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The New Testament in Religion Courses

BY

REV. JOSEPH L. LILLY

C. M., S. T. D., S. S. L.

*Assistant Professor of Sacred Scripture,
Catholic University of America; Secretary,
Catholic Biblical Association of America*

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The New Testament in Religion Courses

I COME before you not as a salesman for Confraternity Publications. Neither do I come to advocate the reading and study of the Word of God. If you really believe that the New Testament is the Word of God, "living and efficient and keener than any two-edged sword" (Heb. 4, 12), nothing that I or any other human being can say will increase your appreciation of the forcefulness and finality of that written revelation. But I come before you simply to propose and to attempt to prove the thesis that **THE BEST WAY TO TEACH RELIGION IS THROUGH THE MEDIUM OF THE BIBLE.**

The Catechism is an excellent summary of Catholic doctrine but it is an abstract thing. The abstract lacks the warmth and appeal of the living thing. Human beings really love only living things, and the higher their life, the deeper and stronger is the attachment which binds us to them. Abstract statement of principle will mean little and

will scarcely move us at all unless in addition to seeing its reasonableness we bring ourselves to love it as a part or an emanation from one whom we love.

Our religion is not a religion of a book. (Evangelical Protestantism would seem to be largely that.) I dare say, however, that some children, from the emphasis put on learning the Catechism, often get the idea that Catholicism is a religion of a book — the Catechism. Ours is the religion of a Personality — a divine Personality — and the object to be striven after and realized in the teaching of religion is union with that divine Personality. "Yet not for these only do I pray, but for those also who through their word are to believe in Me, that all may be one, even as Thou, Father, in Me and I in Thee; that they also may be one in Us" (Jn. 17, 20-21).

Our Lord states this in a different way in the words: "If anyone wishes to come after Me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross, and follow Me. For he who would save his life will lose it; but he who loses his life for My sake will find it" (Mt. 16, 24-25). In these words the Master calls for the denial *of self*, not the denial *to self* of some creature comfort, but the utter, com-

plete, total abnegation of self, absolute selflessness, the entire living out of self and the total submersion of self in the divine Personality of Christ. He further demands as a condition for being His follower that we go with Him to complete self-immolation and death. That only can be the meaning of carrying one's cross. The audience to whom these words were first addressed had frequently seen those whom the Roman rulers of Palestine had condemned to death, trudging to the place of execution and carrying the instrument of their execution on their shoulders. To carry one's cross, then, meant to go to death. He who seeks to save his physical life by fleeing from the hardships and self-denial which Jesus Christ demands of His followers, is doomed to lose the higher life of eternal blessedness in heaven. Thus Jesus Christ makes of His disciples supreme demands, than which there can be no greater.

What right has He to make such terrific demands on any human being? It is reasonable to ask that question and to expect a satisfactory answer to it. He has the best possible right. He is God, our Lord and Creator upon Whom we depend for all we are and all we possess. We belong by right

of creation entirely to Him. His demand could not possibly be better grounded. For God is the *Summum Bonum*, *Summa Veritas*, *Summa Sapientia*, *Summus Amor*. Therefore, whatever demand He makes on us, proceeds from and is inspired by His infinite Truth, infinite Goodness, infinite Wisdom and infinite Love.

We do not expect the first-grade child to grasp the Scholastic arguments which are brought forward in proof of the divinity of Christ, but if the sacred Personality of Jesus as described and set forth in the pages of the simple Gospel story is presented to the child with the utmost graphic vividness and simplicity, the child will conclude, of itself almost, that such a Personality is more than a mere man. Let the teacher tell the Gospel stories with vividness and enthusiasm — the story of how Jesus commanded the winds and the waves, the story of the multiplication of the loaves, of the change of water into wine, to illustrate His power over material things and the natural elements; the story of the cure of the lepers — a vivid description of the symptoms of this dread disease will not be out of place — the story of the cure of the lame, the blind, the paralyzed, the fevered, to illustrate His power over the hu-

man body; the story of the calling back of Lazarus to life, to illustrate His power over death.

The extraordinary kindness, sympathy, patience of Jesus with poor, weak human nature, as evidenced in the accounts of how He dealt with sinners, with the poor, the afflicted, the outcast, cannot but produce a profound impression on the child, and draw it to love Him tenderly. And loving the divine Personality of Jesus, the child will also love whatever He has taught for our guidance and sanctification, and will accept that teaching as the only rule of life, to be followed at all costs.

Each point of dogma, each sacrament, each religious practice, the commandments, the Church with its legislative, teaching and sanctifying power — all these points of doctrine should be presented as the teachings of Jesus, the Man-God; and since the child has been brought to love and admire Jesus, he will by that fact love and accept the teachings and example of Jesus and will wish to guide his life according to them.

I am inclined to think that the teaching of religion has been in many cases too theoretical, and that we have relied too much on the false dictum that knowledge is power.

Knowledge, theoretic knowledge at least, is not power; it is light. It plays the same relative rôle in man's life as do the headlights on an automobile. They light the way, but they do not furnish the motive power to propel the automobile on its course. So theoretic knowledge shows us what is to be done and what direction to give to our lives, but something else is required to drive us forward on the way to life. That something else is love. Without it our faith, our knowledge, is like that of the devils who "believe and tremble" (James 2, 19). "If I should speak with the tongues of men and of angels, but do not have charity . . . I am nothing" (1 Cor. 13, 1). We must put heart into our religious teaching and get the heart of the child active, aflame with love, if we expect him to follow in the way lighted by the theoretical knowledge afforded by catechetical instruction.

Now love is directed to persons, and therefore we must present to the child the sacred Person of the God made Man in such a way as to render that sacred Person supremely attractive and lovable. Love means loyalty, love begets the crusading spirit which makes its possessor an active apostle in the cause of Jesus Christ.

I contend that if religion is presented through the medium of the Scriptures the child cannot but come to love Him Whose lovable Personality is so simply yet so forcefully presented in the Gospels.

Of course not all points can be presented in the language of the New Testament. For creation and the commandments we shall have to have recourse to the Old Testament. The first chapter of Genesis, if properly understood and presented to the child, will make a most vivid and lasting impression. The story of the giving of the Ten Commandments on Mount Sinai amid the grandiose setting described in Exodus will also deeply impress the child. But for most of the sacraments there are corresponding incidents connected with their institution in the New Testament. All the sacraments should be presented as the institutions of Jesus Christ.

Similarly the Christian virtues can all be presented in the setting of New Testament incidents which inculcate or illustrate these virtues. The vices too can often be depicted in their undesirable results in connection with New Testament incidents. Avarice and stealth stand out prominently in the character of Judas, and no doubt had much to do

with his downfall. Lying was the sin of Ananias and Sapphira, who dropped dead. The destruction of Sodom and Gomorrha can be described in connection with the vice of impurity. The parable of the Rich Fool or of the Rich Man and Lazarus will illustrate the folly of a selfish hard-heartedness, insensible to the needs of one's poverty-stricken fellow-beings.

Thus I believe our teaching of religion will be Christo-centric. We shall thus present Catholicity as Christ still active and living in the world, and thus on every individual rests the obligation of embracing it as being the continuation through time and space of Him of Whom St. Peter said: "There is no other name under heaven given to men whereby we must be saved" (Acts 4, 12).

The teacher who would thus present the Catechism must be thoroughly familiar with the Bible, particularly with the Gospels. Daily reading and study of them, along with a good commentary or a good life of Christ, is the way to get that knowledge. In this connection I recommend *A Commentary on the New Testament*, prepared by the Catholic Biblical Association, and any of the authentic lives of Christ which have appeared

in recent years: Fillion, Goodier, LeBreton, Lagrange, Willam, Fouard, O'Brien are all excellent, and if read in connection with the Gospels will be found to throw great light on them.

I believe that if this method is followed, there will be no danger that the child will get the idea that ours is the religion of a book. The Personality of Christ, ever kept in the foreground, will make that impossible.

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