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All Who Are Capable, Should
TEACH AND FOSTER
THE CATECHISM

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(Cf. Decree *Provido sane consilio*,
January 12, 1935)



ONE of the purposes of this National Catechetical Congress, and without doubt extremely important amongst its aims, is the desire to increase the number of those who work for the Gospel of Christ in the teaching of Catechism. "Going teach ye all nations" (Matt. 28:19); "Go ye into the whole world, and preach the Gospel to every creature" (Mark 16:15). This is the mandate given by Christ to His Apostles, to His Bishops: and on them rests the responsibility for religious teaching.

A GENERAL INVITATION

Nevertheless, the honor of participating in that labor, of co-operating with it, of aiding and assisting it, particularly in the form

of catechetical instruction, has been extensively and repeatedly offered to the faithful men and women of every age and of every condition of life. Only a little more than a year ago the latest fervent appeal of the Church for such co-operation was spoken in the Decree *Provido sane consilio* issued by the Sacred Congregation of the Council on January 12, 1935: "In places where on account of the scarcity of priests the clergy themselves cannot sufficiently perform the work of teaching Christian Doctrine, let the Bishops take active steps to supply capable catechists of both sexes to help the pastors. Let them teach religion in the parochial or in the public school, even in the most remote parts of the parish" (Decree *Provido sane consilio*, No. 4). The Code of Canon Law had previously commanded that, where needed, efforts should be encouraged on the part of "devout lay people, especially those who have been enrolled in the Confraternity of Christian Doctrine" (Canon 1333). Now, the new Decree of the Holy See makes us understand that there should be associated together in this Confraternity "omnes quot sunt idonei catechismo edocendo et fovendo"

—“all who are capable of teaching and enkindling love for the Catechism” (Decree *Provido sane consilio* No. 1). It is an urgent appeal, and today the National Catechetical Congress sounds it forth again to American Catholics.

There is no question here of an instruction in which the truths of faith are to be expounded with learned comments or scientific study, with philosophic proofs or controversial arguments. We are thinking only of a simple colloquy between teacher and pupil. We are considering an echo, as the derivation of the word “catechism” indicates — the echo of those clear and plain assertions of the Divine Master which are spoken for the instruction and edification of those who desire to hear the word of God.

Saint Paul, writing to the Corinthians, sets forth a beautiful concept of catechetical instruction. The Apostle and teacher of the Gentiles had received a special privilege from God of mastering languages, the charisma known as the gift of tongues. He did not neglect it. Rather, he declared: “I thank my God I speak with all your tongues” (I Cor. 14:18). But he went on to add

that in the assemblage of the faithful he preferred to speak five words in his own way — that is adapting them to the conditions of those who would hear them, that they might understand them and be instructed by them — rather than to speak ten thousand words with his gift of tongues, when the people might not understand.

The ideal instruction, therefore, does not point out many things nor insist on what is extraordinary. Instead it dwells upon a few sound principles, those which give direction to life and guide our steps along the pathways of righteousness. With this simple method the Church has changed the customs of whole nations and of great peoples. With it she has given education and formation to youth, and with it she conducts her missions and carries on her work today. Thousands of women have dedicated themselves in our Sisterhoods to forming Christ in the souls of children. How much of good they have done is ignored by the world! They deserve our deepest gratitude. Under the direction of the Church many Orders and religious Institutes have risen with the chief task of teaching the Catechism, as for example those

of Saint Jerome Aemilian, Saint Philip Neri, Saint Joseph Calasanctius and Saint John Baptist de la Salle. The Church has encouraged the drawing up in writing of catechetical instruction ever since the earliest ages of Christian history, and more especially since the Council of Trent and the marvelous work done by Saint Peter Canisius, Saint Robert Bellarmine and many others. It was on October 6, 1571, that the Sovereign Pontiff Saint Pius the Fifth gave approval at Rome of the Confraternity of Christian Doctrine; and now it is the law of the Church that this Confraternity be established in every parish (Canon 711, No. 2).

THE VALUE OF THE CATECHISM

The Catechism is a small book, but it sets forth the Gospel in brief formulas which can be readily understood. Through the Catechism children of every age in the history of the Church have become strong in faith, sincere and veritable theologians. From it the young have received a formative influence in every field of activity and in every social

environment. It is a tiny book, but it is the fountain-head of the universal science which touches upon all divine and human knowledge. It is a true fountain of life in the fullest sense of the word, pouring forth rivers of living water in all directions.

In the terrible trials with which countries are now afflicted, their rulers are trying anxiously every remedy proposed for our great social evils. More than anything else the nations have need of God. There is urgent and supreme need for the truths of faith. Souls have need of life; and the soul is truly and fully alive when it keeps up contact with God; when it recognizes Him as the Author and Creator of life; when it knows that the Eternal Word became man to be our Master, Redeemer and Saviour; when it receives the gifts of the Holy Ghost and His grace; when it stands secure in the knowledge that the Church is the continuation of the Incarnation and of the teaching of Jesus Christ; when it exercises active membership in the Church, militant in piety and the reception of the Sacraments, through which true peace of soul and sanctity of life are attained; when it looks with firm hope

to life eternal and lays up for itself not treasures of this earth but of heaven. These are the contents of the Catechism, a compendium of Divine Revelation.

THE GREATEST EVIL OF OUR TIME

To have forgotten or neglected these things, or perhaps never to have known them, is the greatest evil of our time. The Holy Pontiff Pope Pius X, in his Encyclical *Acerbo nimis* of April 15, 1905, making a diagnosis of the evils which afflict society, declared that the greatest misfortune and the greatest disaster was "ignorance of divine things." In his zeal as supreme shepherd of souls he pointed out to the Bishops and parish priests that it is their first duty to instruct the people in religion. He commanded that everywhere the Confraternity of Christian Doctrine should be organized. He laid down rules for the teaching of Catechism to children and adults, and he warmly recommended the selection of "able-co-workers amongst devout lay people to assist in this salutary work."

Ignorance of the things of God is fatal both for the individual and for society. It tends naturally to intellectual and moral suicide. Human respect and the passions claim many victims; but ignorance has many more, because it takes away the light from our eyes, and blinds both the great and the lowly. Reason is a guide to faith, and the human mind is as it were naturally Christian; but with doubt and prejudice and indifference, this power is destroyed.

Visit the prisons and you will see that the greater part of their unhappy inmates have neglected its lessons or never knew their Catechism at all. Enter into the families where there are moral disorders, and you will find lack of attention to the Catechism. To save the world from many crimes and social maladies, to save many poor misguided souls from the misery of their state, the short lessons of the Catechism would suffice. Where this instruction is lacking, it is easy to lead into evil ways those who are ignorant of the things of God, to bring about the acceptance of theories that are perverse and horrible, even to take man back to a state which borders on savagery. It is a fact

that the most fertile field for the cultivation of wickedness is ignorance of the doctrines of Christ, and that irreligion and contempt for the things of God grow best in such a soil.

It is of supreme importance to the nations themselves that Catechism be taught when human nature is the more genuine and sincere, and that mankind be given then the spiritual food which by nature it was designed to receive. Childhood is the strategic point of greatest importance in the life of man, and even more is this true when we consider the public weal and the advancement of civilization. It is in childhood, when the soul is a stranger to corruption, devoid of prejudice, and not yet seized upon by the artifices and deceits of the world, that the moral precepts and the postulates of virtue make us hear their voice the more readily. It is then that souls are more willing to tread the pathways of virtue, and conscience is more prompt to mold itself according to the dictates of eternal truth. But it is necessary that there be someone to set forth these truths of God and give these divine directions of life.

WHO SHOULD HEED THIS APPEAL?

In the face of this extreme and compelling need, the Church places before our eyes a picture of the Divine Saviour going about through the cities and towns, teaching and preaching to the people: "And seeing the multitudes, He had compassion on them: because they were distressed, and lying like sheep that have no shepherd. Then He saith to His disciples: The harvest indeed is great, but the laborers are few. Pray ye, therefore, the Lord of the harvest, that He send forth laborers into His harvest" (Matt. 9:36-38).

To every upright soul who lives the religion of Christ, it can well be said in the name of the selfsame Saviour: "Go you also into My vineyard" (Matt. 20:4). If you are united to God, and religion is the bond with God, you will readily understand the questions and answers of the Catechism, and it will not be too difficult for you to repeat them to others and to impress them upon the minds and hearts of children.

METHOD OF TEACHING

Teaching the Catechism is indeed directed to enlightenment of the mind, but substantially it is the purpose of Christian education to incline the will toward good and to direct the pupil toward a spiritual life and the acceptance of the sweet yoke of the Divine Saviour. The great masters of the Catechism have been those who, expressing the truth in simplest fashion, have succeeded in conducting their students to the practical application of their religious training in a life marked by the harmonious blending of knowledge and virtue.

A certain deacon at Carthage asked Saint Augustine for practical directions in the teaching of Christian Doctrine, and the holy doctor answered him with a book entitled *De Catechizandis Rudibus*. There are applied in it the best principles of pedagogy and psychology: do not confound the young with too many facts, nor even the others who may be being catechised; do not tire the memory; insist on what is substantial or important, and omit the rest, or at least pass over it lightly; present the truth clearly and

entirely, but adapt your presentation to the intelligence of your listeners, and with the slower ones make use of many comparisons and illustrations; put forward the love of God as your principal theme and central purpose; aim above all at purity of heart; proceed with that charity which made Saint Paul write to the Galatians: "My little children, of whom I am in labor again, until Christ be formed in you" (Gal. 4:19). These are not difficult rules. All who are animated by love of God and neighbor may well render themselves capable of teaching and enkindling love for the Catechism if they take these suggestions to heart. It is not a passing philosophy the Catechism contains, but the eternal truth, easy to impart if it is lived, and so easy to understand that the Apostle compares it with milk, a material food which can be assimilated at any age.

WE MUST LIVE THE CATECHISM

Our Holy Father Pope Pius XI has repeated many times that the Catechism needs not only to be known but to be lived, and that we ought so to live it as to conform

our whole life to its teaching. In fact our lives reflect our viewpoints and our ideals. If these be harmful or godless, our lives will be godless and harmful. If our views are Christian, our life will be Christian. Saint Paul could say, "To me, to live is Christ" (Phil. 1:21), because his doctrine was that of Christ. With the external work of the teacher the inner working of grace will be in agreement, and with faithfulness to grace there cannot but be perseverance in godliness. Even with the passing years good habits will be more firmly rooted, religious principles will extend their influence over every activity, and both the individual and human society will profit immensely.

URGENT APPEAL

As many of you, therefore, as love Christ and His Gospel, as many of you as are capable or can render yourselves capable of teaching and fostering the Catechism, as many of you as love honesty, propriety and uprightness of life, as many of you as are persuaded that the family is a sanctuary and that marriage is and ought to be a holy

union whose sublime aim is the procreation and education of children — every one of you therefore, take an interest in the teaching of Catechism. As many of you as love your country, its laws, its prosperity and its progress, as many of you as have at heart the interests of civilization — all of you, therefore, foster, sustain and spread abroad the doctrine of Christ, help to carry it into every parish and mission, into every angle and corner of this great nation. Through these efforts, honesty, sobriety and industry will be increased amongst the citizens of the land, the moral treasury of the nation will grow larger and larger, and you will secure for those whom you influence both choicest blessings here and eternal life hereafter.

