

Liberals dismayed by new catechism

by Kathleen Klenetsky

A new catechism, meant to define the whole of Catholic doctrine for the universal Church, will be published this May. But even before it has reached the public, the document has met with a barrage of criticism from ultraliberal elements in the Church, especially among the “American exceptionalist” grouping in U.S. Catholicism. At least one seminar on the catechism has been held, at the Jesuit Woodstock Seminary in Washington, where the document came under bitter attack, and Harper and Row publishers has already decided to rush a diatribe against it into print.

Prepared under the guidance of Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger, a draft of the *Catechism for the Universal Church* is currently circulating among the Catholic bishops, who have been asked to review it and forward their comments to the Vatican before the document’s scheduled publication. Parts of the provisional draft have found their way into the media, and a vocal debate over its alleged demerits is already under way in the U.S.

The project originated at the Vatican’s Extraordinary Synod in December 1985. Statements by the Pope and other Church leaders have made it clear that the document is intended to reassert and strengthen traditional Catholic teaching, in the face of multiple assaults against it from both within and without the Church. In 1986, John Paul II described the project as an “an important help in guaranteeing the unity of the faith”; several years later, he cited the urgent need for a “concise and clear exposition of the essential and fundamental contents of the faith and of Catholic morality.”

Based upon published reports, the document does precisely that—to the palpable dismay of those who have been pushing the so-called “Vatican III” agenda, i.e., married and female priests; endorsement of birth control, homosexuality, abortion; and a new Christology that emphasizes the “human”—at the expense of the divine—aspect of Christ.

According to the conservative Catholic weekly, *The Wanderer*, as well as other media, the catechism:

- Affirms the reliability of reason in reaching knowledge of the personal God, and says it is wrong to insist that divine Revelation alone is the source of all religious and moral knowledge.
- Contains a lengthy section explaining the Catholic recognition of the natural law, and pointing out the mission of the Magisterium (the body of Church teachings) to “express

and interpret” such law. The natural law, it says, is engraved in each person’s conscience, and is accessible to all. Everyone is bound by its precepts. In “obeying the natural law,” the catechism states, “man obeys ‘the divine law itself—eternal, objective, and universal,’ of which it is the expression.”

- Stresses belief in God as Creator and His creation as “the foundation of faith in all the saving designs of God. . . .”
- Rejects fatalism that gives determinative force over man’s actions to the stars or the natural forces of the cosmos.

Natural law

What seems to be causing the most disquiet among the dissidents, is the primary emphasis which the catechism places on natural law. The Jesuit magazine *America* gave over its March 3 issue to essays attacking various aspects of the catechism; the most irate comments were aimed at its stress on the agreement of natural and divine law.

That is hardly surprising. If you do away with the idea of natural law, you eliminate the basis for making any judgment on what it is to be human, what is moral, what is the good. Hence, those who most oppose the idea that man is made in the image of God, and that this has profound ramifications for human behavior and the structure of society, have made their chief objective the destruction of the concept of natural law.

The erosion of this concept over the past few decades, coupled with the parallel emergence of such philosophical idiocies as situation ethics (another word for pragmatism), has brought us to the point where such moral atrocities as Tiananmen Square and mass abortion and euthanasia are not only tolerated, but justified.

But this does not deter the catechism’s critics. Take Fr. William Spohn, S.J. of the Jesuit School of Theology in California, who, in his *America* essay, claims that there has been a change in theology since Vatican II, under which “the basic model of Christian moral life has shifted from obedience to divine law to responsible initiative for human and Gospel values.” One of the catechism’s main failings, says Spohn, is that it ignores this shift. Not only that, “The catechism insists that there are objective, eternal norms that command and forbid specific actions,” and also “goes to elaborate lengths to insist that Christian freedom and conscience are always in conformity with ‘the divine law.’ ”

The real concern among the dissidents is that the catechism will give added force to the Vatican’s efforts to reinforce core Catholic doctrine, thus making it more difficult to espouse the openly heretical beliefs that have been spreading. One of the catechism’s most vocal U.S. detractors, Bishop Raymond Lucker of New Ulm, Minnesota, is a de facto defender of Fr. Matthew Fox, who was silenced by the Vatican in 1988 for working with a known witch. Lucker believes that the catechism uses “oppressively sexist” language.