

OF CATECHISMS, CATECHETICS AND CATECHISTS

Q. What is a catechism?

A. A book of questions and answers that originated in the Christian church.

Q. That sounds interesting, a kind of Socratic dialogue?

A. No. Catechisms have a reputation for being very boring.

Q. Why so?

A. The questions are thought to be artificial and the answers canned.

Q. Why have such a book?

A. It is thought that some people are not capable of thinking for themselves but only of memorizing.

Q. Was that the original idea?

A. No, although the book was never intended to stimulate original thinking.

Q. Who wrote the first catechism?

A. Martin Luther is usually credited with the first catechism, but the primary meaning of the word then would have been the process of teaching, only secondarily the book.

Q. Was Luther's book a success?

A. It was a runaway best seller.

Q. What was the nature of the text?

A. Short and simple, the essentials of Christian doctrine.

Q. Who was the book for?

A. There were two books, one for parents and ministers; the second could be given to children.

Q. Was Luther's catechism effective?

A. If one accepts H. A. Reinhold's characterization of the catechism as "K rations for the field," it served the purpose.

Q. What effect did it have on the Reformation?

A. It certainly scared the Catholics.

Q. What did the Catholics do?

A. They published a Catechism of the Council of Trent.

Q. One of those terribly defensive walls of the Council?

Actually, it was one of the better documents of the Council.

Q. Who was it directed to?

A. To the clergy. Most of the 16th century clergy were not up to reading Aquinas's little handbook (Summa Theologica).

Q. But didn't they want a little book for children?

A. Yes, but it took them a long time to get it together.

Q. Did it succeed?

A. With only slight variation it lasted until the 1960s.

Q. What happened then?

A. A lot of things, but the catechism that broke the mold was the "Dutch Catechism."

Q. How did it do so?

A. 1) it was directed to adults; 2) it left out the questions; 3) it concentrated on essentials and admitted uncertainty about much else.

Q. Should it have been called a "catechism"?

A. Perhaps not; it was refused an imprimatur by the Bishop of Burlington.

Q. I mean the format; for example, leaving out the questions?

A. You might say it had one question: What is Christian doctrine?

Q. And how about its 500 page answer to the question?

A. It appealed to intellectual types who start by asking about the meaning of existence.

Q. Then only a few people bought the book?

A. No, hundreds of thousands of people bought it and millions were affected by it.

Q. Does that mean there might be a place for catechisms?

A. Within the right context, a summary of Christian doctrine might be useful.

Q. How would it have to be done?

A.. With attention to the interrelation of Christian doctrines around a few central beliefs; Richard McBrien's Catholicism is an example.

Q. Who would it be for?

A. Any thoughtful Christian adult.

Q. Does that mean the church should concentrate on adult education?

A. No, the church needs a meaning of education that does not exclude adults.

Q. So what do we do with children?

A. Provide them with a religious education.

Q. Could you expand on that?

A. Yes, but not in this restricted format of a question and an answer.

Q. What needs to be developed at length?

A. Two themes: education as lifelong and the nature of Christian doctrine

Lifelong Education

In the twentieth century we have learned a few new things about particular phases of education. In particular, we know more about how children learn and what children of a certain age cannot learn. When Rousseau launched modern education, he thought that the child reached the age of reason at twelve years old. We now have detailed evidence that shows important kinds of reasoning going on at five or six years of age. However, Rousseau may not have been as wrong as first seems; the full use of abstract reasoning does take years to evolve. For most children, twelve or thirteen years old is probably about right.

What do we do with such knowledge if our interest is a lifelong education that is adequate to religious life? The pattern of teaching children from six to sixteen years old starts too late for some important elements and ends too early for others. In fact, for the two purposes of

religious education, most of the "understanding of religion" comes long after age sixteen; and much of the orientation for "the practice of a particular form of religious life" comes before the age of six.

The child before six years acquires an attitude to life as a whole. The child is mainly taught by example, by what people do. The child also learns by story and ritual. Neither in history nor in a child's life does religion begin as a logical system. It begins in the practices that shape a life and provide an implicit answer to why a life at all. The child may not be able to think in abstract logical terms but it can ask profound questions. At any moment a sizeable percentage of the world's metaphysicians are two or three years old.

Should a child be taught bible stories? Yes, every child growing up in the United States needs to know these stories, whatever he or she may later do religiously. If the bible is important to the adults who tell the stories, then the stories are likely to affect the moral and religious life of the child. But no catechism - including the bible used as a quasi-catechism - can provide moral and religious answers to children. The stories are to open the world, not close it. The moral and religious guidance has to come from an adult community that substitutes for whatever kinds of reasoning the child lacks.

By ages five or six the child exhibits some degrees and kinds of reasoning. Gradually the child asks particular questions that we identify as "scientific." Urged on by the culture, the child demands evidence. When the evidence seems insufficient, skepticism can run rampant. Religion's claim to have answers meets resistance from age 5 until 18, 21 or 25. And for some people this one way movement never stops. They keep asking for logico-mathematical answers to every question life asks, even when the question is "Should I trust him?" "Do you love me?" "Does anything matter?" "Why am I dying?"

For many people, however, the great religious themes recede at times but do not disappear. The profound questions of life keep emerging at crucial moments of personal experience and in the study of history, social science, literature and other subjects. The religious life of young people up to 18, 21 or longer is sustained by stories that have been absorbed into life, by rituals of daily, familial living along with a few cultural rituals, and by the

continuing guidance of those people who evoke trust.

Courses in religion should be offered in school and school like settings. Religion is a difficult subject; the possibility of its being studied as a separate subject takes a long while to emerge. In senior high school many people are ready for a good challenge of religious study; but if not then, there are still sixty or seventy years for an interest to surface. The controlling language of the classroom should not be Christian theology but religion. That is, theology is only one of the religious languages that has to be part of the classroom dialogue.

There are places appropriate for the study of Christian theology. Certainly, seminaries ought to offer courses in the specialized language of Christian theology for people becoming professional ministers of the church. Theology ought to be available in other church settings for Christians and those inquiring into becoming Christians. In saying this, we hereby return to the value of a catechism, that is, a comprehensive summary of Christian doctrine for literate and interested adults.

Even in adult life the best of these books remain auxiliary and reflexive. A Christian education is mainly sustained by a liturgical life which overflows into activity directed toward justice. Some people will regularly or occasionally look for seminars, workshops, courses. Church related institutions should provide such educational experiences. But a study group should not be equated with the church's responsibility for the education of adults. The agent of the church's education is not catechist, group facilitator or clergy but the church's way of existing.

The Nature of Doctrine

There are a set of beliefs that Christians hold as true. The contents of the set varies among Christian churches and within churches, but Christianity entails a set of beliefs. If we take the Roman Catholic church as our main example, the system of beliefs is an elaborate code that is often quite removed from biblical language. Catholics, like other Christian groups, would claim that the whole system somehow goes back to the New Testament.

People are interested in this elaborate construction either

because they were immersed into it early in life or something has nudged them toward inquiry later in life. Sometimes people are attracted by an intellectual problem to which Christian theology has given attention. More often people admire some person or group and try to find out what beliefs support them. Glock and Stark defined conversion as "coming to see the world the way your friends do"; that is not bad as sociological description.

The catechetical part of Christian life arose out of reflection on liturgy and moral life. The same would have to be true today. Christian doctrine is no less and no more than thinking about Christian life as it has been experienced in liturgical and moral life. Catechists are people who deliver a message to people who are asking to receive it. Today's actual or potential Christian confronts a set of beliefs that has been millennia in development. Anything can be rethought within a living tradition but the conversation does not start with everything up for grabs.

Children learn the grammar of a language by joining in the conversation. The child may eventually say things which no one has articulated before, but one has to learn the grammar before doing new things with it. The church ought not to water down its doctrine to make it appetizing to modern taste; beliefs are of their nature conservative. What we need is a religious education that is sufficiently long, deep and wide so that people will have a chance to appreciate the complexity and profundity of Christian doctrine.

Judging whether any one statement of Christian doctrine is correct requires knowing how it relates to the whole of doctrine and theology. Whether the whole pattern of Christian teaching is true is finally judged by whether it makes sense of life as a whole. That does not mean a few experts trying to calculate a rational fit between Christian doctrine and life in general. Most of us live the best we can with whatever lights we have, and this experience opens a further door. We believe what we believe because all of our experience seems to support the belief.

What Christian doctrine provides is a protest against idolatry, a resistance to closure of our lives on any finite object. This claim has to be tested against other religious claims to do the same. The Christian can claim no less and no more than the truth of Christian doctrine, a truth that has been

tested out in one's life. Today we are only crossing the threshold of a truly ecumenical dialogue. The Christian who is thrown into this new world may be tempted either to reduce the Christian claim to a supposed common denominator or to take the opposite strategy and defend Christianity by the asserting of claims against all other religions. Neither approach provides for a sustained conversation. We need, instead, an intelligent grasp of Christian beliefs that has emerged from Christian life and religious study. Then we can carry on a permanent conversation with ourselves, with other Christians, with Christian tradition and with non-christian believers.

Implications for Church Catechists

Q. Doesn't reflection on lifelong education and the nature of Christian doctrine make catechetical work difficult?

A. Perhaps. But if catechists take lifelong education and Christian doctrine seriously, the work of catechesis has an exciting complexity.

Q. Are there ways to get handles on the complexity?

A. Certainly. But they will entail willingness to rethink present practice.

Q. And if people are willing to take part in such rethinking, what are some critical areas where they might start?

A. If they take seriously what has been written above, at least four areas suggest themselves: language, form, age, and the protest against idolatry.

Q. What implications exist for catechists concerning language?

A. Catechists have to be willing to extend the language of religious education beyond the church context.

Q. Wouldn't that result in lessening the importance of the church?

A. Paradoxically, no. It would instead set the entire conversation in a wider context, where church education would not have to carry the entire burden of all education that is religious.

Q. How might catechists begin addressing language?

A. By refusing to equate education with "schooling" so that other ways of educating can be allowed in. It would probably help also to distinguish between "church education" or "Christian education" and "religious education."

Q. What are some of the other ways of educating besides schooling?

A. Actually, that's one of the answers most church educators know best: churches have always educated through their ways of being in the world.

Q. What are some of those ways of being?

A. That brings up the issue of form. Community, prayer, worship, proclamation of the word, works that serve justice have always been forms of educating in the church. They are named, for example, in the second chapter of Acts, (2: 44-47) where the Apostles are described as continuing in:

the teaching (didache)
of the apostles (kerygma) and in the
communion (koinonia) of
breaking the bread and the prayers (leiturgia)
as well as being concerned about and aware of
anyone who had need (diakonia).

Q. What is the connection between these forms and language?

A. It is a subtle one, and is that catechists and others tend to make one of the forms - didache - equivalent to all of church education.

Q. What is the alternative?

A. The alternative is talking what we know: education includes a number of forms, such as those named above.

Q. What might be the outcome of talking this way?

A. The outcome would be that catechetical language would match the reality of religious education as pluri-form.

Q. What does this mean for catechists?

A. That although most of their work is rightly centered on practice of a particular way of religious life, other educating in religion needs to go on in schools and in the wider society. Catechists are not responsible for the entirety of religious education.

Q. Is there anything else that is a crucial understanding for catechists?

A. Yes, and is something they - again - already know: that a Christian education is mainly sustained by a liturgical life which overflows into action directed toward justice. Those two forms - liturgy and works that serve justice - are, and always have been, central to catechetical work.

Q. But how help local churches see that - and even more, practice it?

A. That's for each congregation to decide. But they might begin by exploring together, in study groups, how worship is educating, or even mis-educating; how families are educating; how works that serve justice are educating; how the proclamation of the word is educating. Of course, it's sometimes difficult to hear the answers, because they can call a great deal into question.

Q. What is an example of something that might be called into question?

A. One example is the assumption that the only form educating takes is in its being verbal, and even more, that doctrine is **the** verbal form. Sometimes catechists unwittingly imply that if it can't be said logically and analytically, it can't be known.

Q. And what is the "it"?

A. At the deepest level, "it" is the mystery at the core of the universe; the sacred; the holy, God. Actually, at the deepest level, "it" cannot **ever** be spoken.

Q. So what other possibilities do catechists have?

A. In the verbal itself, besides doctrinal language, catechists have access to the languages of drama, poetry, narrative, story, and humor, not only found in scripture, but in contemporary life. Who does not remember being educated more by taking a part in a play, for example, than by memorizing a message?

Q. And beyond the verbal?

A. The church has much in its treasury here: community; the entire realm of the arts, for starters - music, sculpture, architecture, stained glass, painting. And maybe most of all, ritual - all of these being examples of what Andre Malraux called the "voices of silence."

Q. Besides language and form, age can be a handle. How might that be?

A. Age is important because, on one hand, there are very precise things catechists can do with 6 to 16 year olds, things appropriate for these ages.

Q. But catechesis involves more?

A. Yes. For on the other hand, churches have to attend carefully to the religious education that goes on in the home before six, not by parents teaching doctrine, but by parents being parents. And after sixteen, church catechists and all who educate in the church need to realize religious

education continues through the young adult years, and into mid-life and into the Jubilee years too: the years after 50, and 70 and 90!

Q. What is the principle behind all this?

A. That education in religion is **lifewide** - inclusive of all life's forms, and **lifelong** - inclusive of every age.

Q. What about the protest against idolatry mentioned above?

A. That may be the greatest change in religious education as the twenty-first century begins. Religious education has to include understandings of other religions besides one's own.

Q. How does that contribute to a protest against idolatry?

A. It means Christians test out religious claims by holding them against other religious claims. It also means Christians do not set their lives on any finite object.

Q. And that means...?

A. It means at the very least that Christians, especially catechists, will not declare any formulation closed. In fact, grasping Christian beliefs intelligently should lead to that as a natural stance.

Q. Isn't this too much to lay on the shoulders of catechists alone?

A. Definitely.

Q. Then what is to be done?

A. The church as a whole has to come to a self-understanding of itself, and each of its members, as involved in catechesis and religious education. The community educates as a whole community.

Q. Isn't this too big a task to take on now?

A. On the contrary, now is the best time to do it.

Q. How so?

A. The church stands at the beginning of a new era. It is a time of kairos.

Q. In other words, it is an acceptable time.

A. Yes. As always, now is the acceptable time.