

Tadej Stegu


 <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-7894-6408>

Tadej.Stegu@teof.uni-lj.si

University of Ljubljana

 <https://ror.org/05njb9z20>

Lay persons in catechesis. Experience and challenges in the case of Slovenia

 <https://doi.org/10.15633/ps.28103>

Tadej Stegu – Assistant Professor, PhD, is a married layman who lectures on pastoral theology, catechism and didactics at the Department of Pastoral and Kerygmatic Theology at the Faculty of Theology of the University of Ljubljana.

Article history • Received: 22 Jul 2023 • Accepted: 20 Dec 2023 • Published: 2 Apr 2024

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Abstract

Lay persons in catechesis. Experience and challenges in the case of Slovenia

Unlike in most other countries, religious education did not return to public schools in Slovenia after the fall of communism. The Catholic Church intensively introduced and developed catechesis in parishes. The new Slovenian Catechetical Plan opens the door to consider the various forms of catechesis already taking place in parish communities and to a lifelong model of catechesis that is not confined to the period of childhood and adolescence. The article analyses the development of the field of catechesis in Slovenia and the role of lay catechists. It highlights the main trends and challenges in catechesis and some of the existing solutions that no longer look only at the age of candidates but take into account their maturity and readiness when preparing to receive the sacraments of initiation. The analytical research is further illuminated by the author's personal experience as a layperson involved in catechesis.

Keywords: religious education, catechesis, kerygma, lay persons

Abstrakt

Laikat w katechezie. Doświadczenia i wyzwania w przypadku Słowenii

W przeciwieństwie do większości innych krajów, edukacja religijna nie powróciła do szkół publicznych w Słowenii po upadku komunizmu. Kościół katolicki intensywnie wprowadzał i rozwijał katechezę w parafiach. Nowy słoweński plan katechetyczny otwiera drzwi do rozważenia różnych form katechezy, które już mają miejsce we wspólnotach parafialnych, oraz do modelu katechezy przez całe życie, który nie ogranicza się do okresu dzieciństwa i dorastania. Artykuł analizuje rozwój katechezy w Słowenii i rolę świeckich katechetów. Podkreśla główne trendy i wyzwania w katechezie oraz niektóre z istniejących rozwiązań, które nie patrzą już tylko na wiek kandydata, ale biorą pod uwagę jego osobistą dojrzałość i gotowość podczas przygotowań do przyjęcia sakramentów inicjacji. Badania analityczne są dodatkowo oświetlone osobistym doświadczeniem autora jako osoby świeckiej zaangażowanej w katechezę.

Słowa kluczowe: edukacja religijna, katecheza, kerygmat, laikat

The involvement and engagement of lay people in catechetical activities take place with different intensities in different environments. The experiences of various European countries and the challenges that catechesis faces are different in many ways, but they are similar in even more ways. The conditions in which the Church in Slovenia operates have long ago encouraged an active involvement of lay people in catechesis in various fields. Many years of experience have enabled reflection and appropriate further planning of the development of the catechetical field, which has led to a national catechetical plan that takes into account specific conditions and possibilities. In the article, we will first briefly analyze the specificity of Slovenian conditions that dictated the development of new approaches in catechesis. Some of the approaches and methods of catechetical work that have been developed could be useful in a wider environment, so we highlight them in the second part.

1. Analysis of the state of catechesis in the Church in Slovenia

Most Central European countries, to which Slovenia belongs, have religious classes in public educational institutions from kindergarten to university. At the same time, parish catechesis takes place, intended for those who want to grow up in faith, deepen it and live with the celebration of the sacraments. In Slovenia, the authorities banned religious instruction from school premises in 1952. After the ban on religious education in schools, the Catholic Church intensively introduced and developed religious education in the parishes. Parish religious education was created to prepare children for the reception of the sacraments and to teach basic knowledge about Christianity, as well as about religiosity in general. The advantage of such an approach is that it gives children and young people a stronger sense of belonging to the parish community and direct contact with parish life and worship. On the other hand, the long-term exclusion of religious instruction from schools has strengthened the belief in the general mindset that religion has no place in public space¹.

¹ M. Burger, S. Rebec, B. Zelič, F. Zorec, A. Česen, S. Gerjolj, T. Stegu, A. Šegula, Slovenski katehetski načrt (Slovenian catechetical plan), Celje 2018, p. 18.

Unlike most other countries, even after the fall of communism, religious instruction did not return to public schools in Slovenia. There was, in fact, no lustration² in Slovenia, and despite the transition to a democratic social order, the same group of people retained the political power, which hindered the entry of Christianity into the public sphere, especially in the field of education. Even today, Slovenian legislation allows religious instruction only in private schools. In Catholic high schools, the Religion and Culture subject is taught, which deepens the religious outlook on life in dialogue with other subjects and, in private Catholic elementary schools since 2008, also religious instruction. For the vast majority of children and adolescents of Catholic parents, apart from any religious education in the family, the only religious education and instruction is parish catechesis.

The advantage of such an approach is that it gives children and young people a stronger sense of belonging to the parish community, direct contact with parish life and liturgy, and greater involvement of the laity in catechetical activity. On the other hand, the long-term exclusion of religious education from schools has strengthened the general belief that religion has no place in public space.

1.1. Parish catechesis for children

Given the situation, in recent decades most of the catechetical effort in Slovenia has therefore been invested in the parish catechesis of children. Catechesis for children in parishes and the reception of the sacraments at a certain age have been taken for granted for a while³. Systematic catechesis of children makes sense, of course, especially if we take into account the fact that in our country catechesis is intertwined with religious instruction, which children do not receive at school. We are aware that acquiring knowledge about religion is also important for

² From the Latin “lustratio”, meaning “purification by sacrifice”, lustration is the removal of public officials and judges who are associated with a tainted political regime. It has been used as a tool of transitional justice in newly independent and postconflict countries.

³ Slovenian Bishops' Conference, *Pridite in pogledite, Slovenski pastoralni načrt (krovni dokument), Come and see, Slovenian pastoral plan (umbrella document)*, Ljubljana 2012, p. 118.

a holistic introduction to religious life. On the other hand, catechists in parishes have repeatedly noted that the parish catechesis of adults cannot sufficiently introduce them to faith if they had not received primary Christian socialization or the first evangelization, which in most cases takes place in the family, through parents. This, however, can no longer be taken for granted in a secularized and de-Christianized society, where the media largely shapes public opinion and influences individual values and is characterized by a permissive upbringing. It seems that the catechesis that most of today's parents received while growing up does not allow for the kind of growth and maturation in faith that would enable them to be their children's first religious teachers and witnesses of faith. Christian initiation and catechesis often end already in adulthood – and therefore many adults do not know what to do with the infantile image of God and Christianity they have received and which seems to have no contact with their concrete lives. Many are therefore simply not interested in God, while not denying his existence. It is also true that many families in Slovenia are not able to effectively transmit the faith to their children. On the other hand, for several years now we have seen attempts to find various alternative and renewed forms of catechesis. This brings new hope to the catechetical effort at different age levels, from small children to elementary school pupils and young people. Here we can mention the so-called *Catechesis of the Good Shepherd*⁴, which has been very well accepted in most environments.

1.2. Adults and young people

In recent years, some Slovenian parishes have seen initiatives and attempts to introduce catechesis for adults. In some cases, it is a planned work with groups of adults, mostly parents of children attending parish catechism, which takes place with various intensity and according to different programs. Individual approaches to family catechesis are being developed. In the field of adult catechesis in Slovenia there are also some movements and new realities which follow their programs, mainly aimed at introducing people to adult faith. Despite the decline of

4 S. Cavalletti, *Catechesis of the Good Shepherd: essential points*, Ljubljana 2017.

youth groups in parishes, in recent years, youth pastoral care has seen signs of hope. Several new directions have emerged. This is, among others, evidenced by very popular and massive youth gatherings, such as the one at the Cistercian monastery at Stična. That young people are prepared to not only be recipients of catechesis but also active Christian witnesses is indicated by the large number of young animators in diverse environments, where they are offered appropriate support⁵.

1.3. Lay associates

It is encouraging that in Slovenia, in addition to numerous priests and religious, we find no less numerous lay colleagues who are involved in preaching and catechesis. In catechesis and youth ministry, we cannot overlook the many animators in the parishes. In adult catechesis, the role of catechists and witnesses from various movements and new realities, which the Church recognizes as the fruit of the Holy Spirit's activity in modern times, is noticeable. One of the most recognizable roles in catechesis in recent decades in Slovenia can easily be attributed to female catechists and some catechists, religious and laymen, who give elementary catechesis in parishes. Without their generous and fervent cooperation, primary school catechesis would be threatened or even abolished in many places. Due to the declining number of priests, parish priests in some places are no longer able to do all the catechetical work by themselves, even if they wanted to.

However, the position of lay catechists is still rather unclear and inconsistent. Some have a canonical mission (*missio canonica*) for catechetical work. In many parishes, some catechists do not have an official church license—because they do not meet the conditions for it or simply because their parish priests have not applied for it. Only a small number of female catechists are regularly employed in the field of catechesis, while the vast majority of catechists of both sexes perform their work on a non-professional basis, and in too many cases their material conditions are not regulated. In short, there are not enough catechists and catechists in the parishes to meet the needs. The reasons for this

⁵ T. Stegu, *Kateheza dobrega pastirja: bistveni poudarki*. (Adult catechesis in Slovenia: the most widespread forms of adult catechesis.), "Church Today" 54 (2020), p. 22–25.

are various: the lack of will to recruit new catechists or regulate their status by pastors, the lack of financial means to maintain employed catechists and their delicate sensitivity in the area of interpersonal relationships and communication⁶. It is anticipated that in the following years, the status of lay catechists in Slovenia will be regulated according to the *motu proprio* entitled *Antiquum ministerium* by which Pope Francis has established the ministry of lay catechists⁷.

1.4. Challenges

Catechists in parishes often find their parish catechesis for children and adolescents unsuccessful in bringing to the faith those who have not received primary Christian socialization, that is, the first evangelization, which in most cases takes place in the family, through their parents. Primary Christian socialization cannot be taken for granted in a secularized society where the media create a large part of public opinion and influence individual values⁸.

It would seem that the parish catechesis received by most parents while growing up has not given them the maturity in faith required for exercising the role of the first teachers and witnesses of their children. Due to an insufficient Christian initiation and formation, many adults do not know what to do with their infantile ideas of God and Christianity which seem to have no contact with their concrete lives.

On the other hand, we have seen attempts in Slovenian parishes to find various alternative and renewed forms of catechesis for different age groups. In recent years, some parishes have intensively offered various forms of adult catechesis with different intensities and programs, in which priests, religious men and women and lay people participate. The parochial groups for the Bible study and others which include married couples bring together many lay people who, in addition to attending the

6 Slovenian Bishops' Conference, *Come and see, Slovenian pastoral plan (umbrella document)*, Ljubljana 2012, p. 110.

7 Francis, *Antiquum ministerium*, https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/motu_proprio/documents/papa-francesco-motu-proprio-20210510_antiquum-ministerium.html (18.08.2023).

8 M. Burger, S. Rebec, B. Zelič, F. Zorec, A. Česen, S. Gerjolj, T. Stegu, A. Šegula, *Slovenian catechetical plan*, p. 19.

liturgies, seek the growth in faith and support required to live as mature Christians. Individual approaches to family catechesis have been devised. Various movements and new realities with their programs aimed mainly at adult catechesis connect both lay people and clergy⁹.

2. Slovenian catechetical plan

The Slovenian catechetical plan is a document intended to direct catechists in their catechetical work. In the foreground is the whole process of catechesis in all periods of life. The Slovenian catechetical plan starts from the point of view that catechesis has a lifelong dimension and treats it as such in its broadest sense¹⁰.

The plan is divided into two parts. The first part defines the concepts encountered in catechetical activity in the Church in Slovenia, such as catechesis in the narrow sense, inclusive catechesis, catechumenal model, mystagogic catechesis, catechetical activity, kerygma, subjects, competences, catechetical itinerary, planning, new evangelization, vocation. The term “catechesis” does not only refer to religious education as teaching in religion but covers the entire activity of education in religion from an individual’s birth to death¹¹.

The plan emphasizes that catechesis is the responsibility of the entire Christian community. Catechists or priests should therefore not only take care of the introduction to Christianity, but the whole community of believers¹². Permanent education in faith concerns the entire Christian community. Therefore, catechesis is an educational activity carried out by each member of the community. It derives from the responsibility

9 T. Stegu, *Evangelization of movements and new communities*, in: *We know that you are chosen! From clericalization to synodality in pastoral care and catechesis*, ed. by J. Vodičar, Ljubljana 2022, p. 97–104.

10 M. Burger, *What is the Slovenian catechetical plan (SKN)*, “Church Today” 52 (2018), p. 9.

11 A. Šegula, *New directory for catechesis in the context of Slovenian catechetical practice*, in: *New directory for catechesis. Challenges catechesis and pastoral care today*, eds. M. Mohorič, M. O. Llanos, Zadar 2023, p. 429–442.

12 H. Neuhold, *Glaubenskommunikation statt Belehrung und Indoktrination – eine neue Kommunikationskultur auf dem Hintergrund der gemeinsamen Taufe und des gemeinsamen Priestertums*, in: *For we know that you are chosen! From clericalization to synodality in pastoral care and catechesis*, ed. by J. Vodičar, Ljubljana 2022, p. 123–134.

of individual members and is given in the context or environment of the community, which is rich in relationships. This enables catechumens and the catechized for an active involvement in parish life.

2.1. Catechumenal character of catechesis

According to the logic of the above plan, the sacraments (especially the sacraments of initiation) are not imparted solely based on age, but also based on a personal approach and an expressed personal request in terms of the catechumenal character of initiation into Christianity. The plan shows a “spiral development” of general goals, which catechists can analyze in more detail and adjust according to the needs of a specific group or individual. Maturity for receiving the sacraments can no longer be measured by the number of years of catechesis received by an individual but by the processes within the so-called catechumenal way. This does not assume a supportive religious environment in which the catechists would live and therefore requires a complete and integral introduction to the faith. It starts by helping the catechized to understand what it means to be touched by God’s grace and how it affects their daily life¹³. From this conscious personal experience, which is the first evangelization, catechists help to create a renewed experience that takes place within the community in which the catechized person is involved and which can be called “the second evangelization”¹⁴. In the second part, the plan provides guidelines for the preparation of catechetical material, which must take into account the starting points, assumptions and goals of the catechetical plan concerning the addressees. An important part of the plan is its openness and effort to incorporate good practices that are already implemented in the catechetical field in the Church in Slovenia but are not yet coordinated with the structure of the catechesis of the local Church. We can say that some new approaches

¹³ F. Feiner, *Empowerment zu Priestly Wirken kraft der Taufe—Jesu Ermächtigung zum Leben und Handeln aus dem Glauben*, in: *For we know that you are chosen! From clericalization to synodality in pastoral care and catechesis*, ed. by J. Vodičar, Ljubljana 2022, p. 123–134.

¹⁴ F. Zorec, *Kar je dobro, ni treba spreminjati* (What is good does not need to be changed), “Church Today” 52 (2018), p. 20.

complement the established practice and thus represent the second pillar of catechesis¹⁵.

2.2. Two-pillared catechesis

The novelty that the plan brings to the understanding of catechesis in Slovenian is the so-called “two-pillared catechesis”. This opens the door to new forms of catechesis, which are already established but have not been formally taken into account so far. It complements established forms and offers different possibilities for finding ways that suit individual persons. In Slovenian parishes, we can find different models of such two-pillared catechesis. In addition to the already mentioned catechesis, which takes place alongside the regular parish catechesis in various movements and new realities¹⁶, several parishes also carry out family catechesis. One of the models is performed in the parish of Domžale. The approach is innovative, as it involves the catechesis of the entire family. On their website, family catechesis is presented as a pilot project, offering an opportunity to parents who want to deepen their religious knowledge together with their children. Parents should be the first catechists of their children and not only “taxi drivers” who make sure that their children get to the right place at the right time. Once a month, the entire family attends meetings in the parish. Four times a year, as part of this joint meeting, a quiz is held based on a selected biblical text, which all involved families are invited to read¹⁷.

In the context of vocation and mission, families are invited to cultivate a positive (joyful) attitude towards life and to realize that life is a gift from God. They should also value the openness and the acceptance of new life in the family, respecting it from conception to natural death (by accepting and welcoming the sick and dying). This requires a lifelong Christian formation. Families should be made aware that they are the

15 M. Burger, S. Rebec, B. Zelič, F. Zorec, A. Česen, S. Gerjolj, T. Stegu, A. Šegula, Slovenian catechetical plan, p. 21–57.

16 T. Stegu, *Evangelization of movements and new communities*, in: *For we know that you are chosen! From clericalization to synodality in pastoral care and catechesis*, ed. by J. Vodičar, Ljubljana 2022, p. 103–104.

17 N. Podjavoršek, *What is family catechesis*, <https://natalijapodjavorsek.splet.arnes.si/> (26.02.2022).

first and basic cell of the Church¹⁸. They also need to be acquainted with and prepared for the transmission of faith to their children¹⁹.

The Slovenian catechetical plan serves as a springboard for concrete planning and work²⁰. In the plan, catechists receive “structural support” for the preaching ministry and learn how to plan and target their preaching. The plan provides them with an external framework for the annual planning of catechesis. Despite giving concrete guidelines, the plan still gives catechists ample room for individual imagination and creativity and does not want to limit their charisma. It takes into account that the best method is the catechists themselves with their traits and skills²¹.

3. The author’s personal experience as a lay catechist

In his childhood, the author received excellent catechesis from priests and female catechists from religious orders. In his adolescent years, however, he spiritually distanced himself from the Church temporarily, as he could not see the connection between faith and concrete personal life. His experience of adult catechesis in one of the new Church realities—the Neocatechumenal Way—was extremely important and groundbreaking for him. It helped him to remain active in the Church, enter a Christian marriage, accept children with his wife and transmit the faith to them. In this experience of adult catechesis, which is always carried out by a team composed of lay people and a priest, he received a kerygmatic announcement that God loved him, as he was. Little by little, year after year, he has experienced Christ’s liberation from his slavery to passions, sin, and fear of suffering and death. As an adult, he was taught by the catechists how to pray with the Church, live according

18 I. Nežič Glavica, *Family—the “hidden” potential of the Church*, in: *We know that you are chosen! From clericalization to synodality in pastoral care and catechesis*, ed. by J. Vodičar, Ljubljana 2022, p. 49–58.

19 Pontificio Consiglio per la Promozione della Nuova Evangelizzazione, *Direttorio per la catechesi*, Città del Vaticano 2020, p. 230–231.

20 M. Turnšek, *Načrtovanje v katehezi (pastorali) je izziv življenja (Planning in catechesis (pastoral) is the challenge of life)*, “Church Today” 52 (2018), p. 5.

21 A. Šegula, *A best practice example of new evangelization with an emphasis on declericalization*, in: *We know that you are chosen! From clericalization to synodality in pastoral care and catechesis*, ed. by J. Vodičar, Ljubljana 2022, p. 89–96.

to the word of God and actively participate in the celebration of the sacraments, especially the Holy Eucharist and the Sacrament of Reconciliation. He learnt how to be a Christian husband and father. Without this in-depth catechesis, which he received from the Church during his adulthood, the author cannot imagine living in the Church today.

He sees as an invaluable gift the ministry of his catechists who taught him how to transmit the kerygma and faith to his children. He is aware that this is far from easy and is today causing many frustrations to Christian parents. Despite the formation received by the catechists, the transmission of faith – this most precious treasure – to children remains one of the biggest challenges for himself and his wife. The author considers it a great privilege to have not only received catechesis, but to be able – as a layman in the power of his baptism – to serve as a catechist of children in the parish, and especially as a catechist for adults in various teams of the Neocatechumenal Way.

The author's personal experience of both the recipient of catechesis and the catechist (as well as a collaborator in the preparation of the catechetical plan) confirms that in catechetical ministry lay people and priests connect and complement each other. As a lay catechist, he never had a problem with this cooperation, either on the Neocatechumenal Way or the broader Church: he has always encountered exemplary cooperation of priests and lay people in catechesis.

Conclusion

The inclusion of the laity in the catechetical activity is one of the Church's responses to the necessity of evangelization in the modern world. It awakens the enthusiasm of individual Christians and strengthens their awareness that, in the power of baptism, they are called to live this ministry in their community.

Due to the exclusion of religious instruction from public schools, the development of catechetical activity in Slovenian parishes took place somewhat differently and in some respects more intensively than in neighbouring countries. Intensive parish catechesis accelerated the involvement of lay people in catechetical activity and the integration of catechetical activity. Within the framework of movements, new

realities and other organized forms, this has taken shape in a unified catechetical plan. Such an understanding of catechetical activity has prompted the development of new catechetical models and forms, such as family catechesis. At the same time, the inappropriateness of the age criterion in the bestowing of the sacraments of initiation has become evident. Maturity for receiving the sacraments in this model can no longer be measured by the number of years of catechesis an individual attends but by the processes within the so-called catechumenal itinerary. In this way, the catechumenal character of catechesis is even more clearly expressed, without presupposing a supportive religious environment in which catechists would live, and therefore requires a complete and integrated introduction to the faith.

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