

The Bourdin Document and the Meeting with the Dying Child at the Foot of Pilat

The Meaning of “the required way”¹ in Pastoral Theology

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In Chapter 6 of the Life of Champagnat the famous event takes place of the confession of “a sick child” of twelve years of age “in a hamlet”.

“Before proceeding with the confession, he put a few questions to make sure that he was sufficiently instructed to receive the sacraments. To his great surprise, the child knew nothing about the principal mysteries and, in fact, didn't even know whether God existed. Greatly upset at finding a twelve-year-old in such ignorance, and fearing that he would die in such a state, he sat down beside him to teach him the mysteries and truths necessary for salvation. It took him two hours for the instruction and confession. It was extremely difficult to impart, even the most fundamental truths, to a child who was so sick that he scarcely grasped what was being said.

Having heard his confession, and helped him make several acts of love of God and of contrition as preparation for death, the priest left him, to minister to a sick person in an adjoining house.”

On his return, having heard of the child's death, he reflected as follows:

“How many children are in the same predicament every day, exposed to the same dangers because they have no-one to teach them the truths of faith!”

And Champagnat decided to found a Society of Brothers to compensate for this danger.

There exists another version, quite previous to this tale. When, around 1830, Father Bourdin was making enquiries into the origins of L'Hermitage, he posed the question, “What necessitated the haste about this work?” and he noted, in an abbreviated style, the following response, definitely Father Champagnat's:

“Sick child at the foot of Pilat, the required way...Left for a moment for a neighbour's, dead on return, reflection: how many children are away from the path to salvation...with instruction, he would know to repent, he would know...” (Origines Maristes 2/754 no 6).

We can make this clearer: Father Champagnat visits a sick child at the foot of Pilat. He then goes to visit a neighbour and, on his return, learns that the child has died. From this springs his reflection

¹ Translator's Note: The original French of this phrase (*necessité de moyen*) is virtually impossible to translate meaningfully into English. In my translation, I have tried to provide what scripture and liturgical scholars refer to as the ‘dynamic equivalence’ of the phrase.

on children in danger of damnation. However, within his words lies the expression, “the required way”; I have spent a long time trying to grasp their exact meaning. In fact, it is a matter of a concept in pastoral theology, and the work *Instructions familières* by PJ Henry (or Henri), Parish Priest of Surice in Belgium, gave me the key. I used the 1828 edition [1] but it is, in fact, an old book: the 1770 edition was already a re-edition.[2]

Two catechetical methods

In his preface, the author recalls that the bishops stipulated to priests that they must preach in such a way as to resemble a catechism more than a sermon. He develops reasons for this: sermons assume that the hearers are sufficiently instructed in doctrine, without their necessarily being so. Diocesan catechisms, in their question-response format adapted for children, are inadequate “for those whose spirit is capable of being nourished by the greater truths of our holy religion”.

“Two types of catechism must therefore be distinguished: one with questions and answers for children to learn the most important truths of religion by heart [...] the other, much more extensive, with instructions and lessons to be followed for teaching the faithful, at greater depth, the mysteries of the faith and Christian morality.”

The work then goes on to furnish for pastors, in a simple, condensed, language “the truths of the Catholic faith, either dogmatic or moral.” It is, in short, theology adapted for the faithful, where ecclesiastics will know “the majority of topics they will have read or learned about in the course of their studies.”

At the time of Champagnat, there are then two catechetical modes, theoretically distinct: instruction in simple language for adults and the questions-and-answer catechism for children. However, in practical terms, the two methods were mixed up: the priests using the simple-language instruction with children and the memorisation with adults. The Life of Champagnat gives some examples and the Brothers themselves were tempted to put aside their function of coaching the text, as is said in Chapter 5 of *Avis, Leçons, Sentences*, criticising the “Preaching Brothers”

The required way and the required precept

It is in the author’s first instruction “On Faith” that the notion of “the required way” is clearly expressed (p 5).

“Let us see now what we need to believe in to be saved. There are two areas: one that we need to believe, the required way, according to theologians *necessitate medii*: the other that we need to believe, the required precept, *necessitate praecepti*. The first area is so necessary for salvation that one cannot attain it without belief. This comprises the following articles: 1, That there is a God 2. That God will eternally reward in heaven those who have loved him and faithfully served him on earth and, on the contrary, will eternally punish in hell those who have not loved him and served him as they should. 3. The mystery of the Most Blessed Trinity. [...] 4. The Incarnation of Our

Lord Jesus Christ. To these four articles are related the immortality of the soul and the infection of the soul by original sin, the catastrophic heritage of Adam, the first man.”

As for the truths to believe, as the required precept, which are contained in the Apostles Creed, the Commandments...they are not absolutely indispensable for salvation “if we are not negligently ignorant of them”. That, however, is very rare and negligence “ordinarily very blameworthy before God” places salvation in peril. Fathers and mothers, then, must instruct their children or have them instructed “by those whom God has especially appointed for this work, such as pastors, schoolmasters and mistresses and others.” In short, salvation depends on the knowledge of certain articles from the creed (the required way) but also on the knowledge of duties towards God (the required precept). This distinction has important consequences, notably in ministry to the dying, because the priest must verify to what level the person he is assisting has been instructed.

All priests learned this distinction while doing their theology and when Champagnat spoke to Father Bourdin about “the required way” with regard to the child to whom he had urgently ministered, it was clearly understood what he meant: Champagnat, having ascertained the child’s religious ignorance, delivered an elementary catechesis on the six points described above. Brother Jean-Baptiste (Life ch 6 p 81 English version) says roughly the same thing “ (the child) didn't even know whether God existed... he (Champagnat) sat down beside him to teach him the mysteries and truths necessary for salvation.” that is to say, those which are true as the required way.. Only then did he instruct on the level of the required precept.

In the Bourdin text, Father Champagnat adds: “with instruction, he would know to repent, he would know...”. This might remind us of ‘the required precept’: among other things, the precepts of the commandments and the sacrament of penance. Now, speaking of the sacrament of penance, Father Henry (Vol 2 p 99) reminds us of the classic doctrine: “It is not sufficient to receive absolution [...] at the sight of his sins (the sinner) must conceive a lively sorrow for having offended God and a firm resolve to offend him no more. He must then confess, as far as possible, all his sins to the priest...”

Brother Jean-Baptiste states that Father Champagnat, having heard the child’s confession, “helped him make several acts of love of God and of contrition as preparation for death”. Bourdin himself suggested that Champagnat wondered about the sacramental value of a confession *in extremis* “that a child away from the path of salvation ... “with instruction, would know to repent, he would know...”. Brother Jean Baptiste, who confirmed that “(the) child was so sick that he scarcely grasped what was being said.”, offers a similar opinion, but concludes in a more optimistic manner, “Then he felt an upsurge of joy at having been there so opportunely, but it was mingled with a shudder of dread at the danger run by the poor boy”.

So Champagnat accomplished the duty of every zealous priest. However, he was conscious of having provided only a temporary, imperfect, remedy to a global problem: “how many children are away from the path to salvation...” he said to Father Bourdin. Creating a specialised body for the religious instruction of children became, in some way, a “required way”, not in a theological sense, but as a pastoral response to the massive religious ignorance among children.

[Translator's Note: Translations from Jean Baptiste's *Life of Champagnat* are from the standard English-language version .]

[1] The complete title is: *Instructions familières dogmatiques et morales, sur les quatre parties de la doctrine chrétienne... éditée retouchée et augmentée d'exhortations avant et après la première communion*, Lille, L. Lefort, 1828, 2 volumes, 280 and 229 pages. The work seems to be a remake of *Explications sur le catéchisme de Liège, de Cambrai et de Namur*, Paris Leclere, which, in its 1828, was in its 5th edition. Other editions located were: 1768, 1782, 1798.

[2] Consultation of the catalogues of the Bibliothèque Nationale and the Bibliothèque de Lyon indicated new editions released in 1783, 1804, 1827, 1828, 1832, 1845. There were probably new editions between 1804 and 1827.