

English catechism

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of prayers" — analyzing what it teaches Christians about prayer.

Have there been other catechisms?

The word "catechism" comes from the Greek verb *katechein*, which means to teach orally. Early Christians used the term to refer to instruction in the elements of the faith. Those who were being instructed were called catechumens.

Over the centuries there were many commentaries and manuals for instructing people in the faith, but "catechism" became the standard term for such texts only after the appearance of Martin Luther's "Kleiner Katechismus" ("Little Catechism") in 1529. His "Grosser Katechismus" ("Big Catechism"), a more detailed compendium for teachers and preachers, appeared the following year.

The first official Catholic catechism for the whole church was mandated by the Council of Trent. Completed in 1566, it was called the "Catechismus Romanus" ("Roman Catechism").

It divided Christian teaching under the same four headings as Luther but rearranged them in the order of creed, sacraments, commandments and prayer. That approach put the sacraments back into a more integral place in the plan of redemption and set morality within the context of faith.

The new catechism, the first official catechism for the whole Catholic Church since the "Roman Catechism," duplicates the basic structure used in the 16th-century text.

For whom was the catechism written?

The 400-page "Roman Catechism" was written primarily for parish priests as a manual to guide them in instructing their people.

Similarly, the new catechism is directed primarily to bishops as the first pastors and teachers of the faith in their dioceses.

Paragraph 12 of the catechism, after describing bishops as its primary audience, says that after bishops it is addressed to catechetical writers and publishers, to priests and to catechists. It is presented as useful reading for all Catholics and other Christians as well.

In addition, bishops conferences are encouraged to use the new catechism to assist with writing local catechisms to take into account varied situations and cultures.

How does the "Baltimore Catechism" differ from this one?

The "Baltimore Catechism" was a simplified version of the "Roman Catechism." It was mandated by the U.S. bishops in 1884 and completed in 1885. The bishops issued a revised version in 1941.

There are two major differences between the "Baltimore Catechism" and the new catechism:

■The "Baltimore Catechism" was written in question-answer format: "Who made you? God made me. Who is God? God is the supreme being who made all things." The new catechism is in straight expository form and gives far more detailed treatment of Catholic teachings.

■The "Baltimore Catechism" is an example of what catechists call a "minor catechism," aimed at students and intended for classroom use. The new catechism is an example of what is called a "major catechism," a reference work for teachers rather than a text for learners. Its language, length and style are well beyond the capacities of most children, and even adults will find the organization of the material driven more by systematic concerns for a comprehensive presentation than by teaching methodologies.

Here are a few selected passages from the "Baltimore Catechism No. 3," the text generally used until the 1960s with U.S. Catholic children in the upper elementary grades, and parallel passages from the new "Catechism of the Catholic Church."

Q. Who is God?

"Baltimore Catechism"

A. God is the supreme being, infinitely perfect, who made all things and keeps them in existence. (No. 2)

"Catechism of the Catholic Church"

A. The God of our faith has revealed himself as he who is; and he has made himself known as "abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness" (Ex. 34:6). God's very being is truth and love. (No. 231) God alone created the universe freely, directly

and without any help ... God created the universe and keeps it in existence by his Word, the Son "upholding the universe by his word of power" (Heb. 1:3) and by his Creator Spirit, the giver of life. (Nos. 317, 320)

Q. How can the laity help the church in her care of souls?

"Baltimore Catechism"

A. The laity can help the church in her care of souls by leading lives that will reflect credit on the church and by cooperating with their bishops and priests, especially through Catholic Action. (No. 151)

"Catechism of the Catholic Church"

A. "By reason of their special vocation it belongs to the laity to seek the kingdom of God by engaging in temporal affairs and directing them according to God's will" ("Lumen Gentium") ... Entrusted by God with the apostolate by virtue of their baptism and confirmation, they have the right and duty, individually or grouped in associations, to work so that the divine message of salvation may be known and accepted by all ... The laity consecrate the world itself to God, everywhere offering worship by the holiness of their lives ... Lay people also fulfill their prophetic mission by evangelization ... "Every person, through these gifts given to him, is at once the witness and the living instrument of the mission of the church itself" ("Lumen Gentium"). (Nos. 898-913)

Can the "Catechism of the Catholic Church" be used in the same way as the "Baltimore Catechism"?

In some senses the new catechism combines in a single volume both traditional forms of catechetical texts; the major catechism and the minor catechism. At the end of each thematic section, typically several pages long, is a much shorter summary of the essential elements of doctrine contained in that unit, always highlighted under the heading, "In Brief."

Someone who reads just the summaries will have a "minor catechism," of less than 100 pages — a simplified exposition of the essentials of what Catholics believe.

Catechism draws praise for summarizing beliefs

By Lee Strong
Senior staff writer

Nathan Kollar, professor of religious studies at St. John Fisher College in Pittsford, was surprised by a recent discussion he observed while teaching a summer course at the East Avenue college.

Kollar's statement that one of the Catholic Church's basic teachings is that Jesus is God clearly confused some Catholic students in his *Introduction to Roman Catholicism* class.

"(The students) said, 'We were taught that Jesus is the son of God, not that He is God,'" Kollar recalled.

The Fisher professor speculates that the problem is one of language: what they understand "son of God" to mean is not what theologians and church leaders have traditionally meant by that phrase — that Jesus is God, coequal with God the Father and God the Holy Spirit as part of the Holy Trinity.

This misunderstanding illustrates both the need for the new "Catechism of the Catholic Church" — currently available to the general public — and one of the potential problems, Kollar said.

"(The catechism) will begin to give people a common language," Kollar said. "It gives us a starting point."

Kollar, however, thought the stilted nature of the English translation and

the use of traditional theological language might cause confusion for some people — just as the term "son of God" was lost on some of his students.

"It will require some adapting to the things people are asking," Kollar said. "You have to be creative and talk the language of the people."

Nevertheless, Kollar said he welcomed the new catechism.

"I think it's a good thing to have," he said.

Some students' confusion in Kollar's class illustrates one of the reasons James Likoudis, president of the conservative lay group Catholics United for the Faith, believes the catechism is needed.

"I think it's a book that's been badly needed because of the catechetical problems since the Second Vatican Council," Likoudis said. "I think a lot of bad catechesis before the council prepared the way for catechetical collapse."

Monsignor William H. Shannon, professor emeritus of theology at Nazareth College of Rochester and the author of a monthly series of articles on the catechism for the *St. Anthony Messenger*, likewise agreed that the catechism will fill a gap in the church.

"There was a real need to have some kind of a summing up of where we stand and what we believe as Catholics," the priest said. "I think it's

a really important document."

At the same time, however, Monsignor Shannon has doubts about how many people will actually read the catechism in its entirety — in part, he said, because of the document's literary style.

"It's a reference book, chiefly of value for catechists," he observed. "But then they have to put flesh on the necessarily dry style of the catechism."

Nevertheless, Monsignor Shannon added, "I think an educated Catholic might like to have it as a book of reference — like they might have a biblical commentary when reading Scripture."

And despite some stylistic concerns, Monsignor Shannon said the catechism does feature a number of sections well worth reading just as they are written.

"The section on prayer I think is a splendid section," the theologian said. "The section on the Lord's Prayer — I think that's very well done. (The liturgy section) is very good. It definitely has been influenced by the documents of Vatican II, and the documents after the council."

Although the catechism can be read by all people in its current form, Kollar said Pope John Paul II upon its issuance suggested that local catechisms based on the official catechism be written to take into account "various situations and cultures."

"You're supposed to have your local catechism that's going to be used by

all the people," he said.

Likoudis, too, believes that local catechisms are likely.

"I'm certain there will be question-and-answer catechisms," Likoudis said. "People ask questions, and they like to have answers."

But he also believes that any educated Catholic would have little problem reading the official catechism.

"The language is not complicated," Likoudis said. "I think any adult reader can understand it — and you have a summary at the end of each section."

"The catechism is intended to clarify doctrinal confusion in the church," Likoudis continued. "I think it's going to take time to do that. I think you've got to put it into the hands of all Catholics."

Monsignor Shannon, however, cautioned Catholics not to assume that this is the final "Catechism of the Catholic Church."

"The danger is (some people) will say it's the last word and nothing further can be said on these issues," Monsignor Shannon said. "If you look at the Council of Trent and the catechism that was drawn up after the Council of Trent, the tone of this (new) one is different."

"But (the new catechism) is certainly not the final word," Monsignor Shannon added. "We will never say the final word on God's revelation."