

The Catechism of the Catholic Church—3

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THE ENGLISH VERSION of the *Catechism* appeared more than a year after the French. The difficulty was with the translation that had been sent to Rome for approval. Rome, it appears, did not share the North-American commitment to the cause of inclusive language, as a cursory glance at the Vatican website shows. But the delay in publication of an English version was caused by more than the ambiguity and awkwardness of inclusive language. In fact, the original English translation was in places inaccurate or, at least, misleading. While it was downright harmful not to have had, as early as possible, the *Catechism* available in English, it was even more important to have a good translation. Vernacular versions carry more weight nowadays than previously when many people could and did consult the official Latin text. And, if the past is a precedent, we can expect to be using this text for a good long while; its predecessor, *The Catechism of the Council of Trent*, lasted more than 400 years.

In next week's article, I shall write about the actual text of the *Catechism*. Here I intend to address the importance of having any catechism at all. Fundamentally, catechisms exist because Catholicism is a religion. As such, it has something to say about the transcendent, about the immanent, and about the relationship between the two; in Christianity these three are specified as God, man, and Jesus. A catechism has two overlapping purposes. The first is simply to state what the Church teaches about God, man, and Jesus; the second is to present those teachings in a form which is comprehensible to contemporary society. The former is, in a sense, easily accomplished, given that the Church has stated its beliefs many times and in many forms over the centuries. There are the liturgical texts to draw upon, and also the copious statements of bishops and popes, councils large and small, and all sorts of commentaries on Scripture. There are also the forms of popular Catholicism, which have been the seedbed out of which has grown our Catholic piety. When the Church speaks she must honour all of these, for novelty in the essentials of our faith would be pernicious, as implying that earlier formularies were wrong. If they were, there would be no reason for crediting what happens to be popular today given that it, in its turn, will be pushed aside for something new tomorrow. To indulge an itch for novelty, I may safely observe, would pretty well finish off Christianity.

The point is that there is in the Church something that doesn't change with time and can therefore be found in all its creeds. The new *Catechism* reflects this fact in its frequent references to the Bible, to the patristic and mediæval eras, and to the magisterium. On the other hand, if every society were the same, there would no need for any creed or catechism beyond what the Apostles left the Church in the New Testament and the ancient traditions of the Church. But societies do change, and Catholicism has in the past succeeded in re-expressing that apostolic data in new situations. The mediæval Church effected for Europe what the Fathers had for the Græco-Roman world. What is now happening is another attempt to re-express the truths of faith, this time for modern man. "We shall take pains to present to the men of this age God's truth in its integrity and purity that they may understand it and gladly assent to it" (Vatican II, *Opening Message*).

This brings us to the second purpose of a catechism. What topics must be approached in a new way for the Church to reach man in a scientific age? As I have noted, a start has already been made in Vatican II, which was convened "to give the Church the possibility of contributing more efficaciously to the solution of the problems of the modern age." It's worth repeating that the Pope thought that the Church would be able to perform this task because it had already been "in great part transformed and renewed. . . . It has strengthened itself socially in unity; it has been reinvigorated intellectually; it has been interiorly purified." On this firm basis, and only on it, could the Church bring to the world her desperately needed message about the dignity of man. The almost fifty years that have passed since Pope John spoke these words have not borne out his confident optimism about the Church. There has been too much confusion within the Church for her to address effectively the difficulties that face the worldwide human family. The scandal of this situation is that it prevents the Church from accomplishing what she has founded to do. That the *Catechism* had first to re-establish that the Catholic ethos is an indictment of our generation of believers, but if the *Catechism* succeeds in regaining the allegiance of Catholics to Catholicism, we may be ready to begin the great work envisaged by Pope John XXIII and the Second Vatican Council.

The fact that the *Catechism* was a best seller in the countries indicates, perhaps, that modern man is ready to consider a contemporary restatement of Christianity. Evangelization today, however, must progress in a scientific atmosphere where even the most ignorant think that they know something about the world and society, beginning with their own biological functioning and then moving outward to the physical universe, political and economic systems, and the all-important, all-engrossing world of entertainment

(including professional sports). In matters of religion, two areas in particular demand today a different treatment from what has been customary: ecumenism and scholarship.

We can expect the *Catechism*, therefore, to recognize that there are Christians who are not Catholics as well as religions that are not Christian. Respecting human freedom and honouring human accomplishment force the Church to express its unique role as the locus of revelation without denying the activity of the Spirit outside her confines. Given that a commitment to ecumenism has characterized the pontificates of Pope John Paul II and Pope Benedict, one looks for openness in the *Catechism* but without any compromise of the Church's privileges. Turning to scholarship, we note that the disciplines that most immediately affect Catholicism are the biblical studies, history, and the social sciences of psychology and sociology. The first of these may call into question the Church's claim to teach today what the Apostles taught; the second, the claim of the Church to have taught a constant message across the centuries, whatever its nature; and the third, her claim to address man as he is, to give his life a purpose that he truly needs, and to provide effective means to reach it. Such are the matters that a contemporary catechism must take into consideration. Next week I shall test my ideas about what modern man requires by comparing them to the text the Church has provided for his consideration. ❧