

Comment

Putting orthodoxy into print

May is Mary's month. This year it is also the month of the plenary meeting of the commission which Rome has set up to produce a universal catechism. This could be by far the most important Catholic theological gathering this year, so we had better write something about what this commission is doing. Quite a lot was written elsewhere, much of it critical, after Cardinal Ratzinger told last October's Synod that the universal catechism called for by the 1985 Extraordinary Synod was turning into a reality. Now we know a little more.

Pius IX had proposed to Vatican I that he should prepare one himself, based on Bellarmine's catechism of 1598. Then the faithful would have 'but one voice and tongue'. In those days it was easier to believe that unity and uniformity were the same thing. Garibaldi and his troops interrupted the Council before the decree was promulgated. There was a brief, abortive effort in the same direction by Pius X, in favour of his own *Compendio della dottrina cristiana*. Catechists have taken it for granted that advances in child psychology and educational theory, and Vatican II's recognition of the importance today of the local church, have made projects like this a thing of the past. And they are right, insofar as John Paul II's universal catechism is intended above all for bishops, to be a point of reference, not a substitute.

Here the politics of the project are not our business. (Is it primarily another put-down of bishops' conferences? Is it a product of schemings by the far right?) Assuming that the Church is going to have a universal catechism, who, if anybody, is going to benefit? That is the question here.

The bishops, maybe? There have been some painful clashes between Rome and the bishops over catechisms: over the famous *Dutch Catechism*; in 1981 over *Un tal Jesus*, the soap-opera on audio-cassette meant for Latin America; in 1984, in France, over *Pierres vivantes*. Wouldn't life be pleasanter for bishops if only there were some sort of check-list handy?

Quite a lot of bishops are themselves in the project. A draft, thought to be quite interesting but not to hang together well, went out to forty experts. After being discussed at this month's meeting, chaired by Ratzinger, it will be reworked by seven editors (bishops—but among them is David Konstant of Leeds, so this project cannot be altogether hostile to the aims of the modern catechetical movement!). Then it will

be sent to all the bishops of the world for their opinions, before a final editing. It is supposed to be launched on the Church at the Bishops' Synod of 1990, though it is going to be a scramble to manage that.

And then? Its structure—truths to believe, the sacraments, the precepts—is close to that of the so-called Roman Catechism, which came out in 1566, after the Council of Trent. That catechism was very much admired ... but little used. And here we come to the big snag. A catechism is a media product, and if the media world of 1566 was too tough, think what the media world of 1990 is going to be like. Seriously, if you think that this universal catechism is going to contribute significantly to a strait-jacketing of the mind of the Church you are mistaken. There will be too many other alien voices.

Through the media we unconsciously absorb a motley bundle of values and opinions, yet, just because of all the competition, it is hard to dictate successfully precisely what people should think. It is not only Ratzinger who feels that there is today an excessive emphasis in religious education on personal experience. Yet still less is going to be gained by just firing at people a round of objective religious truths. As Congar has said about the kind of catechism he was taught as a boy, 'How much sticks?' How successful this universal catechism is going to be will partly depend on the modesty of its authors—how well they understand what they *cannot* do, what is better left unsaid.

The sheer cultural complexity of our world means that a multiplying of catechisms is not merely desirable, but inevitable. The best argument for supplying the bishops of the world with a universal catechism that could be a 'point of reference' is that, bringing the mind of an outsider to texts of new local catechisms, it might help bishops, in their briefings and vettings, to reduce the parochialism (of the bad kind) that flaws some catechisms. It would do this above all if it helped them to see imbalances in structure and presentation. But to be an effective tool for this purpose it would have to be concise and simple, with excursions into exegesis and history down to the barest minimum. In fact, rather like Herbert McCabe's *The Teaching of the Catholic Church*. If it tries to say everything it will most surely fail.

But how long is it since Rome published something that did not try to say everything?

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