

Session 3

Why the New Catechism?

'Father... this is eternal life, that they may know You' (Jn 17:3)



Father, may the truth of the Gospel shine forth in your Church so that all are led by its beauty to seek you, the one God, and find everlasting life in your eternal Kingdom.

We ask this in the name of Jesus your Son, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, world without end. Amen

In our first session we discovered that a catechist is an echo of Christ and his Good News. We saw that the 'deposit of faith', as Scripture calls this treasure which is to be lovingly received and handed on, has been re-presented for our times in the new Catechism of the Catholic Church. In this session we explore this Catechism. We look at its purpose, and how to use it for learning about the faith and for teaching the faith.

The Catechism is a superbly-crafted teaching instrument. It is also a work that will transform your life and the lives of those you catechise. It is not a book to be read quickly; one needs to ponder the text, pray with it and immerse oneself in it to fully appreciate its visionary power and the compelling sense of beauty, goodness and truth which radiate from its pages. In these pages we meet the Spirit at work in His Church.

To read and use the Catechism prayerfully and carefully, searching its depths and allowing oneself to be questioned and challenged by its teaching, one needs to understand some of the elements which structure and inform its presentation of the faith. When these elements are firmly grasped and their significance appreciated the Catechism can become the most transforming and penetrating teaching tool the Church has ever possessed since the Scripture.

Unfathomable riches

'I ask all the Church's Pastors and the Christian faithful to receive this Catechism in a spirit of communion and to use it assiduously in fulfilling their mission of proclaiming the faith and calling people to the Gospel life. This catechism is given to them that it may be a sure and authentic reference text for teaching catholic doctrine... It is also offered to all the faithful who wish to deepen their knowledge of the unfathomable riches of salvation.'

Pope John Paul II, Fidei Depositum, 'The Deposit of Faith'

The purpose of the Catechism

What do we learn about the Catechism from this excerpt from Fidei Depositum?

- 1 • **It is a sure reference guide.** It is reliable, a secure point to which we can turn to discover and understand Church teaching. You can use the contents pages or the indices to find out about particular aspects of Church teaching.
- **It proclaims faith.** It teaches the faith clearly, unambiguously and fully. It is a serious presentation for adults of a living faith for today.
- **It calls us to the Gospel life, to Christ.** It is written to lead others to Christ and to life in him. The truths presented in its pages are truths about Christ. They introduce us to him.

- **It is for teachers.** The Catechism has been written to assist catechists, whether pastors or lay people. It is a teaching document. It is set out and structured for ease of teaching. It is the handbook every teacher of the faith needs.

The logo on the front cover

- 2 Take a moment to look at the logo on the front cover. What is it? Look inside and read the explanation of the design. Notice how the logo presents the whole message of the Catholic faith – Christ and His redemptive work are at the centre, redeemed humanity lies securely and peacefully at his feet, drawn into paradise to share the life of the Blessed Trinity. Christ is playing a beautiful melody, the ‘symphony of the truth’.

This image of a ‘**symphony**’ can help us to understand the **structure** and **layout** of the Catechism.



Structure

Just as a symphony normally has four movements, so the Catechism has four parts. These four parts correspond to the four ‘parts’, or dimensions, of the life of the Church and of every Christian. The Christian life is one of faith, worship, following Christ in the way we live, and prayer.

Catechism

- 3 1. Turn to the Contents pages and *identify the four parts* of the Catechism.
2. Notice the *ordering of the four parts* and the *amount of space* given to each. Parts 1 and 2 proclaim God’s revelation and work, his loving plan of salvation, through the time of the Old Testament, the New Testament and now in the time of the Church when he works through the liturgy and the sacraments. This is what we have faith in and what we celebrate. Parts 3 and 4 are concerned with our response to God’s gracious activity – our life in Christ and our prayer. God’s action comes first (parts 1 and 2) and two-thirds of the Catechism is concerned with presenting this for us. Our action follows as a response to what God has done, and just one-third explains what we are to do. The Catechism, then, emphasises God’s grace in the Christian life and asks catechists to do the same.
3. Notice that each part of the Catechism has *two sections*. The first section in each case looks at general issues and points concerned with faith, worship, morality and prayer. The second section focuses upon the creed, the sacraments, the commandments and the Our Father.

Layout and themes

A symphony is satisfying when it is experienced as a unified piece. A certain unity is achieved by the fact that the whole symphony is written in a particular musical key, C major, D minor, or whatever. Musical themes that are heard in one movement often recur in other movements.

We can think of the Catechism in a similar way. The authors of the Catechism tell us that ‘This catechism is conceived as an *organic presentation* of the Catholic faith in its entirety. It should therefore be seen as a unified whole.’ (para 18) This is an important point. When we read a section of the Catechism we are doing more than learning about particular aspects of the Faith; the Catechism has been written so that, whichever page we open, we are introduced to the fullness of the Faith, to ‘one thing’ to be believed, to love and in which to place our hope. Just as God is One, though he is Three in One; so the Faith is one, though it is made up of many parts. This sense of unity is achieved in two ways in particular:

Through the use of cross-references. These link the different parts together to help us see connections between faith and life.

Through the use of recurring ‘themes’ which lie at the heart of the faith. We can call these the ‘foundational truths’ of the Faith. They run like

4 What's on a page

This tells you which of the four parts of the Catechism you are in:

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history, governing hearts and events in keeping with his will: 'It is always in your power to show great strength, and who can withstand the strength of your arm?'¹⁰⁷

Italicised words identify key teaching points, as do the bold sub-headings in the text.

*'You are merciful to all, for you can do all things'*¹⁰⁸

270 God is the *Father Almighty*, whose fatherhood and power shed light on one another: God reveals his fatherly omnipotence by the way he takes care of our needs; by the filial adoption that he gives us ('I will be a father to you, and you shall be my sons and daughters, says the Lord Almighty'):¹⁰⁹ finally by his infinite mercy, for he displays his power at its height by freely forgiving sins.

When you are given a reference number for the Catechism, it is not the page number, but the paragraph number. All Church documents use this method of referencing. 'CCC' is the abbreviation used for the Catechism, so 'CCC 271' is paragraph number 271 in the Catechism.

271 God's almighty power is in no way arbitrary: 'In God, power, essence, will, intellect, wisdom, and justice are all identical. Nothing therefore can be in God's power which could not be in his just will or his wise intellect.'¹¹⁰

The mystery of God's apparent powerlessness

272 Faith in God the Father Almighty can be put to the test by the experience of evil and suffering. God can sometimes seem to be absent and incapable of stopping evil. But in the most mysterious way God the Father has revealed his almighty power in the voluntary humiliation and Resurrection of his Son, by which he conquered evil. Christ crucified is thus 'the power of God and the wisdom of God. For the foolishness of God is wiser than men, and the weakness of God is stronger than men.'¹¹¹ It is in Christ's Resurrection and exaltation that the Father has shown forth 'the immeasurable greatness of his power in us who believe'.¹¹²

The central truths of the faith stand at the heart of every part of the Catechism: Christ, the Paschal Mystery, the Holy Trinity, the Church and the dignity of every human person.

273 Only faith can embrace the mysterious ways of God's almighty power. This faith glories in its weaknesses in order to draw to itself Christ's power.¹¹³ The Virgin Mary is the supreme model of this faith, for she believed that 'nothing will be impossible with God', and was able to magnify the Lord: 'For he who is mighty has done great things for me, and holy is his name.'¹¹⁴

The Catechism emphasises the implications for our lives of the faith we profess, and provides models for us to contemplate.

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¹⁰⁷ Wis 11:21; cf. Esth 4:17b; Prov 21:1; Tob 13:2.

¹⁰⁸ Wis 11:23.

¹⁰⁹ 2 Cor 6:18; cf. Mt 6:32.

¹¹⁰ St Thomas Aquinas, STh 1, 25, 5, ad 1.

¹¹¹ 1 Cor 1:24-25.

¹¹² Eph 1:19-22.

¹¹³ Cf. 2 Cor 12:9; Phil 4:13.

¹¹⁴ Lk 1:37, 49.

These numbers point us to the sources which are listed at the foot of the page. Notice how the majority are from the Scriptures. Catechists can use these references for study, for memorisation and for prayer.

The numbers in italics at the side of the paragraphs are cross-references to other paragraphs. These shed more light on the topic you are considering. They expand points, link the parts together, and help to deepen our understanding of the topic we are investigating.

Look for these words - 'therefore', 'because', 'thus', 'for', and so on - which indicate that reasons are being given for the statement which has just been made. The Catechism explains the Faith as well as presenting it.

golden threads through each part of the Catechism. They are:

- The Holy Trinity
- The Person of Christ, true God and true man
- The Paschal Mystery, the saving death and resurrection of Christ
- The nature and dignity of the human person, created and graced

5 • The Church

One of the keys to effective teaching with the Catechism is to ensure that, whatever the subject you are teaching, you relate it to these key themes. Why? First, because in doing this you will be helping others to see the coherence of the faith, the way in which the pieces fit together. Secondly, because you will be offering your hearers reasons for the faith: the Church's teaching becomes understandable in that the elements you are teaching are seen to be drawn together in a beautiful harmony around these themes.

6 Read paragraphs 214-221: 'God, He Who Is, is Truth and Love'.

Look for the points raised in this session.

Summary

In this third session we have been looking at:

- Why the new Catechism is so important for catechists
- How to use the Catechism to learn about the faith
- How to use the Catechism to teach the faith

Further reading

- For the purpose of the Catechism: 'Fidei Depositum', Pope John Paul's introduction to the Catechism.
- For how to learn from the Catechism and teach the Faith from it: the Prologue, 1-25; and the General Directory for Catechesis, Part Two, Chapter Two.

Glossary on some key terms in the new Catechism

Fidei Depositum: 'Deposit of Faith', the title given by Pope John Paul II to his introduction to the Catechism

Grace: our introduction into the divine life, freely given so that we can respond to God's call to become children of God. The Catechism emphasizes God's grace.

Mystery: the reality of God lying at the heart of creation and especially of the history of salvation which we know only because God has revealed himself to us

Paschal Mystery: the phrase used to describe the reality of our redemption through Christ's death and resurrection, a redemption of which we know because God has revealed this to us.

Final meditation and prayer

O my God, Trinity whom I adore, help me to forget myself entirely so as to establish myself in you, unmovable and peaceful as if my soul were already in eternity. May nothing be able to trouble my peace or make me leave you, O my unchanging God, but may each minute bring me more deeply into your mystery!

Blessed Elizabeth of the Trinity (see CCC 260)

Glory be to the Father, and to the Son and to the Holy Spirit.
As it was in the beginning, is now, and ever shall be, world without end. Amen.

