

# Catechism has disappointing faults

By Father Richard P. McBrien  
Syndicated columnist

I recently attended a religious book-sellers trade exhibit just outside of Chicago to promote the updated edition of my "Catholicism" book.

Many bookstore owners and their employees as well as representatives of various publishing companies visited my publisher's booth to say "hello" and to pick up a free autographed copy.

One of the representatives who stopped by happens to work for a conservative publishing company dedicated to the reprinting of pre-Vatican II Catholic books.

The evening before, at the exhibit banquet, I had had a polite, but pointed, exchange with the man about the translation of the English edition of the Catechism of the Catholic Church.

It was a surprise, therefore, to look up the next day and see him in line, waiting for me to sign his copy of "Catholicism." I greeted him, signed the book, and then pointed out the several references to the new Catechism in my new edition, including its place among the recommended reference books given in my Preface.

That seemed to catch him by as much surprise as his appearance at the HarperCollins booth had caught me. As I explained my book's layout and its intentionally inclusive and balanced approach to matters of doctrine and theology, I wondered if he might be prepared to revise his earlier, generalized opinion that "liberal



## ESSAYS IN THEOLOGY

Catholics" never acknowledge the work of "the other side." No sooner had he departed with my book and a handshake when two other representatives of his company came over to obtain signed copies of "Catholicism" for themselves.

A few moments later one of the two returned with a gift for me: a copy of Ludwig Ott's "Fundamentals of Catholic Dogma," originally published in German in 1952.

A few of this column's older priest-readers will recognize the title. The English edition, published in 1955, served as a handbook for many Catholic seminarians and priests, between that year and the opening of the second Vatican Council in 1962.

My gift-copy was also signed, after a fashion. It was inscribed to me, with

the Latin words, *GRUX AVE SPES UNICA*, which mean, "Hail, O Cross, our only hope."

Even the inscription reflected one of the limitations of preconiliar theology: Our redemption in Christ is incomplete without the resurrection.

Ludwig Ott acknowledged that, but only up to a point. Although the resurrection "belongs ... to the completeness of the Redemption," he wrote, "unlike Christ's Death, it is not the meritorious cause of our Redemption" (p. 193).

By contrast, the "Catechism of the Catholic Church" refers to the resurrection as "the central truth of our faith in Christ" (n. 638). It cites the classic text from Paul: "If Christ has not been raised, then our preaching is in vain and your faith is in vain" (1 Cor 15:14). Nowhere does it refer to the crucifixion as the "meritorious cause of our Redemption."

At the same time, the catechism itself displays a certain ambivalence toward the developments in Catholic theology and biblical studies that have occurred over the past half-century.

While the catechism's treatment of the resurrection accords it central importance and acknowledges that it is one of "two aspects" of the paschal mystery (alongside the crucifixion), its prior treatment of the crucifixion is inexplicably devoid of any mention of the resurrection whatever.

The catechism says that "Christ's death is both the Paschal sacrifice that accomplishes the definitive redemption of men ... and the sacrifice of the

New Covenant, which restores man to communion with God by reconciling him to God ..." (n. 613).

It cites the 16th-century Council of Trent as emphasizing "the unique character of Christ's sacrifice as 'the source of eternal salvation' ..." (n. 617). And it, too, repeats the line from the hymn *Vexilla regis*, "Hail, O Cross, our only hope."

Clearly, it would have been as theologically and doctrinally appropriate for the catechism to emphasize the redemptive significance of the resurrection in its presentation of the crucifixion as it was for the catechism to have reaffirmed the redemptive significance of the crucifixion in its presentation of the resurrection.

It is just these sorts of lapses that many bishops, theologians, biblical scholars, religious educators, and others have in mind when they express some measure of disappointment, not only about the catechism's English translation, but about some of its doctrinal and theological content as well.

And this isn't a matter of liberals versus conservatives, or dissenters versus orthodox.

After all, what is so "liberal" or "dissident" about wanting to ensure the resurrection's central place in the formulation of our faith in Christ the Redeemer? And what is so "conservative" or "orthodox" about attempting to define the redemptive significance of the cross without any explicit reference to the resurrection?

More about the catechism next week.

## One loses way when not choosing Christ

By Father Albert Shamon  
Courier columnist

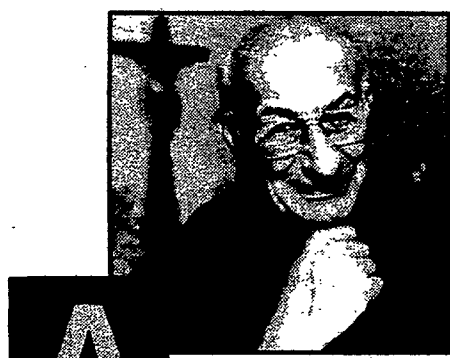
Sunday's Readings: (R3) John 6:60-69; (R1) Joshua 24:1-2, 15-18; (R2) Ephesians 5:21-32.

There always comes a time in life when decisive choices have to be made. Joshua asked God's people to choose between God and Baal. In the Gospel, Jesus asked His disciples to choose to be with or without Him.

The game of checkers is a game of choices. The choices we make determine whether or not we win the game. Likewise our choices will ultimately determine our character. Sow a thought, reap an act; sow an act, reap a habit; sow a habit, reap a character; sow a character, reap a destiny.

We can make only one of two choices: a good one or a bad one. John Wayne, in the movie "The Alamo," said: "There's right and there's wrong. You gotta do one or the other. You do the one and you're living. You do the other and you may be walking around but in reality you're dead."

Choice demands alternatives, just as motion must have direction. To leave one place necessitates going to



## A WORD FOR SUNDAY

another place. And not to choose is to choose. If one does not choose Christ, then he chooses anti-Christ. To ask, "Do you choose Christ?" is really no choice, because no alternative is given. St. Peter caught this when Jesus asked, "Do you want to leave me too?" Simon Peter answered: "Lord, to whom shall we go?"

One of the major mistakes in religious education today is to give the

student no choice. We tell students that they ought to be a Catholic. That's no choice, for no alternative is pointed out. Christ did not teach like that. He said: "No man can serve two masters. He will either hate one and love the other or be attentive to one and despise the other" (Mt. 6:24). The other is the anti-Christ or the devil. In a nutshell, Christ was saying: "Either take me or take the devil. Choose heaven or choose hell." Religious educators should point out that hell is an alternative.

Not to choose Christ is to choose the devil. Not to choose life is to choose death. Not to choose the light is to choose darkness. Not to choose the way is to choose error.

We cannot remain neutral with Christ any more than we can drive in neutral. Either we are with Him or against Him. Joshua put it clearly to the people: "Decide today whom you will serve, the gods of your fathers... or the gods of the Amorites." To ask, "Do you want to follow Christ or not?" is stating the question wrongly. The question correctly put is, "Do you want to follow Christ or the devil?" There's no in-between.

Yet many choose not to follow Christ. Fifty years ago the great Archbishop Fulton J. Sheen thundered: "Never before has the church been so impoverished for good, strong intellectual opposition as at the present time. There are no foemen worthy of her steel. The opposition today (to Christ and to His Church) is not intellectual, but moral."

"Men are no longer objecting to the church because of the way they think, but because of the way they live. They no longer have difficulty with her creed, but with her commandments. They remain outside her not because they cannot accept the doctrine of Three Persons in One God but because they cannot accept the moral of two persons in one flesh; not because infallibility is too complex, but because the avoidance of artificial contraception is too hard; not because the Eucharist is too sublime, but because confession is too exacting. Briefly the heresy of our day is not the heresy of thought—it is the heresy of action."

When one does not choose Christ, one loses his or her way, loses his or her sense of sin.

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