



AP/Wide World Photos

Refugees flock to Tanzania

Rwandan refugees May 12 carry water to their tents at the Benaco refugee camp in Tanzania, located just over the Rwandan border. More than 250,000 Rwandans fleeing violence in the neighboring Central African nation have set up a city on some 20 square miles of open savanna.

Bishops answer questions about the catechism

EDITORS' NOTE: In preparation for the long-delayed English version of the "Catechism of the Catholic Church," scheduled to be available in U.S. bookstores June 22, the U.S. bishops recently issued 50 of the most frequently asked questions regarding the catechism.

This is the first in a five-part series, which will run through the issue of June 16.



• 1. What is a catechism?

A catechism is a text which contains the fundamental Christian truths formulated in a way that facilitates their understanding. There are two categories of catechism: major and minor. A major catechism is a resource or a point of reference for the development of minor catechisms. The "Catechism of the Catholic Church" is an example of a major catechism. The "Baltimore Catechism" is an example of a minor catechism.

• 2. What is a "universal catechism?"

A "universal catechism" is a major catechism which is intended to be a resource or point of reference for the development of national or local catechisms and catechetical materials throughout the world. Such a catechism can be termed "universal" in that its primary audience is the universal church.

• 3. Is the "Catechism of the Catholic Church" a "universal Catechism?"

Yes. Insofar as it is intended to be a resource or point of reference for the development of minor catechisms throughout the universal church, it is a "universal catechism." The "Catechism of the Catholic Church" was titled the "Catechism of the Universal Church" in an earlier draft, but it was never officially titled the "universal catechism." The catechism is in need of what its Prologue terms "the indispensable medication" of particular culture, age, spiritual life and social and ecclesial conditions. The catechism is "universal," then, because it is intended for use by the universal church.

• 4. What is a brief history of the catechism?

The "Catechism of the Catholic Church" originated with a recommendation made at the Extraordinary Synod of Bishops in 1985. In 1986 the Holy Father appointed a commission of cardinals and bishops to develop a compendium of Catholic doctrine. In 1989 the commission sent the text to all the bishops of the world for consultation. In 1990 the commission examined and evaluated more than 24,000 amend-

ments suggested by the world's bishops. The final draft is considerably different from the one that was circulated in 1989. In 1991 the commission prepared the text for the Holy Father's official approval. On June 25, 1992, the Holy Father officially approved the definitive version of the "Catechism of the Catholic Church." On Dec. 8, 1993, the Holy Father promulgated the catechism with an apostolic constitution.

• 5. What is the purpose of the catechism?

The catechism serves several important functions:

- a) It conveys the essential and fundamental content of Catholic faith and morals in a complete and summary way.
- b) It is a point of reference for national and diocesan catechisms.
- c) It is a positive, objective and declarative exposition of Catholic doctrine.
- d) It is intended to assist those who have the duty to catechize, namely promoters and teachers of catechism.

• 6. For whom is the catechism intended?

The catechism is intended, first of all, for bishops as teachers of the faith and pastors of the church. They have the first responsibility in catechesis. Through the bishops, the catechism is addressed to editors of catechisms, priests, catechists and all other responsible for catechesis. It will also be useful reading for all the faithful.

While the catechism is not intended for direct use by young people or children, the Holy Father has said that the catechism "is offered to all the faithful who want to understand better the inexhaustible riches of salvation."

• 7. How, then, will children and young people use the new catechism?

Children and young people — under the direction of a catechist, teacher or parent — ordinarily use texts that are developed from a variety of sources, some of which are similar to the new catechism, such as "The National Catechetical Directory and Basic Teachings for Catholic Religious Education." The new catechism will serve as a point of reference for the development of such catechetical texts which in turn are directly used by children and young people with the assistance of catechists, teachers and parents.

• 8. Does the new catechism contain a methodology for its use by the faithful?

No. The new catechism does not include a methodology. It is a complete and accurate exposition of Catholic doctrine. It does not present methodologies for the communication and study of that doctrine by people of different ages and circumstances throughout the world. Methodology varies according to the developmental levels of those to whom the catechesis is directed and according to the cultural contexts in which catechesis

is given.

• 9. How is the new catechism a "point of reference?"

The new catechism is a "point of reference" primarily for the development of national and local catechisms. We do not have a national catechism in the United States. Neither are there diocesan or local catechisms presently in use in the dioceses of the United States. Catholics in the United States ordinarily depend on catechetical materials that present what the church believes, teaches, lives and prays in a comprehensive and systematic manner within a process that spans many years. The new catechism will be a "point of reference" for the development of these kinds of catechetical programs as well as for catechetical materials that will be revised or developed in the future.

Secondly, the new catechism is a "point of reference" for bishops, priests, catechists, teachers, preachers, scholars,

students and authors. Similar to a Bible commentary or theological dictionary, the new Catechism will serve as a vital reference work for all those responsible for catechesis.

• 10. What exactly is in the new catechism?

The new catechism contains the essential and fundamental content of the Catholic faith in a complete and summary way. It presents what Catholics throughout the world believe in common. It presents these truths in a way that facilitates their understanding.

The new catechism presents Catholic doctrine within the context of the church's history and tradition. Frequent references to Sacred Scripture, the writings of the Fathers, the lives and writings of the saints, conciliar and papal documents and liturgical texts enrich the catechism in a way that is both inviting and challenging. There are more than 3,000 footnotes in the catechism.

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