

THE CATECHISM OF THE CATHOLIC CHURCH

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How the Church Catechises

In order to appreciate this major Church document, I suggest that we temporarily put aside our present conceptions and images of catechisms, and approach our subject from the perspective of how the Church catechises. A most illuminating way to do this is to look at how the Church has changed its ways of catechising at different times down the centuries, and why.

What we find is that whenever the aims, structures and methods of catechesis changed, it was due to shifts of emphasis in the Church's perception of revelation, or faith, or pastoral circumstances.

For example, in the **Apostolic era**, revelation was the very person of Christ - "the image of the unseen God". Revelation was a person! Correspondingly, faith was one's acceptance of him, communion with him, obedience to him. The result was a very Christ-centred way of thinking about everything; church, grace, heaven, baptism, morality, etc. were all aspects of our relationship with Christ. The aim of catechesis was the deepening conversion of adults, and the method was to share with them the marvellous *experience* of what was happening: "what we have seen, and heard, and touched...."; "the good news came to you not just as words, but as the power of the Holy Spirit... and with joy....." (cf 1 Thes. 1:5, 6)

In the **Patristic era**, revelation was perceived very much as each person's illumination by Christ the light of the world (cf St John). Faith therefore involved a new vision of reality; a putting on of "the mind of Christ". Those being catechised were the "illuminandi". Catechesis was structured around the wonderful things God had done in salvation history and continued to do in the liturgy. The aim of catechesis was to elicit a grateful, believing, worshipful response to such a God.

During the **Middle Ages**, especially the time of the great "summas", revelation came to be seen as a body of revealed truths; correspondingly, faith was seen as intellectual assent to those truths. Catechesis now came to be structured around the Creed, the commandments, and the Church's worship, and its aim was to teach doctrine.

During the **Reformation era** of the 16th century, a significant way of viewing revelation was as the good news of salvation for sinners. Faith was a living confidence in God's forgiveness. Catechesis aimed at helping people to be aware of their sinfulness and of God's mercy. This is a nuance that comes through some of the writings of Pope John Paul II. This was also the time of the first catechisms as we know them, when the method took the form of questions and answers.

The **Tridentine era** (16th-17th centuries) re-emphasised revelation as a body of revealed truths with emphasis on the Church's teaching authority. The Council of Trent gave origin to a catechism which attempted to recapture the patristic mode of catechising. But it was eclipsed by the catechism of Cardinal Robert Bellarmine SJ because his catechism, in question and answer form, seemed better suited to the special need of the time, viz. to give

clear answers. Catechesis was addressed to pastors, because their lack of education was a special problem at the time of the Reformation.

During **18th - 20th centuries**, the way revelation was thought of was affected by the Enlightenment, which had proclaimed the primacy of "man" and of reason, and in reaction to this there was a tendency within the Church to rescue faith by separating it from reason. (This led to the errors of Fideism and Modernism.) This was also the time when catechesis began to be more school-centred, child-centred, and text-book-centred.

During the **1930's to 60's**, it was faith's turn to be affected by the circumstances of the time: two world wars and the beginnings of Catholic existentialism; a new openness to biblical scholarship, and ecumenism. Religious educators were trying to address the problem of practical atheism co-existing with a good intellectual knowledge of Catholic doctrine. They wanted to touch not just the minds but attitudes and the affective side of human nature, bringing about real personal conversion. They wanted to give not just teaching, but a message that made a difference.

Their method was the famous kerygmatic catechesis, which means proclaiming the wonderful, marvellous works of God in human history. The trouble was it was mostly ancient history and did not sufficiently link with people's actual experience. It lacked that understanding of revelation, as something happening here and now, that would be endorsed by the Second Vatican Council.

1970's - The Second Vatican Council rejected the schema on revelation that had been prepared for it. That schema was based on the body of truths model, which the First Vatican Council had gone to so much trouble to expound. Five drafts and three years later, the Second Vatican Council produced one of its most wonderful documents, *Dei Verbum*.

The focus here was on revelation itself, i.e. God being revealed here and now, in nature, in history, in saving progressive movements, in the loving transformation of persons, and above all in Christ and in the body of Christ. This is not in opposition to the fact that the *content* of revelation was already fully revealed before the close of the Apostolic era, which is normative for all times. Corresponding to the fact that God is revealed to us in our own experience, faith is perceived as the surrender of the whole person (mind, heart, body and life) to the God who loves us.

Against this backdrop, catechesis tries to correlate the mystery of Christ to the mystery of the human person. The basic human aspirations for life, love, belonging, and freedom are the signs of what God is calling us to become. Revelation is the good news that God is actually meeting these expectations. ("The signs of the times" are the social expression of these same aspirations - hence, movements for justice, peace, participation, autonomy, self-development, etc.)

Sin is the destructive opposite to all these. It is against human nature and therefore against the God who calls us to be authentically human.

It is to be noted, though, that human nature includes human relationships. And so catechesis involves our call into those relationships which make us a communion of life - God's life in us. The fullness of this communion is heaven; its present manifestation is a community which points to that future.

What about today?

This very brief historical synopsis of how the Church catechises, and why its ways of catechising change, gives us a way into answering the question: did we need this new catechism, and why? In other words, is there anything about these same key factors - revelation, faith and contemporary circumstances - that might have a bearing on what is needed today? Let us look briefly at each:

1. Revelation

- Vatican II's exposition of revelation is still to unfold in the life of the Church - both its teaching in D.V. and its teaching regarding a certain revelation outside the Christian faith (cf G.S. 58).
- The place of experience needs to be properly understood. Experience can never be the *source* of Christian revelation. It can never reveal salvation, the incarnation, Eucharist, God's forgiveness, etc. Nevertheless, this is not a reason for downplaying the importance of experience in catechesis. G. O'Collins SJ points out that Pope John Paul II

does not appear in the slightest way nervous that by emphasising God's living and revealing activity today, he might be undercutting the fullness of the foundational revelation in Christ.

The same ease in using the appropriate language comes across when John Paul II writes about human experience, the medium through which we encounter God's self-communication. Human experiences, both everyday and special, have conveyed God's revealing and saving activity, and continue to do so. The divine self-manifestation meets us in our experience or it does not meet us at all..... (*1)

For similar reasons, Bishop David Konstant (a member of the Editorial Committee for the New Catechism) reminds us that

The way to lead someone to the faith or to a deeper faith is not primarily through reason (important though this is), but by capturing the heart. This means that gifts like imagination, story-telling, and the witness of holy people are as important to growth and faith, as the gift of reason. (*2)

After all, doctrine is but the distillation, and an abstraction, of what is first known in a more fully human way. Doctrine, by being true, only points to the truth; truth is more than its abstraction in the form of doctrine. (*3)

The real demons are individualism, subjectivism and relativism, which focus on the feelings, opinions, experience and will of the individual, and which use the language of experience. But that is no reason why skilled catechists shouldn't use experience in the service of the gospel.

2. Faith

Today our faith sees the Church as the sacrament of what God is doing in creation and the whole of history, namely saving. This is a different perspective from that which saw no

salvation outside the Church itself.

3. Pastoral circumstances of our time

It would be a truism to say that much has changed even since the time of the Second Vatican Council. But it sometimes needs to be remembered that while some of these differences originated in the Church, many others originated in wider society and the Church needed to make its own changes in order to speak to that society. Indeed, the Church has declared itself at one with people in their lives and struggles (G.S. n.1)

- People's searching, whether in right directions or wrong, is itself a pastoral circumstance affecting the Church's catechesis.
- Renewal within the Church, wider participation in the Church's mission, and the resulting need for more widespread formation, are significant factors.
- Both in the Church and in wider society, there is also more scope for the dictum: "a little learning is a dangerous thing". Popularised, over-simplified versions of what the Church teaches don't help much.
- There is even a certain anti-intellectualism characteristic of our romantic era.
- There is a certain fragmentation of the Church's message resulting even from the multiplication of official Church documents.
- There is the impact of worldly ideologies even on Catholics, and often simple ignorance regarding the Church's teaching.
- There is opposition to the Church's teaching; e.g. from upwardly mobile Catholics who find the Church's social teachings an obstacle on their paths, and who are often the ones hardest to interest in programmes of adult education in the faith. (*4)
- On the more positive side, there is also a greater sense of social morality among many.
- There are right and wrong understandings as such things as demythologisation.
- There is unsureness and lack of ease among those who catechise. Religious education teachers aren't the easiest to find!

I am sure you could fill out this picture of the circumstances in which the Church must catechise today. It is this situation that the Catechism of the Catholic Church is intended to address.

And so we come to the question: What kind of document is it? I shall treat this under four headings - its purpose, its authority, its structure, and its method.

1. Its purpose

The bishop theologian W. Kasper notes that whenever the Church focuses on its mission it risks losing touch with its identity; and when it turns in on its identity it risks losing touch with its mission. (*5) I predict that the future will recognize the present Pope's great leadership in trying to hold together and promote both the Church's identity and its mission. The Catechism of the Catholic Church will be a witness to this twin responsibility.

In the Apostolic Constitution promulgating the Catechism, the Pope links the Catechism with the purposes of the Second Vatican Council. He then takes up the intentions of the 1986 Synod which asked for this catechism. And so its declared purposes are:

- to give a unified, holistic compendium of the faith

- to give clear and dependable teaching
- to be a sure guide and authoritative source
- to be a "reference point" for other catechetical materials
- to support and give confidence to those in teaching ministries
- -to contribute to the renewal of the Church.

2. Its authority

The Catechism of the Catholic Church was promulgated by the Pope in the exercise of his teaching responsibility throughout the whole Church. Preparing it involved a massive consultation and redrafting over a six year period. This consultation does not constitute the Catechism as a conciliar document, nor was it promulgated by the universal episcopate.

However, it is not intended to bypass the local churches, i.e. it is intended to be mediated.

- Far from bypassing the involvement of local churches, it actually calls for and needs their involvement. Its *own* fruitfulness requires this mediation. It is to find expression in local catechetical materials. In this sense it is a "reference point".
- The work of mediating is not merely a matter of drawing conclusions for local application; nor is it a matter of merely producing a simplified version of the same text. It is a process that requires internalisation of the message, interpretation, discernment, and re-expression.

Cardinal Ratzinger has been particularly insistent in this "indispensable condition" if the Catechism itself is "to be able fully to actuate its nature and completely realise its objectives. On it, he says, depends in great measure "not only the proper use, but even the success itself and the desired fruits of the Catechism." (*6)

Moreover, as Cardinal Ratzinger has said, this "is the task of the whole Church, but in particular of pastors, theologians, and catechists." (*7)

- This relationship between the universal catechism and local catechisms reflects the relationship between the universal and particular or local churches. The universal Church only exists in the local churches.

Cardinal Ratzinger also speaks of the limitations of the Catechism:

Certainly, no expression, formulation, cultural mediation, and therefore not even the best catechism, has succeeded, is succeeding, or will succeed in expressing adequately, thoroughly, exhaustively the richness, the depth, the breadth of the Christian mystery, considering the historical, social, cultural conditions of human understanding and expression of any age or place. For this reason, we are well aware of the structural and contingent limitations of this Catechism..... It is not and cannot be considered the only possible way or the best way of giving a catechetical re-expression of the Christian message.

Nonetheless, despite such indisputable limits, the Catechism, insofar as it tries to express, truly and worthily, if always inadequately, the essential and basic contents of Catholic faith and morality, has what it needs to present itself as a model, as a

point of reference, as a beacon to illumine and lead to new and safe harbours the unceasing and eager effort (to inculturate the faith and catechesis). (*8)

The need for integration and adaptation is highlighted by the way the Catechism prefers to use the language of traditional statements of the faith, even to the point of ignoring important developments in the expression of Catholic teaching. For example, in its treatment of original sin it still uses the imagery of a world-view that is obsolete. It runs the risk of coming across as fundamentalist and of being misused by Fundamentalists. In this way, the Catechism missed an opportunity to illustrate the Church's own teaching that

...the meaning of the pronouncements of faith depends partly upon the expressive power of the language used at a certain point in time and in particular circumstances. Moreover, it can sometimes happen that dogmatic truth is first expressed incompletely (but not falsely) and at a later date, when considered in a broader context of faith or human knowledge, it receives a fuller or more perfect expression... (*9)

The inclusion of any particular doctrine in the Catechism does not upgrade the status of that particular teaching. This point has been explicitly acknowledged by Bishop Schonborn, who was the Chairman of the Editorial Committee of the Catechism. The same bishop also makes the important point that

The Catechism has to avoid the impression that all its affirmations have the same level of certainty. The level of certainty of the doctrines must instead be derived from the context, from the modes of expression, from the doctrinal authority of the information, etc. (*10)

I think we have all recognized the harm done by previous catechisms which unintentionally gave the impression that all their contents were of equal importance.

In assessing the degree to which the Church has committed itself to particular doctrines, the classical norms of theological interpretation will have to be invoked: the character and authority of the sources from which the doctrines are drawn, the frequency and universality with which they are taught, the style of the texts in which they are proposed, and so forth. Inclusion of various elements in the new Catechism will not by itself settle the issue of the varying degrees of authority that lie behind them. (*11)

The English translators hoped to convey something of the different degrees of certainty by the use of verbs: e.g. the Church "confesses/professes; solemnly/definitively teaches; commonly teaches/holds, etc. (*12) It remains to be seen if this device was acceptable.

3. Its structure

Its structure is in four parts

- the faith professed (the Creed)
- the faith celebrated (liturgy and sacraments)
- the faith lived (moral teaching)
- the faith prayed (prayer).

A weakness of this arrangement is fragmentation of topics into different sections.

Local catechetical materials are not obliged to follow the fourfold structure of the CCC.

Its most fundamental structure is trinitarian - our being drawn into the life of the Holy Trinity (cf n. 234). This is at the heart of everything - salvation, Church, the Creed, worship, etc.

4. Its method

Taking his cue from Pope John XXIII, the present Pope believes that the teachings of the faith, properly presented, have a "force and beauty" that deserve to be "serenely shown forth" (cf Apostolic Constitution). Consequently, the Catechism is non-polemical in its style. It simply declares what the Church teaches. It does not use the question and answer form.

It is consciously scriptural and liturgical.

The Catechism does not endorse or exclude any particular catechetical method.

....this Catechism does not intend to undertake adaptations of the explanation and the catechetical methods demanded by differences of culture, age, spiritual life and the social and ecclesial situation of those to whom the Catechism is addressed. The indispensable adaptations are left to the appropriate catechisms, and still more, to those who instruct the faithful. (Preface, nn 23-24.) (*13)

The General Catechetical Directory, and the New Zealand Catechetical Directory, and other documents which treat of catechetical method retain their importance, and it is to them we turn for guidance regarding method.

The issuance of a doctrinal compendium for the use of bishops, publishers and catechetical leaders does not mean that the developmental approach should be set aside in a single-minded campaign to have children master as much doctrinal information as possible. The guidelines of the (catechetical directories) are still valid and important for effective catechesis. (*14)

The Catechism makes use of the "analogy of faith", i.e. the way in which one or more aspects of the faith throw light on other aspects, and the whole on its parts.

It also respects the ranking/prioritising of truths that was called for in Vatican II's Decree on Ecumenism, n.11.

The "In Brief" sections at the end of each chapter are not intended to be a balanced summary, and much less a substitute for, the main text. They simply pick up key points in each section. (Bishop D Konstant).

Its treatment of sacraments favours the model that relates them to stages of human growth and life. But it is to be remembered that sacraments are actions of the Church, and not just moments in the lives of individuals.

Its treatment of morality hinges around the commandments. There are other ways it could have been done, but no system is perfect.

- the twin keys to Christian morality are the vocation to holiness and the dignity of

persons. Moral formation is about formation for Christian life, Christian decisions, and Christian character. Someone has said conscience is a vision that governs one's decisions. In any event, it is Christ's vision that the Catechism is concerned with.

- The dignity of persons is important also because it is the basis for the necessary distinction between objective/subjective morality.
- It also enables us to see sin as one's personal investment in wrong rather than just the wrong action itself.
- The dignity of persons also ensures that we include both individual and social morality.

The Catechism's use of scripture has been criticized because it does not restrict itself to the "literal" meaning. This is the meaning actually intended by the author, and discovered through exegesis, or the historical-critical method, which explores the world the author lived in.

- What needs to be avoided is reading *into* the text meanings which are not there. That is how metaphorical and typological meanings got a bad name, because of pious exaggerations, especially in the Patristic era.
- Nevertheless, there are meanings which are actually in the text but beyond what the author himself intended. This has to be so because God's word is addressed to people of every era. The revealed truth is always grasped only inadequately, even though accurately, by the words of any era. New insights are always possible, and are accessed through prayer and contemplation, the analogy of faith, and interaction with our own lives.
- When these fuller meanings of the text are re-expressed, they are valid expressions of biblical faith: e.g. midrash, old testament passages read in the light of the Resurrection; the liturgical use of scripture.
- And so the Catechism uses scripture in this wider-than-literal sense, and rightly so. It is concerned with what the text means to us (the hermeneutical question), not just what it meant to the author (the exegetical question).

The Catechism features the saints. The saints should be seen as "symbolising" or "representing" what the Church is and is becoming. Local catechisms are invited to do the same, and are not restricted to canonized saints. (Greatness is not about role or rank; the Church has always seen it as holiness.)

The section on the "mysteries" of Jesus' life (note that these are not just "events"), inspire a faith that is first of all a relationship with Jesus before it is true doctrine or correct behaviour, though, of course, the desire for these belongs to the relationship.

Of course, no catechetical texts can ever substitute for the catechist's own love for Christ, and his/her deep conviction that in Christ God gives purpose, meaning and hope to the whole of human history and to each person's life (cf G.S. 45).

Conclusion

I suggest that we need to approach the new Catechism with the attitude of disciples, certainly not the attitude of scribes and pharisees. It makes all the difference to what we see and hear, or don't see and hear and understand. This was true even in the presence of Jesus, and still is. Whatever else about the Church, it is still Christ's way of being with us on our journey.

But this does not mean we cannot approach the Catechism with the attitude of scholars. I shall conclude with the words of a scripture scholar and a systematic theologian.

Taken as a whole and in one bite, this Catechism does what it needed to do: establish for a generation swept as none before by challenges to faith a recognisable measure for Catholic identity and a reliable source for Catholic catechesis. It does so not only by its individual statements, but in its entire arrangement, as it moves from the authority of revelation through doctrine to liturgy to morals, and concludes with the life of prayer. By that very arrangement it appears as the most countercultural instrument imaginable. The Catechism is offensive to our world not only by declaring against abortion, or demanding that the Sabbath be a day of rest, or by calling the media to a standard of truth, but above all by insisting in its final section that all doctrine and morals must be directed to and by a relationship to God, mediated by prayer. (*15)

Although I approached the Catechism of the Catholic Church with professional curiosity, intending to examine its choice of content and its hermeneutical and organisational principles, after about 20 pages, the tables were turned: I was not evaluating the text; the text was evaluating me! Perhaps others will have the same experience when confronted with the truths of faith, so terrifying and yet consoling, so bracing and refreshing when faced all at once. (*16)

I hope this experience will be yours too!

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FOOTNOTES

- 1.G. O'Collins SJ, *The Pope's Theology*, The Tablet, 22 June 1991, P.801
- 2.Konstant, *Priests & People*, June 1993, p.2156
- 3.Cf H.U. von Balthasar, *Truth and Life*, Concilium, vol 3, p.45.
- 4.Cf F.D. Kelly, *The Catechism in Context*, The Living Light, Summer 1993, p.33
- 5.He actually speaks of identity and relevance, W. Kasper, *Jesus the Christ*, 1977, p.15
- 6.Quoted by J.A. Komonchak, *The Authority of the Catechism of the Catholic Church*, Living Light, P.44.
- 7.Quoted by Komonchak, *ibid*, p.46
- 8.Quoted by Komonchak, *ibid*, p.47
- 9.Mysterium Ecclesiae, 1973, Section 5
10. Quoted by Komonchak, *ibid*, p.49
11. J.A. Komonchak, *ibid*, p.43
12. D.K. Clark, *On "Englishing" the Catechism*, Living Light, p.21
13. This is highlighted by Cardinal J.T. Sanchez, *L'Osservatore Romano*, 14 April 1993, p.4
14. F.D. Kelly, *The Catechism in Context*, The Living Light, Summer 1993, p.35.
Cf also Pope John Paul II, *Catechesis in our Time*, nn 35-44; Kelly, *The Mystery we Proclaim*, (Sunday Visitor, 1993), *passim*.
15. L.T. Johnson, *Commonweal*, 7 May 1993, p.18.
16. Sarah Butler MSBT, *Commonweal*, p.18.