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## Box 12, Folder 09 - "The Narrative Method Versus the Catechism" (E.M.S.) +[ Is catechism the best method]

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Use For Child Learning in Church, Also the Parables

THE NARATIVE METHOD VERSUS THE CATECHISM

The importance of emphasising the historical basis of Christianity in the religious training of children--from the beginning and right up through the various grades--has wider implications than would be perhaps apparent at first glance. It goes much deeper than the question of teaching Biblical history as history along with other subjects. It is something which should have an influence on our whole approach to the teaching of the Catholic Faith to the younger generation.

Is the Catechism the best method?

During the past twenty years or more there has come about a great change in our ideas as to what is the best method for the religious instruction and training of children. The parrot-like learning by heart of answers to questions has been more and more criticized, as being contrary both to common sense and psychology. But what Catholics, as a whole, do not yet realize is that the Catechism book, with its method of use as described above, is a Protestant invention and was unknown before the so-called Reformation. It was, in fact, the arch-heretic Luther who printed the first Catechism book in 1529, and enforced its use with the most rigorous discipline. As the Rev. Joseph V. Tahom says in his excellent book entitled "THE FIRST INSTRUCTION OF CHILDREN AND BEGINNERS":

"It is a matter of historical fact that Luther was the principal promoter of these doctrinal booklets in the short question-and-answer form; it was he who initiated that parrot-system of committing to memory a text not yet understood--which is a cruel trial to the learner--and has wrecked many a child; it was he who imposed that uneducational system of explaining

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a text only after it has been committed to memory".

The new tendency, which is showing itself wherever there is a living interest in this question, is to base religious instruction on the "twin pillars of Biblical History and the Liturgy". We have just used the phrase "the new tendency", but, as a matter of fact its not a new thing at all; it is simply a return to the age-long method used by the Church during the fifteen centuries before the rise of Protestantism.

In the book from which we have just quoted it is made clear in Chapter I that the Narrative Method of first relating the story of the events which happened, and only afterwards defining and teaching dogma, is both scriptural and apostolic. It was the method used by Our Lord Himself. As shown in His discourse to the two disciples on the way to Emmaus St Luke says, "And beginning at Moses and all the Prophets, He expounded to them in all the scriptures the things that were concerning Him."

And the same method was carried on by Our Lord's disciples. Take, for example, St. Peter's speech to the crowd on the morning of Pentecost (Acts 2, 14-36), and also on other occasions--e.g. Acts 3, 12-26. St. Stephens' great speech, which led to his martyrdom, was along the same lines (Acts 7, 2-53). In the wonderful story of St. Philip and the Ethiopian Eunuch we see the same principle in application--"St. Philip, opening his mouth and beginning at this scripture, preached unto him Jesus". When St. Paul was rescued by the Roman officer from the fury of the Jewish mob in the temple courts, and was permitted to address them from the steps of the garrison fortress, he begins by telling them of his own actual experiences (Acts 22, 11-21)--and he took the same line in his defense before Agrippa (Acts 26, 2-53). The appeal is always first to the facts of history--to Moses, and the Prophets and the Psalms--followed up by their own actual personal experiences.



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IS THE CATECHISM THE BEST METHOD

During the past twenty years or more there has come about a great change in peoples' ideas as to what is the best method for the religious instruction and training for children. The parrot-like learning by heart of answers to questions has been more and more criticised as being contrary both to common sense and psychology.

What most people do not realize, even yet, is that the Catechism book and the method of using it mentioned above is Protestant invention. In fact it was the arch-heretic Martin Luther who printed the first Catechism book in 1529 and enforced its use with the most rigorous discipline.

"It is a matter of historical fact that Luther was the principal promoter of these doctrinal booklets in the short question-and-answer form; it was he who popularised the name Catechism as applied to these booklets; it was he who initiated that parrot-system of committing to memory a text not yet understood - which is a cruel trial to the learner, and has wrecked many a child; it is he who imposed that uneducational system of explaining a text only after it has been committed to memory!"

This is a quotation from a book entitled "THE FIRST INSTRUCTION OF CHILDREN AND BEGINNERS" - An inquiry into the Catechetical tradition by the Rev. Joseph V. Tahon with an introduction by Mgr. Drinkwater. This very readable and scholarly book should be read by every one interested in the method of instruction children (and adults) in the teachings of the Catholic Church.

The new tendency which is present everywhere nowadays - wherever there is a living interest in this matter - is to base the instruction in religion on the twin pillars of Biblical History



and the Liturgy. We said above just now "the new tendency" - but as a matter of fact it is not a new thing at all; it is simply a return to the age-long method used by the Church in the fifteen centuries before the rise of Protestantism.

In the book from which we have just quoted it is made clear in Chapter I that the narrative method of first relating the story of the events which happened is both scriptural and apostolic. In Chapter II the author points out how this method was formulated by St. Augustine in the fourth century. Here is a typical quotation from the great Bishop of Hippo:

"If you have to teach your hearers, you must do so by narrative."

"Your narrative must begin at the beginning of Holy Scripture, at that very chapter which reads 'In the beginning God created heaven and earth.' Your narrative will come to an end only when you have finished telling the story of the present times of the Church...But do not imagine that you have to relate each one of the countless facts mentioned in the five books of Moses, or in the books of Judges and Kings or Esdras, or in the Gospels and in the Acts of the Apostles; nay, you have neither time nor need to read or teach all that amount; you have rather to summarise the main lines and leading facts of these stories, and among them you will select those that are the more marvellous and pleasing to your hearers, and especially those that are mentioned in our Creed. Some of these facts are, as it were, a precious casket in which are mysteriously enshrined the articles of our Faith; such events must not be quickly related and soon left out of sight, but they must be considered for a good while, turned over and over, opened out



wide and clear and presented to the inquiries and contemplation of your hearers. As to events of less importance you will relate them in a brief survey and connect them with the main lines of your narrative, and so you will go on, up to the events of the contemporary times of the Church."<sup>1</sup>

We must observe that the efforts of St. Augustine are bent upon understanding doctrine, not upon memorizing formulas.

That the story of the great Biblical events should come first, and only after that the doctrine derived from them seems so obvious, when one comes to think of it, that one wonders however it could have come to be abandoned in favour of the Catechism with its emphasis on purely verbal memory. In the New Testament we read that Our Lord chose His disciples "that they might be with him"; and thereafter, day after day, week after week and month after month, they were constantly in his company/observing His reactions to all sorts of situations - often the most difficult and unexpected. It was only after this prolonged and immediate experience that the idea could dawn on them that He was somebody wholly different from the rest of mankind; it was only after "being with Him" all that time that Peter - in answer to Our Lord's Query at Caesar Philippi - was able to give that memorable answer, "Thou art the Christ, the Son of the living God"; and, later, that other testimony when our Lord said "Will you also go away?" and Peter replied "To whom shall we go? Thou hast the words of eternal life."

But, in the light of our Lord's desertion by his disciples in the hour of His Passion, it is clear that the full realization did not come to His disciples until after our Lord's resurrection from the dead. It was the story of the empty tomb and the subsequent appearances of the risen Lord that gave full meaning to Our Lord's



remark to Mary at Bethany, "I am the Ressurrection and the Life." First the event and then the article in the Creed, that is the logical order.

THE BEST STORIES IN THE WORLD

As stories, the Bible stories are the most wonderful in the world. Could one find anything more dramatic than the story of Abraham offering his son Isaac as a sacrifice at the command of God. In one Montessori school where I taught it made such an impression on my class of four to six year-olds that for days after it the children reenacted the drama in a little copse adjoining the playground during the morning break. The part of the angel who rushes in just in time to hold back the hand of Abraham with the dagger in it was so popular that they had to take it by turns.

Then agin<sup>a</sup>, simply as a story, as a work of art, could anything be more perfect than the story of Joseph and his brethren? And could anything better prepare a child's mind for the doctrine that God's Providence sees the end and the beginning, and watches with iffinite love and wisdom over the destinies of those who do His will, even bringing good out of evil.

THE RIGHT STORY FOR THE RIGHT AGE

In telling Bible stories to children we should, of course, bear in mind that some are more suitable to very young children and others to those of a more advanced age. With the little ones, who need a sense of security, those stories are specially suitable which display the protecting love of God and His Mother. Thus, the story just mentioned of Joseph and his brethren, the story of Moses in the bulrushes, Daniel in the lions' den, the flight into Egypt, and the parable of the lost sheep, and stories about God and aggels are good examples. And, as noticed elsewhere, stories that have to do with animals have always a special appeal to young children.