

# Sì sì no no

THE ANGELUS ENGLISH-LANGUAGE ARTICLE REPRINT

Let your speech be “Yes, yes: no, no”; whatever is beyond these comes from the evil one. (Mt. 5:37)

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## The Catechetical Teachings of Pope St. Pius X

St. Pius X is justly known for many things: his fight against Modernism, the lowering of the age of First Communion, and the formulation of the Code of Canon Law among them. What is perhaps less known today is his intense catechetical work. This article, written in 1953 by Don Silvio Riva, provides some insight into this aspect of his life and pontificate.

In the Vatican gardens on feast day afternoons between 1903 and 1914, an uncustomary scene would take place: the gates of the Vatican opened to admit an ever-growing crowd desirous of seeing and hearing the Pope, who would comment on the Gospel and explain the catechism as he did when he was chaplain at Tombolo and parish priest at Salzano. Then came an “apostolic blessing.” The act was unusual for the Vatican’s environment, but not for him who was born “with the catechism in his blood.”

### **The Catechetical Magisterium of St. Pius X**

St. Pius X was the soul that profoundly interpreted the role of the catechism in the life of the Church and its salvific function in the economy of souls. It will not be without gain to follow him, even summarily, in his catechetical vocation as it appears when one examines the mystery of his life.

One remembers that during his childhood he was diligent and enthusiastic at the school of Christian Doctrine in his native village of Riese, where he stood out among all the children his age; and when he was a high school student, during summer vacations he would organize “open air catechism classes” on the plaza of the Sanctuary of the Madonna di Cendrole, where he deftly explained some lessons of Christian Doctrine, listened to with pleasure and profit by the village children. The lessons were “active,” accompanied by alternating songs and prayers, and made lively by the intuitive gesticulation of the young catechist.

But once ordained priest, it was during the years of his first assignment as chaplain at Tombolo from 1858 to 1867 that he perceived the scope of the catechetical problem for children and adults alike. Thanks to the practical vision he acquired from his pastoral ministry, he observed that the pulse of the Christian community is taken by measuring the vitality of its catechetical instruction: without

catechism, one does not make genuine Christians. It was during these years that, having instituted a school for the poor, he came in touch with the vital problems of education and pedagogy, for it happened that he replaced the village's primary school teacher. His awareness of catechetical instruction became more acute while he was responsible for the parish of Salzano (1867 to 1875), during which he saw the urgent needs of the people.

"I beg and beseech you to come to catechism. Miss Vespers rather than catechism!" he would tell his flock repeatedly, certain that if they frequented catechism, he would soon see them at Vespers, too. He was convinced that religious ignorance is the root of every evil. It was at Salzano that the outline of his famous encyclical on catechesis, *Acerbo Nimis*, was born in his heart; once he was Pontiff, he merely ratified with the supreme authority of the magisterium what had ripened during his parish ministry.

We remember the delightful "dialogue catechism" he would give at church with the young Don Giuseppe Menegazzi, of the neighboring village of Noale, to which flocked not only his own faithful, but many other eager listeners in the surrounding area. During the lessons of the "dialogue catechism," the two priests would talk to each other; one played the part of the ignorant, and the other, the teacher. A certain jealousy naturally arose among the priests of neighboring villages, and this strange method of catechism was even denounced to the bishop, who answered: "Do likewise yourselves!"

This curious catechism enthused and interested the people, for the *ignorant* made himself the intelligent and effective interpreter of the doubts and difficulties of the audience. The catechetical zeal of Fr. Sarto did not prevent him from becoming aware of a pedagogical dissonance: the catechetical textbooks did not correspond to the mental development of the children, who were nonetheless judged by Bishop Zinelli, in the decree of his pastoral visitation, "well instructed in Christian Doctrine."

On April 18, 1885, Giuseppe Sarto was elected Bishop of Mantua. His first pastoral visitation opened his eyes to the immediate needs of the diocese so well that during his conversations with the priests, with bitterness and affliction, he constantly had on his lips the refrain he would still repeat when he had ascended the See of Peter: "Christian Doctrine! Christian Doctrine! Christian Doctrine!" In a pastoral letter to the parish priests in 1885 and during the diocesan synod held at Mantua on September 10, 1888, he anticipated the practical rules that constellate the Encyclical *Acerbo Nimis* of 1905:

In every parish a school of Christian Doctrine is to be established, and every Sunday and holy day of obligation,

catechism is to be taught in every church: The pastor will explain Christian doctrine to the children, and immediately afterward he will teach catechism to the people from the pulpit. During Advent and Lent, special daily instruction is to be given to the children to prepare them for confession and Communion. Parents, guardians, and employers who habitually prevent their children or subordinates from regular attendance at the teaching of Christian doctrine cannot receive absolution.

This pastoral solicitude was to push him to inform his clergy during his second pastoral visitation: "I shall especially be pleased by the good ordering and progress of the teaching of Christian doctrine. This is the subject about which I spoke to you on my arrival in the diocese. It is what I have vigorously recommended in all the parishes during my first pastoral visitation, and it is the subject I shall insist upon the most during my second visitation" (Letter No. 501).

Monsignor Sarto had a dream, and he enthusiastically shared it with his priests: to see the churches of the diocese transformed into great schools of Christian doctrine for the people. He called upon everyone's help, declaring that "the deepest gratitude of his heart would be earned by the aid lent him in such an important part of his episcopal ministry." Thus he wrote in a letter to the clergy dated April 19, 1893. His magnificent catechetical letters constitute a practical summary of pedagogy and pastoral technique from the religious magisterium and, in my opinion, they would merit being collected and organized in a volume and published, for they are documents of a burning relevancy for our time.

A number of episodes followed that show his zeal and firm, fatherly intervention on behalf of the accomplishment of this very serious pastoral duty. Monsignor Sarto was a courageous bishop who dared to sound the depths of the ministry and to expose it in its least dynamic aspects. He did not hesitate to denounce certain forms of ecclesiastical eloquence that failed to correspond with the genuine need of souls: "I much prefer that the Lenten conferences, which most of the time prove to be absolutely fruitless because the people do not understand some speeches, be suppressed and the distinguished orator preach in the desert, rather than the faithful remain without Christian doctrine and the pastor's catechism," he wrote in his letter to the clergy of October 12, 1885.

In response to a question about pastoral practice posed by some of the parish priests, namely, whether the explanation of the Gospel could replace the catechism lesson, he bluntly replied in the letter quoted above:

No, the explanation of the Gospel, while necessary, cannot take the place of catechetical instruction, for these are two quite different duties. The explanation or homily made on the Gospel, even if it is adapted to the meager capacity of the listeners, presupposes that the faithful are already instructed in the rudiments of the faith, for these are recalled on the fly, so

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to speak, while catechetical instruction must propound a truth of faith or Christian morals and explain it in all its parts.... Preparation for teaching catechism cannot be done without great care, to the contrary; it requires study, even more than for the preparation of an eloquent sermon. It has been said aright that it is easier to find a preacher than a catechist who can give good instruction. Whatever may be the aptitude one may think one has, one will never be able to teach catechism fruitfully without diligent preparation. The pretext that the people is loutish and uncouth only increases the duty to spend more time studying than if one had to address cultivated and instructed persons.

Need one add that the catechetical magisterium of Pius X did not mature on the pontifical See, but was the laborious and considered fruition of his long pastoral experience in the world of living souls? At every passage, obvious correspondences stand out. Pius X is known for the drafting of his “catechism,” which is a precise formulary of Christian doctrine.

The origin of the “uniform catechism” goes back to September 1889, when the first National Catechetical Congress was held at Piacenza, presided by the outstanding bishop and catechist that was Msgr. Giovanni Battista Scalabrini, Bishop of Piacenza. Msgr. Sarto was occupied with his second pastoral visitation and so was unable to participate. However, he presented a motion and a wish for the drafting of a catechism that would be satisfactory by its clarity and the simplicity of its formulas, which could be placed in the hands of the people and understood by them. The catechism in usage in the diocese of Mantua did not satisfy him, nor did the catechisms of the neighboring dioceses which he had studied attentively, for, he confided to his clergy in a letter of April 19, 1893, “with all due respect for the councils and methods, I have not yet found any that can be adapted to the needs and conditions of our diocese.”

It should be related that during the preparatory phase of the Catechetical Congress, during a discussion to determine whether the idea of a single catechism, which was desired by a great number, should be included among the topics of interest to the congress, Msgr. Scalabrini, a balanced and refined soul, expressed fear “lest the congress encroach upon the authority of the bishops,” who have the right to select and impose the catechism they consider best adapted to their diocese. But when the motion of the Bishop of Mantua was read, which recalled an identical wish formulated by the Fathers of the First Vatican Council, during an executive session, the general opinion shifted towards this practical objective, and it was Msgr. Scalabrini who was the first to express his affirmative opinion. Even though he had “decided not to refer to the development of a uniform catechism during the Congress,” he showed himself to be forthwith very happy to speak about it and to conclude with a petition to be addressed to the Holy See. The Acts and Documents of the First Catechetical Congress of Piacenza, printed by the

Episcopal Press of the same diocese in 1890, precisely report the fact and reproduce the text of Msgr. Sarto’s motion, which deserves to be known, at least in its most interesting passages:

The undersigned Bishop of Mantua respectfully greets the First Catechetical Congress, and makes a proposal that he desires to see discussed by the learned ecclesiastics who will be taking part.

Faced with the abundance of catechisms which are lacking, especially among those published recently, not only in form but also in dogmatic exactitude, it is desirable to have a single text that would be adopted for instruction in the Schools of Christian Doctrine.

In anticipation of the objection that this is not a question that can be treated of during a local congress because the bishops, masters of the faithful entrusted to their care, have the right to present, each one in his own diocese, the catechism in the form they believe the most opportune.

The Congress is not being asked to deliberate, but only to manifest its desire on this subject and to make it known to the Apostolic See.

Indeed, just as the Holy See established the *Catechismus ad Parochos*, which belongs to the Universal Church, likewise it is desirable that there be a popular historical, dogmatic, and moral catechism, written in short questions and answers, which would be taught in all the Schools of Christian Doctrine and translated in all languages, so that in this matter also, all may be *labii unius*; and this would be the foundation of the other, more numerous institutions which must be established by the parish priest and catechist.

He supported his desire with reasons of obvious practical urgency, such as the uniformity of a child’s catechetical language in its family and in the parish; the frequent emigration of the faithful from one parish to another—an argument making allusion to the work of Msgr. Scalabrini for immigrants—and from one country to another; and the fact that St. Robert Bellarmine’s *Book of Christian Doctrine*, even though composed by order of Clement VIII, “proves to be very difficult for uncultivated minds, not only of children, but also of adults, who in this domain are ‘*quasi geniti infantes*.’” Msgr. Sarto does not exclude a few difficulties, which he judges to be “negligible in relation to the great advantages to be gained.”

He suggested the text of the resolution: “The First Catechetical Congress addresses a prayer to the Holy Father, that he might command the redaction of a popular and easy Catechism of Christian Doctrine in the form of very brief questions and answers, divided into different parts, and that he make it obligatory throughout the Church.”

He then added a remark of great biographical and apostolic interest, because it is praise and indirect recognition of what he himself, as Pius X, was to do for the practical achievement of this very same episcopal motion: “It would not be the least of the glories of Your Pontificate, and the First Catechetical

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Congress of Piacenza would have the merit of having promoted a work of immense profit for souls.”

He was to be the one to accomplish this petition, which the Congress forwarded to the Holy See, and this pontifical glory would be his only 14 years later when he became Pope. The enterprise was not easy, but Pius X did not fear to become unpopular, for in his soul he was still Don Giuseppe Sarto, chaplain of Tombolo and archpriest of Salzano: that is to say, a man of God and workman of the Church.

This was at Mantua. At Venice, when he reigned on the patriarchal see, he was to repeat vigorously this catechetical magisterium, stigmatizing a deplorable oratorical formality, which remained, as he pointedly remarked, “in the lofty heights of the pulpit, closer to the organ pipes than the people’s hearts.” Thus he expressed himself in a letter to his clergy of January 17, 1895.

There is a document of considerable value and of pastoral relevance coming from Cardinal Sarto just two months before his accession to the patriarchal see: it is a letter burning with zeal and full of paternal bitterness, not unworthy of authentic patristic literature. In it one sees the notion of the primacy of teaching in pastors of souls take precedence over their liturgical and sacramental ministry, a theme that he will take up with prophetic vigor in the great encyclical that remains sovereign among pontifical documents concerning catechesis, because it harkens to Christ’s *docete*, which precedes the *baptizantes*. Here it is in its essential passages:

We preach too much and teach too little. We must put aside these florid speeches and preach piously and simply to the people the truths of faith, the commandments of the Church, the teachings of the Gospel, the vices and the virtues, because it often happens that persons well instructed in profane sciences do not know or misknow the truths of faith, and know less of the catechism than idiotic children do. Think of the good of souls more than the impression you hope to make. The people thirst for truth: let them be given what they need for the salvation of their souls; and so, instructed in their own language, touched and moved, they will weep over their faults and approach the divine Sacraments.

These teachings of Cardinal Sarto announce the documents of Pope Pius X: the pontificate would only increase their authority and force.

## The Catechetical Activity of St. Pius X

### The Pope of Catechesis

There is a date in the life of Pius X and consequently in the history of the Church, which has particular importance, for it projects the apostolic vigor of St. Peter and St. Paul, of St. John Chrysostom

and St. Augustine: April 15, 1905. The Catholic world received from Pius X an eminent gift: the Encyclical *Acerbo Nimis* on teaching Christian Doctrine. Some of his august predecessors gave exhortatory rules for catechesis, but the task of giving it a complete treatment in its theological, moral, legal, and pastoral aspects devolved to him. Even now [1953], his encyclical constitutes the *code of the Catechism* for the Catholic Church, and subsequent legislation drew upon this source, including the Code of Canon Law redacted under his authority and promulgated by Benedict XV.

A brief synthesis of the document will effectively clarify the pastoral and social content of his catechetical thought, officially expressed at a historical moment in which Freemasonry, which had seized political power in several Christian nations, “had especially attacked the public schools in order to rear up new generations not only ignorant,” remarked Msgr. Lorenzo Pavanelli, eminent specialist on the catechetical problems in light of the teaching of St. Pius X, “but also resolutely opposed to real and authentic Christianity, that is to say, Catholicism. Even in Italy, by cunning regulations and underhanded ploys violating the spirit and the letter of statutory legislation, all Christian teaching and prayer were driven in sectarian fashion out of all the schools, even the lower grades.”

There was on the one hand a massive front hostile to catechism at school, even elementary school, that advanced reasons such as the incompetence of the priests, charged with religious teaching within the confines of the church and who should not profane this teaching by giving it in public schools; and on the other hand, there was a no less hostile aversion toward the text of the catechism itself, composed as it was according to didactic criteria inferior to those in practice at school. Such accusations were supported by factions in our own camp, and perhaps even by elements of the clergy, ignorant of the adversary’s game. In effect, the didactical situation of the catechism—one catechism for all the grades—seemed delicate and vulnerable. Catechesis at school did not fit in with the didactic structure of the other disciplines because of its insufficient and rudimentary methodology, because the catechetical criterion of questions and answers exclusively learned by heart was not the most indicated for schooling at the time. For the same reasons they even went so far as to denounce the deficiencies of parish catechesis, and in the Italian parliament a blasphemous voice of condemnation and contempt was raised which overstepped the limits of methodology and crossed the line into doctrinal content and the Church’s teaching power. Finally, the teaching of religion was banished from Italian schools.

Pius X was the man placed by Providence to hoist the destiny of the catechism, beginning with

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the parishes and dioceses, so that it might then be ready and able to hold a place at school with dignity and honor. He took up the idea of a School of Catechism based on the thought and rules of St. Charles Borromeo, but a school in keeping with the times, school as it was then, with its didactic and technical rules, with its pedagogical spirit purified and refined by the educational treasures of the Church and its holy educators, to whom he fervently looked for guidance. It would be difficult to form a fair idea of the catechetical encyclical of Pius X without keeping in mind these determining factors set by the circumstances, and especially by the pedagogical and apostolic acuity of this Pontiff, who achieved the Church's desire for perfection in the domain of catechesis. The program of this document is "the renewal of the Church's teaching mandate by developing it within the framework of the era, with the adoption of the best pedagogical and didactic results, thereby impressing upon catechesis an organization that transforms the parish into an authentic catechetical teaching authority." The encyclical is thus a short treatise of pastoral catechesis, catechetical legislation, and organization, such as was required by the exigencies of the nascent 20th century.

The encyclical begins with an analysis of the religious decadence caused by "ignorance of things divine," which leads men to insensibility to good and evil. This leads to the corruption of morals in which every affection of man is turned to a love of vanity and deceit, and men stray from the paths of justice. Pius X sees "the knowledge of divine things" as the only guide able to direct the erring will of man, and he does not hesitate to state that "the obligation to dissipate this most pernicious ignorance...rests upon all who are pastors of souls," according to the command of Christ. The encyclical then traces the evangelical figure of the priest as teacher and catechist, as propagators of the doctrine of Jesus Christ and saviors of the human family, athirst for light and truth. Indeed, Pius X affirms with apostolic frankness:

...for a priest there is no duty more grave or obligation more binding than this.... If what We have just said is applicable to all priests, does it not apply with much greater force to those who possess the title and the authority of parish priests, and who, by virtue of their rank and in a sense by virtue of a contract, hold the office of pastors of souls? These are, to a certain extent, the pastors and teachers appointed by Christ in order that the faithful might not be as "children, tossed to and fro and carried about by every wind of doctrine devised in the wickedness of men.... (§§9, 10).

The encyclical, in reference to the parish priests, expounds wise rules about the catechetical magisterium. It recalls that the teaching of catechism comes before the explanation of the Gospel because

The sermon on the holy Gospel is addressed to those who should have already received knowledge of the elements of faith. It is, so to speak, bread broken for adults. Catechetical instruction, on the other hand, is that milk which the Apostle Peter wished the faithful to desire in all simplicity like newborn babes. (§12)

Pius X then finds it opportune to provide the general outline of a catechism lesson that will really lead to amendment of life:

The task of the catechist is to take up one or other of the truths of faith or of Christian morality and then explain it in all its parts; and since amendment of life is the chief aim of his instruction, the catechist must needs make a comparison between what God commands us to do and what is our actual conduct. After this, he will use examples appropriately taken from the Holy Scriptures, Church history, and the lives of the saints—thus moving his hearers and clearly pointing out to them how they are to regulate their own conduct. He should, in conclusion, earnestly exhort all present to dread and avoid vice and to practice virtue. (§13)

In the clear pedagogical conception of Pius X, the lesson comprises four parts: the first makes an appeal to the mind by the master's lively, oral exposition in which he examines the particular truth in all its parts. In this part, the teaching aspect of catechism dominates, as distinguished from mere moralizing, in which doctrine is absent and the mind left inactive. The Pontiff likes simple, forceful catechesis, which he demands be dispensed with great clarity and simplicity. Once the truth has been expounded, its application to practical life follows: this calls for an interior act of reflection and verification, engaging the understanding and facilitating assimilation and possession of the truth. It is tantamount to an examination of conscience injected quickly into the catechism lesson, the efficacy of which is incalculable. The mind that before was hesitant about a truth of faith now seeks support and confirmation in practical, lived examples that extend beyond religious knowledge as such and translate into the lives of men as it is represented in sacred literature, or reliable historical truth which constitutes literature for edification and encouragement. This is the appeal to the sensibility, which receives so much emphasis in contemporary pedagogy. The heart has its role in catechesis, as in all teaching, and Pius X, with the sensible balance that characterizes him, discreetly assigns it its place so that it can fulfill its function. The fourth part is reserved to the will, of which Pius X shows that he has a lofty and sovereign conception, for it is man's backbone. The final exhortation he desires as a conclusion to the lesson is volitional, for once the motives for action have been exposed and illustrated, there is nothing left but to exhort the pupils to put them into practice. The common sense

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and the cultured—in order that they may arrive at eternal happiness. (§26)

of these volitional applications is worth pointing out, for they do not end in cold, illogical exhortations; they are grafted on the living trunk of the lesson, in which the foundations of doctrine and hence of motivation have been laid. Contemporary volitional psychology rightly extols the indispensable character of *motivation* that persuades the understanding and discovers to it the beauty of truth, which becomes lovable through the heart's office: from there to the will, the passage is short.

Without any display of pedagogical erudition, Pius X summarizes the best of the Catholic Church's knowledge of education handed on by the experience of the most reputable persons worthy of the confidence of Christian schools. Even today, almost a half a century after the promulgation of this encyclical, it is astonishing to glimpse such freshness, vigor, and truth, and it must be admitted that some saints can teach every age and offer, in a nutshell, the vital principle of what men will do afterwards.

After outlining the lesson, Pius X confirms the oral nature of catechetical teaching: "Faith then depends on hearing, and hearing on the word of Christ" (Rom. 10:17, quoted in §16). It was from this truth that an academic program for catechetical instruction was developed and put in place by a handful of apostolic priests who were able to adapt the teaching of catechism to the school setting, organized by grades in parallel to the public school grades, with professors, a curriculum, textbooks, registration, grades, teachers' manuals, supplementary instructional material; with an office, secretariat, examinations and competitions, rewards and feasts, celebrations and apostolate.

Finally, the encyclical establishes the norms and directives for parish priests, concluding with a fervent appeal to the duty of pedagogical preparation, which even today occupies the lion's share of catechetical efforts:

We do not, however, wish to give the impression that this studied simplicity in imparting instruction does not require labor and meditation—on the contrary, it demands both more than any other kind of preaching. It is much easier to find a preacher capable of delivering an eloquent and elaborate discourse than a catechist who can impart a catechetical instruction which is praiseworthy in every detail. No matter what natural facility a person may have in ideas and language, let him always remember that he will never be able to teach Christian doctrine to children or to adults without first giving himself to very careful study and preparation. They are mistaken who think that because of inexperience and lack of training of the people the work of catechizing can be performed in a slipshod fashion. On the contrary, the less educated the hearers, the more zeal and diligence must be used to adapt the sublime truths to their untrained minds; these truths, indeed, far surpass the natural understanding of the people, yet must be known by all—the uneducated

Pius X repeats this point several times in the encyclical, persuaded that fruitful catechesis largely follows upon a preparation adapted to the pupils: without wishing to, he has described himself, for Don Giuseppe Sarto, then Bishop, Patriarch and lastly Pope, prepared his catechism lessons at Tombolo and Salzano, at Mantua and Venice, and even those he gave from the Chair of Peter, in just this way.

## The Pope of the Catechism

In his youth, he studied catechism in the books of his time. As a young priest, he lamented the inadequacy of the texts and programs ill-adapted to the mental capacity of his pupils, but he said nothing. As a parish priest, he highlighted this lacuna and perhaps contented himself with talking about it to fellow priests and calling for a sound revision. He supplied the deficiencies of method by his words and skillful presentation. As bishop of Mantua, he observed the insufficiency of the diocesan catechism: he would have liked to see the material organized more rationally, the form and style less rhetorical and plainer and more concrete, simpler and more concise. We have already spoken of his motion at the first National Catechetical Congress of Piacenza in 1889—which remained a dead letter until 1912, the year in which he promulgated *his* catechism.

[Almost a century] has elapsed since that 12th of October on which Pius X wrote a letter to Cardinal Pietro Respighi, his vicar general for the city of Rome. The Letter, imbued with paternal fervor, is as it were the synthesis of all his other writings on catechesis. As such, it ought to be made known for the benefit of priests and Christian educators, who will find in its lines an abundance of doctrine and wise rules for catechetical instruction.

From the beginning of Our Pontificate we have taken the greatest care for the religious instruction of the Christian people, and in particular of children, convinced that a great part of the evils afflicting the Church arise from ignorance of its doctrine and laws. The enemies of the Church condemn it, blaspheming what they do not know, and very many of her children, failing to appreciate this doctrine and its laws, live as if they were not children of the Church. That is why we have often insisted upon the urgent necessity of catechetical instruction, and we have promoted it everywhere, according to our power, by the Encyclical Letter *Acerbo Nimis*, and by regulations concerning the teaching of catechism in the parishes, but also by the approbation and encouragement given to catechetical congresses and schools of religion, and by the introduction here at Rome of the text of the Catechism used in some of the major ecclesiastical provinces of Italy.

However, several years having passed, because of the new difficulties cunningly erected against any teaching of Christian doctrine in the schools, where it had been taught for centuries, but also by the useful anticipation, wished by Us, of the first Holy Communion of children, and for other motives, the desire having been expressed to Us for a suitable

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Catechism, which would be much shorter and better adapted to today's needs, we have consented to the abridgment of the old Catechism into a new, concise one, which We, Ourselves, have examined and which We wished to have examined by many Fellow Bishops of Italy, so that they might express their opinion in general and indicate in particular, according to their knowledge and experience, changes to be made.

Having received from them an almost unanimous favorable appreciation, as well as a great number of precious observations which We have ordered to be taken into account, it seems to Us that we ought not to postpone a substitution of a text recognized to be opportune for different reasons. We are confident that this text, with the Lord's blessing, will prove to be much more practical and also profitable—if not more—for souls than the former: Significantly abridged, it will not discourage the youngest, on whom already weigh heavy scholastic burdens, and it will permit the masters and catechists to have it learned in its entirety. In spite of its brevity, one finds better explained and emphasized there the truths which today are the most combated, misunderstood, or forgotten, to the great detriment of souls and of society.

We are even confident that adults who wish to revitalize in their soul the fundamental knowledge upon which rests the Christian moral and spiritual life—as they ought sometimes in order to live better and to educate their families—will find useful and will appreciate this short, carefully worded compendium, in which they will find expounded with great simplicity the chief divine truths and the most effective Christian reflections.

This Catechism, and the rudiments we would like excerpted without modification of the wording for the use of young children, We approve and consequently prescribe for the diocese and the ecclesiastical province of Rome, by the authority of this present letter, and We forbid that henceforth any other text be used in catechetical instruction. As for the other dioceses of Italy, it is sufficient for Us to express the wish that the same text, judged by Us and by numerous Ordinaries, also be adopted there, so that, among other reasons, the detrimental confusion and inconvenience many experience today in their frequent changes of domicile, finding in their new place of residence notably different formulas and texts which they have difficulty learning even as they confuse and finally forget what they already knew. It is worse for the children, for nothing is more fatal to the success of teaching than to pursue it with a different text from the one to which the child is already more or less accustomed.

And as the adults may meet with some difficulties in teaching the present text, for it departs from the previous in certain formulas, and to remedy this inconvenience, We command that at the beginning of all the main Masses and classes of Christian doctrine the essential prayers and main formulas be recited aloud clearly and slowly. In this way, after some time and without effort, all will have learned them, and an excellent habit of common prayer and instruction will have been introduced, which is already in force in numerous dioceses in Italy, not without edification and profit.

We firmly exhort in the Lord all the catechists, now that the very brevity of the text facilitates their work, to endeavor with the greatest care to explain Christian doctrine and make it penetrate into the souls of young children, so great is the need today for solid religious instruction because of the diffusion of impiety and immorality. Let them remember that the fruit of catechism depends almost totally upon their zeal and knowledge and skill at making the teaching lighter and appealing to the pupils.

We pray God that just as today the enemies of the Faith, ever more numerous and powerful, propagate error by every means, so also may arise a great number of souls desirous of zealously assisting the parish priests, instructors, and Christian parents in the teaching of catechism, as necessary as it is noble and fruitful.

The date and the august signature, preceded by an affectionate benediction, seal this important pontifical document, which has lost nothing of its urgency and practicality.

A few notes of a didactic character should be made in the margin of this little masterpiece of Christian catechesis which was the code of the Faith for generations of children. The “catechism,” as it is known, was drafted at the order of St. Pius X by abridging the former text used in certain Italian dioceses, which was very extensive and little indicated for use by primary school children who, thanks to the Decree *Quam Singulari* by the same Pius X, could make their first Holy Communion sooner than previously. A sufficient but short catechism was needed that could easily be learned by heart, in conformity with the august teachings of the encyclical of 1905. Memorization made its entrance into Catechism class as a dike to check the collapse of a body of knowledge that was not taking sufficient root in the child's mind, dissipated by the onset of puberty and still more by adolescence. Pope Pius X personally examined the new edition.

Thus it is that we have the “Catechism of Christian Doctrine” called, even today, the “Catechism of St. Pius X,” a precious little book that has educated and is still educating in the faith entire generations of Catholics. In the didactical organization of catechetical instruction, a formulary is distinct from an actual text: the formulary condenses in very brief, precise statements the essence of a religious truth so that it can be learned entirely by heart; the text, on the contrary, based on the formulary, develops the truth in a simple and clear fashion so as to reach the same formula as a logical, theological conclusion. The Catechism of St. Pius X is a formulary, it is not a text; as such it is useful to both great and small, to the learned and the illiterate. It is the orthodox synthesis of Catholic doctrine, of dogmatic, moral, and sacramental theology, in a very simple didactic form. It possesses all the qualities of a synthesis: conciseness, clarity, simplicity, integrity, and fidelity. Of course, to be understood by the pupils, the formulas require, like the rules of grammar, the teacher's explanation. The formula cannot replace the teacher's personal instruction. That is why as a synthesis, the formulary of Pius X is

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the most remarkable work we could have had in the domain of catechism to the present day.

The difficulty of the wording of some of the formulas, hard and dry for a child's mind, has been noted. It is obvious that the catechism by nature abounds in abstract terms and speculative notions, but that is inherent in Christian doctrine, which is revealed and which concerns the relationship of created man with the Creator God. That the Catechism of St. Pius X may sometimes seem difficult to children is granted, especially in certain particularly condensed formulas, but the division of the subject matter into cycles, currently in vigor in teaching texts, mitigates the asperity by dosing the contents of the catechism according to the children's age. Perhaps the most widespread error is to consider it as a text when it is simply a formulary which all the writers of textbooks can draw upon. There is another error, which consists in conceiving of it as a point of departure in oral catechesis when in fact it is the point of arrival, the conclusion of the exposition of the lesson given by the instructor with the aids contemporary pedagogy recommends.

Decades of experience have taught many things about the formulary of Pius X: it has first and foremost assured the precious unity and uniformity of terminology which is very important in the religious study of children and of the people, and which was one of the holy Pontiff's principal intentions. Also, the remarks he made in 1912 on the frequent migration of families from one town to another, have been largely confirmed today by the continual moving of families within a country. Questions of terminology, concerning the conciseness of concepts, can be explained by the absolute respect for doctrinal

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exactness and precision. There were, in effect, here and there some attempts at new catechetical formularies, perhaps in the intention of replacing that of St. Pius X. They succeeded in being clearer and less hard, but by increasing the amount of text, explaining in half a page what the Catechism of St. Pius X explained in a maximum of two or three lines. The latter still remains vivid, perennial, incisive. It is a monument of doctrine, synthesis, clarity, and piety, for the short catechetical formulas are full of unction and inculcate true Christian piety.

**(To be continued.)**

Translated from *Courrier de Rome*, January 2010.