

## THE NORMATIVE STATUS OF THE *CATECHISM*

### Introduction

In posing the question of the normative status of the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* we are undertaking to view this document through an optic which seeks to address two distinct but related questions. Firstly, in what sense is the New Catechism as a whole to be regarded as normative, i.e. as a rule of belief? Secondly, what are the corresponding rights and responsibilities which flow from its normative character? In order to offer an adequate response to these two questions we are obliged to set our discussion within the historical and canonical contexts for the production and approval of catechisms in general and of the new Catechism in particular.

### The Historical Context

The term *catechism* comes from the Greek word *katechein* which means to speak so as to be heard, and thus, where it is used in the New Testament, it refers to oral instruction (*Lk* 1,4; *Acts* 18,25; *Rom* 2,18; *Gal* 6,6). This is the origin of the canonical notion of catechesis which classifies it not as a sub-specialty of Catholic education but as one of two formal expressions of the ministry of the Word of God. According to English and German usage, however, it denotes a manual of Chri-

stian doctrine, often in question and answer form (Germ. *Katechismus*). In Romance languages, the term also signifies the act of catechizing, the work of presenting Christian doctrine or an individual lesson, particularly to the young (French, *catéchisme*, Italian, *catechismo*)<sup>1</sup>.

In the Patristic and Early Medieval periods, catecheses formed part of the pre-baptismal instructions in the Faith and were, therefore, adult in orientation. The Canonical association of catechesis and the homily is verified in the examples of oral instruction which are found in Patristic literature, for example, in CYRIL of Alexandria's *Katechesis*, CHRYSOSTOM's *Homiliai katechetikai*, AUGUSTINE's *De catechizandis rudibus*, and RUFINUS' *Commentarius in symbolum apostolorum*. Sometimes these lectures and homilies dealt with the post-baptismal needs of the neophyte, in which case they were called *mystagogic* or simply *paschal*.

As for the subject matter of these *katecheses*, this consisted in the fundamentals of faith attributed to the Apostles, of which creeds of councils were summaries<sup>2</sup>. It was an essential part of the process by which one entered the community and referred inescapably to an extensive period of didactic preparation which, by the Fourth Century at least, was conducted by the Bishop during the Lenten season and loosely structured on the articles of the credal formulae or *symbola*<sup>3</sup>. While it is an open question as to how the credal formulae or *symbola*

---

<sup>1</sup> Cf. v. *catechism*, in *New Catholic Encyclopedia*, New York - London - Sidney 1967, III, 225.

<sup>2</sup> Cf. J. DANIELOU, *A History of Early Christian Doctrine before the Council of Nicaea: II, Gospel Message and Hellenistic Culture*, London 1973, 157.

<sup>3</sup> Cf. J.N.D. KELLY, *Early Christian Creeds*, New York 1972; C.M. LACUGNA, *The First Presentation: The Creed*, in *Catechumenate* (July 1989) 2-9.

developed, it seems probable that the act of faith in the persons of the Trinity, fleshed out in pre-baptismal rites, formed the proto-type for subsequent formulae. The period of the pre-baptismal instruction concluded with the handing over of the *symbol*. Thus the Bishop CYRIL of Jerusalem gave a series of instructions to catechumens in AD 348, numbers six to eighteen of which were based upon the credal *symbol* in use in the city at that time.

Throughout the Carolingian and Early Medieval periods, hand-books appeared which aimed to form clergy and laity alike. Examples of these include one manual that was directed at children in the form of questions and answers, and called the *Disputatio puerorum per interrogationes et responsiones*. It is attributed to ALCUIN (ob. 804) though some doubt its authenticity<sup>4</sup>. The Ninth Century handbook called the *Catechesis Weissenburgensis* was produced from the monastery of the name, and in the Twelfth Century HONORIUS of Autun is claimed to be the author of another, entitled the *Elucidarium*<sup>5</sup>. Finally HUGH of ST. VICTOR produced a manual *De quinque septenis* which formed the first generation of true *compendia* so-called<sup>6</sup>. These texts of course were written in Latin but as most people could not speak it, Bishops and Synods produced catechisms that were to be spoken orally to the faithful by those who had the care of souls (*cura animarum*). For this reason the canonical tradition associates the work of *catechesis* with the pastor or parish priest, and the New Code is faithful to this tradition (c. 773). These simple courses tended to be phrase-by-phrase commentaries on the baptismal

---

<sup>4</sup> Cf. *PL* (MIGNE) 101, 1097-1144.

<sup>5</sup> Cf. *PL* 172, 1109-1176.

<sup>6</sup> Cf. *PL* 175, 406-414.

prayers, the Apostles' Creed, the Lord's Prayer and they included a list of vices to be avoided. The New Catechism has not departed from this basic structure. Examples of such courses are numerous but worthy of mention are the *Capitularia* of CHARLEMAGNE (AD 802) and the many Synods in his Empire which proposed such course (Leipzig, AD 743; Aachen, AD 802; Arles, AD 813; Mainz, AD 813; and Trier, AD 1227). In England, the Council of Lambeth (AD 1281) serves as a useful source for determining the subject matter of such instructions. They were to be given by pastors four times a year on feast-days «without any fantastic weaving of subtle adornment» and include

*the fourteen articles of faith (i.e. the Creed), the Decalogue, the precepts of the Gospel, namely the two concerned with charity, the seven works of mercy, the seven capital sins, and the seven Sacraments of grace*<sup>7</sup>.

The utility of catechisms was not lost on the Reformers. LUTHER produced his *Kleiner Katechismus* in 1529, strongly influenced by those of the Waldensians, followed a year later by his *Grosser Katechismus*. LUTHER's handbooks, however, tended to stress the duties of one's state in life. The chief architects of the Counter-Reformation, particularly PETER CANISIUS, produced handbooks of Catholic faith to counter the doctrines of the Reformers. CANISIUS printed three (the Greater [*maior*] in 1555, the Lesser [*minus*] in 1556, and the Small Catechism [*parvus*] in 1558). The intermediate one, the Lesser Catechism, became normative in many countries, appearing as the *Capita doctrinae christianae compendio tradita*, and containing 124 questions, divided up into five sections, the first three

---

<sup>7</sup> Cf. MANSI XXIV, 410.

on the theological Virtues, the fourth on the Sacraments, and the fifth on the duties of Christian holiness. ROBERT BELLARMINE too produced a *Breve dottrina cristiana* in 1597 drawn from the instructions he gave to Jesuit brothers in Rome. So successful was BELLARMINE's catechism that the Fathers of the Council of Trent (1549-1563) asked for a similar catechism for pastors, which was to become known as the Roman Catechism. Three years later the text of four hundred pages was ready and adopted the traditional division; a) Faith and the Creed, b) the Sacraments, c) the Decalogue, and d) Prayer. It relied heavily on Scripture and the Fathers for its language but the tenor of the doctrinal exposition was Augustinian which in a sense brought it back to the Fifth Century rather than the First. Post-Tridentine catechisms followed the lead of ROBERT BELLARMINE.

In the Nineteenth Century there arose a desire for a Universal Catechism, to be produced for the whole Church. On the 14th January 1870, the Bishops assembled at Vatican I saw the distribution of a draft of a constitution on a catechism for the whole Church<sup>8</sup>. It was not greeted with unrestrained enthusiasm. One of England's representatives, Bishop CLIFFORD from Clifton, dryly commented that notwithstanding the undoubted talents of the assembled gathering of Bishops they were hardly likely to succeed where BELLARMINE and CANISIUS had failed. Despite such interventions, the vote in mid-May 1870 produced 491 *pro* and 56 *contra* with 44 *secundum modum*. The pessimism of some Bishops found an ally in the much more serious theological and pastoral objection that such a catechism would severely curtail the

---

<sup>8</sup> Cf. MANSI L, 699-701.

rights of Bishops, guaranteed, it was emphasized, by divine law, to govern and legislate for their own Dioceses. The final text of a constitution was formulated, but the adjournment of the Council forced the abandonment of the project<sup>9</sup>.

It is generally held that the present Archbishop of Boston BERNARD Cardinal LAW, articulating the desire of many Bishops at the Extraordinary Synod of 1985, first proposed the production of a Universal Catechism in modern times. To Cardinal JÄGER of Paderborn, however, must be accredited the distinction of having been the first to propose such a catechism; this took place at the Second Vatican Council<sup>10</sup>. The merit of Cardinal LAW's request was that it expressed the desire of the Synodal Fathers for a compendium of official teaching which could go a considerable way to offsetting a perceived lack of doctrinal substance in the catechetical programmes which followed the Council. The task was entrusted to the Apostolic See to coordinate the project and on 11 October 1992, after wholesale consultation with the Catholic Episcopate, Pope JOHN PAUL II signed *Fidei depositum*, the Apostolic Constitution which promulgated the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*<sup>11</sup>. The structure of the New Catechism follows the traditional four-part division of the Creed, Sacraments, the Decalogue and Prayer, though the over-arching format is designed to express the divine

---

<sup>9</sup> Cf. V. MORAN, *The Universal Catechism at Vatican I*, in *Pacifica* 1 (1988) 47-48.

<sup>10</sup> Cf. J. CARD. RATZINGER, *The Catechism of the Catholic Church and the optimism of the redeemed*, in *Communio* 20 (1993) 469-484.

<sup>11</sup> From a canonical point of view an *authentic* text of the Catechism has still to appear. This text should be in Latin and should form the normative text for translations. The master text of the

initiative (Creed and Sacraments) that calls for a human response (Decalogue and Prayer)<sup>12</sup>.

## The Canonical Context

In order to understand the canonical background to the Universal Catechism we shall have to examine the norms of the Code of Canon Law regarding the production of catechisms in general, and thence we shall be able to come to a decision regarding the normative value of the New Catechism and consequently of our rights and responsibilities toward it. The structure of the norms of the Code actually provide useful theological pointers for understanding the principles which lie behind the publication of a catechetical programme. It is Christ whose power and authority inspire the activity of the Church. He informs its life and teaching according to the threefold mission received from the Father, of Priest, Prophet and Shepherd-King. The sanctifying mission of the Church corresponds to Christ's Priestly dignity, the governing mission responds to his Kingly dignity and the teaching mission responds to his Prophetic dignity. This is the division assumed by the Code even if not always systematized consistently. The mission to sanctify incorporates norms on liturgy, sacraments and sacramentals; the mission to govern incorpo-

---

Catechism was redacted in French by the Commission but from the point of view of law, existing versions, French, Spanish, German, Portuguese and English, remain only versions of an as yet unavailable authentic text. There is also some discussion as to whether substantive changes will be made to the authentic text in view of the doctrinal evolution that has taken place with regard to specific moral issues, i.e. capital punishment.

<sup>12</sup> Cf. L. CUNNINGHAM, *The Structure of the Catechism*, in *The Universal Catechism Reader*, (ed. T.J. REESE), New York 1990, 35.

rates norms on hierarchical constitution, legislation, judicial and administrative procedures; and the mission to teach, which interests us, incorporates norms on five distinct areas in the life of the Church, namely, the ministry of the Word (cc. 756-780), the missionary activity of the Church (cc. 781-792), Catholic education (cc. 793-821), social communications and religious books (cc. 822-832), and the profession of faith (c. 833).

Catechesis is regarded as an expression of the church's ministry of the Word and it is thereby related to the proclamation of the Gospel in general and the homily in particular even though these are given a distinct sphere in the life of the Body of Christ. Catechesis, therefore, remains a responsibility of the work of bishops, presbyters and deacons, but especially of pastors. It is a distinct institution from Catholic education and the difference between the two has been the subject of much official comment<sup>13</sup>. While the mission to teach finds various expressions in the life of the church, among which one may count institutions of Catholic education (schools, universities and faculties of higher studies), it is in the ministry of the Word that we see catechesis, as it were, closer to its source; namely the mandate of Christ to go out and teach all nations (*Mt* 28, 19-20). Catechesis, therefore, forms one of two expressions of the ministry of the Word. The other is preaching which principally takes the forms of the homily at the liturgy (cc. 762-768),

---

<sup>13</sup> Properly speaking catechesis is related to evangelisation (cf. *Catechesi Tradendae*, 18, 19, 20, in *EV* 6 / 1796-1807, at AAS 71, 1979, 1291-1292, 1292-1293, 1293-1294). In one allocution Pope JOHN PAUL II distinguishes the ministry of the Word "as proclamation and as catechesis" (*Ad quosdam episcopos Foederatarum Civitatum Americae Septemtrionalis limine Apostolorum visitantes*, 24 aprilis 1993, in AAS 86, 1994, 250).

but also includes christian doctrine (c. 769), spiritual exercises (c. 770), evangelization (c. 771) and multimedia (c. 772).

The responsibility which the Code entrusts to the Church for catechizing the faithful falls on three categories of person. It falls on pastors of souls as a grave duty according to c. 773. In this canon the immediate and mediate purposes of catechesis are described; that through doctrinal instruction (the immediate end) and the experience of a Christian life the faith of the people of God might become more alive, explicit and operative (the mediate end). These last three qualities are the essential notes which give catechesis its particular quality and distinguish it from Catholic education<sup>14</sup>. The former, therefore, is designed to stimulate faith in the believer while the latter is designed to nurture the whole human person (GE 14, CD 14)<sup>15</sup>. Recent interventions of the magisterium, however, caution pastors lest these two aspects of the life of the community be separated, so that, for instance, one removed the Catholic School from the sphere of catechetics<sup>16</sup>.

A special concern (*sollicitudo*) for catechesis is enjoined on all members of the Church (*omnia Ecclesiae membra*) by c. 774, § 1. This is an addition to the Code which was inspired by the resolutions of the 1977 Synod of Bishops from which was produced the docu-

---

<sup>14</sup> Cf. *Catechesi Tradendae*, 18-25, in EV 6 / 1796-1823, at AAS 71 (1979) 1291-1298.

<sup>15</sup> Cf. *Evangelii Nuntiandi*, 44, in AAS 68 (1976) 34-35; *Directorium Catechisticum Generale*, 21-30, in AAS 64 (1972) 112-116.

<sup>16</sup> Cf. The allocution from Pope JOHN PAUL II on this precise subject, namely *Ad quosdam Magnae Britanniae sacros praesules in sacrorum liminium visitatione*, 26 martii 1992, in AAS 85 (1993) 353-357.

ment *Catechesi tradendae*. Paragraph 12 of the final document of the Synod states:

*Catechesis is a task of vital importance for the entire Church. This task falls upon all the faithful, each according to the condition of his/her life and his/her particular gifts or charisms... and the natural place or ambit of catechesis is the Christian community*<sup>17</sup>.

This proposition found its way into article 16 of the Apostolic Exhortation and thence into the Code. Its inclusion following the grave duty of pastors mentioned in c. 773 would suggest that in the order of responsibility it is secondary to that of pastors. A third category of persons, however, is also mentioned by the Code. According to the second paragraph of c. 774:

*Parents before others are bound by the obligation to form their children in the faith and practice of the Christian life by word and example; godparents and those who take the place of parents are bound by an equivalent obligation*<sup>18</sup>.

This canon implies that Christian parents have a prior (even prior to that of pastors) responsibility to educate their children in the faith. From the point of view of style the section on responsibility is somewhat confusing. It might have been more logical to order the three figures differently, say, parents, then pastors, and finally, all the faithful. In the redaction of this section, how-

---

<sup>17</sup> Cf. Synodus Episcoporum (1977), *De catechesi hoc nostro tempore tradenda*, § 12, in EV 6 / 401, at *Ad populum Dei nuntius Cum iam ad exitum*, 28 octobris 1977, Civitate Vaticana 28 octobris 1977, 18.

<sup>18</sup> *Prae ceteris parentes obligatione tenentur verbo et exemplo filios in fide et vitae christianae praxi efformandi; pari obligatione adstringuntur, qui parentem locum tenent atque patrini* (c. 774, § 2).

ever, we see the tension between a systematic ordering of the material as required by legal criteria and the concerns of theologians and catechists to insist that parents also teach in the name of the Church by virtue of the mission conferred at marriage<sup>19</sup>. Likewise, the second category of person mentioned (all the faithful) is something of an interpolation in the consistency of the canons that comes to us from the resolutions of the 1977 Synod. We may, therefore, justifiably ask if there is some way of understanding the different ways in which catechesis is undertaken by these figures and how they relate to one another, especially that of pastors and parents. Surely the mandate of pastors and the mandate of parents do not proceed from the same source? According to F. URRUTIA, where pastors have this mandate from Christ's mission to teach, parents receive it from parenthood (*ex generatione*), and thus, for parents, it is an obligation which arises out of marriage, articulated most explicitly in the liturgical rites established for the baptism of infants<sup>20</sup>. Parents are, therefore, *the first teachers of their children in the ways of faith*, and the canons are eager to underline this role<sup>21</sup>. Something of a return to canonical consistency is signalled when the concern for catechesis which is accorded to all members of the faithful is placed under the governance of the legitimate ecclesiastical authority (*sub moderamine legi-*

---

<sup>19</sup> Cf. *Familiaris Consortio*, 52-53, in AAS 74 (1982) 144-145.

<sup>20</sup> F. URRUTIA cites two papal documents on the origin of the parents' responsibilities, namely PIUS XI, *Divini Illius Magistri*, 31-12-1929, in AAS 22 (1930) 49-86, and *Mit brennender Sorge*, 14-3-1937, in AAS 29 (1937) 145-167 (cf. F.J. URRUTIA, *De Ecclesiae munere docendi*, Romae 1987, 28).

<sup>21</sup> C. 774, § 2 needs to be seen within the context of the other canons which deal with this matter:

*timae ecclesiasticae auctoritatis*), an echo of the norms of the General Catechetical Directory<sup>22</sup>.

This proviso could appear restrictive if we did not recall the origins of catechetical instruction, namely oral instruction in the essential elements of Christian faith and life. Moreover the clause reminds us that catechesis belongs to the official activity of the Church and we know from its inclusion among the forms of pastoral activity undertaken by religious subject to the governance of the Local Ordinary that the law wishes to place it under the oversight of ecclesiastical authority (c. 678, § 1).

The work of catechesis, as we have seen from church history, has, at different times employed systematic guides or *compendia* of one kind or another to help illustrate the essentials of Christian faith and practice. The acts of production and approval of religious texts in general to be used in ecclesiastical institutions are, in the Code, considered as expressions of the teaching authority of Bishops. The publication of catechisms is especially associated with this teaching authority. Depending on the type and scope of such texts, their approval is, therefore, associated with a canonical description of the relationships that obtain between Bishops, their Conferences, and the Roman Pontiff. According to this perspective there are two distinct en-

---

a) C. 226, § 2; Christian parents are especially to care for the Christian education of their children.

b) C. 1136; parents have the most serious duty and primary right to see to the... religious upbringing of their children.

c) C. 1366; a just penalty is to be imposed if parents hand children over to be educated or baptised in a non-Catholic religion.

<sup>22</sup> Cf. *Directorium Catechisticum Generale*, 38, in AAS 64 (1972) 120-121.

ties which interpenetrate one another, the Particular Church (here the Diocese) and the Universal Church. The Code does not employ a third category of Church which one might call Local, Regional or National as theological entity in itself. This is not because the Code does not accept the value of structures like the Episcopal Conference, indeed it provides norms for its activity, but because it bears witness to a longstanding canonical tradition that operates within the strict criteria laid down by the priority of the Universal and Particular Church over every other intermediary. The Universal Church flows from and into the Particular Church; an organic description of the latter appearing in c. 369, and of the former in c. 204. The Local Ordinary is in communion with the Bishop of Rome in such a way that an intermediary structure may not legitimately supplant the right of representation accorded by divine law to Diocesan Bishops. This is perforce a somewhat restrictive schema when set alongside existing national or regional arrangements but it may help to recall that here we are dealing with juridical rights and responsibilities which flow from and depend upon *sacramental status* in the Church. In the sphere of the production and approval of catechetical programmes the Code makes, as it were, a preferential option for the Particular Church.

### **The Production and Approval of Catechisms**

The first thing we should note is that a Universal Catechism is not explicitly envisaged by the Code. Its norms envisage only a diocesan and a regional catechism. As we have indicated, the starting point of the Code, regarding the production of catechetical instruments, is not the Universal or the Local but the Particular

Church and the Diocesan Bishop as its authoritative teacher<sup>23</sup>. The mission to teach is associated with his sacramental status as high priest (*ad apicem pontificatus*) and his standing as a member of the College, and follows the Council's attempt to tie *munus* more closely to sacramental ordination (*LG* 24)<sup>24</sup>. The Diocesan Bishop is, therefore, the moderator of the Word of God in his diocese and the chief authoritative practitioner of prophetic ministry of Christ for his people. The Bishop so described cannot remain unconcerned about the catechetical formation of his people. It constitutes one of his more serious responsibilities. In practice this is often left to diocesan or interdiocesan bodies to organize — sometimes it may even take the form of a national project — but, the Code echoes the conciliar ecclesiology when it situates the primary responsibility for the production of catechetical instruments with the Diocesan Bishop:

*While observing the prescriptions of the Apostolic See it is the responsibility of the Diocesan Bishop to issue norms concerning catechetics and to make provision that suitable instruments for catechesis are available, even by preparing a catechism, if such seems appropriate, and by fostering and coordinating catechetical endeavours*<sup>25</sup>.

What precisely are the rights of the Diocesan Bishop in this regard? A simple exegesis of the canon

---

<sup>23</sup> The Code does not know of the oft-used expression in popular theological parlance, *local Church*. Nor does it acknowledge the existence of a regional or national Church that somehow interposes itself between the Particular Church, headed by its Bishop, and the Universal Church, headed by the Roman Pontiff.

<sup>24</sup> S. WOOD, *The Sacramentality of Episcopal Consecration*, in *Theological Studies* 51 (1990) 479-496.

<sup>25</sup> *Servatis praescriptis ab Apostolica Sede latis, Episcopi dioecesani est normis de re catechetica edicere itemque prospicere*

above shows us that a) he is to issue norms for catechetical matters (which also bind religious when they are instructing non-exempt faithful); b) make provision that there are in fact suitable instruments of catechesis; c) foster and coordinate catechetical endeavours; d) prepare a catechism if it seems appropriate. Quite clearly the distinction sometimes made between *catechisms* and *catechetical programmes* does not have any bearing on correlative rights and responsibilities; they are both considered as *apta catechesis instrumenta*<sup>26</sup>.

A few words on the preparation of a catechism. As the first catechist and pastor, the Bishop himself has the right to prepare a catechism (with the delegated aid of consultors), a right which springs not from professional qualifications he may or may not have for the task, but from his mission and office as *pastor primus* of the portion of the people of God entrusted to his care (c. 369).

It is worth noting that, during the redaction of c. 775, two recommendations from consultors were specifically rejected. The response of the Commission provides an insight into the balance achieved by the final promulgated text between the legitimate autonomy of the Diocesan Bishop vis-à-vis Rome, and the same autonomy vis-à-vis the Episcopal Conference:

*One Father recommended that any catechism prepared by a Bishop would need to be approved by the Apostolic See. The suggestion received a negative response because it was be-*

---

ut apta catechesis instrumenta praesto sint, catechismum etiam parando, si opportunum id videatur, necnon incepta catechetica fovere atque coordinare (c. 775, § 1).

<sup>26</sup> Cf. *Directorium Catechisticum Generale*, 105, 109, 116, in AAS 64 (1972) 160, 162, 165.

*lieved that the Bishop as local pastor, has the right to prepare a catechism*<sup>27</sup>.

Hence the canon stands as a corrective to an unnecessary centralization. But by the very same token the excesses of decentralized centralization were also rejected:

*It was also recommended that it should be required that Bishops acquire the approval of the Episcopal Conference before issuing a diocesan catechism. This was also rejected because it was believed that it would not be opportune to insert another level of control over the local pastor*<sup>28</sup>.

From a legal point of view, therefore, the Diocesan Bishop enjoys full discretion on this matter. Canon 775 in its present form differs significantly from the 1977 schema which proposed that only Episcopal Conferences should enjoy the responsibility of producing catechisms. According to the law promulgated, therefore, the Diocesan Bishop has the right to publish a catechism without the need to obtain approval either from Rome or from the Conference, whether in terms of consultation or of common policy. The prerogatives of the Conference regarding the issuing of catechisms seem to be quite circumscribed by c. 775, § 2 and 3:

*§ 2. It is within the competence of the Conference of Bishops, with the prior approval of the Apostolic See, to see to it that catechisms are issued for its territory if such seems useful.*

*§ 3. There can be established within the Conference of Bishops a catechetical office whose principal task would be to furnish assistance to the individual dioceses in catechetical matters*<sup>29</sup>.

---

<sup>27</sup> Cf. *Communicationes* 15 (1983) 97, c. 730 n. 1.

<sup>28</sup> Cf. *Communicationes* 15 (1983) 97.

<sup>29</sup> § 2. *Episcoporum conferentiae est, si utile videatur, curare ut catechismi pro suo territorio, praevia Sedis Apostolicae approbatione, edantur.*

In general, therefore, we can affirm, on the basis of the canon above, that the Episcopal Conference has a limited competence in this area. Essentially it includes: a) seeing that catechisms are issued, and b) setting up a consultative office. More is revealed, however, of the relationship of Bishop to Conference from a simple exegesis of the Latinity of canon. The key expressions in paragraph one and two, namely *oportunum* and *utile*, connote quite different expectations. The sense of the former, which is applied to the Diocesan Bishop, indicates *appropriate* or *satis conveniens*, whereas *utile*, applied to the Conference, suggests *if nothing has otherwise been done*. The meaning seems to be: the Conference may act if nothing has been done by Diocesan Bishops.

As regards the approval of catechisms, we will have to explain some essential canonical concepts before dealing directly with the issues involved. The act of approval (*approbatio*) is distinguished from other administrative acts which qualify, condition or affect the validity or legitimacy of a juridical act. Such a condition may be attached, for example, to the issuing of decrees by Episcopal Conferences (c. 455, § 2), to the composition of liturgical texts and their translation (c. 838, § 2)<sup>30</sup>, or to the publication of catechetical texts (c. 775, § 2). The Code uses a variety of terms which in English we would designate very broadly to mean *approval*. The Latin terms carry different implications for the legitimacy or validity of the act in question. Approval (*approbatio*), although sometimes

---

§ 3. Apud Episcoporum conferentiam instituti potest officium cateheticum, cuius praecipuum munus sit singulis dioecesibus in re catechetica auxilium praebere (c. 775, §§ 2-3).

<sup>30</sup> Cf. *Pastor Bonus*, 62, 64, 66, in AAS 80 (1988) 1034-1036.

referred to as confirmation (*confirmatio*)<sup>31</sup>, is distinguished from recognition (*recognitio*). Thus the *approval* of the Holy See is required for the decision of an Episcopal Conference to convene a plenary session of a Particular Council (c. 439, § 1). On the other hand, the decrees of an Episcopal Conference simply require the *recognition* of the Holy See for their validity (c. 455, § 2). The former is a condition placed before notification, the latter is a post-publication acceptance of the legitimacy (and in this case the validity) of an act.

The norms of the Code for approving *catechisms* employ the word *approval* and not *recognition*. Thus, according to c. 775, § 2, an Episcopal Conference, before issuing a regional or national catechism (note the use of the word *praevia*) is required to seek prior approval from the Apostolic See. Some programme writers have sought to avoid the terms of this canon by describing their programme as a syllabus or as a resource rather than as a catechism, but the terms of article 94 of the Apostolic Constitution of the Roman Curia, *Pastor Bonus*, show that not only catechisms formally so-called fall within the remit of this approval but also *ali-*

---

<sup>31</sup> According to X. OCHOA, the term *confirmatio* appears twenty times in the Code: cc. 147; 178; 179, § 1; § 2; § 3; § 4; § 5; 182, § 1; 317, § 2; 324, § 2; 341, § 2; 427, § 2; 525, § 1; 625, § 3; 700; 1420, § 5; 1720, § 1 (cf. X. OCHOA, *Index verborum ac locutionum Codicis*, Romae, 99).

*Sacrosanctum Concilium*, 36, § 3 has the formula *actis et probatis confirmatis* which suggest that the terms are transferrable in the Council documents. In the Code, however, c. 341, § 1 suggests that these are distinct acts:

Concilii Oecumenici decreta vim obligandi non habent nisi una cum Concilii Patribus a Romano Pontifice approbata, ab eodem fuerint confirmata et eius iussu promulgata.

*isque scriptis ad institutionem catecheticaam pertinentibus.* Furthermore the Constitution makes it clear that this approval is to be sought from the Congregation for Clergy, with the consent of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith<sup>32</sup>.

One should recall that this is not the case with the production of a catechism by the Diocesan bishop, and the reason is threefold: a) there is a distinction in their respective roles in the Church; b) there is a difference in the size of their potential audience; c) there is a concern to respect individual Bishops who may disagree with the policy of the Conference. Since a regional or national catechetical programme would typically be approved of by a majority vote in Conference, the possibility exists that a portion of the Bishops may have disapproved of the programme. Dissenting Bishops should at least have another forum of appeal in which to make their views known, and if their reservations are not taken on board they should not be impeded from preparing their own texts<sup>33</sup>.

The point of reference of course for the approval of regional catechetical programmes remains the *General Catechetical Directory*, as re-stated by Pope

---

<sup>32</sup> Institutionem religiosam Christifidelium cuiuscumque aetatis et condicionis pro suo munere promovendam curat; opportunas normas praebet, ut lectiones catecheseos recta ratione tradantur; catecheticae institutioni rite impertiendae invigilat; praescriptam Sanctae Sedis approbationem pro catechismis aliisque scriptis ad institutionem catecheticaam pertinentibus, de assensu Congregationis de Doctrina Fidei, concedit; officiis catecheticis atque inceptis ad religiosam institutionem spectantibus et indolem internationalem prae se ferentibus adest, eorum navitatem coordinat iisque auxilia, si opus fuerit, praestat (cf. *Pastor Bonus* 94, in AAS 80, 1012).

<sup>33</sup> Cf. F. URRUTIA, *De Ecclesiae munere docendi* (cf. nt. 20), 29.

JOHN PAUL II in *Catechesi tradendae* 50, according to which "agreement with the Apostolic See" is the norm for approval. Some confusion regarding approval had been introduced by the decree *Ecclesiae Pastorum* (1977) which spoke of the approval of catechetical texts by the "Ordinary of the place *or* by the Conference" and, thereby, suggested that the Conference itself could approve the publication of a regional or national catechism. The matter was settled by the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith in a response of 25 June 1980, in which it was indicated that *Ecclesiae Pastorum* did not remove from the Conference the obligation of seeking the approval of the Apostolic See<sup>34</sup>.

It should be clear then from the norms set out above that the Code of Canon Law envisages the production of catechetical programmes as happening at a local rather than universal level. It may sound as if the Code is not terribly collegial in its approach but we need to recall that the Code is concerned strictly with the relationship of local catechetical programmes and, faithful to the schema of the priority of the particular over the general, it sets forth its norms with a view to establishing the rightful place of the Diocesan Bishop in all this.

### The Universal Catechism

The collegial nature of the process which has produced the Universal Catechism should be immediately apparent to everyone. This means that it cannot be regarded as a Roman imposition on an unwilling episcopate. The Bishops are as responsible for the production

---

<sup>34</sup> Cf. Responsum S.C.D.F., 25 June 1980, in AAS 72 (1980) 756.

of this document as the Apostolic See. In assessing the *normative* value, or authority, of the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, however, we need to keep in mind the schema of relationships established in the Code between the two primary entities for this material, the Universal Church and the Particular Church. We also need to have at the forefront of our minds the relationship between the whole College of Bishops and the Bishop of Rome, for, while the request was made by the Bishops attending the 1985 Extraordinary Synod, the responsibility for its production was entrusted to a commission set by Pope JOHN PAUL II. After extensive consultation, the final text of the Catechism was ready for 11 October 1992 and promulgated by the Apostolic Constitution, *Fidei depositum*.

In this Constitution, the Pope outlined the importance of the document and set it within the context of the major magisterial event of recent times, namely Vatican II, which remains the *constant point of reference* for the New Catechism<sup>35</sup>. From the point of view of canon law, one can conclude that three principal areas of the life of the Church, namely liturgy, discipline and doctrine, are now formally systematized in the light of Vatican II. Such an ambitious project could not but involve the entire Catholic Episcopate. Just as the two codifications of the law of Vatican II involved the consultation of the whole College of Bishops, it seemed only right that the production of a Universal Catechism should have been subjected to the same process. So, returning to our question, in assessing the normative value of the New Catechism could we not suggest that it should be evaluated, *per*

---

<sup>35</sup> Cf. JOHN PAUL II, Apostolic Constitution *Fidei Depositum*, n. 1, in *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, London 1994, 4. Latin text in AAS 86 (1994) 115-116.

*analogiam iuris*, much like a diocesan catechism produced by the Diocesan Bishop, though here destined for the Diocese of Rome and which thereafter becomes a model or exemplar for other Dioceses in the Church? This approach, in fact, had been considered in the early stages, but it was not the one followed. That leaves us, still following the norms of the Code, with the other possibility; should it be considered, *per analogiam iuris*, on a par with the regional catechism, a product of the authority of the Bishops who make up an Episcopal Conference?

The collegial approach seems to offer us the best way forward. After all, the Apostolic Constitution, *Fidei depositum*, states quite explicitly:

*The project was the object of extensive consultation among all Catholic Bishops, their Episcopal Conferences or Synods, and theological and catechetical institutes. As a whole, it received a broadly favourable acceptance on the part of the Episcopate. It can be said that this Catechism is the result of the collaboration of whole Episcopate or the Catholic Church, who generously accepted my invitation to share responsibility for an enterprise which directly concerns the life of the Church... The achievement of this Catechism thus reflects the collegial nature of the Episcopate; it testifies to the Church's catholicity<sup>36</sup>.*

So it would appear from an initial reading of the Constitution that the New Catechism is invested with a certain collegial authority. The Constitution uses the term "reflects" a much less precise term than say "expresses" or "realizes". In fact, during the presentation which accompanied the publication of the Catechism,

---

<sup>36</sup> Cf. JOHN PAUL II, Apostolic Constitution *Fidei Depositum*, n. 1, in *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, (cf. nt. 35), 4. Latin text in AAS 86 (1994) 115-116.

Cardinal Ratzinger, who presided over the Commission, indicated that it should be compared to the production of the Code of Canon Law. The New Catechism is a response to the request of the College which had been entrusted to a specially-constituted Commission, the *Commissio ad Catechismum redigendum pro Ecclesia Universali*. Its official signatory was the Roman Pontiff who represented the Apostolic See, the First See of the Universal Church. This suggests that, from a strictly juridical point of view, it is not a *collegial* act. This term has its own technical meaning distinct from the consultations that went into the project. The terms of the letter addressed to Bishops which accompanied drafts of the Catechism during the Consultation process help remind us of the purpose of the consultation:

*As you know, the Holy Father wishes that the whole Catholic Episcopate be consulted on this draft of the Catechism in order to prepare a Magisterial text which will serve as a "point of reference" for National and Diocesan Catechisms<sup>37</sup>.*

Clearly Rome wishes that the Bishops *take their share of the responsibility* for the project, to use the words of the Pope from the Apostolic Constitution, so as to give it a magisterial status that may not be undermined. In the same letter though there seems to be an inconsistency: it is not intended to supplant National or Regional catechetical programmes but to assist in their development. If this is the case, are we in fact dealing with a Roman, rather than Universal Catechism? After all if it were a Universal Catechism, would it not be *imposed* on the entire Church?

---

<sup>37</sup> Cf. *Commissio ad Catechismum redigendum pro Ecclesia Universali*, Litt. 3-XI-1989, Prot. N. I/86 C. Piazza del S. Uffizio, 11, 00193 Romae.

In the section of the Apostolic Constitution on the normative value of the text, the Pope states explicitly that he is approving the text for publication by force of his apostolic authority which guarantees that it is an official and authentic exposition of the faith of the church and of Catholic doctrine, witnessed to and illuminated by Scripture, Apostolic Tradition and the Magisterium. Here we have to separate out the juridical status of the document as a whole and the magisterial values represented by various parts of the document. The *promulgation* of the New Catechism was not, therefore, a collegial act of the whole Episcopate, in the strict sense of the term, but rather of the Bishop of Rome, acting in his capacity as Universal Pastor. Put in ecclesiological terms, the approval and promulgation of the text constitutes a service which the successor of Peter offers to the Catholic Church and to all the Particular Churches (Dioceses, Prelatures, Prefectures, etc.) that are in peace and in communion with the Holy See, a service to strengthen and confirm the faith of all the disciples of Christ (*Lk* 22,23).

## Conclusion

To conclude then, we can affirm that while the promulgation of the New Catechism was not a *collegial* act, it is a product of collegial consultation and input. This gives it a *magisterial* authority that sets it on a par with other documents that have been agreed upon by the Universal Episcopate, i.e. the Code of Canon Law.

In an Allocution to the Bishops of Western Canada, recently, Pope JOHN PAUL II, explaining the rationale behind the New Catechism, put it across as a synopsis of conciliar teaching:

*to assist us in our ministry at this time as heralds of the truth which sets us free (Jn 8,32), the Lord has given us a precious instrument and gift: the Catechism of the Catholic Church. In your hands this mature outcome of the Second Vatican Council will be an apt instrument by which the authentic teaching of the Council — itself a witness to the Church's great Tradition — can faithfully enter preaching and catechesis... It is not just for Pastors and specialists — as has been shown by its enthusiastic reception by the laity in many countries — but it is destined for all sectors of the Church*<sup>38</sup>.

While, therefore, it is directed *principally* to Bishops (here we must recall the ecclesiology behind the norms) this does not mean that it is entrusted to Bishops *exclusively*. It is intended to be passed on; to be transmitted to the whole people of God and also offered to those who wish to know what the Catholic Church believes. It amounts to a comprehensive statement of the conciliar and post-conciliar doctrine of the Catholic Church. Obviously it is a text that is directed to the unity of faith rather than to the pluralism of theology as such, which means it is to be interpreted as a *minimal* rather than *maximum* statement of the parameters of teaching. For this reason, it is described by its redactors less as a *compendium* of doctrine and more as an extension of the Gospel, i.e. not a theology text-book (*Fachwissenschaft*) but an instrument of proclamation (*Verkündigung*)<sup>39</sup>.

---

<sup>38</sup> Cf. JOHN PAUL II, *Allocutio Ad quosdam Canadae episcopos coram admissos*, 16 septembris 1993, in AAS 86 (1994) 492. For two more allocutions on the New Catechism see: *Ad quosdam episcopos Foederatarum Civitatum Americae Septemtrionalis coram admissos*, 20 martii 1993, in AAS 86 (1994) 72-77; *Ad quosdam Canadae episcopos sacra limina visitantes*, 3 iulii 1993, in AAS 86 (1994) 318-323.

<sup>39</sup> Cf. J. CARD. RATZINGER - C. SCHONBORN, *Kleine Hinführung zum Katechismus der katholischen Kirche*, München 1993), 15.

Here then we touch on the required response to the document. As it embodies texts of varying doctrinal weight our response to the different teachings will vary from the assent of faith required for articles of faith to the religious *obsequium* required for authoritative but non-definitive teachings of the ordinary magisterium (cc. 750, 752). It is not for us to provide a detailed analysis of the *dogmatic* status of individual affirmations of the Catechism. We have been concerned with its *juridical* value as a whole. Episcopal collaboration and Papal approval lend it particular weight and assure its normative status as a solemn expression of the ordinary teaching authority of the Church. As regards the rights of the people of God, it seems fair to conclude, on the basis of the terms of the Apostolic Constitutions and subsequent Allocutions of the Roman Pontiff, that just as the faithful have the right to hear the Word of God in all its integrity, they seem to have, by way of extension, a right of access to this new catechetical instrument as an authentic proclamation of the Mystery of Christ<sup>40</sup>.

RICHARD J. BARRETT

---

<sup>40</sup> Obviously this is a right which is deduced from the primary obligation of the Church to proclaim God's Word. It is furthermore a second-generation principle that regards one specific expression of the content of that Word, considered as an object of rights in the Body of Christ. Ecclesiastical authority reserves the right to limit the *exercise* of such rights either intrinsically by the prior obligation to preserve hierarchical communion or extrinsically by the need to preserve the common good of the same Church (c. 223, § 2). For a more detailed discussion of this point see R.J. BARRETT, *The Right to Integral Catechesis as a Fundamental Right of the Christian Faithful*, in *Apollinaris* 67 (1994) 179-206.