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How to Get the Most Out of This Book

The purpose of *Catholicism and Life* is to present in popular language the background and meaning of the ten Commandments and the seven Sacraments and to show how they can be applied to our lives today. Religion is not a subject to be learned; it is a life to be lived, and those who strive to follow the moral code given to us in the Commandments, and who take advantage of the seven channels of grace that are the Sacraments, will find themselves firmly situated on the road to heaven.

Because it offers such a clear blueprint for Catholic life, *Catholicism and Life* will appeal to a wide audience—from high school students to senior citizens. It would make an ideal text for students in Catholic high schools, colleges, and universities, where the time allotted to religion classes would allow in-depth presentations of the material in each chapter over a span of several class periods.

The text is written in such a way, however, that it would also be an excellent tool for high schoolers in parish religious education programs. The 22 chapters are just about the right number for a weekly course of instruction that runs from the fall to the spring. The material could easily be supplemented with Penance services, special liturgies, and other activities that would help the students relate what they have learned in the classroom to the actual practice of their Catholic Faith.

Finally, *Catholicism and Life* would be a valuable asset for adult education programs, and especially for those preparing for full Communion with the Catholic Church through the Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults (RCIA) process. The text easily lends itself to a full-year program, to separate series on

the Commandments and the Sacraments, or to shorter discussion segments during, say, the seasons of Advent or Lent.

But whatever format you choose, few books lends themselves better to discussion than *Catholicism and Life*. The material itself, along with the many references cited at the end of each chapter, particularly the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* and Pope John Paul II's encyclical *Veritatis Splendor*, will give Catholics plenty of ammunition to challenge and persuade those who are violating basic human and Christian values to turn away from their evil ways, to reform their lives and believe in the Gospel (Mark 1:15). Armed with this information, Catholics will then be able, in the words of Pope John Paul II, "to act with the serene conviction that grace is more powerful than sin because of the victory of Christ's cross."

Specific suggestions for stimulating interest and initiating discussion can be found under the individual chapters. These suggestions, of course, are not all-encompassing, but they should provide some practical ideas for the teacher/catechist or group leader. The chapters contain more than sufficient information for the typical class of forty-five to sixty minutes, but they need not be confined to one class; in some cases, this will not be possible because there is such a great amount of material that can be covered.

It will be up to the teacher/catechist to decide how the time should be divided between lecture and discussion. Some groups are more responsive than others, and make the teacher's job easier. Adults, for instance, are there voluntarily and have no problem listening to a lecture. But high schoolers are there involuntarily and demand more creative ways of presenting the information on the Commandments and the Sacraments. But the subject matter often has to do with situations and events that are in the news media every day, so there should not be much difficulty in preparing interesting and effective classes.

Generally speaking, the suggestions for presenting the material will be helpful whether you are teaching high schoolers or adults, although there are certain topics, questions, and projects that will be more appropriate for one age group than another. The catechist will have to be the judge of that. But whatever the age of the group, the goals of the teacher are

dents to rate all kinds of things in the order of their importance (the Commandments, Sacraments, corporal and spiritual works of mercy, gifts of the Holy Spirit, etc.) to stimulate discussion. Ask them their top five choices of teen problems.

3. *Although the material in Catholicism and Life can be presented effectively in lecture form, the ideal way to develop it is through discussion.* Students are more likely to remember things if they have had a chance to talk about them, ask questions, and even figure out some of the answers themselves. By discussion, it should be made clear, we do not mean an aimless stream of consciousness where everybody's opinion is equally valid and where nothing is resolved. We mean rather an atmosphere where the teacher teaches and the students learn; where questions, comments, and dialogue are encouraged under the guidance and direction of the teacher; where facts are stated by the catechist if the students do not come up with them; and where the teacher summarizes the matter discussed at the end of class, trying as much as possible to answer all questions and to resolve all doubts.

4. *Instead of merely stating the points to be covered, try to draw the information out of the students.* Catechists should be constantly asking questions, making the students think, and inviting them to participate in the class. When you first ask a question, do not direct it to a particular student lest the others in the class stop paying attention. Ask the question first of the entire class and then, if no one volunteers an answer, direct it to a particular person. Do not allow a few students to monopolize the discussion. It's a temptation to call on those who usually know the answers, but you must try to involve everyone, especially those who seem not to be paying attention. Be careful not to embarrass the shy or reticent student, but try to bring him or her out of their shell. When students ask you what you think about some issue, before giving them your opinion turn the question around and ask, "What do you think?"

5. *Keep the class interesting and current through the use of stories, anecdotes, and up-to-date items related to the sub-*

ject matter. Storytelling is an effective way to make a point, as Jesus proved with his use of parables. Have the students bring into class pertinent items from newspapers and magazines so that you can relate them to the Commandments and Sacraments and perhaps even correct some misinformation. Get the students in the habit of watching for these things and you will have a successful class. Remember, however, that media accounts of religious and moral issues are often slanted, misleading, out of context, or just plain wrong. Insist that authentic Church documents, not some reporter's biased view of a Church teaching, be used to form the basis of any valid discussion.

6. *Define all terms, even if it seems unnecessary.* You should not assume that any religious term is understood correctly, particularly in today's climate of religious illiteracy, so ask the students what a term means and then spell out the definition for them. Unless they understand exactly what you are talking about, you will either lose them or misinform them. A Catholic dictionary or encyclopedia, or the glossary section of the *Catholic Almanac*, will be most helpful in providing definitions. Even some of the secular dictionaries can provide accurate definitions of religious terms.

And don't be afraid to have the students memorize some of these definitions. They must have a vocabulary of their Faith. As Pope John Paul II said, "A certain memorization of the words of Jesus, of important Bible passages, of the ten Commandments, of the formulas of profession of the faith, of the liturgical texts, of the essential prayers, of key doctrinal ideas, etc., far from being opposed to the dignity of young Christians, or constituting an obstacle to personal dialogue with the Lord, is a real need. . . . We must be realists. The blossoms, if we may call them that, of faith and piety do not grow in the desert places of a memory-less catechesis" (*On Catechesis in Our Time*, n. 55).

7. *Use the chalkboard and other visual aids as much as possible.* The old saying that one picture is worth a thousand words is still true. Children remember about 10 percent of what they hear, 50 percent of what they see and hear, and 90

percent of what see, hear, and do. You can talk about abortion and its horrors for hours and not convince anyone that it is evil, but one video showing the beautiful developing child at twelve weeks, or the crushed and bloody remains of an aborted baby at that same stage of development, can make a profound impression. Not all issues can be as graphically portrayed as abortion, but any maps, videos, slides, pictures, charts, cassettes, or compact discs that can be used to illustrate a point will add immeasurably to your class. Even simply writing things on the board will make a difference in getting points across to the students.

You could also use flash cards that say AGREE or DIS-AGREE after you make a statement, or you could hold up large cards asking such questions as:

WHAT (is authority, sin, abortion, sex, Baptism, Eucharist)

WHO (is involved in my action: sex with spouse or neighbor)

WHEN (do I drive 50 miles per hour: on highway or in neighborhood)

WHERE (is action taking place: in church, school, or on street corner)

WHY (do I want to do this: is it love or manipulation)

HOW (saving lives by bombing, saving taxes by cheating)

WHAT IF (I didn't drink and drive, didn't skip the sacrament of Penance)

WHAT ELSE (what are alternatives: to abortion for unwanted pregnancy)

8. *Review what you have covered previously.* It is a good idea to use the beginning of each class to summarize, or have the students summarize, what has been covered thus far in the course, or at least in the previous class. In this way, you will know what is getting across and what needs to be repeated. If time permits, you could give brief quizzes at the beginning of class. Quizzes and tests are important, even in once-a-week religious education classes, if we expect the students to take the subject seriously and if you want to know whether you are reaching those in your class. It wouldn't hurt to summarize the main points at the end of class either.

9. *Assign homework and projects so as to involve the students more deeply in the course.* Spending forty-five to sixty minutes a week on religion (about 24 hours a year in the typical parish program, or one day out of 365) isn't much time in which to develop faithful Catholics. So homework ought to be assigned, such as reading a chapter a week and answering a dozen questions (they can be true/false, fill in the blanks, crossword puzzles, acrostics, etc., anything that will reinforce the information in their minds and prepare them for an intelligent discussion in the next class). Give them projects to do and reports to make, either as individuals or in small groups. This will not only increase their knowledge about their Faith, but it might also make them as skilled and comfortable in talking about Christ and the teachings of his Church as they are in discussing sports or television shows.

There are many possibilities along these lines in the portion of the text dealing with the Sacraments. For example, students could compose some Prayers of the Faithful for Mass, write a Penance service, perform good works for Confirmation, take part in a communal Anointing of the Sick, or visit the local diocesan seminary.

10. *State the position of the Church clearly and unequivocally.* This is most important since many Catholics are confused today on where their Church stands because of misinformation spread by the media and, unfortunately, even by members of the Church who have chosen to dissent from her teachings. Your job is not to give your own opinion or that of some popular theologian, but rather the definitive teaching of the infallible Church of Jesus Christ, as expressed by the Holy Father and those bishops in communion with him. This definitive teaching is contained in the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* and in *Veritatis Splendor*, and every teacher should consult both documents frequently.

"Catechists for their part," Pope John Paul II said, "must have the wisdom to pick from the field of theological research those points that can provide light for their own reflection and their teaching, drawing, like the theologians, from the true sources, in the light of the magisterium [teaching office of the Church]. They must refuse to trouble the minds of the chil-

dren and young people, at this stage of their catechesis, with outlandish theories, useless questions, and unproductive discussions, things that St. Paul often condemned in his pastoral letters" (*On Catechesis in Our Time*, n. 61).

This adherence to truth is a solemn responsibility. Make sure that the class always knows what the Church's teaching is and the reasons for that teaching. If you do not know the answer to a question, do not try to fool the students. Tell them that you will find the answer—and then do so. Do not get bogged down in certain areas, and do not worry if you cannot completely convince your students about the merits of a specific teaching. Do your best to present the view of the Church and then leave it to the Holy Spirit to enlighten the minds of your listeners.

11. *Encourage daily prayer, frequent reception of the Sacraments, and the performance of good works.* Take advantage of the numerous reminders throughout the course to mention the necessity of daily prayer, at least weekly Mass and Holy Communion, and frequent recourse to the sacrament of Penance or Reconciliation. Urge the students to carry out works of charity, either individually or collectively. Begin and end each class with a prayer, inviting the students to suggest prayers and petitions and to lead the class in saying them. A decade of the rosary is a good way to start a class period, with individual students reciting the Our Father, Hail Mary, and Glory Be to the Father. Refer often to Scripture, using the Bible in class and giving the students passages to look up and reflect upon outside of class.

The teacher can be an actual grace for the students by inspiring them to do good and avoid evil and always to remain close to Jesus and his Church. Teachers who demonstrate a sincere interest in the well-being of their students, who pray with them and for them, who are available to them after class for any help or advice they may need can have a positive and long-lasting influence on the young people entrusted to them. You may never know how you have touched the lives of your students, although if you are lucky some former student will come up to you years later and tell you how much he or she benefitted from having been in your class. So don't get dis-

couraged or conclude that you are wasting your time. *Something is getting through*, no matter how little. Your efforts are not in vain.

Effective catechesis depends upon "the faith, hope, and love of catechists, responding to God's grace by growing in these virtues and ministering to others," said the Bishops of the United States in the concluding paragraph of *Sharing the Light of Faith*. "The person of the catechist is the medium in which the message of the Faith is incarnated. Whether catechists be parents, teachers, religious, priests, bishops, or any other of God's people, their witness to faith plays a pivotal role in catechesis."

12. *For teachers of high school students, acquaint the parents of your students with the course.* Three things necessary for a successful religion class are good books, good teachers, and interested parents. We have provided the first requirement and have contributed to the second. The third is up to you. With the permission of the principal of the school, department head, or Director of Religious Education, contact the parents at the beginning of the year, invite them to a meeting to explain the course to them, urge them to send their children faithfully if it's a voluntary program, and invite them to visit the classroom or to contact you with any questions or suggestions. Some students will tell parents that they don't want to attend class because "we're not learning anything." Parents who know what is being taught to their children will not be swayed by that argument.

13. *It is important for the catechist to realize that the work of helping others to grow and mature in the Christian life is primarily the work of the Holy Spirit.* The catechist, said Pope John Paul II, "must be very much aware of acting as a living, pliant instrument of the Holy Spirit. To invoke this Spirit constantly, to be in communion with him, to endeavor to know his authentic inspirations must be the attitude of the teaching Church and of every catechist" (*On Catechesis in Our Time*, n. 72).

"The fundamental tasks of catechists," said the Bishops of the United States in *Sharing the Light of Faith*, "are to pro-

claim Christ's message, to participate in efforts to develop community, to lead people to worship and prayer, and to motivate them to serve others" (n. 213). In order to be effective teachers, the Bishops said, catechists "must have a solid grasp of Catholic doctrine and worship, familiarity with Scripture, communications skills, the ability to use various methodologies, understanding of how people grow and mature, and of how persons of different ages and circumstances learn" (n. 211).

But perhaps most important, the Bishops said, "the catechist must be fully committed to Jesus Christ. Faith must be shared with conviction, joy, love, enthusiasm, and hope. . . . To give witness to the gospel, the catechist must establish a living, ever-deepening relationship with the Lord. He or she must be a person of prayer, one who frequently reflects on the Scriptures and whose Christlike living testifies to deep faith. Only men and women of faith can share faith with others, preparing the setting within which people can respond in faith to God's grace" (n. 207).

Chapter 2

Law and Liberty

Purpose: The purpose of this chapter is to define and illustrate the ways of determining the morality of human acts.

Tips for Teachers: This will not be an easy chapter to teach because there are so many terms and concepts to be defined and clarified. Take your time, carefully explain each term, and use plenty of examples to illustrate the meaning of the words. Refer to the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* and to *Veritatis Splendor* for help in presenting this material. An understanding of this material will be a great help in living a moral life.

Read some stories from the newspaper about sinful and criminal actions and ask the students if those actions are wrong, and how they know they are wrong. This can lead to a discussion of the three elements that determine the morality of a human act: the object of the act itself, the purpose or intention for performing the act, and the circumstances surrounding the act. Use some of the examples in the text and in sections 76-82 of *Veritatis Splendor*. Make sure to point out that there are certain kinds of behavior that are always wrong because they are evil in themselves. No intention or circumstances can make these evil acts good.

St. Paul listed as intrinsically evil acts that would keep a person from reaching heaven such things as fornication, idolatry, adultery, sexual perversion, theft, miserliness, drunkenness, slander, and robbery (1 Corinthians 6:9-10). The Second Vatican Council provided us with an even longer list in paragraph 27 of the *Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World* (also quoted in *Veritatis Splendor*, n. 80).

Since knowledge and free will always play a part in moral guilt, anything that would interfere with these two elements can lessen or even remove moral responsibility entirely. Describe in detail such conditions as ignorance (vincible and invincible), fear, concupiscence or unreasonable desire, violence,

habit, temperament, and nervous mental disorders. Give examples of how each affects moral guilt.

In the section on occasions of sin, point out how many sins could be avoided if we stayed away from persons, places, and things that might lead us into sin. Next comes a more extensive discussion of natural law, which Pope John Paul II called "the human expression of God's eternal law" (*Veritatis Splendor*, n. 43). This can be compared with positive law, whether divine or human.

One of the most important parts of this chapter, if not of the entire book, is the section on conscience—what it is, the types of conscience (true and false, certain and doubtful), and the principles for forming a correct conscience. Many people today have the mistaken notion that conscience can be divorced from the law of God and the teaching of the Church, so a teacher has to spend sufficient time giving students an accurate idea of what conscience is and showing them that a truly Christian conscience must be in tune with the moral teaching of the Church. The material in paragraphs 54-64 of *Veritatis Splendor* will be of great help in presenting this topic.

Following the discussion on conscience is the matter of sin and its consequences. Make sure that the class understands what sin is, how many kinds of actual sin there are, the conditions for a mortal sin, and how some people today are attempting to undermine or water down the Church's understanding of sin through such concepts as the "fundamental option" and "proportionalism." Pope John Paul demonstrated the problems inherent in both of these concepts first in *Reconciliation and Penance* and later in *Veritatis Splendor*. The teacher should be familiar with what the Holy Father said in both documents. Draw the attention of the class in particular to his cataloguing of serious sins in *Veritatis Splendor* (nn. 13, 49, 80, 81, 100, 101) in case anyone believes the current myth that sin is out of date.

Finally, one must talk about the mercy and justice of God, the forgiveness that is available through the sacrament of Penance but also the punishment that will be forthcoming if one chooses not to keep the Commandments. The biblical stories of the Lost Sheep (Luke 15:3-7), the Penitent Woman (Luke 7:36-50), and the Prodigal Son (Luke 15:11-32) will help to

illustrate the mercy and forgiveness of God toward those who were sincerely sorry for their sins. You might mention that the sacrament of Penance will be discussed in great detail in chapter 18.

Topics for Discussion:

1. How can we determine if an action is right or wrong?
2. If I am ignorant that something is a sin, that means I have not done anything wrong.
3. I can handle any occasion of sin.
4. It is more important to follow my conscience than listen to the Church.
5. Things that used to be sins, like abortion, are legal now, so it's not wrong to take part in them.

Some Questions and Answers:

1. Why do I have to listen to what the Church says? Her laws are only man-made.

A. Because the Church, that is, the Holy Father and those bishops in communion with him, speaks as the voice of Jesus himself. Remember that our Lord told Peter, the first Pope, "Whatever you declare bound on earth shall be bound in heaven" (Matthew 16:19). And he told the disciples, "He who hears you, hears me. He who rejects you, rejects me. And he who rejects me, rejects him who sent me" (Luke 10:16). So we must follow the guidance of those to whom Jesus gave the authority to speak in his name. He said that he would ratify in heaven whatever laws these men made.

2. How can God be merciful and still send people to hell?

A. God is merciful, but he is also just. He will reward the good people and punish those who deliberately and knowingly persisted in doing the evil things mentioned in this chapter. He gives people every opportunity to turn away from sin and to seek his forgiveness. But those who consciously and callously reject God's mercy choose hell for themselves. If they want nothing to do with God in this life, then the logical consequence of that attitude is total separation from God in the

next life, which is hell. There is no one in hell who did not freely choose to be there.

3. You mean that hell isn't something that religions made up to scare people?

A. That's right, hell really does exist. Jesus mentioned it many times and described it as "unquenchable fire" (Mark 9:44), as a place where there will be "wailing . . . and the grinding of teeth" (Matthew 8:12), and as a place of "everlasting fire prepared for the devil and his angels" (Matthew 25:41). Our Lord also indicated that hell would not be lacking in occupants. In the Sermon on the Mount, he declared, "The gate that leads to damnation is wide, the road is clear, and many choose to travel it. But how narrow is the gate that leads to life, how rough the road, and how few there are who find it!" (Matthew 7:13-14).

Projects:

1. Draw up a list of sins mentioned in *Veritatis Splendor*.
2. Read the advice columns in the newspaper for a week, write down the advice they give to people, and compare that advice with what Jesus and the Church teach.
3. Read the parable of the Prodigal Son (Luke 15:11-32) and put it into a modern-day situation.
4. Prepare a Penance service for your class.

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