

# Some Priorities For The National Catechetical Directory

By WILLIAM H. MARSHNER

(PART II)

Every Catholic priest, parent, and teacher has a special stake in seeing to it that there is a "next generation" of Catholics, by which I mean to suggest that, today, such a generation cannot be taken for granted. Already the decline in Mass attendance (which, admittedly, is only one yardstick, but an informative one) is "catastrophic" by all accounts. Nowhere is it more catastrophic than among young people. You don't have to be a prophet of doom to see that instead of a "next generation," we could easily end up with a "remnant."

The General Catechetical Directory is not a voice of doom, for example; yet it clearly says (sections two and

six) that modern culture, unlike the traditions of the past, does not favor the transmission of the Faith and that as a result, "great numbers are drifting little by little into religious indifferentism." The only remedy, says the Directory, is an intensified catechesis which in many cases would amount, frankly, to "reevangelization."

Catechetics, in other words, as a component in the Church's sheer survival, is more important now than it has ever been before. We can't afford mistakes. We can't afford fads and gimmicks, like contentless textbooks. On the other hand, we can't afford the luxury of unthinking reaction, as though the world had stood still these ten years waiting for Mary Perkins Ryan to return to her theological senses. In every dimension of life, America's secular society has grown decisively more hostile to Catholic social and religious formation than it was a

decade ago. The evidence is already massive that the Baltimore Catechism, good as it was, was not completely adequate for the parents' generation in the light of present Catholic challenges. How can it be enough for the children?

### WHAT IS NECESSARY?

These realistic considerations, at once sobering and bracing, lead us to the one document, now being drafted which could make a difference, the National Catechetical Directory. Putting aside all questions of detail (for there will be future rounds of consultation in which these i's can be dotted), what is it absolutely necessary for this document to say? What is the sine qua non for catechetical reform?

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The answer to that question, I believe, should begin with something the American Bishops said toward the end of their pastoral letter *To Teach As Jesus Did*:

"Educational needs must be clearly identified; goals and objectives must be established which are simultaneously realistic and creative; programs consistent with these needs and objectives must be designed carefully, conducted efficiently, and evaluated honestly."

It is hard to imagine anybody quarrelling with those directives, yet one discovers an interesting pattern if one tries to match them up with the current reality of American catechetics. Start with "educational needs." They are not being "clearly" identified, quite the opposite, for the simple reason that there is no agreement on what religious education is. Gabriel Moran, for example, thinks it is nothing, since "religion can't be taught." Given a plurality of theories on that point, it is no wonder that "goals and objectives" are constantly shifting rather than being "established," and that it is precisely their "realism" that is most in doubt. Then we come to "programs." From one parish to another, we find every variety of program, from the most *avant garde* to the most conservative, conducted with every variety of "efficiency" from superb to atrocious, and using every variety of textbook from *Bandas* to *Benziger*. In other words, we have variety and profusion of every point of the above-quoted episcopal directives, save the very last: honest evaluation. With these two words, we step suddenly from a jungle into a desert.

## LET US EVALUATE

Let me give two illustrations.

Colleges, high schools, diocesan newspapers, Andrew Greeley, and several other institutions, during the last five years, have conducted polls of Catholic young people as to what they believe and what they will practice as far as their religion is concerned. These polls are from all over the Country; and, despite minor variations, they present a picture of Catholic collapse. By sixty, seventy and eighty percent, these young people favor contraception and even abortion. They deny that Mass attendance is an obligation and, as far as dogmas are concerned, there seemed to be rather few which these kids either understand or believe. Moreover, these figures are no secret. They have been widely publicized.

About eighteen months ago, I tried to determine whether those responsible for Catholic religious education had ever coordinated these figures and tried to read out of them a judgment on recent catechetical experiments, or whether there were any plans to do so, or to do anything similar. Of course, the answer was No.

Now consider the common sense of the thing. With all the pressures that youngsters are under today from the mass media and other secularizing forces, it would be absurd to suggest that bad catechetics is alone responsible for their apostasy. Much of the blame must fall upon the "times." But that is not the point. The very claim that is made for the "new catechetics" is that unlike the old

stuff it can elicit a "faith commitment" precisely in these "times." And that is the very claim that is called into question by the above-mentioned polls. Therefore: not to use the objective evidence of apostasy as a yardstick to measure the effectiveness of catechetical programs is to retreat from honest evaluation. This is perhaps the most crucial thing that the National Catechetical Directory must say.

I tried to make this point eighteen months ago to Auxiliary Bishop William E. McManus, then chairman of the Bishops' Education Committee. The answer he gave me was fascinating. He said, "How can you measure faith? You can't." In other words, according to one bishop, there is no such difference between an anonymous Christian and a practicing one, or at least, it makes no difference whether Catholic schools produce the one or the other. If you can't measure faith, then there is no such thing as "objective evidence of apostasy," and therefore there is no yardstick to measure the effectiveness of catechetical programs. Honest evaluation is ruled out a priori!

Parenthetically, this business about being able to measure faith shifts with the circumstances in the rhetoric of updated catechetics. In the context of high-school kids who don't go to Mass, one bishop says, "You can't measure faith." In the context of second-graders who should be making their first Confession, you not only can measure faith but you must do so before admitting them to so awesome a Sacrament, says another bishop (Broderick of Albany)!

## ALL ANSWERS BUT THE RIGHT ONE

Now for the second illustration. As far as textbooks are concerned, the Bishops were already calling for a thorough evaluation five years ago. They wanted to know precisely one thing: whether the various new catechism series adequately presented the Catholic Faith. That was the question. After two years of work involving over five hundred educators in forty-eight "team" structures that would have gladdened the heart of Rube Goldberg, the education bureaucrats of the USCC produced a volume entitled: *Evaluative Reviews of Religious Textbooks*, which answered every question you can think of except the one the Bishops were asking. You could find out which books had the prettiest pictures, which ones had affective rather than cognitive methodology, which ones taught Gabriel Moran's theory of on-going revelation or Teilhard's theory of Christ, but you could not find out which books adequately presented the whole Catholic Faith (taking "Faith" now as distinct from theological speculations). The evaluation was anything but honest and, in fact, as Fr. Burns suggested in a column last week, there is every reason to look for conflict of interest in the work of chief evaluators (see Jan. 31st, 1974, issue of *The Wanderer*).

As a remedy to this absurd situation, the Bishops finally published last January a document widely known as the *Basic Teachings*, which sets forth fairly exactly what the Bishops are looking for in textbook content. Now, one would think it would be a

straightforward operation to turn this document into a numbered checklist of doctrinal or moral points, use the list to evaluate the contents of each of the major catechism series in circulation today, and come up with a perhaps crude but nevertheless objective judgment of which textbooks meet the Bishops' minimum standards and which do not. But to this day, no such thing has yet been done. What is worse, there are no plans that it should ever be done.

Why not? Well, this question has been posed several times to Msgr. Olin Murdick, head of the Education Department of the USCC, and every time he has given the same answer. He says, "Gee, that's a good idea you have there. We never thought of that before."

Whether you believe Msgr. Murdick or not, the conclusion is obvious: not to use the Bishops' *Basic Teachings* as a mandatory yardstick to measure the acceptability of catechetical textbooks and program curricula is to retreat from honest evaluation. This is, perhaps, the second most important thing that the National Catechetical Directory can say.

It may surprise some people that I seize on this issue of "evaluation" as the *sine qua non* rather than jumping on some doctrinal point or insisting, perhaps, on a correct definition of religious education. Logically, it is true, I seem to have put the cart before the horse.

## FREE COMPETITION NEEDED

But consider the practical realities. There is just no way that we are going to get this National Catechetical Directory to repudiate all the fuzzy or false notions of religious education, catechetical methodology, and so forth which today are not only widespread but often firmly established. We may be able to eliminate a few of these errors but

not all. What we really need, then, is to establish a mechanism that can gradually expose the counter-productive programs, books, etc., and weed them out. This mechanism can only be one thing: compulsory objective evaluation imposed by the Bishops and executed by impartial people that is (and this is crucial) by different people from those who design and conduct the programs. Put that one provision into the National Catechetical Directory and our problems have at least the possibility of being solved.

Consider some corollaries. Evaluation by impartial personnel would replace the present arbitrary and self-serving evaluations conducted by diocesan and national bureaucrats who often form an interlocking directorate with the progressive textbook publishers. For example, the power of diocesan school boards to forbid the use of orthodox catechism series on grounds of methodological adequacy would be taken away. If a book meets the minimum standards set by the *Basic Teachings*, any parish would be free to use it. This step alone would establish the freedom, with respect to different methodologies desired by the *General Catechetical Directory* and violently opposed by American progressives, who reverse all common sense by making content optional and method compulsory. Give us a situation, rather, in which "conservative" programs (that is, Rome-oriented) are allowed freely to compete, and we will soon see which approach leads to objectively measurable results in the lives of young Catholics.

Savor the flip-flop: Our *Wanderer* gang defending legitimate pluriformity and the catechetical establishment cast in the role of oppressive authoritarians!

I shall propose further priorities in a third installment.