CREATING Catholics

Catechism and Primary Education in Early Modern France

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Introduction

One of the most interesting questions in the study of religion centers around belief: why do adherents of a particular religious confession believe what they believe? For the early modern period in France, this question has often led historians to matters of religious conversion. The Protestant Reformation in France was primarily an urban event, and by the time the religious wars began most towns and cities counted at least a few Huguenots among their numbers. Because the inhabitants of so many of France’s urban areas experienced violent conflicts over religious issues during the second half of the sixteenth century, a number of historians have attempted to uncover the reasons for this division by examining whether factors
like gender, profession, location, and class might account for confessional preference.1 These historians ultimately discovered that the reasons behind religious conversion defy simple explanations, but in their attempts to understand religious motivations and sensibilities they uncovered the fulcrum upon which the whole Reformation hinged: the ordinary lives and religious beliefs of France’s urban artisans, printers, and magistrates.

On the other hand, the focus on urban Protestantism leaves out the masses of French peasants who remained Catholic through the upheavals of the religious wars and beyond. While that crucial moment of decision for a Huguenot or a member of the Catholic League makes for a dramatic symbol of the changes that the Reformation brought about in the second half of the sixteenth century, the long-term commitment of the French countryside to Catholicism stands out as an even more tantalizing—and axiomatic—characteristic of the early modern period. My initial question about the nature of religious belief, when placed in a rural context, leads to many additional questions that encompass not only belief itself but also the dissemination of religious knowledge and practices over time and space. Why did the peasant farmer attend Mass every Sunday and take communion at least once a year? Why did he insist on baptizing his children, and why did he and his wife dedicate even a small portion of their scant resources to the Catholic Church? Why did they believe in Catholicism, and why did their children and their children’s children continue to believe?

There are, I believe, two elements of early modern Catholicism that can significantly advance the historian’s understanding of these particular questions: catechism and rural primary schools (petites écoles). Although no historical document can fully explain why any individual or society chose to believe in and follow a given religion, the surviving documents surrounding catechisms and schools do provide unique details that allow us to contemplate the framework within which French Catholics constructed and understood religious belief and religious education. This framework was not always entirely orthodox, nor did it remain uniform from individual to individual. As a key element of early modern religious education, however, catechisms were an important step in a standardization process that could strengthen that framework and give it more stability. Reform-minded clergymen envisioned
a comprehensive program of religious education that would unify and systematize Catholic practices at both the parish and diocesan levels. They saw themselves as using catechisms and schools to create Catholics through the orthodox instructions provided for each new generation of believers.

The bishops’ primary motivation for aiming their educational efforts at children rather than adults resulted from their conviction that the type of religious education children received would have a tremendous influence on what they believed—and how they demonstrated that belief—as adults. The archbishop of Reims, Alexandre-Angélique de Talleyrand-Périgord (uncle of the Revolutionary churchman-turned-diplomat Talleyrand), emphasized in his late eighteenth-century rules for schoolteachers that the right sort of education could indeed make all the difference in ensuring the dissemination of orthodox Catholicism:

Children are the most precious part of Christianity, the resources of the church and the state; it is in the cultivation of these young plants that a pastor can begin the renewal of his parish, and without attention to the children, the pastor will never complete this work. Scripture and experience confirm this truth, and teach us that the first impressions are the most lasting that a man has; he does not stray from the path that he entered in his youth even in old age. When he has received from his earliest years the principles of integrity and religion, he usually conserves them for all his life. Thus, nothing merits our attention, and the attention of the curés, more than the establishment and the conduct of schoolmasters, who are charged in part with the education of children.2

What better way, then, to examine questions of belief than to focus on children’s education? Catechism classes and primary schools—the gathering of parents and clergy in homes, schools, and churches to teach doctrine and behavior to the next generation of believers—were meaningful social and religious practices that allow the historian to investigate the creation and transmission of Catholic belief. It is around these two institutions, and the Catholic Reformation movement to which they owed their origins, that this book is organized. It argues that children’s religious education was the centerpiece of Catholic reform
in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, and as a result Catholic believers—especially in rural areas—knew more about the doctrines and behaviors of their religion than they ever had in the past. At the same time, the bishops’ program of religious education was implemented by curés, parents, and village notables at the parish level, and these local authorities adapted the program to suit their own needs. Thus, the Catholic Reformation can be seen as a result of interaction and compromise between the clergy and the laity, rather than a top-down process of institutional reform.

*Catechism and the Foundations of Orthodoxy and Orthopraxy*

The core of all primary and religious education in the early modern period was the catechism. On Sundays and feast days in parishes all over France during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, curés opened the doors of their churches and rang the bells, calling the children to catechism class. By listening to and memorizing a series of questions and answers, children between the ages of seven and fourteen learned the basic doctrines of Catholicism—everything they would need to know for their salvation. Even children who could not read learned the catechism, since every child who wanted to take first communion had to demonstrate that he or she had successfully memorized the text.

Catechisms written by a number of different authors were used throughout France in the early modern period, but most contained similar elements. Catechisms usually began with the Apostles’ Creed—a twelve-article statement of fundamental Christian beliefs. In the process of memorizing the Creed, children learned orthodox doctrines about God, Jesus Christ, and the mysteries of the Incarnation and the Redemption. Sections on the Decalogue offered lessons on the Ten Commandments as well as the commandments of the church. The sacraments received the greatest amount of attention in most catechisms; children memorized more responses to questions on baptism, confession, and communion than any other topic. Finally, children learned a number of prayers by heart (in both Latin and French, in many cases).

Catechisms taught much more than theology, however. In fact, the catechisms that bishops published often downplayed even the most
basic and fundamental aspects of Catholic doctrine in order to emphasize the more outward and visible elements of Catholicism—primarily the moral and ethical code of behavior prescribed by the Decalogue and the public, ritualistic characteristics of the sacraments. Bishops believed that the regulation of the laity’s behavior would lead to belief, rather than the other way around, so they limited the amount of theology in their texts and instead included material that taught children how to properly perform their Christian duties.

The catechetical method itself emphasized behavior rather than doctrine as well, first by requiring children to memorize and publicly recite the texts (usually immediately before or during the increasingly significant first communion ritual), and second by teaching proper religious behavior in both word and deed during catechism classes. During the Sunday afternoon hours that children spent with their curés responding to questions about the Trinity and the Beatitudes, they also learned how to sit still in church, pray, respect the church and its priests, give a proper confession, take communion, and obey those in authority over them. These societal expectations and behaviors could last a lifetime, even if children eventually forgot the exact words of the catechism itself.

Although the catechism has substantial potential as a historical source, children’s religious education is a topic that has been curiously neglected by historians of the Catholic Reformation in France. For example, when Victor Carrière published his three-volume Introduction aux études d’histoire ecclésiastique locale in the 1930s, with the intent to establish the parameters for future inquiries into French religious history, he did not include catechisms in his list of source materials available for the early modern period. More recent historians have also overlooked the importance of the religious education of children in the Catholic Reformation period. Most acknowledge the church’s involvement in catechetical instruction but then move on to other Catholic Reformation topics—such as Jansenism, the reform of the religious orders, and the secular clergy. The laity’s involvement is often studied through their role in confraternities, missions, the cult of the saints, charity, poor relief, and the persistence of popular religious practices after the Council of Trent. But the church’s primary means of replacing popular beliefs and practices with orthodoxy and orthopraxy—the
catechism—is rarely discussed in depth in these studies. The edu-
cation of new generations of believers, as perhaps the most crucial as-
pect of any lasting cultural or religious change, deserves a more exten-
sive treatment.

The catechism is also a key text for understanding rural religion. Urban Catholics had access to a variety of religious practices, pro-
vided by lay- or clerical-run confraternities and the religious orders, in ad-
dition to their parish churches. Peasants in rural areas had fewer op-
opportunities to experience their religion in an official setting, however,
because they lived far from religious orders and from any chapels or 
churches other than their own parish church. Bishops believed that by 
emphasizing the catechism, they could compensate for the lack of reli-
gious education in rural areas by making the simple truths contained 
in the text available to all Catholic believers. If rural parents could not 
prepare their children for first communion by sending them to charity 
schools run by the religious orders (a common practice in urban 
areas), they could send them to their parish priest as well as their local 
lay schoolmaster, who both taught catechism on a regular basis.

I have decided to use catechisms to investigate rural, rather than 
urban, religion primarily because historians have already used a variety of 
other sources—like records from confraternities—to examine religious 
practices in cities and towns. Rural religious practices have left so few 
traces in the historical record that it makes sense to use the catechism— 
a text we know a majority of peasants had access to—to study rural re-
ligion. And, although most of the urban children from the middle and 
upper levels of society would have learned their catechism in schools 
and churches just like rural peasant children, the urban poor often 
slipped through the cracks and never received any sort of religious edu-
cation in their early years. Rural peasants received more attention from 
their curés than their urban counterparts and thus were more likely to 
learn the catechism. As Châtellier argued in La religion des pauvres, mis-
sions had some of their greatest successes in rural parishes in the eigh-
teenth century, leading to a significant shift in the importance of rural 
areas within the church as a whole. Catechism can help us to understand 
this shift, since the texts were taught not only during the occasional mis-
sion but on a weekly or even daily basis in rural churches and schools.
Furthermore, catechisms crossed gender lines in rural areas. Seventeenth- and eighteenth-century educational theorists, as well as church leaders, generally insisted that boys and girls should receive separate educations and study subjects that would be most useful to them in their adult lives. One justification for separate treatment of boys and girls in educational matters was that girls did not need to be exposed to complicated (and thus potentially dangerous) theories or doctrines. Even Fénelon, famous for insisting that girls needed a better education than what most governesses or nunneries provided, pointed out the dangers of turning girls into “les savantes ridicules.” Consequently, we might expect to find that the church produced one catechetical text for boys and another for girls. However, because the doctrines in the catechism had already been simplified (by the very fact of their inclusion in the text), bishops had little reason to further differentiate between male and female religious education. As a result, bishops did not publish sex-specific catechisms, and boys and girls memorized the same text. Furthermore, the behaviors learned in catechism class—prayer, participation in the sacraments, and, most importantly, preparation for first communion—were necessary for children of both sexes. Both boys and girls needed instruction in these matters in order to participate in parish life as adults, so both had to learn the catechism.

In rural parishes boys and girls not only learned the same catechism, they attended the same catechism classes and primary schools. Small villages did not have enough resources to teach more than one class, and in most cases boys and girls learned the same things from the same teachers. The classroom was inevitably a gendered space, and at times both the text of the catechism and the way it was taught reinforced certain patriarchal gender roles; for example, girls learned that as children they were subject to their parents and as wives they would be subject to their husbands. At the same time, because girls learned the same Catholic doctrines and behaviors as their brothers did, they may have discovered a certain fluidity in the church’s prescribed gender roles. The catechism emphasizes the uniformity of doctrine. Each person residing within the jurisdiction of a particular bishop learned the same catechism: orthodox doctrines and behaviors—at least as they were decreed by the church—did not change depending on age,
social status, or gender. According to the catechism, men and women were equal in the eyes of God, and this knowledge could have had a powerful effect on the way that women understood their own religious beliefs and their role within the church structure.

Finally, the study of catechisms provides insight into religious practices at the very end of the early modern era, a time period often neglected by historians of both religion and education. Between 1650 and 1700 French bishops published at least 57 different catechisms in 48 dioceses in France as they attempted to establish uniformity within their own dioceses. The number of diocesan catechisms increased significantly in the eighteenth century, and by 1800 the total stood at 181 catechisms published in 102 dioceses. Thus, the years between 1650 and the French Revolution represent the period when catechisms were the most widely available and when parish priests could ensure that the children in their care memorized Catholic doctrines and learned appropriate religious behaviors and practices. Catechisms were a critical component of the church’s reform program, and catechetical education was to be the first—and the most important—exposure to Catholicism for generations of believers.

Pastoral Visits and the Growth of Religious Education in Three French Dioceses

The catechisms themselves can only provide part of the story, however; other sources are needed to fully understand how the Catholic Reformation affected the laity at the parish level. Fortunately, the implementation of another Tridentine reform resulted in a category of documents that provide a variety of details about parish life: visitation records. The Council of Trent required bishops to visit each parish in their dioceses once a year, or, in the larger dioceses, once every two years. During their visits, bishops inspected church property, questioned curés, and met with village notables to make sure that everything in their parishes was running smoothly. Visits provided an opportunity for bishops to find out what was really going on in their dioceses, and the records they left offer a similar opportunity for the historian. Like catechisms, visitation records can illustrate how the clergy and the laity
interacted, and they can explain something about belief. The questions that bishops asked, and the responses that the curés and the laity gave, provide an interesting insight into what it meant to be an early modern Catholic believer.

In part 2 of the book I use visitation records from three dioceses in northern France—Auxerre, Châlons-sur-Marne, and Reims—to examine religious and primary education at the parish level. I chose these particular dioceses because each had bishops who left detailed visitation records and because of the differences in prosperity and prestige between the regions. Both Reims and Châlons are in the province of Champagne in northeastern France; today, they make up the departments of the Marne and the Ardennes. As an average-sized diocese, Châlons included four hundred parishes and annexes (or sub-parishes) within its borders. Reims was one of the largest dioceses in France, with over seven hundred parishes and annexes. Both dioceses were wealthy, with generous ecclesiastical revenues and a relatively prosperous population, and the Champagne region had significantly higher literacy rates than other parts of France, suggesting that educational opportunities—either religious or secular—were more widespread. Auxerre, on the other hand, was a small diocese (just over two hundred parishes and annexes) in Burgundy, about halfway between Paris and Dijon; most of the diocese is now part of the department of the Yonne. Auxerre was considerably less wealthy than either Reims or Châlons, and the ratio of curés to parishioners was much smaller; the bishops of Auxerre would certainly have had fewer resources at their disposal to try to implement programs of religious reform, and an economically challenged people might have been less willing to support those reforms. Literacy rates in Auxerre were significantly lower than in Champagne, although it is statistically an average diocese when compared to France as a whole.

The most useful and most abundant visitation records in these three dioceses begin in the 1650s. Records previous to this date demonstrate that early seventeenth-century visitors were concerned primarily with the property of the church rather than the morals or education of the laity. Bishops conducting these early visits certainly did not take care to inquire about the availability of parish education, religious or otherwise. By the second half of the seventeenth century,
however, the content of Reims’s visitation records had changed dramatically. Beginning with the episcopate of Archbishop Antoine Barberin (1657–1671), visitors began to make inquiries about attendance at Mass, Easter communion, pilgrimages, confraternities, and, finally, catechism and schools. From this point on, visitors in Reims always made notes about the status of religious and secular education in their parishes. Only a handful of early seventeenth-century visitation records from Châlons-sur-Marne and Auxerre exist, but the situation in other northern French dioceses seems to have been much the same as in Reims. In Rouen, for example, there are a number of visitation records dating from 1445 until the Revolution, but not until the 1650s did visitors begin recording information about schools and catechism. Details about education were included routinely thereafter. Clearly, regulation of the moral and religious behavior of the laity, as well as the education of children, had become one of the bishops’ primary concerns by the end of the seventeenth century.

Of course, like any historical document, there are some difficulties with the use of visitation records. Despite the fact that pastoral visits involved the bishop, the curé, and the laity, the task of actually producing the records fell to bishops’ secretaries. While the curé’s voice is heard in some of the documents, it is filtered through both the bishop and the record-keeper, making it difficult to see his side of the story. Visits were also high-pressure situations for curés; it is entirely possible that a curé might decide to leave out certain details or omit the fact that he was less than diligent at teaching catechism. Because bishops often interviewed curés and their parishioners at the same time, however, it would have been rather difficult for a curé to say that he taught catechism on a regular basis if the village notables standing next to him knew that he had been negligent. Even if the curé and the laity teamed up to try to mislead the bishop, they knew that their deception could easily be uncovered when the bishop asked to hear the children of the parish recite their catechism. Bishops seemed to have a way of exposing what was really going on in a parish, and visitation records often reflect this.

On the other hand, if the children’s ignorance was due to the negligence of the parents to send them to catechism class, the curé might have been reluctant to share this with the bishop while in the presence
of the parents. Fortunately, other sources from the curés themselves allow a more direct look at the state of education at the parish level. For example, letters written to bishops by curés and by village notables give a good sense of their concerns. In addition, bishops also acquired information about their parishes through questionnaires that they sent to their curés to be filled out and returned. At the end of the seventeenth century, Charles de Caylus asked his curés to send him a report (état) on the state of their parishes each year. In Châlons bishops sent out questionnaires in the weeks before a visit, providing an opportunity for curés to report things that they may have been reluctant to share during the public visit. By far the most valuable questionnaires are those sent out by Archbishop Talleyrand-Périgord in an enquête of January of 1774 to every parish and annex in Reims. Nearly seven hundred of these thirteen-page questionnaires have survived, and they are filled with details about parish life, including the quality and availability of primary education in the parish. This set of documents is perhaps the largest and most comprehensive source for details about eighteenth-century rural religion anywhere in France, and it provides a window into children’s education from the point of view of the curé, who was, after all, primarily responsible for providing that education.21

Used in combination, then, visitation records, letters, and questionnaires can provide the viewpoints of both the bishops and the curés and their insights into the progress of religious and primary education in their parishes. Bishops asked their curés to provide information about specific topics, but the priests also took the opportunity to both complain about their parishioners and praise them. Judging by their responses, curés apparently felt quite free to express their feelings in these documents, so we are able to see their concerns as well as their successes. They indicated whether or not their parishioners attended Mass and participated in the sacraments, and how often the taverns were full and the churches empty. They reported the charitable activities their parishioners engaged in but also their tendency to work on Sundays and feast days after Mass. Most importantly, curés told their bishops that they taught catechism on a regular basis and that parents generally made sure that their children attended. To bishops, this meant that the reform of their parishes was well under way.
The Village School: Religious and Primary Education

Bishops did not, however, rely only upon curés to teach the catechism; the clergy expected that children would receive a great deal of their religious instruction by attending local primary schools. In seventeenth- and eighteenth-century France, a petite école generally consisted of a lay schoolmaster who taught reading, writing, and catechism for several months of the year. Financial support for these schools came from the community itself, although most schoolmasters’ salaries were low and facilities generally lacking. Schoolmasters held classes in their stables or kitchens, and their students sat on benches with their books on their knees. By modern standards the petites écoles might seem rather primitive, but the fact that a majority of children in rural areas had the opportunity to obtain a basic education in reading, writing, and religion should not be overlooked. As my analysis of visitation records and other sources will show, the number of schools in operation was much higher than previous historians have recognized: at least 89 percent of all of the parishes in Reims, Châlons-sur-Marne, and Auxerre had established their own schools by the time of the Revolution.

Historians have long recognized the existence of the petites écoles in the early modern period, but too often they are relegated to the margins of educational history. Instead of examining the importance and impact of the petites écoles from the perspective of the initial founders and supporters of the schools—seventeenth- and eighteenth-century clergy, parents, and village notables—most historians have instead preferred to analyze the types of education that would become more important in the modern world, namely, reading and writing. One of the most obvious signs of this is the fact that historians of French education and literacy overwhelmingly focus on the nineteenth century—the point when, in the standard view, the state began the process of taking over control of primary schooling from the church. These historians implicitly argue that the only schools worth studying are those that the state built and administered.

For example, Raymond Grew and Patrick Harrigan demonstrate the existence of 36,000 schools in France by 1829 and about twice that many by 1906. They rightly point to this as an enormous growth in the availability of schooling but say very little about the thousands
of schools that existed before 1829. According to their analysis, primary schools grew most rapidly in the 1830s (55,300 schools were in operation in 1840, a 54 percent increase from 1829). Some areas of France, however, may have experienced this type of growth more than a hundred years earlier, at the end of the seventeenth century and the beginning of the eighteenth. In Auxerre the number of parishes with schools increased from 38 percent in 1700 to 89 percent at the time of the Revolution. Yet because most of these ancien régime schools were held in schoolmasters’ homes rather than in public school buildings, and because they often favored the teaching of religion and catechism over reading and writing, historians of nineteenth-century education often fail to consider them as schools at all.

Even those historians who do concentrate on the early modern period still analyze the village school in terms of its potential to increase literacy rather than as a multilayered social and religious institution in its own right. Historians who study the petites écoles in the early modern period generally agree on two fundamental issues: that local communities hired lay schoolmasters and administered the schools themselves, and that religion was one of the most important subjects taught there, along with reading, writing, and perhaps a bit of arithmetic. Yet in their analysis of these schools, their focus is usually on the so-called profane subjects and the growth of literacy rather than the results of religious instruction. Currently, literacy and other harbingers of modernization are the only metrics available for those who wish to measure the influence of the petites écoles, despite the fact that the people who paid for the schools wanted their children to learn both their letters and the catechism.

The need that the petites écoles fulfilled was primarily religious and social. In the eighteenth century few parents believed that being able to write would bring great advantages to their children; thus, parents did not pay school fees with learning this skill in mind. Although schools taught some children to write, we may never know exactly how many, and the number was certainly much smaller than those who learned only reading and catechism. Instruction in religion was something that everyone needed, however, and for this reason parents were willing to send their children to the petites écoles and pay their fees. In school children learned to read but primarily for religious purposes.
They read their prayers, the catechism, and other religious texts. They also learned to recite their catechism, enabling them to visibly prove their dedication to Catholicism and become a part of the Catholic community by receiving their first communion.

This type of education might seem backward and pedantic to the modern mind, but in the early modern world instruction in religion and morals was indispensable to both individual and community formation. The people of a small hamlet in the diocese of Reims understood this well when they wrote to their archbishop and explained to him that in their community there were “many children of an age to learn to know and serve their creator and to attend the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass, who do not attend at all; but they could attend if there was a Mass and some instructions on feast days and Sundays in the village, and then they would not have to live in ignorance, like the animals, as they do now.” Learning the principles of Catholicism was an essential rite of passage for early modern children, and parents expected that schools would provide at least part of the instruction they needed. Memorizing the catechism was just as important as learning to read or write. Thus, the three “R’s” of early modern education—read, write, and recite—became inextricably linked in the seventeenth- and eighteenth-century petites écoles.

The Catholic Reformation and Confessionalization

Both catechisms and primary schools must be placed within the context of the Catholic Reformation. Beginning in the sixteenth century, the Catholic Church experienced unprecedented changes at all levels of society, as bishops and other clergymen attempted to make the ideal model of Catholicism that their predecessors had envisioned at the Council of Trent a reality in French dioceses and parishes. Of course, reform meant different things to different individuals. The movement for Catholic reform was never fully unified, even within a single diocese, but this diversity has provided fertile ground for historians, who have produced important studies analyzing the interpretation and application of Tridentine Catholicism throughout Europe. Many of these works concentrate on the battle against Protestantism, the institutional
church, and the religious orders, while others examine the processes of religious and cultural change in the everyday lives of ordinary Catholic believers. Together, these studies demonstrate the importance of the reform movement and the ways in which members of both clerical and lay populations interpreted the meaning and practice of their religion.

The cooperation of state and church authorities to impose confessional norms of belief and behavior on a largely ignorant population—or the confessionalization process—recently has become an important avenue of research for Catholic Reformation historians. Confessionalization studies began to take shape with a series of articles published by German historians Wolfgang Reinhard and Heinz Schilling beginning in the 1980s. Schilling and Reinhard argued that by the mid-seventeenth century in the Holy Roman Empire, the once-fluid boundaries between the three major religious confessions (the Catholic, Lutheran, and Reformed versions of Christianity) had hardened, and each group defined itself not only in terms of their own specific doctrines but against the doctrines of the other confessions. Furthermore, the process of creating the boundaries between the confessions was carried out by the state in deliberate cooperation with religious authorities. Thus, the early modern state used religious belief to regulate the behavior of its subjects in order to ensure domestic tranquility and to centralize its own power. The bureaucratic institutions built up by the churches became instruments by which state power was wielded, and the clergy became agents of the state. The clergy did not have to be forced into this process, for they found that it enabled them to use the state’s power to reinforce their own reform programs. Thus, both church and state worked together to standardize the beliefs and behavior of the laity in early modern Europe.

The confessionalization model has been applied successfully, albeit with some reservations, by historians of numerous European states. For France, Philip Benedict argues that there are essentially two forms of confessionalization: the strong model, in which the state actively supports the confessionalization of its subjects, and the weak model, which deemphasizes the role of the state in favor of the processes of rivalry between the confessions that created consolidated notions of orthodoxy and orthopraxy. Benedict sees little promise in applying the strong model to France and points out the dangers in trying to tie every development of the early modern era to the growth of the state. But
Benedict does see the weak model as holding more promise for French religious history, suggesting that his research into Catholic and Protestant relations in Montpellier supports this theory.34

The discussion of primary education in this volume will add to current research on both the Catholic Reformation and confessionalization in several ways. First, in order to fully understand the reform movement, historians need to examine the implementation of that reform in the eighteenth century. The traditional time period for Catholic Reformation studies is often limited to the first 100–150 years or so after the Council of Trent since so many important changes occurred in the French church during that period.35 Likewise, with the advent of the Enlightenment and the Scientific Revolution, the eighteenth century is often viewed as the beginning of secularization and dechristianization in France. Yet it is also the century when the use of the catechism to teach religious doctrines and behaviors became more regular and widespread than it ever had been in the past. Most curés did not begin teaching catechism with regularity until the end of the seventeenth century, and most villages did not establish schools until that time. Here I follow the example of historians like Philip Hoffman, Timothy Tackett, and Philippe Goujard, who insist on the importance of the eighteenth century for the Catholic Reformation.36 The programs of the Catholic Reformation could not be implemented with any sort of effectiveness until the eighteenth century, when schools and catechism classes became a regular part of parish life. Thus, religious belief in the eighteenth century — after the church had been able to implement its reforms and after the laity had been given the chance to either accept, reject, or reach some sort of compromise with those reforms—warrants further investigation.

Second, like Benedict, I argue that what he calls the strong confessionalization model, which emphasizes direct influence of the state in the standardization of religious belief, does not apply for much of Catholic France, and it certainly does not apply in the dioceses of Auxerre, Châlons-sur-Marne, and Reims. At the diocesan and parish level, the state had very little interest in church affairs unless there were large groups of Protestants involved. If the church wanted to make any changes, or institute any reforms in Catholic areas, they had to do it themselves, through bishops, parish priests, and their influence on
local authorities. State officials had little to do with local schools either; the Crown issued edicts requiring communities to open *petites écoles*, but no official provisions for ensuring that the edict was followed were established. Thus, it was again up to local authorities to hire schoolmasters and encourage children to attend.37

Finally, the history of catechisms and the *petites écoles* is critical to understanding interactions between the laity and the clergy at the local level. Historians such as Keith Luria, Marie-Hélène Froeschlé-Chopard, and Wietse de Boer38 represent an important trend in the history of the Catholic Reformation: the idea that what “reform” meant in the early modern period was not simply the implementation of a completely new form of Tridentine Catholicism by the clergy on an often stubborn and reactionary laity but rather a process of compromise and adaptation by both clergy and laity. Bishops and curés routinely tried to impose their ideas about religious education on their parishes, but if parents and village notables had not hired schoolmasters, paid their fees, and made sure that their children attended schools and catechism classes, the clergy’s words would have had little effect. Laity and clergy worked together to implement reform in their dioceses, and thus both groups are responsible for the shape of the Catholic Reformation.

In confessionalization studies the interaction between the laity and either church or state authorities is usually examined in terms of social discipline. Confessionalization historians were heavily influenced by the larger theories of social discipline emphasized so vigorously by scholars like Michel Foucault and Norbert Elias, so a great deal of research has been carried out in order to understand how religious, moral, and civic ideals were implemented and internalized within various states and communities.39 But recent studies have suggested that historians should avoid portraying the state as the most important force for change in ideas about public behavior. For example, Marc Forster argues that religious change in southwest Germany was instigated by the popular classes and reform from below was much more effective than anything promoted by the elites. Forster also emphasizes that the strong clericalism of the region was popularly motivated.40 In France an interesting commentary on social discipline comes from Sara Beam’s work on farce in the seventeenth century. She argues that a new code of morals and civic behavior did indeed emerge in seventeenth-century France,
but it was not due to the influence of Louis XIV’s court, as Elias and others have suggested. Instead, the impetus for the change came from the urban bourgeois who were trying to create their own identity and distinguish themselves from the lower classes.41

Catechisms might also be seen as a tool used by authorities in their attempt to impose discipline on the parish, but in reality local notables and even ordinary parents were just as responsible for creating and enforcing the code of social behavior found in the catechism as the authorities. Indeed, catechisms defined orthodoxy in a way that had never been done before, yet they also illustrate the existence of a certain amount of dialogue between clergy and laity: bishops had to adapt their catechisms to the needs of the souls in their care or the texts would be discarded and forgotten. An overly long catechism, or a text that focused too narrowly on theology, was of little use to most Catholics, who in turn demanded a more appropriate text. In addition, many parents recognized the benefits that could come from catechism classes, which would enable their children to participate in parish activities and to conform to their own ideas about belief and behavior. A study of catechisms demonstrates that the laity’s goals merged with those of both church and secular authorities, and the texts can reveal a great deal about the beliefs shared by a wide segment of the population. They are one of the few sources available that can help to identify the intersection of clerical and lay ideas about Catholic doctrines and practices and, thus, allow a richer and more nuanced view of the Catholic Reformation.

The book is organized as follows: Part 1 examines the diocesan catechisms themselves—their content, organization, and method. Catechisms were intended to provide a very specific type of education, and this is demonstrated by the bishops’ overall goals for their catechetical program and by the material in the texts. Bishops and curés expected the children who memorized the catechism to learn both doctrines and behaviors, but they placed the most emphasis on the more practical and outward aspects of Catholicism: prayer, the Ten Commandments, and the sacraments. Part 2 looks more closely at how the bishops’ program of religious education was actually implemented at the ground level in Auxerre, Châlons-sur-Marne, and Reims. Chapter 3 deals with
the curés— their background, education, and dedication to religious education. Chapters 4 and 5 focus on schoolteachers, their schools, and their participation in religious education.

The final chapter concludes with an evaluation of the effectiveness of both the petites écoles and primary education in general. Due to a significant amount of cooperation between the clergy and the laity, a system of primary education involving both village schools and church catechism classes was firmly in place in all three of these dioceses by the time of the French Revolution. The Catholic Reformation achieved its greatest success in rural villages in the eighteenth century, where believers went to Mass every week, confessed their sins and took communion at Easter, and passed along knowledge of Catholic doctrines and practices to the next generation through catechism and primary schools. As a result of this education, Catholic worship and practice, at least in their outward manifestations, were as uniform and regulated as they had ever been in France. Although we may never know if conformity in doctrine and practice led to sincere religious belief, the bishops of the church believed that it would:

Always ask the same questions, in the same terms. So that your children always give the same responses in the same words, choose those which are the most natural, the most simple, and the most customary, and do not change them in any way; by this method the children will respond with boldness, ease, promptness, and pleasure. They will order their ideas; they will become accustomed to doctrinal language, and as they grow up their knowledge will be arranged and retained; it will grow and expand through Sermons, readings and reflection; they will find within themselves what once came from without.42