

The Writing Apostolate of the Marian Catechists

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When the Marian Catechists first began with the encouragement of the Holy See, their foreseen role was to strengthen the faith of believing Catholics and bring the true faith to those who are either not Catholics or even Christians. In the intervening years, both the number of Marian Catechists and their apostolic opportunities have increased beyond all expectations.

In the providence of God, I believe this is a good time to assess, not so much our apostolic commitment, as how this commitment is to be put into practice. The present reflections will concentrate on what I consider the single most basic form of apostolic endeavor in which the Marian Catechists are to engage in the years to come. We shall divide these reflections into three parts: *Writing and the Spiritual Life*, *The Writing Apostolate in the Providence of God*, and *Marian Catechists as Apostles of Writing*.

Writing and the Spiritual Life

Few people realize the value of writing. It was St. Augustine who confessed, as he said, that he was "one of those who write because they have made some progress and who, by means of writing, make further progress" in the spiritual life (Letter 143).

The proverbs of all nations praise the value of writing:

. "Nature's chief masterpiece is writing well."

. "Look into your heart and write."

Except for the inspiration to write, we should not have the Sacred Scriptures. What is the Bible, except the inspired word of God in written form?

My purpose here is to look briefly at some of the reasons why writing is such an asset of the spiritual life. To be convinced of the worth of writing, daily – if only a few words – is to have made a giant stride on the road to sanctity.

Discipline for the Mind. Left to themselves, our thoughts tend to roam about. Our minds are not naturally under control. They tend to run in all directions at once and are not spontaneously under our command.

That is why writing is so important. It provides a pathway for the mind. It gives direction to our thinking. It helps us to master our faculty of thought.

Intellectual Humility. Cardinal Newman explained why more people do not write. The reason, he said, is that writing demands humility.

When I read what I have written, I must look at myself as I really am. I must see the vagueness of my thinking, the inconsistency of my logic, the triviality of my life and the experience is humiliating.

The pathway to humility is humiliation, and the deepest humiliation is being humiliated in my own eyes. Writing is a proven way of lowering myself in my own estimation by looking at my real self as reflected in the thoughts I have set down on paper.

Record of Graces Received. One reason why some of the great saints of history have written much is that they wished to keep a record of the graces they had received from God in mental prayer.

On the one hand, writing helps us to keep humble by giving us visible proof of our own weakness and folly. But writing can also be a tribute to God's wisdom and a record of His graces. We honor Him when we set down in writing what ideas or inspirations He gives us during the day, especially while we are quietly meditating in His presence.

Cultivating the Memory. We remember what we want to remember. By writing down our thoughts and spiritual experiences, we make a strong act of the will to remember what we have written.

This is one reason why making even a brief notation, say, of a quotation from one of the saints helps to fix into our minds what we wrote down.

It is a good idea to begin collecting choice sayings from the masters of the spiritual life, as a powerful aid for deepening our own spiritual resources.

Whatever is memorized, becomes part of the treasury of our mind. Our memorized thoughts contribute to everything we think, say or do for the rest of our lives.

Moral Inventory. St. Ignatius stressed the importance of a daily review of our conduct, put in some written form. This serves many purposes:

- . It shows how serious we are about overcoming our failures.
- . It shows how honest we are about growing in the virtues we need.
- . It gives us the opportunity of looking back over the progress – if any – we have made in our imitation of Christ.
- . It makes us conscious, during the day, of what we plan to put down in some written form at the end of the day.

The Art of Speaking. We are told by St. James that, "every kind of beast and bird, and of serpents and the rest is tamed by mankind; but the tongue no man can tame – restless evil and full of deadly poison" (James 3:7-8).

The apostle does not mean we cannot tame the tongue. What he means is that we cannot tame it ourselves. We need the constant help of God. And God will give us the grace to tame this wild creature if we do our part. A most valuable part is to write down our thoughts while saying a prayer before we start writing, as we write, and after we have written – to obtain the divine light we need to see what God wants us to say and the divine help to say it.

People who do this will go a long way to using their tongues as God wants us to. The effort and grace required to write down our thoughts are a major contribution to mastering our speech.

Too often we speak without first thinking. But we cannot write without thinking. The practice of writing, therefore, will develop the art of speaking according to God's will. The reward? "If anyone does not offend in word," we are assured, "he is a perfect man" (James 3:2).

The Charity of Sharing Our Souls. Writing is a proved trainer of the tongue, to prevent us from failing in charity through speech.

But there is more to the practice of charity than merely avoiding failures against the virtue. Charity is, above all, sharing with another what I have, in order to enrich the person whom I love.

What is our dearest possession? It is the gifts of the spirit that the Holy Spirit has generously given to us. If I am to share these gifts of my soul with others, I must do several things:

- Acquire as much grace as I can by reading, prayer and self-denial.

. From my record, I share – as occasion arises – with others what the goodness of the Lord has shared with me.

It would be a good idea if we started keeping a written record of past experiences, interesting episodes, uplifting sentiments, whether our own or those received from others.

When God became man, He taught the people mainly through short stories – we call them parables. He wants us to follow His example. In practice, this means we should make a written memo of the parables in our own life, to share them with others and thus bring everyone we talk to closer to the Heart of Christ.

The Writing Apostolate in the Providence of God

We may say that the writing apostolate began with the discovery of alphabetical writing. It was about 2000 B.C. that phonetic writing was discovered. This meant that for the first time in history, human beings could communicate their thoughts and desires by means of single sounds expressed in a few easily remembered written forms. No expert in Sinology knows all the eighty thousand Chinese symbols, and even the ten thousand normally used by Chinese scholars are beyond the capacity of most people to learn. How much easier to use only twenty or thirty signs.

In a relatively short time, the alphabet passed from one language to another, from the Phoenicians and Hebrews to the farthest regions of Eastern and Northern Europe. It can be said that the alphabet was discovered just in time for God's revealed truth to be put down in writing. Another name for this written revelation is the Bible.

All the effects of literacy were accentuated with the discovery of printing. If 1456 is accepted as the date of his great invention, when he issued the Mazarin Bible, this would give an even eighty years to the publication of John Calvin's *Institutes of the Christian Religion*. During that period, a new form of Christianity came on the scene, whose principles were strongly shaped by the rise of a print civilization. As we all know, Protestants consider all of God's revealed truth to be contained in the Bible. This unthinkable and devastating principle would never have penetrated Christianity until the discovery of print. But it gives us some idea of how powerful the written word can be in shaping, or shall I say reshaping, the minds of millions.

When St. Ignatius founded the Society of Jesus, he trained his followers to write, write extensively, write daily, write through correspondence, write for publication. That is why the bibliography of the published writings by Jesuits contains literally thousands of books covering every aspect of the teaching apostolate.

As a spiritual son of St. Ignatius, it is my duty to not only encourage you to write. Dare I say it, I must demand of all of you as Marian Catechists to write.

Marian Catechists as Apostles of Writing

At this early stage of the writing apostolate by the Marian Catechists, we can only spell out the larger picture of what this means. Basically, it means that to be a Marian Catechist, one must cultivate the art of writing to bring Christ to others. There is no limit to the forms that this can take. The following is a basic overview of the ways in which this apostolate can be exercised.

Writing Letters to People. Since the dawn of writing, letters have been the normal way for literate persons to exchange their deepest sentiments. A Marian Catechist should be a regular letter writer. I would say at least one letter a day. The letter need not be long, but should be written from the heart. It should contain at least a sentence or two touching on the faith. For example, a letter of condolence may say, "As believing Christians, we are confident that we shall be reunited in heaven with those whom we have loved here on earth. And we shall not be separated from our loved ones for all eternity."

Never close a letter with just some prosaic phrase like, "Sincerely yours." At least say, "Very sincerely yours in Christ," or "Cordially yours in our Lord," or "With my prayers."

The literature of all nations is filled with beautiful passages about how much people appreciate receiving letters. Susan Emory, in the nineteenth century, wrote an essay entitled, *An Old Woman's Answer to a Letter from Her Girlhood*. She says:

I listen and my hand thy letter presses;

I, time-worn woman, touch it with caresses,

I kiss the faded ink of its addresses.

Over the years of my priesthood, how many people have told me they still keep letters that I had written them thirty or more years ago.

The writing apostolate of the Marian Catechists must include the writing of letters, not only to those who have written to us, but especially to those from whom we have never received a letter, and who may never correspond with us in return.

Letters to Editors. Most of us do enough reading of newspapers and magazines to know that letters to the editor are, I would say, an essential part of every periodical.

Many, if not most, of these letters to the editor are critical. Something published in a previous issue is displeasing to a reader. So what does the reader do? Writes a letter to the editor complaining about what had appeared in the newspaper or magazine. Or again, something was said in print that is not clear, or confusing. This time the letter to the editor asks for an explanation.

But as I know from experience, the letters which editors most appreciate are those in which the readers are happy with something that had been printed. Or they are pleased with the spirit in which something was published. Then they inform the editor by complimenting the writer and expressing their satisfaction with what had appeared in print.

Thus, in a recent issue of *The Catholic Faith* magazine, a reader wrote to the editor, "I have been a great proponent of *The Catholic Faith* since it was first available. As a DRE at Holy Apostles Church in South Meriden, Connecticut, I insist all my catechists read every issue." Needless to say, the editor was very happy to receive this short letter.

Another monthly newspaper, *Adoremus Bulletin*, has a letter to the editor, entitled "What's the Point?" It reads, "Regarding 'An Architecture to Honor the Church's Vision'; if the architecture portrayed are examples of what is to come, I don't like it, or am I missing the point here? In your opinion, very simply, are you for or against this new architecture of St. Basil's, University of St. Thomas, Houston? Can you please clarify this for me?"

The editor's response is five paragraphs long and brings out some very important points which the readers would never have known except for the question raised by a letter to the editor.

Articles for Periodicals. The two basic forms of periodical writing are what we commonly call newspapers and magazines.

Catholic newspapers will generally welcome contributed stories or newsworthy facts which are unsolicited but voluntarily sent in to the editor. Of course, you must know what I call the philosophy of the newspaper. Assuming this, a very valuable form of apostolic writing is to provide these papers with news items that are not only announcements of some future meeting or convention. The secret is to describe, concisely and informatively, about some event or experience that would be interesting to the readers.

On another level, with few exceptions, Catholic magazines welcome articles that are well-written, authentically Catholic, and consistent with the editorial policy of the publication. So important is this form of apostolic writing that I dare say it is almost the lifeblood of periodical literature.

At this point, I wish to share with the Marian Catechists one of the plans for the immediate future. Those who either have already had the experience of writing for Catholic magazines, or those who would like to engage in this apostolate, are hereby requested to submit their names and at least a short description of the kind of periodical writing they would be interested in pursuing.

Having over the years organized Catholic writers' guilds, both for my own Jesuit confreres and for the Catholic laity, I hereby invite Marian Catechists to form a similar writers' guild as an essential part of our apostolate.

Manuscripts for Books. The modern world is literally flooded with thousands of volumes that are published every year in our country alone. Most of these books are not only not Catholic, but many are brazenly unchristian and even openly pagan.

In contrast, there are relatively few authentically Catholic books published in our day. It is almost as though professed Catholics were either afraid to express their convictions or, as the expression goes, there is no market for their writings. On the first level, we dare not keep silence about Incarnate Truth for fear of being criticized, or ostracized or, to coin a word, martyred. Having done my share of publishing books on the Catholic faith, one of my fondest hopes for the Marian Catechists is that, with God's grace, they will publish volumes in explanation and defense of their faith in Jesus Christ.

There is a large market, widely open, for sound, Catholic books. They can be small paperbacks of a hundred or less pages. They can be larger volumes. One thing I want to make clear. Our nation is literally starving for the truth that we, faithful followers of Christ, have received from Him to share with others. Something like a dozen large Catholic publishers in the United States went out of existence during the revolution in the sixties and seventies. Without going into the reasons for this misfortune, we must do everything in our power to reopen the market for soundly Catholic books that are so deeply needed in the Western world today. But there will be no such books unless there are zealous writers who are willing to spend the hours, and I mean sleepless hours, in writing the manuscripts for books to nourish our dechristianized society with God's revealed truth.

As was said before, I welcome those Catechists who believe they have the grace to do so, to let me know if they are willing to write manuscripts for books. These can be individual manuscripts written by a single person, or what I call collective manuscripts, where ten or so authors each contributes a chapter on one master theme.

Conclusion

This is only the prelude to what I consider one of the main forms of the Marian Catechists' apostolate. There are other forms of apostolic communication. There is the spoken word, which is indispensable. There are the mass media of communication.

It is worth quoting the first paragraph of the Second Vatican Council's decree on the means of social communication, *Inter Mirifica*. First issued in 1963, it has been the most neglected of the sixteen documents issued by the council. One reason for this widespread neglect is that its underlying thesis is the duty we have to use these modern media for the extension of Christ's kingdom on earth. The first paragraph reads:

Man's genius has with God's help produced marvelous technical inventions from creation, especially in our times. The Church, our mother, is particularly interested in those which directly touch man's spirit and which have opened up new avenues of easy communication of all kinds of news, of ideas and orientations. Chief among them are those means of communication which of their nature can reach and influence not merely single individuals but the very masses and even the whole of human society. These are the press, the cinema, radio, television and others of a like nature. These can rightly be called "the means of social communication."

You will notice that the first form of media identified by the council is the press. In the Latin original, the word is *prelum*, which means every form of the printed word. It is impossible to exaggerate the importance of identifying the apostolate of published writing as the principal medium of apostolic communication in the modern world.

As time goes on, we shall elaborate on other means of social communication in the Marian Catechist apostolate. For the present, we concentrate on writing. It was writing that the Holy Spirit inspired the authors of the New Testament Scriptures to give the world the Good News proclaimed by the angels on Christmas morning.

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