

The Catechism of the Catholic Church

The Dignity of the Human Person

A study guide to the Catechism of the Catholic Church



CATHOLIC RURAL LIFE

The National Catholic Rural Life Conference, founded in 1923, is a faith-based membership organization focused on agriculture, food, and the land. Our mission is to apply the teachings of Jesus Christ for the social, economic, and spiritual development of rural America. Our program activities provide spiritual, educational, and advocacy initiatives for rural people to lead lives of dignity and piety.



We are grateful to Catholic United Financial who provided a grant for the production of this study guide and their past support for our program work related to all those who live in rural communities.



Catholic Rural Life
University of St. Thomas Mail 4080
2115 Summit Ave
St, Paul, MN 55105
651-962-5955

Copyright © 2013 by Catholic Rural Life

The Catechism of the Catholic Church

Background

A catechism is the name given to a written work that contains a summary of all the beliefs of the faith that is used as a teaching tool. Until the second half of the twentieth century, for millions of Catholics in the United States the word *catechism* meant the *Baltimore Catechism*, which originated at the Third Plenary Council of Baltimore in 1884 when the bishops of the United States decided to publish a national catechism. The *Baltimore Catechism* contained 421 questions and answers in thirty-seven chapters and gave unity to the teaching and understanding of the faith for millions of American Catholics. Its impact was felt right up to the dawn of the Second Vatican Council in 1962. At that time, Blessed John XXIII articulated a vision for the Fathers of the Second Vatican Council that charged them to guard and present more effectively the deposit of Christian doctrine in order to make it more accessible to the Christian faithful and all people of goodwill in the contemporary world. Eventually, it became clear that the development of a new universal catechism would be beneficial, especially since the Church has grown and the world has changed significantly since 1566.

In 1985, at a synod of bishops in Rome convened to celebrate the twentieth anniversary of the conclusion of the Second Vatican Council, a proposal to develop a universal catechism for the Catholic Church was made and accepted. The outcome was the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, first published in 1992, A new edition with some modifications was released in 1997. The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* is arranged in four parts:

1. Part I: The Profession of Faith
2. Part II: The Celebration of the Christian Mystery
3. Part III: Life in Christ
4. Part IV: Christian Prayer

The content of the *Catechism* is faithful to Apostolic Tradition, Scripture and the Magisterium. It incorporates the heritage of the Doctors, Fathers, and Saints of the Church and illuminates with the light of faith, contemporary situations, problems and questions.¹

The *Catechism* is available online from the Holy See website at:
http://www.vatican.va/archive/ENG0015/_INDEX.HTM.

Numbers are used to identify paragraphs. Endnote numbers are used to identify citations of original sources and/or citations to confer or compare (cf).

¹ *Catechism*; United States Conference of Catholic Bishops website: <http://www.usccb.org/beliefs-and-teachings/what-we-believe/catechism/>

The Catechism of the Catholic Church

The Dignity of the Human Person

The Meaning of Man

You are great, O Lord, and greatly to be praised: great is your power and your wisdom is without measure. And man, so small a part of your creation, wants to praise you: this man, though clothed with mortality and bearing the evidence of sin and the proof that you withstand the proud. Despite everything, man, though but a small part of your creation, wants to praise you, for you have made us for yourself, and our heart is restless until it rests in you.

St. Augustine

These words from the *Confessions* of St. Augustine (and quoted in paragraph 30 of the Catechism) indicate for us a very basic truth about ourselves, namely, that the good and happy life, which everyone by nature seeks, is possible only when our otherwise restless hearts find their rest in God. While Augustine addresses himself to God, praising the divine attributes of wisdom and creative power, the Catechism quotes him not so much to make a statement about who God is, but rather about who we are.

We should reflect for a moment on the significance of this. Although we believe that the Church infallibly tells us the truth about God, we may overlook the fact that the Church also instructs us--with equal infallibility--in what it means to be human. We moderns, who place a supreme value on autonomy and self-determination, predictably chafe at this claim. Why should we look to the Church to tell us about our humanness? Isn't it clear by now that the sciences of biology, anthropology, psychology, sociology, and so on, provide a more or less complete view of the human person? Certainly, all such natural knowledge of man is of inestimable worth, and the Church has historically made good use of it. But the human and natural sciences are unable to give us more than partial and provisional answers to the deepest questions we ask about ourselves. We need a sure and certain guide to the human things. And so Christ gives his Church the authority to teach about man as well as God, and for a very simple reason: without a reliable knowledge of who and what we are, the truth about God would be of questionable value to us, hanging, as it were, between heaven and earth. Thus the first two parts of the Catechism, taking first things first, teach us about God, his plan of salvation, and the ways in which he comes to us in the sacraments. Part Three is all about our side of the relationship (*Life in Christ*). If we want a serious answer to the question of what we are and where real freedom and happiness are to be found, we could scarcely make a better beginning than by studying this part of the Catechism.

Be ready, however, to be challenged. We humans are the greatest mysteries this side of heaven. For one thing, we are the only spiritual beings who are also animals. We are complex in a way that neither angels nor animals are, which is why we come to know ourselves only with great difficulty. Self-knowledge is easy for angels, being as they are, pure spirits. Nothing messy or complicated about being an angel or, for that matter, a demon. Animals, on the other hand, don't seem concerned with self-knowledge at all; the beasts don't have identity crises. But such is our exalted state--our dignity, as the Catechism puts it--that in us alone the visible and invisible creation are united. We're not just *at* the intersection of material and spiritual, we *are* the

intersection. For this reason, we're the only beings that run up against the problem of self-knowledge. The good news is that we humans actually like solving problems, and none better than this one. You don't have to be a philosopher, an artist, or a theologian to ask things like "why am I like this?" "what am I here for?" "what is the good life?" "how do I find happiness?"--you just have to be a human. As you might expect, difficult questions don't admit of simple answers, and the Catechism does not pander to those who prefer sentimental bromides of the sort you find on greeting cards and inspirational posters; grown-up questions require grown-up answers. Yet all really good answers will at least be clear, and clarity is one of the many virtues of the Catechism. So while it treats the big questions of happiness, freedom, responsibility, sin, and so on, it can be counted on always to stick to the point and avoid unnecessary elaboration and over-fine distinctions.

The following lessons are meant to help you in a close reading of the first chapter of Part Three, which is concerned with the meaning of human "dignity." This term, as is so often the case, is used much and understood little. Chapter one sheds more than a little light on the subject, showing us how our dignity isn't simply a static or unchangeable quality which is possessed by everyone and about which we needn't do anything. On the contrary, while man's dignity, or worth, "is rooted in his creation in the image and likeness of God" (1700), it must either be completed and perfected in charity or be disfigured and destroyed by sin:

...it is fulfilled in his vocation to divine beatitude. It is essential to a human being freely to direct himself to this fulfillment. By his deliberate actions, the human person does, or does not, conform to the good promised by God and attested by moral conscience. Human beings make their own contribution to their interior growth; they make their whole sentient and spiritual lives into means of this growth. With the help of grace they grow in virtue, avoid sin, and if they sin they entrust themselves as did the prodigal son to the mercy of our Father in heaven. In this way they attain to the perfection of charity. (1700)

So our dignity entails a great deal more than an affirmation of our essential worth. It involves a challenge, a vocation. It is this vocation to which Augustine refers when he declares before God "you have made us for yourself, and our heart is restless until it rests in you."

A Word about Reading the Catechism

The Catechism has a number of features that are meant to help you navigate through what might otherwise be an intimidating book. You'll notice right off that it's broken into numbered paragraphs. This makes it easy to find what you're looking for and to "digest" the content more easily, though it also means the experience of reading it will differ from reading an ordinary book. That's as it should be. The Catechism is meant not only to instruct, but to serve as a source of meditation. Moreover, it allows you to go as deep as you wish. In the margins you'll find cross-references--paragraph numbers that tell you where else the Catechism treats the matter you're reading about. Most editions of the Catechism also include a glossary of important terms and concepts, so if you've forgotten (or never knew) what "consubstantial" means, just flip to the back. Lastly, a catechism is only as good as its reliance on Scripture, Tradition, and the Magisterium of the Church. The Catechism of the Catholic Church not only derives its teaching from this threefold authority, but identifies on every page the sources from which the Church's teaching arises. There is a way in which the text of the Catechism is only the tip of the iceberg; the bulk of the iceberg lies beneath, in the rich heritage of Scripture, Tradition, and Magisterium cited in the footnotes. There is a wonderful resource entitled the Companion to the Catechism

of the Catholic Church which includes all the actual texts referred to in the notes. It's a great way to dig a little deeper by reading some of the most important works of the Catholic intellectual and doctrinal tradition. Happy reading!

Lesson One: *Man and the Search for Happiness*

Read: 1699-1729

The root of our dignity is found in the image of God, which “is present in every man” (1702). This image is not corporeal or bodily--we don’t look like God, since God doesn’t “look” like anything--but is, rather, spiritual and immaterial. So what is this mysterious image? It is our rationality. That is, it is in the fact that “by his reason, he is capable of understanding the order of thing established by the Creator [and] by free will, he is capable of directing himself toward his true good” (1704). Because we are endowed with understanding and freedom we are oriented to an end that is proper to our nature. That end is happiness, or beatitude. All human beings without exception desire happiness and though it is common to suppose that everyone’s idea of happiness is unique to themselves, everyone wants a happiness that is perfect and permanent--mere pleasure is insufficient and happiness in creatures is necessarily temporary. The desire for happiness is in fact infinite and so it can only be satisfied by an infinite object. In other words, only God can fulfill the human desire for happiness, and the sort of happiness which he gives is called in the Catholic Tradition “beatitude.”

Study Questions

1. What might the Catechism mean when it states that man is “the only creature on earth that God has willed for its own sake” (1703)? What is the purpose of other creatures?
2. Why does the Catechism call the intellect and will “spiritual powers” (1705)? How does this view differ from the modern view of the intellect as the same thing as the brain and the will as a natural or instinctual drive?

3. How did the Fall of Man affect man's intellect and will?

4. How do we know that the desire for happiness is of "divine origin" (1718)?

5. How are happiness and the moral life related (1723)?

For Reflection

According to St. Augustine (and many others) one of the signs that our desire for happiness is really a desire for God is the fact that we still desire it even when we “have everything we want.” Another sign is the disappointment that we sooner or later will feel in even the best of created goods. Has God ever used disappointment, sorrow, or loss to draw you closer to himself?

3. Why is it important to know the “sources of morality” (1750-1754)? How does knowing this help us?

4. How do circumstances affect the morality of an act?

5. What error does paragraph 1756 warn us against? (see also 1759)

For Reflection

The idea that our freedom increases the more we do what is good is not some abstract proposition, but is verified in the lives of all who live virtuously. Have you ever experienced liberation from some habit or sin that threatened to “enslave” you? How did God work in this circumstance?

3. What is the relation between strong feelings and the morality or spirituality of a person (1768)?

4. What, exactly, is the conscience?

5. How does the Church say the conscience is to be formed?

For Reflection

A major way in which our passions are developed in the moral life is through the examples of those who live lives of heroic virtue and holiness. Those who inspire us are actually developing within us a desire or passion to imitate them in some way. Who have been your greatest inspirations in the moral life? How, specifically, did their example inspire you?

Lesson Four: *The Virtues*

Read: 1803-1845

This week's lesson is devoted to the longest article in the chapter. Virtue is the heart of the moral life. So much more than just doing good deeds or "random acts of kindness," the virtues are actually habits whereby we act well and enjoy it. The Greek word for virtue--arete--means "excellence." The virtuous person is the excellent person. We should note that this lesson is essentially related to the previous one in which we learned about the passions, for the virtues perfect our passions and appetites. Think of the human person as a kind of English garden; the passions, appetites, and desires are like the plants, flowers, bushes, and trees within it. Unless there is constant weeding, pruning, shaping, and so forth, the garden simply becomes an overgrown wilderness. Likewise with the passions; unless they are habituated to the good, they "take over" and the soul's beauty is diminished. Without virtue we begin to be led around by whatever feeling or desire is strongest at the moment. When the virtues perfect our passions, the soul is beautified and we become free and happy persons. This is an article to read and re-read slowly and carefully.

Study Questions

1. How does the Catechism define virtue? What does a virtue enable a person to do and be?

2. What are the four cardinal virtues and what do they enable us to do?

3. Why aren't the human virtues sufficient to save us? In other words, why do we really need the theological virtues?

4. What are the theological virtues and how do they differ from one another?

For Reflection

Joseph Pieper, one of the great Catholic thinkers of the twentieth century, wrote several important books on both the cardinal and the theological virtues. He is noted, especially by confessors, for his observation that our habitual sins tend to have a common root in a defective theological virtue. For instance, if my moral life consists mostly in merely avoiding bad actions, not so much in a desire to be pleasing to God, then I am probably lacking in the virtue of charity. Using the Catechism as your guide, which theological virtue do you find most strong in you? Which one needs most strengthening?

3. What is the difference between mortal and venial sin? Why would God allow us to commit a sin by which we would damn ourselves?

4. What happens when sin is not repented of (1865 ff.)?

5. Under what circumstances do we share in the responsibility for other peoples' sins?

For Reflection

It bears repeating:

The most important thing about a final reflection is that it gives you an opportunity to say clearly what you know now that you didn't know before, and to clarify questions that you now have that you'd like to have answers for. So... state briefly just a few important insights that you had in the course of this study. What questions still remain?

For Further Reading

There are countless books, old and new, that cover the ground which this study has covered-- which means there are many excellent ones and many dreadful ones. Here are a few of varying difficulty that you might find helpful.

The Sources of Christian Ethics, by Servais Pinkaers.

A terrible title for a fantastic book. Pinkaers amply demonstrates that the Christian life is the answer to man's quest for happiness. If you think that Catholic morality is only a matter of following rules, this book will cure you. Pinkaers' work had a tremendous influence on the writers of the Catechism.

The Screwtape Letters, by C.S. Lewis

Want to know how sin works? You'll have a hard time putting down this marvelous work, written in the form of letters from an older demon to his less-experienced nephew.

The Everlasting Man, by G.K. Chesterton

How is man different from other beings and, really, what difference does Christianity make? If this sounds a little too lofty, perhaps this might pique your curiosity: C.S. Lewis remarked in 1963, six months before he died: "The contemporary book that has helped me the most is Chesterton's *The Everlasting Man*."



CATHOLIC RURAL LIFE

University of St. Thomas, Mail #4080, 2115 Summit Ave, St. Paul, MN 55105