THE CATECHISM AND ITS REQUIREMENTS: THE BALTIMORE CATECHISM A GOOD ...
REV ALEXANDER L A KLAUDER
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# THE CATECHISM AND ITS REQUIREMENTS.

BY REV. ALEXANDER L. A. KLAUDER.

THERE seems to be a general demand for a common catechism of Christian doctrine for this country. It was this demand that prompted the Fathers of the late Plenary Council of Baltimore to issue the present authorized manual, known as the Baltimore Catechism. This manual, however, as it is well known, has not met with general favor as a work viewed in the light of strict catechetic science. Whatever the defects of the work itself may be, it must be admitted, nevertheless, that the movement inaugurated with the issue and authorization of a common manual was a good and necessary one. It is one that ought to receive the firm support of all promoters and well-wishers of solid Catholic interests in this country. But some who were dissatisfied with the authorized catechism refused to introduce it in their schools; others who had adopted it, but looked for an improvement of it, became impatient over the delay and replaced it with manuals of their own selection. The result is that at the present time there is a great variety of catechisms used all over the country.

## THE BALTIMORE CATECHISM A GOOD GROUNDWORK.

The questions that suggest themselves now are these: Shall the employment of this variety of catechisms be tolerated, or shall the plans of the bishops of the Plenary Council be carried out? In the latter event, shall the Baltimore Catechism be withdrawn and an entirely new catechism take its place, or shall not an improvement of the present authorized manual be preferred? There are those who maintain that the Baltimore compilation is so utterly deficient that it cannot be improved. We think there is more prejudice in this assertion than reason. With the defects of the Council Catechism plainly in view, we nevertheless insist that the groundwork of a good American manual, such as is needed to meet the main requirements of the American mind, has been formed; and this was, no doubt, all caviling aside, the distinct work of the Holy Spirit, who placed the bishops to rule the church of God.

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The present writer has used the Baltimore Catechism ever since its issue by the council. He has used it in the largest parochial schools and Sunday-schools, and in the remote rural districts. He has used it among American children of almost every extraction. We have, indeed, often sighed for a more intelligible and complete manual; and we ourselves have finally labored hard and long to improve this catechism according to the best examples and the principles of the best catechetic writers.

The obstacles that present themselves to the introduction of a uniform manual of religious instruction in this country are many and peculiar. These are due to the varied conditions of instruction in a country as large as ours, and covered with a multitude of races of different languages and customs. But as this divergency of even Catholic interests increases, the demand for a uniform text-book of religious instruction becomes all the more urgent, if unity of Catholic faith and interests is to be secured. In delay there is both danger and loss. Hence we advocate that the work once inaugurated under such sacred auspices as a Plenary Council should be maintained at all hazards.

## NEED OF IMPROVEMENT.

That the Council Catechism needs improvement no one will dispute; indeed, there is not a catechism extant that does not demand improvement, not only in view of national and ever-changing conditions, but from a view-point of strict catechetic science. According to the consensus of the best catechetic writers the ideal catechism has not yet been written. And we shall say right here, even though by way of a slight digression—for we cannot well afford to say it elsewhere—that any text-book of religious teaching is after all only a makeshift for oral teaching. "Faith cometh from hearing" is a biblical saying as true and vital as any contained in the great Book. The child that does not obtain its religious instruction daily at the knee of a pious mother and weekly from the lips of a zealous priest, remains after all a poorly instructed and a badly trained Catholic. The questions and answers of any catechism are but a dry skeleton that is liable to produce repugnance rather than interest. They must be filled out with the meat of the living word supplied by assiduous and earnest teachers. This is the oft-repeated saying of one who is justly styled the Master of Catechetics, John Baptist Hirscher, who deplores the too great dependence in our day upon catechetic manuals of instruction. The more catechisms

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published, and the better they are adapted to convey a complete knowledge of religion, the more patent becomes the neglect of personal instruction by both parent and priest. Everything is left in the end to the mere memorizing and recitation of the catechism.

If this exclusive dependence upon a catechetic manual for religious instruction may be said to be an evil in parochial schools and in parishes with resident priests, what shall we say when we consider the overwhelming balance of territory in this country where people are left to the exclusive instruction of incompetent and unprofessional teachers, not to speak of the thousands and tens of thousands of children who are necessarily dependent upon the catechism as the sole means for both the learning and explanation of their religion? A glance at some of the returns of the late census, at the Catholic Directory, at the last report of the Indian and Negro Missions, must convince the most casual observer that the balance of catechetic instruction in this country is not in favor of a normal system by any means, but knowledge is rather picked up in divers and slipshod ways in thousands of missions, stations, and over vast territories, where regular and frequent instruction by the priest is out of the question, and where the only hope of having some knowledge of our religion imparted at all is through the medium of a simple and intelligible catechism. The needs of this preponderating class of catechumens cry louder than do those of the children of the parochial schools and of the city Sunday-schools. Or shall we have two catechisms, one for the school and one for the country home? We maintain that a uniform catechism can be compiled for this country that will fill the needs of the home as well as of the school, and be suitable also for converts of the most ordinary education. Hence, in view of the abnormal conditions that prevail in this country, we say, if we must have a common catechism, let it be such an one as will apply to the national conditions, and not merely to those of the schools for which the average catechism of the past seems to have been compiled; otherwise we cannot but go on deploring an ever-growing leakage from the Catholic ranks because of the neglect of an adequate and far-reaching instruction of the American youth. When we have acquitted ourselves of the manifest duty of supplying a good catechism, according to the best of our opportunities, we can then look to the Lord to supply the increase of faith that otherwise comes from hearing.

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The matter required in an American catechism must, besides embracing the teachings in common with all other elementary catechisms, include such issues as affect the religious and moral welfare of the American people in particular. We have been severely criticised for inserting in our *Catechism of Catholic Teaching* such matters as the payment of taxes, voting, bribery. A catechism, writes Spirago in his *Method of Religious Instruction*, that says nothing of duelling, socialism, cremation, government, voting, the press, etc., is of little use in our day. We feel convinced that security for the government of this country, for the political rights of Catholics, lies in the proper instruction and training of our Catholic children. Further matter for an American catechism, considering our limited opportunities for general uniform instruction, are, the prayers in general use both public and private, a short catechism for the illiterate as a requisite for the valid reception of the sacraments, the manner of making the sign of the cross, the manner of making confession, of receiving Holy Communion, an examination of conscience both for large and for small children; also pictorial illustrations of the different articles used at divine service. All these matters are imperative in a manual that must be used frequently, in many a rural home and elsewhere, as a sole means of instruction in the doctrines and practices of the faith. No other catechism, to our knowing, contains all these things and gives the student such a condensed and complete knowledge of the Catholic religion without dependence upon other sources of instruction.

The matter of a catechism must withal be kept within prudent bounds. Considering especially the many wants of American instruction, the observance of this rule becomes all the more peremptory. The average text-book with its finely printed pages, used and explained daily in the school-room, becomes a perfect bugbear to children who have not like advantages in a country home or average Sunday-school. The mere moralizing in so many catechisms and padding to fill in the artificial chapters planned must be avoided in a practical manual such as the American Church requires. It is far better to have strikingly short lessons contrasted with disproportionately long ones in order to simply state the teaching and the practice, than to make the chapters equally long by preaching platitudes.

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If a catechism must be complete, it is, on the other hand, not expected to be a manual of theology. In stating a theological truth it is not necessary to give all the divisions and distinctions of theologians. Only familiarity with catechetical manuals can guide the compiler in this matter. Critics who have little experience in this field are frequently unjust to a compiler in this respect. Some demand a complete division of grace, for instance, as made by theologians. But no catechism of repute gives any further division of grace than that of sanctifying, actual, and sacramental grace. If a compiler, in view of the peculiar wants of the American student, lays down a rule to employ no difficult word in the manual without giving at least some explanation of it, he does not thereby oblige himself in every case, in defining such a term, to state the full theological doctrine involved. Hence, if in the definition of inspiration only the general meaning of the term is given, the student is put into a partial and incipient understanding of the word used at least, with no danger of getting a false idea of inspiration because all the various notions claimed by theologians for the true character of inspiration are not included in the word-meaning given by the compiler. No elementary catechism treats the matter of inspiration, although all of them use the word in the definition of Sacred Scripture. There are the extremes of defining no terms and of taking the knowledge of Latinic words on the part of the child for granted, or of asking the compiler, because he endeavors to be helpful to the child, to turn the child's catechism into a manual of theology.

If even the excellent catechism of Deharbe is admittedly too abstract even for the children of Germany, what shall we say of those manuals of recent publication that are little more than a translation of the former? German abstractions and the plethora of German definitions and divisions, in the testimony of Spirago, will not do for the practical and matter-of-fact minds of the American people. What the American child needs particularly in its catechism are definitions of the Latinic words in their general sense rather than fine theological distinctions. Just what words require a general definition or a specific definition in a catechism is best known to one who combines a familiarity with catechetic manuals with a long experience of actual teaching. The lack of sufficient appreciation of the terms used in the catechisms in vogue is largely

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responsible for the childish repugnance to learn them, for the common ignorance of ecclesiastical language, and for the baneful apathy of American Catholics towards Catholic literature. English-speaking Catholics as a rule are not sufficiently grounded in the terminology of their religion.

If the reviser of the Baltimore Catechism has been pronounced inexact by a few of his critics, it is because these are not familiar with the sphere and with the formulæ of catechetic teaching. If the criticism of a catechism is not made from the stand-point of strict catechetics, but rather from that of theology or of mere literature, it must necessarily be unjust and derogatory to the compiler and implicating to the critic. If the Immaculate Conception as paraphrased by the compiler is taken to be *passive sumpta* and severely criticised as such by a late reviewer, it is because the latter does not seem to understand the character of the doctrine. If the same reviewer finds fault that in our catechism priests are made assistants to the bishops, he shows unfamiliarity with Deharbe's catechism and other popular catechisms, as well as with the propositions of Jesuit theologians, and with the definition of the Council of Trent. When he again finds fault that the church is made to derive her knowledge of doctrine from the Scriptures and tradition, he again betrays ignorance of the language of Deharbe and other catechists as well as of the sphere of catechetic teaching generally.

### THE APPORTIONMENT OF SUBJECT-MATTER.

A necessary arrangement of the catechism is its apportionment of matter in several numbers for the different grades of scholars. But these numbers, whilst differing in the quantity of matter treated in them, should nevertheless be identical in the character of the text. The observance of this rule is imperative both for the easy memorizing and for a clear understanding of the subject-matter. A change in the text of a given question and answer in a higher number of a manual both confuses and disheartens the average pupil. Whatever is to be added to a subject in a higher manual should be done by way of a new question or special explanation. In this point again some American compilations are at fault, and the writer has taken special care to correct this same fault in the Baltimore manual, so that the three numbers of the present revised edition read identical as far as the matter goes in each of them with the higher numbers. At the same time

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each number is made to read logically and completely for itself. This arrangement has entailed considerable labor, and has necessitated certain observances not liable to be understood by the superficial reader, but appreciated as a distinct advantage by the careful catechist and professional teacher of children. If the higher numbers under the above-mentioned arrangement include the identical matter of the lower numbers, which to some seems superfluous, it must be remembered that the higher numbers are intended also for the use of teachers who should be enabled at a glance to distinguish the exact matter of each number. We must not forget also that many teachers of Christian doctrine in this country are far from being trained and professional teachers, and will find the combined information of the three numbers a distinct advantage to them.

### A QUESTION OF DIVISIONS.

All catechists agree that the more simple the division of a catechism the greater its utility. The genius that is largely responsible for the minute scientific treatment of catechetics is also responsible for a reprehensible endeavor to cut up the simple catechism into forced divisions and subdivisions. The Bible, which is the word of God itself, is not treated in that manner. The Roman Catechism is very simple in its arrangement of matter. The catechisms of St. Peter Canisius and of Deharbe are more forced in this respect. Yet these same divisions may be employed in a catechism without being pronounced. The arrangement of the Baltimore Catechism into consecutive lessons without being forced into parts, or more general heads, is an admirable one and has this advantage, that matters can be treated more easily where it is natural without obliging the scholar to wait for an information that is necessary, whereas the artificial divisions of the book demand treatment of it under another head further on in the book. The treatment of the four last things at the end of the catechism, whereas they really belong to the Apostles' Creed, is a purely sentimental arrangement. Both Hirscher and Gruber deplore this artificial and strained method. Their contention that the whole divine economy should be interwoven in the catechism and be treated parallel, as it were, with every lesson, and not merely gradually and piecemeal in disjointed chapters, finds its application in the Baltimore Catechism more easily than in the more scientific and artificial manuals in vogue. In the revised edition of the Council Catechism the writer has

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inserted references to their proper heads of all matters not previously or not immediately treated in the lesson in hand. This arrangement we consider indispensable. It helps to a complete understanding of the matter under treatment, and meets the contention of Hirscher as closely as it is possible in a rudimentary hand-book of religion. If we are taken to task for not observing certain stereotyped divisions, we are fully aware of what we have done and why we have done it, and can console ourselves that we have acted upon a well prepared plan, even if it is not appreciated by the average book-reviewer. We were fully prepared for the severe criticism of many of our arrangements, for having displaced certain matters, for repeating certain definitions, for asking apparently tautological questions. But all these departures are supported by deeply underlying principles, which the size of this article will not permit us to explain in these pages, and were moreover prompted by the peculiar wants of American children at large independently of any one locality, nationality, or particular scholastic opportunity.

The treatment of the sacraments before the commandments is that of the Roman Catechism, and is justified in this country particularly, where so much depends upon text-book instruction Our small children cannot be well prepared for an intelligent reception of the sacraments, if these are treated at the end of the book which they have not as yet mastered. The sooner the sacraments are treated the better. The knowledge of the commandments is imparted in easier and in many more ways than is that of the valid reception of the sacraments.

But if any species of division is detested by catechetic writers, and no doubt every experienced teacher will concur in this, it is the division of the answers. There are certain answers in the catechism, of course, that require an enumeration of heads, such as the answers in reference to the number of sacraments, commandments, certain sins and certain virtues. But as for the forcing of ordinary answers into numbered heads as a catechetical method, it is not only useless, but bad, and betrays on the part of the compiler a lack of practical experience in teaching children—especially the children of this country. That such answers help the memory of the child for the morning recitation, we would not call into question; but that they leave much or anything for the average child to remember in after life, is extremely doubtful. And yet some catechisms abound with this style of answer. If they

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are employed by Deharbe and have been unwittingly copied, and even multiplied, by some recent compilers, they are nevertheless faulty and severely criticised by the catechists generally.

### DIFFICULT WORDING OF THE BALTIMORE CATECHISM.

One of the main defects of the Baltimore Catechism is its difficult wording. The compiler of the revised edition has endeavored to remedy this defect by framing the language in short and smoothly running sentences; avoiding as much as possible the divided answers referred to. Children remember sentences couched in simple and rhythmic language longer than the numbered divisions of an answer. To help the memory of the child still more he has also employed that common rule of catechists, to repeat the wording of the question as much as possible in the answer.

The author of the revised edition of the Baltimore Catechism has sought also, as much as possible, to observe the golden mean between the exalted language of ecclesiastical writing and the popular language of the people. Whether he has gone too far in the latter respect may be matter of opinion. But those who have studied the conditions of the American Church may be better able to appreciate his designs The slender opportunities of vast portions of the faithful to obtain a technical knowledge of the language of their religion, the rapidly vanishing use of Latinic words among the people in the sense in which they are employed by the church, but more than all, the multitudes of children of foreign parentage in this country who have little appreciation of the meaning of Latin words, as they are used in classical English—all these considerations, and that of the salvation of immortal souls whose knowledge of God and of his religion is mainly dependent upon an intelligible manual of religious instruction, has urged the writer to employ a language as simple as it could be written, and to do all in his power to impart at least a partial knowledge of the difficult terms that must of necessity be employed in a manual of Catholic teaching. We must not forget also the intention of the Third Plenary Council, that the children of all nationalities shall learn the catechism in the common language of the country.

### A CATECHISM MUST BE SUITABLE TO THE PEOPLE.

If the present writer has laid himself open to severe criticism for the wording of his catechism, it is because he has had

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the above-mentioned conditions steadily in view during the preparation of his work. To him the salvation of souls was paramount to purity of English style, for he makes bold to affirm against all assertions to the contrary that the number of helpless children and ignorant Catholic people who are exclusively dependent upon a plain and intelligible catechism for obtaining the bulk of their religious instruction in the English language is, in a missionary country like ours, overwhelmingly great against the few who have the advantage of schools in which both religion and the English language are taught by the regular methods. Hence the eternal welfare of the majority must be preferred to the literary tastes of the few. If it is a part of religion to bear one another's burdens, we Catholics of this country have the appalling burden of ignorance and helplessness on the part of the majority of our co-religionists to put up with for the sake of the one necessary thing of all education, the salvation of souls. It would be only blindness or consummate pride to resent these assumptions, and the height of uncharitableness and dereliction of duty to shirk this fearful burden and responsibility for the keeping of our brethren of the faith. We must have in a word, a catechism that the vast and helpless majority of our American Catholic people can understand, can interpret for themselves, and can explain to their children.

To obviate the difficulties still more which frequently present themselves to both teacher and scholar through the difficult terminology of the catechism, the author has moreover added an index to each number of the catechism, and arranged the wording in such a manner that neither teacher nor scholar need be left with an inadequate knowledge of any matter treated in the catechism within the domain of catechetic teaching. Thus the catechism becomes at the same time a practical manual for the teacher and a small encyclopædia of doctrinal information.

We trust that, with all these arrangements and their underlying principles in view, we have done our utmost to improve the Baltimore manual and to adapt it to the needs of the American people. We feel confident that we have earnestly endeavored to preserve the Council Catechism rather than replace it with a still more defective manual. We had sent out an abundance of type written copies, as stated in the preface of the book, and we are at all times willing to receive suggestions for the further improvement of the work. We believe

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that no other course is better calculated to secure a proper catechism for this country. But we expect, at any rate, after the publication of a work of such importance, to be treated from a technical stand-point. If we are guided by a spirit of fairness in our estimate of a work of this kind, we must call attention not only to its defects, but also to its merits. These merits must be considered, moreover, in the light of true catechetic science, and of the true and studied wants of the American people. We are willing for any one else to take up the work we have engaged in, and desirous that they bring it to that perfection of which the Baltimore Catechism is both capable and deserving. We close this paper with the earnest words of St. Peter Canisius when he beheld his famous catechism and labor of love torn to pieces by his critics and imitators: "Would to God there came another who was both able and willing to explain the teachings of our faith in a still shorter, clearer, and more advantageous manner!"

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