THE CATECHISM OF THE UKRAINIAN CATHOLIC CHURCH

When I personally think of the word “catechism” I immediately associate it with a Sister asking me prepared questions about God. Many of us have probably gone through this routine because, until the last 30 – 40 years, not much has changed in our church with regards to the teaching of catechism since the days of St. Josaphat and he lived 500 years ago.

The History:
Actually it is more or less the same in the Latin Catholic Church. In 1566, St. Charles Borromeo, at the wish of the Council of Trent, published a Catholic Catechism. This was divided into four sections – faith, sacraments, the Commandments, and prayer. This was necessary because of the events of the time, namely, the Protestant reformation and the catechism which Martin Luther published in 1520. Luther’s catechism also had four sections but he started with the Commandments, and then had a section on faith, prayer and the sacraments of Baptism and the Holy Eucharist. Both of these were similar in some ways, and both introduced the question and answer approach.

About 100 years later in 1618 St. Josaphat, the Ukrainian Catholic martyr, published a catechism which was largely based on the one put out by the Council of Trent – using the question and answer method. His main topics were faith, prayer, the Commandments, and the sacraments. He followed the Eastern theological approach. Metropolitan Petro Mohyla of Kyiv, the Orthodox leader of Ukraine at the time, published a historic Orthodox Catechism in 1640 under the divisions of Faith, Hope, and Love. Both St. Josaphat’s and Metropolitan Mohyla’s catechisms followed the Council of Trent in approach and style: both were also in the question and answer format (Mohyla had 256 questions and answers). There were a number of other attempts to write an Ukrainian Catholic Catechisms.

The biggest influence on Ukrainian Catholic Catechetical education was the annexation of Western Ukraine into Austria in 1772. Austria was Latin Catholic at the time and her rulers were very favourable to the growth of the Catholic Church in Ukraine. In 1814 the Austrian Catholic Bishops conference published a small catechism based on the Council of Trent, using the question and answer format. Of course this Austrian catechism was entirely Latin Catholic in spirit, tone, and style. Near the end of the 1800s, Fr. Franz Spirago wrote a “Catholic People’s Catechism”. It was translated into Ukrainian by Fr. Yaroslav Lewitski in 1913-1914 and was widely used in Western Ukraine.

To this day Spirago’s work, based on the Austrian Bishops Catechism of 1814, is legendary in Ukraine. Spirago’s catechism accompanied the massive immigration of Ukrainians in the last century. The Basilian and Redemptorist Fathers in Canada and the U.S.A. published and republished it. It was also used in South America and Australia. This is the catechism I was taught when I was about to receive my First Holy Communion. Redeemer's Voice Press of Yorkton, played a major role in its popularity in the last century.

The very widely used Baltimore Catechism, which is basically the Latin Church’s equivalent of Spirago, made sure that all of us had the same religious initiation.

Most criticisms we receive our own Ukrainian Catholic Catechism, especially from Ukraine, are centred on the question “why do we need a new catechism?” “Spirago is still good and we know him and love him.” Besides, it is so easy to teach children in the question and answer style! Yes indeed it was, why change? For one thing, in 1900 most people in Ukraine presumed that the only difference between our Church and the Latin Church was the fact we used old Slavonic and they Latin, and that our liturgies were quite distinct. Many clergy and people did not grasp that we actually had a different theology. Our icons became frescoes. Our liturgy incorporated many elements of the old Latin Mass. We Ukrainian Catholics differ from Roman Catholics in our
Spiritual, Liturgical, Biblical, and legal theologies. We are and should be very unique—most people do not know the difference, and it is the difference that makes the difference.

It seems humorous now, but in the early 1900s our priests in Ukraine had to write to Rome for permission to wear beards! Even Metropolitan Andrei Sheptytsky had to write to the Pope for special permission to give his mother the Holy Eucharist in the Ukrainian tradition because she was actually Latin Catholic herself. Mind you, he was never refused and later on he stopped asking. You need only look at the historic photograph of Metropolitan Andrei to see when he himself started to carry a beard. The history of his beard wearing reflects his personal growth as a Ukrainian Catholic. He died with a very long beard.

One must remember the bitter history in our church in Ukraine during the 1920’s and 1930’s. There were very serious attempts to eradicate our Eastern Catholic Church because it was considered inferior to the Latin Church and seen as something unnecessary. Many faithful, and even clergy themselves, were accepted into the Latin Church. To this day, in some of our churches in Ukraine, the playing of the organ is still accepted and is commonplace. In some Eparchies in Ukraine married clergy were strongly discouraged, even forbidden. One could hardly tell the difference between the churches by the way Priests and Bishops dressed. Remnants of all these things still remain in our church. Spirago’s Catechism found very fertile soil until today. Religious education not only transmits a faith, but also a culture.

Today it is the Holy See (the Vatican) which is calling on us to return to our own roots in the practice of our own faith.

The Catholic Catechism
At the direction of Pope John Paul II, after many years of preparation the Latin Catholic Church published a new style of catechism in 1992, called the “Catechism of the Catholic Church”. It has four main sections – Faith, the Sacraments, the Life in Christ (Commandments), and Prayer. The first and fourth sections have some small contributions from the Eastern churches, but it is basically a Latin Catholic Catechism. The other sections do not contain much Eastern theology at all. Bishop David Konstat, a member of the editorial committee, came from Leeds, England to Melbourne to promote this catechism. When I asked him about the lack of universality in contents of this new catechism, he told me that this catechism was basically written for the Latin Church and that someday we, in the Eastern Churches, would have to write our own catechism which would explain our faith according to our own traditions.

Indeed, we would have to. In his introductory letter to this catechism, Pope John Paul II says, “This catechism is not intended to replace the local catechisms. 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”.

Again voices around the world resounded, “Why do we have to write our own catechism; we now have the Catholic Catechism – that is enough!”

Since 1814 our church and faithful have become instilled with Latin Catholic teaching through the Austrian catechisms. Were not our ancestors, when they came to Western Canada, called Austrians? We attend Latin Catholic schools, we read their religious literature, and we have become more or less immersed in Latin Catholic theology and tradition. No wonder our church is deeply latinised to the extent that we do not even see a need to change or to rediscover our own roots and traditions.

Thank God Pope John Paul II, realizing this, asked us to think about our own catechism. We are also very grateful for the directives from the Vatican seen in such documents as Lumen Gentium, Orientalium Ecclesiarum, and Unitatis Redintegratio of Vatican II, Orientale Lumen and Ut Unum Sancti of John Paul II and, more specifically, the liturgical instructions of 1996. These documents
and others from the Vatican, including the publishing of our own Code of Canon Law in 1990, clearly urge us to rediscover our own liturgy, our own traditions, and our own customs. In other words, as the late Holy Father said, “let the church breathe with two lungs again, its Eastern and Western lungs. In this way we will be expressing the true universality of the Catholic Church”.

Here we have to thank God for the leadership of our great church leaders, Metropolitan Andrei Sheptytsky, Patriarch Josef Slipyj, Confessor for the faith and of course, now retired Patriarch Lubomyr Husar who wrote in the introduction to the Ukrainian translation of the Catechism of the Ukrainian Church, “The teaching of Christ is one and the same for all. The Christian faith is also the same for all Catholics regardless of what church they observe and to what church they belong. However, the theological understanding of the truths revealed by God could be different in various cultures as are the liturgical practices. Having already before us a basic text (here he refers to the Catechism of the Catholic Church), with time our Church will provide the faithful with theological interpretations on the basis of our own tradition”.

It is time for all of us to realize the identity of our own Ukrainian soul. It is time to take the bold steps necessary to place into the hands of our Bishops, Priests, Deacons, Monks, Nuns, Sisters, and lay faithful, a depository of faith, on what it means to be a Ukrainian Catholic. In other words, what is it exactly that our Orthodox-Catholic tradition introduced officially into Ukraine when Volodymyr the Great accepted Baptism from the Church of Constantinople in 988? What were the Bishops of the Reunion of Brest in 1596 talking about? What is the Holy See now specifically telling us to rediscover? What are our own religious roots and traditions?

Our Ukrainian Catholic Synod already started this process a while ago. In 1996 the Patriarchal Catechetical Commission was formed. In 1999 the Catechetical Directory of the Ukrainian Catholic Church was published. In 2001 our Synod blessed the writing of our own catechism of the Ukrainian Catholic Church. In 2002 an editorial board was formed and the title of the catechism was announced “Christ – our Paskha (Easter)”. In 2004 the Synod approved the structural outline of “Christ-our Pascha”. Then about 50 theologians of our Church met in Ukraine to review the material already written. Our present Patriarch Sviatoslav Shevchuk, led the writing of the third section.

What is in our new catechism?
Our catechism reflects our Ukrainian Eastern theology. It is a depository of the faith which reflects our 1000 year old Kyivan tradition. The underlining thread that keeps the catechism is the anaphora of St. Basil the Great (the prayers recited during the act of Consecration during the liturgy). The spirituality that we speak of here is at the very heart of our soul. Our Church is our liturgy, our spirituality and tradition is liturgical. These themes will be presented both theoretically and practically.

To make this catechism specific to the expression of our Eastern Church, the writers of this catechism draws on the following sources: Sacred Scripture, the works of the Eastern Fathers of the Church, the teaching of the Ukrainian Catholic Fathers such as Metropolitan Andrei Sheptytsky and Patriarch Joseph Slipyj. The decrees of the Synods of our Church, our liturgical texts, the lives of our Saints and Blesseds, sacred art, in particular our iconography, the teachings and documents of the universal Catholic Church and, of course, last but not least, the teaching Magisterium of the Universal Church.

The catechism has three sections: our Faith, our Prayer, and our Life, in other words, a theological, liturgical, and moral section. Each of these sections are about 160 pages in length.

Allow me to introduce our catechism to you briefly.
The First Section
The first part talks about God because faith is our response to God. Here we explore the Nicene Creed and our liturgy to show how God has revealed Himself to us in creation and history, through the Sacred Tradition and Sacred Scripture. We speak of the Trinity, about the incarnation; in other words how God became man in Jesus Christ. As we say “God became man so that people could become (like) God! Christ’s Resurrection, of course, is central to our faith; that is why our whole catechism be called “Christ our Paskha”. We talk about the fall of humankind and the promise in the Holy Spirit of the realization of the kingdom of God in this world. The community which lives according to the rule of the Kingdom of God is the church – Christ’s Church. The church is one, holy, catholic and apostolic, and in our case, it is a particular church – the Kyivan Orthodox-Catholic Church; the Ukrainian Greek Catholic Church. Our Church is in communion with other Sister Churches.

The church is Christ’s “new creation”. Each of us is called to be “new persons in Christ as are the Mother of God and all the Saints”.

The Second Section
God wants us to receive His love and He wants us to respond to it. The way we respond to God is our prayer, “We lift up our thoughts and our hearts to God”.

Prayer saturates all our life in all its aspects. The best prayer is communal prayer. While there are many, many forms of prayer, and we talk about them all, the most intense prayer we have is called the "Divine Services"(Boho-Sluzhennja) because in this liturgy (and all authentic liturgy is prayer) God reveals Himself and gives Himself to His community. We accept this gift and respond with a mutual gift of our own life.

This is a great mystery (Sacrament) but, as you know, there are other mysteries (Baptism, Confirmation etc.). We talk about the cycles of the day and cycles of the year in our prayer life. The life of our church revolves around these cycles.

God knows us and calls each one of us by name (this is why our tradition expects us to use our Christian name or our monastic name in every Sacrament). We explain how we respond to this in our personal prayers. In order to be in full communion with God we have to work against various obstacles. The catechism helps and guides us in our pilgrimage towards God.

The Third Section
The last part of the catechism is dedicated to Christian morality. This is logically tied to the second part about the prayer of the church. In this way, we want to show that rules and norms of Christian morality flow from the life of the Holy Spirit amongst us.

Loving God and worshipping Him calls us to a “vocation of holiness”. The basic indications of the life of a person in Christ, morality, freedom, responsibility, moral law, conscience, teaching on Christian virtues and even a notion of sin, are developed in this section. We stress that Christian morality flows from our being a new creation in Christ through our baptism. This is what gives us the strength to respond to God’s call to holiness and makes us able to fulfil His law in love – love for God, love for His people, and love for all His Creation.

We speak of the Christian understanding of family life in marriage which makes the domestic church. We speak of human sexuality, the indissolubility of marriage and the fruitfulness of family life. We address the question of protecting this dignity from the beginning to the end of life.

The catechism also addresses the moral principles of life within society; how moral foundations are the building blocks of social order – the common good, communal relations and the just sharing of
God’s resources. On this basis is found a Christian understanding of government, the economy, and the right for recreation. We speak of war and peace and the common life of global friendship.

Christian faith, empowered by the presence of the Risen Christ through the Holy Spirit, are the starting points for a discussion about our responsibility for God’s creation, about Christian stewardship of our ecology – all this in anticipation of the new heaven and the new earth.

Our Ukrainian Catholic Catechism, indeed the Ukrainian Catholic Church, needs to speak about all of this because our people in Ukraine and in every part of our immigration want to know what Jesus has to say about these things.

How will it appear?
Our catechism follows the lead of modern catechisms and abandons the question and answer format. This follows the more Eastern approach to spirituality, much the same as did the other catechisms in the past. It includes a so-called moral section – the third one, called the life of a Christian. This, itself, has already stirred some controversy, because in the Eastern Church we do not divide our religious life into specific categories. Life is fundamentally a journey of each Christian from birth to death. Even though the Eastern Churches do have moral positions on all questions, no “orthodox” catechism has done this until now. The Eastern Orthodox Churches do have distinct theological moral teachings, but they usually express them differently, perhaps more subtly. This is not the place to discuss this. But it is important to note that we, in the East, do have our own approach to morality.

To explain it simply, let us look at the way Catholics of both churches, Latin and Ukrainian, approach the Sacrament of Penance (Confession). A Latin Catholic would typically say, “Bless me father for I have sinned”; an Eastern Catholic would say “Bless me father for I am a sinner”. One approach stresses the individual sins one has committed and then speaks them; whereas the other approach - ours – looks at the state of our soul or the state of our journey towards God. Having heard confession in both churches, I can confirm that Latin Catholics confess specifics and clearly so; while Eastern Catholics tend to be very general in their confessions. After all, when on the road to alcoholism, getting drunk once, whilst bad, does not yet make you an alcoholic. Eastern Christians tend to confess their bad habits, not each specific act. All of this comes from the way we look at God and our journey towards Him.

Having said that, we must admit that some moral issues are rather modern in nature; i.e. medical ethics, business ethics, etc., You will notice that since we have not yet developed specific Eastern positions on some of these issues we use the recent moral teaching of the Universal Church on these topics, and so it should be. But, I think you will notice that we stress the Eastern theological approach on these topics.

Conclusion
Perhaps it would be appropriate here to quote Taras Shevchenko when he said, “Study my brothers, think and read. Learn what is of value from others but do not ignore what is your own”. This is good advice in our present situation.

One can certainly say that if we look at our Church around the world, the very absence of such a catechism reflect our present lack of unity, identity, respect for our own liturgical traditions, and a lack of a Ukrainian religious consciousness.

Our Church has already become a "hybrid" in some places. The road before us is going to be long and difficult, but we must start that journey. If we are to be an authentic Ukrainian Catholic Church in the future; if we are to continue to exist and be vibrant in 25, 50 or 100 years from now, then we must journey down this road. We must rediscover our own roots and traditions and then we must pass all this onto the next generations.
Doing nothing will only accelerate the assimilation process. Surely we all have a dream that our church will be unique, vibrant, and strong. Each of us does have a soul which has been shaped over the centuries of our past. Just as we cannot forget “bandura” music, so too, our soul will not easily forget our own Ukrainian spirituality.

The writing of this catechism is a God sent opportunity to identify and present a clear instruction about the nature of our church as it has grown amongst us since apostolic times.

It is a fulfilment of God’s desire as the church has so clearly taught us. The late Pope John Paul II said, “I listen to the Churches of the East, which I know are living interpreters of the Treasure of tradition they preserve. In contemplating it, before my eyes appear elements of great significance for a fuller and more thorough understanding of the Christian experience. These elements are capable of giving a more complete Christian response to the expectations of the men and women of today.” (Orientale Lumen)

The Second Vatican Council clearly stated “attention should be given everywhere to the preservation and growth of each individual Church”. (O.E.#4)

The Holy Spirit will lead us and bless us. We ask for your prayers and cooperation to spread the good news.

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