

The Catechism of the Catholic Church—4

by Father Daniel Callam, C.S.B.

THE *CATECHISM* is attractively produced. It is also well written. But the feature that will initially strike the reader is its excellent plan. Everyone should know by now that the *Catechism*, following the traditional method of catechesis, is divided into four parts: the first part, which deals with belief, is an extended treatment of the Apostles' Creed; the second section, on worship, takes the form of an extended discussion of the seven sacraments; part three addresses morality as a commentary on the Ten Commandments; and finally there is a section on prayer, based on the Our Father. Each of these parts is divided and subdivided, with the smallest subsections addressing a specific topic. Part two, for example, on worship, is divided into two sections: "The Sacramental System" and "The Seven Sacraments of the Church," of two and four chapters respectively. Each of these chapters is further divided into articles, each with at least three and as many as seven further subsections. One such subsection, "The Necessity of Baptism," occurs in the article on baptism, which is discussed under a larger heading as a sacrament of initiation and is therefore within the section, "The Seven Sacraments." There are five paragraphs in "The Necessity of baptism" which, like all the paragraphs in the book, are numbered consecutively. There are altogether 2,865; these five happen to be §§1257-1261. In the margin are numbers that refer the reader to other paragraphs that treat of allied topics. Besides the detailed table of contents there are two indices, one for biblical and extra-biblical quotations and the other for subject headings. There is thus no difficulty in locating what the *Catechism* says on a given topic or to discover whether, and then how, it uses a particular verse of Scripture or a text from standard Catholic authors, such as Saint Augustine and Saint Thomas Aquinas (who, aside from the Bible, are the most frequently cited). This careful, well-worked-out plan allowed the authors of the *Catechism* to treat every imaginable topic. Some are almost amusing in their positioning; the mass media, for instance, are discussed under the commandment against bearing false witness.

The preceding paragraph may give the impression that the material in the *Catechism* has been chopped up into tiny pieces, as fine and dry as straw coming out of a combine. Not so. This is lush vegetation that will provide excellent fodder for many a long winter day. The tone is confident. Catholics know what they believe; and they believe a great deal, for a faith that

recognizes God as the source and goal of all that is will have something to say on everything from business and politics to art and medicine. Our faith has had a long time to ponder things, and so we know where we stand on topics as broad as creation and as specific as polygamy.



This image is found on the official version of the Catechism published in the Vatican. The design is based on a third-century Christian tombstone in the Catacomb of Domitilla, Rome. The rural theme, which comes from paganism, was used by Christians to symbolize the rest and happiness of eternal life for the souls of the dead.

The image also contains several elements characteristic of the Catechism: Christ the Good Shepherd who guides and protect the faithful (the sheep) by his authority (the staff), draws them by the melodic symphony of the truth (the pipes) and brings them repose in the shade of “the tree of life,” his redemptive Cross which opens paradise.

My comments last week raised several issues that one would expect to find addressed in the *Catechism*: one was ecumenism and the other was scholarship—specifically biblical scholarship, the academic study of history, and the social sciences of sociology and psychology. As one reads and ponders the book, he becomes aware that contemporary interests and insights into each of these have had their effect, but not in an obvious way. Ecumenism, to begin with, has been a Catholic cause since the sixties, with Vatican II (1962-65). In North America our partners in dialogue have been

principally Protestants and Anglicans, but Rome's larger view focused more on our near neighbours, the Orthodox. This larger view is refreshingly apparent in the *Catechism* which makes full use of the fact that Catholicism already represents the most successful achievement of ecumenism to date: the presence in one Church of Christians from West and East, the latter including not only those—such as Ukrainians—traditionally in union with Constantinople, but also “Orientals,” i.e., Syrians, Copts, and others whose Churches have been centred on Antioch or Alexandria. The *Catechism* makes ample use of the somewhat neglected fact that all of these rites have as much claim to the title “Catholic” as the Latin rite does. Furthermore, if we are to profit from what God has revealed to his worshipping Church, we must draw upon these Traditions whose patrimony is enshrined mainly in their liturgies. The second section of the book, therefore, draws on the liturgical prayers and actions of these Eastern Churches as important for our understanding of what and how Christianity functions. This is truly, to employ a phrase John Paul II liked, breathing with both lungs.

As for ecumenism in the usual sense of the term—of bettering relations among Christians—the contribution is indirect. It cannot be the purpose of a *Catechism* to sift through the details of harmony and discord between Catholics and other Christians. But the cause of authentic ecumenism is well served in the *Catechism's* clear and comprehensive statement of Catholic belief. Dialogue can now proceed, as theologians try to extend the boundaries of commonality between Catholics and other Christians.

Scholarship is another area which at first seems oddly absent from these pages. A generation raised on the internet and cinema will find it difficult to accept this utterly confident, self-sufficient expression of the Catholic faith. Where we continually look for counter-arguments and other points of view, as common now in blogs and texting as in academe, the *Catechism* merely presents a body of cultural experience, reasoned reflection, and explicit teaching, trusting its effectiveness to the inner coherence of a complete system of belief. This confidence seems to have determined its attitude toward biblical studies which have revolutionized the study of Scripture over the past 200 years. University theses on the Bible have been coming thick and fast, each with its refined gauge of the credibility of this or that passage, questioning consistency and limiting or totally bypassing inspiration. The approach of the *Catechism* is different. Scripture is inspired, it is consistent, it is coherent: “All of Scripture is a single book” (§134). Remove this principle from the structure of Catholic belief and it collapses into a heap of disjointed fragments. Too often what

the Bible happens to mean to a scholar has little to do with what the Church has made of it in her worship and teaching. For believers, the Jesus of John's Gospel must be the same as that of the other Gospels. It follows that one Gospel illumines another. The *Catechism* applies this principle across the Bible. That Catholic scholars, to risk a generalization, have not yet found a way of incorporating their faith into their academic discipline does not mean that nothing can be said for certain about Scripture in the interim; it merely means that the technical study of Scripture has, thus far, concerned itself with material that is preliminary to Catholic theology.

Much the same can be said about the attitude toward the academic discipline of history. The footnotes, which are brief and numerous, contain hundreds and hundreds of references coming from across the entire Christian era. Following the index, we can categorize these sources as follows: Scripture, creeds, councils, the magisterium, canon law, the liturgy, and Church writers. For the last of these, precedence is given to the patristic and mediæval periods. Only a couple of writers who died within the last century or so are quoted: Thérèse of Lisieux (+ 1897) and Elizabeth of the Trinity (+ 1906); and there are only two more to be added to the list if we go back a hundred and fifty years: John Henry Newman (+ 1890) and the Curé d'Ars (+ 1859). Accepting Newman's judgement of his own work, we note the significant fact that none of these was a theologian. The living witness of Tradition precedes the theologians' lucubrations. The *Catechism* as the witness to the former precedes and commissions the latter. But let the theologian not repine; any ideas of his which, in a century or two, find themselves universally drawn upon in the life of the Church may well be quoted in the universal catechism of A.D. 2600.

It's a little more difficult to discern the influence of sociology and psychology on the text. There is no overt invocation of these disciplines, with the possible exception of psychology which allows us to reduce moral responsibility by a consideration of the influences of habit and disposition on sins of the flesh. But the effectiveness of the work as a whole bears witness to an awareness of the psychology of belief for modern man and also to his various cultures. With regard to sociology, it is in the use rather than in the composition of the *Catechism* that an influence is apparent. For the statement of Catholic truth here presented is to be inculturated in different societies. This task should call upon the skills of Catholic psychologists and sociologists as well as those of historians, theologians, and ecumenists. ❧