

Pope Francis to Catechists

"Starting anew with Christ means not being afraid to go with him to the outskirts. Here I think of the story of Jonah, a really interesting figure, especially for these times of great change and uncertainty. Jonah is a devout man, with a tranquil and ordered life, which causes him to have a clear-cut way of seeing things and to judge everything and everyone accordingly. He has it all figured out: this is the truth! He is rigid! So, when the Lord called him and told him to go and preach to Nineveh, the great pagan city, Jonah doesn't like it. "Go there? But I have the whole truth here!" He doesn't like it. Nineveh is outside his comfort zone; it is on the outskirts of his world. So he escapes, he sets off for Spain; he runs away and boards a ship that will take him there. Go and re-read the Book of Jonah! It is short, but it is a very instructive parable, especially for those of us in the Church.

What does all this teach us? It teaches us not to be afraid to pass beyond our comfort zone and to follow God, because God is always pushing, pressing forward. But do you know something? God is not afraid! Do you realize this? He isn't afraid. He is always bigger than our little way of seeing things! God is not afraid of the outskirts. If you go to the outskirts, you will find him there. God is always faithful and creative. But, really, is there such a thing as a catechist who is not creative? Creativity is what sustains us as catechists. God is creative, he is not closed, and so he is never inflexible. God is not rigid! He welcomes us; he meets us; he understands us. To be faithful, to be creative; we need to be able to change. To change! And why must I change? So that I can adapt to the situations in which I must proclaim the Gospel. To stay close to God, we need to know how to set out, we must not be afraid to set out. If a catechist gives in to fear, then he or she is a coward. If a catechist has an easy time of it, he or she will end up being a statue in a museum. We have a lot of these! Please, no more statues in the museum! If a catechist is rigid, he or she will dry up and wither. I ask you: does any of you want to be a coward, a statue in a museum, dried up and withered? Is that what you want to be? [the catechists reply: No!] No? Are you sure? Good! I am now going to say something I have already said many times before, but it comes from the heart. Whenever we Christians are enclosed in our groups, our movements, our parishes, in our little worlds, we remain closed, and the same thing happens to us that happens to anything closed: when a room is closed, it begins to get dank. If a

person is closed up in that room, he or she becomes ill! Whenever Christians are enclosed in their groups, parishes, movements, they take ill. If a Christian goes to the streets, or to the outskirts, he or she may risk the same thing that can happen to anyone out there: an accident. How often have we seen accidents on the road! But I am telling you: I would prefer a thousand times over a bruised Church than an ill Church! A Church, a catechist, with the courage to risk going out, and not a catechist who is studious, knows everything, but is always closed: such a person is not well. And sometimes he is not well in the head....

But careful! Jesus does not say: Go off and do things on your own. No! That is not what he is saying. Jesus says: Go, for I am with you! This is what is so beautiful for us; it is what guides us. If we go out to bring his Gospel with love, with a true apostolic spirit, with parrhesia, he walks with us, he goes ahead of us, he gets there first. As we say in Spanish, primera. By now you know what I mean by this. It is the same thing that the Bible tells us. In the Bible, the Lord says: I am like the flower of the almond. Why? Because that is the first flower to blossom in the spring. He is always the first! This is fundamental for us: God is always ahead of us! When we think about going far away, to an extreme outskirt, we may be a bit afraid, but in fact God is already there. Jesus is waiting for us in the hearts of our brothers and sisters, in their wounded bodies, in their hardships, in their lack of faith. But can I tell you about one of the "outskirts" which breaks my heart? I saw it in my first diocese. It is children who don't even know how to make the sign of the cross. In Buenos Aires there are many children who can't make the sign of the cross. This is one of the "outskirts"! And Jesus is there, waiting for you to help that child to make the sign of the cross. He's always there first."