

Universal Catechism came 'dead on arrival'

By Father Richard P. McBrien
Syndicated columnist

The headlines were predictable: "Scholars Criticize Holy See's Draft of New Catechism."

A panel of 15 Catholic experts (including a bishop) in catechetics, Scripture, and theology had met in late January at the Woodstock Center — a Jesuit-run enterprise in Washington, D.C. — to discuss their written analyses of the first draft of the Universal Catechism.

They criticized the catechism's structure, its use of Scripture, and its general theological content and tone, which they described as 1950s theology.

"To go back and talk about the issues of the late '80s in the language of the '50s is not an accident," Father William Spohn, S.J., of the Jesuit School of Theology at Berkeley declared. "It's an attempt to say that all that happened in between doesn't count."

"The difficulty is that they are going to end up preaching to the choir. There are fewer and fewer people who make any sense of their lives out of that highly legalistic language of moral theology of the '50s," he continued, "but that's almost exclusively the tone that is here. We have some Scripture here, but, frankly, that is garnish."

The scholars also complained about the inconsistent and selective use of official church teachings from the Second Vatican Council, and the draft's seemingly deliberate omission of important principles and insights contained in various conciliar and post-conciliar documents.

They said that the draft document fails to make necessary distinctions between what is essential to the faith and what is more peripheral, and between established doctrine, on the one hand, and theological opinion and church discipline, on the other.

Another Berkeley Jesuit, Father John Wright, gave an example. "The existence of angels is put down as a matter of faith. I personally kind of favor angels, I'm not really opposed to angels," he insisted, "but I don't want to make them a matter of faith, and that's what the catechism does."

This tendency to homogenize everything

is especially evident in the catechism's treatment of sexual ethics, which the panelists agreed is the weakest part of the document.

The draft's conclusions on such moral issues as contraception, abortion, *in vitro* fertilization, and the roles of women in the church are stated as absolutes without reference to the theological debates surrounding them.

One of the panelists, Lisa Sowle Cahill, a widely respected ethicist at Boston College, concluded that, although the style of the catechism draft is not polemical, "there is definitely a polemical intent ... to squelch debate, especially on issues of sexuality." She also noted that the document is filled "through and through" with sexist language.

In some cases, the catechism is simply wrong, as when it asserts that "the Eucharist is not a meal."

The Eucharist is a meal, in spite of the discomfort which that thoroughly biblical concept may cause some ultra-conservative Catholics who regard "the Mass" as a private affair between themselves and God.

What's really at issue here is control. The Universal Catechism has but one real purpose, and that is to construct a new official yardstick against which all other catechetical materials can be measured, censured, and banned, if necessary.

One should not forget where the idea for a Universal Catechism originated. It was first proposed at the 1985 Extraordinary Synod in Rome by one of the church's most conservative pastoral leaders with close connections to Opus Dei, Cardinal Bernard Law of Boston.

Cardinal Law was not elected to the synod by his fellow bishops. He was appointed personally by the Pope.

"One suspected that he had been brought



to the synod to make this very point," Peter Hebblethwaite writes in his *Synod Extraordinary* (Doubleday, 1986, p. 119). "It was a rather crude tactic."

No amount of tinkering with this draft document will ever make it acceptable to religious educators, biblical scholars, and theologians. And those who originally proposed the idea would not accept a fundamental and thoroughgoing revision.

A little realism is in order here. The Universal Catechism was born dead. It should be buried with a Mass of the Angels.

A sensible brother struggles against forgiveness

By Cindy Bassett
Courier columnist

Samuel looked out across the rows and rows of grain and frowned. The plants were much too small for this late in the season. Not only had the planting been rough, back-breaking work, but if rain didn't come soon, all of his efforts would come to nothing.

"This is all Benjamin's fault!" he cried bitterly, kicking at the dry, cracked earth. "If my brother had been here to help me plant the crop, it would have taken hold before the drought came."

Nearly a year had passed since Benjamin had left home. "Is it my fault that farming doesn't appeal to me?" he asked to his father's dismay. "I see myself as a merchant in the city with a profitable business." His father finally relented and gave him his inheritance to start his business.

Although Samuel and his father had heard nothing from Benjamin for months, there were plenty of rumors. Samuel had overheard the servants gossiping about his brother.

"They said Benjamin has squandered all of his money on a good time in the city



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with his new friends," one said. "He doesn't have enough money left to feed even himself. His new friends have abandoned him. He's living on a pig farm feeding animals."

For his part, Samuel didn't care if he ever saw his brother again. "Whatever happens to Benjamin is his own fault! He wasn't thinking of me when he left me here to do all of the work like some dumb beast of burden."

Samuel gave one last look at the failing crop before he turned homeward. He was tired and discouraged. It would be good to eat a quiet meal with his father.

When he was still some distance off, he heard the sounds of music and laughing coming from the house. A servant came running to meet him.

"Benjamin has come home!" the servant told him. "Your father sent me to bring you to the celebration. All of your relatives and neighbors have come to welcome your brother back!"

Samuel left the servant standing there and stomped off toward the barn. He took some of the tools and flung them at the wall in his fury. After his anger had been spent, he sat down in the corner of the barn sulking as he contemplated his grievances.

Why was it always this way with Ben-

jamin and his father? Even when they were growing up, Benjamin could always make his father laugh at his foolishness. Samuel was known as the sensible brother.

It was his father who came to seek Samuel several hours later. "Samuel, what are you doing sitting here alone in the dark?" he asked.

"I am avoiding the hero's welcome that you are hosting for your youngest son," Samuel said coldly.

"What did you expect me to do?" his father asked. "I love Benjamin. He made a mistake. But he's sorry now."

"What about me?! All of my life, I've stayed here to keep the farm going!" Samuel shouted. "What has it gotten me? Did you ever have a party in my honor?"

"My son, I love you," his father replied. "All that I have is yours. I thought that Benjamin's life was lost forever. Now that he is back, isn't that a reason to celebrate?"

Samuel said nothing. He refused to look at his father.

His father sighed heavily. Just before he went back to the house, he said to Samuel, "The decision is yours. Will you forgive your brother?"

Scripture Reference: Luke, Chapter 15:11-32.

Stumbling block to being a complete follower of Jesus: An unforgiving heart. "Get rid of all bitterness, passion and anger. No more shouting or insults, no more hateful feelings of any sort. Instead, be kind and tender-hearted to one another, and forgive one another, as God has forgiven you through Christ" (Ephesians 4:31-32).



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