

Catechetics is Not Enough

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by Derek Lance

Gabriel Moran has written an important and disturbing book.¹ It is disturbing because it challenges practically every axiom of modern Catechetics. Just when it seemed we were getting somewhere we are made to wonder if we have to start all over again.

For about sixty years now the Catechetical movement has been working away to bring new life into the teaching of religion, to make religion relevant to the lives of the pupils; and in this it has achieved considerable success.

One of the first things that Catechetical experts turned their attention to was the danger of verbalism and jargon. Thus, the 'penny Catechism' with its archaic, involved and abstract vocabulary was soon under fire. Although not long ago Catechetics was regarded by many as the off-beat hobby of a few cranks, recently (and especially since Vatican II) it has become respectable and even fashionable. Catechetical books pour on to the markets, and phrases such as *kerygma*, *Salvation History* and *the Four Ways* are to be heard in staff-room and presbytery. And it is just this that worries Brother Moran! He is conscious that Catechetics has reached a crisis. There is a danger of complacency and fossilization. We may wake up and find that instead of a renewed theology we have merely a new jargon.

It is not that Brother Moran thinks that these phrases and axioms are wrong. On the contrary, he concedes that the Catechetical movement has progressed in the right direction and that its leaders have been saying the right sort of thing, often in advance of the theologians. What he fears is that a great many Catechists are using these words without really understanding at a sufficient depth what they mean. In Catechetics as elsewhere, 'a little learning is a dangerous thing.' As he puts it, 'This, I would claim, is the great crisis of Catechetics today; not the dying catechism and manual, but the still rising hope that the education of hundreds of millions of people in an incredibly complex world can be carried out with a bit of scripture and liturgy and much sincerity and good will: This simply is not enough. There is need for patient enquiry, deep understanding, and detailed knowledge.' (pp. 34–35.)

In particular the author points out the dangers of people hailing the History of Salvation approach as a panacea without being aware

¹*Catechesis of Revelation*. Gabriel Moran, F.S.C. (Herder and Herder. pp. 151, \$4.50).

of what exactly is meant by history, and especially Salvation History. Some have seen in this merely a teaching gimmick. They will start at Creation and Abraham and plough their way faithfully through the centuries of Patriarchs. Prophets and Popes; and at the end their pupils look back at them with the same glazed stare that greeted Matter and Form or the Apologetics courses. Brother Moran reminds us that history is not primarily the *record of what happened* to those people then, but what we are experiencing now; and Salvation History means the present reality of God and us now. The account of how God and man acted in the past is useful only in so far as it enables us to penetrate more deeply into our encounter with God now and, so, to respond to this more fully and personally now. Another main line of attack is against the ideas that may lie behind such phrases as *Handing on the Faith*. Such an idea would be one that saw Christian revelation as a *thing*, something static and once-given. It is over there and the pupil is over here. Thus, the job of the Catechist is to devise a method that will enable him to give the pupil the message and to make the message attractive. The catechist is concerned with 'getting it across'.

This is, of course, something of a caricature, and I must say that I think that in the first part of the book there is a tendency to exaggerate the dangers and defects just a little. But, even so, these dangers are sufficiently real to make this one of the most important works on Catechetics to have been produced in recent years.

All this may depress the Catechist, but Brother Moran offers a way forward. The way he suggests is a deeper understanding of the theology of Revelation and what he has to say on this is fully in accord with, and a commentary on, the Decree on Revelation of Vatican II. Revelation is God's self-giving to man, reaching its fulness in Christ. But perhaps a distortion has occurred. Brother Moran fears that in the past we may have tended to regard revelation as the imparting by God of a body of doctrine to men. The Church then becomes reduced almost to a publishing house issuing successive reprints, with Councils adding an occasional explanatory footnote, and the Holy Spirit making sure that the proof-reading is accurately done. With such an idea it is easy to see how Catechetics would stress the notion of handing on the faith and make of this a sterile business. But the argument of this book is that Revelation is essentially a personal communication between God and men *now*. The Church's understanding of God's continuing self-giving can, and does, develop as time goes on: there is a true development of doctrine. The revelation of God to each man is to be seen within this pattern. Thus, as Brother Moran sums it up, revelation is, '. . . a present, personal, conscious, free happening with Christ and our brothers in society.' (p. 29).

To set out on this tack involves radical consequences for Catechetics. The Catechist is truly a prophet. He cannot *give* the faith,

but only help the pupil to look in the direction of God. The author in the second half of this book works out thoroughly what these Catechetical consequences are, and he begins to show us the theological depths that underlie such phrases as *Christocentric* and *the Four Ways*. But the teacher will not find here sample lessons; that is not the author's task. One of the most important chapters is that on 'Revelation and Individual Freedom'. If revelation is a personal, conscious, free happening with Christ, then the Catechist must not curb this freedom, and the author gives a timely warning against syllabuses and lesson plans that would demand too automatic and facile a response or a forced commitment by the pupil.

Much of what this book contains has been said, here and there, in various recent catechetical works, but it has not, I think, been said before in so pungent and concentrated a fashion. This is by no means light reading, but that is not the author's fault. His style is always clear and easy, but his subject matter requires close and patient study; the bibliography and index are extensive and useful. Perhaps many teachers will find this book too academic or even bewildering if they have only recently become acquainted with modern catechetics. I would hesitate, therefore, before recommending all catechists to read it, but it is certain that for anyone engaged in writing, lecturing or guiding others in catechetics this is essential reading.

As the author says, 'In the next few years the catechetical movement must make a basic decision: whether to turn in on itself and its formulas in narrowly conceived catechetical journals, or to expand its vision by opening out to the whole of man's personal life. Catechetics is on the verge of its greatest breakthrough; it must not be frustrated by rigid new schema, categories, and approaches. The only thing which can save the catechetical movement from self-strangulation is to prepare teachers who have a theological understanding of Christian revelation.' (p. 151).

In fact it is clear that more and more teachers are hungry for just such a preparation, but often they are at a loss where to begin. They would find *The Mystery of Salvation*, by Paul de Sury^a a useful introduction. This is a book for biblical beginners. The author sets out clearly the main lines of God's plan of Salvation as recorded in the Bible. Each chapter is a concise guide to the biblical content and its interpretation and at the end of each chapter there is a list of the more important, relevant texts. The section on the Old Testament is particularly good. This is a translation by Rosemary Sheed from the French original which was published in 1958. This means, of course, that the work has not profited from the insights of Vatican II. This is most obvious in the last part of the book which deals with the Church. Here the accent is almost entirely on the Church as the Mystical Body, and scarcely at all as Sacrament or the People of

^aSheed and Ward. Stagbooks. 12s 6d.

God; and the treatment of the Church's relations with other religions, and especially with the Jews, is decidedly pre-Council. But the idea of *types* is well dealt with and there are two useful maps and a time chart. It is a pity, of course, that most of the references are to French books.

It is good, and indeed essential, for teachers to busy themselves with their own theological development, but in the meantime they are daily faced with the pressing problem of how to teach their pupils and to arouse them to some enthusiasm for the revelation of Christ. At first sight they may think that Douglas Hyde's *Dedication and Leadership*³ has much to offer. Hyde here aims to describe the methods used by the Communists to awaken in their followers great dedication. He contrasts the enthusiasm and self-sacrifice seen in the lives of most Communists with the apathy so widely evident among Catholics. His claim is that the Church might, with profit, adopt many of the Communist techniques. It is a tantalizing offer, and many teachers will be tempted to take it. But I think this would be a great mistake. One really needs to judge this book in the light of what Brother Moran has to say. It strikes me that in Hyde's book we have a classic example of what Moran means when he talks of a too automatic and facile response or a forced commitment. What Hyde is describing seems to be a fairly efficient method of manipulating people. Any such activity is quite alien to Catechetics and we have seen far too much of it in the history of the Church. Hyde describes the techniques with clarity and it all seems so simple and useful; this makes it the more dangerous.

But the teacher still feels that he must have some guidance in the decision of what to teach. If he turns to the *Over to You* series⁴ he will find he is on much surer ground. The introductory book called *Education for Christian Living* is a short, but in some ways masterly vision of Catechetics. After reading Moran one might be a bit suspicious of the frequency with which phrases about 'handing on the message' occur, but these suspicions are soon allayed as one reads into the book. In the first essay Fr Konstant sets the Catechetical scene. This is nothing new, but it is a neat summary of the state of present day religious teaching, and it will provide material for answering the fears of some who distrust 'all this modern catechetical stuff'.

Fr Charles Southwood in the second essay, *A Scriptural Approach in Christian Education* goes a long way to help in the teachers' own theological preparation. This is really a concise masterpiece. It ranges over the whole field of theology and is quite up to date. In contrast with Douglas Hyde, Fr Southwood says (p. 22) 'We must not simply "indoctrinate" our children, what we have to do is to communicate to them our own "concern" '.

³*Sands*. 155.

⁴*Surdaw Publications*.

This same attention to the pupils as persons to be respected is shown in the chapter by Eve Lewis on the Psychology of Childhood. She takes a Jungian position and describes in a way the ordinary person can understand how children think and *feel* about religion. The work of Ronald Goldman has recently had a great influence on catechetical thinking and here Eve Lewis offers a valuable comment and critique on his findings. This is a chapter that most parents would enjoy and benefit from reading.

Finally there is a very fine piece by Rosemary Haughton which sets the religious teaching of children in the context of the whole Christian vocation. She makes a plea for us to trust the children and to give them the chance to explore and to make mistakes. How good it was to read her contention that contemplative prayer is not a hobby for pious cranks or the privilege of certain religious orders, but the normal prayer for the adult Christian. She also has some thought-provoking things to say about 'establishment Catholicism' and would like to see Christian educators being more adventurous in their preaching of Christ's Gospel and not falling so quickly into line with the standards of contemporary society. There is a lot packed into this small booklet. It promises well for the courses that are based on these ideas and that complete the series. This introductory booklet would serve admirably for discussion groups of teachers and especially parents.