

THE DOMINICANS AND THE CATECHISM OF THE COUNCIL OF TRENT

The Council of Trent has been styled "the greatest event in Catholic history during the last five hundred years."¹ Not until the last century or so, however, has its importance been realized or its authority admitted as among the greatest of the ecumenical councils of the Church. More and more is the work of the Council coming to be recognized and appreciated today. This is particularly true of the Catechism of the Council which is being adopted by many bishops of the country as a basis to be used in instructions to the people by the clergy at all Sunday and holyday Masses. It is the purpose of the present article to discuss briefly the origin of the Catechism and the part played by Dominicans in the work of its composition.

"The Fathers of the Council had defined with unerring accuracy the dogmas of Faith which were being denied or disputed by the so-called 'Reformers,' but the internal life of the Church likewise demanded attention, and hence they devised means of instructing ignorance, strengthening discipline, and correcting morals."² Among the means proposed for the instruction of the clergy and laity was the Catechism of the Council, or, as it is sometimes called, the Roman Catechism. The Fathers were led to adopt this means because "the 'Reformers' were busy composing innumerable small books, which, veiling their errors under a semblance of piety, deceived with incredible facility the simple and incautious. The Fathers of the Council, anxious to apply some remedy to an evil of such magnitude were not satisfied with having decided the more important points of Catholic doctrine but deemed it further necessary to deliver some fixed form of instructing the faithful in the truths of religion."³ As a result they passed the following decree in the next to the last session, the twenty-fourth:

"That the faithful may approach the Sacraments with greater reverence and devotion, the Holy Synod commands all bishops, not only to explain in a manner accommodated to the capacity of the hearers the nature and use of the Sacraments

¹ F. J. Kinsman: "Trent."

² "Catechism of the Council of Trent," Eng. trans. Donovan.

³ Catechismus ex dec. Conc. Trid. praef. VII.

when they are to be administered by themselves, but also to see that every pastor piously and prudently do the same, in the vernacular language, should it be necessary and convenient. This exposition is to accord with a form to be prescribed by the Holy Synod for the administration of all the Sacraments in a Catechism which the bishops will take care to have translated into the vernacular language and expounded to the people by all pastors."⁴

The twenty-fifth and last session was held the next day. Impatient to conclude the Council, already dragging on for eighty-two years, the prelates charged the Pope, Pius IV, to have the Catechism composed and promulgated throughout the world. Pius appointed the commission to carry out the work under the direction of his nephew, Cardinal Charles Borromeo. All historians agree that this commission was composed of three Dominicans, Aegidius Foscarari, bishop of Modena, Leonard Marini, archbishop of Lanciano, and Francis Foreiro. To these Tiraboschi, in his monumental "Storia della Letteratura Italiana," adds the name of Muzio Callini, archbishop of Zara. Cardinal Pallavicini, on the contrary, who is par excellence the historian of the Council, makes no mention of Callini in connection with the Catechism, whereas he expressly states that the three Friar Preachers were on the commission for the formation of the Catechism and the revision of the Missal and Breviary.⁵

The Catechism was a work of prime importance and was, moreover, not the least honor that the Order received from the Holy See. Those chosen to compose it were brilliant theologians and all had played conspicuous parts in the debates of the Council. All have left other writings in addition to the Catechism.⁶ Foreiro was the preacher of the court of Portugal. Born in Lisbon, he had entered the Order at an early age, and had been sent by the King, John III, to Paris with several other Friars to pursue higher studies. On his return to Lisbon he became the leading professor of theology in the University there and was named court preacher. His greatest writings in addition to the Catechism are his translations and commentaries

⁴ Conc. Trid. sess. XXIV can 7.

⁵ Pallavicini, S. J., "Histoire du Concile de Trente, vol. 3, bk. 24.

⁶ Quetif-Echard "Scriptores Ord. Praed." vol. II, pp. 184, 228, 261.

of the books of the Old Testament, especially Isaias. When the Council resumed its sessions at Trent in 1562, King Sebastian named Foreiro his special theologian to the Council. The Fathers there appreciated his worth and charged him to carry to the Holy See communications on several delicate points which they were unwilling to decide without the advice of the Pope. But his most important work in connection with the Council was the composition of the Catechism, as is attested by Pallavicini and St. Charles.⁷

Marini was archbishop of Lanciano in the kingdom of Naples. Previously he had rendered illustrious services to the Church as coadjutor to Cardinal Hercules Gonzaga in the government of the duchy and diocese of Mantua, and as Apostolic nuncio to Spain under Julius III in 1553. Desirous to recompense him for his services in Spain, the successor of Julius, Pius IV, at the request of Philip II named the Friar bishop of Lanciano, January 16, 1560. Two years later the Pope raised the see to the dignity of an archiepiscopacy. A month after receiving the pallium Marini was ordered to the Council of Trent as legate of the Pope. There he was entrusted with the delicate mission of explaining to the Holy Father in person the reasons why the Council should continue its sittings despite his orders that it should dissolve. In the deliberations of the Council Marini took an active and energetic part. The tact and affability which had enabled him to overcome the estrangement between Charles IV and the Pope during his nunciature at Madrid now served him in good stead, and several times enabled him to reconcile conflicting views among the prelates of the Council.

The third Dominican chosen was Aegidius Fosarari, bishop of Modena.⁸ Born at Bologna he had had a short but brilliant professorial career in the Order. At the age of thirty-four he was named Master of the Sacred Palace, official theologian of the Pope. The next year, 1547, it fell to his lot as censor of books in Rome to pass upon the "Spiritual Exercises" of St. Ignatius Loyola, which he approved, although compelled to defend some of the doctrine contained therein. In 1560 he was

⁷ Pallavicini op. cit. vol. II, bk. 18. Cf also Tournon "Histoire des Hommes Illustres de l'Ordre de S. Dominique," vol. 4, p. 474 -qq. and Mortier "Histoire des Maitres generaux de l'Ordre des Freres Precheurs," vol. V, p. 533.

⁸ Pallavicini op. cit. vol. III, bk. 24.

made bishop of Modena by Julius III and it was in this capacity that he attended the second and third assemblies of the Council.

Such, in brief, were the three men who, of all the theologians present at the Council were deputed to compose the Catechism. They began their task immediately after the close of the Council, under the direction of St. Charles. King Sebastian of Portugal was anxious to secure the services of Foreiro once more and besought him to return to Lisbon instead of going to Rome to work on the Catechism. So insistent did the King become that St. Charles was obliged to inform him that Foreiro's talents were needed in Rome more than in Lisbon.⁹ The work was completed in December, 1564, less than a year after it was begun. It was presented to Pope St. Pius V, and by his order translated into French, German, Italian, and Polish. The first copies came from the press in 1566.

Catechism in the ordinary sense of the word today means a summary of religious doctrine compiled in the form of question and answer. The Roman Catechism is not a catechism in this sense, for it is not written in the form of question and answer. Furthermore, it is by no means elementary, since it is a very careful and complete exposition of Catholic doctrine. In accordance with the decree of the Council, it was composed primarily for priests, to guide them in instructing the people in the matter of faith and morals. It is the most authoritative work of the kind in the Church, intended to embody the results of the Council, and published by the authority of the Pope. On its appearance it received approval from the Universal Church, and ever since then has been a standard compendium of Catholic theology. As one writer says: "It is recommended both by the erudition, exactness, and conciseness with which it is written, and by the elegance of the style."¹⁰ After it had been composed, the charge of polishing the literary style was entrusted to Julius Poggiani, secretary to St. Charles Borromeo.

The Catechism itself is divided into four main parts, treating of the Apostles' Creed, the Sacraments, the Commandments, and Prayer. As theologians of the Dominican Order, the composers had been trained in the doctrine of St. Thomas Aquinas, hence they naturally based the Catechism on the works of the

⁹ Tournon op. cit. vol. IV, p. 477.

¹⁰ Cf. Butler, "Lives of the Saints," vol. 4, Nov 4, St. Charles Borromeo.

Angelic Doctor, where there are to be found treatises on the Creed, the Decalogue, and Prayer, as well as the treatment of the Sacraments in the "Summa Theologica." This, indeed, was but fitting in a work embodying the teaching of the Council which during its sessions had placed on the altar with the Bible and the decrees of the Popes the immortal Summa, "whence to seek counsel, reason, and inspiration,"¹¹ an honor shared by no other Doctor of the Church.

Thus it is that the present revival of interest in the Roman Catechism is but a practical application of the command of the late Pope Leo XIII that St. Thomas be restored to his rightful place in the Catholic world as prince of theologians, for the Catechism, composed by Dominicans, the only true teachers of the doctrine and spirit of the Angelic Doctor is based on the works of St. Thomas. What better encomium of the Catechism than the words of Cardinal Newman: "I rarely preach a sermon but I go to this beautiful and complete Catechism to get both my matter and my doctrine?"¹²

¹¹ Encyc. of Leo XIII "Aeterni Patris," Aug. 4, 1879.

¹² Apologia Pro Vita Sua. Newman.

—Bro. Theodore English, O. P.

SPRING

When the birds again start singing,
And the sleigh bells stop their ringing,
When that biting blighting wind has passed away,

When the trees just move a-swaying
And the young folk talk of Maying,
Then we know that Spring is here and come to stay.

When the grass begins a-growing,
And the crocus starts a-showing,
Being hidden from all view through Winter's day,

When the buds begin a-peeping
And the ants again start creeping,
Then we know that Spring is here and come to stay.

—Bro. Arthur Kelly, O. P.