

Can religion be taught successfully?

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Teachers and parents alike have to face up to a common problem. Anybody can teach a child to memorize the questions and answers of the catechism. However, this does not mean that the child, once grown up, will keep, observe and practice the Faith. To the contrary, we are all aware of the frequency with which our students and children abandon everything. This is a great frustration for traditional parents and teachers. We explain the Faith at length, we drill on the memorization of the catechism; we teach apologetics; we explain, at least to some extent, the crisis in the Church. Yet all this abundant information appears to be on no avail with certain students and young people. One response to this tragedy is to simply attribute it to free will, since ultimately no one turns against God unless he chooses to do so. Another response is to blame it upon the spirit of the world, which introduces into the imaginations, passions, mind and will of young people its own false principles of materialism, self-satisfaction, personal advancement, success, etc., entirely opposed as they are to the principles of the Catholic Faith.

Is something missing?

However, a more truthful examination of conscience finds such explanations too facile. Is

there not, perhaps, something that we are doing wrong in our teaching of the Faith? Is there not, perhaps, something missing that paralyzes children's free cooperation with grace? Is there not some inadequacy that makes our children easy prey to the world and to its false principles?

It seems, indeed, that there is, and that far too frequently we have focused on filling the minds of children with information, but have left the character as a whole unformed. Just as one can study Theology without being a saint, so also is it possible, nay even frequent, for children to know their catechism very well, but to have missed out on a supernatural character formation. Their intellect has learned the truths of Faith, but there is no corresponding supernatural elevation to their thoughts, views, judgments, opinions, appreciations, passions, desires, bearing, manners, to their whole outlook on life. Here lies the real defect in our teaching of the catechism. The teachings, well known as they are, tend not to be interiorized so as to form the whole man according to Christ. The book of the catechism alone, as thorough and precise as it might be memorized, is no more sufficient for teaching the Faith than the Bible alone is in teaching divine Revelation. Good teaching methods alone, as sophis-

ticated and well developed as they might be, are no more sufficient in forming character than theology is in making saints.

Faith depends on hearing

What, then, is this elusive, missing element, that ought to be communicated along with the catechism? An inkling of this comes from the very word "catechism", a Greek word that means to teach by word of mouth. It is likewise referred to by St. Paul, when he explains that the mission of the Apostles is to preach "the Gospel of peace", the "word of faith", and explains why, namely: "Faith then depends upon hearing, and hearing on the word of Christ" (Rm 10:17). It is, he explains, the Profession of Faith with the mouth, that brings about eternal salvation both for those who speak and those who hear (v.10).



If Faith is a gift that God alone can infuse into the heart, the human act that best disposes to this is the exterior but heartfelt profession of supernatural Faith. For although it is a divine and theological virtue, it is exercised by real men, using their human intelligence, overflowing there from to all the other human faculties and activities. It is consequently not surprising that from the time of the Apostles until now, it is the sight of a living and enthusiastic Faith, placing all thinking and life in dependence upon divine re-

velation, that most attracts souls to the Church. Why would the teaching of catechism to Catholic children be any different? It is true that the baptized child already has the gift of Faith, but he still has to be drawn to use it, to exercise it, to apply it to daily life, and to see his happiness in this Faith. This is not done by pure instruction.

Here lies the most frequent defect in the teaching of catechism. The mind is filled with truth, but the character is not formed by the catechist as it ought to be, as it was by the Apostles, as it was by St. Francis Xavier. Father Edward Leen, C.S.Sp., in *What is true education?*, has this very relevant observation to make:

"The growing child in its character reflects not a book, but the person under whose ascendancy the child comes. If the young person is to acquire a strong Christian temper, this will be done not through the dead letter of the printed page, but through a person whose own mind and will and emotional nature are attuned to the spirit of Christianity. It is not enough that the catechist know accurately the truth he teaches and the morality he expounds. He must have a love for, and an enthusiasm for, the truth...The catechist must aim at inflaming the minds and the hearts and the emotions of his pupils with an enthusiasm for their religion." (p. 166)

The Acts of the Apostles demonstrate the method used by the Apostles. They spoke of Jesus Christ Himself, His works, His sufferings, His death, His teachings, and His divine life. Would it not also be very effective for us to relate the teaching of the truths of the catechism to the words of Our Divine Savior, or His passion or His life? This is the great intuition of St. Ignatius of Loyola in his meditation on the call of Christ the King. It is the divine Person that we are invited to follow, rather than simply a moral code or even a teaching, that sharing in his life and sufferings, we might also share in His victory.

World appealing to the young

What a better response could there be to the attractions of the world? The world attempts to make itself appealing to the young by presenting itself as genuinely human, capable of giving man self-confidence and self fulfillment, so as to achieve his full human potential. The deception is diabolically devious, but it is a trap laid

for every young person, especially if he has some sense of an ideal. Very many are those who fall for it, for they very wrongly consider the practice of the Faith as the following of a book of rules and laws, of obligations and restrictions. In answer to this, the catechist must present the appeal of a divine Person, only capable of enabling man to overcome his sins, failures and weaknesses; the sublime appeal of a divine Person alone capable of bringing man to rise above his littleness, his finite pusillanimity, to satisfy his longing for the infinite, for a share in the divine life, to fulfill the restlessness of the soul who, like St. Augustine, will remain restless until it finds its rest in God. There are always exceptional young people who are aware of this, and who are consequently drawn to follow a vocation. But why should not all teenagers feel this divine attraction, which is just as necessary to make sense of life in the world as out of it? Is it, perhaps, that their teachers do not always present it adequately to them?

Father Leen points out clearly the connection between the enthusiasm of living our Faith focused on the divine Person, with its immediate consequence of the sharing in Christ's life through sanctifying grace, on the one hand, and the resistance to the world's temptations on the other:

"It is only when mind and will and imagination are, as it were, steeped in the person of Jesus, His life, His works, His sayings, His views, His principles, His ideals, that one is strong to resist the seduction of what competes with the Saviour for the loyalty of the human heart... Vividly should be set before the young person the words, the works, and especially the kind of life Jesus wished man to live. The spiritual beauty of the moral life taught by Christ should be painted in glowing colours to recommend the asceticism without which it cannot be. The child should be taught that this good way of acting is necessary, otherwise the soul cannot get the beautiful life of God which the soul of Jesus had and which He was anxious to share with men." (Op. cit. pp. 167-171).

Simplification

Clearly creativity and imagination are required to communicate this enthusiasm for the Faith that forms the character. However, alone

they do not suffice, no matter how elaborate the class. There is another requirement: simplification; going beyond the detail of the catechism to enable the child to discover the essential mystery of the catechism. What is this, if not to be filled with wonder at a leitmotiv to be found throughout - namely that God came to share our human life, that we might share his divine life, that we might be lifted up to the supernatural order, which we know only by Faith. It is this sense of the supernatural, to which children are so open, that is fundamental in the teaching of the catechism. Allow me to quote Father Leen once more:

"The whole economy of God's love relations with mankind turns upon the notion of the supernatural....The great central notions of the whole Christian scheme are, then: Divine Grace; Jesus the meritorious cause of Grace; the Mystical Body, the actual mode in which Christ's grace is communicated to and shared in by man. To these three notions is joined that of Our Blessed Lady who, as Mother of the Mystical Body, exercises the function of motherhood towards the whole redeemed race of mankind." (Op. cit. pp. 176-179).

Here lies the key to character formation in teaching the catechism: - the imitation of Christ so as to share his life in a supernatural way. Understood in this way, the catechism is no longer a list of questions and answers, a compilation of facts to be learned, but an appealing invitation by the Most Holy Trinity to share His goodness and happiness with His creatures. The teachings of the Gospel and the lives of the saints can be used to illustrate this plan of love that extends from the divine permission for the evil of Original Sin to the final transformation at the Last Judgment. A supernatural character based upon the admiration for the mystery of sanctifying grace, and the living of the reality, is established in the soul. The character of Jesus, our Saviour, is imprinted, so that it is no longer the child who lives, but Christ who lives in him (Gal 2:20). Thus are defeated the false ideals of the enemy of mankind.