

Supplemental Information for
Why Catholic? Journey through the Catechism
Life In Christ – Walking With God
To group leaders of
Christ the King Parish, Springfield, Illinois

By Deacon Al Laabs
September/October, 2010

Session 1: “The Beatitudes”

Welcome back to *Why Catholic* for the start of our third year. It hardly seems possible, doesn't it? I do want to repeat several thoughts from the introduction. This third book breaks open Part Three of the *Catechism* (CCC) with a focus on the moral life. It weaves together important issues such as our freedom and responsibility, conscience, virtues, moral law, and grace—all to draw out their implications for our life as Christians (which is to say a life in Christ). The second half of the year will draw out implications from the commandments for our living.

Let me again encourage you as a group leader to re-read the introductory material. There are some good thoughts in the Faith-Sharing Principles section and a reminder of what small group leaders should be and what they should avoid although by now I suspect you are all veterans. While this year's edition does not use the *USCCA* (*United States Catholic Catechism for Adults*) in its text citations or info boxes, it will be a valuable resource for you personally and by now many of our groups and individuals have invested in the *USCCA*. If you look in the “Looking Ahead” section at the end of each chapter, this book suggests specific pages in the *USCCA* that complement each chapter we will be discussing. As I commented last year, the *USCCA* often has an excellent over view of each topic in a broader format with a bit clearer integration than the straight forward declarative paragraphs of the *Catechism*. Because it is more of an overview, it also can be more succinct. Certainly as a group leader you will want the *USCCA* as part of your “environment.”

Also you should note that the text returns to bold letters indicating material almost directly from the CCC, and has a good deal more specific paragraph number citations in each chapter from the CCC. You may notice some other differences such as the lack of a “story” beginning each section and fewer focused graphics such as “Spotlight On” that were helpful in last year's revised edition. Let's prayerfully ask for the Spirit's presence this year as we try to develop a deeper understanding of our faith: faith as it impacts on our moral life and relationships to our God but especially each other.

Suggested Environment

Note that we are reverting to the table arrangement suggestion from year one but I would continue to make the *USCCA* a part of each table arrangement since many of you who used it think highly of it.

Lifting Our Hearts

As I mentioned at the beginning of the second year's sessions, it would be good to welcome everyone back and maybe offer a spontaneous prayer for the success of the journey this fall of 2010. Certainly introduce any new members of the group that may have been added. And I certainly think it would be well to ask everyone when you say the prayer together, to keep the success in mind of all the other groups meeting, those within our parish and those meeting throughout the diocese. You might even consider calling attention to the very second line of the opening prayer, "We need your transforming action in our lives," because that is what the moral life implies—gradually turning our actions, our choices, our priorities towards more fully embracing life in Christ—the very title of our book. And quite honestly, we all know that without God's help and grace it would be very difficult to do that on our own.

Sharing Our Good News

[Not really applicable in this first session but...]

The usual sharing of how we've all done on the precious session is not quite operative here, since we're starting after quite a break but I would encourage some sharing perhaps in the sense of what these past two years have meant. I have had several individuals involved in Why Catholic say such things as, "I would not have imagined myself talking about some of things we discussed," or "When I see someone from my group at Church, I feel so much closer to them during the Mass." All those type of sentiments and others I've heard about are the fruit of the Spirit working in our lives as we build community. So perhaps just eliciting some comments along those lines will add to the renewed sense of small community that we are once again beginning.

Exploring the *Catechism*

Paragraphs one through five could almost be called Catholic Christianity 101. The truths that are there such as our creation by a loving God in freedom and love, our uniqueness but also our equality before God, our relationships as sons and daughters before God, and our adopted membership in God's family because of what Jesus did for us all are matters of faith for us. Perhaps the key question for each of us is really the depth to which we take the above in all seriousness and then the implication of that for how we live and treat others.

That second paragraph might need a bit of emphasis. That simple statement that Christ has given his Church the mission to teach the truth about moral living might prompt some discussion. If we Catholics really believe this, one might ask the question why statistics, or so I've been told, seem to indicate that Catholic women have abortions in the same percentage as the rest of the population. How seriously does your group accept this statement? I mention this because it is a recurring theme in many subsequent chapters and a good discussion of this at the start might prove beneficial.

The truths contained in the third paragraph would certainly be echoed in a frequent message from our Pope. If Christ is to teach us humanly by his words and example, then we, in Pope Benedict's words, "...have Him as a model of what it means to be truly human." That bolded section from the CCC 1708 is almost a reflection of what St. Paul says in so many places that in Christ we are made "new" and that we have new life because of what he did for us.

Those words in the fifth paragraph, "...God lives with us and within us, reaching out to love others through our words and actions" are tremendously powerful. A favorite theme of mine has always been, "Whose hands does our Lord have in the world but mine?" You might invite your group members to reflect on the beauty of thinking of such simple things as baking and donating a dish for the funeral luncheon in the parish hall as the hands of Christ at work in the kitchen and in the parish community.

That sixth paragraph (really all one sentence) could be the theme of more than one book. Let me for just a few moments run off at the keyboard. Maybe a picture in our head might help with this idea of a parallel between us in community and the three Divine Persons in the community of the Trinity. Our most common image of Trinity is that of the triangle with Father, Son, and Holy Spirit at each one of the corners. In their oneness and uniqueness they exist in a community of love. So picture a triangle with God or Jesus at the upper corner and you at the lower right corner and me (or some other neighbor) at the lower left corner. We are brought together into a new life through Jesus as Mediator out of love for us. In that new life, we as a family (brothers and sisters in Christ) are joined together by a love and a grace that begins with our Baptism and is made ever stronger as we advance in the moral life. We are a muted picture of Trinitarian love in our relation to God and neighbor through a love that will only be made perfect when we are joined with the Trinity (our goal = Heaven see CCC 1024). Keep this in mind since we are going to encounter a sentence in session 5 that reads "Jesus teaches us that loving our neighbor is inseparable from loving God." In our humanity, however, we have the power (free will given to us by our creator) to diminish this loving relationship to both God and neighbor when we sin. We are pretty awesome creatures, aren't we? And it is only because of God's grace, Word, and Sacrament (esp. mercy/penance) that we have faith and confidence in His promises that we are able to stay in this community of Christian love.

The remaining paragraphs of this section are fairly self-explanatory as they introduce the beatitudes. What I think needs discussion and what is not stressed in the text is how revolutionary are these sayings, literally, Jesus' first sermon in Matthew. To the crowds listening to him these words were both puzzling and yet could be seen as hopeful. If we are amazed at the authority that the crowds saw in Jesus, there must have been hope in their hearts (remember that most of the people in 1st century Israel were desperately poor) as they listen to his words about the meek, the poor in spirit, the persecuted, etc. In our own time, similarly we should see these as both challenging our secular culture and as literally a blueprint for building God's kingdom on earth. We should feel perhaps that same tension that the crowd must have felt. A tension in the sense of this must be what God wants of us as human beings but it's certainly going to take faith and most certainly God's help if I am going to be able to be that peacemaker, to be someone who hungers and thirsts after justice and righteousness and who practices mercy to even those I do not like. These beatitudes are God's introduction to what it means to live in His kingdom and they continue to challenge us today. If we take them

seriously, they have the power to change our values, how we set our priorities, how we see and treat our possessions, and certainly how we enter into all our relationships. Here are several links to sites that will give you addition insights about the beatitudes: [Site number one](#); [Site number two](#). Note: these are in my order of preference.

Scripture: Pondering the Word

This reading from Matthew will awaken some echoes to what most of our groups will hear on the 26th Sunday in Ordinary Time (Cycle C) as we read from the OT prophet Amos criticizing his culture and then listen to Jesus tell us the story of the rich man and Lazarus.

Matthew 1-12

- 1 ¹ When he saw the crowds, ² he went up the mountain, and after he had sat down, his disciples came to him.
- 2 He began to teach them, saying:
- 3 ³ "Blessed are the poor in spirit, ⁴ for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.
- 4 ⁵ Blessed are they who mourn, for they will be comforted.
- 5 ⁶ Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the land.
- 6 Blessed are they who hunger and thirst for righteousness, ⁷ for they will be satisfied.
- 7 Blessed are the merciful, for they will be shown mercy.
- 8 ⁸ Blessed are the clean of heart, for they will see God.
- 9 Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God.
- 10 Blessed are they who are persecuted for the sake of righteousness, ⁹ for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.
- 11 Blessed are you when they insult you and persecute you and utter every kind of evil against you (falsely) because of me.
- 12 ¹⁰ Rejoice and be glad, for your reward will be great in heaven. Thus they persecuted the prophets who were before you.

This scripture is taken from the USCCB web site and the footnotes in the small colored letters can be accessed back to their site. What is also important to note is the ending of line twelve. “They persecuted the prophets before you” carries with it the idea that this message, or any counter-cultural message we hear from “prophets” even in our own time may result in persecution. Some commentators see in this line early in Matthew’s Gospel Jesus taking on one of his roles as a prophet calling his people to a new way of seeing what the Kingdom should be.

Sharing Questions

I think the sharing question is certainly worth discussing but I would also encourage you to frankly ask your group if they do feel the kind of tension that this “sermon” from Jesus was meant to produce. The challenge is there as in a new way of looking at relationships which certainly was highlighted by our beginning prayer.

Exploring the *Catechism (continued)*

Most of this second section is fairly straight forward and the references to the CCC really complement the summary material. I would encourage you to develop a level of comfort and test it with such ideas as “the sacraments give us the grace” to live these challenges and make progress in moral behavior from a Christian perspective. A statement as is found in the third paragraph on page five “...true happiness is not found in riches or well-being” is easy to agree with in the abstract and to nod our heads at, but I have yet to find someone who really never wants to win the lottery when they buy a ticket. It might be fun to pause and ask everyone in the group to share what they might mean when they use a term like “true happiness.”

The second major point I would draw from this section begins with the second paragraph from the bottom of page five. “Discipleship involves calling others to share the intimate friendship of God.” That paragraph ends with a powerful statement: “The witness of our humble and dedicated lives invites other to become disciples of Jesus...” and I can’t think of a better way to end a discussion than by focusing on the power of example. And in my mind Mother Teresa of Calcutta is one of the most persuasive examples of recent sainthood in practice and of a discipleship that has led hundreds and hundreds of young women to join her order and wear the blue and white, simple gowns that witness a love to the needy in so many parts of the world. We may be afraid of engaging others in words of invitation but let’s never forget that we will always be challenged to live what we believe.

At this point I would think the group should have an understanding that we all have an invitation to become disciples, that same invitation in a way that Jesus extended to all during his public ministry. So becoming a disciple in his Kingdom, to have “his life” in us, means to “live his life” within each of the communities of which we are a part.

Sharing Our Faith

These are some great questions to discuss. Let me suggest that with the second bullet point some may admit a little bit of a struggle since it takes on ongoing sense of the presence of God in our lives to see “His hands” in the hands of others. But it might help if we could become convinced ourselves that maybe when we are feeling that little prompting to do a good deed that it is evidence of God’s grace operating in us, his actual grace giving us that little push we need every now and then. I guess a more generic way to ask a similar question is do I have the eyes of faith that see God’s action in our world?

Living the Good News

Given that we all can use a deeper understanding of what the kingdom means and a deeper appreciation for Jesus as our model, I would really suggest encouraging everyone to consider making a commitment to “read and pray the Scripture each day.” Praying the scriptures is one of the oldest traditions we have as Catholics. Praying the scriptures is also known as [Lectio Divina and here is a good link](#) you can share with folks to help them learn about Lectio. The other suggestions, or course, also have merit but I sincerely believe that prayer is always the engine that drives so much of the direction we need to go.

Lifting our Hearts

You will find me encouraging each group to open up the closing to spontaneous prayer for all the variety of intentions that we always do carry in our hearts so suggest going around the room/group to ask each person present to pray for a specific intention. Be a good example and start using our CTK format: EG; For the Spirit’s presence with us this year to open our hearts to understanding and growth, let us pray to the Lord. Or, for a greater commitment to really live Christ’s life in my circle of family and friends, let us pray to the Lord. Group response: Lord, hear our prayer.

Note two how this ending prayer is a wonderful summary invitation of that transformation we need in our human lives to let God become more central. I think it is a great idea to extend peace to each other. The real definition, you can check this, of beatitude is “supreme blessedness or happiness.” When we fully believe that true happiness indeed comes from more fully entering into Christ’s life, then we will be filled with peace that can’t help but spill over to all around us.

Addendum Note: Any feedback you would like to give is most welcome. Please reply to allaabs1770@gmail.com

Addendum Note 2: Attached are pictures of my visit to mount of the Beatitudes ‘Church in the Holy Land. It was truly wonderful to walk out, sit on that hillside and imagine Jesus was standing near by.

The Church near the summit of the hill rising about the Sea of Galilee:



The Altar of the Church:



The eight Stained Glass windows depicting the Beatitudes form the dome of the Church:

