

Bishops Approve "Basic Teachings"

By W.H. MARSHNER

WASHINGTON, D.C. — By an undisclosed but reportedly "overwhelming" vote, the Bishops of the United States have approved the document called "Basic Teachings for Catholic Religious Education." Designed to set guidelines for the doctrinal content of catechesis, the document was prepared by an ad hoc committee consisting of Archbishop John F. Whealon of Hartford (chairman), Bishop Clarence Elwell of Columbus, Auxiliary Bishop John J. Graham of Philadelphia, Auxiliary Bishop John B. McDowell of Pittsburgh and Auxiliary Bishop William E. McManus of Chicago. The final draft was approved by the Sacred Congregation for the Clergy in Rome and then submitted to all the U.S. Bishops by the NCCB administrative committee. The Bishops were asked to vote on the document by mail, a procedure which caused unexpected delay in its final ratification because the balloting coincided with the Christmas mail rush. A two-thirds majority was required.

Passage of this important text marks a major victory in the effort of parents, pastors and orthodox religious educators to halt the flow of inaccurate or misleading catechetical materials and to put solid content back into religious teaching at all levels. The "Basic Teachings," according to the Introduction, "sets down the principal elements of the Christian message. These basic teachings are here specified by the American Bishops. . . . It is necessary that these basic teachings be central in all Catholic religious instruction, be never overlooked or minimized, and be given adequate and frequent emphasis." Further on, the Introduction says that "this text makes clear what must be

stressed in the religious formation of Catholics of all ages" (emphasis added). These norms clearly invalidate the oft-heard plea that a certain tenet of the Faith cannot be taught in a lower grade because the child is too young, or that a paragraph or two in one volume of a multi-volume series will excuse the absence of a key teaching, such as Papal Infallibility, in all the other volumes.

ESSENTIAL DOCTRINES STRESSED

Moreover, the "Basic Teachings" document now includes certain important points that were omitted or were less clear in earlier drafts and in the General Catechetical Directory itself (which, after all, was never intended to be a complete list of

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doctrines). Among these added points are the following: Recommendation of the Rosary (p. 3), the reality of angels (p. 8), insistence that the Resurrection was a literal fact (p. 10), insistence that worthy reception of Holy Communion requires the communicant to be in the state of grace (p. 15), the adoration due to the Blessed Sacrament reserved in the tabernacle (p. 15), the evil of divorce (p. 15), the insistence that grace transcends nature (p. 17), the existence and nature of mortal sin (p. 19), the necessity to obey God rather than the world (p. 20), the importance of Religious vocations, especially consecrated virginity (p. 21), the existence of heresy (p. 22), reverence for the sacred (p. 22), the prohibition of pre-marital sex, self-abuse, pornography, artificial contraception, euthanasia, abortion, and indiscriminate methods of warfare (p. 22), the perpetual virginity, Immaculate Conception, and Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary (p. 27), the cult and intercession of the saints (p. 27), prayers for the dead (p. 27), Purgatory (p. 28), and Hell (p. 28). The treatment of Original Sin is also excellent, stressing the fact that each individual contracts this sin through inheriting human nature from the First Adam (p. 18). Holy Orders are spoken of as conferring a "sacred power" and not just an office or function (p. 14). A valuable new phrase warns that in presenting the mystery of the Incarnation, "the teacher must take care to follow Christian tradition as expressed in Sacred Scripture and by the Fathers and Councils of the Church" (emphasis added, p. 10), a clear reference to the Chalcedonic formula. Finally, two appendices to the approved text require teaching of the Ten Commandments, the Beatitudes, and the Precepts of the Church.

On all of these points, as well as dozens of others not mentioned, the document insists that "the authentic teachings of the Church, and those only be presented in religious instruction as official Catholic doctrine. Religion texts or classroom teachers should never present merely subjective theorizing as the Church's teaching."

A FEW WEAK SPOTS

Given, then, that the issuing of the "Basic Teachings" is a great step forward, the question remains whether the new document is in all points satisfactory. Here, reluctantly, one must point out some negative features. The section on ecumenism (p. 25) is weak and omits some timely warnings that were contained in the *General Catechetical Directory*. There is no forceful presentation of the doctrine "extra ecclesiam nulla salus." The section on the Papacy and infallibility (p. 24) is much too general, even perfunctory. Indulgences are never mentioned, nor is there any direct treatment of the Devil. Perhaps most seriously of all, there is nothing in the "Basic Teachings" about the nature of Revelation, a subject which was treated adequately and pointedly in the *General Catechetical Directory*. One must hope that these deficiencies will be rectified in future editions of this text or in the national catechetical directory currently in the early phases of preparation.

Of course, it is ultimately academic what the "Basic Teachings" include or omit, so long as there is no clear mechanism to enforce the document's provisions. This is now the number one worry of those who have been fighting the catechetical battle. It is utopian to suppose that the "Basic Teachings" will receive a ready compliance either from classroom teachers or from textbook publishers. And since the former are numerous and hard to supervise, the publishers are left as the obvious targets of episcopal action. Paulist, Sadlier, Benzinger and others have large chunks of money invested in series which they will not particularly want to change, it being expensive to do so, especially when the same series have already been lauded and hailed by the Bishops' national bureaucracy! I refer, of course, to the celebrated "Evaluative Reviews of Religion Texts" put out by the USCC under the leadership of now-Bishop Raymond Lucker.

CLEAR THE LANDSCAPE

So the first order of business is a quiet shelving of the "Evaluative Reviews." This step can be ac-

complished without fuss, noise or recrimination, since one need only say that "new norms" have emerged in the meantime. Then, with the landscape cleared, the Bishops will have to commission a new study of the existing catechetical series, a job which could drag on for years, however, unless some hard-nosed, practical decisions are made. For one can already hear what the educationist lobby will say: "What do you mean by adequate treatment?" "How frequent is frequent?" "Series X is really in line, because all the teachings are implicitly there." "Surely you don't mean that all these points have to be treated explicitly! Where does it say so?" "Can't an implicit presentation also be 'adequate'?" Aren't many dogmas adequately but only implicitly contained in Scripture and Apostolic tradition?" "Even so, how can you judge whether a text 'adequately' presents a certain teaching? 'Adequate' for whom? A bishop or a child?" "The precise relationship between the explicitness of a text and behavioral grasping or non-grasping of the truth contained in that text has never been carefully studied," and so on and so on.

FOUR STEPS NECESSARY

Absolutely: If the Bishops are serious about making an impact with their "Basic Teachings," they must take four hard steps.

1) They must select a small committee to review all the existing series — and to do the work personally, not through endless consultation;

2) "Adequate and frequent emphasis" must be defined as explicit treatment, at least once in each volume or grade or else whenever the subject matter is germane, with the understanding that a presentation is "adequate" only when a Catholic teaching is so stated that it cannot be easily confused with a heretical distortion of that teaching;

3) A norm must be set for the accurate statement of Church teachings; this norm might be the "Basic Teachings" document itself taken in conjunction with Denzinger, or Tanquary, or Ott, or the Catechism of the Council of Trent.

4) The findings of this committee must be promulgated by each bishop in his own diocese and imposed upon the education bureaucracy in each diocese, in such a way that the staff is com-

pelled to forbid the use of any catechetical series which does not contain all the teachings set forth in the "Basic Teachings" adequately and frequently, as these terms have been defined above.

Only if these steps are taken is there any reasonable prospect of moving textbook publishers to comply with the expressed will of the NCCB.

The time is now for parents and orthodox religious educators to urge the Bishops to take these or equivalent steps. Within a few months the Spring regional meetings of Bishops will begin to take place. Unless the Bishops take this opportunity to direct the Administrative Committee of NCCB to establish an "enforcement" committee, no meaningful action is likely to take place until next November, when the entire National Conference meets again. And even then nothing will happen unless the "enforcement" resolution is placed on the agenda! But none of these things will happen unless there is an urgent call for them. Already — who can seriously doubt it? — the catechetical establishment is busy inventing the difficulties, ambiguities, questions, cavils and delays that could make the "Basic Teachings" a meaningless scrap of paper.