

# Some Priorities For The National Catechetical Directory

By WILLIAM H. MARSHNER

(PART I)

The catechetical battle, which has involved more Catholic laypeople in bruising controversy since Vatican II than any other single issue, save the liturgy, is coming to a head. During the next three months, ordinary Catholics across America will have an opportunity such as never existed before to influence the content of a crucial document which will determine the nature of Catholic religious education in this Country for years to come.

This document, of course, is the National Catechetical Directory, now in the early stages of being drafted. It will supersede everything said by the American bishops in this area to date, including both the Basic Teachings and the pastoral letter "To Teach as Jesus Did." In fact, the only catechetical guideline which the National Directory will not outrank and supersede is the Pope's own General Catechetical Directory, which pertains to the universal Church.

In the light of how important this forthcoming document is, Msgr. Wilfrid Paradis, whom the bishops have appointed as the chief executive officer responsible for putting the Directory together, has wisely decided that a truly broad-based consultation is called for, that is, a consultation which goes beyond bureaucrats and self-appointed experts to include parishes, parents, and all others interested in catechetical affairs, including the staff of this newspaper. As envisioned by Msgr. Paradis, there will be several rounds of consultation in all; but presently, and for the next three months, we are all being consulted on the elementary question of what should go into the first draft. As a guide for our consideration, the consultation packets which Msgr. Paradis is mailing out contain a provisional table of contents, amounting to no less than 135 proposed sections or chapter headings.

It is vital that readers of *The Wanderer* participate massively in this consultation process, along with other parents who have seen the practical effects of the "new catechetics" and want to do something about them. It is vital because without such massive intervention there is just no chance that the present, suicidal course of "official" Catholic thinking will be altered.

May I cite a rather odd authority in defense of this assertion? On the front page of the *National Catholic Reporter*, Jan. 11th, appears a report of a study of Catholic schools conducted by Andrew Greeley and William McCready. These two gentlemen, according to the report, opine that Catholic schools are "in an irreversible decline." Why? Well, because, they say, "many of those who staff and administer Catholic schools seem willing no longer to believe in what they are doing. . . . The deterioration of self-confidence is such now that it is improbable that any good news can reverse the process." (The good news that Greeley and McCready are talking about, mind you, is the evidence that Catholic schools turn out more "optimists" than any other kind of school. Vaguely religious Pollyannas are the most fashionable type of humanity these days in "liberal Catholic" circles. But never mind about that point.)

## IT'S THE KIDS WHO SUFFER

For once Greeley and the *Wanderer* "gang," as he loves to call us, are in agreement: "many," indeed, "of those who staff and administer Catholic schools" have lost all grip on the kind of faith that would justify, nay prescribe, their institutional roles. In the throes of an "identity crisis," these men and women vacillate from one crackpot educational ideology to another: ungraded learning, unstructured classrooms, process catechetics, values formation — you name it, we've seen it. Rather, our kids have suffered it. It is exactly these men and women — confused, despondent, fad-ridden — who will dominate Msgr. Paradis' consultation, if we don't. Hence our onerous obligation.

To tell the truth, it goes against our grain to get into a thing like this. The work of handing on the Catholic Faith from one generation to another did not begin the day before yesterday, after all. Parents and teachers have been doing it for almost two thousand years without, thank you, the aid of a National Catechetical Directory. So, why at this late date in this supposedly

most blest of nations, is everything suddenly different? Why can't people just teach, as they have always done, without elaborate documents and interminable consultations to tell them what to do? At least the old-fashioned assumptions saved everybody a lot of headache. We just assumed that teaching was an art or a knack. Those who had it, didn't need to be told what to do; and those who didn't, wouldn't be helped no matter what you told them. Similarly, we assumed that children would naturally learn, if you had something to teach them. No doubt, when the children were small, they would only learn words in religious matters without understanding their meaning, but nobody worried much about that, because (a) little children picked up everything else in just the same way, and (b) by the time they grew up, oddly enough, they did understand.

Of course these old-fashioned assumptions did not have an enormous weight of sociological research behind them, but they did (and still do) correspond to common-sense experience. And the least you can say is that while the old assumptions still prevailed, despite all the problems, most kids came out of Catholic schools believing in the Catholic religion, as they certainly do not today. Ask Andrew Greeley.

## THE TEACHERS NEED HELP

In other words, our temptation, as we look at this National Directory project, is to tell those responsible for it (very bluntly) to "come off it." Either the bishops have the guts to give the religion teachers some tough orders, or they don't; and if they don't, then one more document full of "pastoral advice" is going to make zero difference. In fact, many people, I am sure, look at the whole National Directory project as itself a serious symptom of malaise, a sign of unwillingness to face reality, a nerveless collapse into self-absorption (variously labelled as "study," "evaluation," even "renewal") of the kind that has paralyzed institution after institution in the post-conciliar Church.

One could go on in this vein, but there is no point. Even if the complaints were true, the facts would still remain that (a) the National Catechetical Directory will be written, (b) that stand-offishness on the part of conservatives can only make the outcome worse, and perhaps much worse, and (c) that the Bishops will listen to advice that comes in the form of proposals for the Directory, as they will not listen to advice that comes in other forms.

Moreover, if I may add a personal note, the more I see of Catholic religion teachers, the more I become convinced that something like a National Directory will be genuinely useful. Late last Summer, at the New England Congress on Religious Education, and last Fall in Richmond, and on several other occasions, I have had extensive opportunities to "hang around" religious educators, both school and CCD. If you stay up carousing with people all night, you get a pretty good idea of what they are like. Well, religion teachers seem to be charming people, very dedicated to the difficult art of "communicating" with their young charges; but, quite frankly, they are ill-equipped to succeed. With teenagers, especially, it is very difficult to make yourself credible if you don't know what you are talking about. In that light, consider the following incidents.

One night I was in a Scrabble game for a couple of hours with a nun (or Sister, to be precise) who taught religion and had studied theology for a year or two at Providence College. She was a woman in her thirties, secure in her vocation, full of personality, and nobody's fool by a long shot. We got into an argument, I forget how, over infallibility. How many times had it actually been used in the history of the Church? She said, "Only once."

I said, "No, hundreds of times; I'd need a computer to figure it out."

"Wrong," she said, "only the Assumption, 1950."

I said, "At least you have to count the Immaculate Conception, 1854; that would make two. But forget about the Pope alone. How about the Ecumenical Councils? Nicaea, Chalcedon, Trent — their definitions are all infallible. Good grief, did you ever count the number of canons laid down by Trent?"

She said, "Wait a minute. What are you talking about? Ecumenical Councils aren't infallible."

I insisted they were. She said she had never heard of such a thing; she was going to go ask some priest about it. She did and came back smiling from ear to ear: the priest (can you stand it?) had taken her side. The funny thing, of course, is that this Sister, although she was a bit on the liberal side, didn't have anything against Ecumenical Councils; she would have been quite happy to believe what the Church believes on this subject, if she had only known what it was!

## AND NOW FOR A LITTLE CULTURE

Then there was the time I was in a big party with ten or fifteen teachers and about forty high-school students whom the teachers had brought with them, over 400 miles, to this mammoth Congress on Religious Education. Vatican II speaks frequently of entering into dialogue with modern culture; and the catechetical specialists, of all groups in the Church, have taken up this theme. So, I just assumed that religion teachers would know something about our culture, especially its literature.

I got to talking about "camp" (high camp and low camp), which has been an important development in recent years. This subject naturally led to art nouveau and to "decadence" as a pose or style in literature. Well, the term *fin de siècle* didn't seem to ring any bells with those present, so I thought of illustrating my point with Oscar Wilde. Only — you know how sometimes a name that you know as well as your own will fly out of your head? — well, I couldn't think of Wilde's name. So I said, "Oh, who am I thinking of, the English aesthete and epigramist, nineteenth century, wrote *Salome*? The *Portrait of Dorian Gray*? The *Importance of Being Earnest*?"

Nobody knew.

"Oh, come on," I said; "he used to lecture with a lily in his hand, and then there was a big scandal because he was arrested for homosexuality."

"Uh, Hemingway?" said one man.

"No, no; British."

"Uh, Milton?" ventured another.

"No, no; nineteenth century!"

And so it went. I kept knocking my head and trying out the same clues on people, but nobody knew. The thing was beginning to drive me mad; I wandered through the building accosting dozens of people, like Diogenes looking for the honest man, asking them who wrote *The Importance of Being Earnest* and the rest. Nobody had the faintest idea who I was talking about. I just couldn't believe it. Was this a convention of educators or a Moose meeting?

Now, I am not suggesting that Oscar Wilde is frightfully important in himself, or that we want religion teachers to know all that much about him, of all people. But some kind of grounding in our literature and culture is vital, even for religion teachers, especially in the light of the Council. Yet the nescience I encountered on this occasion was really alarming. After all, it is one thing not to know who wrote *Salome*; but it is something else to suppose that Hemingway was a British pervert, or that Milton was a nineteenth-century aesthete!

## A LOT OF YAK YAK

Just one more incident. One of the main speakers at the mammoth New England congress was the stercoral Walter Imbiorski. He put the thousand-or-so teachers in his audience through a routine which I have seen elsewhere, and with the same response. Imbiorski tells a couple of stories to indicate the deep meaning of the word "sign." Then he asks everybody what a Sacrament is. "What did we use to say?" The audience rattles off, "A Sacrament is a visible sign of an invisible grace, instituted by God, etc." — straight out of the *Baltimore Catechism* or wherever. And Imbiorski chuckles and says, "Yeah, that's what you taught, and what did it mean to you?" "Nothing," flashes through everybody's mind and everybody chuckles, too, and relaxes.

Now, this response is of great interest to me (as I said, I have seen it evoked several times in similar situations; evidently this is a proven shtik among speakers on the

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catechetical circuit). Here is an audience of teachers who can be made to think that a traditional or technical definition, which they are supposed to understand professionally, doesn't mean anything to them. Think about that. Can you imagine trying the same thing with a different professional audience? Think of lecturing to a convention of chemists, asking them what sulfuric acid is. Everybody shouts back "H 2 SO 4." "Yeah, that's what we used to teach, but what did it mean to you?" The response would be a stoney incomprehension of the question: a technical formula means exactly what it says, and anybody who doesn't understand the terms has no business teaching chemistry. Period.

My impression, then, gathered from the above incidents and many others, is that religion teachers today just don't fit our old-fashioned and preferred assumptions. In vast numbers, they are so lacking both in general culture and in theological knowledge that, frankly, they have no basis on which to judge, evaluate, or criticize the advice they are given by catechetical faddists. They are oriented toward bureaucratic pronouncements rather than intellectual challenge. They have no sense of professional responsibility for an inherited or cumulative body of knowledge; hence, they are quite willing to believe that all the formulas

they learned fifteen or twenty years ago are (a) meaningless and (b) useless. No wonder they are reluctant to teach "content"!"

As I remarked above, learning comes naturally to children, if you have something to teach them. But these "teachers" have nothing to impart beyond the shallowest commonplaces. The only role they can play with kids is to be their buddies. Frankly, when I was a kid, I had great respect for the tough and demanding teachers, but I thought that a middle-aged "buddy" was about the last thing I needed. Somehow I doubt that kids today are much different.

## WHICH ROUTE TO GO?

My point is this: Those who think we can avoid the hard (and possibly thankless) work of pitching into this National Catechetical Directory — those, that is, whose sound instincts convince them that there must be a stronger and more direct way to achieve catechetical reform — are too optimistic. They have not taken the whole dismal measure of the human resources on whom our bishops, unhappy men, must rely.

What, then, should the National Catechetical Directory say? Are there four or five key things that we should propose, things that will make reform a real possibility? This question I shall take up in the next installment.

(To be continued)