

The New Dutch Catechism¹

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by Peter Hastings and
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When theologians grumble and growl and commissions sit, a mere schoolmaster might have the sense to leave a book like this alone. It is true that the same theologians who bare their teeth at the little eccentricities of the Dutch Catechism have not, through the long years of damage, waved our own aloft shrieking for the faggot, an omission which anyone really interested in education must find it hard to forgive. Even without such unchristian, carping thoughts, an educator not hooked on the ancient catalogues of angelic powers might well go in to bat for the Dutch simply on the grounds that they have produced the right educational approach.

It is not only its approach that I welcome, the content is often of immediate interest and importance to the schoolmaster, e.g. the section on 'The faith to which one is bred' in which are discussed the problems of child education and eventual personal acceptance and conversion that are built in to the practice of infant baptism. The views expressed endear the authors to me, but more yet the manner in which the problem is discussed in the light of the experience of the reader and the attempt to initiate trains of thought—and so it is not the content so much as the catechism's significance in education that I intend to discuss.

Other catechisms in use have not shown much interest in thought, only in answers—sometimes accompanied by dogmatically phrased 'reasons' in lieu of thoughtful discussion, but, with some less convincing answers, the bald statement alone without discussion or context. E.g. compare the English catechism's treatment of unbaptized infants with the Dutch—the one a plain, positive statement, as of fact, of something we do not know; the other a reference to the doubts of important thinkers in the past, a reminder of truths which must be kept in mind when thinking of the problem, and a plea for a little healthy agnosticism. There is no doubt which approach will produce a more mentally active people of God. As any teacher knows, answers kill thought, especially answers to questions beyond the maturity of the catechized to consider, and couched in terms that the catechizers resolutely refuse to translate into human language. Compilers of past catechisms have rigorously adhered to the latter flaw so that 'no man spoke to us as we spoke in the street'—while users of this misery-making collection of jargon befogged seven-year-

¹A NEW CATECHISM: Catholic Faith for Adults. *Burns & Oates/Herder & Herder* 1967. 510 pages. 35s.

olds who were meanwhile protected from simpler and more useful things such as logarithms.

These two faults—the definitive ‘answer’ and the technical jargon that defied translation precisely because the thoughtful understanding of the concept signified had been prevented by the presentation of the answer—have produced a harvest we are still reaping. There is a parallel between the relation of the catechism answers learned young to advanced, interested, developing thought in theology and the relation between ‘O’ level and advanced, interested, developing thought in e.g. history, studied and examined in the manner of past years. The tie-up in each case is the kiss of death. A student who has learned his ‘facts’ concerning Gladstone’s financial policy at ‘O’ level is normally quite incapable of deepening his thought on the same question for advanced level studies precisely because he has been presented with ‘the answer’ in the past. This is bad education but it is not a major tragedy; we can jog along without Gladstone. Theology is a different matter and the consequences for the Church of this early sterilization of theological thinking, followed by a similar process in seminaries until recently, have been fairly extensive—it is twenty years since Balthasar pointed out that, whereas in earlier days the great theologians had been saints quite clearly drawing their life from their theology, since Trent there appeared to be a divorce between dogmatic theology and sanctity—perhaps the only man to bridge the gap being Newman whose education did not derive from the post-tridentine Catholic tradition.

From this state of intellectual atrophy the theologians have been emerging this half-century. Now those who have emerged are proposing that beginners in theology should do likewise and that thinking about the Resurrection should become a main-spring of a sanctity that should be the light of the world. This is what the Dutch Catechism is all about; it is to be hoped that its critics who are upset because the edge is off Adam and Eve and Pinchme will at least see this.

Now by what means do the Dutch bishops aim to achieve this? First, by translating theology into ordinary language and by this master stroke communicating with those who only speak ordinary language and are the public to whom the catechism has in theory always been addressed. This is a difficult task; we all know the intellectual traumas that have accompanied the translating of ‘Hoc est corpus meum’. It is not only difficult but dangerous, if the people of God understand they can also mis-understand—*quelle horrible* surprise! The Dutch bishops, however, have taken the view that if one does not risk misleading people then one cannot lead them either and that, strange thought, the catechism is not intended to render the hierarchy redundant but to provide help for talking with the hierarchy—in the course of those talks the misunderstandings might be corrected; after all, that is how teaching usually works.

Indeed the real misunderstandings arise where, communication being non-existent, understanding is impossible.

It is, on this plan, a people that will steadily increase its vocabulary with its ideas because not answers but lines of thought are given (can it be this that is seen as so dangerous?)—lines of thought, pointed by copious scriptural quotations and references with support from Fathers and others which are aimed at compelling the reading and consideration of the Scriptures. The need for this is stated and re-stated: 'The Gospel is a message which constantly forces us to revise our thinking'.

This thinking is not to be kept neatly in its religious compartment but, because it is in ordinary language, can be seen to have implications in any discussion in ordinary language and which must cut near the bone: under 'Possessions on earth', some implications of the Sermon on the Mount: 'Hence the vigilance which permits a society to enjoy the fruits of the earth is directed ultimately not against another's avarice, but against our own', or 'Ultimately, for instance, all Netherlanders will be glad that the people of Indonesia are not nobodies from a colony, but their equals as nationals of a great state'—though the translator might have substituted Englishmen and Egypt.

None of this is an apocalyptic appeal for world revolution but a balanced, down-to-earth approach. Yet even this can seem extreme as a result of the division between religious and ordinary thinking one encounters so much in the Catholic educational world; lay the very mild statement on 'Helping the needy' (p. 435) alongside a passage from a horrid little book in a new series for Catholic schools which the editor of this journal has been trying to make me review, and which states: 'We must never yield one inch of progress we may have made towards better conditions of work and pay or reduce our living standards.'¹ Such is the need for putting theology into ordinary language and showing its relevance thereby.

The book has weaknesses no doubt—the historical section is an example. Inevitably any generalization is misleading and the use of evidence or of references is precisely to qualify a generalization not to reinforce it. This of course is achieved in the great mass of the catechism by the constant reference to scripture, but the very swift historical section has no work to refer to likely to be used by the vast majority of its readers. Certainly the problems of writing potted history have not been solved here.

Blemishes or no, the coming of this catechism is an important event for schools. Not because it is for schools—it is not, though sane sixth forms will use it. Thought-provoking, scripture-pointing, relevant and in ordinary language, it is an adult catechism—and this is the final point I would like to make as an increasingly con-

¹*Getting Ready for Work*, by Graham Bloodworth. Darton, Longman and Todd, London, 1967. 64 pp. Paper. 3s.

tented schoolmaster. It is the possibility of creating an adult society which will not frustrate our school leavers. Some of us are trying to produce theologically thinking young men and women, thinking, that is, about theology and its implications to the same depth that they would think about their literature or law or physics. Perhaps in a few years these new super students will start entering the adult community, or perhaps this is a pipe-dream—but if they do, and we are successful, they are going to have no adult community to enter (meaning by adult community one that can see some connection between the Incarnation and Vietnam or the parable of Dives and Lazarus and Bihar), unless some massive adult education takes place. Moreover the very process of helping persons to grow up as thinking Christians is a communally managed process—at present too many children can see very clearly that intellectually Christ is irrelevant in Christian lives outside of a very restricted field of activities. If this catechism catches on, parents may produce a theologically educated society to produce theologically educated children and I can put myself out to grass. Happy thought—as my salary is pretty nearly guaranteed this could be a very comfortable operation—but I can hear a discouraging cough from the Dutch bishops: this is not seeing the relevance of the Resurrection. I must get back to their Catechism.

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It is unfortunate that so much controversy and so many rumours have surrounded the new Dutch Catechism,¹ since it has become almost impossible to read it with a fresh and innocent eye, without a sense that one's party allegiances are to be engaged by it. In spite of every effort to the contrary, I found myself waiting for the controversial passages, hurriedly turning over the unexceptionable pages and obscurely disappointed that there were so many of these.

For it ought to be said straightaway that the general texture of this Catechism, the feel of it as one opens it at random, is a refreshment of one's Christian sensibility. The biblical, liturgical, catechetical renewals in the Catholic Church have come together in this Catechism, and set up in it a worthy monument to decades of study and reflexion. Nor is this merely a matter of ecclesiastical expertise, for the whole is warmed by a concern for the human reality to be transfigured by the presence of Christ in his Spirit. This is not a catechism which intends primarily to instruct: its primary intention is to interpret and nourish a mature Christian experience in our

¹This review is based on the first edition of *A New Catechism*, Burns and Oates/Herder and Herder; 35s. I have used the first Dutch edition, *De Nieuwe Katechismus*, as a control. No use has been made of additional matter to appear in both the Dutch and English editions, and I have no knowledge of any Roman modifications.

time, and it pursues this intention by offering itself as an example of such a comprehensive Christian experience. It is not then surprising that as well as providing some excellent pages on prayer the Catechism as a whole can quite soberly be described as prayerful; it demands to be read reflectively and meditatively together with the Bible which the authors ask should be its constant companion. The authors move easily from biblical texts to their liturgical actualization, and so to their living significance in a Christian experience become conscious of itself in the world.

The authors of the Catechism are resolutely determined to be fair to this world: to recognize it for what it is in its contemporaneity and its historical evolution, to acknowledge its autonomous values and achievements, to discern in it the hidden stirrings of the Spirit, to admit the well-foundedness of some of its objections to the Gospel in the forms in which it has sometimes been proposed to the world. They are aware too of the world-religions, Islam, Hinduism, Buddhism, and pay respectful attention to them more than once. If Christianity is genuinely a universal way of salvation, there can be nothing in the world which is beyond its scope. The Catechism tries to embrace all things in a comprehensive Christian vision, and reconcile them in it at least in anticipation.

But just this generosity, this resolve to allow every element in experience its due weight, seems to be the source of what must, I feel, be recognized as weaknesses in the Catechism. The winning tone of the Catechism, benign and conciliatory, rings a little false when topics are being discussed which are not in fact capable yet of rounded and balanced treatment. The Catechism does from time to time say, 'We do not know.' But even when it does so, and even more where it does not and ought to, it is sometimes trapped into a kind of high-toned evasiveness which is surely the vice of generous-minded ecclesiastics, anxious to show sympathetic appreciation of what they are not competent to judge. I do not see how a mature Christian experience today can fail to acknowledge the existence of what are still irreconcilable conflicts in that experience, and conflicts of different kinds: the co-existence of partial truths derived from various sources, and the opposition of values.

As regards the partial truths, perhaps the major conflict relevant in the present case is between styles of theological exposition. Surely the major source of disquiet provoked by the Catechism is its style of exposition—interpretation of experience, rather than instruction. Its concern for the subjective growth of the Christian believer, which gives it what I have called its 'prayerful' quality, does tend to make it present Christianity as a process of personal growth and insight. It does not, it seems to me, allow sufficiently for the fact that any Christian, however mature, has to submit to at least some truths of revelation which he cannot integrate into the whole of his personal experience; in fact, it is a part of Christian maturity to recognize the

inevitability of this gap between revelation and experience.

As regards the conflict of values, the Catechism is by no means free from a widespread ecclesiastical reverence today for 'modern man', a concept which often seems to differ little from the myth of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century rationalistic positivism; there are ecclesiastical writers who seem to be unaware that this myth has been continuously subjected to bitter criticism by 'modern men' from Blake onwards. The Catechism version of 'modern man' seems to be a Teilhardian figure, though it does recognize some of the ambiguities of 'modernity'. But it would benefit, I think, by protesting rather more and reconciling rather less, even if its tone were to become a little shriller in consequence.

In what follows I shall summarize the treatment of sin in the Catechism, to be read in the light of the foregoing remarks. I shall place an asterisk against every statement which seems to illustrate them or to demand critical reflexion.

The account of sin forms the first part of what is presented as a twofold treatment of our salvation: sin and redemption (pp. 259-70; 270-86). A first section, 'Redemption co-extensive with sin',* points out that humanity is the race of men who have Jesus Christ for their fellow-man. Later in the book (pp. 479-81), eternal punishment or 'eternal sin', as it is excellently called, is explained, though no cross-reference is given in this section. There follows a section 'Universal guilt', in which critical moments of experience* are appealed to in which one becomes aware of a mysterious sense of guilt. The Catechism refers to wars, capitalism, colonialism, race and class-hatred, concentration camps, as elements in this experience. A long quotation from Anna Blaman (of whom I admit I know nothing), entirely phrased in terms of 'my shortcomings, inadequacies, failings', and Newman's famous passage about the 'terrible aboriginal calamity', complete this section. Rejecting as incomplete accounts of sin in terms of immaturity, man's deep experience of guilt is said to be an awareness of 'his tremendous, universal, inevitable and yet inexcusable incapacity to love.'

The biblical message is next considered. The narratives of Genesis 1-11 are 'symbols in which the kernel of all human history is described'.* The message of Romans 5 is that grace has come through Jesus Christ in greater abundance than sin and death. It is explained that the repetition of the word 'one' in this chapter of Romans is only part of the literary dress of the message, not the message itself, and is due to the world-picture of Paul's time.*

The next section explains that the Fall is a message about man, not about beginnings.* The old world-picture, it is said, was static, and God was spoken of 'like a carpenter who had made something and left it there.'* 'The existence of sin was explained primarily by the fact that man *had sinned*' (emphasis in the Dutch). Now we see that the whole universe exists in God, and that creation grows in his

hands.* It is only the whole of history which will explain it all and show that 'everything was very good' (Gen. 1: 31; the Dutch has 'is'). On whose authority I do not know, the English text substitutes the innocuous statement, 'The meaning of the first sin needs to be pondered deeply', for the Dutch: 'We need not attach any particular significance to a "first sin".'¹ The sin of Adam and Eve is in ourselves.

In a further attempt to deal with the beginnings of sin, it is said that in the new world-picture too, sin has to do with human freedom. 'Freedom grew in man and so did sin'.* But evil ultimately is not comprehensible; it is the great absurdity, and so its origin in world-history remains incomprehensible.*

The Catechism makes it quite clear that it is sin and guilt of which it is speaking, and not just imperfection in a developing world. In such a world of 'ascending evolution' (*omhoog groeiende wereld*), 'sin is often nothing but the refusal to grow in the direction conscience reveals'.* Trying to grasp the collective character of evil by way of the contagiousness of our sins, we may recognize that the whole world forms a single breeding-ground. 'The whole of humanity is in a condition in which its values are obscured. And worst obscured of all is the supreme value, that of love.'

Especially when we look towards Jesus' cross, we recognize that this condition of lovelessness is within ourselves. We rebel against God's love for us. We are powerless of ourselves to be otherwise, and yet this impotence is not inculpable. Enough freedom remains to us, and it is used to set ourselves against God. The mysterious solidarity in guilt in our situation used to be explained by theologians in the condition of 'human nature' propagated since Adam. But Scripture sees the unity of the human race not in propagation but in the call by the one Father.* The oneness of sin is also to be sought on this level, though here in man's refusal.* It is 'the sin of the world', to which I myself contribute, since like every man I too am 'Adam'.

The weakness of earlier discussions of 'original sin', from Augustine's time onwards, was that it placed too much emphasis on sin in infants.* Now the stress is laid on adult man. 'Original sin is the sin of mankind as a whole (including myself) in so far as it affects every man.'* 'Original sin' is not a sin in the ordinary sense of the word, but only takes on concrete form in our personal sins, where we personally ratify original sin, so to speak.* It is only for these personal decisions that a man is condemned.

'The sin of the world came to a climax in the crucifixion of Christ. This is the Fall in the most radical sense: the killing of the uniquely

¹Later the English version adds 'only' in the sentence: 'The sin which stains others was not only committed by an Adam at the beginning of man's story, but by "Adam", man, every man.' In general, the translation seems to me excellent. A number of sensible adaptations have been made, though I am sorry that an appalling poem by Belloc has been substituted for a Dutch one, perhaps equally bad, for all I can tell. Marx has been curiously mistranslated on p. 32, and the use of 'symbols' as well as of 'signs' has led to the odd statement on p. 253, 'Sacraments are just symbols, which are efficacious signs.'

good, the expulsion of God. Every man takes part in it . . . All mankind has a hand in it.'

But this, the greatest of all sins, was also redemption on the part of God. The flood of sin was surpassed by the greater flood of grace. We have the Redeemer for our fellow-man, so we can be sure that good is stronger than evil, that the solidarity in good in which we also share is stronger than the solidarity of sin. The authors of the Catechism mention themselves for once and declare that although 'some of their heritage of sin and aversion from God might be reflected in the text, they were still more confident that the forces of truth and grace which flow to them through mankind and the Church,* would work superabundantly in their pages. Mary, as part of the mystery of Christ, lived in a sinful world and shared its pain, but not its guilt. She overcame evil by good, entirely in virtue of Christ's redemption.

The divine message which requires our faith, then, is 'the biblical message that mankind (1) was created by God; (2) that it was called to participate in a special way in his life; (3) that collectively and culpably it fails to respond to God's purpose; (4) that God wills to love and heal us.' 'This message has been propounded in the light of our present view of the world, as a world in a state of growth and evolution.'

In a final reflection on the origins of sin, it is repeated that we really know nothing of the actual beginnings. The story of paradise and the fall intends to convey 'the purpose of God, as realized in the whole, and above all in the end.'* As to the connection between sin and death, while Scripture sometimes expresses this by saying that through sin death came into the world, the beginning of biological death, like all beginnings, is obscure. What we can be sure of is that the resurrection of Jesus is at once the conquest of sin and the conquest of death.

This summary of the Catechism on sin has been offered in an attempt to be fair to its authors. To criticize single items taken out of their context would have been meaningless. In fact my main doubt about the rightness of what is said there is concerned with the exposition as a whole. Two aspects of this are immediately noticeable: first, that no single reference is made to the Councils of the Church, Trent in particular; and secondly, that the authors simply take for granted that the 'new world-picture' is that provided by generalized evolution in its Teilhardian form. The exposition may be seen as an attempt to transpose the biblical message, released from its particularity by the techniques of modern exegesis, into the categories of this world of 'ascending evolution'. 'We' (precisely as 'we' and not as 'they') enter into an understanding of this world as process and growth because we too are part of this process and growth, individually and collectively.

I must say that I am profoundly dubious about this whole enter-

prise, at least in so far as it takes shape in a 'catechism'. How many readers of the Catechism are going to be in a position to evaluate this exposition theologically? Would it not have been more *honest* to present the conciliar evidence along with the biblical evidence (and this less tendentiously), and then to offer the preferred interpretation tentatively and provisionally? Would this not have been to make a more serious demand on the Christian maturity of the reader? For all its undoubted virtues and insights, it seems to me that this Catechism is sometimes lacking in Christian discretion. Perhaps the point is that ours is hardly the time for a catechism at all.

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