

## THE OBSOLESSENT PARROT

MANY of the manifestations of the counter Reformation, or rather of its backwash, are becoming almost unpopular, even among Catholics. Rococo was the first to suffer, and Baroque. Then florid counterpoint. Then some of its devotional forms and religious methods, institutions, and thought. Many expressions of the Catholic reaction do not belong merely to the period. Michael Angelo, Palestrina, and the Jesuits, for instance, if not immune from criticism, are anyhow great enough to defy it. There is now an attack on a common catechetical method which dates from the sixteenth century.

In a recent book,<sup>1</sup> Père Tahon, a Scheut missionary in the Philippines and an educational expert, has marshalled the evidence to show that what he aptly calls *psittacism*, or the system of imposing a bare summary of Christian doctrine on the memory of the child without previous understanding, is Protestant in origin, is not authentically Catholic, exists in the Church as an abuse, and is, besides, contrary to the principles of pedagogical psychology.

The apostolic method of teaching beginners consisted in first presenting the facts of sacred history, and then drawing out from them the doctrinal elements of religion. This narrative method was continued by the Fathers, was formulated by St. Augustine (*de Catechizandis Rudibus*) precisely as the best way of instructing the ignorant, and became traditional in the Church, until it was largely displaced by a new

<sup>1</sup> *The First Instruction of Children and Beginners. An Inquiry into the Catechetical Tradition of the Church.* By Joseph Tahon. Edited with an introduction by the Reverend F. H. Drinkwater. (London: Sheed and Ward, 1930; pp. 115; 3/6.)

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catechetical method deriving from the polemics of the Reformation.

The Hussites were the first, apparently, to present an outline of doctrine in the short question-and-answer form. It is not this that is criticised, for it makes use of a sound heuristic principle, but the later custom, inspired by Luther, of making it primarily a matter of memory.

Luther's method of teaching is indicated in the preface to his *Enchiridion, or Little Catechism* (1529):

'Reverend Preachers and Parish Priests, I pray you to help us in teaching Catechism to the common people, and above all to children; if you have not a better way for this, I beg of you to adopt the present booklet I offer you, and to teach it, word for word, to your people. We must teach through one text only, and in such a manner as never to change a single syllable of it, at any time, in any year, whether we teach it or even pronounce it. Be faithful to that text, word for word, in such a manner that your hearers will be able to repeat it after you and commit it to memory. If any refuse to learn it in that way, you must tell them that they are renouncing Jesus Christ. When the text has *first* been committed to memory, you will then, *in the second place*, teach them the meaning of that text in order that they may understand what it means.'

Luther's Catechism was written in a popular style, but it marks the beginning of that parrot-system of committing to memory a collection of abstract formulas not yet understood; a break with the Catholic catechetical tradition, founded on the example of our Lord, who 'spoke in parables to the multitudes, and without parables he did not speak to them.' It is all part of that wider movement away from the authority of a living Church to the authority of a dead document.

Indication that the memory-method has its uses, Luther's catechisms spread rapidly through the Germanies; by 1568 more than a hundred thousand copies were in circulation. To meet the danger a

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counter propaganda was launched, which finds its best expression in another 'best-seller,' the *Summa Doctrinae Christianae* (1554), a book of about one hundred and ninety-three pages, composed by St. Peter Canisius at the charge of the Emperor Ferdinand. This was twice compressed, first into the *Minor Catechismus* (1558), of about thirty pages, then into the *Minimus Catechismus* (1560), of about twelve pages.

The first purpose of these catechisms was polemical; and only afterwards were the Catholic catechisms, often poor imitations of Canisius, which were multiplied in countless numbers, used as the first means of introducing Catholic doctrine to children and beginners. Canisius's first catechism is at least Augustinian in method. Points of doctrine are introduced by events in sacred history; and proof of the life, interest, and humour of his teaching may be seen from the fact that children hung on his words for a whole hour or more without lassitude or restlessness, and parents complained that they remained too long in church. What wonder, says Père Tahon, since he was above all a teller of stories.

The *Catechismus Romanus* (1566), commonly called the Catechism of the Council of Trent, was published for the use of catechists and priests. The point is important. Doctrine is arranged in a philosophical order, but insistence is laid throughout on the need of relating before all (*in primis*) the story of the facts concerning dogma or precept. Similarly, Bellarmine's *Dottrina Breve*, the text of which underlies our present English Catechism, was not intended for young children. Milk before solid food.

Nevertheless, in the following centuries, great teachers had cause to lament the ever-growing imposition of bare formulas on the memory of children. They asked for bread, and were given a stone.

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Fénelon and Bossuet demanded the narrative method; Fleury, in the preface to a historical catechism he arranged as a basis for teaching doctrine (1679), writes :

‘ It cannot be denied that the literary style of catechisms is usually exceedingly dry, and that children have much difficulty in retaining their contents, and even more in understanding them. There are none but are full of scholastic terms that common people do not understand : *infused, theological, cardinal virtues, dulia, hyperdulia*. The least possible use should be made (in oral teaching) of scholastic language, and of those abstract terms, *essence, substance, act, power, qualities, disposition, habitual, virtual*, which are not understood by most people. Scholastic language has the disadvantage of burdening the child’s memory with words that are strange to him and as empty of meaning as those of a foreign language. You may tire yourself out making children or peasants repeat hundreds of times over that in God there are three Persons and one Nature, and in Jesus Christ two natures and one Person, yet each time you question them, you will risk getting the answer, ‘ two persons in one nature,’ or ‘ three natures in one person.’ Examples are known of grown-up people—well informed in other respects—complaining of their having to be sent back to the Catechism, for ‘ don’t we know quite well that there are three Gods in one Person?’ This comes of their having no idea in their mind answering to words *nature* and *person*, so that they easily confound the two, and couple with either of them the words *one* or *three*, whichever strikes them first.’

Similarly, a Catholic child who is the victim of the mere memory method is quite as likely as not to describe a sacrament as an inward sign of outward grace.

How dry and abstract catechism teaching can be, may be seen from this typical example from the *Westminster Shorter Catechism* (1647), a Puritan production which has much influenced the style of Catholic catechisms : ‘ (VII) *What are the decrees of God?* The decrees of God are **his** eternal purpose

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according to the counsel of his will, whereby, for his own glory, he hath pre-ordained whatsoever comes to pass.' A stone indeed, when how fresh and vivid, if at times unconventional, a child's reaction to proper religious instruction can be. There is the little Cockney's finale to the Fall, 'and a ningel kime up wiv a big flymin sword an said nah then you two—ahtside!' There is the child who told Our Lord a ghost story after Communion.

A method of instruction which relies primarily on the memorizing of abstract phrases stands rightly self-condemned. The drilling of children in verbal repetitions is a by-product of the process for providing standardised mass-education embodied in Bills for compulsory education.

It is beside the point to argue, as Père Tahon does, that the memorizing method is based on a false piece of philosophical psychology; namely, that there are three distinct faculties of the soul, the memory, the understanding, and the will; and that this is contrary to the teaching of St. Thomas, for whom the memory is not a separate faculty, but an appanage of the understanding.<sup>2</sup> For, it should be noted, St. Thomas is speaking of the *memoria intellectiva*, the power of retaining ideas, and not of that power, commonly called the memory, to which *psittacism* (an ugly name for an ugly thing) directs its first attention. This he would range under the work of the internal senses, which are, of course, distinct from the understanding. This leads the author to confuse the issue, for both the narrative and the parrot system approach the understanding through the imagination, the one through a picture, the other indeed through the chill image of an uncomprehended word. Not even Luther must be twisted into reversing the common adage of the ancient

<sup>2</sup> Ia, LXXIX, 7.

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philosophers: Nothing in the intelligence if not beforehand in the senses.

From the point of view of applied psychology, too, the value of the verbal memory as an instrument of formation must not be minimized. Luther appears to have made startling use of it. Obviously, a previous mental attitude of understanding, or interest, or good will is necessary, but a Dominican student recalls how useful a regular learning by heart of an article in the *Summa* can be; and there is the old novitiate custom of memorizing the epistles of St. Paul, or parts of them.

This brings us to the value of words, even abstract words, and formulas in catechetical instruction. Father Drinkwater, in his admirable introduction—the book should be secured if for this alone—remarks the need of pegs to hang doctrine on, a reason why the teacher should often crystallize his teaching into little fixed phrases and expressions which the children will take in and remember.

For there is a danger of reducing the first religious instruction of children to the recounting of interesting tales. A clear distinction must be kept between the bed-time story, and the historical truths of sacred history, whose only religious value is their relation to dogmatic truth. Father Drinkwater refers to the abuse of forgetting that Christ is central in the Old Testament as well as in the New; of disconnecting the narratives of scripture from the teaching of doctrine; of learning man-made *Bible Histories* in which the letter is allowed to kill the spirit, and the Messianic and liturgical purport of the Old Testament forgotten.

Children can easily seize on the non-essential, especially in a circumstantial story presented with great wealth of detail, which they love, having little use for literary economy. Witness the identification

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of sanctity with the miraculous, the direct result of popular hagiography. A pictorial image, while more vivid, is less exact than a verbal image as a basis of doctrine. Hence the need of an experienced teacher to isolate the central signification in an accurate, even technical, phrase. The bogey-man and the black devil must be avoided, and the angry visage of Jehovah of a Calvinist childhood. You cannot satisfy a child's *intelligence*, already athirst for the highest form of truth, with more or less historical stories.

There is the uncomfortable story of the small boy, observed in catechism class to be shaking with suppressed laughter. Asked for the joke, he indicated his neighbour: 'Please sir,' he said with a horrible chuckle, 'he—he thinks it's all true.' The fault must have been in the instructor, for is there a child devoid of the religious faculty? Strictly speaking, there is no such thing as a religious faculty. Mind and will are sufficient. People talk about the religious temperament, but the heart of religion is beyond emotion, beyond imagination, beyond what is commonly called experience, and is as passionless, unimaginative, and scientifically certain as the fundamental mind and will of man it satisfies. And the religion of the child and the grown-up is the same in kind, though not in degree.

There is such a thing as the religious experience. But without going so far as to call it a luxury, it is true that religious certitude is not founded upon it. There is always the need to justify it intellectually, it must always be subjected to a scientific canon. Dr. F. R. Tennant, in the first volume of his *Philosophical Theology*, stressing this point, has uttered what *Theology* calls 'hard sayings and peculiarly distasteful in these times when so much stress is being laid upon the value of experience.'<sup>3</sup> But his position is that

<sup>3</sup> Vol. XXII. No. 127, p. 26.

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of St. Thomas, who removes religious experience from the order of ordinary intellectual certitude.<sup>4</sup> Thomist theology quite happily dispenses with the second of the starting-points granted by Professor Julian Huxley, 'the idea of God to be derived from reasoning on the facts of nature and the facts of religious experience.'<sup>5</sup>

Religion is not a question of taste, however sublimated, but of Truth; not a personal disposition, but a natural imperative. But it needs scientific instruction. From Dr. Boyd Barrett's autobiography *Ex-Jesuit* we can recognise what an unsatisfactory groundwork religious experience can be. A matter of mood, which difficulties dispel.

Although some children may appear to lack what is commonly called the religious temperament, they can be taught religion, and be—and become—religious. The imagination may be reluctant, but mind and will are there to be satisfied. Religious teaching, then, must not stop at a stock of stories or visual images, any more than it must merely strive to inject a collection of verbal images. Its main object must be to give the child a sufficient knowledge of dogmatic truth, or divine truth expressed in exact words. Words and concepts are the currency of thought; pictures are more closely allied to personal experience. But experience is individual and therefore incommunicable, while intellectual knowledge may be held in common, and is expressed most closely by arbitrary sounds, or words.

Intellectual capacity is the same in kind for everybody who has reached the age of reason, at least as

<sup>4</sup> Cf Ia-2ae, CXII, 5; X de Verit. 9, 10; (Ia; CXI; I, ad 3); for our conjectural knowledge of the presence of God.

<sup>5</sup> Essays in Popular Science; Evolution and Purpose, p. 187.



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regards fundamentals, such as religious truth. The proposition of truth is, at last analysis, impersonal and universal. These are the two first conditions for the teaching of truth.\* Religion, though it may be ignored, in much the same way as oxygen, is natural and necessary. Needless to say, we have not been speaking of the wholly supernatural side of religion, but of that natural side of it which can be touched by the reason and the teacher. At most, the theologian's *supernaturale quoad modum tantum*.

Three conclusions emerge. First, children are capable of receiving dogmatic instruction. Boys, anyhow, of the preparatory school type can become capital little theologians, keen to resolve a point of doctrine or case of conscience.

Secondly, a beginning must be made, not by memorizing formulas, but by awakening a living interest through the narrative method. *Ut gaudens quis catechizat*, says St. Augustine.

Thirdly, the dogmatic content must be isolated in a crisp expression, and may be usefully committed to memory.

The end of teaching is ideas, not images. An idea is more embracing than a particularised image. Truth is better tested by a principle than a precedent. The idea of sin as a disorder is more adequate than its image as filth. The filth-image can cause a false conscience, can evoke the conception of sin as something just bodily and beastly; as a parrot-like learning of an examination of conscience can produce a confession in which there appears little sense of personal guilt. But the possession of an idea of virtue and vice can provide the engaging apology of 'please Father, said half-a-minute to mother, twice; and spilt the milk and

\* Ia, CXVII, I; XI de Verit. I.

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watched the cat being blamed for it, once.' The child obviously possessed an idea at the same time more exact and embracing than any image. This is the mark of the highest truth, maximum extension and comprehension, synthetic but not *simpliste*.

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