



## Meet the bishop behind the updated Catholic Catechism

[www.americamagazine.org](http://www.americamagazine.org)



*Archbishop Rino Fisichella, baptized Salvatore, is an Italian prelate who has served as the first president of the Pontifical Council for Promoting the New Evangelization since 2010 and president of the International Council for Catechesis since 2013. Pope Benedict XVI appointed him to the former post as part of the process leading into the Synod for the New Evangelization and the post-synodal exhortation *Evangelii Gaudium* of Pope Francis. Previously, he taught fundamental theology for 20 years at the Pontifical Gregorian University. He also served as an Auxiliary Bishop of Rome, Rector of the Pontifical Lateran University and in various curial positions.*

*A specialist in the theology of Hans Urs von Balthasar, Archbishop Fisichella recently completed a revision of his 1993 *Theological Commentary on the Catechism of the Catholic Church that Our Sunday Visitor* is publishing in the United States this summer as part of an updated version of the Catechism itself. As editor of this commentary, he oversaw the contributions of 42 experts chosen from among bishops, theologians, pastors, catechists and other scholars.*

*On April 12, I interviewed Archbishop Fisichella by email about this project. The following text of our conversation has been edited for style and length.*

***Since Pope St. John Paul II first promulgated the Catechism of the Catholic Church in 1992, the Vatican has given us the Compendium to the Catechism of the Catholic Church and the Youth Catechism (YOUCAT) as follow-ups. As per the Catechism's directive, we also have a United States Catholic Catechism for Adults and other catechisms now synched to it. What need does this new commentary edition fulfill that these previous supplemental texts have not met?***

First of all, it is important to remember that YouCat is not an initiative of the Holy See, although it does have its approval. YouCat is rather an interesting initiative by a group of young people which received the support of the bishops of Austria in the first instance and has since been translated and adapted into many other languages. So while it is very worthwhile in itself as an attempt explain our Catholic

faith to young people, it does not have the same status as either the Catechism of the Catholic Church or its Compendium which are Magisterial documents promulgated directly by the Holy Father.

The Theological Commentary, which I have edited, is very different from the texts you mention. It has its origins in the fact that, from the beginning, the Catechism was intended for bishops and as a basis for national catechisms. Our intention in producing the commentary was to offer an instrument to bishops, pastors and catechists by which to better understand the Catechism. The Catechism itself was redacted using a system of numbered paragraphs and syntheses at the end of each article which make it highly accessible. But there are always going to be those who require to know more, be they bishops, pastors, catechists or the interested laity.

***If the Catechism represents “a sure norm” on faith and morals, as John Paul II described it, why do we need to interpret it further?***

I suppose that the short answer is because no text, however authoritative, is capable of expressing the faith in a way that is completely exhaustive and univocal. Attempts to state the faith of the church—which stands in relation to God, time and space as no other institution does—are always going to require mediations to some degree. This is not to say that the Catechism is not a sure guide to faith and morals—it certainly is—but a recognition of the fact that statements of the Magisterium are always open to theological reflection.

***In the United States, the Canon Law Society of America has produced a similar commentary on the Code of Canon Law, and various Catholic scholars have produced study bibles with commentaries. As a product of the Vatican, does this new Catechism of the Catholic Church with Theological Commentary carry more official magisterial authority than these other texts, or should we treat it as equivalent?***

Let me say at once that our commentary is not a document of the Magisterium. In fact, each contributor is named and takes personal responsibility for his or her own contribution. The works you mention are all aimed at mediating specific contents, be it of the Code of Canon Law or Sacred Scripture itself. Such mediations or guides are very precious, since few of us have the time or the opportunity to become experts in a given field, but at the same time we need to consult and to use these texts in order to know the mind of the church and give our pastoral work a better grounding. Also, it should not be forgotten that the 2012 Synod on the New Evangelization called for instruments which would assist in giving the reasons of our faith in the world of today.

***The U.S. publisher has confirmed that this new edition will carry the revision of Pope Francis to number 2267 on the death penalty, making it the first American print edition of the Catechism to do so. Addressing this change in the commentary, how do you explain doctrinal development in a way that makes sense to ordinary Catholics?***

What is often lost sight of in discussions of this matter is the fact that Apostolic Tradition, or “Sacred Tradition” in the language of Vatican II, is first and foremost living. Sometimes we are guilty of giving the impression that tradition is an exercise akin to an athletics relay in which the aim is to pass the gold baton of the faith onto the next runner just exactly as it was received. But this conception risks reducing tradition to a fly in amber and ends up negating its very origin and purpose. Tradition has its origin in the Gospel which the living Christ ordered the Apostles to preach and to hand on to their successors, the bishops. It is precisely tradition which allows the church to confront new situations and evaluate them in the light of the Gospel. To deny this dynamic nature of tradition is tantamount to denying the contemporaneity of the Christian faith.

Does this mean that each new generation of Christians is authorized to change the faith at its whim? Emphatically not, for such a vision not only would not be Catholic but would have no basis in the historical development of our faith. But what it does mean is that the teaching of the church can develop over time in a way that is organic and faithful to the deposit of faith. To put it bluntly, either tradition is living or it is not the tradition of the Catholic Church. As I explained in a recent article, the question of the death penalty and Pope Francis's intervention must be understood within this dynamic conception of tradition.

***What role did Pope Francis play in this project?***

Pope Francis was very supportive of this initiative and generously wrote the preface which will also appear in the forthcoming English edition. He was very keen that the 25th anniversary of the Catechism be commemorated solemnly in the Vatican, and it was on this occasion, in October of 2017, that he announced his decision to ask for a reformulation of number 2267 in the direction of the inadmissibility of the death penalty. I find it very significant that in his preface the Holy Father notes that St. John Paul II signed the Apostolic Constitution ordering the publication of the catechism on the 30th anniversary of the opening of Vatican II, thus underlining the continuity between the council and the catechism.

***How was your experience collaborating with Cardinal Schönborn, the original editor of the Catechism, and other experts on the commentary?***

I have known Cardinal Schönborn for many years, long before he became a member of the Pontifical Council for the Promotion of the New Evangelization of which I have the honor to be president. He is a remarkable man in many ways. He has made a significant contribution to the church's understanding of the New Evangelization, and the Catechism will remain very much a part of his personal legacy. He was one of the speakers at the event we organized in October 2017 to commemorate the 25th anniversary of the Catechism, and it was very moving as well as interesting to hear him speak of theological and doctrinal principles underlying its redaction under St. John Paul II. In particular, I was very pleased to hear him, speaking of the primacy of grace, underline how the catechism presents God under the aspect of his action in salvation history, from which it derives that faith is above all our human response to God in his self-revelation. This, to me, was confirmation of the model of revelation and faith which is such an important part of the vision of Vatican II with its Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation, *Dei Verbum*, but also confirmation of the Catechism's being very much part of the patrimony of Vatican II.

***In the process of assembling the commentary, what areas proved most challenging and why?***

As one who is not only a theologian whose specific interest is fundamental theology but also a bishop, I never cease to be aware of the challenge which derives from the fact that one is attempting to explain faith in Christ in a cultural context which is characterized by an extreme fragmentariness. But if this context makes the task seem daunting, history intervenes immediately to remind us that the context was also daunting when writers such as Justin Martyr were trying to explain the faith against the background of the Roman Empire. I always think that history is a great antidote to the temptation to despair, pastoral as well as doctrinal.

***As the first president of the Pontifical Council for the New Evangelization, how might you see this text evangelizing readers?***

Let me say at once that the primary aim of a catechism, let alone a commentary on a catechism, is not to convert but to explain the faith to those who have already chosen the way of Christ, although it is well placed to set the ball rolling in any man or woman of good will who is interested in Christ or

the church. So the aim is not to evangelize in the primary sense so much as to bring Christians to a deeper understanding of the faith they profess. Mindful of 1 Peter 3:15, this is a perennial necessity and one we ignore today at our peril.

***Although catechesis remains a necessary part of evangelization, one may question whether we Catholics tend to jump too quickly to it, lecturing people about doctrine before doing the necessary relationship-building that makes them care in the first place. As president of the International Council for Catechesis, how do you respond to this concern that our evangelization must go beyond giving another book to read?***

You highlight a danger which is very real. When they engage in analyzing the act of faith, theologians traditionally distinguish between what they call the *fides qua*, the act of believing, and the *fides quae*, the specific content believed. For too long in Christian formation—at all levels, not just in catechesis—too much emphasis has been placed on the *fides quae*, on the many contents of our faith, to the detriment of the *fides qua* as a personal choice made freely and deliberately under grace. This imbalance is tragic because it has undermined our faith in Jesus Christ as a living, interpersonal relationship, giving the impression that belief is little more than an intellectual exercise limited to just the head rather than involving the human being in his or her totality.

Moreover, I am firmly of the view that this approach lies at the root of many of the problems facing the church in her relations with contemporary cultures. In particular, when the moral teaching of the church is presented as a series of precepts apart from an interpersonal relationship with Christ, we are really putting the cart before the horse and with disastrous consequences for evangelization. Of course, given the profound unity which exists between the *fides qua* and the *fides quae*, just stressing the *fides qua* at the expense of the *fides quae* would be to compound the error by jumping from the frying pan into the fire. What is needed, in my opinion, is a new approach capable of maintaining the *fides qua* and the *fides quae* in equilibrium. Thus Pope Francis's repeated invitation to focus on faith as an encounter with the person of the living Christ in his church.

***What do you hope people will take away from this book?***

I hope that it will lead people to delve into the Catechism if they have not already done so, or to go back and look at it again with fresh eyes if they already have. It really is a monumental work, an enduring testimony certainly to the clarity of thought and determination of St. Pope John Paul II and his collaborators—Benedict XVI the first among them—but an infinitely greater one to the sublime beauty and coherence of our Catholic faith as professed in the church over two millennia.

***Any final thoughts?***

I am deeply saddened by those Catholics who propagate the view that the greatness of the church is a thing of the past. Very often they give the impression—I am sure most of them unintentionally—that Christ has somehow reneged on his promise to be with his church until the end of time. We must never lose sight of the fact that, while the greatness of the church may know many and varied expressions, from scholarship and art to law and human rights, it is always also a function of the Christian community's fidelity to Christ at a given point in salvation history. It seems to me that here there is a lesson for us all in that we are all called to a deep personal fidelity to Christ through the church and to glorify him and his church through our use of the talents he has bestowed on each one of us. The Catechism itself demonstrates page after page that the Catholic faith is inspired neither by nostalgia nor utopia but by a profound sense of realism which obliges us to live it out at this particular point in salvation history to which we have been called.