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ACERBO NIMIS.

ON THE TEACHING
OF CHRISTIAN DOCTRINE

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THE inscrutable designs of Divine Providence have raised us, despite our lowliness, to the office of Supreme Pastor of the entire flock of Christ at a time when serious troubles and difficulties confront us. Long has the enemy been prowling round the fold, attacking it with such subtle cunning that now more than ever seems to be verified the prediction of the Apostle to the elders of the Church of Ephesus: “I know that . . . fierce wolves will get in among you, and will not spare the flock” (Acts 20: 29). Those who still cherish zeal for the glory of God are at pains to find the causes of the religious decadence. While at variance in their conclusions, they point out, each according to his own views, different ways for protecting and restoring the Kingdom of God on earth. But to us, venerable brothers, it seems that while other reasons may play their part, we must agree with those who hold that the main cause of the present indifference and

torpor, as well as of the very serious evils that flow from it, is to be found in the prevailing ignorance about divine things. This fully bears out what God Himself affirmed through the Prophet Osee: "And there is no knowledge of God in the land. Cursing and lying and killing, and theft and adultery have overflowed, and blood hath touched blood. Therefore shall the land mourn, and everyone that dwelleth in it shall languish" (Osee 4:1-3).

It is a common complaint, only too well founded, that among Christians there are large numbers who live in utter ignorance of the truths necessary for salvation. And when we say among Christians, we mean not only the masses and those in the lower walks of life, who are sometimes not to blame, because of the inhumanity of hard taskmasters whose demands leave them little time to think of themselves and their own interests; but we include, and indeed more especially, all those who, while endowed with a certain amount of talent and culture and possessing abundant knowledge of profane matters, have no care nor thought for religion. It is hard to find words to describe the dense darkness that environs these persons; the indifference with which they remain in this darkness is the saddest sight of

all. Rarely do they give a thought to the Supreme Author and Ruler of all things or to the teachings of the faith of Christ. Consequently they are absolutely without knowledge of the Incarnation of the Word of God, of the redemption of mankind wrought by Him, of grace, which is the chief means for the attainment of eternal welfare, and of the Holy Sacrifice and the Sacraments by which this grace is acquired and preserved. They fail to appreciate the malice and foulness of sin. They have, therefore, no care to avoid it and free themselves from it. Hence they reach their last day in such a state that the minister of God, anxious to take advantage of the slightest hope of their salvation, is obliged to employ those final moments which should be consecrated entirely to stimulating the love of God, in imparting brief instruction on the things indispensable for salvation; — even then it often happens that the invalid has become so far the slave of culpable ignorance that he considers superfluous the intervention of the priest, and calmly faces the terrible passage to eternity without reconciling himself with God. Our predecessor, Benedict XIV, therefore, had good reason to write as he did: "This we affirm: that the majority of those who are condemned to eternal pun-

ishment fall into this everlasting misfortune through ignorance of those mysteries of the faith which must be known and believed by all who belong to the elect" (Inst. 26: 18).

Under these circumstances, venerable brothers, what wonder is it if today we see in the world, not merely among barbarous peoples but in the very midst of Christian nations, a constantly increasing corruption and depravity? The Apostle writing to the Ephesians admonished them: "But immorality and every uncleanness or covetousness, let it not even be named among you, as becomes saints; or obscenity or foolish talk" (Eph. 5: 3, 4). St. Paul bases this holiness and the modesty that curbs the passions on supernatural wisdom: "See to it therefore, brethren, that you walk with care: not as unwise, but as wise, making the most of your time, because the days are evil. Therefore do not become foolish, but understand what the will of the Lord is" (ibid. 15, 16). The Apostle had good reason for speaking in this way; for the human will has retained but little of that love of what is honest and just which God the Creator infused into it and which drew it, so to speak, toward the real and not merely apparent good. Depraved as it has become by the corruption of the first sin, and almost forgetful of God its Author,

its affections are almost entirely turned to vanity and deceit.

REVELATION ANSWERING THE NEED OF A DIVINE GUIDE

This erring will, blinded by perverse passions, has need therefore of a guide to point out the way and lead it back to the paths of justice so unhappily abandoned. This guide; not selected at random but designated especially by nature, is no other than the intellect. But if the intellect be itself lacking in true light, that is, in the knowledge of divine things, it will be the blind leading the blind, and both will fall into the ditch. Holy David praising God for the light of truth which is flashed from Him upon our minds, said: "The light of Thy countenance, O Lord, is signed upon us" (Ps. 4: 7). And he described the effect of this light when he added: "Thou hast given gladness in my heart" — the gladness that fills the heart to make it run in the way of the divine commandments.

All this becomes evident on a little reflection. The doctrine of Jesus Christ reveals God and His infinite perfection to us with far greater clearness than does the natural light of the human intellect. What follows?

That same doctrine commands us to honor God by faith, which is the homage of our mind; by hope, which is the homage of our will; by charity, which is the homage of our heart; and thus it binds and subjects the whole of man to his Supreme Maker and Ruler. So, too, the doctrine of Christ alone makes known to us the true and lofty dignity of man, by showing him to be the son of the Father Who is in heaven, made to His image and likeness and destined to live with Him in eternal bliss. From this very dignity, and from the knowledge that man has of it, Christ showed the obligation of all men to love one another like brothers, as they are, commands them to live here below as children of light, "not in revelry," to quote the words of the Apostle, "and drunkenness, not in debauchery and wantonness, not in strife and jealousy" (Rom. 13: 13). Christ likewise commands men to place all their solicitude in God, since He has care of us, orders us to stretch forth a helping hand to the poor, to do good to those who do evil to us, to prefer the eternal good of the soul to the fleeting things of time. Not to go too much into detail, is it not the doctrine of Jesus Christ that inspires proud man with the love of humility which is the source of true glory? "Whoever, therefore, humbles him-

self . . . he is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven" (Matt. 18: 4). From the same doctrine we learn Prudence of the spirit, by means of which we are enabled to shun the prudence of the flesh; Justice, which teaches us to give everyone his due; Fortitude, which makes us ready to suffer all things, and by means of which we do in fact heroically suffer all things, for the sake of God and eternal happiness; and, finally, Temperance, through which we find it possible to love even poverty for the sake of the Kingdom of God and actually to glory in the Cross, paying no heed to contempt. In fine, the science of Christianity is a fount not only of light for the intellect, enabling it to attain truth, but of warmth to the will, whereby we raise ourselves up to God and unite ourselves with Him for the practice of virtue.

We indeed do not mean to say that a knowledge of religion may not be joined with a perverse will and unbridled conduct. Would to God that facts did not too abundantly prove the contrary. What we do maintain is that the will cannot be upright nor the conduct good so long as the intellect is the slave of crass ignorance. A man using his eyes may certainly turn aside from the right path, but the one who has become blind is certain to walk into the mouth of

danger. Besides, there is always some hope for the reform of perverted morality so long as the light of faith is not wholly extinguished; whereas, if want of faith is added to corruption as a result of ignorance, the evil hardly admits of remedy, and the road lies open to eternal ruin.

Such, then, are the unhappy consequences of ignorance in matters of religion; such, too, are the necessity and utility of religious instruction. Vain, indeed, would it be to expect one to perform the duties of a Christian who does not know them.

THE DUTY OF PASTORS TO ACT AS GUIDES

It remains, then, to inquire whose duty it is to eliminate this ignorance from the minds of the people, and to impart to them a knowledge that is so necessary. And here, venerable brothers, there is no room for doubt, for this most important duty is incumbent upon all who are pastors of souls. On them, by command of Christ, rests the obligation of knowing and feeding the flocks intrusted to them. To feed implies first of all to teach. "I will give you," God promised through Jeremias, "pastors according to My own heart, and they shall feed you with knowledge and doctrine" (Jer. 3:15).

Hence the Apostle Paul said: "Christ did not send me to baptize, but to preach the Gospel" (1 Cor. 1:17), thus indicating that the first office of all those who are intrusted to some extent with the government of the Church, is to instruct the faithful.

We do not think it necessary to speak here of the noble nature of this instruction or to show how meritorious it is in the sight of God. Assuredly the alms with which we alleviate the trials of the poor are highly praised by the Lord. But who will deny that a far greater measure of praise is due to the zeal and the labor expended, not on the fleeting welfare of the body, but on the eternal welfare of souls, by teaching and admonition? In truth, than this nothing is nearer or dearer to the heart of Jesus Christ the Saviour of souls, Who through the lips of Isaias, affirmed of Himself: "To bring good news to the poor He has sent Me" (Luke 4:18).

PERSONAL OBLIGATION OF PRIESTS

For our present purpose it will be better to dwell on a single point and to insist on it, viz., that for a priest there is no duty more grave or obligation more binding than this one. Who will deny that knowledge should

be joined with holiness of life in every priest? "For the lips of the priest shall keep knowledge" (Mal. 2:7). The Church does, in fact, require it most rigorously in those who are to be raised to the sacerdotal ministry. Why? The answer is, because from them the Christian people expect to learn, and it is for that end that they are sent by God, "and they shall seek the law at his mouth, for he is the angel of the Lord of Hosts" (ibid.). Thus the bishop, in ordaining, addressing the candidates for Orders, says to them: "Let your spiritual doctrine be as medicine for the people of God; let them be prudent coöperators of our order, in order that, meditating day and night on His law, they may believe what they shall read, and teach what they shall believe" (Pont. Rom.). If what we have just said is applicable to all priests, with how much greater force does it apply 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 ruling souls? These, to a certain extent, are to be numbered among the pastors and doctors designated by Christ in order that the faithful may no longer be as "children, tossed to and fro, and carried about by every wind of doctrine devised in

the wickedness of men," but that, "practising the truth in love," they may "grow up in all things in Him Who is the head, Christ" (Eph. 4: 14, 15).

PREACHING

Hence the Council of Trent, treating of the pastors of souls, lays down as their first and chief duty the instruction of the faithful. It prescribes that they must speak to the people on the truths of religion on Sundays and the more solemn feasts, and do so either daily or at least three times a week during the holy seasons of Advent and Lent. Nor is it content with this, for it adds that parish priests are bound, either by themselves or through others, to instruct the young, at least on Sundays and feast days, in the principles of faith and in obedience to God and their parents (Sess. 5, ch. 2 de ref.; Sess. 22, ch. 8; Sess. 24, ch. 4 and 7 de ref.). And when the Sacraments are to be administered, it enjoins upon them the duty of explaining their efficacy in the vernacular to those who are about to receive them.

These prescriptions of the sacred Council of Trent have been epitomized and still more clearly defined by our predecessor, Benedict XIV, in his Constitution, *Etsi minime*, in

the following words: "Two chief obligations have been imposed by the Council of Trent on those who have the care of souls: the first that they speak to the people on divine things on feast days; and secondly, that they instruct the young and the ignorant in the rudiments of the law of God and of faith."

THE OFFICE OF CATECHIZING

Rightly does that most wise Pontiff make a distinction between the two duties of the sermon, commonly known as the explanation of the Gospel, and of the Catechism. Perhaps there are some who, desirous of saving themselves trouble, are willing to believe that the explanation of the Gospel may serve also for catechetical instruction. The error of this must be apparent to all who stop to think for a moment. The sermon on the Gospel is addressed to those who may be supposed to be already instructed in the rudiments of the faith. It is, so to say, the bread that is broken for those who are grown up. Catechetical instruction, on the other hand, is that milk which the Apostle St. Peter wished the faithful to yearn after in all simplicity like newborn babes. The task of the catechist is to take up one or other of the truths of faith or Christian precept and ex-

plain it in all its parts; and as the scope of his instruction is always directed to amendment of life, he should institute a comparison between what is required of us by our Lord and our actual conduct. He should, therefore, make use of examples skilfully selected from the Holy Scriptures, Church history and the lives of the saints, using persuasion with his hearers, and pointing out to them how they are to shape their conduct. He should conclude with an efficacious exhortation, in order that they may be moved to shun and detest vice and to practise virtue.

We are aware that the office of the catechist is not much sought after because, as a rule, it is deemed of little account, since it does not lend itself easily to the winning of applause. But this, in our opinion, is an estimate born of vanity and not of truth. We are quite willing to admit the merits of those pulpit orators who, out of genuine zeal for the glory of God, devote themselves either to the defense and maintenance of the faith or to eulogizing the heroes of Christianity. But their labor presupposes labor of another kind, that of the catechist. Where the latter is wanting, the foundations are wanting, and they labor in vain who build the house. Too often it happens that ornate sermons which win the applause of crowded

congregations serve only to tickle the ears, and fail utterly to touch the heart. Catechetical instruction, on the other hand, plain and simple though it be, is that word of which God Himself speaks in Isaias: "And as the rain and the snow come down from heaven and return no more thither, but soak the earth, and water it, and make it to spring and give seed to the sower and bread to the eater; so shall My word be which shall go forth from My mouth; it shall not return to Me void, but it shall do whatsoever I please, and shall prosper in the things for which I sent it" (Is. 55:11). We believe the same may be said of those priests who devote much time and labor to the writing of books to illustrate the truths of religion. They are worthy of great commendation for their activity. But how many read these volumes and derive from them fruit that corresponds in any way to the toil and the wishes of those who wrote them? Whereas the teaching of the Catechism, when performed as it should be, never fails to be of profit to those who listen to it.

SALUTARY EFFECTS OF CHRISTIAN INSTRUCTION UPON SOCIAL LIFE

In order to stimulate the zeal of the ministers of the sanctuary, we must repeat that

there are today vast numbers, continually recruited by fresh accessions, who either are utterly ignorant of the truths of religion, or at most possess only such knowledge of God and of the Christian faith as to lead the life of idolaters. How many are there, not only among the young, but among adults and those tottering with age, who know nothing of the principal mysteries of faith; who on hearing the name of Christ can only ask: "Who is He . . . that I may believe in Him?" (John 9:36). In consequence of this ignorance, they regard it as no crime to excite and to cherish hatred against their neighbor, to enter into most unjust contracts, to give themselves up to dishonest speculations, to possess themselves of the property of others by enormous usury, and to commit other iniquities not less reprehensible. Furthermore, they are unaware that the law of Christ not only forbids immoral actions, but condemns deliberate immoral thoughts and immoral desires; even when they are restrained by some motive from abandoning themselves to sensual pleasures, they without any kind of scruple feed on evil thoughts, multiplying sins beyond the hairs of the head. Again we deem it necessary to repeat that such persons are to be found not only among the poorer classes of the people or in

country districts, but among those in the highest walks of life, and even among those puffed up with knowledge, who, relying upon a vain erudition, think they are at liberty to turn religion into ridicule and to "deride whatever they do not know" (Jude 10).

Now, if it is vain to expect a harvest where no seed has been sown, how can we hope to have better-living generations if they be not instructed in time in the doctrine of Jesus Christ? It follows, too, that if faith languishes in our days, if among large numbers it has almost vanished, the reason is that the duty of catechetical teaching is either fulfilled very superficially or altogether neglected. Nor will it do to say, in excuse, that faith is a free gift bestowed upon each one at Baptism. Yes, all baptized in Christ have infused into them the habit of faith; but this most divine germ, left to itself unaided, so to speak, from outside sources, does not develop or "put out great branches" (Mark 4: 32). Man at his birth has within him the faculty of understanding, but he has need also of the mother's word to awaken it, as it were, and to put it into act. So, too, the Christian, born again of water and the Holy Ghost, has faith within him, but he requires the word of the Church to fecundate it and develop it, and make it

fruitful. Hence the Apostle wrote: "Faith . . . depends on hearing, and hearing on the word of Christ" (Rom. 10:17); and to show the necessity of teaching, he adds: "How are they to hear, if no one preaches?" (ibid. 14).

Now, if what we have said so far demonstrates the supreme importance of religious instruction, it follows that we ought to do all that lies in our power to maintain the teaching of the Catechism, and where the practice of so doing has fallen into disuse there should be a revival of the teaching of the Catechism, which Benedict XIV has described as "the most effective means for spreading the glory of God and securing the salvation of souls" (Const. *Etsi minime*, 13).

UNIFORMITY OF PRACTICE IN TEACHING

We therefore, venerable brothers, desirous of fulfilling this most important duty which is imposed upon us by the Supreme Apostolate, and wishing to introduce uniformity everywhere in this most weighty matter, do by our supreme authority enact and strictly ordain that in all dioceses the following precepts be observed:

I. On every Sunday and feast day, none excepted, all parish priests and, generally speaking, all those who have the care of souls shall throughout the year, with the text of the Catechism, instruct for the space of an hour the young of both sexes in what they must believe and do to be saved.

II. They shall, at stated times during the year, prepare boys and girls by continued instruction lasting several days, to receive the Sacraments of Penance and Confirmation.

III. Every day in Lent and, if necessary, on other days after the feast of Easter, they shall likewise by suitable instructions and reflections most carefully prepare boys and girls to receive their First Communion in a holy manner.

IV. In each parish the Confraternity of the Christian Doctrine is to be canonically instituted. Through this Confraternity the parish priests, especially in places where there is a scarcity of priests, will find valuable helpers for catechetical instruction in pious lay persons, who will lend their aid to this holy and salutary work both from a zeal for the glory of God and as a means of gaining the numerous indulgences granted by the Sovereign Pontiffs.

V. In large towns, and especially in those which contain universities, colleges and

grammar schools, let religious classes be founded to instruct in the truths of faith and in the practice of Christian life the young people who frequent the public schools from which all religious teaching is banned.

VI. In consideration of the fact that in these days adults not less than the young stand in need of religious instruction, all parish priests and others having the care of souls shall, in addition to the usual homily on the Gospel to be delivered at the parochial Mass on all days of obligation, explain the Catechism to the faithful in an easy style suited to the intelligence of their hearers, at such time of the day as they may deem most convenient for the people, but not during the hour in which the children are taught. In this instruction they are to make use of the Catechism of the Council of Trent; and they are to divide the matter in such a way as within the space of four or five years to treat of the Apostles' Creed, the Sacraments, the Decalogue, the Lord's Prayer and the Precepts of the Church.

THESE LAWS BINDING BY VIRTUE OF APOSTOLIC AUTHORITY

This, venerable brothers, we do prescribe and command by virtue of the Apostolic

authority. It now rests with you to put it into prompt and complete execution in your dioceses, and by all the force of your power to see to it that these prescriptions of ours be not neglected, or, what comes to the same thing, that they be not carried out superficially. That this may be avoided, you must not cease to recommend and to require that your parish priests do not impart this instruction carelessly, but that they diligently prepare themselves for it; let them not speak words of human wisdom, but "in simplicity and godly sincerity" (2 Cor. 1: 12), imitating the example of Jesus Christ, Who though He revealed "things hidden since the foundation of the world" (Matt. 13:35), yet spoke "All . . . things to the crowds in parables, and without parables did not speak to them" (ibid. 34). The same thing was done also by the Apostles taught by our Lord, of whom the Pontiff Gregory the Great said: "They took supreme care to preach to the ignorant things easy and intelligible, not sublime and arduous" (Moral. 2, xvii, ch. 25). In matters of religion the majority of men in our times must be considered as ignorant.

We would not, however, have it supposed that this studied simplicity of preaching does not require labor and meditation —

on the contrary, it requires both more than does 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 is able to impart instruction entirely worthy of praise. It must, therefore, be carefully borne in mind that a person, whatever facility of ideas and language he may have inherited from nature, will never be able to teach the Catechism to the young and adult without preparing himself thoughtfully for it. They are mistaken who suppose that in consequence of the intellectual inferiority of the common people they can perform this office in a careless manner. On the contrary, the more uncultured the hearers, the greater is the necessity for study and diligence, in order to bring home to their minds those most sublime truths which are so far beyond the natural understanding of the multitude, and which must yet be known by all, the learned as well as the unlettered, in order that they may attain eternal salvation.

A BLESSING UPON THE WORKERS AND THE WORK

And now, venerable brothers, permit us to close this letter by addressing to you these words of Moses: "If any man be on the

Lord's side, let him join with me" (Ex. 32: 26). We pray and conjure you to reflect on the ruin of souls which is wrought solely by ignorance of divine things. Doubtless you have done many useful and certainly praiseworthy things in your respective dioceses for the benefit of the flock entrusted to you, but before all else, and with all the diligence, all the zeal, all the assiduity that it is possible for you to employ, see to it that the knowledge of Christian doctrine penetrates and pervades through and through the minds of all: "According to the gift that each has received" (these are the words of the Apostle St. Peter), "administer it to one another, as good stewards of the manifold grace of God" (1 Pet. 4: 10).

Through the intercession of the Most Blessed Immaculate Virgin, may your diligence and your energy be fructified by the Apostolic Blessing, which, in token of our affection and as an earnest of divine favors, we impart to you and to the clergy and the people intrusted to each one of you.

Given at Rome, at St. Peter's, on the 15th day of April, 1905, in the second year of our Pontificate.

PIUS X, POPE.

Imprimatur.

June 12, 1941,

† Thomas H. McLaughlin, S. T. D., Bishop of Paterson.