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CATECHISMS IN THE MAKING: QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS IN THE EIGHTH CENTURY AND TODAY

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**Catechisms in the Making:
Questions and Answers in the Eighth Century
and Today**

My theme this evening will be the on-going process of catechizing the faith: in particular I would like to consider with you the lessons we can learn from an unusual and little-known writer active mainly in the seventh century, but whose key-work for our purposes is usually dated from the opening years of the eighth, perhaps from the year 700. His name, Anastasius of Sinai.

However to begin let me pay my respects to the great Aquinas himself, in whose honour the Aquinas Library has been named and the present lecture is given. These are the words of A. E. Taylor, an Anglican scholar, known for his work on Plato and professor of moral philosophy for thirty-three years at St Andrews and Edinburgh Universities:

The great philosopher cannot indeed have too daring an imagination. provided only that its exercise is controlled by a profound sobriety of judgement, a massive common sense... The greatness of St Thomas as a philosopher seems to me to lie in this, that his work combines high originality with an unsurpassed sobriety of judgement and sense for reality.¹

What one looks for from a great teacher is learning and vision, but at the same time this quality of a 'sense for reality', 'a massive common sense'. I hope to let you see that quality in Anastasius of Sinai.

You probably remember that in his *Summa Theologiae* Thomas proceeds according to a set plan, building up a majestic system. But each element in the construction has a simple prefabricated structure consisting of an initial question, followed by a set of propositions

(often quotations) suggesting one answer and another set suggesting the opposite: Thomas then steps in with his *Respondeo* ('But I reply') in which he unfolds the line of reasoning which he considers valid, and he finishes answering the objections raised in the first set of propositions. You see that each step is made up of a question and an answer. This is the method which allows Thomas to pass in review the whole of theology.

Now I imagine that for many of you, the very word 'catechism' conjures up the world of questions and answers. For many years Catholics the world over were brought up on a diet of the *Penny Catechism*, and many of us had answers drummed into us by rote - to the point where a good sister would press the right button and answer would pop out! When we consider the theme of catechisms it is natural that we should associate it with this specific teaching method of question and answer. However at this point we must remind ourselves that the Latin word *Catechismus*² appeared relatively late in the history of the Church, although when it did it had the authoritative backing of the Council of Trent. Before that time an earlier ancestor of the word had been in common use: this is the Greek word *κατηχησις* which of course still enjoys a robust good health in the Greek Orthodox Church. With this word we are swept right back to the very earliest years of the Church, when the Fathers simply took over the word commonly used to signify 'instruction' and applied it to 'religious instruction'. Thus we have the *Catecheses* of the Alexandrian School (Clement, Origen and Didymus) and also of St Cyril of Jerusalem. The later history and evolution of the term need not detain us, but I will mention that the Greek word derives not from the verb meaning, 'to hold firmly' (*κατεχω*) but from another verb (*κατηχω*) derived from the root word *ηχω* 'to make a noise', familiar to us in the word 'echo'. Thus to instruct somebody is partly to enable that person to 'echo forth' what is being taught.

Now teachers soon discovered that one way of achieving this was precisely by means of questions and answers.³ The reason is not difficult to grasp: as children we learn by asking questions. However as Kant remarked, the test of an intelligent person was to know what questions to ask. Plato's great hero Socrates was a master of the intelligent question, to the point where the roles of teacher and pupil were reversed and it was thanks to the questions

put by the teacher that the pupil was enabled to reach wisdom. The whole logic of the question and answer technique is fascinating, and is receiving ever more attention from 20th century specialists in hermeneutics, but first let us turn to Anastasius.

Despite the considerable body of his work which is still available, he remains a shadowy figure. He is linked with the Monastery of Mount Sinai because in the title to several of his works - notably the *Hodegos*, one collection of sermons and another of pious stories, in addition to the work that concerns us this evening, the *Erotopokriseis* or *Questions and Answers* - he is described as belonging to that monastery (του Σινᾶ ὁπουζ or του Σιναιτου). However the little we know about him derives mainly from autobiographical remarks he makes about himself - that he was active in controversial discussions with the monophysites in Alexandria, that he visited the Dead Sea, that he may have come from Cyprus, that he witnessed the Arab invasions and lived in land held by the Muslims. Again from references in his works to the number of years that have elapsed either since the birth of Christ or since the 6th ecumenical Council, we can deduce that he was still alive in the year 700. Some writers have suspected that his links with Sinai were quite tenuous, and when I happened to meet the higoumenos of that monastery he assured me that there was no tradition today of devotion to him in St Catherine's. We may be better directed if we link his active life with Alexandria or even with Emesa; he certainly speaks in one work of living in a place far away from books. The picture we can form of him is of a person devoted to the teaching of the Six Councils, who felt it his duty to refute error and to provide help to those Christians who felt confused by the different positions held by members of various Christian Churches.

In the title to the *Questions and Answers* we also learn that he was normally addressed as 'Father' (Ἀββᾶ in the Greek), that he was a monk-priest, and that his book is made up of answers to questions put to him by different people. It is also important to note that the answers are said to come not just off the top of his head (ἐξεαυτου), but drawing on experience and the reading of the Holy Fathers (ἀλλὰ ἐκ πειραζ και ἀναγνωσεωζ των αγιων πατερων).

At this point I propose simply to read to you one of the *Questions and Answers*: I do this because my own formation in Byzantine theology was at a curious institution in Paris called *École pratique des Hautes Études*, which functions in tandem with the Sorbonne but where all the emphasis is on the reading of texts. My appreciation for these texts sprang from a first-hand contact with them, though I shall always be grateful to the scholars who were able to make these texts speak to me. Here then is the 81st Question⁴ of Anastasius:

Question In the preceding parts, where you explained the working and nature of the four elements, you mentioned that very often it is because of some physical reason and due to the humours of the body that some women come to be childless, others fertile with many children, and yet others with few children, but you did not specify the way in which this causality worked.

Answer Anybody who wishes to explain these and similar problems in detail is forced to have recourse to physiological material concerning medical matters and copulation, subjects which are not at all suitable for public reading in church. However I shall try to shed some faint light on the point in question.

In many parts of Holy Scripture we find the human body referred to with the word 'soil' or 'earth' [cf. Eccl. 17:1, 32; Gen. 2:7]. Now just as the soil which has been moderately watered is fruitful, and the soil which receives much water is barren, the same often happens with the female womb and male seed. Women who have been debauched by licentiousness and excessive copulation reject the seed, as tends to happen among professional prostitutes; it is very difficult for them to conceive.

Here is the reason why in different areas rich people, who live in plenty, desire to have children, but do not, whereas poor people are often very fertile with offspring. The physical part, which because of want has grown thirsty and dry, like parched soil, at once absorbs the moisture of the seed that falls on it, as happens

also to those destitute and impoverished people among us, the Arabs wandering in the desert, who barely have enough bread, but who have a superabundance of children. In addition, as those who are particularly well trained in medical matters bear witness, a child can often perish because the mother's milk is of a bad humoured composition.

However if as a critic you object to me, 'What is this? Can it be possible for human fertility and sterility, or life or death, to occur without reference to God?' my answer will be that all that happens physically, because of created things, and because of the elements, and the winds and the humours, and certain combinations, and the waters and the milk, are not being said to occur without reference to God. It is from Him, and because of His wish and foreknowledge, that all His creatures have their essential physical powers. Indeed tell me, how is it that the basilisk [probably the Egyptian cobra] has the power to destroy, and the viper its deadly poison, or another animal its power to cure what is deadly? How is it that some plants are deadly, while others serve as cathartics, harmless or beneficent?

As a result some men who had studied these and similar cases with care and guidance from God, when they saw that a woman consulting them had borne one, two and even three children, and had buried them all, they counselled her not to nurture any more that might be born from her. However, no matter what happens, it is best to say, 'How great have been your works, Lord; you have done everything wisely' [Ps. 103:24].

You have heard about half of his answer: the remainder is not directly an answer to the problem of female infertility, but provides additional evidence to back up the proposition that it is the theory of the four elements that can explain this and many other predicaments.

If nothing else, this sample should have made abundantly clear why we are justified in speaking of 'lay theology' in the case of Anastasius. The subjects treated by him quite often

have nothing specifically clerical or monastic about them. In this particular case the problem is treated with a breadth that excludes any attempt to link it (for example) with the narrow question of clerical wives. But lest you should think this an isolated case, I propose to make a brief survey of the type of questions that are to be found in the collection. I shall begin by emphasizing those aspects that are most obviously 'lay' but move later to more subtle examples of the same perspective.

A significant proportion of the questions deal with marriage and the practice of the marital act. People have asked if polygamy is legal (as it was in the Old Testament), and if marriage with a non-believer is allowed.⁵ But some questions are much more intimate. Should sexual abstinence be practised before reception of the eucharist, and what is permitted if a husband returns home after a long journey and wishes to receive communion the following morning?⁶ Suppose again that somebody, in a fit of fervour, has promised that he will practise continence for a period and finds it too difficult.⁷ How serious is marital infidelity, and does it make a difference if the sin is adultery (in which a married person is involved) or fornication (in which unmarried people take part). Anastasius points out⁸ that in the case of adultery one always has the added sin against a third person (viz. the wife or husband) but it would be exaggerated to claim that he shows much appreciation for the woman's point of view.

Another problem area which frequently appears is that of property, riches and wealth. How far should one consider these as God-given?⁹ And what is to be done with ill-gained wealth?¹⁰ Alms and alms-giving play a major role in his teaching: he is asked what proportion of one's wealth should be given in alms,¹¹ whether they serve as a means of forgiveness,¹² and if they can be treated as a panacea for earlier faults.¹³ To whom should alms go?¹⁴ To the churches or to the poor (he is strongly in favour of the latter and condemns the useless accumulation of wealth in rich churches, which only serve as plunder for the Arabs).

In a similar vein he considers political problems: are governors and rulers to be considered divinely appointed, and what happens if they are Jews or Arabs? Should one

pray for all rulers, irrespective of their beliefs and conduct?¹⁵ He is no 'liberation theologian' in these matters: his line is that of the sardonic pacifist, who can report with relish one monk's vision in which God declared that a certain Emperor had been appointed because God could not find anybody worse for the job: 'When you see that some unworthy and wicked person is Emperor, or Governor or Bishop, do not be surprised, but understand and believe with complete certainty that it is because of our crimes that we are handed over to such tyrants, and that not even then do we desist from evil...'¹⁶

So much for the subjects discussed by Anastasius that are blatantly not clerical and may be considered narrowly lay-oriented. There are other broader issues, where one is clearly aware of a powerful catechetical preoccupation. I shall mention two of these, partly for their intrinsic interest, partly because they will help us to appreciate wider questions.

Firstly, the preoccupation with personal salvation: 'Suppose there is a man in a position of authority, who has been blessed with many good things by God and is engaged in business affairs, someone who is unable to retire from the affairs of life, who enjoys a wealthy table, a variety of clothes and bathing facilities. How is it possible for him to maintain a life without reproach in the middle of such things and to obtain the forgiveness of sins?'¹⁷ The answer points out that the vast majority of the saints of the Old Testament were in that situation (with polygamy thrown in as a bonus) and were loved by God as his friends. But another question adds a more poignant note: 'If somebody has built up a habit of carnal sin and has grown old in it, and he realizes in himself that he is now incapable of fasting or of undertaking penance or sleeping on the floor or of giving up everything and entering a monastery, how can such a man reach salvation when he is now old, and how can he win forgiveness for his sins?'¹⁸ Such is the question: and just in case anybody here would dearly love to know the answer, it is: 'From the Lord's Words, "My yoke is gentle and my burden light" it is clear that someone in this situation is capable of keeping the Lord's commandments. And indeed He (the Lord) did not stipulate virginity for us, nor withdrawal from the world, and not even abstinence from meat and wine, but to love God and to love one's neighbour, not to be spiteful, not to judge others, to be humble and as compassionate

as possible, to pray within our hearts, to support misfortunes, to be mild and peace-loving. Now all these are things that a sickly man and an old man, somebody confined to his bed or married to a wife in the world is well able to do. If he does these things, he will certainly be saved, no matter if he has committed all the sins of the infamous King Manasseh'.

I would not want you to believe that Anastasius is lax or disinterested in religious practices and discipline: he insists on the need for confession made to a priest (he is asked if laymen can forgive one another ¹⁹), and on the need for true repentance and amendment. He has much to say on the reception of communion,²⁰ on its frequency, on what to do if one is on a journey in a country where no churches are available²¹ (can one carry a consecrated host with one?). How is one to put into practice the Pauline exhortation to pray without ceasing? 'It is not possible', someone objects, 'for a man who is preoccupied with his house and children and who lives in the world, to pray without ceasing'. But Anastasius points out that it is not oral prayer that Paul has in mind; all one's actions, if undertaken for God, become prayer.²² There are grades in prayer: one's relationship with God evolves from that of a condemned slave pleading for forgiveness to that of an intimate friend.²³ He is prepared to recognize that all Christians can, and should ideally reach the state where 'God has taken up His abode in them'. And he is asked, 'How can a person know if this is the case?' His answer has an overwhelming simplicity and authenticity: 'Well,' he says, 'This question resembles that of somebody who asks a pregnant woman, "How do you know if you have conceived in the womb?"' She will reply, he points out, by referring to her periods, her change of appetite, her feelings of the movements in the womb. Anastasius applies all this to the spiritual life: 'The soul sees at once that the impure blood of her customary passions has been stilled, that her appetite for the many different foods of sin has ceased, and especially that she now hates above all else the sweetness of pleasure... for the sweetness of honey becomes hateful to pregnant women.'²⁴

You will have noticed how throughout all the *Questions and Answers*, even when dealing with matters that are in themselves abstruse and speculative, the language and thought patterns, even the formulation of the questions, remain firmly anchored in the

ordinary language of ordinary people. And perhaps at this stage we can begin to draw together certain inferences from the teaching we have surveyed so far.

Note in the first place that all this teaching is being given in the form of answers to questions that have been sent in by ordinary people, troubled by the sort of problems that we can often recognize today. The presupposition is that it will be quite normal for people to raise questions; they are expected to do so. And Anastasius clearly expected the answers to be read out in public in the church. To be fair, one must beware of reading into this process a critical turn of mind that was probably not there. In one answer Anastasius points out that certain subjects are 'deep and difficult to grasp, and few people are able to tackle them... not all that can be grasped by the intellect of the teacher can also be grasped by the intellect of the public being taught'.²⁵ It would be misleading of me to pretend that his approach is anything but paternalistic and clerical. Thus when counselling laypeople who are caught up in religious controversy and polemics, his advice is very simple: 'Tell them to go to the Church [he means the priests] and learn there'.²⁶ He himself, when arguing with somebody of different opinion, is mainly concerned with the superficial gaining of points. There is no notion of a debate or dialogue, no common search for truth. To be honest, I cannot imagine him taking part in inter-Church dialogue. And yet the fact remains that he welcomed questions from the puzzled faithful, and he seems to have done his honest best to answer them.

There are two characteristics of his method: firstly, Anastasius nearly always appeals to some written authority - usually the traditional sources, either Scripture or one of the Fathers, but he will also turn to his near contemporaries for ideas (writers like John Climacus²⁷ and John Moschus²⁸). Secondly, and more surprisingly, Anastasius shows remarkable enthusiasm for the scientific theories of his day. The one that most caught his fancy - so much so that it figures in his theology rather like the theory of evolution in that of Teilhard de Chardin - is that the four elements (as we heard in the first Question and Answer quoted above). It is used to explain a wide gamut of difficult phenomena - personal character, disease, plague, even death. It is linked with theories of diet and climate, and it may be

classified as forming part of a still wider field of scientific knowledge, viz. medicine. He seems to be acquainted with the practice of autopsy and with the findings of anatomy. Admittedly he is somewhat apologetic for his interest in these matters, and tends to present them as personal. At one point he remarks, 'My own opinion on this, but I think it is God's opinion as well, ...'²⁹ He is careful to point out that some of his answers are put forward not in a dogmatic and definitive manner, but with affection and love, in hope that others who know better will correct and complete what he is saying.³⁰

If we turn to examine the values that Anastasius is stressing, may be struck by their personal character: there is a quirky individuality about them. He stresses the primacy of the individual conscience provided that a person has a mature relationship with God. He clearly distrusts the clerical as such: one should confess, he says, not to a priest, but to one who is spiritual (πνευματικὸς) - and if you cannot find such a man, 'Confess yourself inwardly to God, condemning yourself and begging for pardon'.³¹ He prizes discernment, the power to distinguish the movements of the Spirit within the soul, the wisdom to separate what is willed by God from what is plotted by the devil. It is true that for Anastasius 'orthodoxy', in the sense of correct dogmatic views, is essential, but this fits into his system as a foundation upon which to build with great individuality and freedom. These foundations can never be an obstacle to a life inspired by a deep love for men and women, and a firm sense of justice.

Later generations were to consider his views too personal. His book was soon adapted, and equipped with more extracts from earlier authors. But even so, it became a standard reference work, was translated into Slavonic, and is to be found in literally hundreds of manuscripts. It is largely due to the painstaking work of one man, the great Patristic scholar, Marcel Richard, that we can now reconstruct the original work and appreciate as never before the unique individuality of this obscure author and his immense influence on subsequent teachers.

If I may end on a personal note: on his death Marcel Richard entrusted to me the publication of his work on Anastasius. Much remained to be done, and the preparation has

taken more years than I like to recall. But I mention it because as we gather to wish well to Australian Catholic University as it advances into the ocean of scholarship, I feel that the ideal of this type of work - the humdrum work involved in the critical edition of obscure texts - can serve as a star to guide it. If we are to teach future generations the wonders of our faith, we must be prepared to listen first to their questions. To quote from a recent article on Collingwood and Gadamer:

The questioning activity cannot be totally predetermined. It is thrust upon the interpreter by the subject matter at hand. The interpreter finds himself caught in a question in the way in which we 'get caught' in a conversation.³²

So on reflection an after-dinner speech is not such an inappropriate occasion to raise the sort of questions we have been considering. We have been taking part in a conversation, and raising questions. It is only by questions that we can arrive at full knowledge. As John says of the first disciples, their first words to Jesus were a question, 'Rabbi, where are you lodging?' [John 1:38]. We can make our catechisms only by facing up to the questions that men and women are raising in the world today. My hope is that this University will always continue to help its students to do just that.

¹ A.E Taylor, *Aquinas Sexcentenary Lecture*, 1925, p.6.

² *Catechismus ex decreto Concilii Tridentini* (1566).

³ For a useful survey, cf. Heinrich and Hermann Dörries, *art. Erotapokriseis, Reallexikon für Antike und Christentum*, vol. 6 (1966).

⁴ In the Migne edition (PG 89), which reproduces a later reworking of the original texts, the number given is 127. In this case text remains substantially the same and only the numbering has been altered.

⁵ Question 139 in Migne; originally Question 100

- ⁶ Question 115 in Migne; originally Question 67
- ⁷ Question 141 in Migne; originally Question 103
- ⁸ Question 124 in Migne; originally Question 77
- ⁹ Originally Question 45; some traces are to be found in Question 11 in Migne.
- ¹⁰ Question 102 in Milne; originally Question 44
- ¹¹ Originally Question 55; some traces are to be found in Question 13 in Migne.
- ¹² Originally Question 41; some traces are to be found in Question 100bis in Migne.
- ¹³ Question 136 in Migne; originally Question 136
- ¹⁴ Originally Question 58; some traces are to be found in Question 14 in Migne.
- ¹⁵ Question 110 in Migne; originally Question 60.
- ¹⁶ Question 65 in the original collection; it was omitted from the later collection.
- ¹⁷ Two Questions, 132 and 133, in Migne; originally just Question 88.
- ¹⁸ Question 100(4) in Migne; originally Question 47.
- ¹⁹ Originally Question 32; some traces are to be found in Question 63 in Migne.
- ²⁰ Questions 98bis, 98ter, 100, and 100bis in Migne; originally Question 38-41.
- ²¹ Question 113 in Migne; originally Question 64.
- ²² Question 93 in Migne; originally Question 24.
- ²³ Question 106 in Migne; originally Question 50.
- ²⁴ Question 75 in Migne; originally Question 2.
- ²⁵ Question 114 in Migne, originally Question 66.
- ²⁶ Question 116 in Migne, originally Question 68.
- ²⁷ Originally Question 36, some traces are to be found in Question 4 in Migne.

²⁸ Originally Question 41, it was omitted from the later collection.

²⁹ Originally Question 99, part of which is preserved in Migne, Question 55, but with the personal note omitted.

³⁰ Question 91 in Migne, originally Question 21.

³¹ Originally Question 53; not surprisingly it was omitted from the later collection.

³² John P. Hogan, 'Hermeneutics and the Logic of Question and Answer: Collingwood and Gadamer', *The Heythrop Journal* 28 (1987), p.271.