

Introducing the Catechism: A Primer for Catechumenal Catechists

By Paul Turner

For the past year the English edition of the Catechism of the Catholic Church has been found in the news and in publishers' advertisements. It just hasn't been found on bookshelves.

The catechism has already been published in several languages, and it has become a best-seller in many non-English-speaking countries. The English edition, originally scheduled for publication simultaneous with other editions, has suffered delays due to the controversies that translation into a quickly changing language presents.

The delay has created a mystique around the book. To an American marketer, the process must look like a creative ploy to garner sales. Some hail it as an answer book that will help steady a church still rocking from the storms of Vatican II. Others fear it as an authoritarian anchor that will ground the church, keeping it from exploring new harbors.

What will the catechism do? It will present a synthesis of what we understand our faith to be. As such it will resemble other major works from Vatican II: the conciliar documents, the revised Roman liturgy and the code of canon law. It won't be the last word, as none of the other documents are, but it will be the current word, and it provides a useful service to a church that has not had an official current word in the form of a complete catechism for the last four hundred years. It's about time.

WHO THIS BOOK IS FOR

Catechists will surely be wondering what they are to do with this book. It's formidable to look at -- large and heavy even in paperback, with fine print on lots of pages and footnotes that look mighty strange to the average reader. (For example, among the hundreds of footnotes in the section on baptism, you'll discover something like "UR 3." If I told you that was the third paragraph of Unitatis redintegratio, would that help?)

The average catechist may start asking nervously, "Will I understand this? What if I don't? How do I know if I'm teaching this? Do I have to know it all? Relax. You'll be fine. Don't resign -- we need you.

The catechism itself explains what it's about and who it's for. Paragraph 11 says that its purpose is to present the faith of the church in a systematic way and to serve as a reference. It has been written principally for those responsible for catechesis, and that primarily means bishops, professors and pastors. Through them it comes to those who present catechesis -- parish catechists. It's also fine for an Christian to read.

If you're a catechist for a parish catechumenate, the catechism is a resource book for you. It's supposed to help you, not scare you. True, it is written in a style only a college professor could

love, but that doesn't mean you have to understand it all the first time you pick it up. This is a book we'll all come to know better as time goes by.

HOW TO USE THIS BOOK

"All right," you say. "I'll look at the copy in the parish office. I might even buy one. Now that I'm staring at it, what do I do?"

Note the structure of the book. Four main divisions tackle some important issues: faith, the sacraments, the moral life and prayer. The catechism cleverly situates its material on four pillars: the Creed, the sacraments, the Ten Commandments and the Lord's Prayer. By meditating on these elements line by line and image by image, the catechism systematically presents what we believe and do in this church.

Note also the ample index. Want to know what the church has to say about justice? You've got enough references there to keep you busy all afternoon. In fact, the text itself is painstakingly cross referenced, so if you want more information on one particular paragraph, the catechism generally refers you to others.

Should you read the catechism from cover to cover? You could. It really does have a flow, more than, say, a dictionary or an encyclopedia. But chances are you'll find it most helpful when you want more information on a particular issue.

Study the catechism in a way that fits your own learning style. Do you work best alone? Fix a pot of tea and dig in. Do you need a group to stimulate your understanding? Invite some other catechists over, and see what they have to say. Or ask your diocese to host a regional event to introduce the book or to explore some important themes.

Some sections may cause you to reevaluate what you believe. They may provoke disagreement, concern or surprise. But they may also create new insights that help you put words onto what you hold dear in faith.

If one passage puzzles you, talk about it with the director of religious education, the pastor or someone else responsible for catechesis in your area. Or read some other material that will bring new light on the issues. If the book helps us explore our faith, it serves a mighty purpose.

CATECHUMENAL SESSIONS

Practically speaking, the catechism will lend background for any catechumenal session. It provides a context for catechesis. The catechism is not designed to be a textbook for catechumens. If you're planning to adapt your next celebration of the rite of acceptance into the catechumenate by presenting the newcomers not with a cross but with a catechism, you've missed the point.

The lectionary remains the "textbook" for the catechumens' catechesis. All catechesis has its foundation in the scriptures. The lectionary has arranged the scriptures for us in a way that

reveals the mystery of the church in a liturgical, seasonal context. From it, the catechumens will explore the plan of God revealed in the church's prayer.

The lectionary also remains the primary "textbook" for the whole Christian assembly. Week by week, we form our lives according to the gospel we hear and proclaim. Catechizing catechumens from the lectionary not only prepares them for initiation, it also prepares them for a lifetime of catechesis and evangelization as the liturgical years unfold.

Preparing the catechumenal session, then, the catechist draws from three different sources: the word of God, revealed in the Sunday scriptures of the current week; the teaching of the Church, systematized for us anew in the catechism; and the experience of the catechumens, which will help determine which questions need the deepest explorations.

In determining the topic for a catechetical session, it would be imprudent to march through the chapters of the catechism. Learn what the catechumens' experience of God is and what their questions for the church are. Open your heart to the scriptures to hear what they speak to the community. Rely upon the church's teachings -- in the catechism and other sources -- to present the topic clearly and faithfully.

The catechism will also help us ensure that our sessions cover the richness of our church's teaching. Careful planning throughout the liturgical year will wed the seasons of the year to the beliefs of the church so that no major areas of our tradition are ignored.

CONCLUSION

The catechism provides an opportunity for us to reflect upon our mission in catechesis and to rededicate ourselves to the church in which we believe. It will help us focus our conversations about the mystery of God and the revelation of the divine plan in human life.

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