

San Antonio People of Faith Historical Museum

Of Catechisms and String Beans

Q. "Who made us?"

A. "God made us."

Q. "Who is God?"

A. "God is the string bean who made all things."

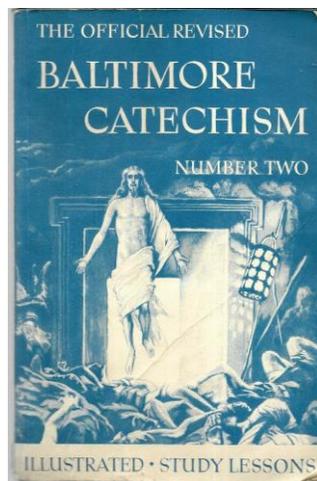
Such was the infamous response of one first-grader to the second question in the 1964 *Baltimore Catechism* when he heard "string bean" rather than "Supreme Being." Children educated until the end of the 1960s learned largely by rote--memorizing everything from catechisms to Scripture passages to multiplication tables and poetry. Many senior citizens can still quote catechism answers, or recite "The Midnight Ride of Paul Revere" or Portia's soliloquy from Shakespeare's "Taming of the Shrew." Even today, long after the efficacy of learning by rote faded in favor of "cognitive learning," educators from MIT to Oxford are once again proposing or least recognizing the lost art of memorizing as an effective tool for learning. For catechists, "minor catechisms"--text which contains the fundamentals of Christian truths formulated in a way that facilitates understanding (USCCB)--such as the *Baltimore Catechism* are still in use for teaching children the Catholic faith. The original version, though, is well over a century old.

In the early history of the United States, Roman Catholic dioceses were all part of one "ecclesiastical province," the See of the Archbishop of Baltimore. Thus the first plenary councils (formal meetings of all archbishops and bishops in a country or region that are under the leadership of a papal legate) in America were held in Baltimore, Maryland in 1852, 1866, and 1884. During the 1866 session of the Baltimore Plenary Councils, while the possibility of producing a new catechism was discussed, ultimately it was mandated that bishops and priests adhere to the Roman Catechism when teaching doctrine. This catechism had been commissioned during the Council of Trent's 18th session in 1562 and was officially promulgated in 1566. It is still in print and in use today. It was originally conceived to be published in Latin and vernacular tongues in order to "equip both children and adults in the rudiments of Catholic truth." However, in a later session of the Council of Trent, the commission drafting the catechism decided that it would be written in an advanced form that would target Catholic priests as users rather than the laity. In the 1884 Baltimore Council, a commission was appointed to "prepare a catechism for general use" ("Plenary Councils of Baltimore," *The Catholic Encyclopedia*).

Bishop John Spalding of Peoria, Illinois--himself author of one of the many minor catechisms in use in the United States--headed the commission; he appointed Msgr. Januarius de Concilio, then a pastor in Jersey City, to draft the catechism document. Ordained a priest in his native Italy, de Concilio arrived in New Jersey in 1860 where he served as chaplain, pastor, and professor of philosophy and theology. He was also a renowned author. Msgr. de Concilio

completed and submitted his draft to Cardinal James Gibbon of Baltimore who approved it in 1885, and the Baltimore Catechism was born and deemed the official text for faith instruction of Catholic children in the United States. Until the end of the 1960s it would undergo many revisions and rewrites, but it still remained the foremost text used by catechists. According to Sr. Mary Charles Bryce, OSB--noted researcher on the history of the Baltimore Catechism, "Between 1885 and 1941 over 100 other Catholic catechetical manuals were published in America with official imprimaturs, although none was as widely used (as the Baltimore Catechism)." Some texts and manuals for children from the 1970s through the present day have been based on revisions from earlier editions of the Baltimore Catechism. Brother Ed Loch, SM, former San Antonio Archdiocese archivist, notes that Fr. Francis Bouchu, appointed pastor of Mission Espada in 1858, hand-wrote a catechism for teaching the mission children. "It was one of the treasures of the archives," Br. Loch remembers. "I had researchers from various parts of the United States come and examine it and photograph its pages." According to the Texas State Historical Association, Fr. Bouchu wrote the catechism in Spanish in 1872, and "by 1896 his catechism became the official catechism of the diocese of San Antonio...and was used throughout South Texas and New Mexico for many years."

Our youngest Roman Catholics today learn their prayers and faith basics through a combination of memory and cognitive learning. And many still put their own charming spin on their burgeoning theology, such as this little girl's beginning to the Lord's prayer as reported in her CCD teacher's blog: "Our Father, who does art in heaven, Harold is his name." A bit of mishearing, perhaps, but also a clear knowledge of God's artistry in creation. The San Antonio People of Faith Historical Museum, located in St. Paul Community Center at 1201 Donaldson, is interested in donations of early catechisms and/or personal memories of experiences in learning from these books. Please call 210-733-7152 for further information. Stories can be emailed to the museum at muldoonkathleen12@gmail.com or vvalenzuela@saintpaulsa.org.



This version of the Baltimore Catechism was published in 1945 and authored by Professor Ellamay Horan, Rt. Rev. William L. Newton, and Rt. Rev. Msgr. James W. O'Brien.

