The Catholic Catechism

When *The Catechism of the Catholic Church* was published in 1994, I initially had some problems with it. I was not happy that no attempt was made to avoid sexist language, language largely absent in the Latin edition. It seemed to me like an attempt by the Congregation of the Doctrine of the Faith, then headed by Cardinal Ratzinger (later Pope Benedict XVI) to impede implementation of the Second Vatican Council. I agreed with the many theologians who felt that the catechism would distill our highly nuanced faith into a series of transactions, due to its question-and-answer style.

Thirty years later, I can report to you with confidence that I was wrong! While I would still like more inclusive language, I have come to rely on the *Catechism* as the authoritative voice on what the Church believes and teaches. Notice that I didn’t say, “the last word.” The final say on any Church doctrine is found in the documents behind the *Catechism*; specifically, the documents of Vatican II, Canon Law and liturgical instructions within the sacramental books (e.g., *The Roman Missal*). These documents offer a broader context.

The purpose of the *Catechism* is to provide one place for authoritative teaching. Rather than searching through numerous volumes about a particular topic, the *Catechism* cites the teaching and gives its source. A little like using an encyclopedia, it should be the first place you look rather than the last. If more depth is required, you can look up the sources as well as commentaries on the subject.

Another value of the *Catechism* is that it’s hard to argue with the official source. When someone disagrees with me (or the Church), I call on the *Catechism*. More than once someone has quoted a medieval source or some cable commentator, and I’ve responded with what the *Catechism* actually says. It clarifies things quickly.

The question-and-answer style of the *Catechism* anticipates our inquiry in a way that avoids having to read through a lot of verbiage extraneous to the information needed. It also forms Church teachings in a way that speaks to our needs. If you’ve ever had to go through a long phone menu only to find that none of the categories answers your needs, you can appreciate that Catholic doctrine is set up this way.

Maybe the biggest barrier to laypeople using the *Catechism* is its massive scope. It starts with the most fundamental questions about our faith, and then breaks them down into ever more specific subjects. To overcome this issue, a number of abridged editions exist, such as the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops’ *Compendium: Catechism of the Catholic Church* and the *United States Catholic Catechism for Adults*. Another useful and enjoyable way to digest the *Catechism* is “Catechism In A Year!” which delivers two items from the *Compendium* to your email daily. You can sign up (it’s free) at flocknote.com/catechism.

Cantata Collective invites you to our next installment of FREE Bach Cantatas this Sunday at 5:00 pm in the Church. We welcome back some local favorites: soprano Tonia D’Amelio and tenor David Kurtenbach Rivera. Joining the ensemble in their Cantata Collective debuts are alto Sylvia Leith and baritone Edmund Milly. They will perform *Christus, der ist mein Leben*, BWV 95, and *Es ist euch gut, daß ich hingeho*, BWV 108.