Society of America and served on its Committee on Admissions in 1990. He was a founder of the Academy of Catholic Hispanic Theologians of the United States and its first president. Father Deck’s 1989 book *The Second Wave: Hispanic Ministry and the Evangelization of Cultures* was winner of the Best Professional Book Award by the Catholic Press Association. The priest was co-editor, with Jay P. Dolan, of *Hispanic Catholic Culture in the United States: Issues and Concerns*, 1994, and co-editor, with Virgil P. Elizondo and Timothy Matovina of *The Treasure of Guadalupe*. Among the awards which Father Deck has received were the O’Grady Award of the National Catholic Conference of Catholic Charities for an article titled “A Christian Perspective on the Reality of Illegal Immigration,” and the Serra International Award for the best article on Christian vocations. In addition to English and Spanish, Father Deck is fluent in Portuguese and reads Italian and Latin.

