

The U.S. bishops have issued a new United States Catholic Catechism for Adults. This Update takes a look at the elements of the new Catechism as well as how the text teaches and how it will impact the lives of American Catholics.

A Quick Look at the New U.S. Catechism

By Carol Ann Morrow

“Why did God make you?” This question was posed in the 1885 *Baltimore Catechism No. 1*, the most basic edition of that venerable series. I know the answer, and many—who used subsequent but similar editions—can recite that answer with me: “God made me to know him, to love him and to serve him in this world and to be happy with him for ever in heaven.”



At Vatican II (1962-1965), the Church not only opened the windows, but also expanded the context for understanding the answers to this and many other catechism questions. The didactic question-and-answer approach fell out of favor as new understanding of the ways people learn influenced teaching methods in all subject areas.

Forty years later, beloved Pope John Paul II saw the need to develop a new catechism for a new time in the Church's life. That catechism, meant to capture and codify the wisdom of Vatican II and its understanding of the faith, was issued in 1994.

Of that book, the pope said, “It is meant to encourage and assist in the writing of new local catechisms, which take into account various situations and cultures, while carefully preserving the unity of faith and fidelity to Catholic doctrine.”

The bishops of the United States responded to this invitation in June 2000 and, after years of work, have now issued the *United States Catholic Catechism for Adults*. They've worked as quickly as their Roman counterparts to prepare a volume designed for post-Vatican II U.S. Catholics, who grew up in a time of transition in the Church. Other Catholics will find it equally useful.

Why the U.S. needs its own catechism

No self-respecting teacher uses even an online encyclopedia as a basic text. True educators draw from life, connect to truth and point toward contemporary circumstance and culture. In religious education, the work of meditation and prayer completes the circle of engagement. While this seems to be a universal truth, it poses particular challenges.

Catholics of different nations or regions face varied circumstances, are engaged by examples drawn from their experience and live their faith within a culture shaped by history, geography and economics into a particular flavor—and it's never vanilla. An adult primer of faith must respect and engage its readers by recognizing and respecting that God-given variety. Pope John Paul II saw the need and the bishops of the United States have responded.

Big picture of a big book

Any Catholic who has consulted the 904-page *Catechism of the Catholic Church* also knows the general outline of its U.S. counterpart. Just as was true in the *Baltimore Catechism*, the Creed, Sacraments, Commandments and Prayer are the structural and thematic pillars of this new book.

Both books are positive, confident and rooted in Scripture. Both include summary statements highlighting doctrinal emphases. Given these parallels of approach and structure, what makes the *U.S. Catechism* distinct?

Three elements deserve special note: 1) stories; 2) application to American culture and 3) inclusion of meditations and prayers.

1. Stories

The Preface and the next 35 chapters begin with a story (the final chapter [36] begins with a summary of Gospel teaching on prayer.) These brief biographies include saints and near saints, laymen and laywomen, religious, priests, bishops, a cardinal and two popes. Native American, black, Canadian, Puerto Rican and Hispanic persons are represented.

Some of these holy people are well-known to most Catholics, others less so. The closer they are to grassroots America, the more edifying is their effect. Each story has a logical link to the chapter that follows. Here's a sampling of the holy U.S. Catholics one can meet in the *Catechism*—some, I expect for the very first time!

Women founders of religious communities: I was edified by the intrepid pioneer spirit of the six sister-founders who introduce various chapters. Elizabeth Seton, Frances Cabrini, Rose Hawthorne Lathrop and Katharine Drexel are perhaps better known but no more courageous than Henriette Delille, who challenged Catholics to overcome prejudice, and Mother Joseph, honored in Washington, D.C.'s Statuary Hall. Sister Thea Bowman was not a founder in her own right, but perhaps is best placed together with these women, given her prophetic voice for Black Catholics in the Church.

Lay leaders: Dorothy Day and César Chávez have long been heroes to me and champions of social justice, but I had not been familiar with journalists Orestes Brownson and John Boyle O'Reilly or lay apostle Carlos Manuel Rodriguez of Puerto Rico. Pierre Toussaint and Kateri Tekakwitha may have ministered more quietly, but they nevertheless led by example. Catherine de Hueck Doherty, though not a U.S. citizen, profoundly influenced many Americans through the houses devoted to the lay apostolate she and her husband founded throughout the world.

The ordained: The rest of the U.S. Catholics profiled in the *Catechism* include eight priests (sometimes two to a chapter), three bishops and Cardinal Joseph Bernardin, whose example in facing death fittingly introduces the chapter on the Sacrament of the Anointing of the Sick.

2. Doctrine applied to cultural challenges

The themes of human dignity, fairness, respect, solidarity and justice are among those treated. As the Introduction states, sometimes this application is positive, but it may also address difficulties such as subjectivism, relativism and moral decision-making dilemmas.

Granted that people of every culture around the globe face crises of faith, these crises will be spawned within and fostered within a culture. It takes glasses adjusted to that cultural perspective to see them clearly for what they are. The catechism issued by the Vatican could not possibly address such local variety!

The *U.S. Catechism* takes on the critical issues of American culture and demonstrates clearly how the faith of old applies to these new challenges and situations.

3. Prayer

The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* says, "Prayer is the life of the new heart. It ought to animate us at every moment" (#2697). The *U.S. Catechism* honors that "ought" by concluding each chapter with an appropriate meditation, prayer and Scripture citation. Some are from the holy person whose story opened the chapter. Many are spiritual classics. The invitation these elements present reminds students of the catechism the reason for their reading: to love God, to prepare for service of God.

The *U.S. Catechism* also includes an appendix of traditional Catholic prayers. Since Chapter 35 says, "The will to pray in a daily, sustained and structured manner is essential for becoming a prayerful person" (p. 469), the revered texts of long tradition make excellent structural starters.

How the text teaches

The U.S. text is 300 pages shorter than its Vatican counterpart. The U.S. volume includes several elements (described earlier) that the international text does not. One can only conclude that when some things were added, others were left out or condensed. Does this imply that the teaching of the universal *Catechism* was altered or deleted? Not at all.

This book does not replace the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*. Both books are foundational. The constant references to the Vatican text within the *U.S. Catechism* remind readers that the two volumes are partners.

Since the newer book is especially designed for American Catholics, it forms an excellent bridge for connecting to the earlier, larger (let's face it, more difficult and scholarly) book when the U.S. text awakens a hunger, inspires a question or creates a need to know more.

This book is directed to a specific audience (young adult Catholics) but keeps the entire U.S. Roman Catholic (and Eastern Catholic) community in mind. The *U.S. Catechism* is simpler in structure, content and language than its international "elder" volume. That's a plus.

When a text originates in the language of a majority of its intended readers, that language communicates with special clarity. In Chapter 9 on the Holy Spirit, for instance, the cultural application is headed "The Spirit Is the Immediacy of God." This eloquent phrase communicates well to U.S. readers accustomed to instant access and rapid response. It situates the truth of the Holy Spirit's activity in the English-speaking experience.

The *U.S. Catholic Catechism* situates the truths of faith in a context particular to our nation. Here, for instance, the new *Catechism* has some comments on New Age spirituality under the First Commandment—not much, but more than the universal *Catechism*. It has more content on abortion and

introduces such topics as abuse, charismatic renewal, civil disobedience, computers (including the Internet and software piracy), copyright violations (under the Seventh Commandment) and fertility (fecundity in the universal *Catechism*) in the Index.

The U.S. bishops have included excerpts from teaching documents they've issued in the past, such as a response to the events of September 11 and reflections on the themes of the Church's social teaching. By reiterating them in the *U.S. Catechism*, they underline their importance and teach by their very placement within the text.

Where will this catechism impact your life?

The *U.S. Catholic Catechism for Adults* is exactly that: Catholic and for adults. It can be used confidently as a resource for every Catholic. It could be a reference for the family, but it is clearly meant to be more than that.

In addition to the stories, the cultural segments and the prayerful conclusion to each chapter, the interested reader will find questions and answers, key doctrinal statements for easy perusal and discussion questions that could engage many a study group and any creative, curious, concerned Catholic.

So this *Catechism* will surely become a staple of the Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults, both for its teaching team and for inquirers. It will be a stimulating resource for parish study groups, who may choose to focus on the discussion questions.

Chapter 8, "The Saving Death and Resurrection of Christ," poses these questions: "How would you help people come to faith in the Resurrection of Christ? Why is it so central to your faith?" You'll find pointers to these and many other questions about the Catholic faith in the *U.S. Catholic Catechism for Adults*.

Carol Ann Morrow, a widely published author and editor, has studied the United States Catholic Catechism for Adults in great detail, as producer of the audio edition available from St. Anthony Messenger Press.