

With all your heart and mind and strength . . .

By Geoff Wood

Way back in 1829 – when there couldn't have been many Catholic families in the new United States – the American bishops (assembled in Baltimore) decreed: *A catechism shall be written . . . It shall give the Christian Doctrine as explained in Cardinal Bellarmine's Catechism (1597) . . . and shall be published for the common use of Catholics.* After several attempts to implement this decree, this Baltimore Catechism became a reality in 1885 – and every parochial school kid was exposed to its question and answer format well into the 1950's - including me. In other words our method and content of indoctrination came from over 350 years earlier. And it worked. The questions were short as were the answers and easily memorized, planted as they were in our young, uncluttered minds.

The problem was: such indoctrination went only up to the 8th grade or maybe high school – though I think it was only up to the 8th grade. Unless one went to a convent or seminary or college (which many working class kids did not) – that was it – and all in terms unbiblical and abstract. Things of course have changed since then – but even now I wonder how many of us keep up studying, probing the depths of our religion once we're raising a family, holding a job, immersed in the news of the day.

And what would Jesus say? Would he not say what he says to the scribe in today's Gospel? To never stop probing the rich tradition into which you were born and all its ramifications in song and story – persist in asking questions, pondering the answers of your faith with every bit of your heart, your soul, your mind – making this the priority of your life, not stopping at a certain devotion or regular practice, turning your religion merely into a habit. Otherwise how can you ever become fully alive? How will you ever understand your faith, your world, your very self - as did someone like Francis Thompson – whose faith revealed the kingdom of God to be the very environment in which he lived and breathed – and not just somewhere beyond time and space. Listen to him:

O world invisible, we view thee, / O world intangible, we touch thee, / O world unknowable, we
know thee, / Inapprehensible, we clutch thee!

Does the fish soar to find the ocean, / The eagle plunge to find the air – / That we ask of the stars
in motion / If they have rumor of thee there?

Not where the wheeling systems darken, / And our benumbed conceiving soars! – / The drift of
pinions, would we hearken, / Beats at our own clay-shuttered doors.

The angels keep their ancient places; – / Turn but a stone, and start a wing! / 'Tis ye, 'tis your
estranged faces, / That miss the many-splendored thing.

But (when so sad thou canst not sadder) / Cry; – and upon thy so sore loss / Shall shine the traffic
of Jacob's ladder / Pitched betwixt Heaven and Charing Cross*.

*A crossroads in central London