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MISSION AND EDUCATION (II)

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In last week's Parish Paper we discussed what the Church is for. Critically, it does not exist to please itself, or to comply with the world's agenda. Rather it has a mission from Christ, which in the Acts of the Apostles is given as a commission to bear witness in the power of the Holy Ghost to the redemption accomplished by Christ: "Ye shall receive power, after that the Holy Ghost shall come upon you: and ye shall be witnesses unto me in Jerusalem and in all Judea, and in Samaria, and unto the uttermost part of the earth" (1:8). From the Acts we showed that the core of this witness to Christ is evangelism or evangelization, the preaching of the gospel (evangel, or good news) of Jesus - the promise of remission of sins and the gift of the Spirit for a new life in the favour of God, a promise fulfilled in those who repent and believe. This task of witness is the work not just of the clergy but of the whole church. For many Episcopalians, the primary mode of their evangelistic witness is through the nurture of children in the faith and fear of the Lord (Ephesians 6:4). This too is the work of the whole Church, but especially that of parents.

Since the beginning and end of this witness to Christ is the worship of God in spirit and in truth (John 4:23), the first element in this evangelizing witness is regular participation in liturgical worship. In the service of our lips is formed the service of our lives. But if such participation is to have its full effect, then it requires an instructed understanding as well as trained will, it requires education. For parents to impart such education to their children they themselves need to have an instructed knowledge of the Christian religion, and a disciplined practice of it. You cannot share what you do not have! And while the Church can provide programs of schooling, the benefits of these programs depend critically upon parental attitudes. If children perceive that you do not take knowledge and love of God seriously, they are not likely to do so either. That is why children need the witness of what we do (a good example) and the witness of what we say (sound doctrine). Without good deeds, our words ring hollow; yet without sound words, our good deeds are (quite literally) mute. Children may know what you do, but not the reason why. Both are needed: consistency of action, clarity of speech, both expressing personal conviction.

But (to persist with this alliterative series) what should be the content of Christian catechesis? What should every instructed adult Christian

have at his command? What should every child be in process of learning? In historic catechisms this content has been grouped in four "pillars".

First, what we must believe – who God is, and what he has done for our salvation. This history of salvation, and the God who saves, recorded at length in the Bible, is authoritatively summarized in the Creeds (Apostles' and Nicene) - the rule of our Faith in God as Truth.

Second, what we must do – God's will for a life of holiness and righteousness before him. This is set forth in the Ten Commandments as interpreted by the teaching and example of Christ and the saints – the rule of Love and Charity toward God as our highest Good.

Third, what we must pray for - the grace of God necessary to live this life of faith and love. Set forth in the Lord's Prayer, this is the rule of our Hope in God as Almighty Father, that he will bring us by his grace into his glory.

Fourth (although some put this second) is how we must worship – the use and benefits of the ministry of Word and Sacraments entrusted by Christ to the Church.

All of this material is treated in a simple manner suitable for children in the venerable Catechism found in the Prayer Book (p. 577), and is explained further in all kinds of other books old and new. (I myself particularly value Luther's Shorter Catechism, the reformed Heidelberg Catechism, the shorter and larger Westminster Catechisms, the modern Catechism of the Catholic Church, and the shorter Catholic Compendium – although all need to be read through the filter of Anglican norms. The best works for younger children that I know of are the beautifully illustrated works of Inos Biffi on the Creed, Prayer, Commandments, and Sacraments.)

How should we know these texts? "by heart", of course! That is, we should be able to recite them whenever we need them, and because we need them always, we should recite them frequently. But that's only the beginning. Then we need to understand them, however simply, so that we can apply them. And yes, we must embrace them wholeheartedly, and apply them in practice. That's a life's work: but this is where life starts.

What is the Church for? I think it is a fundamental misapprehension to assume that the Church is a kind of activist agency for the world's improvement, however worthy such goals may appear. Yes, the Church's business is to change the world, but it does so through the formation of souls in the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Ghost. Souls thus formed are able to be salt, leaven, and light in the world (Matthew 5:13-16; 13:31-36). Through their witness, the world finds its true end, in the worship of God. That is our business: may we not be found slothful in it.

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