

TWO TREATISES OF ST AUGUSTINE

BY

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OMETIME in the first few years of the fifth century a deacon at Carthage began to feel discouraged about his work and wrote for advice to St Augustine. His letter prompted the short treatise known as *De Catechizandis Rudibus*, a book on the matter and method to be used in the preliminary instruction of would-be Catholics, which was to become one of the best known and influential of Augustine's works. In considering the personal worries of the deacon Deogratias, he laid down principles whose force has in no way lessened with time. The treatise has all the psychological wisdom and the epigrammatic vigour which so often make Augustine's writings sound almost contemporary in modern ears. It springs from experience, as its illustrations show, and the repeated assurance that the problems of Deogratias were common to all engaged in routine instruction.

Deogratias was, in fact, a fairly successful catechist. What he had to do was to give the first, general instruction to those who thought they would like to become catechumens, that is, begin a full course of regular instruction. Having said much the same rather elementary things time and again, he felt that his teaching was going stale. He worried sometimes as to whether he got anything across at all, his words sounded so inadequate in his own ears. At other times he chafed under the necessity of leaving more interesting work in order to interview callers inquiring about the Christian faith. Augustine took up each point. He knew what a sinking feeling could rise in the catechist's heart when the listener who had been attentive to begin with began to yawn or to fidget; and the anxiety there could be about the possibility of the very words of instruction sowing error rather than truth. Words at best are poor things when divine mystery is to be revealed, and Deogratias need not expect to feel perfectly satisfied with his language. 'For my part', Augustine said, 'I am nearly always dissatisfied with my discourse. For I am desirous of something better, which I often inwardly enjoy before I begin to unfold my thought in spoken words; but when I find that my powers of expression come short of my knowledge of the subject, I am sorely disappointed that my tongue has not been able to answer the desire of my mind. For I desire my hearer to understand all that I understand, and I feel that I am not speaking in such a manner as

to effect that. This is so chiefly because intuition floods the mind, as it were, with a sudden flash of light, while the expression of it in speech is a slower, drawn-out, and far different process, and while speech is being formed, intellectual apprehension has already hidden itself in the secret recesses; nevertheless, because it has stamped in a wonderful way certain imprints upon the memory, these endure for the length of time it takes to pronounce the words, and from these imprints we construct those audible symbols which are called 'language'. And he goes on to enlarge on the limitation of language, with its variety of signs for even the commonest sensible phenomena. Problems of communication are inevitable in the nature of things, though they can be partly met by careful consideration of the nature of the listener.

One of the first things, therefore, that a catechist must do is to find out what he can about his listener, and especially why he thinks of becoming a Christian, what kind of education he has had, what books he has read if he is an educated man. The information gained on these points will suggest where instruction should start, what is to be left out as unnecessary, what to be stressed. The more literate a man is, for example, the more need probably to enlarge on the importance of humility. Rhetoricians, more used to eloquence than to serious thought, must be assured 'that there is no voice to reach the ears of God save the emotion of the heart. Thus they will not smile contemptuously if they happen to observe that some ministers of the Church either fall into barbarisms or solecisms when calling upon Almighty God, or do not understand and badly punctuate words which they are pronouncing'. By attending to the quality of the hearer the teacher will be more likely to make an impression on him, and seeing an impression being made will be encouraged himself, for 'a hearer who remains unmoved makes the speaker weary'. Sometimes, of course, the hearer may be so slow-witted as to baffle all the speaker's art, and every inducement fail to rouse him. Then, 'we should bear with him in a compassionate spirit, and after briefly running through the other points, impress on him in a way to inspire awe the truths that are most necessary concerning the unity of the Catholic Church, temptations, and the Christian manner of living in view of the future judgment; and we should rather say much on his behalf to God, rather than say much to him about God'.

Such an attitude of patient understanding is only possible where there is great love of God on the part of the teacher. In the first part of the treatise, where the matter and method of instructing is under discussion, there is steady insistence on the primacy of love. Not only must the catechist's teaching point always to the love of God and

lead the hearer towards that end, it must spring from charity to be truly good itself, 'for then only is a work truly good, when the purpose of the doer is winged with love'. The style of teaching will differ for this person or that, but there must be one love for all. The work to be done is God's work, done according to Christ's example, a pouring out of the love of the Holy Spirit which God has placed in the teacher's own heart. Where love is in command impatience at interruption will vanish in the recognition of God's will. Nor will there be weariness in having to repeat simple and familiar things, 'for in proportion as we dwell in others through the bond of love, so do things which were old become new to us also'. This is found true when we do no more than show earthly sights to visiting friends. 'How much more, then, ought we to rejoice when men now approach to study God . . . and how much more ought we to be renewed in their newness, so that if our preaching as being a matter of routine is somewhat dull, it may grow interesting because of our hearers for whom it is all new'. From his own experience St Augustine knows that he reacts differently to the man before him, according as the latter is dull or clever, rich or poor, a product of this or that environment or intellectual movement; that the nature of the reaction influences his address, and that even love itself must act variously. 'Love itself is in travail with some, becomes weak with others; is at pains to edify some, dreads to be a cause of offence to others; stoops to some, before others stands with head erect; is gentle to some, and stern to others; and enemy to none, a mother to all.' There is the constant element in the situation—charity must be mother to all.

This insistence on love which marks the first part, the fifteen short chapters in which *De gratias* is offered advice, is found also in the second part. There, in chapters 16 to 27, two model catecheses are set out in answer to *De gratias*'s request for examples, and in the last paragraph of all are some lines typical of Augustine, a summary of much that he wrote elsewhere, his constant message not only to those under instruction but to all calling themselves Christian. 'Imitate, then, the good, bear with the evil, love all; for you do not know what he shall be tomorrow who today is evil. And do not love their wrong-doing, but love them to the end that they may attain to holiness; for not only is love of God enjoined upon us, but likewise love of our neighbour, and on these two commandments depend the whole law and the prophets.'

It is such passages as these which make so many lesser works of St Augustine admirable introductions to his thought, and worth study in themselves whether followed by wider reading in his larger works or not. There is reason, therefore, to be grateful to the Newman Bookshop, the American publishing firm which has launched a series

of English translations of the Fathers, for having decided to include several of the most notable of St Augustine's opuscula in that series. Two are now available:¹ *De Catechizandis Rudibus* under the title *The First Catechetical Instruction*, and the work usually known as the *Enchiridion*, under the title *Faith, Hope, and Charity*—which reveals its subject at a glance. The latter treatise, written about 421-3, also in answer to a specific request, is more knotty than the earlier work. It includes discussions of the nature of evil, of the consequences of the Fall, and of the nature of lying, which not only refer the reader to some of Augustine's major controversial works but also bring him up against some of the most debated of the saint's theological conclusions. Each volume has a short introduction on the time and circumstances of the work's composition, and its significance; a translation of the text in full, and copious notes. These are valuable not only for the commentary they offer on theologically important sections of the text, but also for their notes on sources, on language, on parallel passages in other Fathers, and for their references to relevant critical studies. *The First Catechetical Instruction* is an especially notable contribution to the series, being an adaptation and revision of the larger work by Dr Christopher which, when it appeared in 1927, was recognised as superlative by no less an authority than Professor Souter, writing in *The Journal of Theological Studies*. The quotations given above witness to its readability. The editor of the other treatise, though less impressive in his commentary is almost as successful in his translation. Judged by the two volumes of Augustine, the series *Ancient Christian Writers* is one to be welcomed both by those looking for theological writing in contemporary English, and by students who want help in their approach to the original texts.

¹ *Ancient Christian Writers. St Augustine: The First Catechetical Instruction (De Catechizandis Rudibus)*, translated and annotated by the Rev. Joseph P. Christopher, Ph.D. *St Augustine: Faith, Hope, and Charity*, translated and annotated by the Very Rev. Louis A. Arand, SS.S.T.D. The Newman Bookshop, Westminster, Maryland. (English price, 13s. 6d. each.)