CATECHETICAL INSTRUCTION IN THE CHURCH
IN THE FIRST TWO CENTURIES

The term Catechesis is derived from the Greek κατηχεῖν which means to sound over or through and therefore to make echo, hence, in its figurative sense, to teach in such a way that the words of the master are an echo of the students' questions and the replies of the students are so to say the echo of the teacher's questions. Hence κατηχεῖν has come to signify instruction by word of mouth given chiefly by the method of question and answer.

We find the word κατηχεῖν used in the meaning of instruction by word of mouth in St Luke, in St Paul, in Clement of Alexandria, and others; while in the particular meaning of instruction in the truths of the faith we find it used in a general way by all Christian writers. In the Acts Apollo appears to us as instructed in the way of the Lord (κατηχημένος τινὶ δόξαν τοῦ Κυρίου); St Luke wrote his Gospel so that Theophilus might know the truth of those things in which he had been instructed (περὶ ἂν κατηχήθης); St Paul says that he had rather speak five words with his understanding that he might instruct (κατηχητὰς) others also, and he instructs him, that is instructed in the word (ὁ κατηχούμενος τὸν λόγον) to communicate with him that instructeth (τῷ κατηχοῦντι) in all good things. The word therefore passed into ecclesiastical use with a technical meaning implying both the act of instructing and the subject-matter of instruction. We find the same thing in the English Language: the term catechism was formerly also used to indicate the act of instructing, but nowadays it is only used for the subject-matter of instruction—for the book in which religious knowledge is given by the method of question and answer.

In the very first days of Christianity, those who wished to embrace the Christian faith received very short instructions for they were Jews and already adored the true God. For the Gentiles a longer preparation was required: they had to become used to Christian life and doctrine for they had no idea of the Scriptures and their moral code was rather

1 Liddel-Scott, Greek English Lexicon, vol. i, p. 927 (9th ed., Oxford)
2 Acts 21,21. 24
3 Gal. 6, 6
4 PG 8, 348
5 Acts 18, 25
6 Lk. 1, 4
7 1 Cor. 14, 19
8 Gal. 6, 6
different from the ten commandments. This preparation took more than a few days and only those who gave an assurance of becoming good Christians were finally admitted into the Church. For the Church had to be careful whom to admit: among those asking for admission into the Church there might be those who would turn back to pagan practices and so be a scandal to the Christian community and a reason for an attack on the Church; or there might be those who wished to become Christians so as to be able to live on Christian charity or worse still to spy on Christians and then accuse them in time of persecution. So the Church had to establish a systematic organization for those asking to be received into the Church: an organization whose chief scope was to prepare would-be Christians by instructing them in the faith and making known to them the Christian way of life. This organization, the catechumenate, reached its peak in the third-fourth century, but traces of it already appear in Apostolic times.

Oral instruction by means of question and answer had been one of the most common methods of instruction used by moral and religious teachers of all countries and all ages. We find this method practised among the Hebrews who had three forms of catechizing: domestic, scholastic and ecclesiastical. The first was given by the head of the family for the benefit of his children and servants; the second by teachers in schools, the third by priests and levites in the temple and in the synagogues. Proselytes were carefully instructed before becoming members of the Jewish faith, while the regular instruction of children began when they were twelve years old. In fact we read about Jesus in the temple sitting in the midst of the doctors hearing them and asking them questions: 'and all that heard him were astonished at his wisdom and his answers.' Jesus Himself often made use of this method: 'whom do you say the Son of Man is? But whom say ye that I am?' We can therefore conclude that the Apostles used the same method of instruction. But what was the subject matter of the instruction given to those who sought admission into the Church in the first two centuries? To answer this question we have to refer to the New Testament writings and to the Fathers of the first two centuries.

Before Christ ascended into heaven, He bade His Apostles to go and teach, that is, to make disciples among all nations, instructing them — διδάσκωντες — to observe all he had commanded them to do, and in this way to admit them into the Church baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Ghost.

In obedience to Christ's command St Peter, on Pentecost Day, stood

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10 Cfr. Ex. 12, 26. 27; Dt. 6, 20. 21
11 Lk. 2, 47
12 Mt. 16, 14. 15
13 Mt. 28, 19. 20
up with the eleven and declared to the Jews and proved to them from the Scriptures that Jesus was truly Lord and Christ, and when he convinced them he invited them to do penance and be baptized in the name of Jesus. In this speech St Peter proved the messianic character of Jesus from the Scriptures and from the fact that Jesus rose from the dead. The authority of the Bible was beyond dispute: it was only necessary to find that quotation so evidently applicable to Christ that it could in no way be gainsaid, and so it would be impossible to refuse belief in Him to whom it was applied. The whole speech revolves around two points: the messianic character and the person of the Messiah Himself. The person of the Messiah is altogether different from that imagined by the Jews and so to render less harsh the scandal of the Cross one insisted on the glory of the Resurrection.

We find again these two main ideas in the discourse St Peter held at the Beautiful Gate after the miracle of the lame man: but they are presented in a totally different way—we cannot expect to find in these early times a rigid formula of doctrine though we have fixed themes of doctrine which however, through improvisation, are presented in a variety of ways.

A new element is to be noticed in St Stephen's speech before the Sanhedrim: the historical proof. St Stephen, besides, showed that belief in Jesus as the Messiah meant the ending of the Old Covenant and the coming in of the new.

Finally we must not leave unnoticed a very important and convincing element in the apostolic catechesis: the insistence the speakers made that they were eyewitnesses of the events about which they preached: whereof all we are witnesses.

We must also note that instruction was not only limited to dogmatic truth: from his very first speech St Peter insists on a moral renewal: penance so that one might be baptized and receive remission of his sins and the Holy Ghost. Philip the deacon after proving to the eunuch of Candace from Isaiah that Christ is the Son of God, makes no invitation to repentance and penance as the eunuch was a just man anxious to do God's will. For the same reason Peter gives no moral instructions to Cornelius but instructs him only on Jesus Christ, 'how God anointed Him with the Holy Spirit and with power, who went about doing good, and healing all that were mastered by the devil, because God was with Him. And we are witnesses to all that he did in the country of the Jews.'

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14 Acts 2, 22-39
16 Acts 3, 12-26
18 Acts 2, 32
20 Acts 8, 26-40
15 DACL ii, 2535
17 Acts 7, 2-53
19 Acts 2, 38
and in Jerusalem, whom also they slew, hanging him upon a tree. Him God raised up on the third day and granted that he should be made manifest even (to) ourselves who ate and drank with him after he had risen from the dead; when he charged us to preach to the people and to testify that He it is who hath been appointed by God judge of the living and the dead; to Him all prophets bear witness testifying that through his name everyone that believeth in him is to receive forgiveness of sins.21

These points of doctrine were also couched by St Paul in his discourses to pagans: he taught publicly from house to house testifying to both Jews and Gentiles penance towards God and faith in our Lord Jesus Christ. But in the case of pagans the approach was different. The Scriptures not only were not helpful but could easily be a hindrance; the appeal to the prophets would lead nowhere; what was required was to show to pagans the reasonableness of the Christian message and the futility of paganism. Whether speaking to the peasants of Lystra or to the philosophers of Athens, St Paul insisted on the fundamental truth of the existence of a just God, Creator and Redeemer of mankind, on the need of doing penance and of believing in the risen Christ.

A quotation from the Epistle to the Hebrews 22 may help us to fix the main points on which the catechetical instruction of the early Church centred. The author of the epistle tells us: 'Wherefore leaving the word of the beginning of Christ let us go on to things more perfect, not laying again the foundation of penance from dead works, and faith towards God, of the doctrine of baptisms, and imposition of hands, and of the resurrection of the dead, and of eternal judgement. And this we will do if God permit.' We can therefore distinguish four sections in the catechetical instruction of the early church:23 a historical catechesis (the word of the beginning of Christ), a moral catechesis (the foundation of penance from dead works), a dogmatic catechesis (faith towards God), a liturgical catechesis (doctrine of baptisms and imposition of hands).

The historical catechesis comprised an account of the life, teachings and miracles of Our Lord; though each speaker would colour this account according to his own character, yet there would be agreement as regards what events and what teachings had to be recounted to the hearers. In fact there is no reason to doubt that the Synoptic Gospels are examples of this historical catechesis which comprised that period quo intravit et exivit inter nos Dominus Jesus incipiens a baptismate Joannis usque in diem qua assumptus est a nobis.24 St Peter's discourses in the Acts all follow this scheme, more or less, and one can legitimately conjecture

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21 Acts 10, 38-43
22 Hebr. 6, 1-3
23 F. Prat, Théologie de St Paul, vol. ii, ch. 2, Sec. 2
24 Acts 1, 21. 22
that it was the prince of the Apostles himself who fixed the subject matter of the historical catechesis\(^{25}\) which, first given orally, later on became fixed for all time in the synoptic gospels.

As to the dogmatic catechesis one can recognize in the New Testament writings traces of a form of doctrine (\(\tauύπος διδαχῆς\)) which moulded as it were the faith of the new converts to Christ's law, and which involved not only the word of the faith believed in the heart but, with the mouth, confession made unto salvation\(^{27}\). In close connection with this we might recall the profession of faith in Christ exacted from the eunuch of Candace\(^{28}\) as a preliminary to his baptism, as well as the formula of Baptism itself in the name of the three persons of the Blessed Trinity. Moreover as soon as we begin to obtain any sort of detailed description of the administration of Baptism we find that before the actual conferment of the Sacrament, a profession of faith was always required from the candidate for the sacrament, a profession of faith which from the earliest times consisted in a clear and distinct confession of the Father, the Son and the Holy Ghost. The oldest profession of faith which has reached us is the Apostles' Creed, though in its present form it cannot be dated prior to the end of the fifth century. It has developed from a combination of a Christological and a Trinitarian formula already in use at Rome in the second century. According to ancient tradition the Creed had to be learned by heart and never to be consigned to writing: this explains the fact that in no primitive creed has the text been preserved for us in a complete and continuous form—what we know of the earliest formulas is what we can piece together from quotations more or less scattered in the works of the early Christian writers.

The most primitive form of the Creed is that preserved for us in the Acts of the Apostles\(^{29}\): I believe that Jesus Christ is the Son of God. Together with this Christological formula there must also have existed in apostolic times a Trinitarian confession of faith for the baptismal rite which later on became the dominant form. In the canonical writings, we may add, we find other Christological formulas more formal in character and more extensive in scope which might have also had liturgical use\(^{30}\). From these formulas A. Seeberg\(^{31}\) has tried to reconstruct the formula of faith used by the Apostles, a formula implying belief in a living God, creator of all things, who sent His Son, born of the seed of David, Jesus

\(^{26}\) Rom. 6, 17
\(^{27}\) Rom. 10, 8, 10
\(^{28}\) Acts 8, 37
\(^{29}\) Ibid.
\(^{30}\) Rom. 1, 3; 1 Cor. 15, 3; 1 Tim. 3, 16; Phil. 2, 5-11; 1 Petr. 3, 18-22; 4, 5 etc.
\(^{31}\) A. Seeberg, *Katechismus der Urchristenheit*, p. 85, Leipzig, 1903
Christ who died for us according to the Scriptures, was buried and rose again on the third day according to the Scriptures, who sat on the right hand of the Father having made subject to him the angels, the powers and the virtues, and will return from the heavens full of power and glory. The reconstruction is very well done but we can never say that it is the creed used by the Apostles—examining the various texts from which Seeberg has reconstructed his creed we can clearly see that the statements are never made as forming part of a baptismal creed, and, besides, certain expressions, e.g. of the seed of David, have never found their way in any Creed formula 32.

The first statements that our Apostles’ Creed was composed by the Apostles themselves dates only from the fourth century. Rufinus is the first to state that the Creed was composed by the Apostles on Pentecost Day according to a tradition received from earlier ages 33. This statement cannot be accepted as a historical fact, but, on the other hand, the earliest Christian writers insist emphatically that the rule of faith is part of the apostolic tradition. This leads many to admit that perhaps St Peter and St Paul themselves, or their immediate successors, gave a primitive Creed to the Roman Church which during the third century passed from one church to another and finally prevailed in the universal Church. Though all agree that the primitive Roman form is the mother of all Western Creeds, we cannot say the same thing as regards the Eastern Creeds, though the Eastern Creeds might be considered as offshoots independently developing from the same stock from which the Western Creeds developed, a stock having its source in the East. In fact, though the Eastern Creeds are different from the Western types, yet we may notice many analogies, and this can be explained from the fact that each bishop would adapt the Creed formula according to his own particular needs 34.

This formula of faith was certainly the subject matter of catechetical instruction. The Creed was taught to catechumens and before being baptized they would be questioned about it; later on this developed in the ceremonies of the traditio and the redditio symboli. Not all would be able to learn the Creed after having heard it once, and therefore we must suppose that after the solemn traditio symboli the catechists would teach the Creed to all the candidates for Baptism in such a way that they would recite it without hesitation on the day of the redditio symboli from which none of those to receive baptism were certainly exempted. Insistence on a good catechetical instruction on the Creed would have been necessary on account of the fact that Christians had to know it well to avoid any alterations in its text, to which it was certainly sub-

32 DACL II, 2543
33 PL 21, 337
34 J. Quasten, Patrology, vol. i, chp. 1, Sec. 1, Spectrum, Utrecht, 1950
jected by the various sects. On what was the composition of the Creed based? Most probably its author or authors based themselves more on the oral teaching than on the written Gospels, though both the Creed and the Gospels speak in the same way about Christ's life on earth, his crucifixion, burial and exaltation. The main idea is the miracle of His earthly life: true Man born of the Virgin Mother, and true God, Son of the Father. The Creed gives us the same impression of the Lord as St. Peter received when he was asked by Christ: Whom think ye to be the Son of Man? And Peter replied: Thou art Christ the Son of the living God. This impression is expressed in words which recall St. Paul.

From the letter to the Hebrews we know that the liturgical instruction of the faithful certainly included Baptism and Confirmation (the doctrine of baptisms and imposition of hands). It also included instruction on the Eucharist and on the Lord's prayer, which was recited three times a day, probably at the Jewish times of prayer.

Finally with regard to the moral catechesis, some have thought that its basis is a writing of Jewish origin in which moral doctrines were imparted through a system which has come to be known as the system of the two ways. There are various Christian writings which contain more or less the same moral precepts imparted through this method. Foremost is the Didache; with it we may mention the Epistle of Barbanas, the seventh book of the Apostolic Constitutions, the Syriac Didascalia Apostolorum, the Apostolic Tradition of Hippolytus of Rome, the Ecclesiastical Canons of the Apostles, the Syntagma Doctrinae falsely attributed to St. Athanasius. All these writings seem to be dependent on the Didache, though some have thought that all depend directly on some Jewish source adapted to Christian concepts. Some even say that the Didache itself is of Jewish origin: a moral catechism for proselytes which Christians adopted for the instruction of the candidates for Baptism adding to it chapters on liturgy and ecclesiastical discipline. A full discussion of this question would lengthen this article too much: we can, for the present, just conclude that there are convincing arguments to show that the Didache, the oldest, so to say, Christian catechism extant, is not of Jewish origin.

Treating of the dogmatic catechesis of the apostolic times we have spoken of traces in the NT of a body or form of doctrine which moulded, so to say the faith of the new converts to Christ's law. We read, for

\[25\] DACL II, 2545
\[26\] Mt. 16, 16
\[27\] DACL II, 2545
\[28\] Hebr. 6, 1-3
\[29\] 1 Cor. 11, 23-8
\[30\] Didache, 8, 2, 3; cfr. Rom. 8, 15; Gal.
\[31\] DACL II, 2531
\[32\] 5, 4
example, that those who were converted on Pentecost day persevered in the doctrine of the Apostles (τῇ διδαχῇ τῶν ἀποστόλων)\(^{42}\); in his second letter St Peter exhorts the faithful to be mindful of the commandments of their apostles and of the precepts of the Lord and Saviour\(^{43}\); St Paul exhorts Titus to hold fast to the word which is according to the teaching (κατὰ τὴν διδαχήν)\(^{44}\) and to speak the things that become sound doctrine (διδασκαλία)\(^{45}\) and he proclaims that those who teach otherwise are besotted with pride and know nothing\(^{46}\). This body of doctrine hinted at by the passages referred to just now is also designated by the term 'my ways in Christ' (τὰς ὁδοὺς μου τὰς ἐν Χριστῷ)\(^{47}\) and 'He was instructed in the way of the Lord'\(^{48}\). Could the Didache be this body of doctrine? The title under which the Didache has reached us (Διδαχὴ τῶν δόξεως ἀποστόλων) corresponds exactly to the expression used in the Acts (τῇ διδαχῇ τῶν ἀποστόλων) but this cannot prove anything, so many apocrypha exist.

Oral teaching was a custom long established in all Jewish schools: the teacher would say a sentence, recall the various comments and explanations given by doctors, and finally add his own elucidations. These sayings were orally transmitted for at least two centuries before they were laid down in writing. We must suppose that the Apostles followed this custom, but because the subject matter of their preaching was very limited compared to the casuistry of the rabbis, it soon became fixed. We must not forget that the Apostles were persons of limited culture and so they tended to use the same expressions once they had adopted them, and to repeat the same things using the same phrases: they preferred Christ’s own words and this gave a fixity to their dogmatic teaching. The same can be said with regard to their moral teaching based as it was on the Decalogue and on Christ’s own precepts. St Irenaeus and St Clement both witness to the fact that the faithful remembered not only the ideas imparted but the words themselves, and Papias of Hierapolis\(^{49}\) is a clear example of the keenness of the first Christians to know the exact sayings of the Apostles. And therefore we can reasonably suppose that in the Didache we have at least the subject matter of the moral catechesis of the Apostles. In fact the nature of the teachings imparted, the style, the language, its date and place of origin, are all favourable points to support the opinion that the Didache is an example of the preaching of the Apostles who had to adapt themselves to the intellectual capacity of their audience and to support their statements with

\(^{42}\) Acts 2, 42  
\(^{44}\) Tit. 1, 9  
\(^{46}\) 1 Tim. 6, 3, 4  
\(^{48}\) Acts 18, 25  
\(^{43}\) 2 Petr. 3, 2  
\(^{45}\) Tit. 2, 1  
\(^{47}\) 1 Cor. 4, 17  
\(^{49}\) Eusebius, Hist. Eccl., III, 39, 3-4
references to the OT so familiar to the people hearing them, without at the same time ignoring the spirit of Christ's teaching. The Didachë is planned on a method suggested by Christ himself: "Enter ye at the narrow gate"; it lists the sins mentioned in St. Paul's letters; it follows the plan suggested by Hebr. 6, 1-3 already quoted; its language is similar to that of the New Testament (of its 552 words 504 are found in NT) but different from the post-apostolic writings, the apocrypha, Philo, Josephus and the Septuagint. Together with the Gospels therefore, the Didachë gives us the apostolic catechesis, but while the Gospels in telling the life of our Lord teach moral and dogmatic truths in a manner which is in no wise didactic, the Didachë presents to us precepts for a Christian rule of life in the manner of a catechism text-book.

That the Didachë was written in Greek is no argument against the opinion just mentioned: one can easily suppose that the Apostles, not very familiar with the Greek language and ignoring its niceties of style and the shades of meaning of Greek vocabulary, limited themselves to a series of phrases, simple and easy to remember, which they were careful not to change.

This opinion explains the various similarities and dissimilarities which are found in the various documents which reproduce the teachings of the Didachë. It is not a coherent product but an artless composition of various texts: in fact we must not suppose that any of the Apostles ever co-ordinated the various moral precepts he preached or wrote fixed rules of liturgy and ecclesiastical discipline. Some unknown person gathered the matter contained in the Didachë from the lips of one or other of the Apostles or of one of their successors, adding to it quotations from the Gospels. Perhaps this may have happened in Jerusalem itself, while parallel versions of the Didachë (in the Pseudo-Barnabas, the Apostolic Constitution, etc.) would represent the same catechesis as preached in other places e.g. Antioch, Alexandria, Carthage. The various dissimilarities between these versions can be easily explained through an elasticity natural in an oral tradition; and the text incorporated in these various works would, besides, be subjected to the adaptations their authors would have made in using it.

Actually only the first six chapters are of a catechetical nature, and it is these six chapters which for a long time maintained their usefulness, for the liturgical and disciplinary precepts found in the remaining chapters, describing a very primitive state of Christian community, soon became obsolete. In actual fact the first six chapters were still useful for teaching catechumens of the eighth century on the banks of the

50 Mt. 7, 13, 14
51 DACL II, 2540
52 J. Quasten, Patrology, vol. i, Chp. 1, Sec. 2, Spectrum, Utrecht, 1950
Rhine: St Boniface, the Apostle of Germany, made use of the doctrine of the two ways in his catechetical sermons.

In what way is this doctrine imparted?

The Way of Life is to love God and our neighbour. The writing treats more fully love of one's neighbour, the basis being the golden rule in its negative form: do not do to another what you do not wish to be done to yourself. Various extracts from the Sermon of the Mount follow, concluding with a curious passage on giving and receiving. The second chapter contains the commandments against murder, adultery, theft, coveting and false witness together with additional recommendations. In chapter three we are told that one vice leads to another: anger leads to murder, concupiscence to adultery, augury to idolatry, lying to theft, grumbling to blasphemy. Chapter four exhorts us to keep the various virtues: honour for preachers of God's word, contact with the saints, pacification of contending parties, just judgement, almsgiving with a good heart, good treatment of one's slaves, abhorrence of all shame, no neglect of the commandments. This chapter ends with the words: 'Such is the way of Life'. The fifth chapter gives the Way of Death which is nothing more than a list of vices to be avoided. Chapter six exhorts to keeping the way of teaching; and the conclusion is: if you are able to bear the Lord's yoke in its entirety you will be perfect; if you are not able then do what you can. And in the matter of food do what you can stand, but be scrupulously on guard against meat offered to the idols; for this is the worship of dead gods.

Concluding therefore we might state that even before the New Testament writings existed, there was a body of doctrine which was expected to be known by all those who wished to embrace the true faith: this body of doctrine was slowly developed. With all probability we can affirm that this body of doctrine comprised an account of the life of Our Lord from the Baptism of John to his Ascension into heaven, those elements of dogma which presented God as Creator sending His only Son to redeem mankind, King of Angels and Powers and Judge of Men at the final resurrection of all mankind; instruction of Baptism and on the imposition of hands to receive the Holy Ghost, and on the Eucharist; and finally a series of precepts on moral behaviour. We can also affirm that the propagation of the faith was not left to private initiative but was disciplined and regulated. The teaching imparted was not from any written texts but yet there was certainly an official elementary catechesis i.e. certain points of doctrine and moral teaching on which all had to insist but each in his own way. Later on we get these elements developed: we get the canonical writings, the beginnings of liturgical formulas and canonical legislation (the Creed and Didache) and finally what is an irregular
development of Christian catechesis, the Christian apologists who by their writings tried to interest pagans to seek out fundamental truths of Christianity – but this leads us out of the scope of the present article.

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PUBLICATIONS RECEIVED

We acknowledge with thanks the receipt of the following:

Analecta Tertii Ordinis Regularis S. Francisi — Vol. VI (1956)
Australasian Catholic Record — Vol. XXXIII, nos. 3, 4 (1956)
Biblica: Elenchus Bibliographicus Biblicus — Vol. 37 (1956)
Carmelus — Vol. 3, no. 2 (1956)
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Scripture — Vol. VIII, nos. 3, 4 (1956)
Scuola (La) Cattolica — Anno LXXXIV, nos. 5, 6 (1956)
Theology Digest — Vol. IV, nos. 3, 4 (1956)
Unitas — Vol. VIII, nos. 3, 4 (1956)

* A review of this book will appear in the next issue of Melita Theologica.