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**Navigating the Catechism**

**By Gary Shirley**

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In 1994, the Holy Father authorized the publication of a new Catechism of the Catholic Church. This was a cause for great joy for it had been over four centuries since the last catechism had been promulgated. At that time the Church was trying to reconcile the impact of the Protestant "Reformation" and needed to clarify her teachings for those in spiritual turmoil. Fast forward to the twenty-first century and, once again, Christians face challenges for which they need deep insights and clear answers. This wonderful book has answered the call.

From nuclear war to stem cell research, modern Catholics wrestle with issues that are simply not addressed in the Sacred Scriptures and far removed from our childhood CCD classes. The new Catechism fills the void by carefully delineating the teachings of the Church and the source reference of those teachings. The second edition of the Catechism (green cover) was released in 1997 and contains improvements from the first edition such as inclusion of a comprehensive index and glossary.

Reading and studying the text, however, can be a bit daunting to the average Catholic. A catechism is a reference text and should be read as such. Small forays into its depths with subsequent time for reflection is more productive than attempting to read it like a novel. Like Scripture, it presupposes a certain understanding of Sacred Tradition. Without this grounding, readers may have difficulty unearthing the great wisdom in its pages.

Perhaps a short review of some key building blocks of the Catholic faith will assist in this regard. The Magisterium is the teaching authority of the Church which, guided by the Holy Spirit, seeks to safeguard and explain the truths of the faith. Magisterium comes from the Latin magister meaning "to teach." All the world's bishops united with the Pope comprise the Magisterium. Their singular goal is to protect the authentic teachings of Christ until the end of time.

The Deposit of Faith is the body of saving truth entrusted by Christ to the Apostles and handed on by them to the Church to be preserved and proclaimed. This deposit has numerous components, such as the oral tradition of the Apostles, Sacred Scripture, writings of the Fathers of the Church, the documents of the twenty-one Councils of the Church, testimonials of the Saints and Doctors of the

Church, and pontifical "teaching letters" (known as encyclicals). As evidenced by the list, the Roman Catholic religion runs deep and wide.

As with any component of the Deposit of Faith, however, the Catechism does not stand alone but is part of a vast mosaic. Like hyperlinks on the Internet, the new Catechism presents a teaching and then leads us on to other references so we can pursue the supporting Scripture passage, theological writings or conciliar document. Those who contend that the Bible is the sole reference for faith life miss out on these profound resources.

How is the catechism structured? It begins with the Apostolic Letter from the Holy Father which describes the evolution of the text and authorizes it as a valid reference for teaching the faith. A review of the Contents page shows that the catechism is set upon four "pillars" which form the framework of

the entire text. These pillars, and the doctrines they present, are as follows:

Profession of Faith – This part of the Catechism discusses man's relationship with God and the unfolding of God's revelation to man. God chose to reveal Himself slowly over time as Father, Son and Spirit, and the reader begins to see the deep mystery of this relationship. The text carefully lays out the importance of the Old and New Testaments and their value to the Christian. The reader is then taken on a journey through the twelve articles of the Profession of Faith, the creed that summarizes the key truths of the Catholic religion. In summary, this part of the Catechism explains:

- A. Divine Revelation
- B. Apostolic Tradition
- C. Relationship between Scripture and Tradition
- D. Sacred Scripture
- E. The Profession of Faith (referencing the Apostle's and Nicene Creeds)

Celebration of Christian Mystery – In this part of the Catechism, we plumb the depths of the seven Sacraments. Many of us received the Sacraments in our youth but never understood how deeply they are grounded in Sacred Scripture, Tradition, and the teachings of the great Fathers of the Church. The new Catechism opens up each Sacrament and carefully explains the layers of meaning for each of these powerful gifts. Living among many "Bible-only" Christian groups, this exposition is most valuable in helping us defend these profound moments of grace. The text also gives us an understanding of sacramentals, those physical objects which serve to excite pious devotion and remembrance of holy people or events. In summary, this part of the Catechism explains:

- A. The Sacraments of Initiation, Healing, and Vocation
- B. Sacramentals

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Life in Christ – This part of the Catechism encapsulates the teachings of the faith on the inestimable value and dignity of human life. It is here where we explore those issues that often put the Church at odds with the global "culture of death." We learn about how, from the earliest years of the faith, Christians honored human life from conception to natural death. We go on to learn how, contrary to societal notions, sin and its devastating effects cannot be masked behind euphemisms or "relative" morality. The Catechism conducts an exhaustive review of the Ten Commandments, reminding us that they are still in force and how they must serve as the template to shape our lives. In summary, this part of the Catechism explains:

A. Dignity of the Human Person

B. Christian Morality

C. Virtues

D. Sin

E. Social Justice

F. The Ten Commandments

Christian Prayer – The last section of the Catechism offers insights into the importance of maintaining intimate contact with our Creator through prayer. We learn about the various types of prayer, the intrinsic value of prayer and the obstructions that can affect the quality of our prayer life. Prayer is essential to our pilgrimage but, like any endeavor, it takes practice and commitment. Saints have reminded us that God is interested in quality, not quantity. The Catechism closes with a superb exposition of the Our Father, the prayer taught to us by the Lord himself. In summary, this part of the Catechism explains:

A. The Revelation of Prayer

B. The Tradition of Prayer

C. The Life of Prayer

D. The Lord's Prayer

A wonderful feature of the book is that, after every few pages, there is a bullet-type summary (known as In Brief) encapsulating the major points presented. In a culture grown accustomed to sound bites, each In Brief section gives us a quick review and provides the cross-reference back to the main text. These summaries come in handy when the material is especially deep or theologically complex.

A journey through this profound document would be extremely difficult were it not for the supporting material that comprises almost one-fourth of the book's total pages. Located at the very back of the Catechism, this material gives us the tools to pursue the source of Catholic beliefs and doctrines. It

starts off with the Index of Citations which give us the source reference of each footnote, from Sacred Scripture (all taken from the Revised Standard Version or the New Revised Standard Version of the Bible) to the Ecumenical Councils, the Pontifical Documents, Canon Law, and the Ecclesiastical Writers.

Perhaps the most important navigation tool is the Index of Topics, an improvement made to the second edition of the Catechism. This comprehensive Index is a wonderful pathway to the vast array of topics inside. Those new to the faith find it especially helpful to go here first. They find a topic of interest or concern to them and zero in on the appropriate paragraph in the text to see where the Church stands on that issue. Coming from a "Bible only" background, it is often a revelation for them to see that the Church has squarely faced the difficult issues of the age and given a clear, supported teaching. For those of us who grew up in the Catholic faith, we find comfort in the fact that the Catholic Church is consistent, i.e. that her commitment to virtue, piety and moral living is always the same no matter what new challenge comes along. The difficult topics addressed by the Catechism remind us that Holy Mother Church never was, nor will ever be, afraid to stand as a moral voice for all ages. A helpful Glossary follows the Index, which aids in understanding some liturgical or theological terms we may not come across every day.

The Catechism of the Catholic Church is a treasure. Its riches are wide open to the faithful, reminding us that we are members of an ancient Church, "...so old yet so new." In mining the wisdom of its pages we hear, once again, the voices of the Apostles, the Popes, the Fathers, and the Saints. They remind

us that, in our humility before the world, we can still be proud to be members of the one true Church founded by Jesus Christ.

Gary Shirley, his wife, and three children are members of St. Catherine of Siena Parish in Kennesaw, Georgia, where Gary serves as catechist in the adult education program.

### **Who Needs Prayer?**

**By Kenneth Dean Brown**

#### **Who Needs Prayer? by Kenneth Dean Brown**

According to the old Baltimore Catechism, formally used to teach generations of Catholic children their faith, prayer is defined as "the lifting up of our minds and hearts to God to adore Him, to thank Him for His benefits, to ask His forgiveness, and to beg of Him all the graces we need whether for soul or body." In short, it is our conscious and heartfelt communication with our God. Simple, right? Of course.

Yet, past the basic textbook explanation, what is prayer – really, and why does it matter? In other words, who really needs prayer?

We do!

## Navigating the Catechism

One of the greatest advantages of believing in a true living and personal God as opposed to some remote and aloof "cosmic entity" is prayer and that we can have a real and meaningful relationship with him. In fact, it's that personal relationship with our God that truly defines our faith. The New Catechism of the Catholic Church, describes this relationship called prayer like this.

### PRAYER IS A GIFT

All we have to do to realize the great gift prayer really is is to look around honestly at the immensity and perfection of God's creation. Modern astronomers and physicists remind us daily just how truly insignificant man is in the universe, yet our God allows us and even begs us to communicate with him.

How cool is that? Prayer is easily one of the greatest gifts we could ever imagine.

### PRAYER IS A COVENANT

According to the New Catechism, "Christian prayer is a covenant relationship between God and man in Christ." Our prayers are a key element in the contract we as Christians personally enter into with God at our baptism.

Throughout the bible, God repeatedly teaches if we honor, trust and obey him, "he shall be our God and we shall be his people." In the New Testament, our Lord tells us to pray unceasingly and to seek God constantly in all things. In other words, we as Christians are actually commanded to live our lives in an endless state of prayer as part of our contract with our God.

And finally...

### PRAYER IS A COMMUNION

When we pray, we spend time with God, and it's through this continual and intimate time spent in his presence, that we come to personally know him. Simple common sense tells us that to really know someone, we have to spend time with them and our relationship to God is no different.

We also spend time with those we love. And as with any person in our lives, we cannot truly claim to love Jesus and desire to be like him without desiring also to be with him. This special time spent with

our Lord is prayer, and through its grace we fulfill his command to us to be one with him as he is one with the Father. And since this is the ultimate goal of our Christian walk, prayer then, is absolutely essential to our spiritual growth and journey.

Who needs prayer? WE ALL DO!

It's God special gift, allowing us sinful and cosmically insignificant creatures to communicate personally with the all-powerful Creator as a child converses with a loving parent. It's part of our covenant with Him, a personal communion allowing us to be with Him and spend time in His presence until our death when, through His saving Grace we hope to be truly united with Him in heaven for all eternity.

So pray often and in everything you do, and remember, "with God, all things are possible." Without him, nothing is.

Kenneth Brown publishes "The Prayerful Solution, a free monthly Catholic ezine of Catholic novenas, screensavers, desktop wallpaper, and featured Catholic art and ebooks. To check out his free ezine and other content by this author, go to: <http://www.prayerstillworks.com>



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