

INTRODUCTION
(Catechism nn. 1-25)

‘God has blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing’(Ephesians 1:3).

Seeking an adult understanding and a life-giving renewal of our Christian faith
by way of a journey through the Catechism.

In the opening chapter we will examine what it is to ‘believe’, and then what it means to believe in God. Once we come to see that everything that exists is sacred (an expression of God; held in being by God), it follows that every human experience is ultimately a response (however faulty) to God’s grace drawing us ever more deeply into divine communion.

We may not know to acknowledge it, but we all have insights into the mystery of God, insights inspired by grace. We speak of ‘religious experience’. As the word ‘religious’ indicates (from the Latin ‘*ligare*’, to bind, and ‘*re*’, back), a religious experience is any experience that connects us with (binds us back to) reality. Any real experience of connection is, by definition, religious. It is this that underlies words like ‘sacred’, ‘symbol’ and ‘mystery’, and accounts for the variety of cults in which peoples give expression to their religious responses.

As we journey through the Catholic Catechism we will be focusing on the inspired insights that people have had in the Judeo-Christian culture, insights that we find expressed in the Bible (see Chapter Four) and in other documents that belong to this tradition (see Chapter Three).

It is important that we remember that it is we that change, not God. As I see it, when we speak of ‘revelation’ we are not speaking of God choosing to let out elements of knowledge to us, whether on Mount Sinai or on the Mount of Beatitudes. Revelation happens when we human beings ‘get it’, when we are ‘enlightened’. God is constantly giving God’s self. Revelation happens when we are ready and willing to welcome the gift. Revelation is insight inspired by the sacred mystery that we discover at the heart of creation, the mystery we call God. I trust this will become clearer in Chapter Two.

It is not difficult to see why, as well as finding words to give expression to new insights, we need to re-express the inspired insights of the tradition. Hence the need to regularly renew the Catechism. Every insight occurs in the limited context of the person who has the insight and the context in which the insight is experienced and expressed. We can share the insight only to the extent that we grasp the context, and when the context changes we have to find ways of expressing and communicating the insight in the new context.

When we speak of ‘revelation’ we are acknowledging that God is the source of these inspired insights, as of everything else in our world. Of course we do not have direct access to the mind of God. What we do have are limited human responses to God’s inspiration. When we speak of the Bible in an unqualified way as ‘the word of God’ we are in danger of opening ourselves to a serious misunderstanding. The Bible was not written or dictated by God. It was written by limited human beings. We are confident that the authors were responding to grace and were inspired in their writing because of the way the communities welcomed, cherished, copied and handed on their writings. The writings, however, remain the product of human activity, and so share the limitations that are part of any and every human endeavour.

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Jesus (see Chapter Eight) holds a special place for Christians because, according to those who knew him, his experience of God was pure (always willing to transcend the self in love). He gave himself in love to the God he called ‘Abba’ and this love flowed over to all he met. His intimate communion with God was such that the Beloved Disciple could place on his lips the words: ‘I am in the Father, and the Father is in me’. It was Jesus’ conviction that everyone is called to this intimacy, a communion that he spoke of as ‘the reign of God’. To answer this call we need to be liberated from anything that blocks the inpouring of divine grace. This liberation effected by Jesus through his presence and his words and actions came to be called ‘redemption’.

Jesus came to be seen as the human face, the human heart, the human word, of God, and it is this Jesus whom his disciples invited their contemporaries to know by being in communion with him through being in communion with the Christian community. This is expressed clearly in the opening words of the First Letter of John:

‘We declare to you what was from the beginning, what we have heard, what we have seen with our eyes, what we have looked at and touched with our hands, concerning the word of life – this life was revealed, and we have seen it and testify to it, and declare to you the eternal life that was with the Father and was revealed to us – we declare to you what we have seen and heard so that you also may have fellowship with us; and truly our communion is with the Father and with his Son Jesus Christ. We are writing these things so that our joy may be complete.’

While for some of his contemporaries the inspired insights of Jesus were a beautiful fulfilment and flowering of their traditional faith, for others they were shocking. Some dismissed him as a blasphemer, others tried to fit what he was saying into old formulas and structures. Jesus told them that this was not possible. It was like trying to put new wine into old wineskins (see Mark 2:22). New wine will expand. Old wineskins, having already stretched as far as they can, will simply burst from the pressure exerted by the expanding wine: ‘the wine is lost and so are the skins’. New wine requires fresh skins. New insights need new ways of envisioning the divine, new ways of living, and new words to convey new insights.

The revelation inspired by Jesus has been around for two thousand years. From one point of view the wine can now be called ‘old’. So why do we need new containers (wineskins) to hold it? The insights inspired by Jesus are expressed wonderfully and powerfully in the words of the Newer Testament. Why do we need to find new formulations? Over the centuries the Church has given expression to our faith in propositions that are guaranteed to express the truth accurately. Why do we need to keep on finding new words?

Pope John XXIII gives us the answer in the speech he gave at the opening of the Vatican Council in October 1962:

‘Our task is not merely to hoard this precious treasure, as though obsessed with the past, but to give ourselves eagerly and without fear to the task that the present age demands of us – and in so doing we will be faithful to what the Church has done in the last twenty centuries. So the main point of this Council will not be to debate this or that article of basic Church doctrine that has been repeatedly taught by the Fathers and theologians old and new and which we can take as read. You do not need a Council to do that. But starting from a renewed, serene and calm acceptance of the whole teaching of the Church in all its scope and detail as it is found in Trent and Vatican I, Christians and Catholics of apostolic spirit all the world over expect a leap forward in doctrinal insight and the education of consciences in ever greater fidelity to authentic teaching. But this authentic doctrine has to be studied and expounded in the light of the research methods and the language of modern thought. For the substance of the ancient deposit of faith is one thing, and the way in which it is presented is another. And it is to this latter that careful and where necessary patient consideration must be given, everything being measured according to the requirements of a teaching authority that is predominantly pastoral in character.’

Every statement, however sacred and inspired, is made within a certain limited historical context. New insights are always arising from the context of our current age with its unique issues and challenges. For example, new insights will come from our ever increasing understanding of human psychology and relationships. New insights will come from our knowledge of the physical world and our relationship to it either as destroyers or custodians. These new insights require new expressions of truths formulated in previous generations.

Jesus promised to be with the Church forever. He promised that his Spirit would continue to guide us into the fullness of truth. Each generation, under the guidance of the Spirit, has to find ways of presenting traditional truths that connect with the changing situations and the new questions that arise out of these changing circumstances. Hence the need for new wineskins to hold and present the old wine.

The aim of these reflections on the Catholic Catechism is to help rediscover the wonder and beauty of the insights inspired by Jesus and find words and images in which to express them in a way that attracts today’s seekers after truth.

The words from Paul’s Letter to the Ephesians, quoted at the head of this Introduction (‘God has blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing’) highlight the positive nature of our quest. We want to find the wealth of ‘spiritual blessings’ that are offered us ‘in Christ’ and are summarised for us in the Catechism. In this course we are seeking ‘an adult understanding’ and ‘a life-giving renewal’.

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In his Preface to the Catechism, Pope John-Paul II writes:

‘The Second Vatican Ecumenical Council ... had as its intention and purpose to highlight the Church’s apostolic and pastoral mission. And, by making the truth of the Gospel shine forth, to seek and receive Christ’s love which surpasses knowledge’ (see Ephesians 3:19).

Knowledge is important, for only the truth can set us free. Our study of the Catechism is fundamentally about knowledge. We want to know what it is that Jesus revealed, and how this has brought meaning to people’s lives over the two thousand years of the Church’s life. We are seeking to look again at what it is we believe. The Pope’s words, however, alert us to the fact that the knowledge we seek comes only through intimate communion. The goal of our search is love, a love which ‘surpasses knowledge’ (Ephesians 3:19).

The Prologue to the Catechism (n. 5) quotes from Pope John-Paul’s first Apostolic Exhortation, issued in October 1979 after the synod concerned with catechesis, a synod held in 1977 towards the end of the pontificate of Pope Paul VI. Pope John-Paul defines catechesis (and hence the aim of a catechism):

‘Catechesis is an education in the faith of children, young people and adults which includes especially the teaching of Christian doctrine imparted, generally speaking, in an organic and systematic way, with a view to initiating the hearers into the fullness of Christian life.’

The Catechism is an attempt to state the basic teaching of our faith ‘in an organic and systematic way’. However, once again it is important to remember that its aim is ‘to initiate the hearers into the fullness of Christian life.’ Full human and Christian living is the aim. Jesus spoke of himself as the good shepherd who came ‘that you might live and live to the full’ (John 10:10). Our aim in this study is the same.

Later in the Prologue (n. 25) the Catechism quotes from the Roman Catechism, published in 1566, three years after the conclusion of the Council of Trent. It beautifully expresses the aim of the Catechism of the Council of Trent. Today’s Catechism has the same aim:

‘The whole concern of doctrine and its teaching must be directed to the love that never ends. Whether something is proposed for belief, for hope or for action, the love of our Lord must always be made accessible, so that anyone can see that all the works of perfect Christian virtue spring from love and have no other objective than to arrive at love.’

In his encyclical *Lumen Fidei* (2013, n. 45) Pope Francis has this to say about the Creed:

‘The Church hands down her memory especially through the profession of faith. The creed does not only involve giving one’s assent to a body of abstract truths; rather, when it is recited the whole of life is drawn into a journey towards full communion with the living God. We can say that in the creed believers are invited to enter into the mystery which they profess and to be transformed by it. To understand what this means, let us look first at the contents of the creed. It has a trinitarian structure: the Father and the Son are united in the Spirit of love.’

The believer thus states that the core of all being, the inmost secret of all reality, is the divine communion. The creed also contains a christological confession: it takes us through all the mysteries of Christ's life up to his death, resurrection and ascension into heaven before his final return in glory. It tells us that this God of communion, reciprocal love between the Father and the Son in the Spirit, is capable of embracing all of human history and drawing it into the dynamic unity of the Godhead, which has its source and fulfillment in the Father. The believer who professes his or her faith is taken up, as it were, into the truth being professed. He or she cannot truthfully recite the words of the creed without being changed, without becoming part of that history of love which embraces us and expands our being, making it part of a great fellowship, the ultimate subject which recites the creed, namely, the Church. All the truths in which we believe point to the mystery of the new life of faith as a journey of communion with the living God.'

As a final point before we begin our journey through the Catechism, it is essential to stress again the limits of human knowledge, especially in this profound area of our relationship with God. Where clarity is possible, it is important to be clear. It is important, therefore, to point out erroneous thinking. Error doesn't help anyone. But we must be very humble when we try to express the truth in words. Karl Rahner SJ, one of the greatest theologians of the modern era, expresses this well in an article he wrote in the magazine *Communio* (1984):

'How much do our statements from university podiums, from pulpits and from the holy tribunals of the Church have such a ring that we fail to perceive clearly that these statements are virtually trembling with the last bit of the creature's modesty that knows that all speech can be only the last moment before the holy silence that fills even heaven itself with the clear vision of God face to face ... I would like only to testify to the experience that theologians are only truly theologians when they do not think complacently that they are speaking with transparent clarity, but are frightened at the swinging of the analogy between Yes and No over the abyss of the inconceivability of God, and at the same time experience it as holy and testify to it.'

The awareness of the poverty and ambiguity of our words is not meant to discourage us from attempting the excitement and demands of theology. Rather, it is to warn us to be humble.