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Catechism

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"People bought them to have them, and then they realized it's not the typical catechism like the Baltimore Catechism with questions and answers," the priest said.

Instead, they found a book that is "a compendium of true and authentic church teachings," and that provides "the parameters, the foundations of the teachings of the church," but is meant more as an adult-level summary of teachings than as a teaching tool or for casual spiritual reading. Thus many people who bought the book expecting an old-style catechism may indeed have relegated it to their bookcases.

Such has not been the case in religious education offices in dioceses and archdioceses across the country, Father DeVries added. There, the catechism is having a quiet, yet very real impact.

"Many dioceses are reviewing curriculum guidelines that they are using for their religious education programs," he said.

Moreover, publishers are using the catechism to help revise catechetical texts used in religious education programs across the country, the priest reported.

The catechism has had its impact on the Diocese of Rochester as well.

Bishop Matthew H. Clark, for example, quoted the catechism in his Oct. 24, 1996, pastoral letter on the Eucharist, "From East to West a Perfect Offering."

Fox noted that in addition to the workshops, he has used the catechism to outline topics for education programs at his parish, as have other area religious educators.

"It's nice to find in a chapter a nice thumbnail sketch of key issues," Fox said.

The catechism has also been used by authors of the adult education packets being put out by the diocese — the three released this fall deal with Christian parenting, living a eucharistic life, and the spirituality of dying, death and resurrection — according to Karen Rinefierd, the diocese's coordinator for young adult, adult and family faith formation.

And it is used as a "reference for education," noted Maribeth Mancini, director of the diocesan Department of Evangelization

and Catechesis. "It certainly is not gathering cobwebs in our office. We use it a lot."

Meanwhile, Sister Pat Schoelles, SSJ, president of St. Bernard's Institute, said that she and other faculty members consult the catechism regularly as they go out to parishes to talk or present "St. Bernard's on the Road."

"In my own teaching, there is never a St. Bernard's on the Road that I don't bring up the catechism," Sister Schoelles observed. "If I'm going out (to talk) on any topic, I make sure what the catechism says."

Finally, it is the topic of a course being offered by Msgr. William Shannon — "What I mean when I say, 'I am a Catholic'" — which is based on his 1995 book *Exploring the Catechism of the Catholic Church*.

The course, which is cosponsored by SBI, the Sisters of St. Joseph Spirituality Center and the Mercy Prayer Center, attracted so many registrants, that many had to be put on a waiting list, the priest noted.

Thus the catechism is being used, but perhaps not in the same way the Baltimore Catechism was used for rote memorization of teachings — as some people had speculated it would be.

The church was clear from the beginning, however, that the catechism was meant only as a beginning.

Indeed, in his 1992 "Apostolic Constitution *Fidei Depositum* on the Publication of the Catechism of the Catholic Church," Pope John Paul II wrote, "(The catechism) is meant to encourage and assist in the writing of new catechisms, which take into account the various situations and cultures, while carefully preserving the unity of faith and fidelity to catholic doctrine."

"The church was very aware that there would have to be a lot of documents for mediating the teaching of the catechism," Father DeVries explained. "Mediation is up to the local church."

Some of those additional documents are being developed in Rome, such as the General Catechetical Directory, intended to detail elements involved in good catechesis. After that second document is released, the U.S. bishops will begin to develop a National Catechetical Directory to apply specifically to the situation in the United States, the priest added.

Meanwhile, other writers are already translating the catechism into works that can reach a broader audience.

Msgr. Shannon, for instance, created a series of catechism "Catholic Updates" published by *St. Anthony Messenger*. The series sold more than 300,000 copies, he said.

"The catechism is prose yearning to be poetry," Msgr. Shannon remarked. And turning it into poetry is the task of the catechist, he added.

The monsignor expanded the 12 *St. Anthony* updates into the 1995 book — and he is using that book to teach his current class at the SSJ motherhouse.

"I think it's a valuable resource," Msgr. Shannon said of the catechism. "I said in the book it is a gift that can be helpful to us, but I think it has to be used wisely by the right people."

One problem with the catechism is that it is limited by its very nature, the monsignor observed.

"It is a book of unchallenged answers," Msgr. Shannon said. "It does not take you through the steps whereby you arrive at those answers. Part of an answer is the process you use to arrive at it."

Moreover, a catechism is in a sense frozen in time.

"A catechism always looks backward," Msgr. Shannon observed. "It doesn't look forward."

Still, that "look" was attractive enough to induce Ann Kelly, a parishioner at St. Patrick's Church, Victor, to take Msgr. Shannon's course.

Kelly said that she and her husband had lived in Japan from 1988 to 1993, and had begun to lose touch with the church in the United States.

"I think living overseas, you felt this hole that needed to be filled up when you got back," she said.

So she began attending St. Bernard's on the Road sessions and other talks, and eventually was led to the catechism course.

Kelly said she was raised on the Baltimore Catechism, and that it had served its purpose at the time, but that she now wanted something more. The new catechism fit the bill.

"It still is a book of answers to questions, although done in a different way," Kelly

said. "It made me think a bit more. It is written in a more adult way than the Baltimore Catechism was."

She found the catechism to be a good reintroduction into contemporary Catholic teachings and one that "reaffirms beliefs that I held before."

Father DeVries pointed out that the catechism is indeed a means of reaffirming church teachings.

"What we have to remember is the catechism is not necessarily an original document," he said. "It draws on so many other documents for what it teaches."

He cited the footnotes as "treasures in themselves" because they can lead readers from the catechism's summaries of teachings to the original documents used to develop the teachings.

As such, however, the catechism does not enter the realm of speculative theology and new developments in theology, Father DeVries said, adding that this has proven frustrating to some theologians and readers.

Msgr. Shannon is among those individuals who found some of the book's limitations frustrating.

"It's a theology that's part Vatican II and part pre-Vatican II," Msgr. Shannon said. Thus the book does not take into account more recent Scripture scholarship, developments in Christology — theology dealing with the nature and personality of Jesus — that tends now to explore more the human dimensions of Christ, or recent explorations of moral theology and the nature of mortal sin. He is also troubled by the book's noninclusive language.

Still, Msgr. Shannon said, there is much to praise in the catechism. He cited in particular the sections on prayer and spirituality, and the section on the Eucharist that "says the Eucharist directs us to the treatment of the poor."

Ultimately, Fox observed, the catechism may not be as well-used as some proponents had hoped — and may well sit untouched on bookshelves for long periods — but it is a valuable text to have at hand when the need arises.

"The real doctrinal value of the catechism is it supports and confirms the faith of the people in Jesus Christ," Fox concluded.

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