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Use For Church - ~~Change~~ 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

Footnote

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.

The Testimony of the Fathers

In the writings of the Early Fathers it is made abundantly clear that they regarded the Narrative Method, based on the Scriptures, as the best foundation for religious instruction. In the book from which we quoted above Father Tahon gives many passages from the early Fathers in support of this method. He quotes from Tertullian, St. Cyprian (d. 379), St. Cyrila of Jerusalem (d. 386) who said, "even the most insignificant point of Doctrine must not be taught without the help of Scripture." He quotes St. Gregory Nazianzen as saying, "To avoid working among thorns we have levelled our soil; I mean we have imbued our hearers with Holy Scripture, as we ourselves had been imbued with it; henceforth, let us take courage and begin theological instructions."

Passing over the others we come to St. Augustine. It was the great Bishop of Hippo with his brilliant organizing genius who formulated the Narrative Method. In a small treatise entitled "How to teach Doctrine to the Unlearned," he says, "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 , 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 summarize the main lines and leading facts of these stories; 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."

It is clear, from what St. Augustine says, that his efforts--as far as Doctrine is concerned--are directed first to the understanding of it as something which is born from the facts of the narrative, but not definitely first to the memorizing of a doctrine in an abstract definition. This does not imply of course that there should be no memorizing; but the definition and its memorizing should come after the understanding--thus following the natural tendency of the mind.

The Logical and Psychological Order

That the stories of the great Biblical events should come first, and only after that the doctrines derived from them, seems so obviously the right order that one is inclined to wonder however it could have come to be abandoned in favour of the Catechism with its emphasis on purely verbal memory.

It is interesting in this context to recall what it says in the New Testament. It tells us that Our Lord chose His disciples "that they might be with Him". Thereafter, day after day, week after week, and month after month, they lived constantly in His company--somewhat after the manner of an Eastern Ashram. In this way they were enabled to observe His reactions to all sorts of situations, many of them difficult and unexpected. One thinks, for example, of the remark of the young John, "the Son of Thunder", after they had been ejected from an inhospitable village, "Lord wilt Thou that we call down fire from Heaven upon them?" And the Master's quiet reply, "Thou knowest not of what spirit thou art of". Or again, when they met the funeral procession of the widow's son in the street of Nain; or when at a word from the Lord the winds and waves became instantly calm; or the manner in which He dealt with the problem the Pharisees put before Him, when they brought to Him the woman who had committed adultery; and one could mention a score or more of other incidents.

It was only after this prolonged and infinitely variable and wonderful experience of "being with Him", so intimately, that the idea could dawn on them that He was somebody wholly different from the rest of mankind; it was only then that Peter, in answer to Our Lord's query at Caesarea Philippi, could give the memorable answer, "Thou art the Christ, the Son of the Living God", or later, when Our Lord said, "Will you also go away?" Peter replied,

"To whom shall we go? Thou hast the words of Eternal Life". It was only after "Being with Him" that St. John could write, "Our message concerns that Word, who is Life; what He was from the first, what we have heard about Him, what our own eyes have seen of Him; what it was that met our gaze, and the touch of His hands". (First Epistle I-I). In the light of Our Lord's desertion by His disciples on the night of His Passion it is clear that the invincibility of their Faith did not come until after the Resurrection. It was the story of the empty tomb, and the subsequent appearances, which gave full meaning to Our Lord's statement to Mary of Bethany, "I am the Resurrection and the Life". So we see--always first, the event, and then afterwards, its use as the foundation of an article of the Creed. And surely this is the logical and psychological order to follow in religious instruction.

Fenelon sums up the matter in the following passage:

"Stories seem at first to require a long time in the teaching, but the truth is they make the teaching much shorter; besides a story is not a dry lesson like a page of catechism in which the mysteries are separated from their historical frame, and in the former times it was precisely for this reason that children were taught through Bible history. The magnificent method which St. Augustine ordered to be used for unlearned people was not a method arranged by him but was the very method practiced everywhere in the Church from the beginning." (Education des Filles--chapter VI)

The Best Stories in the World

As stories--simply as literature--the Bible stories are the most wonderful in the world. Where could you find, for instance, anything more gripping and dramatic than the story of Abraham setting off at the command of God to offer up his only son as a sacrifice? In one school where the present writer taught it made such an impression on his class of four to six year olds that, for days after, the children re-enacted the drama in a little copse adjoining the playground during the morning break. The