

Exploring the history of the Baltimore Catechism

So you think you know the Baltimore Catechism? Prove it.

1. Who made us?

A.) God made us.

B.) I'm a self-made man.

2. Who is God?

A.) God is the string bean who made all things.

B.) God is the Supreme Being who made all things. (And if you choose B. here, do you want to rethink your choice of B. for question No. 1?)

3. Why do the correct answers in this quiz not perfectly match the answers I remember memorizing?

A.) When you were 7 years old you thought "string bean" was really funny.

B.) They do. In a way.

4. (Here's a hint.) How many editions of the Catechism are there?

A.) Huh?

B.) What?

Exactly. There have been multiple editions to the Catechism, so the answers you memorized might be different from the one someone of an earlier or later generation knew by rote.

Tweaking the catechism

"But ... but ... but," you may be thinking – and rightly so. Did we just get a whiff of heresy? No. Here's the deal. What all those editions teach about Church's ... well ... teachings are the same, but the words or phrases may have been revised. Most likely the American bishops never said, "These need a little tweaking," but that's sort of what happened.

For example, in the original:

Question: Who is God?

Answer: God is the Creator of heaven and earth, and of all things.

See? No mention of Being (or bean) in the 1885 edition that you'll find in the 1964 one.

A little history

What the hierarchy did say – at the Third Plenary Council of Bishops held in Baltimore in 1884 – was, “We need a catechism.” Meaning our people need a catechism.

Yes, they did. Yes, we do.



The Baltimore Catechism relief on the Cathedral of Mary Our Queen in Baltimore Wikimedia Commons/Farragutful

What if the meeting had been held in Poughkeepsie? Who's to say? Would we speak of the “Poughkeepsie Catechism”? Probably. The bishops, who mandated the creation of a formal catechism, gave Bishop John Spalding of Peoria, Illinois, the job of

seeing that it got done.

Bishop Spalding tapped Msgr. Januarius de Concilio (1836-98), a Jersey City pastor, to take care of that. And he did. It needs to be noted that Msgr. De Concilio – a native of Naples, Italy, and missionary to the United States – was also a well-respected scholar, professor and author.

The good monsignor submitted his draft, which ended up on the desk of Cardinal James Gibbons of Baltimore for his “approbation” – his approval. His Eminence gave it the A-OK on April 6, 1885. With that, it was the official text recommended for teaching Catholic kids in the United States.

None of this is to say, “Wow, those 19th-century bishops really moved fast!” In 1852, when the prelates got together for the First Plenary Council of Baltimore, they decreed: “A catechism shall be written, which is better adapted to the circumstances of this Province; it shall give the Christian Doctrine as explained in Cardinal Bellarmine’s Catechism (1597), and when approved by the Holy See, it shall be published for the common use of Catholics.”

On the other hand, Cardinal Gibbons and the 1884 council really kicked the project into high gear. And from that day forward (in 1885), over decades, for generation after generation, it was the book for helping youngsters learn the basics of Catholicism. The same book, but, well, not the same book. In the 1930s and '40s a committee of bishops said, “Wait a minute here. Let’s punch this up.”

Or words to that effect.

They divided the Catechism into several volumes, each aimed at a particular age group. After all, how something is taught and explained to you when you’re 7 doesn’t quite fly when you’re your 17.

And if your religious education stopped in second or third

grade, those answers can be far from satisfying when you enter adulthood. They can seem childish because they are in the sense that they were written for a child. And “anything-but childish” in the sense that they dealt with incredibly deep theological truths and divine revelations.

Appeal

Keep in mind that while the Baltimore Catechism held the No. 1 spot in the United States for many, many years, there were others. As Benedictine Sister Mary Charles Bryce pointed out in her 1972 article in *Catechist* magazine, “Between 1885 and 1941 over 100 other Catholic catechetical manuals were published in America with official imprimaturs, although none was as widely used.”

With the dawning of the Age of Aquarius ... no, that’s not right. In 1964 *The New St. Joseph Baltimore Catechism* was published. Passionist Father Bennet Kelley explained in the introduction:

“[This is] a new approach to the Baltimore Catechism. Its aim is to take the main point of each lesson and to show how that is illustrated or exemplified in some event in sacred Scripture. The concrete picture language of the Bible will be a big help to the child to understand better the main truths presented in the more abstract language of the questions and answers of the official Baltimore Catechism.

“We would like to note here, though, that nothing is completely new in the Church, not even the *kerygmatic* [preaching] approach to the teaching of religion, which is aimed at here.”

That edition is still in use and has undergone a revival in recent times despite falling out of general favor among many after the Second Vatican Council.

Not that the idea, purpose and value of a catechism lost its

universal appeal. Just the opposite. Referring to the Catechism of the Catholic Church (spearheaded by Pope St. John Paul II, who gave it his approval in 1992), the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops' website notes: "A catechism is a text, which contains the fundamental Christian truths formulated in a way that facilitates their understanding. There are two categories of catechism: major and minor. A major catechism is a resource or a point of reference for the development of minor catechisms. The Catechism of the Catholic Church is an example of a major catechism. The Baltimore Catechism is an example of a minor catechism."

A "minor catechism" that played a major role in the history of the American Church and in the lives of countless Catholic Americans.

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The Catechism's Author on God's Mother



Msgr. Januarius de Concilio

Baltimore Catechism author Msgr. Januarius de Concilio was a brilliant scholar who usually strictly adhered to a scholastic form of writing. (Just take a look at the single-sentence last paragraph here!) But he got a little personal in the preface to his “The Knowledge of Mary” (Catholic Publishing Society, 1878). Clearly, it was a topic – and a person – close to his heart.

Reprints of the book are still being sold, and a free online copy can be found here: <https://tinyurl.com/KnowledgeOfMary>.

“When young we used to have the habit of reading everyday something on Mary, and we never cared for emotional books, which did not build their practice of devotion to Mary on the basis of a solid knowledge of her.

“Since we have been a priest all the moments we could spare from other duties we have consecrated to this subject; and we can safely say that we have read every book worth reading treating of Mary, so that we can assert that there is no thought or idea redounding to her glory written by others which will not be found in our book. ...

“May this little effort of our love for a subject so grand, which has charmed us all our life long, and which will, we trust in Mary, be our hope and our joy in death, do the good it is calculated to produce; and may all Catholics, all our younger brethren in the ministry, for whom it is specially intended, study it carefully and patiently, and they will feel the grandeur and sublimity of the faith which they preach; they will obtain a solid foundation for that sweet and tender love which burns in their bosom for Mary; they will acquire facility in preaching that devotion, in inculcating it, in every way and by every means at their disposal; and may some one (and there are many bright intellects among them) try to do better than we could do, and write a work on Mary which, for science, for eloquence, for beauty of style and language, may shame our own, and then our heart will be content, for then our shame will be the glory of our Mother.”