

“Treasures Both Old and New”

The Catechism of the Catholic Church

by Sheridan Gilley

THE *CATECHISM OF THE CATHOLIC CHURCH* is a massive achievement. It follows the Fathers and scholastics and its celebrated Tridentine predecessor in its fourfold structure, of Creed, Sacred Liturgy, Commandments, and Christian Prayer. Its content, however, is more illustrative and discursive than the terse and tightly worded catechisms of the past, with a mass quotation from Scripture, the councils, and theologians, to show from the centuries of Christian thought the riches of the whole Tradition. There is a special richness about the deployment of the wealth of the scriptural text, used not merely in a literal or historic-critical manner but in the senses traditionally described and set forth in the work as allegorical, typological, and anagogical. In this the *Catechism* also seeks to relate the doctrines of faith to their practical expression in the Christian life, especially to the life of prayer, and it is notable for its efforts to draw on both Eastern-Orthodox liturgy and spirituality and the aesthetic theology of Hans Urs von Balthasar to complement the scholastic rationalism of the West. One passage (no. 1158), on the role of music in the liturgy as an aid to devotion, supported with a quotation from Saint Augustine, constitutes an indictment of the lamentable practice of most of the English Catholic churches in which I have worshipped, and offers precepts better observed in Protestant ones. Equally moving is the quotation from Saint John Damascene on the use of images. The *Catechism* is, therefore, a devotional as well as a doctrinal document, speaking to the affections as well as to the understanding, and seeking to raise heart and mind together to the vision of God.

Thus the *Catechism* aims to be universal and comprehensive, and yet to go beyond the naked formularies traditionally characteristic of the catechetical form. In this regard it represents perhaps better than other statements of the faith something of the organic richness of Catholicism itself, which refuses to be simplified into barebones summary and, as a treasure house containing many mansions of the spirit, is always bringing forth treasures both old and new. As in the Pauline image of the Church as a body, Catholicism is an organism, a form of life, containing the manifold concreteness and complexity of a living creature which is complete and at

unity with itself; and this the *Catechism* successfully conveys.

The organic simile suggests the danger of the kind of liberalism that, in denying some traditional teaching, lops a limb from the living body. Other comparisons imply the same danger. In his Apostolic Constitution *Fidei depositum*, which stands as an introduction and commendation to the *Catechism*, Pope John Paul describes the work in musical metaphors as a “symphony” or “harmony.” This neatly anticipates liberal criticism of the work, in that it sees all Christian truth as necessary to faith rather than, as in the manner of Vatican II, in a hierarchy. The musical metaphor is not, however, false to Vatican II, which in the context of *Unitatis redintegratio* was anxious to distinguish principal doctrines for the purpose of ecumenical dialogue, not to declare less central ones doubtfully true. In a symphony, all notes are necessary and, if some of the musical themes are less important than others, all contribute to the harmony of the whole so that, say, belief in the existence of spiritual beings intermediate between God and man—of angels and demons—has its necessary place in the Christian vision of the world, in due subordination to faith in God himself.

In the same manner, all the theological truths considered here are in some way essential, just as organs which are not as utterly indispensable as heart and brain and lungs are still necessary to human life. It is notable how liberal attempts to declare some beliefs in a “hierarchy” inessential lead into the denial of central ones. Reject the existence of angels, and one abandons any historical belief in the Annunciation; with that goes the virginal conception, and so on to the Incarnation itself. The total harmony of the supernatural order dissolves with its less important parts, as does that sense of an immediate supernatural presence and aid which the cult of angels convey. On the other hand, the lesser does contribute to the greater, as the splendid passages of the angels in the *Catechism* offer us a tantalizing glimpse of the divine glory. But the *Catechism* ignores the distinction between essential and inessential truths precisely because its aim and achievement lie very precisely in demonstration the interrelatedness of all essential Christian truth. Thus the Prologue to the *Catechism* calls it “an organic synthesis of the essential and fundamental contents of the Catholic doctrine.” No doubt there are traditional and ecclesiastical teachings which are not “essential and fundamental” to Christianity, but these lie beyond the main summaries of the faith which occur in the central creeds, liturgies, and prayers. Thus in reading Scripture, we are exhorted to “*be attentive to the analogy of faith, . . .*” to the coherence of the truths of faith among themselves and within the whole plan of Revelation.” And so the *Catechism* effectively if accidentally scotches one main plank of theological liberalism

in the present, the attempt, in a kind of parody of Newman's minimism,¹ to reduce Catholicity to the few major doctrines—the Trinity, Christology—and to deny the contextualizing body of belief, prayer, and practice, no less necessary, which in the life of faith sustains it.

Thus although the *Catechism* has no directly controversial aim, it cannot help being controversial by merely stating in fairness what Catholics should believe. Such a majestic synopsis of all that it is useful to know of things celestial, and of things terrestrial in relation to them, is in vivid contradiction to the broken lights of modern or post-modern man, with his utter want, not only of faith, but of practical rules by which to live. In fact, the circumstances of the appearance of the *Catechism* in English have strengthened the contrast between it and the intellectual chaos of the world into which it has come. Thus much of the publicity attending its advent in English concerned the delay required for the removal of “inclusive” feminist language in the original English translation. It is not clear to me whether the employment of such language, would have made much difference to the theological content of the work, which in the abandoned draft, generally kept its enthusiasm for gender-neutral nouns and pronouns for humanity, not God. Yet such feminist language could only have delighted feminists not generally known either for their orthodox faith or for their devotion to the Holy See; indeed such feminism has been unusually linjed to a rejection of the fundamentals of the faith. There was, moreover, an opposite danger in indulging a “liberal” partisan language: of alienating traditionally loyal Catholics. On the other hand, liberals were given a reason for denigrating the document which western public opinion would understand, though the matter of language, at least here, was obviously secondary to the all-important issue of whether Catholicism is true.

The delay, however, meant that the *Catechism* was only the chief of the three major papal documents whose appearance during the past year has constituted the Vatican's response to the doctrinal and moral relativism of the age. The encyclical *The Splendour of Truth* directly assailed moral relativism in the consequentialist and proportionalist teachings of some of its practitioners; while in denying that the Church had authority to ordain women to the priesthood in his Apostolic Letter *Priestly Ordination*, the Pope attacked the very Ark of the Covenant of the feminism which claims access to the ministerial priesthood as a right. Indeed, as the *Catechism* asserts, no one had a *right* to receive the sacrament (no. 1577), even while it reasserts the Pauline femininity of the Church, “the bride without spot or

¹ Minimism is the disposition to minimize the implications of an accepted dogma.

wrinkle,” in whom “the ‘Marian’ dimension of the Church precedes the ‘Petrine’” (no. 773). Given the prevalence of such rival dogmatisms as feminism in the midst of a seeming relativism which disguises its own liberal dogmatic basis, the systematic presentation of the Catholic doctrinal and moral teaching in the *Catechism* could not hope to rise above controversy. Moreover its source is itself controversial. As Hans Küng has recognized, it constitutes in itself a massive assertion of the papal magisterium, and of the duty of Catholics to heed it and to give it conscientious obedience.

Not least the *Catechism*, as a decisive answer to modern relativism and liberalism, was bound to cause disagreement within the Catholic Church, in which the ravages of such relativism and liberalism have been as obvious as elsewhere. Nowhere was this more so than in the vexed area of sexual ethics, where the *Catechism* repeats traditional teaching on the immorality of, for example, artificial contraception, abortion, and homosexual acts. These are, of course, a tiny element in the whole document, but they are of obvious importance in the lives of millions. Here, one might feel, the liberal opponents of such teaching would simply declare their dissent in the manner of Küng, pronouncing the whole catechetical enterprise to be tainted by its very source in a renascent Roman tyranny.

This, however, would be to underestimate the ingenuity of liberal exegetes in bending principles which are unexceptionable in themselves and are indeed the principles of the *Catechism* itself, to avoid the *Catechism*'s teaching. Thus Father Kevin Kelly, who lectured in the Liverpool Institute of Higher Education, writing in the English Jesuit publication *The Month*, points out that the *Catechism* insists on the commandments to love God and neighbour as the overall framework for the decalogue, and declares, “we should presume we are misunderstanding the practical implications of the decalogue, if we interpret any of them to be demanding behaviour which is clearly dehumanizing and violates the good of human persons.” It is misfortune that Father Kelly does not draw out the implications of his argument for those sins which the *Catechism* declares to be always wrong. He urges, however, that, while the *Catechism* resents the “authoritative” Catholic view, the Second Vatican Council's commitment to the ecumenism means that the *Catechism*'s moral teaching “should not be presumed to be the final and definitive Christian position,” with the implication that, say, the Anglican understanding of any matter might be right and the Catholic wrong. His conclusion is, moreover, that the *Catechism* “should [only] be used, as a help for living more fully” and that “to use it as a weapon for witch-hunting fellow Catholics who might have divergent views on moral

issues would be to misuse it.”

No one sensible would want a “witch-hunt,” and any one opposed to, say, artificial contraception or abortion or homosexual acts would argue that they do indeed themselves “violate the good of human persons.” The difficulty is that the moral law itself becomes useless if Father Kelly’s principles are allowed to cancel it. The advocates of abortion would argue that the refusal of the basic human (or woman’s) right to terminate her pregnancy is itself a violation of the “good of human persons,” as is the moral condemnation of homosexual acts which can, like abortion, be also defended as legitimate application of the commandment to love one another. As to living more fully, that is also a principle which, without a strong foundation in the moral law, could be held to justify both abortion and homosexual practice; indeed the principle of fulness, detached from Father Kelly’s preceding sentence about the “mysteries of God’s love and life,” has a delicious vagueness which might justify the private habits of the Emperor Caligula or Marquis de Sade. But Father Kelly not only overlooks the teaching of the *Splendour of Truth* that some things are always wrong in themselves; his more fundamental mistake is to imagine that such general principles as the good of human persons, the law of love, and the aim of life-fulfilment can cancel the moral law, when they are in fact, rightly understood, the fulfilment of that law. Nothing good nor loving or life-giving can come from the violation of the moral law, which is the very foundation of both life and love, and the means to that divine perfection in which Christ wishes all of us to share, in making us in the image of what he desires us to be.

As Father Kelly’s appeal to Anglican opinion, I cannot believe that the documents of the Second Vatican Council teach that the Church of England can be right where the Catholic Church is wrong. Furthermore, there is no one Anglican attitude on anything, as the Church of England has become a past master at holding two incompatible positions at once. It was not always so: in my Anglican youth, the Church of England’s moral teachings was, if anything, stricter than Rome’s, and Roman casuistry and marriage discipline were regarded by Anglicans as infected with Mediterranean laxity. Now there are rival bodies of the Anglican bishops and clergy who teach the liceity and the evil of abortion and homosexual acts, and there is no magisterium to say who are right or wrong.

There are, then, Anglicans who still maintain an older tradition of moral teaching and who, under contempt and even persecution from their own church, deserve our ecumenical support; but there are others who make Father Kelly’s appeal to Anglicanism useless. The Church of England seems

to be for liberal Catholics like Father Kelly a kind of ecclesiastical military laboratory for experimentation with possibly deadly strains of liberalism in isolation from the main body of the Church, in doctrine as well as morals. But the Church of England no sooner agreed to “ordain” women than it also decided to consecrate bishops opposed to such ordinations in principle, and both the opponents and supporters of female “ordination” can claim support from loyal Anglicans. Indeed it is now the distinguished character of Anglicanism to lack any clear moral or doctrinal teaching, just as it is the distinguishing character of the Catholic Church to possess it. Confronted, however, with a set of teachings which are magisterially binding, Father Kelly appeals to a church which lacks such teaching authority altogether, in order to evade the teachings of his own. I think that he should in intellectual honesty join the Church of England, in which one can enjoy the luxury of grandiose and ingenious moralizing in his manner outside the hard and difficult disciplines of the traditional moral law.

For there are surely few who will not find one aspect or other of the Church’s moral teaching hard and who will not feel that it contains a call to martyrdom. There are hard things within this *Catechism*: doctrines difficult to believe, laws difficult to obey. But the difficulties arise in taking them outside the whole of which they are but a part, as in lopping a limb from a body or in isolating some dischord from the symphony. Catholic life and thought and doctrine are not detachable into bits, to be selectively received; they are to be taken as a whole. For difficulties of detail for a Catholic are softened and subdued by the light of pervading the whole, the one equal light of faith, in which doctrine and devotion and discipline reinforce one another.

Of course, we can rejoice with such portions of the Church of England which have retained large parts of Catholic truth, and indeed, in the ecumenical spirit of the *Catechism*, with men of goodwill everywhere who maintain a grasp upon this element or that—say, belief in God and in the fundamentals of the moral law—which are basic to Catholicism itself. But such points of agreement with non-Catholics are arguably becoming rarer in the sophisticated First World; and, as an ex-Anglican, I find it painful to recognize that so much of what I was taught as an Anglican in my youth, in the realms of faith and morals, is now maintained only within the Roman Catholic Church among the major churches of the West, as I once regarded them. It is moving to find the doctrines of the virginal conception and the resurrection of the body so warmly stated here when their defenders have found it impossible to maintain them within the Church of England; it seems that in Chesterton’s immortal ballad, one must now substitute “Catholic” for

“Christian”:

. . . because it is only Christian men
Guard even heathen things.

It appears, increasingly, all but impossible to sustain even the “heathen things” outside the household of the faith, and without its sacramental and moral support. Thus if some Christian teachings create difficulty in the household of faith, they are dying outside it without the assistance of the rest of what the Church believes, above all, the papal primacy. This, once my great objection to becoming a Catholic, became a principal reason for doing so when I finally saw that only some such authority could, in divine providence, stand against the liberal dissolvent of all dogma, and with it, of Christianity itself. In this the Church has already given me more than I can say, and even truer now than when written, do Belloc’s words ring true:

One thing in this world is different from all other. It has a personality and a force. It is recognised, and (when recognised) most violently loved or hated. It is the Catholic Church. Within that household the human spirit has roof and hearth. Outside it, is the Night.

*In hac urbe lux sollennis,
Ver æternum, pax perennis,
Et æterna gaudia*

[In this city, solemn light,
Eternal spring, everlasting peace,
And eternal joy.]