# HANDING ON THE FAITH

By F. H. DRINKWATER

RELIGION would appear to be necessary and native to man, if he is to make any sense of life. He can arrive at some knowledge of God, and even of God's will, by using his heart and mind, darkened as these are by original sin. It would thus be possible for the best minds gradually to build up a workable religion. Naturally they would pass this on, like other human achievements, to the young from generation to generation; and this could be called a kind of religious education. But all this, for poor mankind, would be rather like striking matches in the dark. It would merely accentuate a desperate hope that some word would come to us from God himself to throw a lasting light on the situation.

The christian Church tells us that this has actually happened, that God has visited this world for the space of one human lifetime, that the complete answer to our need is in the God-man's sayings and actions, preserved in the world by this Church which he founded. For the christian Church religious education becomes the task of passing on to the young this revelation or good news, which includes not only the new points in our Lord's teaching, but also the great essential truths he presupposed from jewish or natural religion.

Christian education, then, involves passing on a set of historical facts – the crucifixion and resurrection for example and doctrinal teachings – about the Trinity, redemption, and above all the truth that God is Love, creating us for eternal joy with him; all of which would otherwise be forgotten in course of time.

As everybody in the Church is human, the transmission may be done well or badly, like any other teaching. Some of the teachers may aim too much at the brain, others too much at the emotions. The message itself is of necessity subject to that interior growth which we nowadays call the development of doctrine. To judge finally between true and false developments there is no authority but the Church, to which Christ promised the guidance of the Spirit. We believe that the message, the revelation from God, will always be transmitted intact, because of our Lord's promises made to the apostles and to St Peter.

How effectually this message reaches the individual child, adoles-

cent or adult, is a further business, but a comparatively minor one, which we call catechetics: a mixture of religious knowledge, psychology, pedagogy and personal witness. But all this is secondary; the main thing is that there is, objectively, a message from God to be passed on.

The handing on of the faith began on the day of Pentecost itself, when, after St Peter's first sermon,[1] no less than three thousand souls believed and were baptised. It was not so much a doctrine or creed that Peter proclaimed, but two facts that he regarded as undeniably true. One was the outpouring of the Spirit, which everybody would see for himself; the other was the resurrection of the recently-crucified Jesus, which Peter and hundreds of his friends were ready to swear to. It was Jesus who had sent the Spirit, to reconcile men with God, and this gift was available to all Peter's hearers through baptism. Evidently there was no course of instruction on this first day; even such things as the eucharistic meeting and the second coming were left to be imparted afterwards. But also there was a great deal pre-supposed, because everybody knew it already: not only the one God and the creation and the fall of man, but all the law and the prophets, and a revolutionary re-interpretation of them.

The apostles of today do not baptize on the strength of a few words of kerygma, except now and then at a deathbed. Admission to the Church is a lengthy business of teaching and testing, before and after the baptism which is still considered the decisive step. Catechetics has become a science or an art, almost the central study for the modern apostle, closely connected as it is with theology, scripture, and the liturgy.[2]

The first believers were all Jews, though not all from inside Pales-

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[1] Acts 2, 22–36.

[2] For the history of catechetics through patristic, medieval and Reformation times see J. A. Jungmann, *Handing on the Faith* (London 1959). In modern times, the mind of the Church is revealed in St Pius X's encyclical *Acerbo nimis* (1905), and the decree *Quam singulari* (1910), which deals with earlier first communion. After Pius X the decree *Provido sane* (1935) laid down that every diocese should establish a catechetical centre to promote and co-ordinate all forms of catechesis; whilst the Sacred Congregation of Studies has repeatedly stressed (1926, 1929, and especially 1944) that seminary students should receive a full training in the theory and practice of catechetics. It is sad to have to record that all these enactments have remained, for the most part, a dead letter, due perhaps to the second World War and its effects. Only in some German seminaries have adequate re-adjustments been made. The slow progress in Europe at large and in North America has been due chiefly to the periodicals and catechetical centres (e.g. the international centre, *Lumen Vitae*, in Brussels) established by enthusiasts among the diocesan clergy and religious orders.

tine; and a main point of St Peter's kerygma was that the law and the prophets were now fulfilled. In other words, he was putting forward our Lord's own revolutionary reading of the scriptures, which for the first time united into one tremendous figure, the messianic Son of David, the apocalyptic Son of Man and the redeeming man of sorrows as seen in the later prophets and the Wisdom writers. The more deeply we study the gospels the more we see that the real reason for our Lord's crucifixion was that he was determined to force the issue of 'the mystery of the kingdom' – that is, of the admission of the gentiles to it – and that the chief priests and scribes who dominated God's people in Palestine were equally determined to risist this. It was part of our Lord's plan that God's people themselves should be invited to fulfil their destiny and take the good news to the gentiles. The apostles were not to wait for the conversion of all Israel, but were to turn at once to the gentiles themselves.

Even before the new 'apostle of the gentiles' had time to do anything about it, St Peter had been inspired to settle the principle by baptizing the centurion Cornelius and all his household.

Already, in St Peter's preaching on that occasion, the original kerygma is changing its emphasis: the prophets, though still mentioned, are receding into the background: the central fact now is that the risen Jesus is 'Lord of all', chosen by God to judge all mankind.

As the Church's preaching is directed to the gentiles, so the original core of doctrine is developed and the mystery of Christ, together with the unexpectedly loving Creator whom it reveals, emerges as more and more central.

In the later writings of St Paul and St John[1] Christ is seen as coming forth from God, bringing to mankind God's love and invitation to eternal life; the kerygma has become explicitly trinitarian.

The mention of baptism is a reminder of something else that happened in the course of the first centuries: the firm establishment of the custom of infant baptism. The psychological or rather pedagogical consequences of the practice have only slowly come to be fully realised. One consequence is that christian education is a necessity, not only in the family, but also at school level, otherwise the baptism

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[1] E.g. Phil 2, 5–11 and Jn 1, 1–14, which scholars guess to be christian hymns already sung at Mass.

may remain unfruitful. Another consequence, less recognised in the past, is that when the child reaches full awareness in the use of reason, usually some time in the earlier teens, he needs to make a conscious decision to believe, a ratifying of what his godparents did at his baptism. With many well-taught young people this decision might come gradually and almost imperceptibly; but it needs to be made, to be there in the measure of each person's capacity, because faith is *ipso facto* a free and deliberate choice. In the past, the element of intellectual assent may have been too exclusively stressed in conceiving and defining the virtue called faith, but the balance is now being restored by priest-catechist-writers, especially in Germany and France, who insist on the element of voluntary 'commitment' in the living act of faith. The communal renewing of the baptismal vows at the new Easter vigil may be regarded as another symptom of the same realisation.

Both amongst Catholics and Protestants there are writers who draw considerable argument for the re-discovery of the apostolic kerygma, and affirm vigorously that modern teaching also should be more kerygmatic. It is doubtful whether the adjective will help us much. No Catholic would wish to scrap all our creeds and catechisms and return to the bare proclamation that 'Jesus is Lord'. When a Catholic writer tells us to be kerygmatic, he means two things: that we should proclaim the good news with a real sense of its urgency, and that we should preserve, or recover, the original organic unity of the message, making it clear that it is a message – God's loving offer to all men, and not just a heap of unrelated doctrines and precepts. Nothing could be better than such advice to religion-teachers.

Equally important, however, is pre-kerygma, a pre-evangelisation stage which consists not so much in any formal 'preambles to the faith', or any high-road of apologetics, but in a more personal preparation adapted to individual souls. We have in mind the kind of apologetics envisaged by Newman or Ronald Knox or the French worker-priests, which achieves a real communication with people where they are, in their own cultural prepossessions, leading them towards some sense of God, and making them feel a need for, rather than prematurely proclaiming to them, Christ and his Church.

The proclamation, when it comes, will be a word straight from God, and fully Christocentric: 'This is my beloved Son'! The pre-evangelizing, on the other hand, will be man-centred and gradual

and endlessly adaptable, a presence, a permanent kindly witness, rather than a proclamation.

Has all this anything to do with conditions in a Catholic country such as Ireland, or a would-be christian country like England, where most people have been baptized? In such circumstances we too readily assume that we can take pre-kerygma and kerygma for granted, and start straight off with catechesis. Build plenty of schools, and get all the baptized children into them; hold instruction classes explaining Catholic doctrine to converts and enquirers; teach the faith regularly at Mass on Sundays. This is well enough as far as it goes, but the fact is that most of the non-Catholic population, and about half the Catholic population, are not ready for catechesis. The faith that was planted in them at baptism has never taken root; they have never effectively chosen to be christians, they feel no need of religion or God. We call them lapsed, but they never had much to lapse from. We realise this rather vaguely, and try to remedy it by the kerygmatic urgency of mission-preachers who remind our parishioners of what they are supposed to believe, or by including a course of apologetics in the grammar-school curriculum, or by paying for advertisements for the Church in popular newspapers. But perhaps what is really desirable – but how difficult too! – is that our constant everyday teaching, the talk from the altar at every Sunday Mass for instance, should include all the elements of preparation for the gospel, the gospel-proclamation itself, and the christian catechesis and mystagogical guidance in the christian life. In practice, the word catechesis is used to include all this; for even when all our hearers have been baptized and made their first communion, as is the case in a Catholic secondary modern school, many of them are far from being the good ground where alone, according to the parable of the Sower, the seed of the faith bears fruit.

Amongst the catechetical renewalists it is now customary to enumerate four distinct approaches in teaching the faith: they are scripture, liturgy, systematic catechism, and christian witness. These are not alternative or optional ways of teaching, but rather four equally indispensable ingredients of catechetics; and the more they are fused into one the better, at any rate in the earlier stages of education.

It will be convenient to take each of these four approaches in turn, noting what has happened to them in the last few generations and what is now hoped from them in the renewal.

*The Scriptural Approach*

By scripture we mean here all the Bible as interpreted by the Church: but above all we mean our Lord's own life and teaching as recorded in the gospels. The Old Testament prepares the scene for the incarnate Son of God, and is to be read through his eyes; for he reveals himself as the fulfilment of Israel's history and scriptures. What God had done and foreshadowed for Israel through Moses and Elias, the people of the Torah and its prophets, he is now about to do, in Christ, for the gentiles. In this context, it was natural that our Lord should take delight also in poetical coincidences, such as the three days of Jonas – one of our Lord's favourite prophets because pro-gentile. Later and more literal minds underlined similar coincidences for their own sake, a process we can already see beginning in the documents used in St Matthew's gospel.[1] The end result was the elaborate 'argument from prophecies fulfilled' of nineteenth-century apologetics, which must always have been unconvincing to anyone with any literary sense.

The parallel 'argument from miracles' is equally unpersuasive in these days: we are now more likely to believe in the gospel miracles because we believe our Lord was God than the other way round.

Even the resurrection itself we would probably be slow to offer as evidence; we believe in it rather as a part of our faith in the incarnation, as being the kind of thing we would expect our God to do, the kind of sign we need so desperately when he reveals himself and his purposes to us; as for the historical evidence for it, there is enough to make faith reasonable, and the central piece of evidence, as on the first Pentecost, is still the word of the Church: 'we have seen the Lord'.

What the catechetical movement looks for now from the scriptural approach is above all the irresistibly majestic figure of the historical Jesus, risen and glorious, the centre of mankind's long story and the only hope for its future earthly career, as well as for the final destiny of eternal joy which he came to confirm.

*The Liturgical Approach*

In the early days of the Church, the liturgy had been the main teaching effort, providing the occasions for public readings of

[1] E.g. Mt 2, 15.

scripture, with commentary, but still more for making the whole mystery of Christ continually present to the faithful. He lived on, quite visibly, in the Church, and does so still, more educationally than ever now that the Church's year, with its annual re-enactment of the full story, is consciously developed.

For a long time, however, the teaching value of the liturgy was almost forgotten, or confined to the clergy. Lay people could adore from afar, but were hardly allowed to know what was going on at the remote altar. Everything was sacrificed to the essential reverence. In our own times the liturgical movement, first with its scholarship and then with its pastoral realisations, is recalling the minds of the faithful to what the popes have called the first and indispensable source of the christian life – to the prayers and prayer-actions of the Church herself.

Some enthusiasts in the liturgical movement have talked as if liturgy could do all that needs to be done in the matter of handing on the faith. This is an exaggeration. Liturgy has its limitations. Ritual sooner or later becomes mummery unless people know what they are doing. The jewish liturgy has survived because it has 'built-in' explanations, such as the answer to the ritual question put by the youngest participant in every passover-supper. At every Sunday Mass, too, the short instruction or homily should be a *sine qua non*, but it is a difficult thing to do well and priests are not trained for it or chosen with such things in view. The scriptural readings so prominent in the liturgy are intended as education, but even if and when they are read in the vernacular they will mean little to most listeners, unless they are properly introduced and read with visual accompaniments, or at any rate by the imaginative kind of reader who can make things visual to the mind's eye. Mere competent reading aloud soon gets dull, and one feels there must have been many dozing through those long vigils of the early Church. Then again, the whole supra-rational, sign-and-symbol mentality of the liturgy has become remote from the 'scientific' modern man, and needs to be based upon some matter-of-fact theology and history if it is to be taken seriously. Nevertheless, when all these reservations have been made, it is the Mass which holds and transmits the central fire of our religion – 'Do this in commemoration of me' – enabling every man to be a mystic for a few minutes each week, if he has been educated to play his part in such strange proceedings. We need hardly say that community prayer both presupposes and nourishes that personal interior prayer which is the natural air breathed by the christian.

*Christian Doctrine*

The third approach, which we call systematic catechism, or christian doctrine, considered as an education for the whole body of the faithful, is something that was scarcely practised before the Reformation. If it had been, the catastrophe would probably not have happened. The New Learning had illuminated the Bible as literature, but the light had not fallen on liturgy or theology. The whole weight of Church authority and discipline was felt as an oppression for which no sufficient reason could be given. The ordinary faithful needed a theology, one they could understand. Luther was the first to provide one. His little question-and-answer books, making theology all too easy, were a great success, and after a few decades were imitated by catechisms from the Catholic side. Meanwhile the regular preaching of the clergy was catered for by the catechism produced by the Council of Trent, but this never had its full effect because in practice the clergy continued to be trained along the old super-scholastic lines. For the laity, the shorter question-and-answer catechisms seemed the answer to everything. If every Catholic could be forced to learn all the catechism by heart, it was thought, everything would surely be well. No particular distinction was made between the intelligent and the stupid, nor between the young and the old; in fact the idea was to begin at the earliest moment, and it seemed right and proper to make children of five years old or younger learn parrot-wise dry-as-dust formulas defining such matters as the Trinity and the incarnation. Once in their memory, it was argued, it would be understood and acted upon in after years.

All this highly unpsychological use made of catechisms still continues in many over-conservative regions or schools, but it has been abandoned by all leaders of catechetical renewal. It is recognised that catechisms, in the sense of a theology for the laity, simplified, systematised, and in scientific rather than scriptural language, are a genuine need but must never become the be-all and end-all of religious education. A systematic catechism-book is of little use to the less intelligent members of the church, and no use at all to children of primary school age, for whom conceptual thinking, abstract ideas, technical theological terms, are premature. In school the catechism is really a secondary-school book, for intelligent ten-year-olds at earliest, and any memorizing of it should follow, not precede, the understanding of it. This point about the right use of catechisms is

perhaps the most decisive point of catechetical renewal, and it is also the point which meets most resistance, especially from obscurantist clergy and lazy-minded teachers. Such people will always ruin the religion they teach, but they enjoy their greatest opportunity under a system which gives the printed catechism a top priority.[1]

*Christian Witness*

'Witness' was one of our Lord's own words, to describe what he expected his teachers to do. 'You shall be witnesses to me'; and we can see, from the election of Matthias for instance,[2] how the Church caught the idea. The christian community has to give witness of Christ's life and words, and especially of his resurrection; it has to show that his teaching works, by its own way of living and dying. It has always been recognised that the catechist's words are no use unless they are backed up by his good life.

The catechetical renewalists of today have taken this idea a step further. They would say that the catechist himself, his personal quality and his personal relationship with his hearers, is a part of his teaching, as a map or an illustration is part of a book. As Christ incarnated the Word of God, so in some sense the catechist incarnates the word of Christ. He is bringing good news, the best news of all, and he will communicate a certain joyfulness, what St Augustine called *hilaritas*, which will itself be evidence that Christ is living and working, not least in the catechist himself. As Pius XII said in a very memorable phrase: 'an apostolate without love is a contradiction in terms'.

Presumably too this is what is meant by the modern saying that 'religion is caught rather than taught', which invalidates any kind of physical complusion or spiritual bullying used in teaching or spreading the faith. Sometimes clergy or teachers have thought they were neglecting to give their witness unless they enforced religious practice on the young by way (as they imagined) of 'forming a habit'. Apostles, however, are not judges or thought-police, but witnesses.

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[1] Changes are also taking place in the form and content of the catechism itself. Some renewalists still favour the question and answer form, but most, following the Munich *Katechetenverein* argue for the school text-book form, one chapter for each lesson. A good case can be made out for a national catechism, whose form should be, like the Council of Trent Catechism, a short book for the priest to teach from at the altar. This would be the basis of school text-books. The German Catechism of 1955 has had great influence; its most notable fruit so far has been the new Australian Catechism, the first book of which appeared in 1962.

[2] Acts 1, 21; 10, 42.

Finally, perhaps a word ought to be said about teaching-methods in the communicating of the faith. Presupposing the right personal relationships, evidently the first need here concerns the language of the catechist. We cannot do without words, and they need to be the best words for the purpose. To some extent the Church herself puts words on our lips, in the scriptures and prayers and catechisms; but this always leaves a good deal of comment or explanation to be given by the catechist; hence the need of good teachers' aid-books, which will maintain consistent accuracy in the use of theological terms without squeezing all the vital poetry out of them.

Even when the things to be communicated have found expression in what is considered the best and most effective language, there still remains the pedagogical problem of finding the best methods of 'putting it across'. In the past, in spite of occasional lamps lighted for a time by teachers of genius here and there, the accepted teaching methods in religion were mostly ill-adapted to their purpose and often self-defeating. As educational psychology slowly made its way into the schools, it began still more slowly to be applied to religion by enterprising teachers.

The first fact to be recognised was that pupils had eyes as well as ears, hence the need for pictures and picture-books, yes, even in religion. Later came the recognition that children, and everybody, learn better through activity, through bodily movement, drawing, dramatizing, notebook-making, and, with later age-groups, carrying out work assignments, and getting into discussions. These are mostly only devices, to be used or not according to the resourcefulness of the teacher; but some points of method, such as good story-telling, good black-board technique, or good questioning, might reasonably be hoped for nowadays of any trained teacher. With all the new possibilities today inside and outside the Church, the scripture scholarship, the liturgical revival, the theological renewals, the historical research, the psychological revolutions, the progress in literary and book-production, the universal schooling and the startling improvements in primary education, the handing on of the faith, especially to the young, ought to be easier and more effective today than at any time since the day of Pentecost. Unless there should be some unforeseen obstacle in the process of development of doctrine itself, some prolonged misunderstanding such as happened in the past, there is no reason why we should not hope for a new golden age for the christian Church and its message.