

Catechism blurs essence of Catholics' faith

By Father Richard P. McBrien
Syndicated columnist

Several weeks ago I did a column on the Universal Catechism in which I recommended that the project be abandoned.

One of my colleagues at Notre Dame — someone outside the theology department — expressed a friendly concern about the essay.

He neither challenged my characterization of the document, nor questioned the validity of the criticisms leveled by the theologians, biblical scholars, and religious educators I had cited.

He wondered, however, if such criticisms were directed only at this particular document, or if they were indicative of a more sweeping opposition to all such initiatives — indeed, to the very idea of drawing any lines whatever between valid and invalid expressions of Catholic faith.

He observed that theologians no longer seem to acknowledge that there are lines which a Catholic cannot cross and still be Catholic. It's as if one can believe whatever one wishes to believe.

He asked how a Catholic — any Catholic, not just the traditionalist type — is to know what is essential to Catholic faith and what is not.

I replied that we recite the Creed every Sunday at Mass. The core of Catholic faith is contained right there.

But I could see that he was not satisfied. I thanked him for his gentle prodding and promised I'd do a column on the subject. This is it.

For the record, there are lines beyond which a Catholic cannot step and still be Catholic.

Catholics cross the line if they deny the reality of a loving and providential God. One cannot be a Catholic atheist.

Catholics cross the line if they deny the triune nature of God. It is the essence of Catholic faith that God created us (Father), redeemed us (Son), and sanctifies us (Holy Spirit). One cannot be a Catholic unitarian.

Catholics cross the line if they deny the divinity of Jesus Christ, and the saving effect of His death, resurrection and ascension. One cannot be a Catholic Liberal (in

the 19th century meaning of the word).

Catholics cross the line if they deny the necessity of the sacraments or the Real Presence of Christ in the Eucharist. One cannot be a Catholic anti-sacramentalist.

Catholics cross the line if they deny the resurrection of the body and eternal life. One cannot be a Catholic Sadducee.

But not everything essential is in the Nicene Creed, even if the core is there.

Catholics also cross the line if they deny the reality of grace, reducing everything to the purely natural. One cannot be a Catholic materialist.

Catholics cross the line if they deny the necessity of faith for salvation, arguing instead that everything has to be rooted in human reason. One cannot be a Catholic rationalist.

On the other hand, Catholics cross the line if they deny the use of reason in studying the mysteries of Christianity, arguing that everything must be taken simply on "faith." One cannot be a Catholic fideist.

Catholics cross the line if they deny the essential goodness of the created order, arguing instead that there are two co-equal creative forces in conflict in the world, Good and Evil. One cannot be a Catholic Manichean.



ESSAYS IN THEOLOGY

Catholics cross the line if they deny the necessity of grace for salvation, arguing instead that human effort and strength of will are sufficient. One cannot be a Catholic Pelagian.

On the other hand, Catholics cross the line if they deny the necessity of human freedom for salvation, arguing instead that God has already determined our fate for us, independently of our own responsible thoughts and actions. One cannot be a Catholic predestinationist or determinist.

Finally, Catholics cross the line if they deny that we are all our brother's and our sister's keeper, that we are bound in charity and justice to share what we have with those in greater need and to forgive even our enemies. One cannot be, in the end, an un-Christian Catholic.

Ironically, in collapsing the distinction between what is essential and what is debatable in Catholic faith, it is the drafters of the Universal Catechism — not modern theologians — who have erased those lines.

Jesus' closest friends succumb to fear in their hour of darkness

By Cindy Bassett
Courier columnist

Darkness and despair were everywhere in the garden tonight. Jesus had come here many times to pray with his apostles. It was a sanctuary for them — a place of peace.

Tonight, there was no peace, only his anguish. It had wound itself around them all. Here, in the garden, they were all prisoners of despair.

"John, are you sleeping?" Peter called softly.

"No."

"I'm awake too," came the voice of John's brother, James.

"What did Jesus mean when he said that his sorrow was so great that his heart was breaking?" Peter asked.

"I don't know," John said. "But I feel like something terrible is about to happen."

"I feel it too," James added. "Maybe it has something to do with what Jesus said about his betrayal."

"Betrayal? As I promised tonight, I will never desert Jesus," Peter said. "Even if it means that I must die."

"There are so many who follow Jesus now," John said. "Did you see the crowds that lined the streets when we entered Jerusalem? And yet..."

"And yet what?" James asked.

"I felt like Jesus was saying goodbye to



us tonight," John said.

"Goodbye? You must be mistaken. We've been with Jesus from the very beginning. He would never leave us," James said.

The last thing Peter said to his companions before all three drifted off to sleep echoed everyone's feelings: "I'm afraid."

A short time later, Peter heard Jesus calling him.

"Peter, can't you even keep awake one hour with me?" Jesus asked. Jesus had gone back to his troubled prayers when Peter shook James from slumber. No sooner had he roused them when all three of them fell back to sleep.

"I'm sorry, Lord," Peter said when Jesus returned the second time. "Is there something I can do?"

"I must drink the cup of suffering that is before me. That is my Father's will for me," Jesus said.

Jesus' words only increased the dread in Peter's heart. Soon he joined John and James in a fitful sleep.

Sometime during the long night, the uneasy silence of the garden was shattered. A large mob came with clubs and swords. Their expressions were hideous under the torch lights they carried to blaze their way.

At first, the crowd seemed like an extension to a dream Peter was having. "What's going on?" he cried out.

Jesus' words were resigned. "My hour has come. Here is my betrayer."

Peter, James and John watched in disbelief as one of their own came forward from the mob. Judas' betrayal of Jesus was signed with a kiss.

"Every day you watched me teaching in the temple and you didn't arrest me," Jesus said to the soldiers who bound his hands. "Why do you come at me now with weapons as if you pursue a dangerous criminal?"

Jesus was led away from the garden. He was alone. His three closest followers fled with the others. Fear choked out their promises.

Scripture reference: Matthew 26:31-56.

Meditation: John 16:33. "The world will make you suffer. But be brave! I have defeated the world!"

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JOHN 14:26

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