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## CATECHESIS: FROM ABOVE OR FROM WITHIN?

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*Certainly there has been no lack of controversy in recent years over the introduction and implementation of what is often called the “new catechetics “. Below, Rev. Robert J. Levis examines the Cartesian/immanentist underpinnings of this mode of catechesis and argues that its philosophical presuppositions render it incapable of service to a transcendent faith. This article was first delivered as a “paper” at the Fellowship of Catholic Scholars’ annual convention in the Spring of 1979, and will be published in only slightly different form in the Proceedings of that society in early 1980.*

...at this very moment many of the faithful are troubled in their faith by an accumulation of ambiguities, uncertainties and doubts about its essentials. Such are the Trinitarian and Christological dogmas, the mystery of the Eucharist and the Real Presence, the Church as the institution of salvation, the priestly ministry in the midst of the People of God, the value of prayer and the sacraments, and the moral requirements concerning, for instance, the indissolubility of marriage or respect for life.-P.Paul VI, Apostolic Exhortation to All the Bishops, Dec. 8, 1970.

And while man’s religious sense today is in a decline .... new opinions in exegesis and theology, often borrowed from bold but fluid secular philosophies, have in places found a way into the realm of Catholic teaching. They question or distort the objective sense of truths taught with authority by the Church. Under the pretext of adapting religious thought to the contemporary outlook they prescind from the guidance of the Church’s teaching, give the foundation of theological speculation a direction of historicism, dare to rob Holy Scripture’s testimony of its sacred and historical character, and try to introduce a so-called “post-conciliar” mentality among the People of God. ‘his...spreads(s) about the illusion of giving Christianity a new interpretation, which is arbitrary and barren. What would remain of the content of our faith, or of the theological virtue that professes it, if these attempts, freed from the support of the Church’s teaching authority, were destined to prevail?-P. Paul VI, “Petrum et Paulum Apostolos,” AAS, (March 31, 1967), pp. 198-199.



THE LATE POPE PAUL VI SAW THE DISASTROUS CONDITION OF THE CHURCH, WITH its denatured and degenerated faith, as the result of the misuses of modern philosophy in theology. It is the mark of such philosophizing, he said, to shut us up within our own subjective selves, to close us off from the God of Revelation, the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. It traps us within the limits of our own consciousness and then projects arbitrarily whatever it wishes about faith, religion, and even God Himself. The late Pope insisted on metaphysics: he spoke of the “Natural Metaphysics of Mankind” as the guarantor of openness to God, the transcendent, personal Supreme Being, the wholly other, the God who transcends the cosmos.

...the intellect which God has given us reaches that which is, and not merely the subjective expression of the structure and development of consciousness. (#6, P. Paul's *Creed of the People of God*).

In what follow, I intend to develop this theme of the Holy Father in some detail before going on to show how some American theorists in religious education have fallen victim to their own philosophical perspectives to the detriment of modern catechesis.

## DESCARTES AND THE MODERN VOID

There was a thesis proposed in 1964 by a relatively obscure philosopher, Cornelio Fabro, which, while not completely ignored, has certainly been muted in American philosophical and theological circles. Even when the *Introduzione all'Ateismo Moderno* was translated into English and substantially developed under the title, *God in Exile*, in 1968, it fared no better. Yet it is extremely important to present Fabro's thesis. For Fabro states that modern thought is essentially atheistic because it is founded on the principle of immanence, which is the attempt of the human spirit to attain total and absolute freedom and independence and to fashion thought within the confines of one's own self. This atheistic attitude may be traced to Rene Descartes.

Descartes' principle of universal doubt marked the introduction of the scientific "revolution"; his *Cogito ergo sum* contains in germ all subsequent modern thought which is founded upon it. The first and radical characteristic of the *cogito* principle is the subjection of being, of reality, to thought. Descartes located the terminus of all human operation within an area directly accessible to every human being by his own unaided effort. He reversed the first upthrust of intelligent curiosity and forced it back on the mind itself, whereas the mind's first movement should go toward truth, toward reality, toward God.

Descartes proposed his methodic universal doubt as a revolutionary option, dethroning the intellect and establishing the monarchy of the will, the quintessence of subjectivism. His system is confined to man's most

intimate act, that of willing, to the *volò*. Following this internal logic, there can finally be no escape from immanentism plainly directed against all transcendence. Descartes is responsible for establishing this rupture between the ego and the world, between the body and the soul, between man and God. Insofar as his system has no need of God as principle or foundation, it is atheistic; insofar as it abandons the primacy of being over thought, it is immanentistic.

The removal of the possibility of all things, including God, is the very essence of Descartes' system. *Cogito ergo sum* asserts the truth of the act and content of mind or consciousness on the very basis of the exclusion of the act of being. It derives any truth of the content of being from the truth of the act of mind. The act of knowing is the ultimate beginning. There is no other truth than that of itself. Descartes' immanence swings from the object to the subject, from the world to self, from the external to the internal. And so modern thought is launched inevitably toward atheism, causing Maurice Blondel to say:

Is the enormous apostasy of such an approach now clear, this approach which, even when using God, uses him, so to speak, against himself, takes him at his word in the matter of leaving us to ourselves, dispenses with him as much as possible and contents itself more and more with organizing the world and mankind for our enjoyment, our domination, our self-worship. (*L'etre et les etres*, 1935)



Descartes

The *cogito ergo sum* ultimately makes being dependent on thinking and finite thinking at that. If the thinking act is the root, source, and beginning of meaningfulness and ultimately of reality itself, then eventually one must conclude to a kind of I-am-in-the-world, to a *Sein zum Tode* of radical mortality, to the shrill fact of complete and naked loneliness in a universe depersonalized at its core.

Nonetheless, Descartes succeeded in launching modern thought into its present condition. By making nothingness the ground of being, contemporary thought has cut all real chains to objectivity, to reality, to being, to

God, to the Absolute. And modern man defines his miserable self historically, socially, politically, in terms of the space and time in which he discovers himself. In modern art, literature, politics, society, and science God is banished, reality is unknown, man floats in a void. Modern thought's radically new starting point is to ground thought totally upon itself, upon thought. The result: a definite acknowledgement of the non-being or nothingness of man, based precisely on the non-being of consciousness, of the mind. Today, it seems almost natural to profess the non-being of God solidly with the non-being of man. It has all been inevitable, for immanentism can fall back into nothingness but it cannot break through to reality, to being. This is "the sickness unto death" (Kierkegaard) that feeds upon itself.

The end result of this sickness is the degeneration of man into a "being-in-the-world" destined to vanish in the interests of the world and history. A New Humanism is proclaimed and the result is the loss of even minimal humanity amidst the existential situation of time and place. Man ends up an undefined and indefinable being lost in the world. The start was "I think!"-the end result was the loss of the "I", of the human self, squashed under the "constitutive worldliness" of being itself. Today, man is a being-for-science, a being-for-technology, a being-for-politics, a being-for-culture. As Sartre put it, existence precedes essence, the will conditions truth. In the wake of his denial of God, man no longer knows himself and is doomed to wander in the enormous silences of endless spaces.

Sadly, this infection of modern thought, with immanence set over against transcendence, has spread and affected the whole body so that today the metastasis is nearly complete. No important thinker in modern times has not been influenced. Put in less philosophical terms, modern man has wanted to claim the freedom of man over against the interfering of God. By submerging human thought in its own principle, however, he has placed man either at the mercy of the collective, impersonal All, or at the mercy of the "world" in the shape of blind, amorphous extraneous forces. Man did not wish to exist for the true God, but now he has not succeeded in substituting himself for God with the new principle of mind or consciousness. Man has lost man together with God. He has lost both transcendence and immanence. For the last 100 years man has been simply a "potency of finitude" casually defined in terms of the spatio-temporal that contains him. Human freedom, not being founded

on God, has become a groundless, bottomless void. Man now defines himself in terms of his technological civilization but he is beginning to experience, in the midst of his victories, a mounting uneasiness, rising up from the margins of his mind. In losing God, man is fated to lose himself because he has "fallen into the world" with its exteriority and finiteness. Modern man is lost, despairs of self at the very moment when he is so justly proud of his mastery of the mysterious forces of nature. For the riddle of man is not phenomenological, but metaphysical.

In his bold thesis that the very internal logic of immanence, constitutive immanence which dissolves being into self-realization of the mind, inevitably includes atheism, Fabro does not call all modern philosophers who have followed in the Cartesian footsteps personally atheists. Descartes, Malebranche, Herbert (the founder of Deism, holding God's existence as in innate truth in the human mind) were all practicing Catholics; Leibnitz, Locke, Berkeley, Kant, Hegel were all believing theorists and Christians. The point, however, remains valid, and may be illustrated by reference to Hegel. For no modern philosopher ever spoke so much about God or appealed so much to Him as Hegel, yet no philosophy, not even Spinoza's, has so led to the negation of God as his did through the development of Existentialism and Marxism. And the impact of all this on American catechesis has been enormous.



#### CATECHETICAL IMMANENTISM

While it is a rough generalization, one may say there are two schools of theory in Catholic religious education in America today, that of the transcendists and that of the immanentists. The first emphasizes the otherness of God vis-a-vis man, the supernatural above the natural, the transcendence of God over His immanence in the world, revelation as a message of God to be transmitted and followed by man, and the like. The immanentists, on the other hand, see the supernatural within the natural, stress the immanence of God over His transcendence, hold only for a conceptual distinction, not a real one, between the natural and supernatural orders, consider revelation human experience, and so on. Because of the

current popularity of this immanentist religious education, its proliferation through the literature of the field, its near universal acceptance in America, and the notoriety of some of its advocates, we must now consider its most important characteristics.

Revelation is a continuous personal experience to the immanentist, who would state his case as follows: Since God is immanent in all human events, He participates in the very depths of human experience, all of which is potentially revelatory. This revelation is always on-going. It cannot be established by scripture, or by theology, or by the Church's definition, but rather by the consensus of the community engaged in seeking the divine in all events. Since God is at the heart of all natural process, the divine emerges out of the consciousness of human encounters and experiences. The whole person must be involved in seeking out the more than human dimension of experience which is the self-revealing God in human affairs. All experience can be revelation, can bring consciousness of the divine.

What most reveals God in His immanence is the coming-to-be of the individual person, but this cannot happen unless the person intersects and interfaces with other persons. No person can become except in relation to other persons. Likewise, faith, being a component in that revelational process which is coextensive with experience, is directed to people and not to revelation.

Those who adhere to the above view clearly deny or very much minimize any purely supernatural element in revelation. Salvation, for example, is seen as coming through the very humanizing of human relationships, while grace to the immanentist is a rather amorphous social current which helps bring about an ideal human society in which we are saved. It works very closely with human action, within the ordinary laws of nature. All nature is graced, human existence and social organization are graced, all creation is graced. There is no divine act which is not also human and no human act which is not also divine.

The immanentist Church is a community looking for God in social improvement and concerned with man's betterment and humanization. It is not a special creation of Christ nor is the divine present in it more than in any other society or body concerned with helping people. The immanentists are unconcerned with Church structures in general which some insist actually destroy

true community where God manifests His presence. Along with God, the Church is immanently present in human society. It is ecumenical with no one, including the entire Christian Church, having more revelation or advantage than another. If revelation is seen chiefly as community experience there is neither need nor further place for a teaching magisterium. Worship occurs where growth in personality occurs, where God is revealed in a person's becoming.

In Christology, immanentists emphasize the humanity of Jesus, the perfect human referent to the divine. Christ can be found in all human process and experience primarily in person-to-person relationships. He continues in process within the cosmos and constantly reminds us that the universe contains the divine, that all flesh mediates the interaction of God with man, that He is the perfect example of God's interfacing with man. Not only God but Jesus Christ is immanent in all creation where nothing is merely secular.

Likewise, revelation for the immanentist is not something delivered to the Church to be guarded by its leaders and doled out in measurable quantities at regular intervals to waiting students. Rather, as already seen, it is the totality of experience, which one should be introduced to, not "indoctrinated in". The purpose of religious education, therefore, is primarily personal growth and social change, the stimulation of personal awareness of the depths of human experience. One does not transmit religious truths and dogmatic or moral propositions in catechesis, since this would be too narrow and restrictive of total revelation which is coextensive with experience. This is indoctrination of the worst kind, transmissionist learning of the worst sort. For the immanentist, religious education is religious experience. It is "the affirming of all human values and the taking up of all that is human to push the human beyond itself"(Moran, p. 75).

#### A CATECHETICAL IMPOSSIBILITY

It is perhaps obvious by now that this immanentist catechesis is shot full of the radical philosophy of immanentism so roundly condemned by Fabro, a philosophy which is in itself incapable of being a theistic tool, of being reconciled with defined beliefs of the Catholic Faith in whose service it has been mustered. Two general areas of comment suffice to make the point.

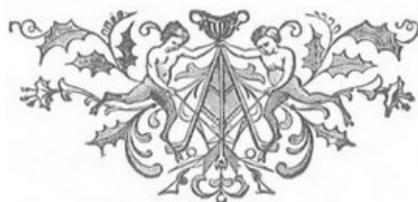
First, this type of religious educator has great problems with the supernatural; he is ill at ease with the notion that God must supply an entitative elevation to the supernatural levels for man to achieve his final end; he dislikes an “outsider God” separate from created nature, an object of knowledge who lives in an order separate and distinct from the natural order. While he surely makes a logical distinction between these two orders, he at best hesitates to make a real distinction between them, and at worst denies a real distinction. And this results in the loss of transcendence; it is the absorbing of transcendence into immanence and thus the loss of both. If the thinking act or consciousness is the root and source of transcendence (as it is if there be only a logical distinction between immanence and transcendence), we conclude to an I-am-in-the-world alone, to a *Sein zum Tode* of radical mortality, to the constitutive worldliness of existence. In grounding the transcendent on our own thought, we ground it on self and thereby lose it forever. A God conceived as an act of the world, immersed in the world, or emerging from the flux of the world’s becoming, a God conceived always as the immanent aim of universal evolution—this is a God who is simply an event of this world and never the Transcendent One, the wholly Other whom man seeks and begs to save him, never the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. An immanentist catechist has to define God, faith, and religion in terms of self, in terms of history, science, society, politics, in terms always of that space and time he is phenomenologically bound to. Such catechesis, never breaking out of the closed circle of worldliness which is its starting point, finishes as atheistic, even in spite of its believing advocates.

Second, the immanentist-minded religious educator emphasizes that revelation is a continuous personal experience, an on-going process, an in-depth experience potentially revelatory of God; it is rarely if ever a special divine intervention but the perfection of the human and humanizing process of normal belief. Here we see the principle of interiority (a compromise with the principle of immanentism and another avenue of the cogito principle) describing the constitutive freedom of faith. It

tries to treat all as if they were apostles, i. e. companions in daily personal touch with Christ. Experience begins with nature and ends there, generally. Faith rather is necessarily “the conviction of things not seen” (Heb. 11:1). St. Paul advises “We walk by faith and not by sight” (II Cor. 5:7). St. Peter says “...without having seen Him you love Him: though you do not now see Him you believe in Him...” (1 Peter 1:8-9). Jesus Himself chided Thomas, who said, “Unless I see in His hands the print of the nails, and place my finger in the mark of the nails, and place my hand in His side, I will not believe” (John 20:25). *The General Catechetical Directory* comments, “It is ...not sufficient for catechesis merely to stimulate a religious experience, even if it is a true one; rather, catechesis should contribute to the gradual grasping of truth about the divine plan...” (Par. 24).

Though space precludes further analysis, the comments of the Jesuit editors of *La Civiltà Cattolica* are germane:

The final characteristic of this new “Christianity” is a passionate devotion to and faith in Christ; not Christ the Son of God who was made man..., but rather the Christ-man, the Christ for others, the Christ who was the friend and defender of the poor, the liberating Christ seen as a revolutionary .... As a result, Christianity becomes a “religion of man”: in effect atheistic, even though the name of God is retained... It is certainly true that the new “Christianity” does not deny any of the great Christian realities—God, Christ, the Church, eternal life, the Kingdom of God, sin, salvation; but while giving nominal acceptance to these fundamental realities, it reinterprets them, and dilutes them to such an extent that little, if anything, remains of their true and authentic Christian meaning. We are forced to the conclusion that this new “Christianity”... is not only irreconcilable with traditional Christianity, but is in radical opposition to it. (March 16, 1974; English translation in *Homiletic and Pastoral Review* March, 1976, pp. 133-144)



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