

Epiphany I

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The history of Christian teaching of the Faith is as long as the life of the Church itself. From the very beginning of its life, Christians have needed to instruct new members in the Faith in order for the Church's life to continue. No one is born a Christian and no one is born knowing Christian teaching; everyone begins at the beginning but everyone begins at a different place, depending on his own background and previous training.

Last week, for our Bible study topic, we began a study of the Catechism in the Prayer Book. This was so we could both talk about some of the characteristics of Anglican instruction and so we could say something about the history of Christian teaching. I thought that a general discussion of this topic would be useful for all of us to hear since it helps us understand the things we do, from week to week, even in the present day and even for those of us who've been lifelong members of the Church.

The very first Christian instruction we see comes to us in The Book of Acts and consists, almost always, of presentations of the Old Testament as a prophecy of the life, death and ministry of Jesus. When the deacon Philip instructs the Ethiopian eunuch, we see a test case of the use of The Book of the Prophet Isaiah as an entry point to welcoming someone who was already inside Judaism into the Church. The centurion Cornelius receives very much the same kind of instruction from St. Peter even though he is a pagan, but this is because he is one of the "God fearers" who joined in with the life of the synagogue and were well acquainted with the Old Testament Scriptures.

Once the Church moved outside of the Jewish milieu, it discovered that instruction in the Old Testament Scriptures was not an appropriate tool for gathering converts or for teaching them what they needed to know in order to join the Church. As far as we can tell, the Christian practice for interested inquirers quickly became a process in which they were welcomed at the celebrations of the Eucharist, up to and including the sermon, but then were ushered out of the service at that point and separated off to be given particular instruction in the Faith. Attendance at the Eucharist was considered appropriate only for full members of the Church, so interested people were not allowed to attend the full service of worship. This much of Christian practice seems to have been universal. One of the things that varied, however, was how long those hoping to be baptized were expected to undergo instruction before they would be accepted into the Church. The fully fledged program seems to have lasted for three years. At the very least, we know that, once the Church was legalized and these proceedings could take place in public, the bishops whose catechetical instructions survive seem to have imagined a three-year process.

This brings us to the fourth century, the first in which Christians in the Roman world were able to live their lives in public. From this time we have a number of different collections of catechetical sermons from important early Christian teachers. Since we have these to read, we can say some very definite things about the shape of Christian catechism in its fully developed form. Three things, in particular, strike me about these collections when I read them: they emphasize the connection between baptism and the death and resurrection of Jesus, they offer extensive teaching on the meaning and proper conduct of the Sacraments of the Church and they always include the teaching and explanation of the Lord's Prayer. These characteristics serve to sketch out a clear picture of how the Church viewed itself at that time.

Just after the legalization of Christianity, the Church was still a relatively small body in an ocean of pagans. In order for the Church to maintain its character as the Body of Christ, it was necessary for new members to be properly instructed before they began joining in the life of the Church. In order for them to do this, they would need to understand the purpose and effects of baptism, to be able to appreciate and join in the worship of the Church and to participate in the Church's prayer life, both in corporate circumstances and as private individuals. These needs were all met by the catechism process that the Church developed.

By the time we come to the Reformation and the beginning of Anglicanism as an organized, separate community, the practical circumstances of the Church have changed. Modern printing with movable type has made possible the production of a large number of Bibles and Prayer Books and the ability to read has spread quite widely through the population. The Catechism that was written for use in the Church in England, a form of which still survives in our 1928 Prayer Book, was written to be memorized and recited by those preparing for Confirmation, which is a use that is only possible if the Catechism will be widely available and the people being instructed will be able to read it. Since these people were all already baptized, Confirmation at a later age having become the norm by this time, our Catechism is designed to equip members of the Church with the practical information they need in order to undertake an adult Christian life. This is why our Catechism includes the memorizing of the Creed, in order to make a short form of the Church's teaching available to them, the 10 Commandments, so they will be able to learn and reflect on an outline of proper Christian living, the Lord's Prayer, so they will understand the place this prayer has in a properly conducted Christian life (for they would certainly have known the Lord's Prayer by heart before they came to be catechized) and a discussion of the Anglican Tradition's understanding of the Sacraments of the Church. (This last section, which is couched in quite formal theological language, was necessary because the Reformation in the West was characterized by complex and sophisticated arguments over the proper understanding of the Church's Sacraments, both how they related to Scripture and how they ought to be understood. The Anglican insistence on giving a primary place to the Sacraments that are explicitly present in the Gospels: Baptism and Eucharist, and the Anglican insistence on a fully sacramental but not overly philosophical explanation of the Eucharist are both expressed in this part of the Catechism. It is quite important to understand this development; otherwise this section can seem mysterious and unnecessary.)

In my opinion, the most important thing that we take away from a brief look at the history of instruction in the Church is a realization that it has always been, in the

deepest sense, a practical process. The Church has always tried to offer its people what they need in order to engage in the life of the Body of Christ in an intelligent and mature manner. The task of the Church in our present age is no different from this, but the particular requirements of our situation may push us to augment our use of the Catechism with other tools or, even, to use it as we do in this parish, mainly as a reference tool rather than a primary expression of our belief.

In our heavily secularized culture, many parishes in the Anglican Province of Christ the King have learned that if they express our traditional Christian teaching in terms that are more easily accessible to new inquirers than the words of the Prayer Book can be, interested people will be encouraged to stay with the parish and participate in our classical liturgy for long enough to begin to feel comfortable with its phrasings and appreciative of its depth and clarity. This may not be the only intelligent way to approach the task of instructing new Christians, but it is a self-conscious and careful attempt to meet the particular needs of our age.

Like any institution filled with sinful human beings, the Church has never been able to follow its duty perfectly. However, as long as Christians have done their honest best to offer God's Good News to the world, they have trusted in His mercy to make up their deficiencies. I am convinced that if we continue in the great Christian tradition of offering the Good News to those around us in the clearest and most accessible form possible, we will be worthy successors to the great minds and great saints who have gone before us in the Church.