



Day 1. Apostolic Constitution, 'Fidei Depositum'

Read: 'Fidei Depositum'

Commentary

Beginnings are always important. The direction in which you start to walk determines your likely destination. The first words of a good speaker capture the audience's attention. This document is the Pope's introduction to the Catechism, and the first words of official Church documents are always extremely important. All Vatican documents are named from the first two words of the Latin text, and therefore these words are chosen with great care, so that they clearly indicate the message of the document. The first two words of the Latin text of this Apostolic Constitution are 'Fidei Depositum', which means 'the deposit of faith'. This tells you what the document is about, it states its theme.

So what does the title of the Pope's introduction tell us about the Catechism? What is the 'Deposit of Faith'? In ancient Jewish, Roman and Greek law a deposit was a contract by which the person depositing freely entrusted something, often money, to the guardianship of another person. The person guarding the deposit had to be able to return it intact to the person who had left it.

The Greek word for deposit is found three times in the New Testament: 1 Tim.6:20, 2 Tim.1:12,14. Look up these references in your Bible. (Also look at Rev.2:25, 3:11, where believers are told to 'hold fast' to what they have.) What has been entrusted to the Church is God's revelation of Himself in Jesus Christ, and it is this which must be carefully guarded. The Church has a duty not to alter this. She must not add to it, nor take from it. Many people imagine that the Pope has the power to change doctrines and moral teachings which are unpopular or are felt to be too harsh. But the Pope, together with the other Bishops, only guards the faith. His task is to be a faithful servant, a guardian - not a master. He holds the Church's faith on trust from God.

Talking about the Church's teaching as a 'deposit' can make it sound like buried treasure which is kept safely but never sees the light of day! But of course the faith is meant to be a message which brings light and hope, which brings salvation to those who hear it. So in fact the way in which the Church guards the deposit is not by putting it into moth-balls and locking it away for safe-keeping - she guards it by *interpreting it faithfully*, making it meaningful for every new generation. She must show how the faith, which is always one and the same faith, unchanging through time, is equally relevant for every age. 'Tradition' is the name we give to this process of interpreting the divine deposit through the centuries in accordance with the changing conditions of the times and the specific needs of each generation.

Let us stay with the title a bit longer. It is significant that it includes the phrase that the Catechism was composed 'following the Second Vatican Council' (*). This is included not simply in order to date it - the date can easily be discovered by looking at the end of the Apostolic Constitution! - but to stress that this Catechism not only 'follows' the Second Vatican Council in the sense of having been written after it; it also 'follows' it in the sense of adhering to it, making the Council's teachings its own, incorporating its teachings into this work. Perhaps the Pope was concerned that he would be seen as putting the clock back to before Vatican II by issuing this Catechism. He is impressing upon us that this is not the case.

Fidei Depositum makes this point abundantly clear in the text as well as the title - for example, notice how the Pope stresses his commitment to the teachings of Vatican II. Look also at the second paragraph, where the Pope identifies the main task of Vatican II as having been the same as the purpose of the Catechism itself - to guard the deposit of faith. He also notes that the Council had this task not as an end in itself, but so that the Christian message could be presented more clearly and adequately in the modern world. And this again is the task of the Catechism: the faith is presented in these pages so that it can be communicated to a world hungry for the truth of the Gospel. Both Vatican II and the Catechism are concerned with mission, with evangelisation. And before we can spread the Good News we have to know what the news is, we need sound and firm knowledge of the faith. The Catechism has been written to provide us with this.

So there are many points of contact between Vatican II and the Catechism:

- both are concerned with guarding the deposit of faith

- both are concerned with communicating the faith more effectively in the modern world
- the Catechism incorporates and presents the teachings of Vatican II
- both are the result of collaboration between all the Catholic bishops - they are 'collegial' (*) enterprises.

The **nature** of this document is made clear by the title it is given, 'Apostolic Constitution' (*). If you look at papal documents you will notice that they have different titles: some are 'Apostolic Exhortations', most are 'Encyclical Letters' or 'Apostolic Letters'. 'Apostolic Constitution' therefore signifies something precise: it is a form of papal decree which deals with matters of faith and which has relevance for the whole Church. It is a 'weighty' document, an especially important one, dealing with dogma, with matters of faith.

To do

Go through *Fidei Depositum* and mark the passages which talk about the need to guard the deposit of faith. Then mark the passages which stress the need to communicate the Gospel to others and the need to present the Gospel in a new way in our own age. What is the connection between 'conserving' the Church's doctrine and presenting it effectively?

Day 2. The Life of Man - to know and to love God

Read: §1-3

Commentary

The Catechism opens with three short quotations from Scripture which sum up its whole purpose. The three paragraphs which follow can be thought of as the Catechism's commentary on them.

The first quotation is **John 17:3**. In John's Gospel, as in the Scriptures as a whole, 'knowledge' is a very rich concept. Eternal life, writes St. John, is a matter of 'knowing' the Father and Jesus. This knowing includes intellectual knowledge, the grasp and full understanding of different truths about the Father and Jesus; but the kind of knowledge we can have of God is also the fruit of a genuine commitment to Him and love for Him. It is a personal, intimate knowing of God as well as an intellectual understanding of Him (see also John 10:14-15). God wants us to have not only an intellectual grasp of his nature but to share in His life. We are called not only to know truths, but to know the Truth, and Truth is a Person. Truth is Jesus (see John 14:6) and knowledge of Him as Truth sets us free (John 8:32).

These two aspects of knowing God complement each other. They go hand in hand. We need doctrine and we need personal commitment to the Lord. That is why the Catechism deals both with what we must believe and also with what we must do. Our knowledge of God must be both personal, springing from a deep inner commitment to Him, and 'propositional' (*) - that is, we must have knowledge *about* God. The two are interdependent. Knowledge and commitment go together.

We love and respect our parents when we know them to be our parents. We cannot love God if we know nothing about Him. We cannot worship Christ without knowing something of His divinity. But on the other hand, we shall never know God fully unless we love Him, and we shall never have a clear understanding of Christ's divinity unless we worship and adore him.

Think of the apostles on the road to Emmaeus (Luke 24:13-35). The two apostles were walking alongside Jesus, and yet they did not really know Him because they did not know enough *about* Him. And so Jesus explained to them all the parts of Scripture which referred to Him, He 'opened the scriptures' to them. He told them who He was. And it was only then that they could experience Him.

C.S.Lewis presented a useful analogy in his book, *Mere Christianity*, to help us think about the relationship between knowing God personally and knowing about God. He said that experiencing God is like looking at the sea from the beach. Doctrines, on the other hand, are like a map of the sea - far less interesting than the sea

itself, but if you want to get anywhere and not merely stand on the beach all day you will need the map. Doctrine is what we need if we want to be practical about the Christian life and start moving.

Or you might like to think of it this way: God is like an electric current, and a personal encounter with Him like an electric shock. Doctrines are like the knowledge we have of what electricity is - boring, perhaps, compared with the experience of a shock, but extremely necessary!

This leads us on to the second and third quotations: **1 Tim.2:3-4** and **Acts 4:12**. Both speak about salvation. God wants everyone to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth, and there is only one way to be saved because there is only one Truth, Jesus Christ Himself. 'Jesus', in fact, means 'God saves'. Look up Matthew 1:21, and see Catechism §430-432 on this point.

§2 and 3 elaborate this theme. They point out that the Church has a universal (i.e. 'catholic') mission. By the proclamation of the Gospel she invites all people to be saved (see Matt.28:18-20). By hearing the Gospel people can 'come to the knowledge of the truth' (1Tim.2:4). It is by believing the truths which God has revealed and which the Church proclaims that we come into a personal relationship with Jesus Christ and enter into God's own life.

The missionary purpose of the Church is made very clear here: we must hand on what we learn; it is not ours to keep. And we hand on the faith to others by *professing* the faith, by *living* it out in community, by *celebrating* it in the liturgy and in private prayer. These points, of course, correspond to the four parts of the Catechism.

To do

1. Look at Acts 2:42 and identify the elements of profession of faith, living faith in community, liturgy and prayer in the life of the first Christians.
2. How would you explain to someone the importance of a knowledge of sound doctrine in the Christian life?

Day 3. Handing on the Faith: Catechesis

Read: §4-10

Commentary

These paragraphs are a brief survey of the place which catechesis has in the life of the Church. They detail the more important moments in the Church's history when there have been major developments in catechesis, right up to the present time when in 1985, at the Extraordinary Synod of Bishops, the request was made for the present Catechism.

The first thing many people think of when one mentions the word 'catechism' or 'catechesis' is the Penny Catechism. This is a Catechism produced by Bishop Richard Challenor, which was revised toward the end of the 19th century, becoming known as the 'penny catechism' because it cost a penny. It begins with the question and answer sequence, 'Who made me? God made me. Why did God make you? To know Him, to love Him and to serve Him in this world, and to be happy with Him forever in the next'.

Now of course the Catechism which you are studying is very different from this, not only in style but also in length and comprehensiveness. The present Catechism is an updating of what is known as 'The Roman Catechism' (see §9). This was written some 400 years ago, following the Council of Trent (1545-63) (*), which was assembled as a result of the Protestant Reformation. The Council of Trent decided to publish two catechisms, one for the clergy, and one for children and for those who were uneducated.

In the event, only the first was written. It has four parts, treating the Creed, the Sacraments, the Commandments and the Our Father. The idea behind this Catechism was to educate the priests who would then be able to educate the people. It is this catechism which is popularly known as 'The Roman Catechism'. It is

more than 400 pages long, very intellectual, and very much in the style of St. Augustine. Unfortunately, it was above the heads of many of the clergy and so its direct use and influence was limited. However, many smaller, shorter catechisms were inspired by it, and Bishop Challenor's catechism lies in this tradition of shorter catechisms.

So when we approach this present Catechism we need to think much wider than the Penny Catechism. Let us go back to the word 'catechesis' itself. This has a much broader meaning than 'catechism'. The Greek word which we translate 'to catechise' means 'to instruct'. Hence, in the early Church, candidates for Baptism were called *catechumens*, and the explanation they were given of the basic truths of the faith was called *catechesis*. A *catechism* is an explanation of the faith in a written form - a book or booklet.

At first, converts were instructed only orally. The first written summary of the faith is a short booklet which was probably composed in Syria sometime between 80 A.D. and 120 A.D. - in other words, around the time when the later parts of the New Testament, such as St. John's Gospel, were being written. It was known as *The Didache*, or *The Teaching of the Twelve Apostles* ('Didache' is Greek for teaching).

The most famous catechism in the early Church was that of St. Cyril of Jerusalem who compiled a series of 24 *Catechetical Lectures* for fairly intelligent adults. These lectures had great success and were widely copied. §8 mentions the work of St. Cyril, together with that of other great Fathers of the Church, such as St. Augustine of Hippo, who in about 400 A.D. wrote two books which were particularly influential: *On the Instruction of Beginners* and *On Christian Doctrine*.

§5 and 6 are important because they explain what catechesis means and distinguish it from other types of Christian activity. You will see that the word 'catechesis' is being used in a very precise way. It is an 'education in the faith' (§5). First it is *education*: it involves teaching and learning. It is not a matter of preaching or worship, but of education. Secondly, it is education *in the faith*: there is an 'organic' and 'systematic' presentation of Catholic doctrine. It is not a presentation of individual, personal views about God and the universe. There is an objective content to what one teaches. In catechesis one presents the Church's faith.

Many of these paragraphs are quoting heavily from the recent Apostolic Exhortation of John Paul II, *Catechesi Tradendae* (Catechesis in Our Time). This important document was written in 1979, following the 1977 Synod of bishops which discussed the same topic. It encourages new methods of teaching while stressing that these should not replace a systematic presentation of the Church's doctrine.

To do

Study §6 carefully. Be clear in your own mind how catechesis (i.e. 'education in the faith') is *different* from each of the following:

- the initial proclamation of the Gospel, aimed at awakening faith in the hearer
- the examination of the reasons for faith
- the experience of the Christian life
- the celebration of the sacraments
- initiation into the Church
- missionary witness

How is catechesis linked to each of these aspects of the Christian life?

Day 4. The Purpose, Intended Audience, and Structure of the Catechism

Read: §11-17

Commentary

The first paragraph in this section, §11, is so rich that every word should be carefully pondered. Let us look at two of the key ideas in it.



Organic synthesis. This is how the Catechism describes its presentation of the faith. What does 'organic' imply? An organism is first of all a living being. It is a single, identifiable being with an inner principle of life and is constantly developing and adapting itself to its surroundings whilst still retaining its own identity. That is a very rich image for the faith of the Church. The inner life of the Church is the Holy Spirit, who enables her to interpret the faith in different times, countries and situations in new creative ways, while still remaining true to the one, original Gospel of Jesus Christ. This Catechism is simply the latest in these creative ventures of the Spirit. (Look at John 14:26 and 16:12-15 on the work of the Holy Spirit in developing doctrine while remaining faithful to the original message of Jesus).

The other point about an organism is that all its parts are related to each other, and all draw from the one inner principle of life. Turn back to *Fidei Depositum* and note how, in the section called 'Distribution of Material', the Pope discusses the interrelationship of the different parts of the Catechism and the relation of all the parts to Jesus Christ, who is, as it were, the inner life principle of the faith.

In the second section of *Fidei Depositum*, 'The Process and Spirit of Drafting the Text', the Pope uses another analogy to describe the interrelationship of the different parts of the faith to each other - the idea of a symphony. This is another helpful image. A symphony is made up of many different notes and musical phrases - this is like the manifold beliefs the Church has about God and Jesus Christ, about the sacraments and prayer, and about how we should act. Together they form one beautiful, harmonious whole.

A reference point. The Catechism is presented as a reference point for understanding and teaching the faith. The Pope writes of this, too, in *Fidei Depositum*, where he calls it a 'secure' or 'certain' norm for teaching the faith. Having this Catechism is like having a ruler, with the measurements marked on it. You can measure the beliefs you hold against what is stated in this catechism. If you follow what the Catechism teaches on different questions, forming your conscience along these lines, you can know that you are in harmony with the official teaching of the Church.

'Reference point' also reminds one of a map. If you are lost and want to know where you are, and how to get to your destination, you consult a map. The Catechism is a map of the world of faith. It outlines all the hills and gullies, warns you about the hidden marshes, and is able to guide you in safety along narrow, dangerous ledges. Consulting this map of the faith will tell you whether you are travelling in the right direction to reach your true destination.

§12 deals with the Catechism's intended audience. Since the 16th century, we have become accustomed to speak of a 'major' catechism as being addressed to bishops, priests and educators. A 'minor' catechism is a simpler version, meant for children and uneducated people. This is certainly a 'major' Catechism in that it is intended primarily for the bishops, who are *the* teachers in the Church, and for those to whom the bishops delegate this work. And most younger children would find it difficult to understand.

At the same time it is very important to realise that this Catechism is for all the faithful: the Holy Father writes in *Fidei Depositum* that it is offered to all the faithful who wish to know better the inexhaustible riches of salvation. The Catholic faith is for all, ordained and lay alike, and this Catechism is making that faith available to all.

Today's reading also deals with the structure of the Catechism. As it says, the main organisational principle of the Catechism is a traditional one. All the doctrines and teachings of the Church have been gathered under four headings. The Catechism is built like a solid house on these four great pillars.

Bishop Christoph Schonborn, the auxiliary bishop of Vienna and secretary of the committee which oversaw the production of the Catechism, has described the structure of the Catechism using the image of a medieval 'diptych'. A diptych is an altar piece consisting of two tablets, or 'doors', joined by hinges, often with different biblical scenes on the doors.

Looking at the Catechism in this way, we can say that on one door of the diptych we find the *mysteries of faith in God*, professed first in the Creed and then as celebrated in the sacraments. On the other tablet we find *the Christian life* itself - in one section the Ten Commandments, the moral truths that set us free; in the other, the

Lord's Prayer, our way to the Father given us by his Son. First we have what God has done for us. Then we have what we should do in response.

To do

Why do you think the authors of the Catechism place the parts of our faith saying what God has done for us before the parts saying how we are to behave? Would our Christian life be distorted if we reversed the order and put what we had to do first?

Day 5. Practical Indications and Necessary Adaptations

Read: §18-25

Commentary

This final part of the Prologue, or introduction, to the Catechism, offers some practical guidance on how to read it.

§18 gives us one very important principle. This is that we should read the Catechism 'as a whole' or 'as a unity'. What does this mean? Let us go back to the image of a symphony. If we want to appreciate the genius of Beethoven we cannot listen just to a single bar of his music or only to one of the instruments. We need to listen to the instruments playing together and to the whole symphony.

In the same way we have to listen to the faith as a whole. We must not pick and choose among the Church's teachings, selecting only the bits of the faith that we like. That corrupts the faith and we are bound to get a false impression of it. Imagine if the timpani or the violins were removed from a performance of Beethoven's fifth symphony - the loss of these instruments would affect the way the whole piece sounded. When we neglect, or throw overboard, bits of the faith we do not want, we do not just lose those items: the parts we retain are affected as well; they lack the fullness they should have and are not properly explained. To change the image: it has well been said that the unity of doctrine is like a face: change one feature, and the whole face looks different.

The authors of the Catechism have given numerous cross-references to help in this process of making connections between the different elements of the faith. Why not add your own? As you study this great work day by day add your own cross-references to those that are already given.

Every symphony has main themes, which recur frequently. So does the Catechism. Some parts of the faith are more important than other parts. The new Catechism has something to say about the immorality of reckless driving (§2290). But this is not as important as what it has to say about Jesus Christ. Using the image of a symphony again we can say that what the Catechism says about Jesus is one of the main themes which recurs in every movement. The sentence on driving could be compared to a single bar of music. Some of these lesser points are printed in smaller type (§20). 'Less important' is not the same as saying 'less true', of course. What the catechism says about Jesus Christ and about driving are both true. But less 'hangs' on Church teaching about driving.

§22 deals with what we can call 'the faith by heart'. The new Catechism is complex, but it aims to be accessible and to enable easy recollection. For this reason, at the end of each 'thematic unit', there are a series of concise restatements of the preceding teaching. These brief statements draw especially on the Bible, the Liturgy, official Church documents and the great heritage of Christian writers, both theological and spiritual. They are intended to help in the composition of local catechisms which, it is hoped, will lend themselves to easy memorisation. Clearly, then, the Church is calling for a resumption of the practice of teaching children (and others) the truths of the faith for memory. There has been something of an over-reaction against the place of memorising in religious education. But, as Cardinal Ratzinger has said, 'No one doubts the importance that memory has in the identity and life of a person - nor its relevance in the transmission of culture between diverse generations'. He



has called these brief restatements at the end of each unit 'the memory of the faith of the Church'.

§23-24 deal with the important question of the presentation of this one faith in different cultures and conditions. The image of a symphony will again be helpful. A composer writes a single musical score. But there is not only one way to play it. You can listen to many different versions of Beethoven's symphonies. Beethoven gave some guidance about how quickly or slowly, softly or loudly, to play each movement, but there is no one definitive interpretation of his works. It is for each conductor and orchestra to interpret the musical score. That is one way to think about the relationship between this new Catechism and other small catechisms which the Pope has asked to be produced nationally following the publication of this major Catechism. Each country will need to exercise its creative judgement in applying the faith which is presented in the Catechism to its own situation.

To do

Look at §25.

What vital point is it making about teaching the faith to others?

Write out this paragraph in your own words.