

THE TEACHING OF CATECHISM



Encyclical Letter

OF OUR HOLY FATHER

PIUS X.,

BY DIVINE PROVIDENCE

POPE.

To The Patriarchs, Primate
Archbishops, Bishops, and Other
Ordinaries in Peace and Com-
munion with the Apostolic See.

Venerable Brethren,

Health and Apostolic Benediction.

A time of great trouble and difficulty is this in which Our littleness has been raised by the inscrutable designs of Divine Providence to the office of Supreme Pastor of the whole flock of Christ. Long has the enemy been prowling round the fold, attacking it with such subtle cunning that now more than ever seems to be verified the prediction made by the Apostle to the elders of the Church of Ephesus: "I know that ravens will enter in among you not sparing the flock" (Acts xx. 29).

The reasons and causes of this religious decadence are being studied by those who still cherish zeal for the glory of God, and differing as they do in their conclusions, they point out, each according to his own views, various ways for protecting and restoring the kingdom of God on earth. But to Us, Venerable Brethren, it seems that while other reasons may play their part, We must agree with those who hold that the main cause of the present lassitude and torpor, and of the most serious evils that flow from it, is to be found in the prevailing ignorance about Divine things. And this fully bears out what God himself affirmed through the prophet Osee: "And there is no knowledge of God in the land. Cursing and lying and killing, and theft and adultery have overflowed, and blood hath touched blood. Therefore shall the earth mourn and every one that dwelleth in it shall languish" (Osee iv. 1 ff.).

That there are among Christians in our time large numbers who live in utter ignorance of the truths necessary for salvation is a common lament now-a-days, and one that is unhappily only too well founded. And when We say among Christians We mean not only the masses and those in the lower walks of life, who are sometimes not to blame owing to the inhumanity of masters whose demands leave them little time to think of themselves and their own interests; but We refer also and even more especially to all those who, while endowed with a certain amount of talent and culture and possessing abundant knowledge of profane matters, have no care or thought for religion. It is hard to find words to describe the dense darkness that environs these, and, more painful still, the indifference with which they regard it. Rarely do they give thought to the Supreme Author and Ruler of all things or to the teachings of the faith of Christ. Consequently they are absolutely without knowledge of the Incarnation of the Word of God and of the redemption of mankind wrought by him, and of Grace which is the chief means for the attainment of eternal welfare, and of the Holy Sacrifice and the Sacraments by which this grace is acquired and preserved. They fail to appreciate the malice and foulness of sin, and they have therefore no care to avoid it and free themselves from it. Thus they reach their last day in such a state that the minister of God, anxious to take advantage of the slightest hope of their salvation, is obliged to employ those final moments, which should be consecrated entirely to stimulating in them the love of God, in imparting a summary instruction on the things indispensable for salvation—and even then it often happens that the invalid has become so far the slave of culpable ignorance as to consider superfluous the intervention of the priest, and to face calmly the terrible passage to eternity without reconciling himself with God. Our predecessor Benedict XIV., therefore, had good reason to write as he did: "This we asseverate: that the majority of those who are condemned to eternal punishment fall into this everlasting misfortune through ignorance of these mysteries of the faith which must necessarily be known and

believed by all who belong to the elect" (Inst. xxvi. 18).

This being so, Venerable Brethren, what wonder is it if we see to-day in the world, and not merely among barbarous peoples but in the very midst of Christian nations, a constantly increasing corruption and depravity? The Apostle writing to the Ephesians admonished them: "But fornication and all uncleanness or covetousness, let it not be so much as named amongst you as becometh Saints, or obscenity or foolish talking" (Ephes. v. 3, 4). But as the basis of this holiness and of the modesty that curbs the passions he sets supernatural wisdom: "See, therefore, brethren, how you walk circumspectly, not as unwise, but as wise, redeeming the time, for the days are evil" (Ibid. 15-16).

And rightly so. For the human will has retained but little of that love of what is right and just which God the Creator infused into it, and which drew it, so to speak, towards the real and not merely apparent good. Depraved as it has become by the corruption of the first sin, and hardly conscious of the existence of God, its Author, its affections are almost entirely turned to vanity and lying. The erring will, blinded by perverse passions, has need therefore of a guide to point out the way and lead it back to the paths of justice so unhappily abandoned. This guide, not selected at random, but designated especially by nature, is no other than the intellect. But if the intellect be itself lacking in true light, that is, in the knowledge of divine things, it will be the blind leading the blind, and both will fall into the ditch. Holy David, praising God for the light of truth which is flashed from Him on our minds said: "The light of thy countenance, O Lord, is signed upon us" (Ps. iv. 7). And he described the effect of this light when he added: "Thou hast given gladness in my heart"—the gladness that fills the heart to make it run in the way of the Divine commandments.

All this becomes evident on a little reflection. For the doctrine of Jesus Christ reveals to us God and his infinite perfection with far greater clearness than does the natural light of the human intellect. What follows? That same doctrine commands us to honor God by faith, which is the homage of our mind; by hope, which is the homage of our will; by charity, which is the homage of our heart; and thus it binds and subjects the whole of man to his Supreme Maker and Ruler. So, too, only the doctrine of Christ makes known to us the true and most lofty dignity of man, by showing him to be the son of the celestial Father who is in heaven, made to his image and likeness and destined to live with him in eternal bliss. But from this very dignity and from the knowledge that man has of it Christ deduces the obligation for all men of loving one another like brothers, as they are; commands them to live here below as children of light "not in rioting and drunkenness, not in chambering and impurities, not in contention and envy" (Rom. xiii. 13); obliges them, too, to place all their solicitude in God, since he has care of us; commands us to stretch forth a helping hand to the poor, to do good to those who do evil to us, to prefer the eternal good of the soul to the fleeting good of time. And, not to go too far into detail, it is not the doctrine of Jesus Christ which inspires in proud man the love of humility which is the source of all true glory? "Whosoever shall humble himself . . . he is the greater in the kingdom of heaven" (Matth. xviii. 4). From the same doctrine we learn prudence of the spirit, by means of which we are enabled to show the prudence of the flesh, justice, which teaches us to give everyone his due, fortitude which makes us ready to suffer all things, and by means of which we do in fact,

offer all things with generosity for the sake of God and of our eternal happiness, and finally, temperance, through which we find it possible to love even poverty, and actually to glory in the cross and pay no heed to contempt. In fine the science of Christianity is a fount not only of light for the intellect enabling it to attain to truth, but of warmth to the will, whereby we raise ourselves up to God and unite ourselves with him for the practice of virtue.

Not indeed that We mean to say that a knowledge of religion may not be joined with a perverse will and a bad life. Would to God that facts did not only too abundantly prove the contrary. But We do maintain that the will cannot be upright nor conduct good while the intellect is the slave of crass ignorance. A man using his eyes may certainly turn aside from the right path, but the one who has become blind is certain to walk into the mouth of danger. Besides, there is always some hope for the reform of evil living as long as the light of faith is not wholly extinguished; whereas if as a result of ignorance want of faith is added to corruption, the case hardly admits of remedy, and the road to eternal ruin lies open.

Such then being the unhappy consequences of ignorance in matters of religion, and such, on the other hand, the necessity and utility of religious instruction, seeing that nobody can fulfil the duties of a Christian without knowing them, it only remains to inquire as to whose duty it is to eliminate this ignorance from the minds of the people, and to impart to them a knowledge so essential on this point. Venerable Brethren, there can be no room for doubt, for this most important duty is incumbent on all who are pastors of souls. On them by command of Christ rests the obligation of knowing and feeding the flocks entrusted to them. To feed implies first of all to teach. "I will give you," God promised through Jeremiah, "pastors after my own heart, and they will feed you with knowledge and doctrine" (Jer. iii. 15). Hence the Apostle St. Paul said: "Christ sent me not to baptize, but to preach the gospel" (1 Cor. i. 17), thus indicating that the first office of all those who are placed to rule in some measure the Church is to instruct the faithful.

We do not think it necessary to speak here of the sublime character of this instruction or to show how meritorious it is in the sight of God. Assuredly, the almsgiving with which we alleviate the trials of the poor is highly praised by the Lord. But who will deny that a far greater measure of praise is due to the zeal and the labour expended in teaching and exhortation, not on the fleeting welfare of the body, but on the eternal welfare of souls? In truth than this nothing is nearer or dearer to the heart of Jesus Christ the Saviour of souls, who, through the lips of Isaiah affirmed of himself: "I have been sent to preach the gospel to the poor" (Luke iv. 18).

For Our present purpose it will be better to dwell on a single point and to insist on it, viz., that for no priest is there a duty more grave or an obligation more binding than this one. Will anyone deny that knowledge ought to be joined with holiness of life in every priest? "For the lips of the priest shall keep knowledge" (Mal. ii. 7). And the Church does in fact require it most rigorously in those who are to be raised to the sacerdotal ministry. And why this? Because it is from them that the Christian people are to learn, and it is for that end that they are sent by God. "And they shall seek the law at his mouth for he is the angel of the Lord of Hosts" (Ibid.). Thus the Bishop in ordaining, addresses the candidates for orders in these words: "Let your spiritual doctrine be as medicine for the people of God; let them be prudent co-operators of our order; in order that meditating day and night on his law they may believe what they shall read, and teach what they shall believe." (Pont. Rom.).

If this is true of all priests, what is to be thought with regard to those who possess the title and the authority of parish priests, and who by virtue of their rank, and in a sense by contract, have the office of ruling souls? These in a certain measure, are to be numbered among the pastors and doctors designated by Christ in order that the faithful may be no longer as children tossed to and fro and carried about by every wind of doctrine by the wickedness of men, but that "doing the truth in charity they may in all things grow up in Him Who is the head even Christ" (Eph. iv. 14, 15).

Hence the sacred Council of Trent, treating of the pastors of souls, lays down as their first and chief duty that of instructing the faithful. It prescribes that they must speak to the people on the truths of religion on Sun-

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days and the more solemn feasts, and do the same either daily or at least three times a week during the holy seasons of Advent and Lent. Nor is it content with this, for it adds that parish priests are bound, either by themselves or through others, to instruct the young, at least on Sundays and feast days, in the principles of faith and in obedience to God and their parents (Sess. 5 ch. 2 'de ref.'; Sess. 22 ch. 8; Sess. 24 ch. 4 and 7 'de ref.'). And when the Sacraments are to be administered, it enjoins upon them the duty of explaining their efficacy in the vulgar tongue to those who are about to receive them.

These prescriptions of the sacred Council of Trent have been epitomized and still more clearly defined by our Predecessor Benedict XIV. in his Constitution "Etsi Minime" in the following words: "Two chief obligations have been imposed by the Council of Trent on those who have the care of souls: first, that they address the people on divine things on feast days; and second, that they instruct the young and ignorant in the rudiments of the law of God and of faith." Rightly does that most wise Pontiff make a distinction between those two duties of the sermon, commonly known as the explanation of the Gospel, and of the catechism. For it may be that there are some who, to

save themselves trouble, are willing to believe that the explanation of the Gospel may serve also for catechetical instruction. This is an error which should be apparent to all. For the sermon on the Gospel is addressed to those who may be supposed to be already instructed in the rudiments of the faith. It is, so to say, the bread that is broken for adults. Catechetical instruction, on the other hand, is that milk which the Apostle St. Peter wished to be desired with simplicity by the faithful as newly-born children. The task of the catechist is to take up one or other of the truths of faith or Christian precept, and to explain it in all its parts; and since the scope of his instruction is always directed to amendment of life, he must necessarily institute a comparison between what is required of us by Our Lord, and our actual conduct; and he should, therefore, by appropriate examples skillfully selected from the Holy Scriptures, church history, and the lives of the Saints, use persuasion with his hearers and point out to them how they are to shape their conduct, concluding with an efficacious exhortation in order that they may be moved to shun and detest vice and to practise virtue.

We are aware that the office of catechist is not much sought after, because, as a rule, it is deemed of little account