 Reading time: 7 min.

Formed in Christian doctrine from childhood, in his family environment, then in schools, and finally in contact with the Jesuits, Francis de Sales had perfectly assimilated the content and method of the catechesis of the time.

A catechism experience in Thonon

How to catechise the youth of Thonon who had grown up all steeped in Calvinism, the missionary from Chablais wondered. Authoritarian means were not necessarily the most effective. Was it not better to attract the youth and interest them? This was the method usually followed by the provost of Sales during his time as a missionary in the Chablais.

He had also attempted an experience that deserves to be remembered. On 16 July 1596, taking advantage of the visit of his two young brothers, Jean-François aged eighteen and Bernard aged thirteen, he organised a kind of public recitation of the catechism in order to attract the youth in Thonon. He composed a text himself in the form of questions and answers on the fundamental truths of the faith, and invited his brother Bernard to respond.

The catechist's method is interesting. When reading this little dialogue catechism, one must remember that it is not simply a written text, but a dialogue intended to be performed before an audience of young people in the form of a "little theatre". The "performance" actually took place on a "stage", or podium, as was the custom among the Jesuits in the college of Clermont. In fact, there are stage directions at the beginning:

Francis, speaking first, will say: My brother, are you a Christian?!
Bernard, placed vis-à-vis Francis, will answer: Yes, my brother, by the grace of God.!

Most probably the author envisaged the use of gestures to make the recitation more lively. To the question "How many things must you know to be saved?" the answer reads "As many as there are fingers on one hand!", an expression that Bernard had to pronounce with gestures, i.e. pointing to the five fingers of the hand: the thumb for faith, the index finger for hope, the middle finger for charity, the ring finger for the sacraments, the little finger for good works. Similarly, when dealing with the different anointings of baptism, Bernard had to place his hand first on his chest, to indicate that the first anointing consists in "being embraced by the love of God"; then on his shoulders, because the second anointing is intended to "make us strong in carrying the weight of the divine

commandments and precepts”; finally on his forehead to reveal that the purpose of the last anointing is to “make us confess our faith in Our Lord publicly, without fear and without shame.”

Great importance is given to the “sign of the cross”, normally accompanied by the formula In the name of the Father with which he began the catechism, a sign that with the gesture of the hand follows, on the parts of the body, an inverted path compared to the baptismal anointing: the forehead, the chest and the two shoulders. The sign of the cross, Bernard was to say, is “the true sign of the Christian”, adding that “the Christian must make it in all his prayers and in his principal actions.”

It is also worth noting that the systematic use of numbers served as a mnemonic. In this way, the individual learns that there are three baptismal promises (renounce the devil, profess the faith and keep the commandments), twelve articles of the Creed, ten commandments of God, three types of Christians (heretics, bad Christians and true Christians), four parts of the body to be anointed (the breast, the two shoulders and the forehead), three anointings, five things necessary to be saved (faith, hope, charity, sacraments and good works), seven sacraments and three good works (prayer, fasting and almsgiving).

If we carefully examine the content of this dialogical catechism, it is easy to detect its insistence on several points contested by Protestants. The strong tone of certain statements recalls Thonon’s proximity to Geneva and the polemical zeal of the time.

From the very beginning there is an invocation to the “blessed Virgin Mary”. On the subject of the observance of the Ten Commandments, it is specified that the precepts of “our holy Mother Church” must be added. In the three types of Christians, heretics are those who “have nothing but the name”, “being outside the Catholic, Apostolic and Roman Church”. The sacraments are seven in number. The rites and ceremonies of the Church are not just symbolic actions, they produce a real change in the believer’s soul due to the efficacy of grace. One also notes the insistence on “good works” to be saved and the practice of the “holy sign of the Cross”.

Despite the rather exceptional “staging” involving his younger brother, this type of catechesis had to be repeated often and in fairly similar forms. It is known, in fact, that the Apostle of the Chablais “taught catechism, as often as possible, in public or in some homes.”

The catechist bishop

Having become bishop of Geneva, but resident in Annecy, Francis de Sales

taught catechism to children himself. He had to set an example to canons and parish priests who hesitated to stoop to this type of ministry: it is well known, he would one day say, that “many want to preach, but few teach catechism.” According to one witness, the bishop “took the trouble to teach catechism in person for two years in the city, without being helped by others.”

A witness describes him seated “on a small theatre created for the purpose, and, while there, he interrogated, listened, and taught not only his small audience, but also all those who flocked from all sides, welcoming them with an incredible ease and friendliness” His attention was focused on the personal relationships to be established with the children: before questioning them, “he called them all by name, as if he had the list in his hand.”

To make himself understood, he used simple language, sometimes drawing the most unexpected comparisons from everyday life, such as that of the little dog: “When we come into the world, how are we born? We are born like little dogs, who, licked by their mother, open their eyes. So, when we are born, our holy mother Church opens our eyes with baptism and the Christian doctrine she teaches us.”

With the help of a few co-workers, the bishop prepared “tickets” on which were written the main points to be learnt by heart during the week in order to be able to recite them on Sundays. But how could this be done if the children could not yet read and their families were also illiterate? It was necessary to count on the help of benevolent people: parish priests, vice-parish priests, schoolteachers, who would be available during the week to tutor them.

As a good educator, he often repeated the same questions with the same explanations. When the child made a mistake reciting his notes or pronouncing difficult words, “he would smile so kindly and, correcting the mistake, would put the questioner back on track in such a lovely way that it seemed that if he had not made a mistake, he could not have pronounced it so well; which doubled the courage of the little ones and singularly increased the satisfaction of the older ones.”

The traditional pedagogy of emulation and reward had its place in the interventions of this former Jesuit pupil. A witness relates this skit: “The little ones ran about, exultant with joy, competing against each other; they were proud when they could receive from the hands of the Blessed some little gift such as little pictures, medals, rosaries and *agnus dei*, which he gave them when they had responded well, and also special caresses that he gave them to encourage them to learn the catechism well and to respond correctly.”

Now, this catechesis to children attracted adults, and not only parents, but also great personalities, “doctors, chamber presidents, councillors and masters,

religious and superiors of monasteries.” All social strata were represented, “nobles, clergymen and ordinary people”, and the crowd was so packed that “one could not move.” People flocked from the city and the surrounding area.

A movement had therefore been created, a kind of contagious phenomenon. According to some, “it was no longer the catechism of children, but the public education of the entire people.” The comparison with the movement created in Rome half a century earlier by the lively and joyful assemblies of St Philip Neri comes spontaneously to mind. In the words of Father Lajeunie, “the Oratory of Saint Philip seemed to be reborn in Annecy.”

The bishop was not content with formulas learnt by heart, although it was far from him to deprecate the role of memory. He insisted that children know what they must believe and understand the teaching.

Above all, he wanted the theory learned during catechism to become practical in everyday life. As one of his biographers wrote, “he taught not only what one must believe, but also persuaded one to live according to what one believes.” He encouraged his hearers of all ages “to approach the sacraments of confession and communion frequently”, “taught them personally the way to prepare themselves appropriately”, and “explained the commandments of the Decalogue and of the Church, the deadly sins, using appropriate examples, similes and exhortations so lovingly engaging, that all felt gently compelled to do their duty and embrace the virtue taught them.”

In any case, the catechist bishop was delighted with what he was doing. When he found himself among the children, says one witness, he seemed “to be among his delights.” On leaving one of these catechism schools, at carnival time, he took up his pen to describe it to Jeanne de Chantal:

I have just finished the catechism class where I indulged a little in merriment, having fun with masks and dances to make the audience laugh; I was in good humour, and a large audience invited me with its applause to continue being a child with the children. They tell me that I succeed in this, and I believe it!

He liked to recount the beautiful expressions of the children, sometimes astounding in their depth. In the letter just quoted, he related to the Baroness the answer he had just been given to the question: Is Jesus Christ ours? “One should not doubt it in the least: Jesus Christ is ours,” a little girl had answered him, who added: “Yes, he is more mine than I am his and more than I am mine myself.”

St Francis de Sales and his “little world”

The familiar, warm and joyful atmosphere that reigned during catechism was an important success factor, encouraged by the natural harmony that existed between Francis' limpid loving soul and the children, whom he called his "little world", because he had managed to "win their hearts".

As he walked through the streets, the children ran ahead of him; he was sometimes seen to be so surrounded by them that he could go no further. Far from becoming irritated, he would caress them, entertain himself with them, asking: "Whose son are you? What is your name?"

According to his biographer, he would one day say "that he would like to have the pleasure of seeing and considering how a child's spirit gradually opens and expands."