

ANNUS MIRABILIS

THE CATECHISM AND THE YEAR OF FAITH

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A 2012 survey from the Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life calculates twenty percent of Americans do not identify with any particular religion. This statistic reveals a thirteen percent increase since 1972 in the category of Americans who do not consider themselves affiliated with any particular religion. Moreover, seven percent of Americans report professing no belief in God or a supreme spirit.

The findings of the Pew Forum, clearly demonstrate the trend which Pope Benedict identifies in his recent Apostolic Letter, *Porta fidei* (Door of Faith), as “a profound crisis of faith” (PF 2). The fact that the number of atheists is on the rise, and that an alarming percentage of Americans—one which has more than doubled in just thirty years—does not identify itself with any one religious tradition is quite troubling. Keenly aware of “the need to rediscover the journey of faith,” the Holy Father sees the Year of Faith as a summons “to an authentic and renewed conversion to the Lord, the one Savior of the world” (PF 6).

Why then, at the start of the Year of Faith, would Pope Benedict place so great an emphasis on the study of the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* in *Porta Fidei*? To answer this, we first need to examine the theological virtue of faith. Only then, with a definition of faith in hand, can we see the relevance of the *Catechism* to the virtue of faith. Finally, when we combine this working knowledge of the virtue of faith with an appreciation of the centrality of the

Catechism, we will see have a broader vision of the *Catechism* in the life of the Church.

THE VIRTUE OF FAITH

The infused virtue of faith elevates the intellect, allowing it to assent to otherwise unknowable truths. The Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation, *Dei Verbum*, from the Second Vatican Council summarizes the breadth of this teaching: “Through divine revelation, God chose to show forth and communicate himself and the eternal decisions of his will regarding the salvation of men. That is to say, he chose to share with them those divine treasures which totally transcend the understanding of the human mind” (DV 6).

Faith, then, through belief in the person of the Word, becomes the believer’s gateway to sharing the innermost life of the Holy Trinity. The infused theological virtue of faith raises men up and, by the Holy Spirit, endows them with spiritual capabilities far greater than those which men possess in the exercise of their natural human abilities.

Theologians agree that the object of faith is none other than God himself. St. Thomas was fond of saying that unaided reason can know that God is, and what God is not, but what God is far exceeds our human capacity for knowledge. If *what* God is cannot be comprehended fully, then without divine assistance we can certainly never know *who* he is. If man is to know the inner life of God—the mysteries of God’s own life as a Trinity of persons—then it must be revealed by God and accepted by man in faith. Thus God is not only the object known by the mind of man, but also the light whereby man comes to see God.

Faith allows man to know God. *Knowing* indicates that faith is a virtue that perfects the mind. It is the theological virtue that allows man to share in God’s own self-knowledge. Every act of living faith leads to an act of the will, but faith itself resides in the intellect,



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for the act of faith assents to what is true, and truth is held in the mind. Moreover, faith is an intellectual virtue unlike any other, for it is completely supernatural. By faith, we know God as more than just the great designer of the universe—we know him as the Holy One of Israel; the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob; the most Glorious and Exalted Trinity. By faith, we know the Father in the face of his Incarnate Son, and recognize the Holy Spirit they send to dwell in our souls.

FAITH AND THE CATECHISM

As Pope Benedict says, “Knowledge of the content of faith is essential for giving one’s own assent, that is to say for adhering fully with intellect and will to what the Church proposes. Knowledge of faith opens a door into the fullness of the saving

mystery revealed by God” (PF 10). It is no great mystery, then, that the study of the *Catechism* both enriches and intensifies the faith of a believer.

St. Thomas observes that a consideration of the object of the virtue of faith includes two aspects. The first is the “formal” aspect of the object, who is God, the First Truth. Thus, as we have said, faith only assents to anything because it is revealed by God. The whole of the Catholic faith rests on the basis of Divine Truth. The second aspect of the object of faith encompasses those propositions which we believe that say something about God. Many and sundry things fall into this category, and it is here in the “material” object of faith that we can locate the *Catechism*. The *Catechism* presents the propositions of faith to the believer, and this is why studying it can be such a strong aid in the life of the believer—because its propositions aid the intellect in attaining the formal object of faith, who is God.

The Holy Father offers Saint Augustine as an example of a man who understood the perennial search for the beauty of the faith. The saintly Bishop of Hippo was committed to a constant rediscovery of both joy in believing and enthusiasm for communicating the faith. For many believers the missionary commitment of the faith can be renewed and invigorated by studying the truths of the faith. In fact, with its elegant and precise formulations, the *Catechism* can be a powerful aid to assist the faithful to build the much-needed vocabulary in order to enter into genuine and effective conversations about the faith.

Pope Benedict notes that the rigorous intellectual exercises we might undertake are not to be misconstrued as *necessarily* being occasions of growth in faith. The Pope writes, “Only through believing, then, does faith grow and become stronger; there is no other possibility for possessing certitude with regard to one’s life apart from self-abandonment” (PF 7). Devoid of the dynamism of true belief, a sterile intellectual endeavor will not be of much assistance to the believer.

Moreover, to avoid the trap of proof-texting the faith, those seeking to know the Lord must subject themselves to a certain type of asceticism of the mind. This does not mean uncritically submitting oneself to the Church, but it does mean approaching the teaching of the *Catechism* with a certain openness and humility. Without these requisite attitudes, we run the risk of missing the presence of the Lord; we might well turn away from him as so many did in his own day.

A BROADER VISION

As we have seen, acquiring knowledge of the content of the faith plays a crucial role in accepting the saving mysteries proposed by God into one's own life. One of the great strengths of the *Catechism* is its systematic presentation of that content. But the *Catechism* by no means contains the absolute totality of the Catholic faith. St. Thomas Aquinas touches on just this point in his *Summa Theologiae* when he wonders why Christ did not simply write a book. His answer is illuminating; he says that Christ's teaching is pre-eminently directed to the heart. The purpose of Our Lord's preaching is not something that can be fulfilled by a book, for he intended his teaching to reshape our hearts after the image of his own heart. Accordingly, if believers adopt Christ's teaching as a mere intellectual pursuit—one without consequence in the way that they live—they miss the seminal truths of the Good News.

Simply memorizing teaching of the *Catechism*, then, will not necessarily usher us into a vibrant life of communion with God. Catechetical study is not an input-output relationship with God. The believer is responsible for more than simply knowing the truths of the faith, for as Pope Benedict says repeatedly throughout *Porta Fidei*, faith bears no fruit without the living-out of charity. But faith itself forms the first step on the path to divine charity,

and the more sincerely we give ourselves to understanding that faith, the more confident our steps will be.

To live out this divine charity places a heavy demand on the life of the believer. A man seeking friendship with God, informed by the knowledge of faith, will live a distinct sort of life: a Christian life. The Holy Father writes, “Faith without charity bears no fruit, while charity without faith would be a sentiment constantly at the mercy of doubt” (PF 14).

Living faith dynamically illuminates our knowledge, and when it works, it works through charity. The *Catechism*, then, can be considered as much more than theory. In fact, Pope Benedict describes it as “an encounter with a Person who lives within the Church.” It is a vehicle for knowing Christ, who dwells in his Church. Jesus Christ, the Pope teaches us, the one who is the answer to the drama of the suffering and pains of the world, the one who has ransomed our souls from death, can be met in the *Catechism*.

To return to the rather ominous statistics presented at the beginning of this essay, Pope Benedict offers a concise and challenging response. He says, “What the world is in particular need of today is the credible witness of people enlightened in mind and heart by the word of the Lord, and capable of opening the hearts and minds of many to the desire for God and for true life, life without end” (PF 15).

The Holy Father is encouraging Catholics in the United States to study the truths of the faith so as to present them in creative, articulate and compelling ways to the twenty percent of Americans who do not identify with any particular religious tradition. Knowing well that this enterprise is fraught with hardship, the Pope exhorts us saying, “How many believers, even in our own day, are tested by God’s silence when they would rather hear his consoling voice! The trials of life . . . are a prelude to the joy and hope to which faith leads” (PF 15).

And so we turn our hearts and minds, even in the face of great tribulation, to the task of rediscovering the perennial truths of the faith, so that we ourselves may continually be converted to the Love that saves, the Love that offers new life in the mystery of our faith.

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