The Catechism of the Catholic Church

Do you know people who try to keep up with all the best sellers? In our world that means being exposed to the novel and exciting trends of the day. But how many of these works will stand the test of time? Today we are reflecting on aspects of a best seller that replaces the Catechism of the Council of Trent (\textit{Catechismus ex Decreto Concilii Tridentini}), published in 1566. This new Catechism may be brought up-to-date before 400 years have passed, but the purchaser has a solid tome that will not be replaced in the near future.

No doubt many can surmise that the term “catechism” was old long before the Council of Trent. It comes from a Greek verb meaning “to make (someone) hear” or “to instruct.” Before the invention of the printing press the message would be proclaimed orally; in the early Church the catechism was a set of instructions for those seeking Baptism. In the Middle Ages, books were prepared to explain Christian faith and practice in a logical fashion. The areas upon which the catechism expounded were based on: 1.) the Creed (the Christian profession of faith), 2.) the Ten Commandments and lists of sins or vices, and 3.) the Lord’s Prayer (“Our Father”). Simple and straightforward!

\textbf{I. The “New Catechism”}

For most of us, “the catechism” was learned in the form of questions and answers. In the English-speaking world, these were usually derived from the \textit{Baltimore Catechism} (published in 1885) or the “\textit{Penny Catechism}” (published in England in 1898). These texts offered a rather complete synthesis of the faith in terms that could be memorized by children, even if they did not fully understand. As they faced challenges of adult life, they would recall the response and apply it. How simple was the world of our grandparents!

No doubt you were impressed to see that this new Catechism is a book of 688 pages of text, plus 111 pages of indices. \textsuperscript{11} However, this is no sketch of the Catholic faith for children. It is a compendium of the Church’s bimillennial wisdom, distilled to meet the needs of Catholics throughout the world, in very complex societies. Yet we bear the same flawed human nature that was shared by our ancestors. The Church wishes Catholics to have a synthesis of the teachings for us to know God, ourselves and other dimensions of creation. From this foundation educators will compose books of instruction for various levels and age groups.
II. Faith and the Creed: “The Profession of Faith”

Like the 13 Principles of Faith in the Jewish liturgy, the Creed is recited in the Catholic Mass as a faith-filled proclamation of principles upon which our life is based. Although some teachers of Judaism have declared that their religion has no dogmas, this was submitted to a sharp critique by Rabbi Solomon Schechter (1847-1915). “It is true that every great religion is a concentration of many ideas and ideals,” which make this religion able to adapt itself to various modes of thinking and living. But there must always be a point around which all these ideas concentrate themselves. This center is Dogma.”[2]

The essential elements of Christian faith were formulated in the West through the Apostles’ Creed, whereas the teachers of the Eastern Mediterranean provided more comprehensive statements. The most familiar of these is the Nicaean Creed of 325, which is recited after the homily at Sunday Mass. The Catechism presents a study of the Creed in 12 articles (263 pages), which remind us of the 12 apostles, whose testimony in faith to the death-and-resurrection of Jesus is fundamental to the Church (see Acts 1:15-26).

The biblical heritage emphasizes that the Creator of the universe is the Lord of history. Jews and Christians express their faith, not merely as timeless truths about God but in terms of history and divine providence guiding the course of human events. This presence of God in history and in the life of each person is celebrated by William Cowper (1731-1800) in a poem, Light Shining out of Darkness.
the core of the Church's proclamation of faith. This is designated as the
"Paschal Mystery" because this unique event of death-and-resurrection is
elucidated in terms of the Passover (Pascha in Aramaic). The Exodus from
Egypt is the paradigm for explaining all subsequent turning points in the
history of the Covenant.

III. Celebration of the Paschal Mystery

As the Jewish people celebrate the Passover, not only with words of faith
and praise, but also in the symbols of a sacred meal, so the Church's Creed is
placed in the framework of worship. Part II of the Catechism is entitled "The
Celebration of the Christian Mystery," wherein the seven sacraments are
presented.

Faith is a divine gift, an insight into the profound meaning of human
existence. Our span of time on earth embraces joy and sorrow, pleasure and
pain. Each extreme can so focus our attention on the given moment that we
may fail to see beyond the present to the sacred purpose of all life and of
creation itself. The vision of a fuller reality of life as communion with the living
God is experienced, not only in moments of personal prayer but above all in
signs and gestures that speak to us as a community.

Thus, for Christians the plunge into waters of baptism not only becomes a
vehicle of cleansing and refreshment, it is a new birth — a birth from above
through the power of the Holy Spirit (Jn 3:5-8). This new life must be fostered
through breathing, that is a regular rhythm of prayer, and through nourishment,
the form of bread and wine taken up into the way Jesus celebrated the
Last Supper.

Each of the Sacraments transforms the life of the individual believer, but
must be experienced within the community of faith. The rites of passage
coincide with the same moments as those celebrated by the Jewish people.
Confirmation is the completion of the blessings of Baptism, maturing the gifts
of the Holy Spirit so that each person may bear witness to Christ by word and
deed (Catechism No. 1258). Those who enter the vocations of marriage and
the priesthood receive sacraments which prepare them for a lifetime of loving
service.

When the grim realities of sin and sickness invade human life, the
sacraments of reconciliation (penance, confession) and anointing of the sick
provide a spiritual healing so that the afflicted person may come to inner peace
and bodily strength.

"Death be not proud ..." (John Donne, Sonnet X). Like the Jewish practice
of tidduat (public confession of sins), the Church stresses the importance of
reconciliation with God and neighbor before one faces death. At this solemn
moment, Penance (confession), Anointing of the Sick and the Eucharist as
viaticum (food for the journey) are the sacraments that strengthen us to
complete this earthly pilgrimage. Difficult or tragic as the circumstances of
death may be, the experience is taken up into the way the person has lived his
or her faith. This is the "last Passover of the child of God, leading to the
fullness of life in God's Kingdom" (Catechism No. 1680).

IV. "Life in Christ":
Keeping the Commandments

The Paschal Mystery of Christ's death-and-resurrection provides the gifts
that enable the Christian to live a new life. However, the gifts do not wait
the person onto a level of existence that avoids all of the potholes and detours of
the common human pilgrimage. The faculties of intellect and free will, human
emotions and drives must be placed at the service of God. As Christians strive
to cope with the ambiguities of human existence, they may pray, with St. Paul,
that "thorns of the flesh" depart. However, they must recall the divine answer
to that prayer: "My grace is sufficient for you, for power is made perfect in
weakness" (2 Cor 12:9). In other words, let God's strength shine through our
feeble frame!

This third section of the Catechism reviews the biblical teaching that the
dignity of each human person is grounded in the reality of being created in the
divine image and likeness (Gen 1:26-28). The Jewish rejection on this truth is
especially pertinent to our age. "A man stamps many coins with the one seal
and they are all alike; but the King of kings, the Holy One, blessed be he, has
stamped every human being with the seal of the first man, yet not one of them
is like his neighbor" (Mishnah Sanhedrin IV:3). By this doctrine of the basis
for human dignity, we learn a healthy self-respect, which is the norm for the
command to love our neighbor as ourselves (Lev 19:18). By marvelling at the
wonderful variety among our neighbors we will respect others when they differ
from ourselves.

Every human being has the right to life, liberty and the pursuit of
happiness. The false roads that people travel in searching for this happiness
are numerous but fall into three categories: possessions, pleasure and power.
The Catechism defines happiness in terms of the Beatitudes (Matt 5:3-12), then
discusses human freedom and its concomitant responsibilities, sin as an
offense against reason, truth and right conscience and the relation between the
individual and the human community, the Christian and the Church.

Already we have noted the ways in which the Catechism draws upon the
Jewish Scriptures to elucidate the content of Christian doctrine. That approach
draws upon the dictum of St. Augustine: "The New Testament lies hidden in
the Old, and the Old is made manifest in the New.” (“Novum in Vete re latet, Vetus in Novo palet” Questions in Heptateuch 2, 73). The delight of Christians to find their Beloved throughout the Jewish Scriptures is expressed beautifully by William Cowper.

Jesus I love to trace,  
Throughout the sacred pages,  
The footsteps of thy grace,  
The same in every age!  
O grant that I may faithful be  
To clearer light vouchsafed to me.  
(Old Testament Gospel, last verse).

The millennial debates between Jews and Christians concerning the meaning of given biblical passages have not been resolved completely. However, from the time of Origen and Jerome in the third to fifth centuries, we have learned to respect the “Hebrew truth” over the Greek translations and to appreciate the Jewish ways of interpreting this text. Recent discoveries of the Qumran scrolls and Aramaic translations (targumim) from early times have given both Christians and Jews insights into the ways in which the Jewish Bible was interpreted during the late Second Temple period. Thus we can recognize that the methods applied by New Testament writers were not foreign to the tradition, even though the given interpretation might be new, focusing as it does on the person and work of Jesus of Nazareth.

Moving to the moral order and the application of the Decalogue to daily life, the Catechism continues the long tradition of seeing that the ten commandments govern all our relationships with God, neighbor, self, and the world in which we live. Without neglecting the insights of Jesus and the Christian community into the meaning and application of these commandments, the Church today can benefit greatly from the ways in which the Jewish people have understood and lived the Decalogue, indeed all 613 commandments. [n]

The Catechism offers a rich fare for our reflection in its treatment of the moral order under the commandments. A few examples must suffice to encourage detailed study of the text. Under the first Commandment in St. Augustine’s division, idolatry is defined as divinizing anything that is not God. “Man commits idolatry whenever he honors and reveres a creature in place of God, whether this be gods or demons (e.g. Satanism), power, pleasure, race, ancestors, the state, money, etc.” Eschewing idolatry and the abuse of God’s Name, Christians are called to worship God both individually and in community. “The celebration of Sunday is to render to God and outward, visible, public and regular worship... Sunday worship fulfills the moral command of the Old Covenant, taking up its rhythm and spirit in the weekly celebration of the Creator and Redeemer of his people.” (Catechism No. 2176) Through this Christian practice, the introduction of a day of rest after six days of work has constituted one of the great contributions made by Judaism to the modern world. Of course, the Church is aware that, in some cultures, this practice is being eroded. “Every Christian should avoid making unnecessary demands on others that would hinder them from observing the Lord’s Day.” (Catechism No. 2187)

The positive commandment to honor our parents provides a context for the Catechism to discuss the family in God’s plan and the reciprocal duties of children and their parents. Would that these principles become points of reflection in every Catholic home! Because the family is the basic unit of every society, the authority of the civil order and the duties of citizens are presented here as well.

Threats to human life are manifold, so the human responsibility to respect and foster life is studied under several headings: legitimate defense, intentional homicide, abortion, euthanasia and suicide. Then appreciation for the dignity of the person is presented: scandal as disrespect for others, respect for health, scientific research and respect for the individual, bodily integrity (rejecting terrorism and torture), and respect for the dead. The needs of society at large are developed by safeguarding peace and avoiding war.

The command to avoid adultery limits the sexual relationship to partners in marriage. The Catechism emphasizes the virtue of chastity, lists the various sins that compromise this personal integrity, and then presents the moral aspects of married love, complementing the teachings given under “the sacrament of matrimony.”

“You shall not steal!” The respect for person discussed earlier is now extended to their property and other goods, as well as for the integrity of all creation, with special reference to animals. The Church’s social doctrine and concern for the poor are included in this context.[4]

The way to avoid false testimony is to live the truth and to bear witness to it. From the personal order the Catechism moves to the use of the communications media, which are to be placed at the service of the common good. This section is completed with reflections on “truth, beauty and sacred art.”

The Catholic tradition follows Deuteronomy (5:21) by dividing the commandment against coveting into two parts. The obligation not to covet a neighbor’s wife is the basis for the Catechism to present the ideals of purity and modesty, while declaring that “moral permissiveness rests on an erroneous conception of human freedom” (Catechism No. 2526). Envy and greed are sins against the commandment forbidding one to covet an neighbor’s goods.

This sketch, while not comprehensive, gives an idea of the way in which moral education can be offered, not merely as a list of “dos and don'ts,” but as a challenge to seek perfection in God’s service. “Commandments must
not be understood as a minimum limit beyond which one does not go, but rather as a path involving a moral and spiritual journey toward perfection, at the heart of which is love." (John Paul II, Veritatis Splendor No. 15)

V. Christian Prayer

The Creed and the liturgy of the sacraments are community prayers but they do not exhaust the possibilities for the Christian to commune with God. The Catechism offers a succinct review of prayer throughout the Jewish Scriptures (paying special attention to Abraham, Moses, David, Elijah and the Psalms), the New Testament (focusing on Jesus and his Mother), and the age of the Church.

Thirty years ago, many young Christians and Jews turned to the ancient religions of the Orient in a search for contemplative prayer and mystical experience. How many even guessed that Judaism and Christianity possess extremely rich and varied traditions in these areas? The Catechism offers a brief but comprehensive survey of the forms of personal and group prayer. Of course, this can be expanded by introducing the schools of spirituality that are fostered by several religious orders and other communities. May those searching for deeper knowledge of God and ways of intensifying their spiritual life become aware of the treasures in their own tradition!

As in classical treatises from the early Church and down through the centuries, the Catechism concludes with a detailed reflection on the seven petitions of the Lord’s Prayer (Matt 6:9-13) and the doxology drawn from Jewish practice that completes it. Unfortunately, this study of the "Our Father" does not explain its roots in the Jewish tradition or allude to parallels in Jewish prayers from the Second Temple period. As Asher Finkel has shown, the petitions are shared but Jesus shows creativity in the way he arranged them. The petitions in the Eighteen Benedictions move from the concerns of daily life to the eschatological goal of life, whereas Jesus has placed the Kingdom first and ordered all else to it. [64]

The Jews

Poor nation, whose sweet sap, and juice
Our scions have purloined, and left you dry;
Whose streams we got by the Apostles’ sluice,
And use in baptism, while ye pine and die:
Who by not keeping once, became a debtor;
And now by keeping lose the letter:

O that my prayers! mine, alas!
O that some Angel might a trumpet sound;
At which the Church falling upon her face
Should cry so loud, until the trump were drowned,
And by that cry of her dear Lord obtain,
That your sweet sap might come again!

The poverty of the Jewish people and their seeming lack of vitality are attributed by the poet to an usurpation of their treasures by Christianity. This judgment flows from a theological judgment that the Christian faith and the Church succeeded and superseded the Jewish people in God’s plan. Like the prophets of old, he accuses the Jews of once failing to keep the commandments—and now their observances are interpreted by the Christian poet to miss the point of God’s purpose. Yet, the living waters of Baptism come from the Jewish wellspring. Since the Second Vatican Council Catholics are taught to eschew this prejudicial approach to sacred history.

Herbert would see the situation rectified through his prayers and the humble intercession of the Church, that the spiritual life of the Jewish community be revitalized. The metaphor, "sweet sap and juice," evokes the image of a tree, and perhaps the poet was thinking of the good olive tree of the Jewish people, onto which Gentiles are grafted through Baptism (Rom 11:17-18, 24). Is Herbert considering this reification of the Jewish people to come only at the end of time? Herbert might be referring to that solemn hour, to be heralded by an angelic trumpet-call (1 Thess 4:16). However, it would be unreasonable for Herbert to think the Church’s intercession at that time would drown out the angelic call. So he must be imagining a conciliatory act by the Church that would touch the heart of Jews before the final day. In any case, in spite of the assessment that the Jews are bereft of spiritual gifts, the vision is rather benign, within the limits of the age in which he lived. The Second Vatican Council called for dialogue and cooperation between Catholics and Jews, and placed the Church on the road to recognition of the ongoing vitality of Judaism and the Jewish people. [65] It looks forward with the prophets and New Testament writers, to a time when all would serve the one God with one accord (Nostra Aetate No. 4, quoting Zeph 3:9). How and when? Those questions, we leave to God’s mysterious ways and bright designs.
VI. Conclusion

For many centuries the Jewish and Christian communities have sought to serve God and to educate their adherents by prayer and study that move into action, in deeds of justice and love. Tragically, they were so alienated that they failed to learn from each other and often viewed the other community as a hostile competitor. The cost of this ignorance and animosity is incalculable and is beyond the scope of this paper. However, these days bring a new beginning in the Church’s effort to understand her roots and to appreciate the Jewish faith and the Jewish people. Has the vision of the Second Vatican Council been integrated into the new Catechism of the Catholic Church? This is one of the questions that will be addressed by Rabbi Jack Bemporad. I am confident that we will benefit greatly from his insights.

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Notes


[5] In No. 2449, the Catechism quotes John 12:8 (“The poor you always have with you...”) correctly as an application of Deut 15:11. The understanding of Jesus’ message is clearer in Mark 14:7. “The poor you will always have with you, and whenever you will you can do good to them...”


Bibliography


“Catechism of the Catholic Church: Catholic and Jewish Readings” Interfaith Focus 1 (No. 2 -1994). This is a publication of the Anti-Defamation League Intergroup Relations Division.

Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger and Bishop Christoph Schoenborn, Introduction to the Catechism of the Catholic Church (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1994).


Note: Readers should consult the major Catholic theological journals from other countries, as most have given considerable attention to the “new Catechism.” The perspectives offered will remind us that this document is intended for the Church Universal. Reactions and interpretations from theologians and catechists in other lands will enrich us in many ways.