

Classroom Catechist

Tips for 'Scripture Teachers' in Government Schools

1. WHAT SORT OF DISCIPLINE?

TODAY'S CHILDREN are often brought up at home and taught at school on a faulty psychology:

- Thus they have often been less well disciplined, and so are less self-disciplined, than their parents were.
- Part of this problem is ignorance, or even a denial, of original sin. Ignorance works for the Devil.
- There is also ignorance of those effects of original sin that remain after Baptism, that battle against grace. Baptism restores grace but not the preternatural gifts of freedom from death, sickness and pain; and from fuzzy thinking and faulty control over bodily appetites.
- Some of the children may be unbaptized, and lacking many natural virtues the older pagans enjoyed by accepting actual graces from God.

Practical solutions to indiscipline:

- Devise stratagems to distract them from their slavery to doing what they *feel* like. Try lively questioning.
- Just as spectators at sporting events are lifted out of themselves in favour of something greater going on before their eyes, so too present our holy religion.
- As a last resort, send out the worst offender or even march him to the deputy: it is better than letting him ruin your teaching the others.
- Never make speeches appealing to their better nature (cynics say they have no better nature!) — it rarely works and is an admission of weakness.
- Do not try to out-yell them. That too is weakness.
- Then there is TV. As well as its unsociability: "No civilization can survive television," asserted Malcolm Muggeridge. He may yet be proved right.
- Its *content* tends to corrupt mind and morals towards irreligion and immorality.
- Its *process* makes for inattention and flimsy thinking.
- Counter it by working for intense mental participation by the pupils. Fan flagging interest into flames.
- Outdo TV with dramatic teaching aids.
- Bring good out of evil... Update the old puppet show. Make a cardboard box into a mock TV screen and display a scroll of joined-up paper sheets which wind across on cut down broom handles or the cardboard rolls from fax paper etc. Quaint yet, absorbing...

2. WHAT SORT OF CLASSROOM?

A shelter shed, a library or a staff room are *not* usually an acceptable classroom for a catechist. Protest! Point out that, if such were offered to a paid teacher, his union would support his protest.

- Written work (see no. 4) requires desks to press on, and arranged to face the chalkboard.
- Lounge chairs encourage lounging — which is not a posture promoting mental effort.
- Remove distractions from fidgety hands and over-curious eyes, etc.

3. BLACKBOARD (CHALKBOARD)

A blackboard is a vital visual focus:

- Its use demands attention, even if only curiosity.
- It engages the mind and evokes intellectual virtues.
- If necessary, make a portable blackboard with a piece of 3-ply about 60cm square (2x2 feet), painting it with

blackboard paint (either black or green).

- Or buy a small whiteboard if chalk is too messy.
- Or a sheet of opaque white or yellow perspex.
- Both chalk and textas (Artline 500 etc.) rub off too easily if the board has to be carried to school with something pre-written at home. The older perspex thought-boards used waxy chinograph pencils which rub off less easily, (after a day or so they need a solvent like methylated spirits). See no. 5 for a carry folder.

4. WRITTEN WORK

Written work is essential:

- Perhaps get them writing as soon as the prayer is finished: it is an effective way to settle a restless class.
- It engages several bodily senses: eyes, ears (for dictation), fingers, posture; plus the spiritual powers of the soul. Ideas have to pass through their minds to activate their fingers; and to write accurately they have to concentrate. Insist on accuracy, neatness etc.
- It fits in with the old pedagogy of 'text explanation'. Although this method of explaining a catechism answer bit by bit is out of fashion, it is the invariable method used for remedial work; e.g. when the pupil who does not understand puts up his hand for help (or goes out to the teacher's desk): word by word, phrase by phrase, the ideas are explained and gradually mastered.
- Written work later on in the lesson fits in with the newer pedagogy of a concluding summary.
- Written work gives the pupil something to be proud of, something to show his ordinary school teacher and his parents.
- Written work can take the place of a text book; more over, it will be needed for home revision just before the exam (yes, the exam! — see no. 11).
- As well as written work, let them copy pictures or draw their own: this also involves the mind; (but not colouring in, which makes too little call on conscious mental effort and merely keeps them quiet).

5. FLANNELGRAPH AND PICTURES

Reach their minds through their eyes: as well as the chalkboard, have other things for the pupils to look at:

- Make a combined carry folder and flannelgraph: use two pieces of plywood (as in no. 3) and hinge them with leather straps. It opens out to 4 feet x 2 feet. On one side glue dark green flannel, on the other side have a chalk board. Have carry handles on each side to grip together when folded shut. This device is a three-in-one: chalkboard, flannelgraph and carry-all for pictures and charts etc.
- All such teaching aids should be displayed with a flourish — a teacher is an actor and timing is vital.
- All visual aids should be reinforced with lively questioning and discussion.

6. FIGURES FOR THE FLANNELGRAPH

- The figures for flannelgraph teaching are expensive and seemingly available only from Protestant shops.
- Buy at least the Prodigal Son and Good Samaritan.
- And/or cut your own flannelgraph figures from magazines. Glue bits of coarse sand paper on the back; they stick to felt, even when vertical, like velchro.

- Flannelgraphs were invented for Infants' schools, for 5-8 year olds, but work with 11-12 year olds in primary schools (6th class NSW) *even in schools full of gadgets* - an older technology so novel as to be fascinating.
- If unfamiliar with flannelgraphs, learn by experience.
- Tell His parables as Our Lord did.
- Get the pupils to put the figures up, and move them round, and keep on talking. It's irresistible!
- Their positioning or moving is matter for suggestion, criticism, debate, as long as these support the lesson.
- Depending on that day's psychology, call on the most inattentive pupils, or reward and urge on the best.
- In any event, they will *fight* to put up the figures and move them. Good! they are interested.

7. STORIES WITH A MESSAGE

Parables, with or without a flannelgraph, are a reminder of **the gripping power of stories**. Rather than talk abstractly about praying and receiving sacraments, give the characters names. A few crisp words make a picture, and the teaching becomes alive.

The old Redemptorist Missioners always had stories - truth unvarnished, or suitably gilded for their purpose - often about sudden death and unprepared judgement of those who did not attend the Mission (in another city, a long way off, of course). Holy Fear...

A catechist paints "word pictures" of his own experiences, or of things he has heard and seen, and he avidly seizes on any little incidents coming into the classroom. It all makes the teaching memorable.

8. SINGING

A sung morning offering is available with simple music (melody line as for a recorder). The new *Catholic Family Catechism in 50 Questions & Answers* on two sides of a single sheet of paper, (*Handouts* no. 13) has answers carefully crafted for plainchant. Robust singing can channel undisciplined exuberance into productive attention and devotion.

9. MEMORIZATION

"The blossoms of faith and piety do not flourish in the **desert places of a memoryless catechesis**," said Pope John Paul II in *Catechesis in our Time* §55. He insisted on some memorization of: 1. Christ's words; 2. other Bible texts; 3. the Creed(s); 4. The Ten Commandments; 5. The liturgical prayers; 6. Other prayers; 7. Doctrinal formulas etc (The 'etc' could be hymns).

Use the new *Catholic Family Catechism in 50 Q&As* with its earlier *Apostles' Edition Large Pocket Size* as a resource for pictures, Bible texts, and ideas on how to teach, how to learn, and how to memorize.

10. GESTURES AND DRAMA

Catholicism is an *incarnational religion*: God became man, the God-man Jesus, Son of Mary, and sacraments involve our bodies because **this is the sort of religion that human nature needs**. Therefore both catechist and class should make use of their bodies:

- As you talk, use your hands like an Italian or a Frenchman - engross the attention of their senses.
- Drama can be a good follow up to the flannelgraph.
- Beware of it getting out of control: it must be a means to an end and help achieve the purpose of the lesson.
- Get pupils to demonstrate the sacred gestures of our holy religion: kneeling, clasped hands, Sign of the

Cross, beating the breast, bowing, genuflecting, eyes shut; and standing, sitting and kneeling for Mass.

- A volunteer pupil to show the others is even better than the teacher. The teacher directs the volunteer from the side or the back of the class.
- Then all practise the sacred gestures and criticize each other. Quiz them on the meaning of each gesture.

11. EXAMS, PRIZES AND REWARDS

An exam shows that religion is a serious subject:

- Have an end of the year exam. It's worth the effort of marking it. Give books as prizes.
- Also, but not every lesson, promise a holy card and a Minty to each child at the end of the class *if* they have ALL been good. Hold up the rewards (N.B. rewards are not bribes but incentives): explain how a single naughty action by even one child hinders the others from learning about God (not to mention the difficulties for the teacher) and will mean no rewards for anyone — not until they do better next week...

12. DON'T STAND STILL TOO LONG

- Move around like modern infantry who are hampered, and often defeated, if they are not mobile.
- Intimidate naughty pupils by 'standing over' them.
- Keep them guessing about where you will move next.

13. DEVOTIONAL FOCUS

Put up a 'visual focus' for devotion: crucifix or a picture - some priests do this at the pagan crematoriums - or a paschal candle, unlit (better no fires in a classroom).

14. GET THEM TO PRAY AT HOME

- Give good example: always start the lesson with a prayer. Do not use the Sign of the Cross to quell a tumult: always insist on silence first.
- Persuade them that a Crucifix etc at home will prompt them to say their prayers, morning and night.
- Photocopy pictures for them to paste in their books from **The Rule of Life** in the *Catholic Family Catechism* pp. 5-7, or *Heart Speaks to Heart* pp. 13, 16, 21.
- Draw pictures on a big sheet of cardboard showing bedside prayers with children on their knees; ('stick-figures' will do). Then they draw them in their books.

15. CONSOLATION AND PERSEVERANCE

Our Lord died in agony on the Cross for the sake of our souls' salvation. So keep in mind that:

- Catechists will "have a portion with all those who have well administered the word of God from the beginning" (*Heart Speaks to Heart* §151, p. 112), with the prophets, Apostles, Evangelists, missionaries...
- If you go home from school feeling battered like St Stephen's martyrdom, remember that St Paul felt like this too after some of his less-successful efforts when he was 'run out of town' (Acts 13:50) or 'left for dead' (Acts 14:18); cf. 2 Corinthians 11:23-27.
- Think of Moses facing the stiff-necked Israelites: be consoled at his weakness in wishing to quit the work of God: Exodus 3:11; 4:1, 10, 13; 5:22; 6:30.
- Ask God to show you new ways of engaging their minds, and hence their lives, with God.
- Keep in mind, first and last, that all else by way of lesson preparation, prayer, penance, teaching tactics, classroom stratagems, is a means to an end: the salvation of souls and the glory of God.