Landas 31:2 (2017) 103–116

A NARRATIVE THAT TRANSFORMS

Story-telling to Story-making in Catholic Religious Education

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The 2007 *National Catechetical Directory of the Philippines* (NCDP) identified the five specific objectives of catechesis as follows:

1. Develop understanding of the truths of the Catholic faith, drawn directly from the basic sources of faith— Holy Scripture, Tradition and Magisterium
2. To educate the catechized in the basic principles and practice of Christian morality
3. To instruct Catholics on how to pray and participate actively in the Church's liturgy
4. Develop the sense of belonging and committed service as active members in the Church community.
5. Develop in the catechized the two-way skill of:
    a. Incarnating their Christian faith in attitudes and values of daily life.
    b. Interpreting their daily life in the light of the Gospel.[1]

[1]Episcopal Commission for Catechesis and Catholic Education, *National Catechetical Directory for the Philippines* (Manila: Catholic Bishops' Conference of the Philippines, 2007), nos. 124–131.

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The list notably begins with the three essential dimensions of Christian Faith, namely doctrine, morality, and worship. It then continues with commitment to the Church community and a two-way skill: that of living out the faith in the context of daily life and interpreting daily life in the light of the Gospel. In February 2014, this list of objectives would serve as the basis for the *K–12 Religious Education Curriculum* developed by the Catholic Educators Association of the Philippines (CEAP)—National Capital Region.

Despite its strengths, what appears to be one of the weaknesses of this latest curriculum is its lack of emphasis on salvation history, which is given focus only in Grade 1, where the entire panorama from Old to New Testament is supposed to be presented, and in Grade 7, where the life of Jesus becomes the focus. In contrast, four years (Grades 2, 3, 4, and 9) are given to the sacraments, another four years (Senior Kinder, Grades 5, 10 and 11) are dedicated to moral topics, two years (Grades 6 and 8) are devoted to ecclesiology and mission, and one year (Grade 12) is allocated to addressing special topics. This comes as no surprise given that the curriculum merely reflects the lacuna concerning salvation history in the 2007 NCDP Objectives.

Taking the cue from the Scriptures and Church Fathers as well as from modern theorists and practitioners of religious education, this article seeks to highlight the central role of narrating salvation history in a Catholic religious education curriculum before attempting to describe how we can apply this principle in our own pedagogical practice today.

Scriptural and Patristic Sources

"Only take care, and keep your soul diligently, lest you forget the things that your eyes have seen, and lest they depart from your heart all the days of your life. Make them known to your children and your children's children" (Dt. 4:9). Such was the injunction of Moses to the people of Israel about keeping alive the memory of the Exodus and of the many wonderful things that the Lord had wrought for them in the course of their history as a people. This admonition also appears

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elsewhere in the Hebrew Scriptures such as in Psalm 48, for instance, where a historical tour of the city of Jerusalem becomes a lesson in both history and doctrine: "Walk about Zion, go around her, number her towers, consider well her ramparts, go through her citadels, that you may tell the next generation that this is God, our God forever and ever" (Ps. 48:12–14).

Being a form of sacred memorial—***zēker*** (זכר) or ***zikkārōn*** (זכרון), more familiar to us in Greek as *anamnesis* (ἀνάμνησις), retelling the story of salvation makes the events present to us again. In this way, they do not remain relics of the past but become our personal experiences here and now. As the Haggadah exhorts all those who partake of the Seder Meal and listen to the Passover narrative, "Each person from every generation must regard oneself as having been *personally* freed from Egypt."

This memorial, however, is not only doctrinal but moral as well, for it serves as the foundation of righteous conduct. When God gave the Decalogue to Moses in the book of Deuteronomy, for instance, it is preceded and interspersed with recollections of the wonders that the Lord had done which justly warrant the people's obedience to the Lord their Savior (Dt. 5:2–5, 15). At the same time, the book of Judges identifies the loss of this memory as the beginning of Israel's moral degeneration after the death of Gideon: "And the people of Israel did not remember the Lord their God, who had delivered them from the hand of all their enemies on every side…" (Jgs. 33:34). Psalm 22, in the same vein, described the recovery of this memory as the turning point that leads to conversion (Ps. 22:27).

Aside from its doctrinal and moral aspects, this memory also contains a liturgical dimension exemplified by the beautiful prayer recited for the offering of the first fruits. It recalls salvation history from the time of the Patriarchs up until their settlement in the Promised Land:

> A wandering Aramean was my father. And he went down into Egypt and sojourned there, few in number, and there became a nation, great, mighty, and populous. And the Egyptians treated us harshly and humiliated us and laid on us hard labor. Then we cried to the

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> Lord, the God of our fathers, and the Lord heard our voice and saw our affliction, our toil, and our oppression. And the Lord brought us out of Egypt with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm, with great deeds of terror, with signs and wonders. And he brought us into this place and gave us this land, a land flowing with milk and honey. And behold, now I bring the first of the fruit of the ground, which you, O Lord, have given me.… (Dt. 26:5–10)

One can thus say that, in the Old Testament model, the narration of the history of salvation represented a program of religious instruction that was not only foundational but complete in itself, bearing and integrating all three dimensions of faith: doctrine, morality, and worship. This retelling permeated the people's life, from the celebration of various festivals to the reading of Scriptures in the temple and synagogue assemblies, the parental instruction of children at home, and the daily traditions and customs that constantly reminded them of the wonders the Lord has done and their Covenant with Him.

In the early Church, the most ancient hymns and creeds, such as the Christological hymn in 2 Philippians and the Symbol of the Apostles, were essentially recitals of salvation history in capsulized form. In the New Testament, this sacred act of remembering would eventually be crystallized most especially in the institution of the Eucharist, which the Lord himself commanded to be done in his memory (cf. Lk. 22:19 and 1 Cor. 11:24–25).

The Eucharist is the memorial of the very core of salvation history—the Paschal Mystery of Christ, which is made present each time the sacrament is celebrated. As John Paul II wrote, "The Eucharist is indelibly marked by the event of the Lord's passion and death, of which it is not only a reminder but the sacramental *re-presentation*. It *is* the sacrifice of the Cross perpetuated down the ages."[2] The Eucharist likewise embodies what we are called to be as members of Christ's Body

[2]John Paul II, Encyclical Letter on the Eucharist in its Relationship to the Church *Ecclesia de Eucharistia*, 11 (emphases added).

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and represents our highest form of worship and the most efficacious means for our sanctification.[3]

For the Church Fathers, the events of salvation history are vehicles of the divine pedagogy and a means of discovering Christ hidden in them. Since the Church's retelling of these sacred events, as we have said, does not merely recall them but makes them present again, it thereby constitutes a living "continuation of the divine pedagogy."[4] In his *Homilies on the Canticle of Canticles*, for instance, Origen does not simply exhort the assembly to study the text in order to grasp its meaning intellectually; he invites them not only to own the words but to appropriate the very experience of the characters in the story as they enter it in prayer: "When you have grasped this, listen to the Song of Songs and make haste to understand it and to *join with the Bride* in saying what she says so that *you may hear also* what she heard" (*Hom. Ct.* I 1, 3). Going on further, he then dares them to become one with Christ himself: "Be *you* of one mind with the Bridegroom" (*Hom. Ct.* I 3, 3). In line with this, he thus advised one of his dearest disciples:

> As you apply yourself to divine reading, seek correctly and with unshakeable faith in God the sense of the divine Scriptures hidden from the many. Do not be content with knocking and seeking, for prayer is most necessary for understanding divine matters. (…) May you be such *a participant*, and may you always *grow in such participation*.… (*Letter to Gregory*, 4, emphasis added)

Around 400 A.D., Deogratias, a deacon from Carthage, asked for the advice of Saint Augustine on how to teach beginners in the faith. Responding to his request, the saintly and learned bishop of Hippo

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[3]John Paul II says that we are called to make our lives "Eucharistic," that is, transformed and given for the life of the world (cf. *Ecclesia de Eucharistia*, 20). In the same document, he reiterates the teaching of Vatican II which described the Eucharist as the source and summit of Christian life (cf. *Ecclesia de Eucharistia*, 1 and the Dogmatic Constitution on the Church *Lumen Gentium*, 11).

[4]Caroline Farey, Waltraud Linnig, & M. Johanna Paruch, eds., *The Pedagogy of God: Its Centrality in Catechesis and Catechist Formation* (Steubenville, OH: Emmaus Road Publishing, 2011), 5.

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prescribed the full narration of the history of salvation as the main content of catechetical instruction, along with the following pointers:

> The narration is full when each person is catechized in the first instance from what is written in the text, "In the beginning God created the heaven and the earth," on to the present times of the Church.… But what we ought to do is, to give *a comprehensive statement of all things, summarily and generally*, so that certain of the more wonderful facts may be selected which are listened to with superior gratification, and which have been ranked so remarkably among the *exact turning-points* (of the history); that, instead of exhibiting them to view only in their wrappings, if we may so speak, and then instantly snatching them from our sight, we ought to dwell on them for a certain space, and thus, as it were, unfold them and open them out to vision, and present them to the minds of the hearers as things to be examined and admired. But as for all other details, these should be passed over rapidly, and thus far introduced and woven into the narrative.[5]

Some important things are to be highlighted in this very rich text. First, a full panorama of salvation history is in order, "a comprehensive statement of all things, summarily and generally." This would give learners the "big picture" in which to situate particular events of salvation history. Second, it is necessary to select and to highlight the "exact turning points," those which he describes "are listened to with superior gratification." It is good to note that the criterion is actually determined from the point of view of the audience, according to what brings them greater spiritual upliftment, rather than by the personal choice of the teacher. Third, such points are to be tackled with more depth while other trivial events and details are to be glossed over.

Thus, instead of a superficial discussion of the sacred events, "exhibiting them only in their wrappings," there may be a spiraling process that traverses from merely "exhibiting" to "unfolding," from "viewing" to "examining," and finally to "admiring," which already implies some level of emotional connection instead of just plain intellectual apprehension. In other words, the narration should produce a gradual and escalating dynamic movement from the cognitive to the affective, which is the gateway that leads to the performative.

[5]Augustine, *De Catechizandis Rudibus*, 5.

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Modern Theorists and Practitioners of Religious Education

Gerhard Lohfink echoes Augustine and Origen when he proposes that faith is an entry into the long history of salvation. According to him, there are many stations in this history, and among them are "crucial" ones like Abraham which are equivalent to the "turning points" that Augustine spoke about. These are the ones that are good to dwell on and emphasize as we present the full panorama of the history of salvation. As in Origen, Lohfink also underlines the need to enter into and participate in the narrative instead of just remaining a detached reader or listener since faith, for him, "is nothing other than entry into this long history of belief. Faith means learning from that history, entrusting oneself to it, living from it, entering on the way of the people of God."[6] To enter the narrative, moreover, is not only to become part of just any kind of story but to participate in the journey of believers—both those whose stories are written in the Scriptures and the nameless throng who have joined this pilgrimage and continue to walk in it by way of entering into this history.

In his "Shared Christian Praxis" model, Thomas Groome highlights the importance of the Christian Story and Vision as the lens by which one reflects upon the present action. He then goes further by taking an approach that is participatory and mutually critical, saying that

> [i]n the Christian faith tradition, there is an overall Story that explains where we have come from and an all-encompassing Vision that calls us forward. Thus, in a Christian educational context, while participants reflect upon the story and visions embodied in their present action, those stories and visions must be critiqued in the light of the broader Story and Vision that is Christianity.[7]

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[6]Gerhard Lohfink, *No Irrelevant Jesus: On Jesus and the Church Today*, trans. Linda M. Maloney (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2014), 286.

[7]Thomas H. Groome, "Christian Education for Freedom: A 'Shared-Praxis' Approach," in Padraic O'Hare, ed., *Foundations of Religious Education* (New York: Paulist Press, 1978), 23–24.

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Groome's methodology involves five steps: 1) grounding in the present context of the participants, 2) articulating their stories and visions, 3) retelling the Christian Community Story and Vision, and 4) entering into a dialectical hermeneutic between the Story and the participants' own stories as well as 5) between the Vision and the participants' own visions.

With this approach to religious education, Groome prefers "making present a story" instead of "teaching doctrines." Indeed, there is little need to impose doctrines when this approach is correctly applied since interacting with the Story and Vision is what already sheds light on and transforms the participants' own stories and visions. In his own words, the "Shared Christian Praxis" model is "an attempt to see to it that our discernment of God's will for us in our present is critically appropriated rather than unquestioningly imbibed."[8]

Storytelling, then, does not end in itself but necessarily continues to what Nathaniel Girard Samuel calls "story-making." According to him,

> a major outcome of a narrative approach to religious education therefore is discerning how to further God's reign with agency, authenticity and responsibility. Narrative religious education should not only renew critical reflection on the story of God's saving action in history; it ought also to encourage responsibility in Christ's mission of realizing this saving work through the action of the Holy Spirit. [9]

A deep and authentic encounter with the stories of our faith must lead as such not only to the transformation of our personal stories and visions but also and ultimately to the concrete transformation of our lives and the world. We are not mere onlookers or passive participants in this narrative; we are active protagonists who are being called by the Lord in our context today to continue this yet unfinished and still unfolding history of salvation, one which has now become ours as

[8]Groome, "Christian Education for Freedom: A 'Shared-Praxis' Approach," 30–31.

[9]Nathaniel Girard Samuel, *Story-Making: A Transformative Pedagogy of the Christian Faith*, Ph.D. dissertation (Boston College, 2013), https://dlib.bc.edu/ islandora/ object/bc-ir:101360/datastream/PDF/view (accessed December 8, 2017).

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well. As Samuel said, "Story-making beckons to the narrative quality of this vision of the reign of God. It is ongoing; it develops in every age as it inspires disciples to take part in creating a more just world where God's indwelling and unconditional love may be evident."[10]

In a similar vein, then Bishop Luis Antonio Tagle, in his speech at the 2006 Asian Mission Congress, said that

> stories are dynamic, open to reinterpretation and re-telling, and transformative.… Stories reveal what made us what we are now while differentiating us from what we were before and opening possibilities for the future. Through stories we get in touch with the dynamism of transformation of personal identity: how much we have changed and how much more we have to change.[11]

He says, however, that the real question is *how* to tell the story of Jesus. To do this, the Church must learn to narrate the history of salvation from her own experience, from her own unique context, and in the multiplicity of ways that the Spirit opens, which includes telling the suppressed stories of the voiceless who are prevented from telling their own narratives, while listening to the stories of others. In concluding his speech, Tagle turned to Jesus, "the Logos or Story of God and master storyteller of the Reign of God," whose life and even death told the story of the Father's love and who in turn sends us now to tell the story of his love.

Telling the Story of Jesus Today

While the primacy and importance of doing so are rather clear, there are some apprehensions regarding the use of Biblical stories in religious education such that it barely progresses beyond mere mention or superficial discussion. These apprehensions include the "negative

[10]Samuel, *Story-Making: A Transformative Pedagogy of the Christian Faith*, 237.

[11]Luis Antonio Tagle, *Mission in Asia: Telling the Story of Jesus*, Asian Mission Congress (Chiang Mai, Thailand: October 19, 2006), http://www.fabc.org/asian_mission_congress/docs/MISSION%20IN%20ASIA%20by%20Tagle.pdf (accessed December 8, 2017).

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or apathetic response from students (and sometimes from teachers) and teachers' lack of confidence in how to use the Bible in the RE classroom."[12] In light of this, models such as the one proposed by Groome above that require a certain level of knowledge, skill, and maturity may make the task seem even more intimidating.

As such, there are in fact simpler models, including the tried and tested methodology of *Lectio Divina* which is composed of four (+1) steps: *lectio* (reading), *meditatio* (meditation), *oratio* (prayer), and *contemplatio* (contemplation), with some adding *actio* (action). This method is similar to "Ignatian contemplation" where one begs for grace, reads the text, and, depending on its nature, either meditates on it or contemplates it as happening at present with oneself as participant before ending with a final colloquy or petition. Still other approaches are much more simple, like the "Watching Jesus" method where one just focuses and observes closely what Jesus does or says in the narrative.

These various styles and methodologies can also be adapted to particular settings such as in the case of *Bibliarasal*, which was made to suit the gatherings of Basic Ecclesial Communities in the Philippines through the addition of singing and the sharing of experiences. For formal educational settings such as in Catholic schools, we have the "Composite Model" developed in 1995 and published in 2001 in Melbourne, Australia by Margaret Carswell, who culled an adaptation composed of three steps from five existing processes, hence the name "Composite Model."

The first step is preparation on the part of both the teacher and the pupils. On the one hand, the teacher needs to prepare by studying the passage carefully and designing the experience connected to it. The pupils, on the other hand, need to prepare to understand it better through appropriate "scaffolding" such as explaining the meaning of difficult words, identifying the literary genre, describing the *sitz-im-*

[12]Karen Walsh, *Teaching Biblical Narrative in Religious Education*, http://www.re-handbook.org.uk/section/curriculum/religious-education-across-the-curriculum/teaching-biblical-narrative-in-rel igious-education#tab-3 (accessed December 8, 2017).

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leben, and highlighting special literary techniques, etc. according to their reading level. Next, the teacher and pupils encounter the Word of God by listening to it or reading it, followed by studying the text and interpreting it together. Finally, the students respond to the text through personal reflection, prayer, or some concrete action.

The Composite Model can be very effective in addressing some theological and pedagogical concerns regarding the use of Scripture in the context of religious education: first, that Scripture itself should be taught and not merely as an instrument of the topic or theme; second, that students should be enabled to make valid and sound interpretations faithful to the text; third, that students should be gradually empowered to access the text on their own; fourth, that well-grounded analysis of the text must always precede interpretation; and lastly, that the teachers themselves should understand the passage they are asked to teach so as to be able to teach it best.[13]

As Walsh said, "It is important that as teachers we do our homework. Not only do we need a knowledge and understanding of the 'story of the Bible', that is, how it came to be, we also need an understanding of the Bible as a religious text; a source of authority and inspiration."[14] This is indispensable and religious educators must embrace it as a sacred duty.

The K.I.T.E. Method, introduced by Stead in 1994, is another way of teaching Scriptures that is more creative and artistic. Like the Composite Model, it starts with a direct encounter with and study of the Scripture text (K-nowing the Text) before continuing with an artistic immersion (I-nspiring the Imagination) where the students are allowed to use their creativity in experiencing the thoughts and feelings of characters in the story through various art mediums such as drawing, painting, poetry, drama, dance, mime, etc. The students are then invited to ponder the message of the story and how they can live

[13]See *Composite Model of Teaching Scriptures*, http://lapushkarussians.com/teachscripture.com/The-Composite-Model.php (accessed December 8, 2017).

[14]Walsh, *Teaching Biblical Narrative in Religious Education*.

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it out (T-ranslating to Life). Finally, they are led to "pray the Scripture" (E-xpressing the Heart) and use it as a springboard to converse and communicate personally with God.[15]

There are still other things that can help in the use of Scripture for religious education, even if indirectly. For instance, Maria Montessori, while describing how the "Atrium" or Children's Chapel should look like, proposes putting up "sacred pictures illustrating Old and New Testament stories" on the walls to stimulate the interest of learners which, when observed, is to be taken as a cue by the teacher to begin leading them deeper into the narratives.[16] This would be most suitable for students in the lower grades or even for the present "Instagram generation" who are highly visual learners.

In addition to this, Montessori also suggested emulating the liturgy, the "magnificent expression of the content of the faith" and "pedagogical method" of the Church as she calls it, "which, not satisfied with teaching by means of the word preached to the faithful… makes [the various acts of religion] come to life, and allows the people to take part in them each day."[17]

Aside from the Eucharist, the liturgy is rich with examples of sacred narratives being transformed into sensory, if not mimetic, experiences of salvation history such as the imposition of ashes at the beginning of Lent, the procession with palm branches on Passion Sunday, or the ritual Washing of the Feet on Holy Thursday. Not only teachers but also pastors as co-agents of religious education would do well to pay attention to the inestimable value of these silent but highly evocative signs that help ordinary people experience faith. More than any profound theology lesson, these are the moments that really allow people to encounter God.

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[15]See *K.I.T.E. Method*, https://teachingreligiouseducation.weebly.com/kite-method.html (accessed December 8, 2017).

[16]Maria Montessori, *The Child in the Church*, ed. E.M. Standing (Saint Paul, MN: Catechetical Guild, 1965), 144.

[17]Montessori, *The Child in the Church*, 22.

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We also have the rich treasury of popular piety that is replete with colorful practices like our own customs here in the Philippines of *Panunuluyan* on Christmas Eve, *Paglilibing* on Good Friday, and *Salubong* on Easter Sunday. As people not only witness but participate in these ritual activities, they themselves become the households of Bethlehem that had no room for the Holy Family, the disciples who buried their Master in great sorrow after abandoning him, and Mary whose grief was overcome with joy at the sight of her Risen Son.

Conclusion

The study of the sacred text in general and of salvation history in particular should regain its rightful place at the very heart of our Catholic religious education curricula. Indeed, it should be found not only in one or more places but at the very center as the pivot around which all the other topics revolve. This is precisely what Pope Francis, in the Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii Gaudium*, refers to as "the first proclamation" which is called first

> not because it exists at the beginning and can then be forgotten or replaced by other more important things. It is first in a qualitative sense because it is the principal proclamation, the one which we must hear again and again in different ways, the one which we must announce one way or another throughout the process of catechesis, at every level and moment.[18]

At the same time, we should progress from merely discussing or understanding the texts of salvation history to enabling our learners to enter these texts together with us so as to allow ourselves to be transformed by them. This participation in turn is what will allow us to continue the unfolding of the history of salvation in our own context today which is so needful of God's redeeming love.

As Frederick Buechner said, the main task of the preacher—in our case, of the religious educator—is to tell the Good News in all

[18]Francis, Apostolic Exhortation on the Proclamation of the Gospel in Today's World *Evangelii Gaudium*, 164.

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its richness as a story which is first of all tragedy, then comedy, and ultimately fairytale, "with, of course, the one crucial difference from all other fairy tales, which is that the claim made for it is that it is true, that it not only happened once upon a time but has kept on happening ever since and is happening still."[19] Or, as the lyrics of a beloved children's hymn go,

> Tell me the story of Jesus, write on my heart every word; tell me the story most precious, sweetest that ever was heard.

[19]Frederick Buechner, *Telling the Truth: The Gospel as Tragedy, Comedy and Fairy Tale* (New York: Harper Collins Publishers, 1977), 90.

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