

To Communicate the *Knowledge of Salvation*: A Brief History of Catechisms in the Church

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“Since what God has revealed remains both manifold and vast... our Forefathers wisely organized the whole science or “knowledge of salvation” under four principal headings: The Apostles Creed, the Sacraments, the Decalogue, and the Our Father.” (*Preface, Catechism of the Council of Trent*, 1566.)

When the extraordinary Synod of Bishops (December, 1985) proposed a *Catechism* for the Universal Church, its members were cognizant that this decision continued a long-standing tradition within the Church. Indeed, we can say that this effort to transmit the Christian Faith goes back even to the very beginnings of the Church itself. The *Relatio Finalis* of the Synod adequately expressed what the Bishops had in mind for the Catechism: We ordain the publication “of a catechism or compendium of all Catholic doctrine, one which deals with matters of both faith and morals, in order that it might serve as an exemplar for those catechisms and other similar instruments which are edited in the different countries of the world. The presentation of doctrine must be biblical and liturgical. It must be sound doctrine, suited to the present life of Christians.” (II B.a.)

I would like to put in these pages the Bishops’ resolve to draw up a catechism for the Universal Church, twenty years after the Second Vatican Council, into the light of the history (and even a bit of the pre-history) of catechisms. First of all, we must define clearly certain terms

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in the discussion. For instance, I would like to distinguish *catechesis* from *catechism*. To catechize remains an "ecclesial action which leads both communities and individual Christians to maturity in their faith." This takes place when one person transmits the Faith to another by suitable methods. Among the means which have enjoyed a privileged status throughout the centuries are the various manuals, compendia, and other primers which compose the classical body of Christian literature. From the beginning of the 16th century, this literary genre took on a determined configuration, namely, that of a catechism. The occasion for this development, of course, remains the events which surrounded the Protestant Reformation and the subsequent Catholic Reform.

Thus, from the 16th century, history can signal three essential features which belong to a catechism. First of all, a catechism *summarizes the Catholic Faith*. Recall that the Catholic Reformers of the 16th-century intended the catechism for children and illiterate adults. On the other hand, the Council of Trent intended that its Catechism serve the needs of another audience, namely, the pastors of the Church. In any event, both types of catechisms still retained the basic characteristic of a summary text. Secondly, a catechism is a *pedagogical tool*; something which one is supposed to learn by heart—a sort of teaching reference book. Hence, catechisms largely took the shape of textbooks composed of questions and answers. These small textbooks were structured so that the student could easily memorize certain essentials of the faith. Thirdly, a catechism signifies an *official document*, that is, one approved, or at least recognized, by a competent authority. Its texts offer then a guarantee of exactitude in expression and of surety in doctrine or, as G.K. Chesterton would say, of orthodoxy. This explains, for example, why our catechisms have always scrupulously circumvented theological quibbles and have refused likewise to favor one school of opinion over another. Rather, they have always tried to set forth clearly the perceived tradition of the Church.

In this list of traits which describe a catechism, I have not mentioned the adjective *universal*. It was the Council of Trent which first chose to redact a reference text intended to serve as a universal exemplar. The First Vatican Council, it is true, was of a similar mind. However, the abrupt ending of its deliberations at the hands of Garibaldi's troops made it impossible to bring the proposal to a successful conclusion after the events of 1870. I have decided to focus on the Catechism of the Council of Trent and on the proposal of Vatican I as a way of bringing us to understand better the present *Catechism*

of the *Universal Church*. Nevertheless, the concept of a catechism enjoys a long history in the Christian tradition, and an accurate evaluation of its merits requires that one takes full account of its historical evolution and continuity throughout the Christian millennia.

I. From catechesis to catechism

The first centuries of Christianity did not know a "catechism" in the strict sense. Doctrinal instruction in those days was addressed to adult pagans who were converted to Christ in the Catholic Church. At this period, according to the formula of Tertullian, "You are not born a Christian; you become one." The whole instruction consisted in a baptismal catechesis, an initiation into the Christian mysteries which, without being secret like certain pagan religions, had no less a need for an introduction to be fully understood.

Theologians call this introduction a *mystagogical catechesis*. This means that the whole rite of initiation into the mysteries of the Christian religion transpired within the context of the liturgy. The believing community incorporated this process into its Lenten preparation for Easter. A phase in this early catechetical instruction was marked by the "traditio," that is, the handing over of the Apostles' Creed, the Our Father, and the Gospels. For our purposes, however, it is enough to underscore that this patristic catechesis unfolded step by step within the context of a liturgical celebration. We see this pedagogy illustrated, for instance, in the celebrated catechetical instructions of St. Cyril of Jerusalem (386) in the East and of St. Ambrose (399) in the Latin West.

A difficulty presented itself quite early when the Church wanted to admit new uneducated faithful, even before the West was overrun by those barbarian tribes whose encounter with Roman culture was to give rise to our own civilization. The first one really to confront this situation in his role as pastor was St. Augustine. He handled it with his usual genius.

Augustine's "How to Catechize Beginners" (*De catechizandis rudibus*), composed about 405, is not the first catechism but a sort of discourse on the catechetical method which eventually became, with his Treatise on Christian Doctrine and the *Enchiridion*, the required reference work. Teacher and bishop, Augustine indicated in this work what was appropriate to teach, adapting the material to diverse

categories of listeners. He distinguished three groups: the peasants without education, the half-educated city dwellers (*idiotae, urbani*), and those who have received instruction in the liberal and profane arts. We see him adapting to each group the message of salvation; this judicious diversification is strongly characteristic of Augustine. For the first group, the peasants, he insists on the existence of a good God, the Creator, retracing the different stages of sacred history, and he speaks of the realities above. For the second category, he finds it necessary to place the emphasis on the examples given by Christ, using a moral instruction centered on the Savior. Finally, for the best educated, who are doubtless also the most exacting, he finds it necessary to go to the roots, for they have a whole mindset that requires changing. They will, therefore, be taught to read Holy Scripture in the light of their new faith, not just literally but with spiritual insight. One can recognize here the various difficulties that the young Carthaginian had himself encountered. Augustine strongly insists, especially in the first part of this work, on the joy with which the successful catechist will have to be animated. He must never succumb to spiritual torpor or allow distaste for his work to take hold of him. He is to announce the Good News with good humor!

This major text has subsequently been revived again and again even though the situation changes radically—for henceforth catechesis will be addressed to children who have been attended to by their parents or the Church. In the Middle Ages, the main stages in the development that led to the catechism properly so-called can be synchronized with the moments which historians consider intellectual “renaissances.” On each of these occasions we note a twofold demand: on the one hand, for a selection of essential texts of prime importance, and, on the other hand, for an assurance that every Christian knows how to understand them, and receives them in faith. What is essential must remain intact even when simplification is required for a text that is to be memorized. So it is, then, that we can quickly trace the distant genealogy of a catechism.

The ancestors of the catechism

The Church has always desired that all her children, even the humblest and most disadvantaged, will have a minimal knowledge of their faith. She wants them to know the Creed (the Apostles' Creed is preferred to the Nicene) and the Our Father, two treasures which the Church has received from Christ himself and his first disciples and

which were precisely handed down and solemnly transmitted in the course of the baptismal catechesis. In early times the Church added the customary prayers of the Mass, especially the Gloria, and a few notions on the sacraments. Those rudiments of the catechism are, therefore, all elements drawn from the liturgy.

Thus, at the beginning of the Carolingian Renaissance of the ninth century, the spiritual and temporal authorities meeting at the Council of Frankfurt (794) required each Christian to know the Apostles' Creed. No one today would dare propose the verification of minimal knowledge on the part of godparents that Charlemagne required at the time of baptism. Moreover at this period, we find the first composition of summaries of the Christian faith in question-and-answer form. These were already appearing in the vernacular.

The second decisive stage in the Middle Ages occurs during what is currently called the "renaissance of the twelfth century." Peter Abelard, known to be very innovative in theology, gives a brief commentary on the Apostles' Creed and the Our Father, insisting upon the need for all Christians to know them in common and to be able to recite them by heart. In this period techniques are perfected. One sees better texts appearing; above all, texts carefully worded to make retention easy. We can cite from among many possibilities the *De quinque septenis sive septenariis* of Hug Saint-Victor (1142), who combines symbolism and pedagogy. He finds in Scripture, interpreted in the tradition of Augustine, the seven principal vices and the seven virtues corresponding to the seven petitions of the Our Father, the seven gifts of the Spirit, and the seven Beatitudes of the Gospel. Though we do not have yet at this time the manual of the catechism, we already see all of its elements progressively put into place.

Why does the thirteenth century, often noted as the high point of the Middle Ages, not seem to be a decisive moment in the evolution that we are tracing? To be sure, this epoch of syntheses, cathedrals of stone or of theology produced a celebrated *Somme le Roi*, composed by a Dominican priest, Laurent, confessor of Philip the Bold, which would subsequently serve as the basis for numerous works in the vernacular. St. Thomas Aquinas himself comments in his opuscula the Creed and the Lord's Prayer. But in the thirteenth century it was preaching, above all, that was reborn, the immense success of the mendicant orders.

The next stage is represented by the Chancellor Jean Gerson (1363-1429), whose work sets forth an ideal of Church reform. First and

foremost a teacher, Gerson insisted, as Augustine did, on the necessity of teaching the faith according to the capacities of each Christian, and he proposed texts adapted to the different levels of education at a time when the "reading-writing population" was ever increasing.

"If you want to reform the Church, you must begin with the children," Gerson wrote. So he composed an "ABC for simple fold" faith. There was also a three-part "Teacher's Manual" (*Opus tripartitum*) for the use of the parish priests, which treated the Ten Commandments, the manner of confessing (with a detailed explanation of the capital sins) and, finally, the "manner of dying well." This triple approach revealed perfectly the obsessions of this period, preoccupied as it was with the art of living well and still more—in an uncertain age that was beset by wars, famines, and plagues—of dying well.

The widely published books of Gerson were used and translated throughout the fifteenth century and still at the beginning of the sixteenth, but they could not by themselves serve as an instrument for the renewal that was so often clamored for, awaited and desired.

II. The Catechisms, Bearers of the *New Faith*

Catechisms as Instruments in the Conflicts of the Reformation Period

The felt intuition of Luther, bitterly defended in learned debates and argued in scriptural commentaries, could really not be spread through Germanic Europe except by a catechism, an instrument that the professor of Wittenberg appropriated and renewed.

As early as 1526, in the Preface of the German Mass, Luther had written, "What the Church needs before anything is a good catechism, without complexities, short and simple." Luther, then, sought to take up the medieval heritage and perfect it. Doctrine had to be expressed as simply as possible to permit memorization, but in a way which assured genuine understanding and assimilation.

In keeping with the earlier tradition, Luther composed a "Teacher's Manual," the Large Catechism, which he published in April 1529, followed in July by the Small Catechism, which was immediately translated into Latin. The plan that he adopted in both of those works, composed for poorly educated pastors (or rather, as a matter of fact, for "heads of families"), was not very original. Under the traditional form

of questions and answers in the Small Catechism, in a more elaborate and sustained style in the Large Catechism, these texts followed the order of the Decalogue, the Apostles' Creed and the Our Father. Precise details were given to explain baptism and the sacrament of the altar. In addition, the Large Catechism included an exhortation to confession.

It is certainly legitimate to see in Luther's catechisms an abridgement of his doctrine, for example, an expression of the dialectic Law-Gospel. Intentionally simple to give children and adults a means of assimilating Christian dogmas, the Small Catechism does not enter into disputed areas. Deliberately Lutheran asserts are to be found only in the Large Catechism: for example, Luther's distinct theology of faith and works in connection with baptism, or a description of consubstantiation in speaking of the Eucharist.

Later, Calvin assigned to the catechism a precise role in the organization of the Church. Jurist and theologian, the Reformer of Geneva was to give the catechism its first institutional status. Upon his return from exile, inspired by the catechisms and of Martin Bucer at Strasbourg, which he had had the leisure to appreciate, Calvin imposed upon the children of the city the obligation to follow a Christian instruction. This instruction consisted in the explanation, Sunday after Sunday, of a catechism very hastily composed by him in November of 1541. This Formulaire was divided into fifty-five sections. "If you want to build a lasting edifice that will not soon fall into decay, have the children introduced to a good catechism that will show them briefly and according to their limited capacities where true Christianity lies," he wrote.

Calvin, therefore, required diligence on the part of the children and competence in the instructors. Above all he formally introduced a new rite; when the child was judged to be sufficiently instructed, he would make his "profession of Christianity" in the presence of the Church, that is, before the community assembled four times a year to celebrate the Last Supper. We are witnessing here a decisive evolution. Knowledge of the faith was required for active entry into the Church and her celebration; by a sort of instinct Calvin reverted to what was the primitive catechesis. For the family catechism of Luther, Calvin substituted, then, an official church ceremony. To a much greater extent, and indeed very consciously, he made the catechism a confession of faith, not restricted to children only. The Geneva catechism was eventually replaced in 1563 by the catechism referred to as that of Heidelberg, a work of Protestant synthesis that allowed many inter-

pretations. But the catechisms of Luther and Calvin were important enough to give rise on the Catholic front to rivals and competitors.

Catechisms involved in controversy and refutation

As a result of the renaissance of the literary genre called the catechism, Catholic authors began to take up the same cudgels, both by reaction to and in imitation of the Protestant reformers. The Jesuits, whose systematic development of institutions of higher learning — “le college jesuite” — also began at this time, as we might expect, led the field. For example, the French Jesuit Fr. Edmond Auger, (1530-1591) composed a celebrated catechism in 1563 for the benefit of his students at the Jesuit College at Pamiers. A carbon copy of Calvin’s arguments point by point. Unfortunately, it seems that the catechisms were destined to serve as weapons in the on-going religious conflicts which divided Europe politically in the 16th century.

This polemical role of the catechism accounts for the fact that the Church exercised a certain surveillance over their production. One need only recall the *Commentaries on the Christian Catechism* of the unfortunate Dominican and Archbishop of Toledo Bartholomew Carranza. Despite his many and unequivocal signs of loyalty to the Church, this prelate spent some 17 years under house arrest in Rome. In 1558, Carranza had composed a sort of theological treatise for the benefit of Catholics who were living in Protestant lands; however, he made the mistake of employing the traditional catechetical structure. This exposition of the Catholic Faith, composed in Castilian, was subsequently denounced for certain heterodox propositions. After the 17 year juridical investigation which followed, the prelate was acquitted of heresy and charged only with the employment of certain infelicitous expressions. He died several months later in the Eternal City.

The Arrival of the “Catechism Handbook”

Refutation and controversy are far from absent in the work of the greatest of the “catechists” in the sixteenth century, St. Peter Canisius (1521-1597), but they form the background rather than the thread of the work. This Ingolstadt professor, later of Vienna, who belonged like Auger to the first generation of Jesuits, was destined to become a renowned author of religious teaching instruments whose success would be so great that before long one would speak of “studying his Canisius” instead of “learning his catechism.”

In keeping with earlier tradition Canisius attuned his books to his public and to the demands of the times. He produced three catechisms in succession: *Major catechismus*, published in 1554, which had within the lifetime of the author thirty-two Latin editions and thirty translations; then at Cologne the following year the *Minimus catechismus*, intended for children; and ten years later, a *Minor catechismus*, a mean between the two preceding. I leave aside the many adaptations in verse, pictures, music, and so forth. Why were these manuals such a great success? In a word, Peter Canisius, S.J., was a skilled teacher. He demonstrated, therefore, a marked preference for the concrete over the abstract. In his catechisms we find biblical narratives, specific details, and the other "tricks of the teachers' trade" which made his handbooks both attractive and full of life.

It must be acknowledged that the catechisms of Canisius, more than any other of his works, earned him the title of "Doctor of the Church." What, then, was lacking in them? Do they not demonstrate marvelous pedagogy and doctrinal soundness? Peter Canisius himself felt the need for an official label when he tried in March, 1562, to obtain from the Council of Trent approbation of his catechism as "Catholic." Circumstances caused the "Canisius" not to be retained as the catechism of the universal Church, and this Jesuit saint had the good humility to accept to translate into German the book which the Council subsequently had clothed with its authority.

III. The Universal Catechisms of the Councils

At the Council of Trent, the idea of a catechism officially recognized and also drafted by the council Fathers surfaced rather quickly. Less than six months after its difficult start, the Council decided in the general session of 5 April 1546 to compose "in the vernacular and in Latin" a catechism "drawn from Scripture and the orthodox Fathers, containing only matters of faith." In thus announcing their intention to compose a catechism themselves, the Fathers were inspired not only by the incontestable successes of the Protestants toward whom they had their eyes turned, but also by numerous responses that appeared just about everywhere in France and Germany.

Yet, for years, the project of the catechism remained in the background. One sees it reappear only in April 1562, in connection with a discussion of the Index. At that time, some considered borrowing the major part of the text from Peter Canisius, but in the end the Fathers

preferred to maintain their idea of doing an original work. They created a commission to draw up a text. To the Spaniards, "the most sure in their faith," they entrusted the explanation of the Creed; to the French and the doctors of Louvain, the commentary on the Our Father.

Since the Commission had not yet completed its work by the closing of the Council, Pius IV entrusted it to a new, more restricted commission under the direction of his nephew, Charles Borromeo. The Catechism of the Council of Trent (or the Roman Catechism) was promulgated by Pius V on 14 September 1566, less than three years after the closing of the Council of Trent. Its principal authors had been Council members, like Muzio Calini (1525-1570), archbishop of Zara in Dalmatia, and two Italian Dominican bishops, with other experts assisting them. The result is a collective work conceived, written, corrected, and improved over four years. Translations into national languages appeared very rapidly.

The Catechism was presented as authorized by the Council; thus, the official character that the other texts lacked was manifest. Was it "elementary"? It is clear that it was not intended to be a manual directly available to the faithful since it was addressed to pastors and parish priests (*ad parochos*), but it nonetheless affirmed a desire for simplicity by exactness and precision. In their celebrated preface, the authors stated that the Council desired "a particular and precise method of presenting the principal points of the faith." It was really a matter of re-establishing *falsified* doctrine. However, contained the text neither controversy nor refutation; only a clear affirmation of the faith.

The division of the text is classically pedagogical: the four parts of the Catechism examine "the entire knowledge of salvation," commenting successively on the "four Pillars": the Apostles' Creed, the Sacraments, the Ten Commandments, and the Our Father. This gives the Catechism a naturally theological structure. "If these four chapters which are like great *axes* of Holy Scripture were once explained, practically nothing else would be lacking the Christian for understanding what he must know." This human and Christian optimism constitutes the strength of the Roman Catechism and confers grandeur upon it. The tone is one of perfect serenity, due perhaps to the Mediterranean origin of the chief authors who had not felt the weight of Protestant pressures in their provinces.

So the Catechism of the Council not only integrated the medieval efforts, but it also marked a return to the patristic heritage. By a more

exact familiarity with Tradition, it discovered a more agreeable presentation, one that was less moralizing and more evangelical. In this sense it was a beautiful product of the Humanis movement of the early century. But above all it is to be situated in the renewal of preaching which was desired and proclaimed by the Council of Trent. St. Paul speaks of the faith born of hearing the word (Rom. 10:17), the *Fides ex auditu* so dear to the Protestant Reformers. Mention of this is made as early as the first lines of the preface of the Roman Catechism. But it is a matter of using this preaching to instill in the souls of the faithful the desire to know Jesus Christ and to bring them to walk in his footsteps. The preface continually joins knowledge and life in charity, the "fullness of the Law."

With its predecessors, the Roman Catechism became one of the instruments of the Catholic Reform, a means of preaching by a return to the Sacred Scripture. This is why it is appropriate to accord a special place here to the great Catholic Reformer, St. Charles Borromeo (1538-1584). He made his diocese of Milan the place of experimentation for the program of the Council; the Catechism played a great role there and even produced a new institution in the Church. As early as 1569, St. Charles created in his diocese the confraternities, or companies, of Christian doctrine, which used both the "Canisium" and the Roman Catechism.

The Catechism of the Council of Trent was a definite success in terms of the synthesis that it effected between elements that its predecessors proposed for it, as well as for its own qualities. But it was one outcome rather than an end. The best proof of this was the publication in the last years of the century of the two catechisms of Robert Bellarmine (1542-1621), the *Dottrina cristiana breve*, 1597, and the next year his *Dichiarazione piu copiosa della dottrina cristiana*. Quickly adopted in several countries, warmly approved and even sometimes imposed by Clement VIII, Bellarmine's catechism won a considerable audience. Its success proves that the Roman Catechism, in spite of its official character, did not enjoy a monopoly.

It is true that Bellarmine's text is more concrete, answering practical questions that simple people ask themselves, more concise in its definitions, but also less scriptural and less mystical. Bellarmine orients the elementary Catholic instruction to an institutional ecclesiology, to a visible and, let us say, Roman Church, perfectly coherent with the theology of his *Controversies* which preceded the catechisms. But with him the catechetical genre seems more suited to a young

audience, a fact which can explain the favor it was to enjoy for such a long time—all the way up to Vatican I where it was prosed as a model.

Thus the catechism handbook finally inserted itself anew into what the Middle Ages had failed to provide, that is, into a more structured and more organic catechesis. It contributed to the Catholic vitality after the shock of the Protestant Revolt. In the centuries that followed, the catechism handbook was geared down to numerous diocesan catechisms of more or less successful quality. These gave rise to a desire for a universal manual.

The “birth of the catechism” is the symbol of this wish to renew the transmission of the faith. But an incapacity to root its elementary teaching in the deepest life of the Church as celebrated in its liturgy perhaps accounts for the fact that very soon the new institution which the catechism had become (while still so traditional in its roots) underwent several deviations.

First, there was a rationalizing drift, affording too much to reasoning and to rigorous definitions of the mysteries of the faith, to the detriment of symbols and biblical language. This was accompanied by a moralizing drift especially from the mid-seventeenth century on. One could also mention in this regard, still another tendency. A political drift towards state control of ecclesiastical affairs, as what happened in Austria with the enlightened view of Joseph II. This enlightened monarch took the liberty to censure the catechism of St. Peter Canisius of its “inappropriate” elements. And in France, the Emperor Napoleon I even took the trouble to supervise the composition of his own “Imperial Catechism” (1806).

We could note perhaps the progression toward clericalization. While the first catechists of the Catholic Reform were not necessarily priests, instruction would be entrusted from this point on almost entirely to priests. The Roman Catechism was already more a pastoral directive than a children’s manual. Thus one understands Bossuet’s continually reminding parents, “Know that you must be the first and principal catechists of your children.”

The subsequent distortions in no way prevented the catechism from being an incomparable instrument of the Catholic Reform from the second half of the sixteenth century. Its fruits would be abundant up to the period of the Enlightenment and even into the nineteenth century. But it is appropriate to picture it rather as an expression of the religious renewal than as its cause. After all, neither its structure nor

its methods were original. We must find its secret rather in the admirable missionary zeal which characterized the Church of the modern era in its European horizons and beyond.

Universality called into question

Throughout the 19th century —a time of religious revival everywhere— the catechism served its purposes well. Of course, we find it in a variety of forms. These miscellaneous editions, however, all relied on the patterns set by key figures for different language groups: Bossuet for the French; Bellarmine for the Italians; Canisius for the Germans. The Roman Catechism was still in circulation, but its detail and scientific level made it less popular than the adaptations.

As I have said, the First Vatican Council intended to draw up a catechism, but the political climate in Italy prematurely ended both the Council and the project. Although the split between “ultramontanés” and those who endorsed the rights of local bishops influenced the debate over the viability of a *universal* catechism, the conciliar Fathers nonetheless officially adopted the project for a catechism. In other words, the deliberations over the schema for the catechism were haunted by the principal item on the Council’s agenda: papal infallibility.

In the initial stages of this debate, the experts were not of one accord on either the conception or the form of a universal catechism. They could only agree to propose that a “small catechism” —composed in Latin— be given to the entire Catholic Church. It would subsequently be translated into different languages. As one might suppose, given the number and importance of Jesuits involved in the preparation of Vatican I, this reference to a small catechism obviously recalled the *Dottrina breve* of Bellarmine. But the audience for this catechism was not specifically determined. And it seems that the redactors really had young people in mind, even though priests and faithful are the ones specifically mentioned.

Contrary to expectations, the conciliar debates on this project were animated. In brief, the “minority” argued that the initiative for such matters should be left to the bishops. One of his party, a certain Hungarian ordinary, bishop Haynald, even grumbled that the Council would wind up taking away the bishops’ right to preach. But the more ultramontane bishops, especially those who came from outside of Europe or who dealt with populations in transition vaunted the benefits

of a single text. For example, Bishop Verot of Savannah, Georgia, even volunteered to withdraw the diocesan manual which he himself had prepared if a universal catechism would be issued. For him and many others, it belonged to the Council to realize such a project.

Unfortunately conciliar politics as much as pastoral purposes affected the conciliar debate on the catechism. Still the proposal passed by a vote of 491 placet, 56 non-placet, 44 placet juxta modum. So, the redaction of a small catechism for children was confided to the Holy Father with the approval of the Council. It was understood that the bishops could introduce certain modifications in the course of translation. There is a marked similarity here with what in fact happened at Trent. In 1563, however, the conciliar fathers put the catechism at the end of their agenda. In May 1871, the Fathers of Vatican I did not know that soon their agenda would be put to an end.

Nonetheless, it is important to insist that the schema was adopted: Catholicism would have a universal catechism. It is true that the conciliar Fathers did not deliberate about the contents of the catechism. But they did refer to Bellarmine, as if to suggest that they had his work in mind. As with so many innovative schemas and proposals, we will never know for sure what the Vatican I catechism would have contained.

From catechism to catechesis

Given the absence of a universal catechism, the 20th-century saw only national catechisms. For example, in Italy the catechism of Pius X remained in use until 1970. Different countries adopted similar programs: England in 1921; Germany in 1925; Austria in 1936; France in 1937; the United States in 1941; Belgium in 1945; Holland in 1948; Canada in 1951, etc. These catechisms—from which many of us learned the rudiments of the faith—were decidedly pedagogical. In the first half of the century, they mostly followed a tripartite plan: truths to believe; commandments to practice; sacraments to receive. Subsequently this was simplified—perhaps too much—into: truths, obligations, and means. Or, in short, believe, obey, and practice.

During the preparation for Vatican II, attention was focused mostly on catechists. One finds hardly a mention of a universal catechism, other than the occasional remark that such a project would be difficult to realize. Advances in catechesis, the renewal of ecclesiology and of liturgy, new missionary circumstances and other factors all

pointed at the start of Vatican II to the role of the bishops. Significantly, then, the only text (*De cura animarum*, 1963) dealing with a catechism subsequently found its way into *Christus Dominus*, that is, into the decree on the teaching office—the *munus docendi*—of bishops. At the end of the decree, in the *Mandatum generale*, mention is made of a “directory on the catechetical instruction of the Christian people.” This directory was promulgated at Easter 1971. Both the 4th Synod of bishops, called by Pope Paul VI in 1977, and the Apostolic Exhortation “On catechesis in our times” of Pope John Paul II prepared the way for directives which would guide a more profound renewal. Still, it remains significant that the profound crisis which gripped the Church after Vatican II and the divisions which this has revealed unfolded as a result of catechisms produced in various countries of the world, beginning with the controversial Dutch Catechism of 1968.

This movement, however, demonstrates that the catechism remains a central feature of the Christian life. In other words, in history, catechesis always leads to catechism. This does not deny the fact that the idea of a universal catechism meets objections from far and wide. These objections recall the polemics of Vatican I and the usual remonstrances which follow upon whatever decisions ecclesiastical authorities might make.

Thus, the complete history of the catechism contains many important lessons for us today. It teaches us to respect, first of all, its classical structure, to recognize as well its limitations, but also to hope that it can produce its promised fruits. Its classical fourfold structure, embodied by the Roman Catechism, however, could be enlarged or adapted to respond better to the contemporary needs. Take, for example, the moral section which, according to the classical presentation, is organized along the lines of the Ten Commandments. Would it not be suitable to include also some feature such as the beatitudes, the virtues, the gifts and the fruits of the Holy Spirit? They belong also to the history of catechisms. One should always remember that the catechism makes sense, only when considered as a part of the Church’s mission to evangelize the world, that is, to announce the Good News of Jesus Christ to every man and woman. The catechism, then, remains a valuable instrument of catechesis. But catechesis, as I said in the beginning, remains an activity of believers in the Church. So a catechism is good only in the measure a bishop, a priest, a sister, or any catechist uses it to explain the Christian religion. History shows that the best catechism produces little in the hands of uninspired catechists. The *Catechism of the Universal Church*, I propose, will succeed only

insofar as it is taken up by men and women of faith, those ready to continue the work begun by Cyril, Ambrose, and Augustine.