

INTRODUCTION

[The Catechism of the Catholic Church] is meant to encourage and assist in the writing of new local catechisms, which must take into account various situations and cultures, while carefully preserving the unity of faith and fidelity to Catholic doctrine.

—St. John Paul II, *The Deposit of Faith*
(*Fidei Depositum*), IV, no. 4

On October 11, 1992, St. John Paul II published his apostolic constitution *The Deposit of Faith*, promulgating the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (CCC). He chose the publication date to mark the thirtieth anniversary of the opening of the Second Vatican Council.

St. John Paul II envisioned the *Catechism* as a sure and authentic reference text for teaching Catholic doctrine and particularly for preparing local catechisms. The bishops of the United States subsequently discussed in depth what they might do to follow the pope's call to prepare a local catechism. It would need to take into account the local situation and culture, while at the same time preserving the unity of faith and fidelity to Catholic teaching found in the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*. In June 2000, the bishops determined that a national adult catechism would be an effective way to achieve this goal.

Before describing the content and approach of this adult catechism, several preliminary matters need to be presented. First, it should be noted that historically the term *catechism* has acquired a variety of meanings. It comes from a Greek word that means “to echo.” Before the invention of the printing press in 1450, in the Church and elsewhere learning was mainly an oral experience. A Church teaching would be recited, and the listener would be instructed to “echo” it, or repeat it, until it was learned. This way of learning has been around since before the Church. Jewish teachers from both before and after the time of Jesus taught the Scriptures by again and again asking the learner to repeat verses.

The invention of the printing press made it possible to adapt the “speak and echo” method of catechesis into a question-and-answer approach that could be fixed in print. The Church adopted this approach. It is especially evident in the influential catechisms of St. Peter Canisius (1521-1597) and St. Robert Bellarmine (1542-1621).

THE ROMAN CATECHISM, 1566

A third development in catechisms occurred when the bishops at the Council of Trent in 1563 undertook the production of a printed catechism that would be a comprehensive, systematic presentation of Catholic teachings. St. Pius V completed this work and published it as the *Roman Catechism* in 1566. It sought to present Catholic truths from the viewpoint of their inherent coherence and value for instructing the faithful. It became the enduring sourcebook for local catechisms up to its last edition in 1978.

Until the second half of the twentieth century, for millions of Catholics in the United States the word *catechism* meant the *Baltimore Catechism*, which originated at the Third Plenary Council of Baltimore in 1884 when the bishops of the United States decided to publish a national catechism. It contained 421 questions and answers in thirty-seven chapters. The *Baltimore Catechism* gave unity to the teaching and understanding of the faith for millions of immigrant Catholics who populated American cities, towns, and farms. Its impact was felt right up to the dawn of the Second Vatican Council in 1962.

At that time, St. John XXIII articulated a vision for the Fathers of the Second Vatican Council that charged them to guard and present more effectively the deposit of Christian doctrine in order to make it more accessible to the Christian faithful and all people of goodwill in the contemporary world.

THE CATECHISM OF THE CATHOLIC CHURCH, 1992

Eventually, it became clear that the development of a new universal catechism would be beneficial, especially since there had been significant growth in issues and insights in the Church and in society since 1566. In 1985, a synod of bishops was convened in Rome to celebrate the twentieth anniversary of the conclusion of the Second Vatican Council. Many of the synod fathers expressed the desire for a universal catechism that would be a reference book for the catechisms that would be prepared in various regions. The proposal was accepted, and the outcome was the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, published in 1992. A new edition, which contained some modifications, was released in 1997.

This *Catechism of the Catholic Church* is arranged in four parts: “The Profession of Faith”; “The Celebration of the Christian Mystery”; “Life in Christ”; and “Christian Prayer.” Its content is faithful to Apostolic Tradition, Scripture, and the Magisterium. It incorporates the heritage of the Doctors, Fathers, and saints of the Church. At the same time, it illuminates, with the light of faith, contemporary situations, problems, and questions.

The *Catechism* begins with God’s Revelation, to which we are called to respond in faith, worship, moral witness, and a life of prayer. The entire text is guided by the fact that Christian life is rooted in the creative and providential outpouring of the Holy Trinity. The *Catechism* centers itself on the saving life, teachings, death, and Resurrection of Jesus Christ, the Son of God and Son of Mary. This text is a work by and of the Church.

The goal of the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* is to help facilitate the lifelong conversion of the whole person to the Father’s call to holiness and eternal life. At its heart is the celebration of the Christian mysteries, especially the Eucharist and the life of prayer. Users of the *Catechism* are called to witness Christ, the Church, and God’s Kingdom of salvation, love, justice, mercy, and peace in the world.

While the *Catechism* is addressed to a number of audiences—bishops, priests, teachers, writers—it is meant for all the faithful who wish

to deepen their knowledge of the Catholic faith. Further, it is offered to every person who wants to know what the Catholic Church teaches.

UNITED STATES CATHOLIC CATECHISM FOR ADULTS

The *United States Catholic Catechism for Adults* is an adaptation of the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, and it is presented to Catholics of the United States who are members of both Latin and Eastern Churches, with the understanding that the Eastern Churches may develop their own catechisms for adults emphasizing their own traditions.

This text follows the *Catechism's* arrangement of content: “The Creed”; “The Sacraments”; “Moral Life”; and “Prayer.” It emphasizes the Trinity, Jesus Christ, the Sacraments, moral principles, and the heritage of the Doctors and saints of the Church. It is an organic and systematic expression of the Apostolic Tradition, expressed in an inspired way in Sacred Scripture and authoritatively interpreted by the Magisterium of the Church. This text also reflects the sacramental language, practice, and discipline of the Eastern Churches to the degree necessary to provide basic information to Latin Catholics about the Eastern Churches.

The Structure of Each Chapter of This Book

1. Story or Lesson of Faith
2. Teaching: Its Foundation and Application
3. Sidebars
4. Relationship of Catholic Teaching to the Culture
5. Questions for Discussion
6. Doctrinal Statements
7. Meditation and Prayer

CANONIZATION

A canonization today is the Church's official declaration, through the decision of the pope, that a person is a saint, truly in heaven and worthy of public veneration and imitation. The process begins by naming the person "Venerable," a "Servant of God" who has demonstrated a life of heroic virtue. The next stage is beatification, by which a person is named "Blessed." This step requires one miracle attributed to the intercession of the Servant of God. For canonization, a second miracle is needed, attributed to the intercession of the Blessed and having occurred after the individual's beatification. Miracles are not required for martyrs. The pope may dispense with some of the formalities or steps in the process.

1. Stories or Lessons of Faith

The Saints and the Beatified of America accompany the men and women of today with fraternal concern in all their joys and sufferings, until the final encounter with the Lord. With a view to encouraging the faithful to imitate them ever more closely and to seek their intercession more frequently . . . the Synod Fathers proposed . . . that there be prepared "a collection of short biographies of the Saints and the Beatified of America, which can shed light on and stimulate the response to the universal call to holiness in America."

—St. John Paul II, *The Church in America*
(*Ecclesia in America*), no. 15

The preface and most of the chapters start with stories of Catholics, many from the United States. As far as possible, this *United States Catholic Catechism for Adults* relates the Church's teachings to the culture of the United States, both to affirm positive elements in our culture and to

challenge the negative. One way of doing this is found in the stories that begin each chapter. Most of these narratives are biographical sketches of American saints or other outstanding Catholics who represent the variety of racial and ethnic witnesses to the Catholic way of life. These stories give us glimpses of how Catholics participated in the unfolding of American culture from colonial days to the present. Those chosen for these examples are Catholics whose lives or actions illustrate a particular Church teaching. From the earliest days of the Church when St. Athanasius wrote the life of St. Anthony of the Desert, it was clear that telling stories about saints and holy people encourages others to want to be like them and is an effective way of teaching Catholic doctrine.

2. Teaching: Its Foundation and Application

In each chapter, the introductory story is followed by a presentation of a particular teaching. This foundational teaching provides expositions on aspects of the Creed, the Sacraments, the Commandments, and prayer. A few comments about each of these sections are in order.

A. Creed: The Faith Professed

When we pray or recite the Creed, we can be reminded that Catholicism is a revealed religion. God is the author of our faith. All that we are expected to believe is summed up in the revelation of Jesus Christ. God has spoken all that is necessary for our Salvation in Jesus, the Word made flesh. God also gives us the gift of faith that enables us to respond, accept, and live out the implications of Divine Revelation. In this first section of the book, the roles of Apostolic Tradition, Scripture, and Magisterium are clearly outlined.

B. Sacraments: The Faith Celebrated

The second section of this text deals with the celebration of the Christian mystery in the liturgy and the Sacraments. Through the Sacraments the Holy Spirit makes available to us the mysteries of God's revelation in Christ. The saving gifts of Christ's ministry are encountered in the liturgy and are available to us. This is evident in the Sacraments

FATHERS AND DOCTORS OF THE CHURCH

The title “Father of the Church” has been given to those whose sanctity and teaching served to help others understand, defend, and pass on the Faith. Those who have achieved this distinction lived from the earliest days of the Church up to the last Father in the West (present-day Western Europe), St. Isidore of Seville (sixth century), and the last Father in the East (present-day southeastern Europe and Asia Minor), St. John Damascene (seventh century).

The golden age of the Fathers in the fourth and fifth centuries included such figures as St. Basil, St. John Chrysostom, St. Athanasius, and St. Gregory Nazianzen in the Eastern Church, and St. Jerome, St. Ambrose, and St. Augustine in the Western Church.

The title “Doctor of the Church” has been applied to persons from any era in the Church’s history whose sanctity and writings have had a profound influence on theological and spiritual thought. Doctors of the Church include such figures as St. Thomas Aquinas, St. Catherine of Siena, St. Anthony of Padua, St. Teresa of Ávila, St. John of the Cross, St. Robert Bellarmine, and St. Thérèse of Lisieux.

of Initiation (Baptism, Confirmation, the Eucharist), the Sacraments of Healing (Penance and the Anointing of the Sick), and the Sacraments at the Service of Communion (Marriage and Holy Orders). Through the Sacraments, God shares his holiness with us so that we, in turn, can make the world holier.

C. Christian Morality: The Faith Lived

The third section of this text offers an extensive exposition of the foundations of the Christian moral life. Themes of covenant, grace, happiness, sin, forgiveness, virtues, the action of the Holy Spirit, the call to love God

and neighbor, the dignity of the person, and the Church's social teachings are part of the foundational elements for morality. Subsequently, when the Ten Commandments are presented, it is easier to see how the Covenant with God comes first and how the Commandments are ways in which we live out this Covenant. In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus presents to us a summary of the New Covenant in the Beatitudes. Hence, the Commandments are more than moral laws; our commitment to living them flows from our response to the Covenant we have with God, as members of the Church strengthened by the Holy Spirit.

D. Prayer: The Faith Prayed

The last section of this text bears an essential relationship to the second section on the liturgy, which is the prayer life of the Church herself. This section deals with vocal prayer, meditation and contemplation, and the types of prayer—adoration, petition, intercession, thanksgiving, and praise. A special chapter is devoted to a commentary on the Our Father, which is the Lord's Prayer. It seemed suitable here to acknowledge the special link between doctrine and prayer so that a Church teaching is not seen as an abstract idea, and so that prayer not be without a solid doctrinal foundation.

3. Sidebars

The doctrinal section in each chapter is followed by a sidebar composed of three questions with answers taken from the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*. This is one of several ways in which the reader is drawn to explore the extensive resources of the universal *Catechism*. Throughout the text, other sidebars on various topics appear where appropriate.

4. Relationship of Catholic Teaching to the Culture

The next section in each chapter returns to the theme of relating Church teaching for a diverse U.S. society. There are many issues to address such as human dignity, fairness, respect, solidarity, and justice. Each chapter contains a reflection on how its teaching can apply to our culture. Sometimes there are positive elements; at other times, challenges are to

be met. Issues such as disbelief, relativism, subjectivism, and differences about morality highlight conflicts between Church teachings and the culture. The purpose of this section in each chapter is to point to the way in which the Church proclaims salvation to the culture, based on confidence in the validity and relevance of Catholic teaching.

It might also be helpful to note that in keeping with cultural practice in the United States, the text uses horizontally inclusive language, that is, describing human persons according to both male and female genders. The only exceptions to this practice are when the *Catechism* or some other source is quoted directly. References to God in this text maintain traditional usage.

5. Questions for Discussion

Following the section of each chapter that addresses aspects of faith as applied to U.S. culture are questions that allow the readers to explore personal and communal ways of internalizing the teaching of the Church.

6. Doctrinal Statements

Following both a story of faith and a concise review of the Church's teaching and its relation to the culture, each chapter contains a review of points of doctrine covered in the chapter.

7. Meditation and Prayer

As far as possible, this book is meant to draw the reader into a prayerful attitude before God. Every chapter concludes with a meditation drawn from a saint or spiritual writer. A catechism needs to be more than a summary of teachings. God has called all of us to prayer and holiness. Doctrines are distillations of prayer and thought made possible by the Holy Spirit's guidance of the Church. Prayer is the gate that leads us to a deeper understanding of the Word of God and to the hidden treasures of doctrinal teachings. A formal prayer is presented at this point in each chapter. It is usually drawn from the Church's liturgy or from traditional prayers of the Church so that the reader may become more familiar with

the prayer life of the universal Church. There is also a collection of some traditional Catholic prayers in the appendix.

Glossary

Finally, an alphabetized glossary of many terms appears at the end of this book. The definitions are brief. It is recommended that readers also consult the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, which has an extensive glossary. While studying the *United States Catholic Catechism for Adults*, readers can consult these glossaries for definitions of words that are not familiar to them.

CONCLUSION

It is our hope that this *United States Catholic Catechism for Adults* will be an aid and a guide for deepening faith. It may serve as a resource for the Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults and for the ongoing catechesis of adults. It will also be of interest for those who wish to become acquainted with Catholicism. Finally, it can serve as an invitation for all the faithful to continue growing in the understanding of Jesus Christ and his saving love for all people.