

## ST AUGUSTINE ON CATECHIZING

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### Introductory Note

*St Augustine, Bishop of Hippo 396-430, wrote the treatise De catechizandis rudibus for Deogratias, a deacon of Carthage, in about the year 400. It describes both the subject-matter and the method of catechetics but also includes most useful instruction on preaching and teaching. St Augustine continued the 'narration' or historical exposition of the truths of faith from the Bible down to his own day; the personal 'exhortation' he recommends does not seem to have been obligatory before his time. The treatise, which depends in part on St Irenaeus' Constitutiones Apostolorum and Demonstratio Praedicationis Apostolicae, has been extraordinarily influential in the history of preaching. It has been translated into English at least seven times; the following abridgment owes much to the edition of J. P. Christopher, Augustinus, De Catechizandis Rudibus (Washington, D.C. 1926).*

**Y**OU have asked me, brother Deogratias, to write you something useful about instructing candidates for the catechumenate, for you tell me that at Carthage, where you are a deacon, those who receive their first instruction in the Christian faith are often brought to you, because you are supposed to have great facility in catechizing with your thorough knowledge of the faith and your charm of style. But you are almost always in difficulties about how to present those truths which we believe as Christians: where to begin and end the narration, whether to add a personal exhortation or only those precepts by whose observance the Christian life and profession are maintained. You have acknowledged with regret that often in a long discourse lacking in warmth you have become commonplace and wearisome to yourself, not to mention him whom you were trying to instruct, and the other listeners; and so you felt obliged to entreat me by the charity I owe you to set down something in writing for you, occupied though I am with other things.

With regard to your own particular difficulty, I would not like you to be disturbed because your discourse often seems to yourself

wearisome and worthless. It may well not seem so to the listener, but simply because you earnestly desire them to hear something better, your own words seem unworthy of them. For my part I am nearly always dissatisfied with my preaching. I desire something better, which I often enjoy interiorly before I begin to express my thought in words; and when my expression is inadequate, I am very disappointed that my tongue has not answered the demands of my mind. I desire my hearer to understand all that I can understand, but I feel I am not speaking well enough to accomplish this. Understanding fills the mind as it were with a rapid flash of light, while the expression of it in speech is slow and drawn-out, a very different process; and while speech is being formed, understanding has already hidden itself in the secret recesses of the mind.

People listen to us with much greater pleasure when we ourselves enjoy this same work of instruction, for the thread of our discourse is affected by the joy that we ourselves experience, and is consequently delivered more easily and received more gratefully. It is not a hard task to give directions about the beginning and end of the narration of the truths we must believe, or about how it should be of varying length yet always complete, and when a shorter or when a longer form should be used. But our chief concern should be that the teacher enjoys catechizing, for the more he enjoys it, the more effective he will prove. An appropriate maxim is ready to hand: if *God loves a cheerful giver*<sup>1</sup> of material wealth, how much more one of spiritual wealth? But the catechist's possession of this cheerfulness at the right time depends on the mercy of God who gave this teaching.

Therefore, as God prompts us, we will first discuss the method of narration, as you desire, then the duty of admonition and exhortation, and, lastly how to obtain the right cheerfulness.

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The narration is complete when the catechumen is instructed first from the text *In the beginning God created heaven and earth*<sup>2</sup> down to the present period of Church history. But this does not mean that we should repeat verbatim the whole Pentateuch with Judges, Kings and Esdras, the Gospel and the Acts of the Apostles (if we know them by heart), or relate in our own words what

<sup>1</sup> 2 Cor. 2, 7.

<sup>2</sup> Gen. 2, 1.

these books contain, and thus develop and explain them; for this there is no time and no need. But we ought to present the whole matter in a general summary and choose out those wonderful facts which are more readily heard and which constitute the principal points. These should not be presented as it were rolled up in a parchment and snatched away at once, but by dwelling on them we should, so to speak, untie it and spread them out to view, for the minds of our hearers to examine and admire. We should include the other details in a short abridgment. In this way the points we wish to emphasize are brought into prominence by keeping the others in the background; the mind of our hearer which we wish to stimulate does not reach them exhausted, and his memory is not confused.

In everything we should keep in mind the aim of the precept, which is *charity from a pure heart, with a good conscience and unfeigned faith*,<sup>3</sup> to which we should refer all that we say, and to which we should direct the attention of our listener. And in fact everything written in Scripture before our Lord's Incarnation had no other purpose than to announce his coming and prefigure the Church, that is, the people of God throughout all nations, which is his Body, and in which are included all the just who lived in this world even before his coming, and who believed that he would come just as we believe he has come. They were not separated from him by being his precursors but rather were joined to him by their obedience to his will.

Indeed what greater reason could there be for the Lord's coming than that God might manifest his love, ardently recommending it amongst us, because, *when we were as yet enemies, Christ died for us*?<sup>4</sup> And it was for this reason also, that in so far as love is the end of the commandment and the fulfilment of the law,<sup>5</sup> we also may love one another, and even as he laid down his life for us, we also may lay down our life for our brethren.<sup>6</sup> With regard to God himself, in so far as *he first loved us*<sup>7</sup> and *spared not his only Son but delivered him up for us all*,<sup>8</sup> even if at first we found it irksome to love him, now at least it should not prove irksome to

3 1 Tim. 1, 5.

4 Rom. 5, 8.

5 Cf. 1 Tim. 1, 5 and Rom. 13, 10.

6 Cf. 1 John 3, 16.

7 1 John 4, 19.

8 Rom. 8, 32.

return this love. For there is nothing that invites love more than anticipation in loving, and that heart is excessively hard which, even if unwilling to bestow love, refuses to return it.

If therefore Christ came chiefly that man might learn how much God loves him, and thus begin to burn with love for him by whom he was first loved, and so love his neighbour too at Christ's bidding and example; and if all Holy Scripture which was written before Christ was written to foretell his coming; and if whatever has since been committed to writing and established by divine authority tells of Christ and counsels love, it is evident that *on these two commandments depend not only the whole law and the prophets*,<sup>9</sup> but also all the inspired books which were written for our good in later times and handed down to us. Therefore in the Old Testament the New is concealed, and in the New the Old is revealed. In keeping with that concealment carnal men, understanding only carnally, were and are made subject to the fear of punishment. But in keeping with this revelation spiritual men, understanding spiritually, were and are made free by the bestowal of love. And since nothing is more opposed to love than envy, and the mother of envy is pride, the same Lord Jesus Christ, God-Man, is both an example of divine love towards us and a model among us of man's lowliness, in order that our swollen conceit may be healed by a greater antidote. The pride of man is a great disaster, but the humility of God is an even greater mercy.

With this love then as the end to which all you say is referred, give your instructions in such a way that your listener may believe by hearing, may hope by believing, and may love by hope.

At the end of the narration we should make known to him the hope of the resurrection, and with due regard for his capacity and the time available combat by discussion the vain scoffings of unbelievers about the resurrection of the body, and speak to him of the future last judgment, favourable to the good, severe to the wicked, and certain for every one. And after recounting the punishments of the wicked with loathing and horror, we should describe with eager longing the kingdom of the just believers and the heavenly city with all its joys.

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If someone well educated in humane learning, who has already decided to become a Christian, comes to you to be catechized,

<sup>9</sup> Matt. 22, 40.

it is most likely that he has already acquired a considerable knowledge of our Scriptures and other writings, and thus equipped comes now only to be made a partaker in the sacraments. With such as these we must be brief, and not dwell with tiresome insistence on what they know already, but touch lightly upon it, saying, for instance, that we believe they are already familiar with this or that point. In this way we pass rapidly in review all that has to be impressed on the minds of the ignorant and unlearned, so that the educated man who knows it already does not have to listen to it as though from a teacher; and if there are any points of which he is ignorant, he can learn them while we are going over them, assuming he is familiar with them. It will certainly be useful also to ask him why he desires to be a Christian; if you see he has reached that decision by books, either the Scriptures or other good writings, you can say something about these, recommending them in accordance with their merits.

There are also some who come from the ordinary schools of grammar and rhetoric, whom you would neither class as illiterate nor as learned men whose minds have been trained by the investigation of serious questions. These seem to surpass all others in the art of speaking, and when they come to be Christians we must convey to them more fully than to the illiterate an earnest warning to clothe themselves in Christian humility, and learn not to despise those who avoid faults of character more carefully than faults of diction; they must not presume to compare to purity of heart the trained language they formerly displayed. Most of all, they should be taught to listen to Holy Scripture, so that sound eloquence may not seem mean to them simply because it is not pretentious, and that they may not imagine that the words and deeds of men, rolled up and concealed in the Scriptures in fleshly coverings, should be understood materially and literally, rather than be unfolded and have their inner meaning revealed. These men must learn that the meaning should be considered superior to the words, just as the soul is preferred to the body. Hence too they should prefer to hear true rather than elegant sermons, just as they should prefer wise to handsome friends.

Let them realize too that no voice reaches the ears of God except the affection of the heart. Thus they should not smile with contempt if they hear some priests of the Church fall into barbarisms or solecisms in their prayers, or others who do not

understand what they are saying or badly phrase their words. Not that such faults should not be corrected, so that the people may say 'Amen' to what they plainly understand; but none the less they should be patiently endured by those who have learnt that true prayer is good speaking in the church just as style is in the law courts. And while the language of the law courts can sometimes be called good speech, it can never be called holy speech.

With regard to the sacrament they are about to receive, it is enough for the more intelligent to be told what the rite means, but for those who are less gifted we should use more words and illustrations, lest they come to despise what they see.

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If it is distasteful for us to repeat over and over again what is familiar to us and suitable for children, let us adapt ourselves to our hearers with a brother's, a father's or even a mother's love; when once we are linked to them with such bonds of affection, these things will seem new even to us. For the power of sympathy is so great that when people are affected by us as we speak and we by them as they learn, we each dwell in the other. Thus they speak in us, as it were, what they hear, while we learn in them what we teach. Is it not a common occurrence, that when we show to our friends the beauties of town or country which we often pass without pleasure because they are familiar, our own delight is renewed by theirs at the novelty of the scene? And the closer our friendship is, the more easily does this happen; for in proportion as we dwell in them through the bond of love, so does what is old become renewed.

If we have made some progress in the contemplative life, we are not content for our friends to be delighted and amazed merely at the work of men's hands; we wish to raise them to consider the skill and design of the artist, and thence have them soar higher to the admiration and love of God, who created all things and is the life-giving end of all true love. How much more then should we rejoice when men come to study God himself, for the sake of whom everything which should be learned is to be learnt, and how much more should we be renewed by their newness, so that if our preaching becomes dull by repetition, it may grow interesting because of our hearers for whom it is all fresh.

To help us attain to joy we should think and reflect that our

brother is passing over from the death of error into the life of faith. And if we walk through streets familiar to us with kindly cheerfulness when we point out his way to one who had lost it, how much more promptly and joyfully should we go over matters of life-giving doctrine even when they are familiar to us, when we are escorting through the paths of peace a soul who deserves our pity and is weary of the wanderings of this world, at the command of him who has given that peace to us?

If our mind is troubled by some scandal and so cannot produce a calm and agreeable discourse, our love should be so great for those for whom Christ died, who willed to redeem them from the death of this world's errors by his own blood, that the very fact of our learning that someone is at hand who desires to be a Christian should lighten and dispel our grief, even as joy over winnings alleviates grief over losses. So let him who comes as a candidate remove our sorrow at another's defection through our hope that he will make progress in the faith.

But if our sadness is caused by some error or sin of our own, we should be glad that an opportunity for a work of great mercy is given to us, as though a well were pointed out to us from which to put out a fire which had broken out. When by such thoughts the darkness of disgust has been repelled, our mind is prepared for catechizing, and our words proceed readily and cheerfully from the rich abundance of love and are imbibed with deep enjoyment. It is not so much I who say this to you as love itself, which is poured forth into our hearts by the Holy Spirit who is given to us.<sup>10</sup>

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*St Augustine's longer specimen of a catechetical instruction cannot be included here; what follows is his shorter version.*

The happiness promised to the saints in the world to come is indeed great and true. But all visible things pass away; the pride of this life, the lust of the flesh and the concupiscence of the eyes shall perish, drawing their lovers with them to destruction. God in his mercy, desiring to deliver men from this destruction of eternal punishment, if only they will not be their own enemies and resist their Creator's mercy, sent his only-begotten Son, his Word, equal to himself, by whom he created all things. But he, though remaining God and neither departing from the Father

<sup>10</sup> Rom. 5, 5.

nor being changed in any way, yet took upon himself a human nature and came unto men, appearing in mortal flesh, so that, as death came into the human race by one man, Adam, who was created first, consenting to his wife who had been led astray by the devil, and thus both transgressed God's commands; so also through one man who is also God, Jesus Christ the Son of God, all who believe in him might enter eternal life, after their past sins had been by him utterly blotted out.

Everything which you now see happening in the Church of God and in Christ's name throughout the world was already foretold long ago: what we read agrees with what we see, and our faith grows thereby. Once there was a flood over the whole earth that sinners might be destroyed, but those who escaped in the ark were a figure of the Church to come, which now floats on the waves of the world and is saved from sinking by the wood of Christ's cross. To one single man, Abraham, God's faithful servant, it was foretold that from him would spring a people who would worship the one true God among the other nations who worshipped idols; everything foretold to this people came about in accordance with the prophecies. In this people too it was prophesied that Christ would come, king of all saints and true God, from the seed of Abraham according to the flesh, so that all who reproduced Abraham's faith should be sons of his. And so it came to pass: Christ was born of the Virgin Mary who belonged to that race. In accordance with the prophecies he rose again, ascended into heaven, and sent the Holy Spirit to his disciples. It was foretold not only by the prophets but also by the Lord Jesus Christ that his Church would be found throughout the world, sown by the sufferings and martyrdom of the saints; and foretold at a time when his name was unknown to the nations, or, if known, it was mocked. Nevertheless, by the power of his miracles, accomplished in his own person or through his servants, which are now noised abroad and believed, we see already that what was predicted is fulfilled and that the very kings of the earth who formerly persecuted the Christians, are now subject to the name of Christ. It was also foretold that schisms and heresies would come forth out of the Church and seek their own glory, not Christ's, wherever they could, yet claiming his name: this too has been fulfilled.

Shall not then the remaining prophecies be fulfilled? It is clear



that even as the former events foretold came to pass, so also shall the others, whatever tribulations still remain for the just: and especially the day of Judgment which shall separate the wicked from the just in the resurrection of the dead and set apart for the fire which is their due not only those outside the Church, but also the chaff of the Church herself, which she must bear with the utmost patience until the final winnowing. But those who laugh the resurrection to scorn because they think that as this flesh rots it cannot rise again, are destined to rise therein to punishment; and God shall show them that he who could make those bodies before they actually existed, can in a moment restore them as they were. But all the faithful who are to reign with Christ shall rise again in the same body in such a way that they will enjoy the incorruption of the angels; thus they will be equal to them, as the Lord promised, and will praise him unceasingly to their hearts' content, living always by him and in him with joy and happiness which surpass all human words and thoughts.

Since you believe this, be on your guard against temptations, because the devil seeks some to be lost with him. Take care that the enemy does not lead you astray either through those who are outside the Church, whether pagans, Jews or heretics, but also through your imitating the example of those in the Catholic Church whom you see leading evil lives of self-indulgence in gluttony and impurity, or those given to vain and unlawful curiosity, charms, divinations and shows of the devil. Beware also those who live in the pomp and vanity of pride and covetousness and practise what the Decalogue condemns and punishes; rather associate with the good, whom you will easily find, if you too are such yourself; so that together with them you may worship and love God for his own sake. He himself shall be our whole reward and we shall enjoy his goodness and beauty in the next life. But he is to be loved not as something seen by the eyes, but as wisdom is loved, and truth and holiness and charity and similar virtues; not however as these are found in men, but as they are in the very source of incorruptible and unchangeable wisdom.

Therefore associate with all who love these virtues, so that through Christ who became man in order to be the mediator between God and men you may be reconciled to God. But do not think that the wicked shall enter the kingdom of heaven

even though they enter the doors of the churches, because if they do not amend they will be separated at the appointed time. Imitate the good, bear with the evil, love all men; for you do not know what the man who is evil today will be tomorrow. Do not love their unrighteousness, but love them in order that they may attain to righteousness: for not only is the love of God enjoined upon us, but also the love of our neighbour; on these two commandments depend the whole law and the prophets. And no one fulfils this law except him who receives the gift of the Holy Spirit, who is truly equal to the Father and the Son. The Trinity itself is God, in whom we must place our hope, and not in any man whatever. For he by whom we are justified is quite distinct from those with whom we are justified.

The devil tempts us not only through inordinate desires but also through fear of insults and sufferings and of death itself. Now if a man suffers anything for the name of Christ and the hope of eternal life and steadfastly endures it, a greater reward will be given him; but if he yields to the devil, he will be condemned with him. Works of mercy however and godly humility obtain from the Lord that he does not allow his servants to be tempted more than they are able to endure.



## COMMENT

### *Alone but never lonely*

MUCH has recently been written in the popular press about that vast army of women who live on their own. Following the publication of such articles, a number of these people hotly denied that they are lonely but many others admitted that their loneliness is so great that it is the overwhelming aspect of their lives. Let us hope that no Catholic women were amongst those who made this sad admission: there is certainly no need for them to do so.

According to the *Oxford Dictionary*, to be lonely is to be 'solitary, isolated, unfrequented, companionless'. What an