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The Catechism at 25 Bishop John T. Folda

Twenty-five years ago, the Church gave to all the faithful a wonderful gift: the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*. After the Second Vatican Council ended in 1965, there was great uncertainty about the best way of handing on the faith in the modern era. But in 1985, at the urging of the Synod of Bishops, Pope St. John Paul II mandated the development of a “universal catechism” that would be a resource not only for teachers but for all the faithful.

This project was overseen by Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger, who later became Pope Benedict XVI, and it remains one of his greatest contributions to the life of the Church in our time.

The word “catechism” comes from a Greek word that means “instruction” or “oral teaching.” To put it very simply, the *Catechism* is a comprehensive summary of the essential teachings of our faith in one single volume. It draws heavily from Sacred Scripture, as well as the official teachings of the popes and ecumenical councils.

The *Catechism* is also filled with the rich testimony of the saints, the great witnesses of holiness who have inspired us and led us to Christ through the centuries. As Pope St. John Paul II said, the *Catechism* is “a sure norm for teaching the faith and thus a valid and legitimate instrument for ecclesial communion.”

The *Catechism*’s structure is somewhat different from the question-answer format previously found in similar works. It is in narrative form and divided into four parts that reflect the four pillars of Christian initiation: the “Profession of Faith” (the Creed); the “Celebration of the Christian Mystery” (the Sacraments); “Life in Christ” (Christian Morality); and “Christian Prayer.”

One could summarize this whole outline as “God’s call and our response.” Or, as George Weigel says, “Parts One and Two illuminate God’s action in seeking us out... Parts Three and Four then outline our response to God’s action through the moral life and prayer.”

The *Catechism* has been a great blessing over these 25 years, especially for the important work of catechesis. Prior to 1992, the catechetical materials available to our parishes and schools were less than stellar. Teachers did their best, but many key aspects of Catholic teaching were neglected, and the resources themselves were somewhat unreliable.

But the promulgation of the *Catechism* changed the whole landscape, and set a much better standard to follow. Now, in the United States, the bishops certify all catechetical materials for their conformity to the *Catechism*, and the quality of these materials has markedly improved.

It would be a mistake, however, to assume that the *Catechism* is only useful to those who teach young people. On the contrary, the *Catechism* is a resource for every Catholic, and should be in every Catholic home, right next to the Bible. It is an excellent summary that allows any one of us to deepen our knowledge and understanding of our Catholic faith.

Some are intimidated by the size and depth of the *Catechism*. It’s not light reading! But it is organized in such a way that one can pick it up and read any section without needing to read everything that came before.

However, the best approach might be to start at the beginning and read a page or two a day. This makes it much more accessible, and with some perseverance, one could easily read the entire *Catechism* within a year. I know of one gentleman from our diocese who read the entire *Catechism* six times, so yes, it can be done!

The *Catechism* also has enormous value for the work of evangelization. Pope Francis has called every one of us to be a “missionary disciple.” We are to be active witnesses of our faith to others, ready to go out and proclaim by our lives the beauty of Christ and the Gospel. But to do this, we need to know Christ and his teachings.

St. Peter says we must be ready to give an account of the hope that is within us (1 Peter 3:15). I know many ordinary Catholics who are completely committed to their faith, but feel ill-equipped to respond to questions or challenges about that faith. The *Catechism* is an excellent tool that can help all of us become more confident about the doctrines we believe.

There are many people out there, including our friends and neighbors, who are curious and have questions about our Catholic faith, and it would be a shame if their questions went unanswered. Our world needs credible witnesses who know what the Church believes about God, Jesus Christ, the Eucharist, Confession, moral virtue, heaven and hell, prayer, the Commandments, and all the rest. The *Catechism* will deepen our knowledge and make it possible for us to answer those questions when they come.

If the *Catechism* itself is too overwhelming at first, the *Compendium of the Catechism of the Catholic Church* might be a better fit. This volume was promulgated by Pope Benedict XVI in 2005 and is organized according to the same four-part structure as the *Catechism*. In each section, it offers a comprehensive series of questions and answers that convey the essence of each article of the *Catechism*. And like the *Catechism*, it is filled with references to the Scriptures, the Magisterium, and the saints.

I can say from personal experience that the *Catechism* is a treasure. I wish it had been around when I was a seminarian and a young priest-teacher. But for the last 25 years, it has been a goldmine for me in my priestly life, and the final section on prayer and the spiritual life is especially beautiful. I have no doubt that it will be equally valuable for all the faithful for many years to come – if we read it! If you don't yet have the *Catechism*, or if you have one but haven't read it, now is the time!