

From Information to Transformation: Changing Approaches to Catechetical Texts

BY FR. DAN MAHAN

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MOST CATECHETICAL TEXTS AND DIGITAL MATERIALS used in parishes and schools throughout the United States today are the product of thoughtful collaboration between the publishers who create them and the bishops who certify their theological and pastoral integrity. This collaboration yields catechetical materials that are not only doctrinally sound but also are effective tools for what is known as an *evangelizing catechesis*. The history and significance of this collaboration is the subject of this article.

An Immigrant Church

Desiring a common language of faith for the children of the many immigrants to their country in the 19th century, the bishops of the United States published the first edition of the *Baltimore Catechism* in 1885. That catechism was based upon *Doctrina Christiana* (1598), the catechism of St. Robert Bellarmine published in the wake of the Council of Trent. The *Baltimore Catechism* would later be divided into three volumes, each volume corresponding to a particular age group. Although over one hundred other catechetical texts for children and youth would be published and used in Catholic schools and parishes, the *Baltimore Catechism* remained the most widely used catechetical text in the United States until the late 1960s. A four-volume set of the *Baltimore Catechism* remains in print (the fourth volume is a manual for teachers and catechists).



The Age of the Second Vatican Council

Unlike many previous ecumenical councils, the Second Vatican Council was not convened to address particular matters of faith or morals. Nevertheless, the council that was proclaimed to be pastoral rather than doctrinal in nature gave rise to sweeping changes in the life of the Church, especially in her sacred liturgy and practices of piety and devotion.

For most Catholics, the Second Vatican Council is seen as the council that replaced Latin with the vernacular at Mass, reoriented sanctuaries, introduced modern architectural forms into the building of new churches, and curtailed the requirements for fasting and abstinence. Pope Benedict XVI would note that these and other changes in the life of the Church led many to view the Second Vatican Council only through a particular lens, where one

saw the council as a call to discontinuity and rupture from “former” doctrines and practices. As a remedy, Pope Benedict emphasized a *hermeneutic of continuity*, a lens through which the Second Vatican Council would properly be understood only within the context of the wider and longer Tradition, rather than the converse.

Catechetical texts of this era were not immune to the hermeneutic of rupture and discontinuity, nor from a contemporary culture that heralded the benefits of “new and improved” over “tried and true.”¹ Pedagogy of that era generally eschewed the rote memorization that was a staple in earlier times; religious educators attuned to these trends desired catechetical materials of a pedagogy far different from that used by the *Baltimore Catechism*. Some religious educators expressed a praiseworthy desire for catechetical materials that would place greater emphasis upon Sacred Scripture and offer the rationale for the tenets of Catholic faith and morals. Other religious educators, caught up in the spirit of that age, preferred catechetical materials that ultimately reflected a tendency to relativize Catholic teaching and minimize the gravity of Catholic moral teaching. An influential parish priest once grumbled to me, “The *Baltimore Catechism* provides great answers to questions that nobody asks.” That same priest would repeatedly express his admiration for the 87 theologians (mostly priests) who publicly expressed their strong dissent from the teachings on the grave evil of contraception in the 1968 papal encyclical *Humanae Vitae* within hours of its promulgation.

A New Universal Catechism

The new pope “from a distant country” who emerged onto the balcony of St. Peter’s Basilica on October 16, 1978, would soon prove himself to be deeply dedicated to and notably competent in the renewal of catechesis.² Pope St. John Paul II built upon the

¹ Consider the trends in the use of artificial materials in kitchen design of the 1960s and 1970s. While Formica countertops, metal cabinets, and avocado-colored appliances were once heralded by many as harbingers of the “kitchen of the future,” they are now commonly viewed as relics of a very different age.

² John Paul II, “Primo Saluto e Prima Benedizione ai Fidei,” October 16, 1978: “*Lo hanno chiamato da un paese lontano*” (They [the cardinals] have called him [referring to himself] from a distant country).

catechetical efforts of Pope St. Paul VI and especially the previous year's synod of bishops, which had focused upon the catechesis of children and young people. On the first anniversary of his election, John Paul II promulgated his first apostolic exhortation, *Catechesi Tradendae* ("On Catechesis in Our Time"). At a time in which serious questions were being raised about catechesis, the Church was blessed with a vigorous, young pope who had the heart of a teacher.

Seven years into his papacy, John Paul II convened an extraordinary synod of bishops on the occasion of the 20th anniversary of the close of the Second Vatican Council. The 1985 synod was convened "to celebrate the graces and spiritual fruits of Vatican II, to study its teaching in greater depth in order that all the Christian faithful might better adhere to it and to promote knowledge and application of it."³ Among the various interventions that were made over the course of the two-week synod came the call for a universal catechism that would be a compendium of all that the Church teaches about faith and morals. The widespread enthusiasm of synod fathers for this intervention prompted nearly immediate action by the pope. By 1992, the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* was published, the first universal catechism since the 16th-century *Roman Catechism*. Few people expected the great number of copies that would be printed in the many languages of the earth over the decades that followed, nor could they have anticipated the tremendously positive impact this new catechism would have.

The Bishops of the United States

A significant, nearly immediate, positive effect of the promulgation of the 1992 *Catechism* took place in the United States, where the bishops used it to address the well-founded neuralgic response to the content of many catechetical texts.

Throughout the 1970s and 80s, the bishops of the United States received many complaints from parents and others about both the content of catechetical texts and the uninspired methods of catechesis. The bishops reflected upon the catechetical renewal of Pope St. John Paul II, especially through his Wednesday audience talks, *Catechesi Tradendae*, and the promulgation of the *Catechism*.

³ John Paul II, *Fidei Depositum*, introduction.

My own archbishop, Daniel Buechlein (1938–2018), was chosen by his brother bishops to be the first chairman of their Ad Hoc Committee to Oversee the Use of the *Catechism*.

Initially, the committee focused on the practical realities of overseeing the printing of the *Catechism* by several publishers and establishing conditions for its use in publications (word limits, royalties, etc.). Then, Archbishop Buechlein led the committee into a much more important initiative: namely, the study of the many complaints about catechetical texts that had been made over the past 20 to 30 years—a study that was undertaken by a very capable staff and by the bishops on the committee themselves.

To carry out this task, the bishops devised the “Protocol for Conformity to the Catechism,” which consisted mainly of the summary points at the end of each section of the *Catechism*. Publishers of catechetical texts were made aware of this new standard and were given the opportunity to seek a declaration from the committee indicating that the text(s) presented the teachings of the Church in a manner that was authentic and complete.

In 1997, Archbishop Buechlein delivered a progress report to the Conference of Bishops on the state of the catechetical texts that had been reviewed. The archbishop’s presentation became known as the “Ten Deficiencies” address.⁴ While making clear that the committee had not reviewed every text on the market and that it was not accusing all publishers of every deficiency, Archbishop Buechlein listed the following serious concerns as being common to texts that the committee had reviewed:

1. Insufficient attention to the Trinity and the Trinitarian structure of Catholic beliefs and teachings
2. An obscured presentation of the centrality of Christ in salvation history and an insufficient emphasis on the divinity of Christ
3. An indistinct treatment of the ecclesial context of Catholic beliefs and magisterial teachings
4. An inadequate sense of a distinctively Christian anthropology
5. Insufficient emphasis on God’s initiative in the world with a corresponding overemphasis on human action

⁴ Archbishop Daniel Buechlein, “Oral Report to the Assembly of Bishops,” June 19, 1997, <https://www.usccb.org/committees/catechism/oral-report-general-assembly-bishops>.

6. An insufficient recognition of the transforming effects of grace
7. Inadequate presentation of the sacraments
8. Deficiency in the teaching on original sin and sin in general
9. A meager exposition of Christian moral life
10. An inadequate presentation of eschatology⁵

Archbishop Buechlein asked me to be a reviewer of catechetical texts in the year 2000. I joined a team of about two dozen other reviewers from around the United States, each with a full-time position as a professor or parish priest. Initially, I could see very clearly why Archbishop Buechlein was able to identify 10 deficiencies in catechetical texts. There was no shortage of problems with the first texts that I reviewed. It seemed that some publishers were taking previously published texts that were seriously deficient and then sprinkling a few *Catechism* references and quotes from Pope John Paul II on top. Perhaps those publishers thought that the bishops were all bark and no bite!

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Over time, those publishers recognized that it made no sense to hire writers who had previously submitted deficient texts. It was necessary to hire writers who understood what the bishops meant when they asked that texts be authentic and complete in their presentation of the teachings of the *Catechism* identified in the protocol document. In many ways, it was an example of the importance of not putting “new wine into old wineskins” (Lk 5:36). Through trial and error, the publishers became very keen on hiring writers who manifested a dynamic orthodoxy—a faith that is believed, celebrated, and lived with enthusiasm.

Recent reviews have required much less time and effort than earlier reviews and have focused mainly on catching an infelicitous phrase or minor, correctable errors. I am confident that the texts the USCCB lists as approved are in conformity with the *Catechism* and that they represent with authenticity the completeness of the

⁵ Buechlein, “Oral Report.”

teachings of the Church.⁶ Yet, there persists the problem of disaffiliation of our young Catholics. Sadly, far too many students who have studied from those texts and have gotten high marks in religion class over eight to 12 years still leave the Church in shocking numbers, many never to darken the door of a church again.

An Evangelizing Catechesis

In recent years, the bishops have worked to address this disturbing trend. The bishops responsible for overseeing the review process have recognized that good catechetical texts can only do what they are meant to do within a culture of Catholic life. Like seeds broadcast by the sower, catechetical efforts produce only momentary growth unless the seeds of faith fall upon fertile, tilled soil. In the United States (and in other parts of the world) we cannot take for granted the importance of the practice of the faith within the home and the difference it makes when a family centers its life around the ringing of the church bells. Without that context, without that culture, young people are opting out of the Catholic Church not so much out of disagreement but out of apathy.

With this in mind, the bishops of the United States have taken action. They have repurposed the Subcommittee (formerly the Ad Hoc Committee) on the *Catechism* so that its work is much more encompassing than granting textbooks a decree of conformity to the *Catechism*. While the theological accuracy and completeness of catechetical materials remains an abiding concern, the former protocols have been replaced by the *Handbook on the Catechetical Accompaniment Process*, which lays out not only cognitive goals but also inner-life and behavioral goals for students, catechists, and parents.⁷ To be effective, a text

⁶ See the list of approved texts at the USCCB website: “Conformity Listing of Catechetical Texts and Series,” <https://www.usccb.org/resources/conformity-review-list.pdf>.

⁷ Institute on the Catechism, *Handbook on the Catechetical Accompaniment Process* (USCCB, 2024). See the handbook in its entirety at: https://evangelizingcatechesis.com/site/wp-content/uploads/2024/07/IOC_Handbook_on_the_Cap_2024-2.pdf.

must touch not only the head but also the heart (the inner life) and the hands (putting faith into practice). This emphasis by the bishops represents a commitment to promoting an *evangelizing catechesis*, or, as it is known in the *Directory for Catechesis* (2020), a *kerygmatic catechesis*.⁸

At the heart of an evangelizing catechesis is a credible, personal witness to faith in Jesus Christ. In the words of Pope St. Paul VI, “Modern man listens more willingly to witnesses than to teachers, and if he does listen to teachers, it is because they are witnesses.”⁹ First and foremost is the importance of the witness of parents. Catechists are called to teach sound doctrine within the context of a personal witness that speaks to the heart and that inspires lives of holiness and virtue. Evangelizing catechesis accompanies others from wherever they might be in life to finding meaning and purpose in a personal, sacramental encounter with the Lord Jesus. Such has been the process of passing on the faith since the days of the apostles. So may it be in our troubled times.

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⁸ See Pontifical Council for the Promotion of the New Evangelization, *Directory for Catechesis* (USCCB, 2020), nos. 57–60.

⁹ Paul VI, *Evangelii Nuntiandi*, no. 41.