

THE 'NEW' CATECHETICS

By A. P. PURNELL

RECENTLY I was at a meeting of parents, teachers and priests dealing with the subject of religious education. A parent, mistakenly, accused the speaker of having said that religious education, in the past, had erred. Quite rightly, he was considerably disturbed by such an assertion. He went on to speak of religious education reflecting the age in which it is taught. What was right for our fathers was not necessarily right for ourselves and still less right for our children. The 'New Mathematics' does not reflect adversely on the mathematicians of the past: in fact, the 'New Maths' has been 'fathered' by the 'old'. Similarly, anyone involved in religious education today knows he is not criticizing the past when he approaches religious education in a different way. In fact, he knows too well that he owes his faith to the witness of a previous generation of faithful, devoted and saintly teachers; and, although they might balk at the idea of being saddled with the responsibility for this offspring, nevertheless what is happening today is a development of the past. Therefore as one who owes his faith to an eminent cloud of witnesses, I would like in this article to say what the 'New Catechetics' mean to me. What follows, therefore, is what I would call 'one man's catechetics'.

Religious Education

Religious education is about God and about man: it is about God's search for man (this has been revealed to us) and about man's response to this search. It is about man's relationship to his fellow man, and about the christian community in which he lives, as well as about the wider community of the world. It is, briefly, an education in relationships: educating people to form satisfactory and satisfying relationships between themselves and God and among themselves. Hence religious education concerns itself equally with all that is divine and all that is human, and the continual interplay between them. Beginning with the human, that is, with everything of which we have first-hand experience, the educator tries to help the individual to ponder upon his experiences in all their dimensions, so as to lead him to God the author of these experiences, and hence to an understanding of revealed truth. This, it is hoped, will enrich his own life and help him to live it more fully.

I come to understand and appreciate, for example, the meaning of love through being loved by parents, family and friends: this understanding and appreciation helps me to understand and appreciate something of that greater love which caused God to send his own Son into the world, a love which led that Son to suffer and die for me. This understanding purifies and deepens my own concept of love, and by accepting God's love for me more wholeheartedly, I am empowered and inspired to love my neighbour in a way that is beyond my own human strength and I come to see that I am the means by which God's love enters into my neighbour's life. Moreover, I am able to recognize God at work in this world in ways which I had not conceived before. Religious education endeavours, therefore, to help people understand and savour God at work in this world in the light of Christ's redeeming presence as revealed in the gospels and of the Church's developing teaching. Religious education invites the individual to consider Christ as revealed within the Church and the implications of the christian response.

I do not think any of this really touched my consciousness as I did my stint of religious doctrine during my years of teaching. I found, then, as I am sure I would find now, teaching religion very hard work. Then, I faithfully used the catechism and the other religious text-books provided for my use. It would be untrue to say that I was over-conscientious in my religious teaching: I welcomed every red herring like a long-lost brother. Basically I saw my function in terms of ensuring that my pupils knew their doctrine and that they developed the devotional side of their faith by prayer, frequent confession and holy Communion: I have to admit that I was not at all sure of the relation between these two approaches. I never felt that I succeeded in any of my aims and always remained thoroughly dissatisfied with the whole business. However, I took comfort from the fact that my colleagues suffered the same unease. I remember, however, one incident which dates from this time which gave me cause for serious consideration and which, perhaps, prodded me in a new direction. One dull afternoon I was endeavouring with a third form to discuss the relative importance of body and soul according to the mind of the catechism, when a budding ascetic doing his 'bit' informed me that he did not mind what happened to him as long as he saved his soul. Fantasy brought on an apocalyptic vision of a white and gold hooped Papal XV (we were a rugby school!) clutching their souls like rugby balls making for a celestial goal line cheered on by angelic choral fans singing 'Abide with Me'. In time the vision faded, but I still have the itch to inquire, when asked to pray for Mr X's soul, if Mr X survived its departure.

When I first began to take religious education seriously, 'salvation history' was all important. We were faced with innumerable diagrams of matchstick characters each with its own data and biblical reference, mounting historic peaks on the way to Calvary's Hill, only to find themselves being dissolved into long luminous lines leading away from that hill to denote the ongoing nature of salvation. I studied the four ways of communicating this salvational dimension: (i) the Way In — rousing the interest of the pupil, (ii) the appropriate scripture, (iii) the relevant liturgy and (iv) the resultant doctrine. It all fitted nicely together. I never took to salvation history, at least, not in that form: it led to a disquieting concept of God — of a God who intervened just on special occasions in man's history and not of a God who was continually giving himself to man and making every moment of time salvational.

Scripture

Scripture, at this point, became a very important factor in my re-education and I came to understand it in a new light. I read and re-read the bible again and again and came to see that, among other things, the bible contained a developing idea about God. Abraham really thought that 'gods' wanted fathers to sacrifice their sons and so quite naturally decided that the God who summoned him and who made a covenant with him and whom he took as his own tribal God really wanted him to sacrifice Isaac. I realized that this incident was as much about Abraham's understanding of God as it was about his obedience. It was this thought which renewed my approach to the bible. I could now read the psalms for example as pre-christian literature and find understanding in passages where before there was little. I realized too, that the attempt to give meaning to Christ's sacrifice in terms of the Old Testament concept of sacrifice was the wrong way round — the sacrifice of the New Covenant is a richer and deeper concept and only in its light can we discover the real meaning of sacrifice and begin to understand what the Old Testament was feeling its way towards expressing. The peak of this biblical development comes in St John's understanding of God — 'God is Love'. But I could also see that this development was still going on because of the very nature of God. And so I was beginning to come to terms with the doctrine of the Development of Doctrine; that this did not necessarily mean that there was a continuous progress in every area of christian thought. It would seem that theologians can go down alleys with dead ends like everybody else and have to retrace their steps to an earlier way of thinking and begin all over again. But continue it must, for God can never be fathomed by the human heart and man needs God.

I saw too that this search for God and for understanding about his involvement with this world was not something you could leave to others: it was something in which each one had to play a part. 'Now I am a man, all childish ways are put behind me.'¹ We all have to strive for that maturity of faith which is to be found in Christ Jesus — we have to spend our lives growing-up into the kind of person Jesus is. I have been struck by the number of people whom I have met who have passed through the events of the last ten years of church life and who have visibly matured both with regard to their approach to religion and in their own devotional lives. Again, it is rewarding to meet those people who speak of the fear of God which was instilled into them in their childhood days and how they have come to a new understanding of God. From a God who demanded the death of his Son Jesus to appease his righteous anger to a God of mercy and love who hates death and pain, and who loves the sinner even in the midst of his evil — a God who even wanted my third form pupils more than they could ever want him!

Theology

I now saw that I must make sense of my theology in terms of daily living in order to make it relevant to other people. It used to be high praise in my student days for a man to be marked out as one who 'lived his theology'. For most of us theology was something to which we turned from the realities of everyday life. This was understandable: it was being taught in a foreign language and all the 'recommended books' were in the same tongue, and one had to use a highly technical vocabulary and a strange methodological approach to come to terms with the rather abstruse ideas. (Scripture was something one used to prove the truth of a doctrine.) It is true that we should not have found the vocabulary so strange, as we had been lisping out 'eternals', 'supernaturals' and 'infinities' almost since birth. I now saw that rethinking theology meant rethinking it out in the language of the 'playground' rather than the language of the 'halls'. This had to be done if God's word was to touch the heart of modern man. Soon I saw that this rethinking process was really at the heart of modern catechetics. Religious education was as much, if not more, about content than about method. What was necessary was to say as simply as possible what one meant; then methods would take care of themselves. Later I found that this was verified by what teachers would accept: they were not able, for the most part, to change their approach, but they could be helped to renew the content of their lessons.

¹ 1 Cor 13, 11.

Later again I discovered that I had to qualify this assumption when I came to some understanding of how God reveals himself in the very method we use.

Pupils

First, therefore, I concentrated on the language of religious education. Next I came to look again at some of the basic principles of teaching and quickly endorsed that principle which governed the transmission of a discipline according to age, maturity and ability. The guiding norm for imparting religious doctrine was not to be the loftiness of the 'thought' but the needs of the pupil. My thinking was further helped by having to produce a paper on 'grace' and having to submit it to criticism. I read and re-read Piet Fransen. God graced us with his love and we in turn graced each other: I began to find a God-graced world and a new way of understanding the teacher-pupil relationship. The teacher's vocation was to share his faith with his pupil, thus he became the instrument by which God's love touched the minds and hearts of those in his care. I saw, too, that this faith was not primarily an assent without doubting to a series of propositions revealed by a hidden God, but a believing in God, himself — a relationship was involved and though faith differed from love, it could only be had with love. Hence one of the basic conditions for coming to the faith was some experience of a satisfying relationship, and one could have a great faith in God, a deep personal relationship, with perhaps, little or no propositional knowledge about him at all. My pupils needed to 'know' God, but this 'knowing' had to be a salvation knowing — 'This is eternal life, to know you the only true God and Jesus Christ whom you have sent'.² This was the kind of knowing to which St Paul referred when speaking of how the pagan husband or wife of a christian finds salvation — the 'knowing' of the heart which involves the union with the person known. The question, therefore, with regard to how much doctrinal content there should be in any scheme of religious education had to be evaluated in terms of how much does the pupil need to sustain and foster a close loving relationship with God his Father, now at his particular stage in life: what he would need later would be met later. This implied that one had to study very carefully the needs of pupils. A young child needed little doctrine, but the little he was given had to be meaningful. 'God, you are more important than marbles!'

² Jn 17, 3.

Revelation

The Decree on Revelation of the Vatican Council and the work of theologians stimulated by this decree has direct bearing on this issue. God has not revealed a body of knowledge about himself to be acknowledged and accepted by his creatures, God has revealed himself and invited man to respond to his love for him by love. Christ is the climax of this revelation; the Truth is a Living Person: 'I am the Truth'. Christ has come among us, calling us out of our own selfishness to love as he loved and to acquire his divine human-ness and live with each other in his Church. Divine revelation is self-revelation.

God does reveal truths about himself: God reveals himself, God communicates himself in his word. In divine revelation God makes himself known. Divine revelation is not new knowledge, it does not make men learned or well informed about the divine; rather it affects man's consciousness, it transforms his relationships to himself and to the world. It initiates him into a new way of being. God's word recreates man.³

This divine revelation is not something which happened once and for all time but it is on-going.

While this revelation has been completed once and for all in Jesus Christ, it continues to resound in the proclamation and the life of the Christian Church. . . . God's word, incarnate in Christ and present in the scriptural and ecclesiastical witness to him is also present, albeit in a hidden and provisional manner, in man's personal life and in his universal history.⁴

This thinking about revelation is profoundly affecting every aspect of religious education.

Experience

Gabriel Moran, in his *Catechesis of Revelation*, speaks of the necessity of giving the student the help to

. . . face the real life situations of his personal history and by accepting them to find God in that history as part of the whole history of man's life with God. The events which the teacher must be especially attentive to are the events which make up the student's life as these events can be understood through other persons and most especially through the unique person, Jesus Christ.⁵

³ Baum, Gregory: *Man Becoming* (London, 1971).

⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵ Moran, G.: *Theology of Revelation* (London, 1967).

God is alive in this world and in our lives, and it is the function of the educator to 'finger' God and help the pupil to come to terms with his own human experiences and to show the divine mystery at work in his life. 'The educator of faith will be able to satisfy this thirst for knowledge by relating his teaching to the child's interests and life experiences and helping him to see the religious meaning of life and in the things around him'.⁶ 'Behold your God!' The teacher begins with his pupil's experiences of life and helps him to deepen and widen them and then to point to God who gives them meaning and fulfilment. Beginning with life experience is no new thing in itself. Christ expounded the mysteries of the kingdom in terms of treasure hidden in a field, leaven, a net cast into the sea, light and a city on a hill. What has been happening recently is an attempt to understand this method in the light of a continuing revelation both in itself and in its effect upon those receiving the word of God.

A teacher can fill a classroom after five minutes teaching with shrill piping voices shouting 'God is my Father'. But this, in itself, is no more than one more fact to be assimilated by a child. It remains just a fact to a child who has had no experience of a loving personal relationship with an adult in whom he can trust. In order that this fact can be made meaningful and the child helped to turn towards God, he must be given some human experience of fatherhood or its equivalent. The child deprived of love and security needs not facts but love, because in that love God speaks much more potently than in mere words. In the love and care which a child receives in a good home background, God speaks to the child long before his teacher can verbalize for him the doctrinal content of his faith. Where this love is present the teacher is in reality not teaching anything new; she is simply giving a name to something already present within the pupil — the sublime mystery at the root of our being. God is not a remote being outside and beyond ourselves: he is within the heart of his creation. And yet at the same time the teacher opens his pupil's heart to understand that the sum total of what is human cannot contain the great God — he infinitely transcends all that is human.

Teachers find considerable difficulty in teaching religion through and in the experiences of their pupils. They feel that they are wasting their time. They want to bypass human experiences and 'get down' to doctrine. Because of the past emphasis on 'Knowledge', 'Religious Knowledge Classes' and the 'knowing' of catechism answers, teachers

⁶ *Renewal of the Education of Faith*, issued by the Italian Episcopal Conference (February 1970).

feel impatient with what to them are merely frills. They believe that there are certain truths which just must be taught: they are too important to be left out. However, the Italian bishops, quoting St Thomas, have recently said:

The Church has always taken particular care to preach those truths which in a specific environment are able to be integrated into the lives and the thoughts of the people listening, teaching them in so far as they are relevant to the situations and duties of state of each person.

This is a very hard idea to grasp for teachers to whom the whole catechism of Christian doctrine was fed from a very early age, and who subscribe to the dictum 'learn now: understand later'. Apart from the example quoted above of the child deprived of love and security in childhood, innumerable other examples of deprivation can be given which can inhibit the true understanding of the gospel message. Michael aged ten has a nagging mother. As far back as he can remember he has never known a time when she has been really pleased with him. Her nagging (for his own good!) reaches a climax whenever he does something wrong which is not infrequently. One may ask therefore, what experience has Michael got of forgiveness! Again, Jane's father places before her standards which she can never reach. She always feels a complete failure in his eyes. She's been told that God her heavenly Father wants her to be good. Now, Helen's father is a little man with a chip on his shoulder who believes in discipline. Law is law for him. Helen finds it difficult in consequence to come to terms with the love of God. One can multiply examples of this sort; and although, by and large, the majority of pupils in a classroom may come from what seem to us fairly balanced home situations, can one say, equally, that these homes are untouched, for example, by materialism, or where truth is not manipulated to suit convenience? Religious education has to pay much more attention than it has done in the past to the kind of person who is hearing the word of God — to the ground as well as to the seed that is sown.

Celebrating Life

The mass is the central act of worship for a Catholic, and no words of mine can possibly convey the importance it assumes in the teaching programme of all dedicated Catholic teachers. Teachers spare no effort to ensure some understanding of it, and use every form of persuasion to make sure that their pupils go weekly. Shades of eternal damnation! What these teachers frequently fail to understand is that the mass, no

matter how important it is, must be made meaningful to their pupil's lives, if their pupils are going to appreciate it. Central to any teaching on the mass is the document on the liturgy of the Vatican Council: it speaks of the mass as the sign of unity, and the means of attaining that unity. This supposes that the pupils to whom the teacher is speaking understand the meaning of unity and have some desire for it. Translated into everyday life, it means that the pupils really must feel themselves drawn to one another and have some understanding of community. Recently I visited a school where a teacher spoke at length of the utter insensitivity of his pupils to each other's needs. He said that he viewed his primary task in religious education to be that of wakening this sensitivity in his pupils. He spent his time trying to help his pupils to care for one another and to show concern for each others' problems. Clearly he was right. The mass will only begin to be meaningful in this situation when some sense of responsibility for each other has begun to develop among the pupils. We do not go to mass to witness a spectacle: we are going to celebrate some part of our ordinary everyday lives. For this teacher, there was to be a lot of hard work ahead of him in creating and fostering everyday human relationships. Perhaps he would never reach the point where he could talk meaningfully of the mass to them: perhaps they would never be ready for mass. This may seem an outrageous statement to a past generation of teachers; but such outrage is the fault of the virtue which makes them appreciate the mass so highly. God calls through Jesus 'follow me', but not everyone is able to respond fully to this call. Many may be able to accept 'Treat others as you would like them to treat you', but falter at 'Love one another as I have loved you', or the call to prayer or to enter into a deep personal relationship with the Father, Son and Spirit or to accept the community of Christ. The teacher has to come to terms with the various ways in which pupils respond, and cope with the disappointment that arises when he meets those who cannot accept fully the faith which he wishes to share with them. This problem is a rapidly increasing one, as the number of pupils from non-practising homes increase and materialism colours their outlook. In these situations a teacher is often tempted to preach 'hell-fire' as a last resort, forgetting that 'hell' is only meaningful to those who have spiritual values and who believe in God.

The God who gives

Every generation of christians is faced with its own problems of how best to share its faith with the next generation. There is no one way which is better than all other ways: there is no fixed method. Problems

there will always be. One day I was in the infants' department. Teacher was talking about God the Father, when she was loudly interrupted: 'My daddy gave me a scooter'. The speaker's magisterial tones commanded attention. The class absorbed the implications of the statement. A challenge? 'My mummy gives me lots and lots of sweets', claimed a diminutive Bernadette. Disbelief clouded the eyes of a young model, who countered with a founce, 'My mummy gave me this dress'. 'Dad gives me money', said Charles. 'Dad gave me a book', said Peter. The assembly now began in earnest to proclaim the gift-giving potential of their respective parents. Suddenly Henry, a rather over-sized child, declared 'My mum gave me a smack'. There was a pause while all present evaluated the significance of this claim. Teacher leant forward to speak, only to be prevented by an infant Teresa, stealing her line, no doubt, 'God gives you things'. 'Silly!', said Paul, 'That's what God's for'. It was a nice bit of theology! A grubby Thomas began quoting authority: 'Teacher says . . .'. It was then that I stole away leaving the assembled Council Fathers (male and female) in session. Later that same day, I listened to a teacher telling me his problems about doing religious education with a group of fifteen-year-old boys and girls. They were openly hostile at times, while on other occasions completely indifferent. God 'cramped their style': religion was 'dead-boring'. As I listened, I thought of the morning's theology. Had the fifteen year-olds ever known the gift-giving God of my infants? I read again Jesus's explanation of his parable about the sower. It was hard reading. I turned to the opening chapters of first corinthians, and read the headings given in the Jerusalem bible: Divisions and Scandals, Factions in the corinthian church, Incest, Recourse of pagan courts, Fornication. . . . St Paul had his problems! One might well be forgiven for believing that those early corinthian christians were a pretty randy crowd. And then I read St Paul's greeting at the beginning of the letter: 'I, Paul, appointed by God to be an apostle, together with brother Sosthenes, send greeting to the Church of God in Corinth, to the holy people of Jesus Christ, who are called to take their place among all the saints everywhere. . .'. The holy people of Jesus Christ in Corinth! I drew comfort for holy adolescents!