

# Themes in the Catechism of the Catholic Church

Published in 1997 in its Typical Edition, the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (CCC) can be an intimidating venture for even the most seasoned cradle Catholic. While the text is explicitly written for anyone who wants to inquire about the Catholic Faith, a few handles are needed to grasp hold of the key themes that run through it.

## The Golden Threads

Through the work of Cardinal Ratzinger (now Pope Benedict XVI), Cardinal Schönborn of Vienna, Austria, Dr. Petroc Willey of the Maryvale Institute of Birmingham, England, and the *General Directory for Catechesis*, we can identify five primary themes, or *Golden Threads*, that run through the CCC.

Trinity    Incarnation    Paschal Mystery    The Church    The Human Person

### 1. Trinity.

CCC 234 The mystery of the Most Holy Trinity is the central mystery of Christian faith and life. It is the mystery of God in himself. It is therefore the source of all the other mysteries of faith, the light that enlightens them. It is the most fundamental and essential teaching in the "hierarchy of the truths of faith." The whole history of salvation is identical with the history of the way and the means by which the one true God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, reveals himself to men "and reconciles and unites with himself those who turn away from sin."

The starting and ending point to the Christian life is the Mystery of the Holy Trinity, the mystery of Who God is in Himself. The Lord Jesus taught that God is One, but He has also revealed that the One God is Three Persons: Father, Son and Holy Spirit. God is a community of Three Divine Persons so in love that there is no separation between them.

The bond between the three Persons of the Trinity is love. St. John tells us that God in His essence is love.

1 John 4:8. ...God is love.

We can begin to comprehend the love of the Trinity by reflecting on God's words and deeds. Jesus' death on the Cross gives us the best example of God's love, a love that rejoices so much in the other that it is willing to give completely of itself, even to the point of death. The Cross models for us Trinitarian love, a love that constantly pours itself out for the benefit of the other.

The goal of Christian life is not simply to be a follower of Jesus, but to be immersed into the life of the Trinity. In Matthew 28:19, we hear the command from the Lord to baptize in the name of the Trinity.

Matthew 28:19 Go, therefore, and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the holy Spirit,

In 2 Peter 1:4, St. Peter tells us that we are destined to be sharers in God's nature. We are meant for communion with God. Communion is more than just a declaration that we

follow God, it means to take on His Trinitarian nature, to be so in love with Him that we become united with Him and His family. We are called to imitate the communion of the Trinity by loving each other.

The theme of communion with the Holy Trinity is on every page of the CCC. To lose this theme in our catechesis would be to lose the most important element in what we do. The doctrine we pass on as catechists is to be directed towards helping people participate in the life of the Trinity.

## 2. Incarnation

CCC 461 Taking up St. John's expression, "The Word became flesh," the Church calls "Incarnation" the fact that the Son of God assumed a human nature in order to accomplish our salvation in it.

In order to save us, the eternal Second Person of the Trinity took on human nature. In Christ, God became incarnate by taking on flesh. Out of love, Jesus shares in our humanity so we can have communion with the Trinity. To save us from sin Jesus took on flesh. Jesus uses the material and substance of the created world as a channel of His grace.

The Catholic Faith is Christ-centered, or Christocentric. Our Faith is not primarily an ideology, a system of tenets or beliefs. The purpose of the Catholic Church is to help people develop a relationship with the Person of Jesus Christ, Head and Body. We are called to fall in love with Jesus and to grow in union with Him.

As catechists, we help make Jesus real to those we serve through the words of Sacred Scripture, sacraments, sacramentals, the environment of our sessions, and through our very person.

## 3. The Paschal Mystery

CCC 571 The Paschal mystery of Christ's cross and Resurrection stands at the center of the Good News that the apostles, and the Church following them, are to proclaim to the world. God's saving plan was accomplished "once for all" by the redemptive death of his Son Jesus Christ.

The Paschal (as in 'Passover') Mystery of Christ refers to Jesus' passion, death and Resurrection. Through His death, Christ defeats the power of sin; through His Resurrection, Christ shows His power over death. The passion and death of Jesus is a sign of God's love and a total rejection of sin. The Paschal Mystery is the central event of our salvation, the purpose for which Jesus took on flesh. It was for His Passion that Christ came.

John 12:27. ..."I am troubled now. Yet what should I say? 'Father, save me from this hour'? But it was for this purpose that I came to this hour.

We are united to the passion, death and Resurrection of Jesus through the liturgy, culminating in the Eucharist. Here the Paschal Mystery is no longer an external event to our lives, but one that transforms us from the inside out. The purpose of catechesis and doctrine is to help us participate more fully in the Paschal Mystery of Christ. Every

catechesis is an opportunity to hear Jesus' voice, learning how to die to sin and rise to life in Christ.

As catechists, our task is to help others learn how to participate in the liturgy by offering our lives to the Father. We teach liturgical participation through catechizing on the Mass, by providing times of silent reflection on Scripture, through song, through reflection on Jesus' presence in our life, through the environment of our sessions and through instruction in holiness.

#### 4. The Church

CCC 749 The article concerning the Church also depends entirely on the article about the Holy Spirit, which immediately precedes it. "Indeed, having shown that the Spirit is the source and giver of all holiness, we now confess that it is he who has endowed the Church with holiness." The Church is, in a phrase used by the Fathers, the place "where the Spirit flourishes."

CCC 759 "The eternal Father, in accordance with the utterly gratuitous and mysterious design of his wisdom and goodness, created the whole universe and chose to raise up men to share in his own divine life," to which he calls all men in his Son. "The Father ...determined to call together in a holy Church those who should believe in Christ." This "family of God" is gradually formed and takes shape during the stages of human history, in keeping with the Father's plan. In fact, "already present in figure at the beginning of the world, this Church was prepared in marvellous fashion in the history of the people of Israel and the old Alliance. Established in this last age of the world and made manifest in the outpouring of the Spirit, it will be brought to glorious completion at the end of time."

Reflecting the very life of the Trinity, the Church is the community of all who have been joined in Christ. The Church is the Body of Christ, the family of God, the means by which Christ offers salvation to the world. Salvation is not just a 'me and Jesus' reality, but is about communion with God and each other.

The Church's purpose is to help proclaim Christ to the nations and to help every person grow in holiness. Reflecting the qualities of Jesus, the Church's marks (or characteristics) are that she is one, holy, catholic and apostolic. The Church is both a spiritual and invisible reality as well as a human and visible one. Built on St. Peter and the Apostles, the Church teaches with the authority of Christ. The beliefs, Sacraments and hierarchy of the Church support her mission and unity. Every article of the CCC is connected to God's plan of salvation through the Church and in some way addresses the Lord's work in overcoming sin and death.

As catechists, the work we do must be done with an ecclesial (or Church) mindset. We are forming people to be participating members in the family of God. Everything we do in catechesis will have a corporate or family dimension to it. Every person is personally invited by Christ to follow Him, and in doing so, He is calling them to participate in His Body, the Church.

#### 5. The Human Person

CCC 356 Of all visible creatures only man is "able to know and love his creator." He is "the only creature on earth that God has willed for its own sake," and he alone is called to share, by

knowledge and love, in God's own life. It was for this end that he was created, and this is the fundamental reason for his dignity...

...CCC 357 Being in the image of God the human individual possesses the dignity of a person, who is not just something, but someone. He is capable of self-knowledge, of self-possession and of freely giving himself and entering into communion with other persons. And he is called by grace to a covenant with his Creator, to offer him a response of faith and love that no other creature can give in his stead.

358 God created everything for man,<sup>222</sup> but man in turn was created to serve and love God and to offer all creation back to him...

Unlike any other visible creature of God, only human beings are created in God's image and likeness. Above all, this means that only human beings are capable of giving and receiving love, the core of Who God is. Being created in God's image and likeness, each person, from the moment of his/her conception, is endowed with dignity and the purpose to love. We are made for God and can only find our happiness in Him.

Everything that the Church offers, including doctrine and Sacraments, is to help us become the people God intended us to be, people free from sin and alive with Christ-like love. The CCC, according to then Cardinal Ratzinger, is a manual for happiness, designed to help every person grow in holiness.

As catechists, we are an instrument to invite our participants to the grand life of following Christ. It is only in Christ that we can find our true identity. Every catechesis we impart must be connected to helping the person discover the love of Christ and the vocation to which Christ calls.

Trinity, Incarnation, Paschal Mystery, the Church and the human person are the foundational themes for all catechesis. Our catechesis will be effective to the degree to which we present these themes in a manner that helps people grow more deeply in love with the One Triune God.

#### Other Themes in the Catechism.

In addition to the above Golden Threads, we also find these themes throughout the CCC:

- *God's Grace* – God's grace is His life in us, given to us in Baptism. No one can earn his/her own salvation, it is a free gift from God. Through the Sacraments, God offers His saving life to us, and through the teachings of the Church, we learn how to respond to that grace.
- *The Symphonic Nature of the Faith* – The teachings of the Church are many, but at their core they reflect Jesus. There is a unity in the Faith that comes from the center of the Faith, Jesus. Just as a symphony is the union of many instruments playing at once, the CCC presents to us the interconnectedness of all the doctrines of the Faith.
- *The reasonableness of the Faith* – Many struggle with the demands of following Christ through the Church. While following Christ may be difficult, with God's grace it is always possible. Following the Church's teachings is not an ideal, but a doable standard that is achievable in Christ. Because they reflect a relationship with Christ, the teachings of the Church help me become the best person I can be.