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Most Rev. Daniel M. Buechlein, O.S.B., D.D.

Archbishop Buechlein: Doctrinal Deficiencies Caused by Desire Not to Offend, Judge or Exclude

By William R. Bruns

This article appeared in the Sept. 18 *Criterion*, the newspaper of the Archdiocese of Indianapolis, IN. Most Rev. Daniel M. Buechlein, O.S.B., D.D. is the Archbishop of Indianapolis. This article is reprinted with permission.

Archbishop Daniel M. Buechlein told religious educators in Salt Lake City on September 12 that he believes our postmodern culture's desire not to offend or exclude has caused deficiencies in our resources for catechesis, preaching and liturgy.

Speaking before some 400 master catechists, directors of religious education, and other diocesan leaders attending the 36th annual Pastoral Congress of the Diocese of Salt Lake City, the archbishop said he believes that the ancient truths of our faith cannot be authentically "translated" into today's culture if plausibility is the presumed first principle. "Plausibility" can be defined as something deserving applause or popular approval. A plausible argument is one that is pleasing or acceptable to those who hear it, but it is not necessarily a rational argument or one that is consistent with the truth.

The archbishop referred to the concept of the "plausible person" as it appeared in a recent article by Louis R. Tarsitano in the journal *First Things*.

Two funerals

To illustrate his concept of the "plausible person," Tarsitano compared the funerals last year of Princess Diana and Mother Teresa of Calcutta- one a media event with performances and entertainment, the other a religious rite that net- work commentators found alternatively boring or embarrassing in its Christian simplicity.

"There is a reluctance to use the terms Father and Son to describe the first and second persons of the Trinity exists in some catechetical texts."

When the TV commentators praised Mother Teresa, Tarsitano said, it "was not the intensely faithful woman whose body lay in the box before them, but a plausible person who (they said) thought all religions were good and more or less equally true." This image of Mother Teresa may be plausible (comfortable or pleasing to most people), but it is not consistent with the real person or with the counter cultural values she represented in all aspects of her life and ministry.

Archbishop Buechlein told the Salt Lake City audience that Tarsitano's notion of the primacy of plausibility vis-a-vis absolute truth struck a chord with him.

"The motive of plausibility, the motive not to offend or exclude," the archbishop said, "is good and important in itself, but not at the expense of important truth. Authentic inculturation of truth cannot be achieved with plausibility as the presumed first principle.

"Surely we agree," he said, "that evangelizing catechesis or preaching, and also worship and prayer cannot succumb to the weight of plausibility (that is, public approval) over doctrine and theology in the practice and life of the Church. Yet there is some evidence that the fullness of doctrine in the resources we use for catechesis and in preaching has suffered in recent times. I submit that the same happens in some of the resources made available for liturgical planning."

Catechetical resources

The archbishop then spoke of his experience as chairman of the National Conference of Catholic Bishops' Ad Hoc Committee to Oversee the Use of the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*.

He said that while the committee's experience with publishers of catechetical texts has been generally positive, the committee and its staff of experts have seen a pattern of doctrinal deficiencies among the catechetical series that they have reviewed to determine if new catechetical resources were in conformity to the catechism.

"While these series often treat certain doctrinal themes quite well, we have noted a relatively consistent trend of doctrinal incompleteness and imprecision. I am convinced," the archbishop said, "that the doctrinal incompleteness is due to the prevailing cultural principle of the primacy of plausibility."

Doctrinal Imprecisions

The doctrinal imprecisions fall into 10 areas, the archbishop said, and he gave examples of how he believed these incomplete treatments were influenced by the primacy of plausibility, that is, the tendency not to offend or exclude or judge:

1. Insufficient attention is paid to the Trinity. A reluctance to use the terms Father and Son to describe the first and second persons of the Trinity exists in some catechetical texts reviewed by the committee. "Plausibility is [the desire not to exclude in this case] causes some to allow gender sensitivity to obscure the central trinitarian doctrine of the Christian faith."

2. An obscured presentation of the centrality of Christ in salvation history and an insufficient emphasis on Christ's divinity. "At times, we detect a negative undertone in speaking of the divine nature of Christ as if divinity is equated with being 'distant and unreal,' perhaps cold and unfriendly. Apparently, plausibility, and the effort not to intimidate, is a major motive here," he said.

3. Indistinct treatment of the ecclesial context of Catholic beliefs and magisterial teachings. The unity of the Church is at times overshadowed by emphasizing the Church's catholicity and diversity. "The plausible motive," the archbishop said, "to present the Church uniquely as a warm and welcoming community eclipses the magisterial and missionary role."

4. An inadequate sense of a distinctively Christian anthropology in which the impression is given that the human person is **the first principle** and final end of **his or her own existence**. "The **plausible and important notion** of self esteem and self-fulfillment over shadow the true and full nature of the human person."

Doctrinal Deficiencies

5. God's initiative is downplayed while human action is overemphasized. "God's initiative at times" the archbishop said, "appears subordinate to human experience and human action. A plausible age-appropriate or experiential methodology that slights the fullness of the truth of the faith is not good methodology."

6. Insufficient recognition of the transforming effects of grace. "Is the mystery of grace too intimidating or, perhaps, too self-effacing," the archbishop asks, "to be culturally plausible?"

7. Inadequate presentation of the sacraments. Many texts speak of the sacraments only as important events in human life of which God becomes a part. These texts also do not present the absolute ecclesial centrality of the Eucharist and the essential role of the ordained minister. "The plausible concern about inclusivity and the emphasis on human experience can result in a distortion of sacramental theology."

8. Deficient teaching on original sin and sin in general. "For some, hearing about sin is definitely not culturally plausible."

9. Meager exposition of Christian moral life. "The distaste for certain moral principles and injunctions in our culture is strong, hence a noticeable plausible silence."

10. Inadequate presentation of the "end-times". "Contemporary society tends to consider such teachings as passé, hence not plausible," the archbishop said.

Intent, outcome not unorthodox

"It is important to understand," he continued, "why there have been deficiencies in our catechetical resources. Neither the intent nor the outcome are necessarily lacking in orthodoxy. In other words," he emphasized "incomplete texts are not necessarily heretical, yet they are incomplete.

"The problem and the hazard ... is plausibility situated as a first principle of inculturation. The deficient result is just that- a deficiency, a lack of precision and fullness concerning doctrinal truth in catechesis," he said.

Must Proclaim Truth in Fullness

The archbishop concluded his remarks by pointing out the need shared by all those who "teach and live the Divine Truth. We must do so," he said, "with the greatest fidelity and yet do so in such a way that speaks to the minds and hearts of the human family in our times. The primacy of plausibility must be overshadowed by our deep commitment to proclaim the fullness of the truth in season and out of season Sound catechetical methodology, authentic liturgical prayer, enthusiastic evangelization and fidelity to doctrinal truth are of a single pastoral fabric," the archbishop said.

Copies of the full text of Archbishop Buechlein's address are available from Ron Massey, Criterion Press, Inc., PO. Box 1717, Indianapolis, IN 46206. (317) 236-1590 or (800) 382-9836, ext. 1590.



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