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Waldemar Kowalski
Jan Kochanowski University of Kielce
waldemar.kowalski@ujk.edu.pl
ORCID: 0000-0003-1692-338X

THE CATECHISM BY BENEDYKT HERBEST: PRINT AND ORALITY IN RELIGIOUS EDUCATION ON THE VERGE OF THE MODERN EPOCH

Abstract

The article discusses Rev. Benedict Herbest's doubts about whether a printed exposition of faith be recommended to the faithful and how much the written word may support the teaching from the pulpit. Herbest (1531–1598) was a Polish Catholic priest, a vigorous polemicist and a leading opponent of the local Reformation. He was the author of *The Teaching of a Righteous Christian*, a catechism that was published in 1566 in Cracow. In terms of communicativeness and pragmatic intentions, it outshines all other catechisms, both Catholic and Evangelical, that were addressed to a Polish readership in the sixteenth century. The dogmas are presented in the form of a dialogue between a priest and his lay interlocutor, a townsman. Despite employing this traditional form of explanation, the catechism shows how difficult it was to reconcile the need for a high-quality religious, print-disseminated clarification against the hoary tradition of oral instruction.

Keywords: the religious Reformation, catechism, sermonizing, early modern Church, Cracow

The political and social changes that took place throughout the sixteenth century were fundamental for the development of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth until it was partitioned at the end of the eighteenth century. Sixteenth-century political, economic and social transformations were more a continuation and fulfilment of processes initiated during the late Middle Ages, than a start of new radical changes. Undoubtedly, this was not the case in terms of culture. In short, Renaissance ideas inspired the material and spiritual culture of the higher social strata, that is, of the royal court, nobility, and of the upper echelons of gentry and townsfolk. At the same time, the majority of Polish society, especially peasants and residents of small towns, lived untouched by the new trends.[1]

The reformation of the Catholic Church was a major social problem for the kingdom, and the improvement of the quality of religious education played a crucial role in those reforms. Late mediaeval synodal minutes show that reaching every Christian in Poland with the rudiments of the faith was high on the agenda of the ecclesiastical authorities long before the Council of Trent (1545–1563).[2] The need to intensify the teaching of the essentials was even greater in reaction to the Reformation novelties that had been spreading over the kingdom from the early 1520s onwards.[3] The range and methods of religious instruction were a continuation of mediaeval practices. Throughout the sixteenth century, Polish synods repeated the rudiments of the faith according to *De instructione confessorum* of 1444, which defined them as: memorizing the Lord's Prayer and the Credo, refraining from work on Sundays and other holidays, and attending Mass on those days,

[1] For the most recent introduction, see FROST 2015; cf. MĄCZAK 1995; GIEROWSKI 1996. On the phenomenon of Christian Humanism in Poland, see HANUSIEWICZ-LAVALLEE 2011.

[2] Cf. NOWAKOWSKA 2007, 72–93; NOWAKOWSKA 2011, 3–39; NOWAKOWSKA 2015, 125, 136–143.

[3] For a detailed outline of the Reformation in Poland, see especially PTASZYŃSKI 2015,KRIEGSEISEN 2016 and BEM 2020.

participating in the annual confession and partaking of the Communion at Eastertide. It was a Christian's duty to observe these tenets in order to remain exculpated before God.[4]

The hitherto research on popular late mediaeval culture has found that formalism was important in shaping mass religious consciousness. It was reduced to the repetition of rules and guidelines a good Christian should have in mind on their way to salvation. The programme of moulding communal behaviour did not necessarily accentuate faith and love; for its effectiveness was measured by obedience to church practices and doing good deeds. This generalisation is well-grounded. It is worth noticing, however, that confessional *summæ*, which were popular at the turn of mediaeval and modern times, recommended and supported a cure-of-souls that responded to individual needs. The authors of those manuals stressed a Christian's personal responsibility for their choices.[5]

Printing was delivering undisputed benefits to the Catholic Church in Poland on the verge of the modern epoch,[6] although it remains debatable how much the growing significance of print in religious instruction was appreciated by the contemporaries. There is no doubt that in those decades sermonising and other forms of oral teaching dominated over handwritten and printed materials in terms of effectiveness, for the readership of this literature was limited by literacy and education. The confrontation of the oral and the written was inevitable, and could be frustrating at times, as this paper shows. It sheds light on how the Catholic clergy in sixteenth-century Poland explained the unwanted but inevitable necessity of turning to print as a means of religious instruction. This aspect of

[4] ROJEWSKI 1978, 168–170; BRUŹDZIŃSKI 1996, 137–138, 148; BYLINA 2002, 46–66; LITAK 2004, 369–371.

[5] CHAUNU 1989, 132–193; WIŚLICZ 2001, 19–23 and passim; BYLINA 2002, 194 and passim; HAMM 2004; BRACHA 2013, 26–57; BRUŹDZIŃSKI 2017, 236–246; BYLINA 2019.

[6] See especially NOWAKOWSKA 2011, 3–39. For the use of various means of persuasion in religious propaganda, see PETTEGREE 2005.

social changes in Poland on the verge of mediaeval and modern times has been given short shrift so far.[7]

Fifteenth-century synods declared the need for frequent vernacular sermonising to effectively explain the Bible and God's precepts. Such systematic teaching could only take place, however, in the major cities. Their parishes were run by priests who were better educated and equipped with handwritten or printed sermon collections. Franciscans and Dominicans, who were based in prominent urban centres, not only preached in their own churches but also at local parish and collegiate ones. Nevertheless, although regular sermonising remained more of a synodal demand than a weekly obligation fulfilled by sixteenth-century Polish clergy, the teaching of the rudiments of the faith must have been widespread.[8]

Some of the aforementioned *summæ* included catechetical teachings and the prayers every Christian should know according to the aforementioned instruction of 1444. The *summæ* provided the clergy with moral comments in a way that not only facilitated intimate dialogue between the confessor and the penitent but also helped educate those gathered at church on Sunday. Thus, they played the same role as catechisms.

In the sixteenth century, the catechism, that is, a plain exposition of Catholic or Evangelical dogma, increased in importance all over Europe. Amidst the ongoing denominational strife, catechisms were appreciated as an efficient tool of both education and confessional propaganda. The defence of the faith and the presentation of moral behaviour as guideposts showing the right way to salvation are features typical of these Catholic and Evangelical manuals. The numerous catechetic publications that were edited at that time form a wide variety

[7] See the interesting comments on the import, results and methodology of the research in 'oral-written' by ŚNIEŻKO 2008, 9–18; KALISZUK 2011, 169–188.

[8] BRACHA 2014, 177–194

of religious literature, which includes thin pamphlets with just the rudiments of the faith as well as thick books of lavishly commented dogmas. These commentaries usually focus on the eschatological nature of man, which is shown through social realities well-known to their readers. This literature was addressed first and foremost to the clergy, but also to the educated section of the laity. Some of those catechetic manuals were similar to collections of thematic sermons in terms of their extensive narratives. Like confessional *summæ*, they were usually arranged in the form of dialogue, although this was not a strict rule.[9]

In the sixteenth century, ca. twenty Catholic catechisms were printed in Cracow, Poland, in an estimated fifty issues (twenty-eight in Latin, twenty-one in Polish, and one in German). Most of these editions were reprints of popular foreign works. The large number of Latin catechisms suggests that they were mainly addressed to clergy. However, the language and the scope of information, surpassing the recommended minimum of basic instruction, allow one to assume that only a minority of clergy, that is those who were graduates of secondary school or university, could effectively profit from those prints. It is highly doubtful that the vast part of the clergy, whose mental horizons did not exceed elementary education, read such handbooks in Latin on a daily basis.

The first catechism in Polish was printed not earlier than 1555, but no copy of this edition exists. Nevertheless, by the turn of the next century, eight such manuals had been published, including a translation of the *Roman Catechism* (1568) and a translation of the *Small Catechism* by the Jesuit Peter Canisius (1570), some of them after having been reedited. The *Small Catechism* by Martin Luther, whose first German edition reached its readership in 1529, was translated into Polish and printed in Königsberg, Ducal Prussia, the next year. It had

[9] See especially PALMER WANDEL 2015.

eleven editions by the end of the century. Moreover, thirteen other Evangelical catechisms were published in Polish during those decades. Some of those were translations, including the bestseller, the *Large Catechism* by the Lutheran theologian Johann Brenz (1556). Most of those catechisms were penned, however, by Reformed Evangelicals.[10]

This paper briefly outlines the concern some priests had to overcome before recommending a catechism to their flock, in contrast to the traditional and rudimentary oral teaching at church. The publication analysed here is *The Teaching of a Righteous Christian* by Benedykt Herbest. This work is widely regarded as the first catechism originally written in Polish. It is 824 pages long, which means that it provides the reader with a relatively extensive presentation of Catholic dogma. The long introduction is followed by the *Credo*, then *About hope and the Lord's prayer*, and finally *About love and the Lord's precepts*. The content corresponds with the three theological virtues, thereby paralleling how catechesis had been arranged by Thomas Aquinas.[11]

Benedykt Herbest (1531–1598) graduated with a BA from the University of Cracow in 1550. His first appointment was with an elementary school in Lviv, but in 1558 he returned to Cracow to run the school at the downtown parish of St Mary's. Having been promoted to MA in Liberal Arts, he lectured at his alma mater. In the 1550s, he developed a reformed teaching programme for parish elementary schools. In 1563, he moved to Poznan, where was the rector of Lubrański Academy and got a stall at the local cathedral. It was probably at that time that he was ordained. In 1569, he joined the Jesuits in Braniewo (Braunsberg), in northern Poland. In 1567, he published his first pamphlet against Anti-Trinitarians. *The Teaching of*

[10] For a broad introduction, see KOWALSKI 2017, 220–225.

[11] Cf. OSIAL 2013, 319–326, where a concise presentation of the discussed catechism with reference to an earlier analysis of the bookish instruction problem.

a Righteous Christian was supplemented with his works on sacramentology, in which he discusses the Eucharist (1567) and baptism (1568). These pamphlets and his response to the evangelical Bohemian Brethren (1567), who had settled in Greater Poland, were written not only to defend Catholicism but also to support the cure-of-souls.[12]

This practical aspect is highlighted on the front page of his catechism. He addresses *The Teaching of a Righteous Christian* to clergy engaged in pastoral ministry as well as to the laity. The book is a "safe" read and assuages any doubts about the faith. The author suggests that the reader follow the author's lecture in the order given, but can also browse for particular topics. Accordingly, the catechism claims to be a must-read for all those getting ready to partake of the sacraments.

The introduction is addressed *To honourable burgesses and all commoners*, which results, one may assume, from the pastoral experience that the author had gained in the city. It is difficult to explicitly explain why he excludes the gentry. No calls for their special treatment as to religious education are known, and it remains unclear how this could have expanded or modified his argument. It is possible, however, that ongoing heated disputes about the gentry's financial responsibility of their parish clergy that antagonised these strata influenced Herbest's decision. Arranging a sermon in a way that best suited the auditorium's expectations was a cardinal rule every preacher had to observe. Although Herbest strongly emphasizes that he had taken the duty of writing his catechism mostly for "the common man", it seems that here "common" is equivalent to "uneducated". He explains that, although he gives only passing mention to some topics, he had no intention to omit anything the common man may find useful.

[12] KOWALSKI 2016a, 14–19; KOWALSKI 2017, 222–223. On the religious Reformation in Greater Poland and the early Catholic reaction against it, see DWORZACZKOWA 2001; KIEC 2015, 19–37.

The Greek word "catechism" means oral teaching through questions and answers. Hence, it comes as no surprise that *The Teaching of a Righteous Christian* is a dialogue between a Priest and a Burgher. The dialogue could take place in private. In those times, however, the usual occasion for teaching the rudiments of the faith was in public, to those gathered at church on a Sunday. The teaching was given as exhortation from the pulpit or from the altar and could take place before or during the mass. It seems, however, that, according to the synodal admonitions of the sixteenth century, the flock was addressed after the Gospel or after the Credo, which followed a Gospel reading. *The Decalogue*, *the Lord's Prayer*, *Hail Mary* and *the Credo* were commented on and repeated with the faithful. The salvific importance of the sacraments was also explained.[13] The faithful expected these rudimentary teachings, however, some of them were eager to listen to extended and less routine, moving narratives. Sometimes those gathered reacted to the preacher's words with questions and comments.[14]

The circumstances and motives that stood behind Herbest's eponymous job are revealed at the beginning of the dialogue, in the subchapter titled *About Polish books*. The Burgher asks the Priest "to write some books that allow us to better remember your teaching and to serve our Lord more diligently".[15] The Priest answers, however, "I am not willing to pen Polish books".[16] The reason is that the Lord's words should be explained with the due respect and not anywhere, anyhow. The hitherto published books in Polish had given rise to widespread sermonising at inns and revelries. Thus, the Priest's answer must have been inspired by the destructive role of those prints whose authors, who, although they had not joined

[13] KUMOR 1968, 281; BYLINA 2002, 49–53; KOWALSKI 2003, 111–112; SKIERSKA 2003, 173–182.

[14] BYLINA 2002, 72–73; BRACHA 2007, 117, 120; KOWALSKI 2016b, 103–104.

[15] HERBEST 1566, Ar.

[16] HERBEST 1566, Ar.

the Reformation, had openly criticised the social order of the Church. The Priest adds that people can talk about God, but with "great awe".[17] One cannot profess the Gospel, even if his soul is sordid with peccadilloes. The Priest has no doubt that discussions about faith between the wined and dined are, unfortunately, frequent. The more important reason for his hesitation, however, is that only the ordained are entitled to preach, and "the common folk must read God's will from the preacher's lips and not from books".[18] This was a widely shared conviction among the Church authorities in sixteenth-century Poland.[19] The Burgher asks then: "Aren't we worthy of having written books?"[20] Half-heartedly, the Priest concedes to the layman's perusal of religious literature. He argues that it would be far better to learn the Bible from the clerics if it were not for the different standpoints within the clergy and for the "heretics who poison people with the venom of their books".[21] He deplores the detrimental change of the times when "even women talk about faith".[22] Therefore, let the common folk read books at home, but with the respect due to the preacher at church. Still the preacher transmits God's voice, and the auditors should concentrate on the Lord and not on his clerical representative. This God-given authority of the preacher was a mediaeval heritage.[23] Herbest reduces the recommended form of educating the flock to the following: "the pastor should teach, and the sheep should listen to his teaching".[24] According to Herbest, the common people must not enter into discussions with "heretics", which is a priestly task. Hence, because the Polish diocesan priesthood was in no way sufficiently well-prepared

[17] HERBEST 1566, Ar.
[18] HERBEST 1566, Av.
[19] HANUSIEWICZ-LAVALLEE 2016, 130.
[20] HERBEST 1566, Ar.
[21] HERBEST 1566, Ar.
[22] HERBEST 1566, Aii r.
[23] BRACHA 2007, 106.
[24] HERBEST 1566, Aii r.

to effectively repulse the surging wave of 'heresy', the synods restricted this duty to the better-educated clerics of religious orders.[25]

The Burgher assures his interlocutor that there are godly people, and they will obey that command. The Priest hopes this will be the case. He recommends books for home teaching of children and servants because it is not always possible for them to attend Sunday Mass. In fact, it is most probable that the majority of urbanised Catholics visited their parish church on Sundays, which was not the case with peasants.[26] Herbest seems to be using the Priest's arguments to convince himself that, nonetheless, there are positives in learning the faith from books. Undoubtedly, it is better to read a catechism at home than take part in binge drinking at the inn. The reoccurring thought that studying books may be salvific if they are "honestly" read, is echoed by the conviction that only priests have authority in matters of the faith. Therefore, it comes as a surprise to learn from the Priest that some of his fellow clergymen do not expose "what is in books" to the faithful, and, as a result, become neither wiser nor godlier.[27] Herbest must have been aware of the poor intellectual and spiritual condition of a vast number of parish clergy, especially of vicars.[28] Once again, however, he dispels his doubts and raises the main argument for book learning: no Catholic must stay unarmed in defence of their faith, which is validated by the Bible and Church Fathers. Still, there remains a difference between church and home education. The father must humbly listen to the words coming from the pulpit to accurately repeat them at home and in the neighbourhood. The Priest resolutely refuses to accept the Burgher's suggestion that the Holy Spirit

[25] KOWALSKI 2001, 497.
[26] WIŚLICZ 2001, 23–27; BYLINA 2002, 25–42, 195–199; SKIERSKA 2003, 283 and passim.
[27] HERBEST 1566, Aiii r.
[28] Cf. WIŚLICZ 2001; BYLINA 2002, 44; KOWALSKI 2021.

may inform lay people. Godly, spiritual inspiration of the laity was a belief shared by the aforementioned Bohemian Brethren, an Evangelical community that had arrived in Poznan in 1548 and settled down in Greater Poland. Nevertheless, although the Burgher does not stop assuring the Priest that he will hold this in his heart and that book learning is useful, the Priest remains sceptical, although he is at the same time under the pressure of Protestant propaganda.

These dilemmas must have accompanied Herbest throughout his work. In the first chapter of his catechism, he admits that "what is said by a preacher, skips one's memory soon, but books are memory's reservoirs".[29] A few pages further, however, he praises the Burgher's good knowledge of Scripture. The latter explains that he owes his knowledge to his father, who, although illiterate, knew the Bible by heart. In sixteenth-century Poland, the distrust within the Roman Church towards laypeople, especially those of the lower reaches, who read religious works, must have been widespread. Rev. Jakub Wujek, the well-known Jesuit polemist expressed the same doubts and hesitations in 1573.[30] Ca. 1553, the unshakable trust in the benefits of oral teaching was expressed by an illiterate peasant, a character of a Catholic polemical pamphlet.[31]

The Priest often repeats that he refrains from entering into Bible teaching deeper than it is necessary to instruct "the common folk". Thus, he remains faithful to the hoary tradition that requires a preacher to meet the intellectual level of his auditors, which does not mean, however, that they may be left with doubts. This is why the Priest often asks his interlocutor whether he is grasping the topic that is being explained. A lecture must be concise. Herbest argues that "who writes

[29] HERBEST 1566, Aii v.
[30] HANUSIEWICZ-LAVALLEE 2016, 130–131.
[31] KOWALSKI 2019, 91–92.

short, makes his words powerful. This is why we explain difficult words with plain ones".[32]

The Burgher plays manifold roles in the dialogue. He gives arguments for the teaching of the commoners, but he also points to the line a preacher cannot cross. The Priest takes his student into advanced theological speculations when he comments on Jesus as the only mediator, however, he stops his lecture abruptly by saying, "but these talks are not for the common folk".[33] The Burgher relies on the Priest's experience and often declares that he believes his mentor's words, although sometimes he is unable to comprehend them thoroughly. The teaching about the Trinity is a case in point. The Burgher ceases the talk on *filioque* saying "It seems to me, a simple man, that this lecture is very silly".[34] Although in explaining the Trinitarian dogma, the Priest went far beyond the rudiments, he could not simplify it in the face of increasing Anti-Trinitarian propaganda. The critique allowed the Priest to disapprove of "those new know-it-alls", that is, Anti-Trinitarians and Anabaptists.[35]

The dialogue is also a lesson directed toward the clergy so that they can refer to the life experiences of their flock. The discussion of the Apostolic succession and the hierarchy is an example. When the Priest says that Jesus gave his Apostles the power to absolve from sin, but they have already passed away, the Burgher responds that "authority never dies".[36] The Priest commends his wit and explains that God gives absolution

[32] HERBEST 1566, 56v.

[33] HERBEST 1566, 28v.

[34] HERBEST 1566, 13v. An explanation of the Trinitarian dogma to those gathered at church had always been a difficult task for a preacher; cf. BRACHA 2007, 125–126.

[35] HERBEST 1566, 13v. Although Anti-Trinitarian propaganda in sixteenth-century Poland has been frequently noticed, neither the Catholic nor the Evangelical argumentation and its consequences have been studied sufficiently; cf. KOŚCIELNY 2017.

[36] HERBEST 1566, 141v.

through Catholic clerics. The Burgher finds this answer too complicated, however, for "a commoner".[37]

Herbest's catechism shows that at least some of the priestly elite in Poland were aware that a renewal of Church life must include active evangelism. This must stay mainly oral because the majority of Polish society was illiterate.[38] There was, however, a social space large enough to believe in the beneficial effects of handbooks like the one penned by Herbest.[39] Although he most probably had both lay and clerical readership, priests engaged in cure-of souls could profit most from studying the discussed manual. The results should be assessed with relation to individual achievements, which, unfortunately, is impossible due to the lack of relevant sources. Nevertheless, this book and similar pastoral guides must have played an important role in everyday parish work for a group of clergy vast enough to make the common people identify themselves with at least the rudimentary basics of Church teaching.

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[37] HERBEST 1566, 141v.

[38] In the second half of the sixteenth century, only ca. 17.5 per cent of men and ca. 4 per cent of women in southern Poland were able to write and/or read; URBAN 1977, 255.

[39] This opinion is based, among others, on the findings of WYCZAŃSKI 1976, 53, whose estimate for the years 1563–65 is ca. 12 per cent literate men in the Polish Crown.

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