

How to teach R.E.

This document entitled *Sur la manière d'enseigner le catéchisme* is to be found in the Archives amidst the documents on the early Chapters.

Translators note

R.E. translates the French word *catéchisme* unless it is obvious that it indicates catechism.

“Let the little children come to me; do not stop them, for it is to such as these that the Kingdom of God belongs.....then he put his arms around them,laid his hands on them and gave them his blessing” Mark 10,14-16.

Without a shadow of doubt RE is the central core of our teaching: there is nothing which contributes more to the salvation of man, nothing more necessary nor sublime. Our religion is rooted in and nourished by it. Men such as Augustine, Chrysostom and Cyril and, in our own days, Fénelon, worked with zeal and dedication in the instruction of children; all convinced that there was no more useful and glorious use for their talents. “I am” as the Apostle said “

We lived unassumingly among you. Like a mother feeding and looking after her children. (1 Thess 2.8)

Our Divine Master himself made this course of action the principal object of his ministry.

A real teacher will thus regard the Religion which he is to teach as the noblest of his obligations, because it ties him to the very author of the Divine Doctrine and to an infinity of Saints and prominent men who, walking in the footsteps of the Saviour God, have made a glorious task of the evangelisation of young people. Imbued with those sentiments which Religion inspires, he will make a deep study of the maxims and moral teachings of Jesus Christ, so that with his own life filled by these teachings he can pass on his knowledge to the children whom the Lord has entrusted to his care. Firstly he should, as instructed by our Holy Rule, completely learn and deeply study the text of the Diocesan Catechism so that he can explain it with ease and facility. Then he should have recourse to greater and wider sources, provided that they are known and approved by ecclesiastical superiors: for example the Explanation of the Catechism of Malines, by Mr Huleu, the Explanation of the Catechism by Couturier, etc. These two authors contain everything a teacher needs; too great a variety leads to confusion in subject matter and in ideas. To explain the “catéchisme raisonné” the teacher could consult Frayssinous’ conferences and Feller’s Philosophical Catechism. Butler’s Lives of the Saints and his treatise on moveable Feasts will give all the explanations necessary about the Feasts of the Year.

He should remember that he cannot speak too clearly. No thought or expression should be given out at random; everything should be geared to the strengths of the pupils, or rather their weaknesses. Only a few things should be said, and they should be said in clear terms and frequently repeated: definitions should be precise and short and always given in the same terms; finally all truths should be made attainable by examples, pictures and familiar comparisons.

In RE lessons everything about the teacher should be expressive: his manner, his expression, his tone of voice: in fact everything about him should indicate to his pupils the importance of what is being undertaken and how greatly it is worthy of their attention.

The teacher will repeat each lesson, entire or in parts, to each pupil to make sure that they know it by heart. But since repeating words without understanding the meaning does not constitute belief, the teacher will explain, as we have already indicated, anything which merits further development. Finally he will select various stories which the pupils can enjoy and will tell them: but, as St Augustine says, tell in such a way that the listeners believe by listening, hope in believing, and love in hoping.

A necessary condition for the use of these historical sources is to use them with discernment and not to allow any facts which are not completely certain. It could, perhaps, be allowed that anything is good for children; but they will become adults and any first impression founded on unlikely or uncertain stories will make them too credulous or will make them mistrust what they have learnt in their youth. The catechism is the word of God; nothing should be associated with it which would not stand up to scrutiny by the most expert of people or which would not be worthy of the majesty of Religion. I will point out here some works which the catechist could use in all confidence as a source of his stories: Shomond's History of Religion and his History of the Church; Butler's Lives of the Saints: Christian Doctrine Illustrated by 400 Examples; Edifying Stories by Baudrant, by Collet and by Father Reyre; and Edifying Insights into Ecclesiastical History, Lille 1833.

Towards the end of the RE lesson the teacher will go over once more the main explanations which he has given, will make several pupils repeat them and will even instruct them to write them out. He will end the lesson by indicating a few practical ways of putting the lesson into effect.

To ensure the pupils' attention the catechist must give his instruction in an interesting manner; should speak in a firm but moderate manner; act with a certain gravity tempered by gentleness; should not seem surprised nor hurt if a pupil answers badly; Above all he should make them feel that the doctrine he is teaching them is necessary to their eternal happiness as it is God's only Son who gave it to us.

The teacher will be at pains, therefore, more than at any other time, to forestall any faults which the pupils might commit so that he has no need to issue any punishments.

The teacher will say nothing in RE which he has not read in approved books of which he himself is absolutely certain; he will avoid making the pupils see as sin that which is not, as an article of faith that which is not. He will not easily decide whether anything is a mortal or venial sin; rather he will say, "that causes great offence to God", "that is a sin to be feared", "that is a sin which has serious consequences" etc. as he judges fit. Although he must never let it be believed that sins are more serious than they are, he should at the same time avoid the more serious error of making them seem small and of no consequence. An offence against God can be small, but nothing concerning God is of no consequence.