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# Why a Confraternity of Christian Doctrine in Every Parish?



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His Grace, The Archbishop of Milwaukee  
*at the invitation of*  
His Excellency

The Most Reverend A. J. McGavick, D. D.  
Bishop of La Crosse

The Most Rev. William R. Griffin, D. D.  
Auxiliary Bishop of La Crosse  
*Congress Director*

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IT IS particularly fitting that this fifth Provincial Conference held this year in the United States under the auspices of The National Center of the Confraternity of Christian Doctrine should open its sessions on the Feast of St. Peter Canisius. In our times Holy Church has made and is making strenuous efforts to widen the scope of catechetical instruction, to improve its methods and to give to pastors of souls, who by virtue of their office are the principal catechists, aids and co-workers, by holiness of life, ardent zeal and proper training equal to their task.

Pope Pius X, of holy memory, in his celebrated Encyclical letter *Acerbo nimis* of the 15th of April, 1905, does not hesitate to say in plain, vigorous language that the sole reason why faith is languishing and is almost moribund in our age, is because the office of transmitting Christian Doctrine is being either discharged negligently or ignored; and offers timely remedies for this tragic evil. In the Code of Canon Law, completed in his Pontificate, eleven canons directly refer to catechetical instruction. Amplifying the legislation of the Council of Trent, the Code of Canon Law defines the duty of the ordinary to teach the faithful, and particularly children and youths, Christian Doctrine; greatly extends his authority over such teaching in his diocese; and gives him the

right to compel clerics, even those exempt from his authority, to come to his assistance in this important work of the Gospel. It fixes definitely the grave obligation resting on priests in care of souls to give catechetical instruction, and sets up a program for such teaching. And it emphasizes the very grave obligation of parents to provide religious instruction for their children. Pope Benedict XV, even during the days when the great World War raged, often encouraged, praised and commended the work of the catechist and pointed to it as the very main exercise of the Preaching Office in our day. Pius XI, of blessed memory, in season and out of season stressed the importance of catechetics. In his *Motu proprio* of the 12th of January, 1935, he ordered the institution in every diocese of a Diocesan Catechetical Bureau, defined its functions, and commanded that everywhere each year there be observed a Feast of Christian Doctrine or Catechetical Day. Among many other wise provisions in this same *Motu proprio*, this Pontiff urged the ordinaries to associate with the pastors of souls in the discharge of their duty of teaching Christian Doctrine, qualified catechists of both sexes, and did not hesitate to say that the work of these catechists was a very essential part of the program of Catholic Action. This Pope set up in the Sacred Congregation of the Council at Rome a special section on Catechetics to supervise and promote all catechetical activity in the Catholic Church, and commanded ordinaries to present to this Sacred Congregation every five years a full, comprehensive report on catechetical instruction in their dioceses.



These are but a few evidences of the contribution of the Popes of our time to the Catechetical Renaissance in the Church. One such effort, first incorporated in the Code of Canon Law and strengthened by Pope Pius XI, I have not mentioned before for it seems to me to comprehend all the others so fully that it may well serve as a resume of them. I refer to the law requiring the canonical erection in every parish of the Confraternity of Christian Doctrine. This canonical requirement must be uppermost in our minds when we discuss our office as catechists.

Now the efforts and appeals of the Roman Pontiffs have not been in vain, for we see about us under the leadership of our bishops everywhere a Catechetical Renaissance, growing more vigorous day by day and giving forth fair fruits. We rightly assert that in the Church today our spiritual leaders hold and proclaim the teaching of the Catechism to be the first need of religion and the remedy for the maladies which grieve us. We fully agree with Pope Pius X and assert with him that the maladies which have befallen the Christian body all spring from a neglect or faulty discharge of the duties of the catechist in the Church. This may seem a hard saying and yet it stands the test of rigorous proof. In countries which we have been accustomed to call Catholic, and where certainly the great majority still call themselves Catholic, these latter days have seen anti-religious, anti-Catholic and pernicious doctrines gain such a sway that their protagonists have been able to reach positions of domination. In these countries workingmen, sorely tried by unquestionable injus-

tices, in their distress have strangely sought relief from the hands of godless leaders. Strange books, redolent of sheer materialism, have come from the pens of writers, and the press has aligned itself with teachers who have no knowledge of the Christian vision. True, in these countries there are staunch Catholics, vigorously defending Christian truths and seeking to apply them to life's problems; but they are a minority, and even in popular elections win but scant support.

All this is a scandal and we rightly seek the reason for it. It is not hard to find. The teaching of Catechism was neglected; the poor did not have the Gospel preached to them. Complacency with fine institutions and forgetfulness of the sorry plight of the masses conspired to bring about this tragical condition. No matter how cleverly the popular apologist may sum up excuses for the ignorance of religious truths prevailing in the masses in these countries, Pius X boldly points out the truth and Pius XI repeats it. The trouble is that Catechism was not taught or that it was not well taught. This indeed should be a lesson for us.

But some lethargic minds, who call back for an example to the days when self-satisfaction begot the tragedies now overwhelming some Christian peoples, say: "Why here in the United States for years we have been carrying on the greatest catechetical apostolate since early Christian days!" They point to our schools and proudly boast that our children and youths know their religion. Without disparaging the catechetical work of our schools, to which we owe the present happy condition of Religion in our midst, let us be honest

with ourselves and fair to Holy Church. Not more than one-half the Catholic children of the United States are in Catholic schools, and only a small percentage of our youths enjoy the blessing of Catholic higher education. We are too prone to look at the large congregations in our churches on Sundays, and at our crowded altar rails, and forget those who are not in church.

It is a fact that our principal pastoral problem today has to do with the very large number of Catholics who are not practical. A recent survey of a typical city parish in Wisconsin revealed that our losses are happening not among the poor but among lower-middle-class people, and that they are very large. Indeed, with the spectacle of crowded churches before our eyes today, we are suffering greater losses than ever before in the history of the Church in the United States. These are not exaggerations and I stand ready to offer proof of them. Do we ask the reason? Foremost among the reasons is ignorance of Christian Doctrine. We have not made efforts in the past to gather together for religious instruction children not in our schools and youths dangerously exposed to false systems. True, we have stressed from our pulpits the obligation of parents to send their children to Catholic schools, and for the most part we have taught Catechism to children not in our schools; but we have not walked the streets of our parishes and sought the hearing of parents who do not hear the words we utter from our pulpits. Look at the tragic consequences! And let us be very honest with ourselves in estimating the worth of catechetics in our schools. Does not



our daily experience show a lamentable ignorance of religion in our Catholic laity? It is appalling to find frequent ignorance of fundamentals where we would expect enlightenment. All is not well in Israel.

Now if we look at the matter closely, we easily discover that in man the intellect ministers to the will. If the mind is not enlightened with truth, then surely we may not expect virtue. How true this is in the realm of the supernatural! Faith is the supernatural light of the intellect. One of the most mysterious truths of the Gospel is stated briefly by St. Paul: "Faith comes from hearing." In the incomprehensible plans of Divine Providence, the Saviour decreed that the Apostles must teach, and that faith would come from their teaching. This ministry of the Word plants faith, waters it and develops it; and where this ministry is not exercised or is poorly exercised, we find that Christian life languishes and dies. Christian life is no more and Christian virtue is unknown.

Now Pope Benedict XIV says: "Two chief obligations have been imposed by the Council of Trent on those who have the care of souls; first that they speak to the people on divine things on feast days; and, secondly, that they instruct the youth and the ignorant in the rudiments of the law of God and of faith." Here we have a clear, definite inclusion of catechizing in the ministry of the Word, and Holy Pontiffs have declared that it is fundamental even to pulpit preaching and instruction. Therefore when the Saviour commanded, "Going teach all nations," He very definitely and positively commanded His Apostles to



catechize. Early church history offers abundant evidence of the fact that this was their understanding of His command. Without catechetics there is no effective preaching of the Gospel, for there is no basic knowledge of it.

Still we must not limit our notion of catechetics to a mere inculcation of a knowledge of Christian Doctrine. Such would be a sorry mistake. In a few brief sentences Pope Pius X describes for us the end and the method of catechetics: "The task of the catechist is to take up one or other of the truths of faith or Christian precept and explain it in all its parts; and, as the scope of his instruction is always directed to amendment of life, he should institute a comparison between what is required of us by our Lord and our actual conduct. He should therefore make use of examples skilfully selected from Holy Scripture, church history and the lives of the saints, using persuasion with his hearers, and pointing out to them how they are to shape their conduct. He should conclude with an efficacious exhortation, in order that they may be moved to shun and avoid vice and to practise virtue."

Here we have stated clearly the formal purpose of catechetics, namely, to foster Christian life and virtue. It differs from mere instruction in that it aims to train the child or youth in Christian truth and life. Merely to consider the task of the catechist as imparting Christian truth is a mistake; he must train and drill the child *in Christian life*. Since rational life starts with the intellect and is directed by the will, his task is clearly and practically to present the truth and then to train the

child in its practical realization. In keeping with this formal purpose, Pope Pius X briefly outlines the method of the catechist, a method which has the sanction of the centuries of the experience of the Church. All too frequently this method is discarded with sorry results and strange substitutions for it are made. However, there is a need of calling on pedagogy for help in making this method efficient. We must discuss catechetical methods among ourselves and courageously incorporate in them all the valid findings of the modern pedagogue. In so important a matter there is need of great diligent work and co-operation. Conferences such as this are a means to this end. Our principle, however, must be never to depart in our elaborations of it from the substance of this method as described by our Pope Pius X.

Now the task of the catechist is indeed difficult. The first impediment he meets is the opinion widely prevailing that his work is secondary and almost negligible when compared to that of the preacher. Again Pope Pius X writes: "We are quite willing to admit the merits of those pulpit orators who, out of genuine zeal for the glory of God, devote themselves either to the defense or maintenance of the Faith or to eulogizing the heroes of Christianity. But their labor presupposes labor of another kind, that of the catechist. Where the latter is wanting, the foundations are wanting, and they labor in vain who build the house. Too often it happens that ornate sermons which win the applause of crowded congregations serve only to tickle the ears, and fail utterly to touch the heart. . . . Whereas catechetical instruc-

tion, when performed as it should be, never fails to be of profit to those who listen to it." It is very much more difficult to prepare properly a catechetical instruction than a sermon. It is this very difficulty which so frequently defeats the proper performance of the catechist. Somehow it has come to pass that many think that only a knowledge of the catechism is necessary and that, for the priest, catechetics is a small matter. We ought frankly to face our failures in catechetics and admit the difficulty involved in properly catechizing. Once we do this, we shall realize that the proper teaching of Christian Doctrine is a challenge to our zeal. Then we shall understand the place of catechetics in the seminary, the need of Catechetical Conferences and the usefulness of training schools for catechists both in religious families and in dioceses. In a word, it is urgently necessary that we sit down and think this matter of catechetics through and gather together the thoughts and experiences of catechists for our enlightenment. Let us keep in mind the words of Pius X: "It is much easier to find a preacher capable of delivering an eloquent and elaborate discourse than a catechist who is able to impart instruction entirely worthy of praise."

We need no arguments to identify in our minds the care of the poor and the helpless with Christian duties. Let me read a quotation from the letter of Pius X: "Assuredly the alms with which we alleviate the trials of the poor is highly praised by the Lord. But who will deny that a far greater measure of praise is due to the zeal and labor expended, not on the fleeting welfare of the body,



but on the eternal welfare of the soul, by teaching and admonition? In truth there is nothing nearer or dearer to the Heart of Jesus Christ, the Saviour of souls, Who through the lips of Isaias affirmed of Himself: I have been sent to preach the Gospel to the poor." Like the Saviour, we must not only teach the Gospel to the spiritually poor, but we must go about seeking them out. We shall never gather together the spiritually neglected children and youths of our flocks by merely instituting catechetical classes for them in our parishes. On foot we must walk the streets of our parishes and spend ourselves in gathering these children into our classes. This is a hard task, for frequently they live in the homes of careless parents. Not one visit but repeated visits we shall find necessary. This is the feeding of the poor in the most excellent manner. This is walking in the footsteps of the Good Shepherd.

We have referred several times to assistant catechists. The pastor and those charged with the care of souls are the catechists. To do their work well they have need of aides. There are good Religious in our schools who not only in school but frequently out of school hours and in vacation schools are at our call when we need them to help us catechize. Then, too, it is the mind of the Church to train and engage as assistant catechists pious lay persons of both sexes who will devote themselves assiduously to this work of charity. These need instruction and training, and the whole work of catechetics in a diocese needs unification and strengthening from the central catechist in every diocese, the bishop. Very wisely has the Holy See

commanded that in every diocese there be set up a Bureau of Catechetics through which the bishops efficiently supervise, encourage, order and direct the teaching of Catechism in parishes, schools and centers. Under this Bureau there should be erected training schools for catechists. It should license properly prepared and fitted catechists. It should keep constantly in touch with all catechetical activities and seek to extend their embrace to every child and youth in the diocese. I think that it is urgently necessary that this training of lay catechists be given more thought and attention. Let it not be said that we fed the orphan and clothed the poor and neglected to break the Bread of Life to the spiritually starving of our flocks.

It would be unfair not to acknowledge the widening and deepening of the Catechetical Renaissance in our midst. Every year we witness the gathering together of more children and youths for religious instruction and the raising of the standard of this instruction. Still, we ought not to be contented with our achievements. They are so partial that they should beget in us a holy discontent with ourselves. If we are to meet this gravest of our problems, we must with the enthusiasm of crusaders go out to bring the Gospel to all our children and youths.

In the beginning of my discourse I said that it was fitting that this Conference opened on the Feast of St. Peter Canisius. He lived at a time when the full catastrophe of the breaking asunder of Christian unity in Europe was apparent. Rightly he judged that the cause of this break was a widespread ignorance of Christian Doctrine among the

people. It never could have occurred if the people had been properly instructed; history attests that thousands of them held to the Church more as a tradition than as a reality. Courageously he started a catechists' crusade, and gave large areas of Europe to the Church. We face today a world which has wandered away from the Church and Christ. To bring it back we need a vigorous, strong Catechetical Renaissance. When our people know their religion and by proper training acquire the habit of its practice, then indeed shall we witness Christ again in the world about us, which is seeking water where there is no water, light where there is no light. If Catholic Action is to be triumphant, its vanguard must be the catechists.







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