

"Basic Teachings" Dismissed At Educationist Workshop

By WILLIAM H. MARSHNER

NASHVILLE, Tenn. — The document called "Basic Teachings for Catholic Religious Education," which is the American Bishops' attempt to stabilize catechetical content and to insure the teaching of the whole Faith, is a dead letter, according to religious-education experts in Nashville on February 28th.

"Would you say that the Whealon document (the "Basic Teachings") will be a help or an obstacle for catechetical progress?" a gentleman asked. And Fr. John Meyers, the executive secretary of Chief Administrators of Catholic Education, NCEA, and co-author of the book *Focus On American Catechetics*, replied matter-of-factly, "Well, neither, because nobody is going to pay any attention to it."

Fr. Meyers was speaking in a seminar devoted to "The Catechetical Directory: What the Official Church Says." The seminar was part of a one-day travelling workshop entitled "To Teach As Jesus Did," whose purpose was to explain the recent

Bishops' pastoral letter on education. The workshop is jointly sponsored by the National Catholic Education Association, the U.S. Catholic Conference (USCC), and the Catholic University of America. After Nashville, the workshop is scheduled to appear in Boston (March 9th), Dallas (March 12th), Denver (March 13th), Portland, Ore. (March 14th), Oakland (March 15th), Orange County (March 16th), Indianapolis (March 20th), Kalamazoo (March 21st), and Minneapolis-St. Paul (March 22nd).

Besides revealing the dismal fate to which religious educators intend to consign the "Basic Teachings," Fr. Meyers gave his small audience a competent, balanced, and accurate summary of the contents of the *General Catechetical Directory*, a document issued by the Holy Father in the Spring of 1971, to lay down guidelines for catechetics. Or

rather, Fr. Meyers' summary was accurate except in one glaring case. For when he came to the place where the *Directory* deals with Divine Revelation, he went into a long digression to explain that the *Directory* really sanctions two different "theologies" of Revelation (one closed and static, the other on-going and dynamic). The same claim was advanced in Fr. Meyers' book and had been thoroughly refuted in these pages (see especially Fr. Edwin C. Garvey's brilliant study, "Process Theology and the Crisis of Faith," published in *The Wanderer*, February 22nd). When asked by this reporter where the *Directory* sanctions an on-going view of Revelation, Fr. Meyers said there was no one passage, but that the idea was "interwoven" throughout.

One thing is curious. Out of all the advice and all the theological
(Continued on Page 9)

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(Continued from Page 1)
norms contained in the General Catechetical Directory, why did Fr. Meyers happen to single out this one little point? What difference does it make? Why is it so vital to maintain that the Directory approves of a so-called "on-going" theory of Revelation? Well, the answer, according to Fr. Meyers, is that the whole new method of catechetics (the method based on extracting religious meaning from the child's own "experiences" and from the "signs of the times") depends upon this particular theory of Revelation. Priceless news! Opponents of the new catechetics have been waiting a

long time for this admission: the admission that the present controversial method is not neutral with respect to theology but depends upon a theology rejected by the General Catechetical Directory and long ago condemned as a form of Modernism. With this admission, the whole idea that a neat distinction can be made between modern methods and traditional content goes out the window.

Thank you Fr. Meyers.

THE KEYNOTER

The workshop program as a whole consists of two plenary

sessions and eight seminars, of which Fr. Meyers' is one. The plenary sessions come one at the beginning and one at the close of the day-long meeting. Both sessions are handled by Fr. Alfred McBride, O. Praem., and both consist of long, moving speeches by him.

It is impossible, really, to analyze Fr. McBride's remarks (how do you hold a moonbeam in your hand?). It makes more sense to review his performance as one reviews a ballet or a concert. The listener experiences a multi-form and subtle appeal to the heart. Laughter and tears are alternately solicited, almost evoked, by a

hundred graces and charming devices which are not at war with reason — by no means! — but also do not appeal to that faculty. Obviously, so great and symphonic a rhetorical talent would be sinister in the hands of a deceiver. Is Fr. McBride a deceiver? A Barnum and Bailey man of the spirit? I rather think not.

The goodness of his intentions and the solid wisdom of most of what he has to say are obvious. A good-humored and down-to-earth practicality allows him to take a good many base commonplaces of modern religious education and transmute them into something like pedagogical gold. And his way of driving home the lesson that every catechist must disclose a deep and vibrant personal faith is little short of magnificent.

There are, however, a couple of points that require dissent. Fr. McBride does seem to believe that our dear ancestor, Adam, was a "corporate personality." Pius XII wrote in *Humani Generis* that it is hard to see how this view could suffice, if the full requirements of orthodoxy are to be preserved. To my mind, *Humani Generis* still stands, because none of the theological arguments which have tried since 1950 to reconcile the "corporate Adam" with other revealed data is fully convincing.

Then too, Fr. McBride has a way of putting down "rationalism" which, though well-taken in many respects, needs careful qualification. After all, the General Catechetical Directory insists several times that young people are to be given the rational reasons for Christian teachings, especially for the existence of God. Finally, Fr. McBride's reliance on a "drive toward the infinite" in man as a starting point for catechetics and apologetics, needs qualification as well. His theory seems to depend too much on the ideas of the so-called transcendental school of Thomism (Mareschal, Lonergan, Rahner), a school whose overall impact has been cause for grave alarm.

OTHER SEMINARS

Msgr. Olin' Murdick, director of the Department of Education, USCC, gave a seminar entitled "Boards and Councils: Effective Decision-Making." One was hoping to pick up all sorts of incriminating information about how lay school boards are going to replace the authority of pastors in crucial areas and eventually secularize the Catholic schools. Msgr. Murdick, however, did not give any such information. His talk was devoted to explaining what a parish school board might do that would be different from what a parish council does. And the seminar quickly generated into a dialogue over details of how such councils are constituted in the Diocese of Nashville. The discussion as a whole proved that if Catholic schools are to be subverted by lay school boards, the plot will have every chance of success for the simple reason that all who might be opposed to it will be numbed and paralyzed by the sheer boredom of the school board as a subject of conversation.

Anyone who is administratively involved in school affairs would derive great profit, it seems safe to say, from Dr. George Elford's two seminars, one of which is on "Budgeting and Financing Parish Education" and the other of which concerns "Tools for Self Study: Parish School and Youth Religion Program." A bibliography of aids and services for budget projection, revenue raising, and parish management is provided. Dr. Elford is director of research for the NCEA.

The general subject of self-study was taken up in more detail in a seminar entitled "Evaluating the Religion Program." The speaker was Sr. Kathleen Marie Shields, Director of Religious Education for elementary schools for the Archdiocese of St. Paul-Minneapolis. Sr. Kathleen Marie speaks in that insufferable way which women sometimes fall into after years of teaching tiny children. Everything is happy, wonderful, repetitious, and simple. But even the insipidity of Sister's presentation could not conceal the central importance of this seminar: It is a blueprint for how to avoid the real and hard questions in evaluating religious education and how to replace those questions with boring, time-consuming, and irrelevant ones. The essence of the blueprint has already been published as *Criteria for the Evaluation of Religious Education Programs*. (NCEA, Washington D.C., 1970). This booklet does for curricula what the infamous *Evaluative Reviews* did for textbooks. In this light, the following facts are of the highest interest:

1) This workshop is designed to give the cue on how religious education is to proceed after the Bishops issued "To Teach As Jesus Did";

2) The portion of this workshop devoted to evaluation is handed over to Sr. Kathleen Marie, who never mentions a word about the "Basic Teachings";

3) On the contrary, Sister recommends using the NCEA Criteria, developed two years before "Basic Teachings" came into being, and gives no hint that these criteria might now be out of date.

There is an inevitable conclusion. The very conduct of the seminar reinforces and confirms the observation of Fr. Meyers: the Bishops "Basic Teachings" document is a dead letter. Not one single wheel is being turned to re-evaluate one single program or one single textbook in the light of the doctrinal requirements which the American Bishops labored well over a year to formulate. If any Bishop wants to find out just how impotent he is, in the eyes of educational experts, let him by all means attend the traveling workshop "To Teach As Jesus Did." Amidst much that is inspiring and useful, the Bishop will also learn a few very grim facts.