

Can'techism

From Webster:

catechize: vt, c.1449, from L. catechizare, from Gk. katechizein "teach orally, instruct by word of mouth," from kata "thoroughly" + echein "to sound."

Dogma: n, from the Greek meaning "to seem"

My friend LeRoy and I share a common experience. We were both brought up strict Roman Catholics and went to a very religious parochial school. We share a common skill too. We were whiz bangs at answering questions posed by the catechism. LeRoy recently wrote a short essay which inspired me to make this contribution to the exegesis and elucidation of the famous Baltimore Catechism, compiled in 1884, an American version of the first one proposed by the Council of Trent and initially published by Pope Pius V in 1566.

This famous tome distills all the important dogma, that is to say, required beliefs, of The Church. Two thousand years of teachings from Jesus, Peter and Paul to Thomas Aquinas to Hans Kung are in this eighty page book of questions and answers. Pretty impressive job I would say.

It was the section on sin that attracted me most at the time. Actually it was sin that attracted me, period.

From the Catechism itself:

54. Q. What is mortal sin?

A. Mortal sin is a grievous offense against the law of God.

59. Q. Which are the chief sources of sin?

A. The chief sources of sin are seven: Pride, Covetousness, Lust, Anger, Gluttony, Envy, and Sloth; and they are commonly called capital sins.

As LeRoy correctly points out in his essay, mortal sins are very bad news indeed. Eternal damnation awaits the sinner. I was not very good at math as a child but I knew intuitively that eternity is a very long time.

So it was with thinly veiled anticipation and pubescent curiosity that I engaged my pastor, Monsignor Augustino, in an ongoing dialogue concerning the subtleties and nuances of sin. These exchanges took place in various confessionals, conversations and serious admonitions offering wisdom and guidance that influenced my entire life thereafter.

Monsignor Augustino's presided over a small Portuguese church north of Southside Park in Sacramento, a parish of which I was a member and as an official Latin reciting altar boy, served Mass faithfully every Sunday for many years.

The Monsignor's name derives from a very famous theologian indeed, Saint Augustine, the fourth century Bishop of Hippo, a self proclaimed expert about matters lustful, who uttered the famous prayer "O Lord, help me to be pure, but not yet."

Mortal Sins. Missing Mass on Sunday. Murder. Concupiscence. Father Augustino was very cross with my continual confession of "self abuse." He always prescribed avoiding "impure thoughts." I found this whole thing very mystifying and exciting. "Nocturnal emissions" didn't count apparently. "But what," I asked him, "if I have an impure thought dream?" Did that count?

"No," he answered without hesitation. It didn't count because it was not deliberate. "Ok," I said, "but what if I saw a good looking girl during the day and she kissed me even though I tried to avoid her and my dream had impure thoughts associated with such behavior with this self same girl? Does that count?" The Monsignor eventually tired of my contextual ethics and hypothetical morality and just gave the obligatory "ten Hail Mary's" as my penance and let it go at that.

Missing Mass. I never had this problem because I was an altar boy, but one day I realized my main motive in going to Mass on Sunday was greed, surely imbedded in one of the seven deadly. If I was a regular altar boy, I would be given the chance to serve at weddings and funerals. It was the custom after a wedding for the best man to tip the altar boys at least five dollars. That was fine with me, but I lobbied like a Halliburton salesman in Iraq for funerals. Everybody at funerals felt bad so they tipped with alacrity. The sadder the occasion, the bigger the tip. I once got a twenty dollar bill for tossing around a lot of foul smelling incense during the ceremony. I knew from the Baltimore Catechism that Greed was pretty bad.

Furthermore, I couldn't ask the Monsignor if it was mortal or not because he had a nose for sin and might not let me collect the big bucks any more. If I couldn't serve Mass as the down payment to weddings and funerals, I probably would miss Mass a lot of Sundays. That would be a lethal sin I calculated. A *lethal sin* was a definition of my own making. An accumulation of many mortal ones culminated in a lethal one I reasoned. So I decided that ten Hail Mary's and ten Our Fathers would do nicely as a self imposed penance seeing as how missing Mass would surely be more grievous than impure thoughts contributing to God knew what within the meanderings of my concupiscent body with nocturnal obsessions of the flesh.

What really got my attention, though, was the equality of mortality associated with sins. Missing Mass and impure thoughts were apparently equivalent to killing someone. Committing any of them meant eternal damnation regardless of flavor as long as it was mortal. I never really contemplated killing anyone, so one Sunday after Mass when I was alone with Monsignor I asked the question that really got his attention too.

"Why is self abuse so bad, Father?" I asked him point blank. "Is it as bad as murder?" After a long look at me, and I am sure there was at least a huge inwardly directed eyeball roll at the heavens, he spoke.

"Because one is spilling seed intended only for procreation, my son," he answered. I knew enough about the procreation business by then to understand the implication. It was mind boggling. Seed is for planting only and should not be confused with self inflicted pleasure. The agricultural metaphor failed to convince me, especially after he continued, "And while mortally sinful, it is different than murder."

I stopped short of asking him if there were people who had impure thoughts about murdering someone night after night before actually committing the foul deed....and could thereby have double jeopardy mortality. And what if they also spilled some seed thinking about it? Surely a *lethal sin*.

Months went by. Finally one day after a particularly lucrative funeral when Monsignor and I were changing from our ceremonial vestments to street clothes, I popped this one.

"Excuse me Father, but girls don't have any seed. If they do self abuse, are they sinful?" The good Monsignor was drinking a glass of water at the time. He coughed so hard water came out of his nose. I whacked him on the back

several times until he stopped coughing. When he eventually got over this attack he said, "We will discuss this at a more appropriate time, my son."

Well, Monsignor Augustino never got around to this moral dilemma of mine so I guess there was no appropriate time. I had another question already prepared if he did. It had to do with spilling eggs. While I knew the basic rudiments of procreation I was not at all sure that eggs couldn't be spilt, and I felt it was exceedingly unfair for the Creator to make something outrageously pleasurable for boys mortally sinful while girls got off Scot free.

At the age of nearly seventy, I have stopped wondering about the various nuances of the dogma book written in Maryland by wise bishops. I now fondly call it the Baltimore Can'techism. Just as food which tastes good is bad for you, clogs your arteries, I now accept unconditionally the fact that everything that feels good is also bad for your soul, clogging the conscience so to speak.

And to this day I am overly fond of impure thoughts thanks to Father Augustino. Wherever he is, I wish to extend my profoundest gratitude for this fine gift.