

## “Chinese Whispers”

I’m sure you are familiar with the parlour game “Chinese Whispers” – someone whispers a phrase to their neighbour who in turn whispers what they heard to their neighbour and so on until it reaches the last person in line and you then compare the original with what that final person heard. The point is to prove how easily things become distorted and changed as a result of each person’s perception of what they thought they heard, and the more people there are in the chain, the greater the risk of the original message being lost. And so, for example, a phrase like “Send reinforcements, we’re going to advance” can become “Send three-and-four-pence, we’re going to a dance” – only two small changes, but it results in a very different message. I use this as an example of what I feel has happened in the process of communicating the basic principles of the Catholic Faith in recent years.

Let’s just compare the list of contents of the old “penny catechism” (left) and the current *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (right):

Faith & Revelation	Divine Revelation
Apostles’ Creed (inc. Sin & Grace)	The Creeds
Hope & Grace	Liturgy & Sacraments
Prayer & the Lord’s Prayer	Vocation – Life in the Spirit
Charity	Freedom, Conscience, Virtues, Sin
Commandments of God	Moral Law & Grace
Commandments of the Church	The Precepts of the Church
Sacraments	The Ten Commandments
Virtues & Vices	Prayer in the Christian Life
The Christian’s Rule of Life	The Lord’s Prayer

While the “penny catechism” took less than a hundred pages (and some 370 questions and answers) to teach the basics of the Catholic Faith, the current *Catechism* takes about six-hundred pages of text to do the same thing.<sup>1</sup> But, as you can see, and as you would expect, the content is basically the same because nothing has changed.

When I was in school (1953-64) we plodded our way through the “penny catechism” year by year, learning the questions and answers by heart a few at a time. It was essentially the “rule book” of what it meant to be a Catholic and provided a basic foundation of faith knowledge that was built upon and supplemented by what our RE teachers taught us over the years. Given today’s educational methods, rote learning of that sort may come in for criticism, but I

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<sup>1</sup> Interestingly in 2006, a “Compendium” of the *Catechism* (containing in concise form all the essential and fundamental elements of the Faith) was published in a questions and answers format (598 questions with slightly longer answers – though still concise - than in the old “penny catechism”) and also containing, like the “penny catechism”, common prayers and formulas of Catholic doctrine (the Beatitudes, the theological and cardinal virtues, the gifts and fruits of the Holy Spirit, the corporal and spiritual works of mercy, etc).

would contend that at least we knew where we stood: it provided a basic foundation, a working level of knowledge that I would claim was (and still is) important whatever the method by which it was imparted. Ever since that catechism method of foundation building was abandoned, I'm not convinced that what might be considered to be the essentials of the Faith are being taught or learned anymore. What we do see is a more flimsy structure, but without the foundation that served us so well and for so long.

**H**aving said that, there are a number of episodes in the gospel where blind observance of the Law (which isn't what I'm advocating) rightly came in for considerable criticism by Our Lord. The scribes and Pharisees of his day had fallen into the trap of believing that because they observed the letter of the Law, all was well in their relationship with God. There was also the incident of the young man who approached Jesus to ask what he must do to inherit eternal life. Confident that his observance of the Law, his keeping the rules, was enough he fully expected Jesus to pat him on the back and say: "Well done, you're doing fine, carry on" - but he didn't. It was OK, but it wasn't enough. The underlying spirit of the Law is a little like the two-thirds of an iceberg that is under the water and just as there's much more to it than what you can see, so there is much more to observing the Law (and to practicing our Faith) than merely keeping the rules.

**T**hat said, I would still argue that just as knowing the rules is important to playing any game or sport, so knowing the "rules" of the Faith is also important. They are by no means the be-all and end-all, but they are a starting point, a point of reference. When we consigned the "penny catechism" to the waste basket and replaced it with our current RE curricula, I think we threw out the proverbial baby with the bath water and, mixing metaphors, the pendulum has now swung too far the other way. The emphasis is now on a God who loves us (no matter what we do) and, in the absence of the firmer guidelines of the old catechism-based method of teaching RE, a certain degree of liberalism seems to have crept in, along with a nod to multiculturalism and political correctness. I remember once, having given a homily which involved reference to venial and mortal sin, someone coming up to me after Mass to say that I shouldn't preach about mortal sin! Well, if you check the current catechism you will find that both venial and mortal sin are still very much a part of Church teaching and can't simply be airbrushed out of the picture because they're inconvenient.

**I**t may seem a little trivial, but, just as a test, I will pick up copies of current First Communion texts and look to see if they mention the eucharistic fast - most don't. Fasting before communion may not rate very highly compared to the far more substantial theology involved in preparing children for the sacrament, but it is still a requirement and therefore should be taught. The fact that it doesn't seem to be, might account for why we see young people, even

young adults, not only chewing gum in church, but even chewing as they approach to receive the sacrament! That's just one small - some might say insignificant - example, but it's how the rot (no dental pun intended) sets in. It's also where "Chinese Whispers" come in.

The old catechism-based method of laying the foundations of the Faith provided a fairly standardised process of religious education. We have now lost that basic uniformity of knowledge. Any omissions in the Catholic teaching imparted to one generation is - when they become parents, teachers, even priests - passed on to the next generation along with that generation's omissions, and so it multiplies and grows like a rolling snowball. This is why, over the course of just the last forty years or so we now have:

- people deciding for themselves (and for their children) whether or not they'll go to Sunday (or holyday) Mass depending on whether there is a conflict of interests with some other activity that day;
- people similarly deciding for themselves what constitutes a sin and what doesn't, hence entire congregations going to communion on Sundays but only a handful ever at confession;
- youngsters (and even adults) who don't know about genuflecting to the Blessed Sacrament when they come into church;
- couples living together but still receiving holy communion, and couples who have never heard the Church's moral teaching with regard to birth control;
- baptism being requested not for the sake of the baby's soul, but (later at age three or four) simply to get them into a Catholic school;
- people reading horoscopes, consulting fortune-tellers and mediums, and trusting in lucky charms;
- those who would struggle to list God's commandments let alone the Precepts of the Church, all of which, in all their depth, we should be living by as Catholic Christians.

And those are just a few examples off the top of my head. It's especially in "people deciding for themselves" – and, indeed, in what they decide - that I feel, as I've said, that the pendulum has swung too far.

Part of the problem is that we can no longer teach RE in our schools the way we used to because of the time constraints of today's national secular curriculum and the fear that we might offend all the non-Catholic pupils now attending our schools because we are no longer allowed to establish our admissions policies anymore. Another problem is the fact that priests must now give homilies based on the day's readings rather than the teaching sermons of bygone years and this doesn't always lend itself to covering matters of Church doctrine. The result is that if people have missed out on certain aspects of basic Catholic teaching in school and have never heard it from their priests since then either, then it is

hardly surprising that the catechetical foundation that those of us “of a certain age” received in school in our day can be quite different to what the next generation heard, and the one after that, and so on: “Chinese Whispers” – and with each generation the whisper is getting worse.

Whatever the teaching style by which we are introduced to our Faith as children, on-going catechesis will always be necessary. We will never know all that there is to know; we will never be fully formed as Catholics. If we are open to this reality then there is every chance that, somewhere along the way, we will discover any gaps that there may be in our faith-knowledge and will have the opportunity to rectify the situation. And as we grow physically and intellectually we should seek to grow and mature spiritually also. But I continue to be of the opinion that a basic and uniform foundation would be more surely laid down if religious education in our schools was more catechism-based (even involving a degree of rote learning as part of that process) rather than what we have at the moment, which doesn’t seem to serve our children quite as well when it comes to their knowledge of the basics of the Faith.

We believe that our baptism into, and our active membership of, the Catholic Church is essential to our salvation - if we didn’t then our claim to be Catholics would be empty and pointless. This is the way by which we have chosen to follow Jesus Christ as members of his body, the Church. Knowledge of him (revelation) and his gospel message to his followers (scripture), combined with the spiritual and moral guidance of the church he founded (Church teaching), are vital to us as Catholic Christians. If any of that has come down to us changed or incomplete, then our following of Christ may be incomplete as well. We need to go back to the Source, back to the First Person in line, and hear the message for ourselves, first-hand, before the whispering began and the changes crept in. What the catechism teaches is essential to that process; we then build on that foundation.

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