The Farncombe Catechism

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Thinking about the Catechism

Many older Anglican Christians will be aware that once upon a time there was a thing called the Catechism. 'Catechism' comes from a Greek word meaning 'to make hear', or 'to instruct'; the Catechism was, accordingly, a book of teachings. The Church of England's Catechism was a short account of what the Church believed in the form of questions and answers. Anyone coming up to be confirmed, and therefore a full member of the Church able to receive Holy Communion, was supposed to learn the answers in the Catechism off by heart (even though it didn't always happen like that). Learning the Catechism, even when it was done in a slightly stodgy school-like way, helped generations of Christians remember very important things about their relationship with God. They might end up disagreeing with elements of it, or abandon their faith entirely in later years, but they still had a good grounding in what the Church taught, arguably far better than average Christians have today.

Nowadays things are a little different. The connection between confirmation and communion is weaker and you'd have to look very hard to find a church that still uses the Catechism in the old way. However, the Church of England still has a Catechism, last updated by the General Synod in 1996, and the Bishops recommend it as a useful guide to the faith. It has 61 questions and answers, organised under 6 headings.

I was as surprised as anyone, perhaps, to discover that the Catechism had been updated and still existed in any shape or form beyond the one included in the old Book of Common Prayer of 1662. However I was interested in it as a form of teaching. Over the years I've collected battered old copies of the *Haggerston Catechism*, devised by Fr HA Wilson of St Augustine's, Haggerston, in the 1930s as a means of teaching the children of his parish a solid Anglo-Catholic interpretation of the Anglican tradition, and while I knew that world was long since passed, the idea filtered into my mind that I might treat the whole *church* as a catechism class and use the modern version as a basis for a series of teaching sermons. They would give me a chance to think and talk about some basic doctrinal issues and questions, rather than the more spiritual concerns that usually arise from thinking about the readings set for each Sunday, which are usually what my sermons are based on. I gulped a little on sitting down and realising that covering the whole Catechism would take a year, and so did the congregation when I told them. Some people didn't

like it at all and chafed a bit at being told things they already knew. Others found it very helpful and as the year wore on would ask me whether I was thinking of gathering the sermons together in some form.

I wasn't, not least because my sermon notes were just that, notes, rather than polished bodies of prose. I hadn't even delivered them in the usual way, but sat in a chair in the middle of the altar step and talked, sometimes departing from my prearranged notes when something occurred to me. But I realised that as a result of preaching the sermons I had actually done a lot of thinking, some of it arising out of my experience as a priest. Most people might assume you learn your stuff at theological college and then simply regurgitate it for the rest of your ministry, but this is not the case! One of the themes that emerged from the process was that the Catechism *itself* is actually rather reticent, introducing ideas rather than detailing them (I once called attention to the difference between the Anglican Catechism – a slim 20-page booklet – and the Roman Catholic one which weighs in at nearly 700). This meant that what I eventually came up with was not just a set of teaching notes on preconceived ideas, but an account of what it means to be a Christian at the Catholic end of the Church of England in the earlier part of the twenty-first century. And sharing those thoughts seems a worthwhile expression of what I am here to do as a priest: to explore what being human means through the tradition of the Church, which is the accumulated record of its life with God.

The sermon series ran to twenty talks in all, and the sequence of questions and answers from the Catechism was somewhat played around with to make a better fit. I've preserved that pattern in this book.

Questions of Belief

Do we have to believe everything in the Catechism? Well, it contains much of the essence of the Christian faith as the Church of England understands it. Some Christians are ordained by the Church to represent publicly the life lived by Christ's people, and when we make our ordination declarations we must affirm that we share the faith of Christ 'as the Church of England has received it'. This means that we are bound to teach certain things. Laypeople, however, have a bit more leeway because they don't have that representative function; and of course you may have noticed that even clergy are not necessarily unanimous in what they think …

At no point do the Scriptures lay out a set of beliefs that we are supposed to subscribe to: in the history of the Church, developing those – the Creeds – came later. Instead what the Scriptures present are pictures and accounts of people living in a relationship with God. The people who encountered Jesus cannot have had clear or in fact accurate ideas of who he really was, and how what he was doing would lead to their salvation. Instead they simply responded to the sense of love, truth and authority they gained from his presence. This suggests that God is less concerned with the minutiae of what we believe than with our attitude towards Jesus our Saviour, that is, whether or not we turn to him humbly and conscious of our sins and shortcomings.

There are some beliefs, if we stray too far from which, we would cease to be recognisably Christian; the nature of the Holy Trinity and Jesus as the essential and final self-revelation of God, for example. But there are many more which, although they may be as it were second-tier issues, nevertheless express important truths about God and human beings; and when we wander from those or fail to understand them, there is a risk that our grasp of the core matters of salvation will weaken – perhaps, eventually, fatally so.

The thinking of the Church changes and develops over time. For more conservative Christians, that means discovering ideas and themes and new understandings which may always have been there in the faith handed on to us, but which we may have missed owing to our faulty understanding. Radically-inclined Christians, on the other hand, are more willing to say, 'Scripture and tradition have got it wrong', and to argue that the Church should change to catch up with the insights of the rest of society, which may represent the will of God more than the Church does itself. *In both cases* what happens is a sort of conversation between the present and the past to form the Church of the future; but that can't happen unless we who make up the Church know what it already thinks and why, which is why teaching and reflecting *on* the teaching are vitally important in the life of God's people. Doctrine, as embodied in the Catechism, is the shape of the conversation we have together, the means by which we discover how to be Christians.

In each section, the text from the 1996 Catechism, its questions and answers, appears in **bold type,** and the answers in ***bold italics.***

Part 1: What did God do for you in your baptism?

Q1. What is your Christian name?

This seems about as easy a start to the Catechism as one could imagine. In fact it's worth noting that the text asks 'what is your *Christian* name' as opposed to just 'your name', which is the question the old version of the Catechism asked. There's something very intimate about this: the text asks you to name yourself as a child would, without reference to your family lineage or your past. Your Christian name is the one by which God and the angels know you, and they aren't interested in the pretensions of the world or anything else. As far as they're concerned, you are just *you*.

It's also a 'Christian name' because at baptism you enter a new life – the risen life of Christ as opposed to the life we're born into, with all the inherited and historical weaknesses of our human nature. Whatever name you may have had before your baptism is a natural name; this is something different, something new. It will be the name written in the baptism register of the church, and, we might perhaps imagine, into the Book of Life.

Q2. Who gave you this name?

My parents and godparents gave me this name at my Baptism.

To show that they have begun a new, spiritual life, the child (if it is a child, which is what the Catechism assumes) receives new parents. In theory, the relationship of godparents and godchildren is exactly parallel to natural relationships – which is why they may not marry one another, and why, in the Roman Catholic Church, priests are not allowed to have godchildren. This is a permanent relationship, too, which doesn't come to an end at any particular point in the godchild's life, although there could be reasons why it might cease as circumstances change.

Q40. What is Baptism?

Baptism is the sacrament in which, through the action of the Holy Spirit, we are 'christened' or made Christ's.

In England people have used the word 'christening' for the sacrament of baptism for centuries, to the point where its real significance has been all but lost as Christian culture and knowledge has declined. In this question the Catechism tries to repair the damage and bring the two together, suggesting that we think of 'christening' as one of the *effects* of 'baptism'.

Q.15 deals with how sacraments work and what they mean, and we'll discuss that later. At this point, however, the Catechism makes clear the revolutionary character of what happens when we're baptised: we are 'made Christ's'. It may not feel like that very much, and may not exactly be apparent if the person being baptised is a baby, but our baptism is something we grow into over the course of the whole of our lives, and its potential may sleep in us for years before it gets going. God knows about it, though, because we have been 'made Christ's': from that point on, a particular human life fundamentally belongs to *him first*, before any other relationships or identities the person may have. On a spiritual level, in God's eyes, that becomes the basic fact about who they are: it's the prime determinant of their identity.

Q41. What is the outward and visible sign in baptism?

The outward and visible sign in Baptism is water in which the person is baptized in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.

Again, we'll consider 'outward and visible signs' and 'inward and spiritual graces' under Q.16, but it's not hard to guess that the 'outward and visible sign' in baptism will be water. This is what Jesus underwent in his baptism at the River Jordan at the hands of John, so this is what we do too: being symbolically washed clean, and drowned to our natural life so that a new, spiritual life can be born. In the early days Christians would have used rivers, pools or wells or whatever water was to hand; then when churches were built they commonly included baptisteries in which a convert could stand or kneel in a broad, shallow font and have water poured over them. Later on smaller fonts developed like the ones we have today; even a tiny amount of water is still OK, as the *quantity* makes no difference to the sacrament, although baptism by full immersion (whether an adult or a child!) makes the point more powerfully. The Church of England specifies that whenever a new church is built it has to include a baptismal pool so full immersion can take place when appropriate. However what is used *must be* water and not any other liquid. The idea of baptism in the name of the Holy Trinity is suggested right at the end of the Gospel of S. Matthew, and although there are Churches

which have experimented with other wording – 'the Creator, the Redeemer, and the Sustainer', for instance – the historic Churches believe that only the name of the Trinity makes a baptism valid. This is because we trust that these are the terms God has chosen to refer to himself, not anything that we have made up, and that if we abandon them we are starting to move away from who God is, preferring our own formulations – which don't have the ability to free us from our illusions and misconceptions.

Q42. What is the inward and spiritual gift in baptism?

The inward and spiritual gift in Baptism is union with Christ in his death and resurrection, the forgiveness of sins, and a new birth into God's family, the Church.

Christians didn't invent the idea of baptism: most obviously Jesus's cousin John 'the Baptist' called the people of Israel to begin their relationship with God over again by having their sins and past lives symbolically washed and cleansed in the water of the River Jordan. But because Jesus too went to John to be baptised even though he had no sins to be cleansed of, he added a new significance to the act. When the early Christians baptised their converts they did so *in the name of Jesus*. This idea *includes* the concept of repenting our sins but is more than that. Baptism marks the point where our life touches Jesus's, and the pattern of his life, birth, death and resurrection, become part of the pattern of ours. His life is born in us, and henceforth we carry it within us.

The death we die in baptism is the death of our natural tendency to sin, which we inherit as part of our humanity and in common with all human beings. It is still active in us, but we renounce it, and God chooses not to see it from that point forward, looking instead on the righteousness of Jesus.

This new birth is not just as an individual: we have a new family of brethren, every other Christian in the world, undivided by age, sex, race, class, or any of the other things that otherwise set us apart from each other.

All these things are going on in us from the moment we are baptised. Of course in a sense they begin even before that, and carry on afterwards, but the sacrament shows them coming to the surface, as it were, even if we are too young to realise it consciously. We are still surrounded by the Church, our brothers and sisters, which does realise it and recognise it, and which works to make it a reality in our lives. This is why it's very helpful for adult Christians

to witness baptisms, as it calls to mind their own. We often think that christening is something parents 'do for' their children, but in fact the babies are doing us a service too: providing us with a means of recalling and meditating on what God has done for us, as well!

Q.3 What did God do for you in your baptism?

In my Baptism God called me to himself, and I was made a member of Christ, the child of God, and an inheritor of the kingdom of heaven.

The Church insists that every soul is *called* specially by God. To be called is to be summoned personally – a general invitation isn't a *call*. God desires you, as an individual person, to share love with you and for you to have the best in this life and the life to come. This means our coming-to-faith isn't an accident: God wants that and tries to bring it about, always respecting our own will to respond to his calling.

Being made *'a member of Christ'* is to be as close to him as part of his body. Just as blood keeps the members of our own bodies alive, so God's grace is necessary for us to live spiritually: to remain as a member of Christ. Without grace we will wither and die.

When we are to *inherit* something it's already ours, promised and set aside for us, even if we don't actually possess it at the moment. We don't possess the Kingdom of God yet, but it's ours by right. It waits for us to come into our inheritance, and to enjoy it for real at the right time. No power in earth or heaven can take it away from us – no power except our own will. But the Kingdom is also something to strive for, and without that kind of striving our inheritance will not come to us.

To say 'I am a baptised Christian' is to accept all of this, to recognise your relationship with God as the most important thing about you. It's the most important because it will determine what will become of you eternally, and affect everything else you do in this world too. And nothing outside you can change it or remove it. It's yours, forever, if you want it.

Part 2: What promises were made for you when you were baptised?

Q.4 What did your godparents promise for you at your baptism?

At my Baptism my godparents made three promises to God for me: first, that I would renounce the devil and fight against evil; secondly, that I would hold fast the Christian faith, and put my whole trust in Christ as Lord and Saviour; thirdly, that I would obediently keep God's holy will and commandments, and serve him faithfully all the days of my life.

Perhaps it's no surprise that you can, should you want to, download from the internet a de-Baptism certificate so that you can renounce your baptism. Traditional Christian thinking goes against that of the whole modern world with its stress on individual choice, autonomy and self-determination: right at the start of a person's life, someone *else* takes a decision about their spiritual life and opinions. Isn't it outrageous that your thinking be decided for you? Isn't this a scandalous violation of the rights of the individual? That's certainly what a lot of atheists think. We'll come on to that a bit later, but consider first exactly what it is that is promised on behalf of those who are baptised.

Almost all of us who call ourselves Christians had these promises made for us, and many of us have at different times made them for others. It's interesting that in the liturgy of baptism the words are addressed to the person *being baptised* as much as they are to their godparents. This was very clear in the old Roman Rite baptism service in which the priest called the baby by name and then asked the questions – 'Mabel, do you turn to Christ?' and so on – to which the godparents would then reply on their behalf.

You can think of the three promises as a kind of ladder with three steps, 'renouncing', 'believing', and 'obeying', although climbing all three takes a lifetime.

Firstly, you *renounce* the three enemies of the Christian life – sin (or in the old language, 'the flesh'), the world and the devil. The baptism service instructs the new Christian to 'fight valiantly' against these three things. The *flesh* is the natural inclinations to selfishness and enmity we all share, stamped through us as human beings. The *world* can be understood many ways – perhaps the temptation to put other things, good though they may be in themselves, before God; or perhaps it means those aspects of creation which do not acknowledge Jesus and so tempt us away from him. And the *Devil* is the active sense of evil which threatens to pull us down and do us harm. You needn't necessarily imagine an actual spiritual being, although that's traditionally what the Church has taught. Its power is real, regardless of whether you imagine it as a person or not.

Renouncing all these three enemies doesn't mean you will never be misled by them or take a wrong turn: it means you recognise them for what they are, and won't give them your allegiance any more.

Believing, seems obvious but that phrase 'hold fast the faith' suggests something more urgent and difficult than just assenting to something with your intellect. In fact, you may not agree with every word the Church teaches, or you may not understand it. That doesn't matter. The Christian faith is faith not in the teachings of the Church *as such* but in Christ, and without him any person is adrift, wandering in a place of danger without light and landmarks. That's why, the Catechism hints, we should fear losing our hold on faith, and clutch it hard to ourselves. It is the most precious thing in the world.

As for *obeying*, that requires prayer and hard work – both discerning God's will and being able to follow it. We need to pray hard for it!

Q5. Are you bound to do as they promised?

Yes, certainly, and by God's help I will.

Here we bump hard up against the whole of modern thinking. How on earth can promises made by someone *else* bind *you?* Well, if those promises were made by people who didn't mean them or who then did nothing to make them real, you probably aren't bound by them at all. But if you're part of a Christian family, surrounded as you grow up by prayer and others trying to be Jesus's disciples, then separating yourself from all of that is going to cost. That's what it means by being *bound*: it's a connection that it costs to break.

The modern, libertarian part of our minds revolts a bit at this, and thinks it's unfair; that children should choose for themselves. Of course they will, when they reach the age to do so; but that modern part of our mind is living in a fantasy that we as individuals are responsible only for ourselves, are answerable only to ourselves, and are influenced only by ourselves. We don't have to do much hard thinking to work out that this is nonsense, and doesn't reflect the way human beings really work.

You may notice that when children encounter Christ they always meet him with joy; not church, perhaps, or Christians, but Christ, and that's what's more important. Never ever feel shy or scared about introducing them to him.

Q43. What is required of persons to be baptised?

It is required that persons to be baptised should turn from sin, believe the Christian Faith, and give themselves to Christ to be his servants.

When people come for baptism or bring their own children to be baptised, I can't judge them or their motivations. Saying the words has to be enough evidence of their good intention. But promises made without sincerity corrode the soul and the lives of all who those false promises touch. People know this, however they may try and brush it aside.

We're going to take the next three statements together.

Q44. Why then are infants baptised?

Infants are baptised because, though they are not yet old enough to make the promises for themselves, others, making the promises for them, can claim their adoption as children of God.

Q45. What is confirmation?

Confirmation is the ministry by which, through prayer with the laying on of hands by the Bishop, the Holy Spirit is received to complete what he began in Baptism, and to give strength for the Christian life.

Q46. What is required of persons to be confirmed?

It is required that persons to be confirmed should have been baptised, be sufficiently instructed in the Christian Faith, be penitent for their sins, and be ready to confess Jesus Christ as Saviour and obey him as Lord.

Not all Christian Churches baptise small children, and even some Anglican parents don't avail themselves of the opportunity because they see it as requiring a positive, conscious intention of faith. That's a respectable position; but it ignores history (because we have evidence of children being baptised almost as far back as we have evidence of anyone being) and theology (which is that children also take part in the fallen nature common to all human beings and because 'we're all in it together' they need the grace of the sacraments too). The Church baptises children on the understanding that those around them and responsible for them are on the road of discipleship as well. That may often be rather a pious hope, but it places the process in God's hands rather than ours.

Originally there wasn't a separate ceremony of Confirmation, and in the Orthodox Churches there still isn't. But in the West as there were too many people for the bishops to baptise they delegated that to the priests and reserved to themselves the last bit, the marking with the Chrism signifying the gift of the Holy Spirit; it was this which developed into the rite of confirmation. The old tradition in the Church of England was that you couldn't take communion until you were confirmed; things are by no means so clear now! Many churches allow children to receive communion before they are confirmed, as the Roman Catholic Church has always done. But it remains as a point when you *must* make a conscious statement that you belong to Jesus – which is helpful to have.

It helps, perhaps, to think what these sacraments are trying to do. They're trying to express in ritual forms the process of repentance, belief and commitment which *must take place* in the life of every Christian *at some point*. But those internal, spiritual changes don't necessarily take place at the same time as the ritual. We'll talk about how sacraments work at a later date; but for now remember that sacraments are promises; they make things happen by committing to making them happen. Baptism and confirmation reveal the Holy Spirit working across the whole of a person's life, summed up at those special moments. They mark the points at which his eternal, ongoing work, expressed in Jesus Christ, connects with our temporally-bounded work – the promises we make to him and with him.

Part 3: What do you learn from the Creeds?

Q6. Where do you find a summary of this Christian Faith which you are bound to believe and hold fast?

I find a summary of the Christian Faith in the Apostles' Creed and in the Nicene Creed.

It's curious that the Catechism mentions the Apostles' and Nicene Creeds but not the third 'Catholic Creed', the much longer and more complicated Athanasian Creed. However, it's understandable: that text isn't used liturgically except in the Prayer Book liturgy on thirteen occasions in the year, and is mainly concerned with the technical details of the relationship between the persons of the Holy Trinity. It's good for modern Christians to know it exists, but that's probably all they need to know!

Why are the Creeds there? Very early on the Christians didn't need statements of belief: they only became necessary when it was clear the end of the world wasn't coming immediately, and Christians began to feel it was helpful to set down exactly what the Church believed. In fact, they were part of the process of working *out* what it believed, and answering questions that were not even thought about right at the start because they didn't seem important.

You might assume from the name that the Apostles' Creed goes back to the Apostles … that's not *quite* true. It's an elaboration of the Old Roman Creed which is first recorded in the *Apostolic Tradition* of S. Hippolytus in the early 3rd century, and probably originated in Gaul. The Nicene Creed of course emerged from the Council of Nicaea, called by the Emperor Constantine, in 325. This was designed to catch out the heretic Arius who

taught that the Son was created by the Father and therefore was not really God. It was added to and altered before being settled in its final form at the Council of Chalcedon in 451. However there is still some ambiguity: the statement that the Holy Spirit proceeds from the Father 'and the Son' (*Filioque* in Latin) is a Western insertion into the text which the Orthodox Churches have never accepted.

Q7. Repeat the Apostles' Creed …

When I preached my series of sermons based on the Catechism I didn't make the congregation repeat the Apostles' Creed! I suppose the Catechism goes for the Apostles' as it's the shorter of the two, although now that the Eucharist is at the centre of Anglican worship far more than it used to be, the Nicene Creed is probably the more familiar to many churchgoers. I find myself regularly stumbling in both Creeds if I try not looking at the words because they share so many phrases and it's easy to stray mentally from the one into the other. But it is a good thing to learn: 'rehearse the articles of thy belief' is the phrase the old Prayer Book Catechism uses. It helps to have these ideas so rooted in us that we can reel them off without too much thought, so that they are at hand when we need them (a bit like learning times tables).

Q8. What do you learn from the Creeds?

> ***From the Creeds I learn to believe in one God, Father, Son and Holy Ghost, who is the creator and ruler of the universe, and has made all things for his glory.***

Of course you learn many things from the Creeds and to discuss them all in detail would take a longer book than I have any intention of writing. The interesting general question to think about concerns the nature of belief and what creeds are there for.

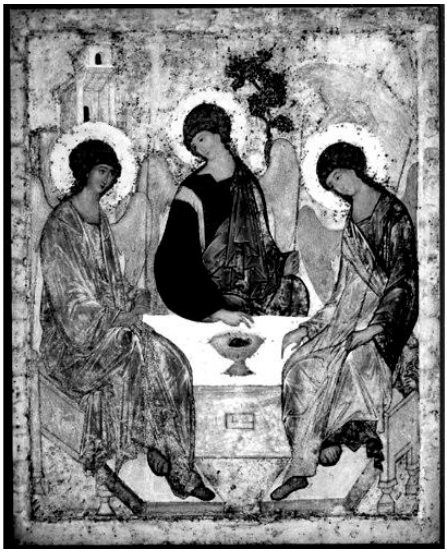
First, we might note that the statement the Catechism makes is very minimalist. It's as though the Creeds mark out the territory for God, and that's the most important thing about them. They don't actually provide all the answers, but set the boundaries and limits within which the answers are to be discovered. The contents of the Creeds are not the *faith* – the 'Christian faith' is following Jesus, rather than a set of doctrinal statements. *But* without the without the life, death and resurrection of Jesus none of the rest of it makes any sense. Just as the heart of the Gospels are the Passion Narratives,

so the heart of the faith is who Jesus is and what happened to him, and the Creeds are the Church's way of remembering those absolute, vital facts.

Now, it may say at the start of the Athanasian Creed, 'whosoever would be saved, it is necessary that he believe the Catholic Faith', meaning very much the various statements that make the Creed up, but laypeople have some latitude. This is acknowledged in the modern Creed translations which very often frame the statements with the phrase 'we believe' rather than 'I believe'; doing that stresses that whatever you're saying is the *Church's* belief rather than an individual's. Those of us who *represent* the Church, however, the people it ordains, are more constrained. At the time we're ordained, and when we take on a new parochial responsibility, we have to reaffirm our acceptance of 'the Catholic Creeds' as a way of stating that we believe the traditional understanding of Christianity as the Church of England has received it, and so can teach it to others. If you're feeling, as a lay Christian, that the Creeds are demanding a lot of your powers of belief and acceptance, it may also help to reflect that there are a lot of things they don't mention at all, what you might call 'second-tier issues' about morality, Church organisation and practice. This means Christians should be generous towards each others' differences, if they aren't credal matters.

Nevertheless the Creeds help in grounding our faith in something definite. You might think of them as the rope that stops us floating off into vagueness or nonsense. Faith is holding on to God's promises, and acting on them, not necessarily feeling much at all. Although way, way down the line you may have the passion and tenderness of a saint, and your prayers will be the means of God making springs burst forth from the rock, the blind to see and the lame to walk, that will almost certainly take a long time. Meanwhile there are the Creeds, to train us in what *really* makes the faith, which is following Jesus through this perilous but beloved world.

Part 4. What does the Church teach about the Holy Trinity?



Q9. What does the Church teach about God the Father?
The Church teaches that God the Father made me and all mankind, and that in his love he sent his Son to reconcile the world to himself.

Q10. What does the Church teach about God the Son?
The Church teaches that, for our salvation, God the Son became man and died for our sins; that he was raised victorious over death and was exalted to the throne of God as our advocate and intercessor; and that he will come as our judge and saviour.

Q11. What does the Church teach about God the Holy Spirit?
The Church teaches that God the Holy Spirit inspires all that is good in mankind; that he came in his fullness at Pentecost to be the giver of life in the Church, and that he enables me to grow in likeness to Jesus Christ. Thus I learn to believe in one God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, and this Holy Trinity I praise and magnify saying:
Glory be to the Father, and to the Son, and to the Holy Ghost: as it was in the beginning, is now, and ever shall be, world without end. Amen.

If you go into St John's and look at the stop of the chancel arch – and the arch of the Lady Chapel, too - you can see a carved shamrock. The legend goes that St Patrick explained the Holy Trinity to the pagan Irish by referring to the clover, with its three lobes that together form one leaf. I am not completely sure that this image works very well!

It's no surprise that Christians have and still do struggle with the doctrine of the Trinity. It's nothing more than a truism to state that we're never going to understand it intellectually. God the Trinity is unique – there are no other analogies or parallels to understand it with. The Christian faith

insists that God is *one* and yet also *three* at the same time, which is not really the same as clover, or anything else. Classical Christianity further complicates matters with ideas such as *perichoresis*, the idea that the three persons of God interpenetrate one another and share each other's identity, yet remain themselves. How can this be? The whole concept makes no sense in any ordinary way.

The Catechism describes the persons of the Trinity in terms of what they *do* rather than getting into the details of what they *are*. This is probably helpful, although it can run into questionable territory. Some Christians have referred to the Trinity as 'the Creator, the Redeemer and the Sanctifier', and although this appears to make sense it runs the risk of suggesting that it's only how we experience God that makes him *appear* as three separate Persons. This isn't right: they still have a relationship with each other that's nothing to do with how we experience their activity.

How did the Church come up with this strange idea? The early Christians were of course good Jews, and the *shema* was the heart of their faith – 'Hear, O Israel, the Lord your God is one' – and believing that God was one, rather than there being lots of gods, was what set Jews apart from the cultures around them. However as the Church got to grips with Jesus's resurrection and what it meant, they were forced to the conclusion that he was divine and that his referring to God as 'Father' was a way of describing a very specific relationship. This belief is unmistakably already present in the Gospels and in Paul's Letters. The understanding of the Holy Spirit as God is harder to grasp: the Jewish Scriptures had already spoken of 'God's Spirit' without elaborating the idea; the early Christians came to view the Spirit as the power that enabled them to believe and do the things Jesus had done. The idea of the Trinity appears most clearly in the New Testament in Matthew 28.19, and elsewhere it's mainly *implied* rather than *stated*. It took a long time for the Church to work out all the details but it always defended the idea against heresies and critics even while not really understanding it.

The classic depiction of the Trinity in the West, which we find from the Middle Ages onwards, was God the Father holding the Son on a cross either above or below the Spirit shown as a dove; its counterpart in the East is the famous icon 'The Hospitality of Abraham' by Andrei Rublev, showing three figures seated around a table, distinct but all looking alike, gazing at

and gesturing towards one another. The latter has largely taken the place of the former over the last few decades.

For God to be a community of persons makes a difference to how we think about Him: it means he is not a monarch, isolated and alone. Even if God were only the Father and the Son, this would be an exclusive relationship: a third Person opens the relationship out and makes the Godhead a community. This marks a very clear from Islam where God is a unity: Mohammed insisted throughout the Quran that the doctrine of the Trinity was monstrous, and couldn't get beyond the idea that Christians believed in 'three gods'. This monolithic conception of God, arguably, affects the whole way Islam relates to the society around it.

Also, because the Trinity is beyond the limits of human understanding, it emphasises how reality, identity and truth flow from God and not from the world. Truth is not changed by the fact that we may or may not understand it: God defines reality, not us. We, and our understanding or lack of it, are secondary to him: they are irrelevant to the truth, and just because we can't understand an idea with our reason doesn't mean that it's rational to reject it.

It's very striking that at this point the Catechism abandons teaching and recites the Doxology, 'Glory be …'. Why does it do this? It must surely be that the Trinity is not an idea we could have worked out ourselves, and even when it's revealed to us we can't demonstrate it by reason. The only response we can have is praise and adoration.

Part 5: What is the Church?

Q12. What is the Church?

> *The Church is the family of God and the body of Christ through which he continues his reconciling work among men and women. Its members on earth enter it by baptism and are one company with those who worship God in heaven.*

There are perhaps infinite answers to the question 'What is the Church?' and some of them are even polite! People sometimes talk about being ordained as 'going into the Church', but this misses the truth that the Church *is* all Christians.

The Church is God's creation, not ours; the phrases 'family of God' and 'Body of Christ' put all the initiative with him and not us. The Church exists not because we decide it's a good idea that it should, but as a natural consequence of the saving work of Jesus Christ. Jesus's disciples didn't decide to set up an organisation between them, but discovered a new life together with each other as a result of their new life with God; this was the Church, and here we all still are. The Church is designed to carry out God's work, not to answer to our concerns and ideas. We aren't simply free to chop and change things as we choose, or to get rid of people whose presence we find inconvenient. The Church is his gift to us, something we are to cherish, love and protect as precious.

The Catechism describes the essential mission of the Church as reconciliation – bringing people into relationship with God, and, by doing that, ordering properly their relationships with one another. That means we ought to be generous in allowing people to approach him, and not putting obstacles in the way, while being clear about who he is and what he wants of us.

The phrase 'One company with those who worship God in heaven' refers to what we call the 'communion of saints'. The Church Militant, the Church which is still struggling and battling on earth, is connected with the Church in Heaven, the saints who have gone before us. In some Christian traditions, bringing the saints into our prayers is completely natural. Asking the saints for their prayers is no different from asking your brothers and

sisters for theirs, which is why we have these images in church and have specific times when the prayers of the saints are invoked.

Q13. How is the Church described in the Creeds?

The Church is described as One, Holy, Catholic, and Apostolic.

These are what are termed the four 'notes' of the Church – that is, four ways in which the Church can be identified as the genuine article. For some reason the old Prayer Book translations of the Creed missed out 'holy'! The Notes weren't talked about much until the Reformation period when Roman Catholic writers began to use them as a way of justifying the RC Church as the only true one, and it's very striking that the Church of England retained these words.

Q14. What do you mean by these words?

By these words I mean that: the Church is One *because, in spite of its divisions, it is one family under one Father, whose purpose is to unite all people in Jesus Christ our Lord; the Church is* Holy *because it is set apart by God for himself, through the Holy Spirit; the Church is* Catholic *because it is universal, for all nations and for all time, holding the Christian Faith in its fullness; the Church is* Apostolic *because it is sent to preach the Gospel to the whole world, and receives its divine authority and teaching from Christ through his Apostles.*

All these four 'notes' are *aspirations* rather than things that the Church has *already achieved* – we are striving to be these things rather than already possessing them. We Christians are clearly not 'one', and we're 'holy' because we have a divine purpose, not because we're very good at it; certainly as far as the Church of England is concerned, we're not really 'universal'; and we only discover as time goes on what it means to be true to our Apostolic mission and identity. Being aware of this gap between what we are now and what we are supposed to be makes a huge difference in keeping us humble rather than arrogant and self-righteous. An awareness of how we are not yet what God wants us to be has even found its way into the Roman Catholic Church. The old statements from the Council of Trent in the 16th century onwards used to say 'This one Holy Catholic and Apostolic Church *is* the Church of Rome', whereas the documents of the Second Vatican Council changed this to say the One Church '*subsists in* the Church of Rome', which is definitely a bit different although nobody seems to be quite sure exactly what

it means! The Church as God wills it, then, to be is something we're all growing towards, not something we already are.

Later on the Catechism talks about the 'doctrine and ministry' of the Church, and we'll deal with this at a later stage. Clearly if the four Notes of the Church are things we aspire to, a Church body – say, the Anglicans, Baptists, or whatever – can be closer to or further away from these aspirations, rather than completely lacking in them. It might be defective in one or another of them, and it might diverge so far from what it means to believe and behave like the Church of God that it might no longer warrant the name. When that happens is a moot point. But so long as a Church continues to *say* these things, to make them the things it aspires to, it will always have something that continually summons it back to the centre, away from its own choices and delusions, and back towards God.

Part 6: What is the Church of England?

Q. 19. What is the Church of England?

The Church of England is the ancient Church of this land, catholic and reformed. It proclaims and holds fast the doctrine and ministry of the One, Holy, Catholic, and Apostolic Church.

You can't really discuss what the Church of England is without talking about its history. Of course a lot of its distinctive character derives from the divisions of the 16th-century Reformation, when the two Provinces of Canterbury and York were separated from the authority of the Pope, and went their own way. However, the *very first thing* the Catechism says is that it is 'the ancient Church of this land', fully in continuity with what went before the traumatic split from Rome. It wasn't Henry VIII and his need for a divorce which brought the Church of England into being.

You can see bits and pieces of the Anglican Church's connection with its pre-Reformation past everywhere. It still looks after the ancient Dark Age and Medieval churches, abbeys and cathedrals. It still has bishops, the current ones standing in succession from the medieval and Dark Age ones. If you go to Malling Abbey you find that the Anglican nuns there occupy the ruins of the convent closed in 1538; and if you look at the coat-of-arms of the Archbishop of Canterbury you will see on it the strip of wool embroidered with crosses called the *pallium*, the sign of an archbishop's office given them by the Pope (and still made from the wool of a flock of sheep kept in Rome!) – even though no Archbishop of Canterbury has worn a *pallium* for over five hundred years. St Paul's Cathedral still has two canons called Cardinals, awarded that title by a 15th-century Pope. No other Reformed Church kept so much of its medieval heritage, and this bit of the Catechism recognises that. Among the documents agreed by the Second Vatican Council of the Roman Catholic Church in the 1960s was *Unitatis Redintegratio*, which includes the statement, '*Among those* [Churches] *in which Catholic traditions and institutions in part continue to exist, the Anglican Communion occupies a special place*'.

The Catechism then says that the Anglican Church is 'catholic *and* reformed'. These two aspects of its identity are not so much held in 'balance' as in what you might call 'creative tension'! The Church didn't always think of itself this way. Under Elizabeth I it was definitely Puritan, and remained

very anti-Catholic for much of its history: in the Coronation Oath the monarch still swears to uphold 'the Protestant faith of this land', even if the word 'Protestant' isn't much used anywhere else these days. However, there were always currents pulling in the other direction. Even during Elizabeth I's reign, writers like Richard Hooker were arguing that the Church of England formed a sort of 'middle way' between Puritanism and Catholicism, and more Catholic ideas never quite died out. Eventually the Oxford Movement in the 1800s brought about a wholesale change in the way the CofE viewed itself, although it took decades to have its full effect.

St John's itself reflects that dual nature. Like many Victorian churches, it's Gothic in style, intended to recall the faith of the Middle Ages, and something bigger than our own little historical or geographical moment. But it also includes the importance of the Word, and the involvement of laypeople as full members of the Church, not just ordained people. You might characterise it as 'trusting tradition but recognising the Spirit's call to change'.

It's always worth remembering that most of the character the Church of England has developed is accidental; nobody designed it like this and nobody intended it – at least no human being did.

The Catechism then talks about the Church of England proclaiming the 'Doctrine and ministry' of the Church as a whole. What does this mean? Its *doctrine* is centred on the Creeds, that is, the matters of belief settled on and decided by the early Church. Many of those early ideas have been developed, elaborated, and added to over the course of the centuries (for instance, the 'Marian Dogmas', the special beliefs about the nature and status of the Virgin Mary the Roman Catholic Church has delineated), but as far as the Church of England is concerned it's only the credal doctrines that are *necessary*. 'Ministry' means the threefold structure of bishops, priests and deacons which was not *quite* there in Scriptural times but which had developed by the end of the 1st century AD. There is some ambiguity about this now, because after the ordination of women to the sacred ministry Anglicans don't *all* accept each others' ministers, but there have in most places been compromises and arrangements which allow us all to carry on 'walking together', as the phrase goes. The next section talks a bit more about those three Orders.

Q. 20. What is the Anglican Communion?

The Anglican Communion is a family of Churches within the universal Church of Christ, maintaining apostolic doctrine and order and in communion with one another and with the Sees of Canterbury and York.

The Archbishop of Canterbury is sometimes characterised as 'more than a metropolitan' (an ordinary archbishop) 'but not quite a patriarch' (a bishop of one of the chief bishoprics of the ancient world). If his role is more than a normal archbishop that's only because of the history of the British Empire, which spread the Anglican Church throughout the world. Not all Anglican Churches are in former bits of the Empire, but that's where it's strongest.

The Anglican Communion has come under great strain recently as its members have increasingly divergent ideas and ways of doing things, especially over matters such as ordaining women and the status of homosexual relationships. There is no longer a single liturgy that embraces everyone and that allows the differences in ideas to become sharper and more obvious. We might ask whether it's worth keeping it going, as Archbishops Rowan and Justin have both devoted a lot of energy to doing. We could argue that the emphasis in the Catechism on being in communion with the sees of Canterbury and York reminds us that a Church isn't fundamentally about beliefs and structures, but about relationships, firstly with God and secondarily with each other.

Part 7 – What orders of ministers are there in the Church?

Q.15 What orders of ministers are there in the Church?

There are these orders of ministers in the Church: Bishops, Priests and Deacons.

The Catechism says this quite blithely, but of course there are Churches which don't have any ministers called these things, or which use the words but to denote different roles entirely! In the NT there are indeed three sorts of ministers mentioned – *episkopoi, presbyteroi* and *diakonoi* – 'overseers', 'elders', and 'servants'. These three developed into what we call 'bishops', 'priests' and 'deacons', but they didn't start off meaning quite those things and there is a lot of scholarly debate about what they *did* mean. However they had acquired *something like* their modern meanings by the end of the first century AD.

Q.16 What is the work of a Bishop?

The work of a Bishop is to be a chief shepherd and ruler in the Church; to guard the Faith; to ordain and confirm; and to be the chief minister of the Word and Sacraments in his diocese.

The bishop is the keystone of the church within a given area, the 'chief minister of Word and Sacraments'. The Apostles appointed *episkopoi*, or overseers, of the various church communities they founded, and these became the bishops. The Catechism doesn't bring it out, but the Bishop provides the line of continuity within the Church, which is why he or she is so important. They're not just a manager: their relationship with the people they look after, ordained or lay, is personal and pastoral. In the early centuries bishops never moved around, but were 'married' to their see and stayed there until death.

The other ministers merely deputise for the Bishop; s/he can do all the things they do, but only s/he can ordain or confirm people. This is because both ordination and confirmation involve admission to the public life of the Church (once you're confirmed you can hold office within it) and so the Bishops, or those who work on their behalf, act as assessors of candidates for those offices, to make sure they're fit for the purpose. The bishop's mitre symbolises the flame of the Holy Spirit which rested on the heads of the Apostles, and thus makes the point that they are linked with that early period.

Q.17 What is the work of a Priest?

The work of a Priest is to preach the word of God, to teach, and to baptize; to celebrate the Holy Communion; to pronounce absolution and blessing in God's name; and to care for the people entrusted by the Bishop to his charge.

Strangely, the Catechism doesn't say the work of a priest has anything to do with filling out forms for the Diocese or scrubbing toilets. The priest is in a strange position because of all the orders, the priestly one grew out of something which originally probably had no priestly functions at all – *presbyteroi* were something entirely different, which is why so many Protestant Churches who aim at being Biblical have Elders rather than Priests. But the *presbyteroi* quickly absorbed lots of things the bishops originally did because there weren't enough bishops to keep up with the work that had to be done. Here again, the Catechism defines priests by the things *they* do which deacons *can't*, namely presiding at Communion, absolving and blessing (in the old Roman ordination service a priest was given a chalice to symbolise their office, the 'tradition of the instruments'). Nevertheless, the priest only does them at all because the bishop can't be there in person. This is hinted at in the licensing service where the bishop says to the new parish priest 'receive this charge of souls which is both yours and mine'.

Q.18 What is the work of a Deacon?

The work of a Deacon is to serve both in the conduct of worship and in the care of souls.

The *diakonoi* were originally responsible for collecting and distributing alms in the earliest Christian communities, and only later acquired liturgical functions as well as these pastoral ones. Deacons wear stoles on the left shoulder and tied at the right side, and their distinctive

vestment is a tabard-like covering called a dalmatic. There are *some* permanent deacons, but most ordained people merely remain deacons for a year before being ordained priests (permanent deacons are more common in the Orthodox Churches). You never stop being a deacon, however, and priests remain deacons 'underneath' just as bishops remain priests *and* deacons. A very traditionally-minded bishop presiding at Holy Communion might choose to wear a subdeacon's tunicle (for which see below) and a deacon's dalmatic *under* the chasuble, although this might make them a bit hot.

Q.53 What is Ordination?

Ordination is the ministry in which, through prayer with the laying on of hands, our Lord Jesus Christ gives the grace of the Holy Spirit, and authority, to those who are being made bishops, priests, and deacons.

This definition is a bit circular! But basically, although all Christians take part in the ministry of the Body of Christ, the Body as a whole sets some aside to represent it publicly. It has always been held that the initiative in 'vocation' comes from God, and the Church merely *discerns* that vocation, doing what's necessary to make it reality. God calls individuals to serve the Church, so there must be both call and reception; and because God the Holy Spirit chooses to work through the Church, so his grace is transmitted to ordained people by what it does. As the Catechism says, an ordained person therefore bears the authority of the Church. That doesn't mean that they are given any sort of institutional power, but that they are authorised to speak God's words *in so far as the Church does*.

These three orders, bishop, priest and deacon, are the *Major Orders*. There are, or were, also *Minor Orders* of Subdeacon, Lector, Doorkeeper, and Exorcist (the modern office of Reader is inspired by the old Order of Lector); but people who were in these Orders remained laypeople. Whereas ordination changes a person in the same way that baptism does, giving someone Minor Orders does not, in theological words, 'confer a permanent character'. Subdeacon is essentially a liturgical role which can be played either by a lay or ordained person: when 'on stage' a subdeacon wears a tunicle, which is virtually the same as the deacon's dalmatic though usually a bit less fancy.

As St Peter says, we are all a royal priesthood – and Peter's language is echoed elsewhere in the Bible too. Apart from liturgical stuff, ordained people do nothing that lay Christians don't do. It's just that ordained people

are dedicated by a sacrament to doing it: they are surrounded and bound by promises, both their own and God's. And both we categories of Christians, ordained and lay, are dependent on each other. I am not quite sure why God wants there to be this relationship: but we're supposed to be learning something from it. One day it will become clear exactly what that is!

Part 8: Where has God made his commandments known?

Q.21 The third promise made at your Baptism binds you to keep God's commandments all the days of your life. Where has God made these commandments known?

God has made his commandments known in the Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments, especially in the teaching and example of our Lord Jesus Christ.

The first point to notice is that the Catechism doesn't just refer to the Ten commandments but describes God's 'commandments' as being found throughout the Scriptures. Rabbi Simlai was the first to count 613 commandments in the text of the Bible, but thankfully we don't have to observe them all …! The Catechism then calls attention back to Jesus, because his teaching and life opens out the traditional ten commandments and puts them into context. As always, his life is the test and explanation of everything else in Scripture, including the commandments.

Q.22 Recite the ten commandments found in the law of Moses.

I am the Lord your God: you shall have no other gods but me. You shall not make for yourself any idol, whether in the form of anything that is in heaven above, or that is on the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth. You shall not bow down to them or worship them. You shall not take the name of the Lord your God in vain. Remember the Sabbath day, and keep it holy. For six days you shall labour and do all your work. But the seventh day is a Sabbath to the Lord your God. Honour your father and your mother. You shall not murder. You shall not commit adultery. You shall not steal. You shall not bear false witness. You shall not covet.

It might be instructive to see whether we can remember all ten Commandments, as the Catechism insists that Anglicans should! For the

moment our purpose is not to look at their content, but to think about what it means that they are there at all.

They may, as we are often told, have been devised to suit the needs of a wandering desert people, but they are not put aside by the new dispensation of Jesus Christ: instead, he deepens and fulfils them, opening them out beyond the few words we read. This means we can't just put them to one side, but that we have to discover what they mean for us. For instance: society may no longer keep a common Sunday Sabbath, and that means we may not be able to either; we may have to work, and get no choice. But we are *ordered* to keep *some* day as Sabbath (and note further that the commandment doesn't mention worship; one keeps Sabbath not so much by coming to church, but by *not working!*). So we have to reassess how the Commandments can be kept in our own social context.

The Commandments are, firstly, reminders that God exists and that he is holy – that is to say, that he is not simply a reflection of our own concerns and feelings; and secondly, they are warning signs put in front of spiritually (and socially) dangerous places, things which we may find ourselves doing that risk harm to ourselves and others. This is why learning them, and being able to call them easily to mind, is a helpful thing to do.

Q.23 Repeat the words of our Lord Jesus Christ about God's commandments.

Our Lord Jesus Christ said: The first commandment is this: 'Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God is the only Lord. You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your mind and with all your strength.' The second is this: 'Love your neighbour as yourself.' There is no other commandment greater than these. Again: 'I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another.

The first words Jesus uses are the *Shema*, the Jewish confession of faith; and it's good that we should know it too, to remind us always of God, just as the whole of the commandments do. His coupling of this with the notion of love for neighbours is the source of the idea we'll deal with later, that some of the commandments are about 'duty to God' and some about 'duty to neighbour'.

This quotation from Jesus comes from one particular place in the Gospel, his conversation with one of the scribes – there are different accounts of the same encounter in Matthew 22 and Mark 12. But then by talking about

the ‘new commandment’, the Catechism leaps to John 13. At first glance we might think this just repeats the instruction to ‘love your neighbour as yourself’? However, in the quotation from John, Jesus is now making his own life and example the test of *how* we should love, not just describing how we should behave on our account. This was something truly new, and it highlights the fact that Jesus both sums up and explains the old Law, and opens it into something beyond itself. The Catechism brings all that out, very neatly and succinctly.

Finally, notice how open-ended this is. Even though the Church implies that God’s commandments are to be found throughout Scripture, and not just in one place, it still resists any temptation to be too prescriptive about what he may have ‘commanded’; instead it is very restrained and only mentions the Ten Commandments and some of Jesus’s phrases. The last thing the Church wants to do is to re-create a situation in which religion becomes a matter of following rules: too many words will only give human beings sticks to beat each other with and distract from the task of working out what God wants of us as individuals. So what we are given is the tools we need to get going with our attempt to ‘be holy as he is holy’. We don’t really require anything more than that, and so we don’t get any more.

Part 9 – What is your duty towards God?

Q.24 What then is your duty towards God?

My duty towards God is:
1 to worship him as the only true God, to love, trust, and obey him, and by witness of my words and deeds to bring others to serve him;
2 to allow no created thing to take his place, but to use my time, my gifts, and my possessions as one who must give account to him;
3 to reverence him in thought, word, and deed;
4 to keep the Lord's day for worship, prayer, and rest from work.

A 'duty' is a thing owed, something due, an obligation: it is a necessary thing. We think of a duty as something that you might choose not to do, but if the obligation is part of a relationship it becomes something you *must* do, unless you are to reassess the relationship with the person, group, or institution to which the duty is owed. That would mean, in a way, becoming a different sort of person. So, in as far as our 'duty' to God goes, if believing in the Christian God logically entails doing all these things, and if you don't do them, are you really a Christian, or are you something else?

These 'duties' are drawn from the Commandments. Splitting them into 'duty to God' and 'duty to neighbour' is a bit of an artificial division, because each implies the other, and again it puts too strong an emphasis on command and obedience rather than the logic of a relationship, but we'll run with it for now and see where it takes us.

The first thing that the Catechism states follows from belief in God is *worship*. It's a consequence of who he is and what he does. His holiness, generosity, goodness and majesty, compared to us, and yet his stooping to know us, bring out the desire to worship, to tell ourselves who he is and to render thanks. You might well ask, 'Why does God need to keep hearing how great he is?' And he doesn't. It's nothing to do with his needs, but ours: it's part of the conversation with him. A human being who never says thank you to others or tells them that they like them is very hard to get on with and is, perhaps, not living very fully.

Loving, trusting and *obeying* again flow from who God is, and we only learn them through long practice. Reminding us of his nature and work is part of training our minds in knowing him and, eventually, being changed.

The Catechism then mentions *Witnessing.* If God is the focus and supreme expression of our lives and identities then we will naturally acknowledge him: that is, we own up to the fact that we have a relationship with him. More actively, if knowing God is good for us it must be good for others too, so witnessing becomes an act of love and hospitality towards those around us, not just a reluctant task forced on us by being churchy people.

The second consequence of belief in God is the rejection of idolatry – 'worshipping created things'. Giving religious allegiance to statues and images, as the ancient pagan religions did, was just a crude and barbarous symbol of not fully relying on God but on other things, and the Catechism rightly broadens the question to one of how we use our God-given resources. Are we concentrating on the right things in our life, or do we place work, family, or self above God, finding our identity in them rather than him? Again, only by placing God first can we discover how to serve others in the right way, so 'duty to God' is very closely connected to 'duty to neighbour'.

In the third clause, the Catechism takes the Commandment against 'taking God's name in vain' and turns it into a positive, 'reverencing him in thought, word, and deed'. This means constantly bending our wills and attentions towards him: our relationship with God is not that of a casual acquaintance and should not be treated as such! There is much talk of 'mindfulness' about these days, but the idea of being 'recollected', that is, keeping God in mind despite all the distractions of life, is a very old one in the Christian tradition.

The final duty, the final necessary consequence of knowing God, is to make space for him. Although it is true, as we've already said, that 'remembering the Sabbath' doesn't necessarily mean 'going to church', making space for God *rather than* earthly things is the inner purpose of the Sabbath, and unless we do so all our other relationships will get out of kilter, whether they're work, family, or anything else. And it *must be* a ring-fenced space rather than 'whatever's left over', otherwise it won't really affect or change us. And being willing to be changed is an integral part of trying to live the Christian life.

Part 10: What is your duty towards your neighbour?

Q.25 What is your duty towards your neighbour?

My duty towards my neighbour is:

5 to love, respect, and help my parents: to honour the Head of State; to obey those in authority over me in all things lawful and good; and to fulfil my duties as a citizen;

6 to hurt nobody by word or deed; to bear no grudge or hatred in my heart; to promote peace among men and women; to be courteous to all; and to be kind to all God's creatures;

7 to be clean in thought, word, and deed, controlling my bodily desires through the power of the Holy Spirit who dwells within me; and if called to the state of marriage to live faithfully within it.

8 to be honest and fair in all I do; not to steal or cheat; to seek justice, freedom, and plenty for all people.

9 to keep my tongue from lying, slandering, and harmful gossip, and never by my silence to let others be wrongly condemned;

10 to be thankful and generous, to do my duty cheerfully, and not to be greedy or envious.

The Catechism insists that our 'duty to God' relates less to abstract ideas we choose to follow, or tasks imposed upon us by an outside authority, but the consequences that flow necessarily from our relationship with him. Our 'duty to our neighbour' is the same: it results naturally from our relationship with other people, something we don't choose, but which reflects our very nature as human beings. The responsibilities outlined here read a little like a Scout's promises, but that doesn't mean they're any less relevant for adults!

Firstly: remember that all these clauses are based on the Ten Commandments, hence the numbering.

Secondly: as it did with the Commandments related to our 'duty to God', the Catechism takes the Commandments related to other people and opens them out, reading positive values into their negative statements and restrictions. For instance, the Sixth Commandment, 'You shall do no murder' becomes a duty 'to hurt nobody …'. This is what Jesus did, as in Matthew 5 (the Sermon on the Mount) where he says, 'You have heard that it is said, "Do no murder", and "anyone who murders will be subject to judgement"; but I tell you, anyone who is angry with his brother will be subject to judgement'. The original Commandments were just the outline of God's holiness which we are called to emulate; Jesus, and the Catechism expressing the mind of the Church, add in the detail.

Thirdly: the duties follow on our relationships with others, but they are not dependent on what others do. 'Love, respect and honour your parents' may be a very hard, even impossible, task for people whose parents have failed in *their* duties and been awful; but the commandment isn't dependent on whether they *deserve* to be loved, honoured and respected. Those things follow merely from the fact that they are our parents – where we come from. In the same way, the other duties we owe our neighbours are due to them merely for being human, like us, not because they are good or lovable or treat us well in return. 'If you only love those who love you,' says Jesus, 'What credit is that to you?'

The Catechism recognises that the Commandments provide the basis for how a society works, because all societies need mutuality and trust, and can't function without them. This is less a business of following rules than about thinking how human beings deal with and relate to each other.

However, you could easily argue 'People don't need religion to be good' and that's true. None of the duties in the Catechism require Christian faith in order to carry out: they make sense even from a completely secular point of view. But by insisting that we owe others these duties regardless of how they behave towards us, the Catechism points beyond that idea of mutuality and towards something more distinctly Christian, based on the uniqueness of every human being and their identity in God.

The 'duties to our neighbour' are only the beginning, in Christian terms. The trust and understanding they engender are what makes real love and community possible.

Part II: What do you understand by God's grace?

Q.26 How can you carry out these duties [to God and neighbour] **and overcome temptation and sin?**

I can do these things only by the help of God and through his grace.

There's a huge literature on what grace means, its different kinds and mechanisms. Much of that technical detail we don't need to know, and the Catechism doesn't go into it. However, at the heart of it is the strange idea that we can't be truly good – in the sense of being truly whole and holy – by our own efforts. As with so many things the *language* of grace is there in the Bible but it took arguments in the Church to bring out what was implied. The New Testament writers talked about the *charis* of God that enables us to do his will; it means 'freely given gift', and implies something unlooked for, undeserved, and yet needed. This is the word we translate as *grace*.

The crucial argument came in the 5th century, and the main personalities involved were St Augustine and a British priest and writer called Pelagius (our very own national heretic!), even though they never actually met. For Pelagius it was simple common sense that people could be good by their own efforts, freely choosing by their will to do God's will. They were responsible for their own choices and accountable for making the wrong choice. Augustine drew on his own experience and St Paul's words, and felt that his own will to do good was so weakened by an inheritance of sinfulness that it was only by God's help that he could act and think rightly. This help was called grace. Augustine argued that this was the common state of all human beings, and that Pelagius was much too optimistic about human ability to choose the good on their own.

After much argument, the Church sided with Augustine. It seemed obvious that people could choose to do good or to do evil, but analysing our thoughts, inclinations and inner feelings as well as acts opened up a deeper view of the matter. The monastic tradition was developing in the Church during this period, and monks and nuns had a lot of time to analyse how the business of temptation and sin actually worked. Spiritual writers insisted that

we didn't simply face each new choice as though we had never made a choice before, but that choosing to follow sinful inclinations over a long time made it harder for people to choose the good. Ultimately, we can be OK for pagans, but being Christians, following Jesus in his footsteps, doesn't come naturally: we need help to do that.

This is the crucial point about grace – it's an impetus from outside us, originating in God.

Q.27 What do you mean by God's grace?

By God's grace I mean that God himself acts in Jesus Christ to forgive, inspire, and strengthen me by his Holy Spirit.

This sounds explicit enough but is actually quite vague! It's supposed to sum up the whole saving activity of God in one sentence, which is a hard job. This statement makes it clear that the whole of the Trinity is involved in the operations of God's grace, and that it is only the working of God's activity and power that enables us to enter into the divine life.

Grace is twofold – God *does actually* forgive, inspire and strengthen us, but also we *know* that he does these things, and we experience grace that way. Thus, forgiveness, inspiration (which is a response to being forgiven) and strengthening (to do the things we are inspired to do) all reinforce each other, working together to the same result.

Q.28 In what ways do you receive these gifts of God's grace?

I receive these gifts of God's grace within the fellowship of the Church, when I worship and pray, when I read the Bible, when I receive the Sacraments, and as I live my daily life to his glory.

The question arises, if our human wills are so compromised that we cannot live the Christian life unless God helps us, how do we even get started? This isn't covered in the Catechism, but the thinkers about grace remembered John 6.44, 'Nobody can come to me unless the Father who has sent me has called them'. Some grace then is *prevenient*: that is, it goes ahead of us and we may be unaware of its working. Even preparing souls to receive grace is a work of grace – in the same way the farmer ploughing is already 'growing crops' even before he plants anything, by preparing the ground.

But once we *are* part of the Church we receive grace within it, in the ways the Catechism lays out. Worship, prayer and Bible reading are dealt

with under other sections; but *Fellowship* refers to the effect of dealing with our brother and sister Christians within the community of God's Church. By striving to get on with one another, by receiving and giving help, by prayer, by being challenged to step outside the familiar, and by working together to achieve things, grace is given to us. It may not always feel like an experience of grace because it may not always be very positive. But provided it results in growth towards what God wants us to be, a motion of grace is what it definitely is.

Finally the Catechism insists that we experience grace merely through the living of our daily lives. Of course this isn't necessarily the case: it becomes true only when we call God continually to mind through the ordinary events of life. There is a connection to gratitude – the Latin word *Gratia* means both grace and thankfulness. Whatever else we do, we have to cultivate that! For this reason, Georges Bernanos's *Diary of a Country Priest* ends with its unnamed protagonist dying and assuring his atheist doctor friend 'Grace is everywhere'. With God, it is.

Part 12: What do you mean by the worship of God?

Q.29 What do you mean by the worship of God?

To worship God is to respond to his love, first by joining in the Church's offering of praise, thanksgiving and prayer, and by hearing his holy word; secondly by acknowledging him as the Lord of my life, and by doing my work for his honour and glory.

We've already said that worship one of the ways we receive grace, but that's not what it is nor why we do it. A cake may be a way of consuming butter, flour, egg and sugar, but that's not why you eat it! The Catechism states that worship is a *response* to something God does. Again, as so often we are passive in this: God acts first and our response comes next.

As soon as somebody comes through the door of a church – unless they're here to support family/friends in something – they're already responding to some awareness of God. As soon as we do something for somebody else because we're Christians and see God in them – although it may be hard to tell that's why – we're responding to God's initiative, and we'll discover more about him and how we relate to him in that activity. Responding directs us towards him and towards others too.

The Catechism insists that 'worship' is twofold: firstly, specifically churchy stuff, and secondly everyday things. The Orthodox saint Maria Skobtsova said that 'the test of the liturgy inside the church is the liturgy outside the church': that is to say, the quality of what we say and do in church is judged according to how we behave in the rest of our lives. We'll take these in turn.

When Jesus was resurrected and then ascended, the response of the disciples was to meet together to praise God and pray; that is, the Church responded to what God had done by gathering to tell him what they felt about it. The Catechism doesn't define any sorts of worship, it merely describes in

very broad categories the elements all forms of worship contain. Praise, thanksgiving and prayer and Word are in everything, from a baptism to eucharist to Messy Church to Compline – perhaps, in groups of Christians meeting in any way.

Secondly, the Catechism outlines what 'the liturgy outside the church' might consist of. Our 'acknowledgement' of God can be explicit, and can be just between God and you but it will be played out in what you do if you mean it. It says in the Te Deum, 'we acknowledge you to be the Lord', and even saying that affects us on a spiritual level and affects how we think and feel. 'Acknowledging' God also means admitting to his role in our lives. Naturally most people are, or like to try to be, modest, and find receiving compliments a bit awkward; but it's worth trying to train yourself, when you are complimented on having done something good or some aspect of your character, to say something like 'I am what I am because of God'. The phrase 'doing my work' has the sense of something *specific*, because it seems to apply to *my* work not to anyone else's. You are unique – other people can sweep floors or arrange flowers or (in employment) stack shelves, but nobody else can be *you* doing it, and sometimes your particular combination of memories and experiences and instincts will make a crucial difference to someone else.

Q.30 Why do we keep Sunday as the chief day of public worship?

We keep Sunday as the chief day of public worship because it was on the first day of the week that our Lord Jesus Christ rose from the dead.

If it's getting hard to find time to worship on Sundays in our society, imagine doing the same in Roman society which didn't have weeks! Of course the Christian Sabbath is not the same as the Jewish Sabbath which runs from sunset on Friday to sunset on Saturday, but it borrows the same idea of setting apart a day for non-secular priorities. Over the centuries some Christians have set such store by our Sabbath they've insisted that people shouldn't do anything non-religious for the whole day. This had a useful purpose, providing a time when most people were compelled to do something other than work, but it could also be oppressive. However, it makes it clear that God has the first and overriding claim on our time, loyalty, abilities and hopes.

I often hear people say that going to worship with other people 'sets you up' for the week, and remembering that Sunday is the *week-start* and not the *week-end* helps that. It also makes clear the connection between what

happens in a church building and what happens outside it, that our acceptable worship of God includes what we do when we go out through the door to get on with the rest of our lives.

Part 13: What do you understand by prayer?

Q.31 What do you understand by prayer?

Prayer is the lifting up of heart and mind to God. We adore him, we confess our sins and ask to be forgiven, we pray for others and for ourselves, we listen to him and seek to know his will.

The Catechism doesn't say much about prayer. It deals with the whole area of praying as one of the 'means by which we receive God's grace'. Prayer is something most Christians are interested in, but equally most think they aren't very good at doing; advice about how to do it and what happens is always welcome, but the Catechism, appropriately, discusses it at a more basic level.

At its most simple, prayer is of course talking to God, and we're encouraged to think of it as a conversation; but it's an elevated sort of conversation because of who is involved. Exodus chapter 33 says Moses talked with God 'as a man talks with his friend', but he still couldn't look at God's face, and when he asks to see God directly it's only his back which is revealed. There is a sense in which direct experience of God is always beyond us.

The Catechism says prayer is 'a lifting of heart and mind to God'. We may not always *feel* much when we pray, but that doesn't matter. However, we do need to be honest about it – Claudius in *Hamlet* says 'my words fly up to heaven, my thoughts remain below; words said without feeling never to heaven go'. The 'heart' in Biblical terms refers not to the seat of the emotions but of our identity, who we really are in our inmost nature, and so it's that which is 'lifted' to God. Of course we probably don't really know what our inmost nature is, though we may think we do; prayer is (at least partly) about trying to find out, by being honest about our thoughts and feelings in a place of complete safety. We are also supposed to lift our 'mind', a word which indicates that prayer involves our intellect and reason as well as our feelings.

'We adore him', says the Catechism. Atheists often describe Christian worship as telling God how great he is all the time. As we already discussed in Part 9 about our 'duty towards God', he doesn't need to be told this, but we do, because we forget. God is the only source of light and life; unless we continually call to mind his otherness and difference from us and from creation, how can we gain access to that light and life?

'We confess …' I wonder how many people do this regularly. The Catechism envisages that confession is an essential element of prayer and that we will need to be continually clearing out the mess that stands between us and God. Some Christians never think about their sins, while some never stop going over them, but confession isn't about neurosis, based on our mistaken preconceptions about what we should be and feel, but on a sober analysis of what we get wrong and how it affects other people. Prayer helps in that process.

'We pray for others …' More than anything else this is what people mean when they talk about praying: asking for things, or *intercessions* as they are more formally known. How this works is once again something everyone would like to know and nobody really does, except that, as far as we can judge, God chooses not to do his work for us alone, and prayer is the way we join in his work. Somehow, us being aware of the needs of others and ourselves, and bringing those needs into God's presence, enables things to happen. We may imagine it as a circuit, in which the current is God's power, but requiring the completion of the wiring in order to flow as it should.

'Listen to him …' Many Christians spend a lot of time speaking *at* God and very little listening, which, if you consider how much he knows and how little we do, is rather the wrong way round. This is about developing *discernment*, the grace that enables us to see things as God sees them. It isn't about hearing voices or seeing signs, although very occasionally we may feel that some communication has come to us specifically in a way we can't define. It's more like allowing God to shape our character in a way that brings us closer to thinking like him.

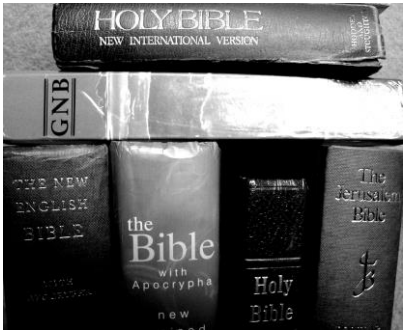
Q.32 Repeat the Lord's Prayer.

Our Father … etc.

Remembering the Lord's Prayer isn't as easy as it should be when you use different versions of it! We find the words in Matthew 6 and Luke 11 (in slightly different texts), but with a 'doxology', or formula of praise, added on the end. From the very early days of the Church all candidates for baptism had to learn it, which is a helpful discipline as it contains everything you need to include in prayer, but it gets so well-worn the danger is it just slips past you. Mother Teresa said, 'just pray the Lord's Prayer – but take an hour doing it'! Remember that Jesus said 'pray in *this way*', not necessarily in these words – it's a pattern, not an order. But it's a *good* pattern.

And when we have no words, and are so spiritually dry we can't summon anything up in God's presence apart from *wanting* to pray, as it says in Romans 8, 'the Spirit intercedes for us'. We can take comfort in the fact that we are not alone, left to our own devices, but held up by God and the prayers of the whole Church, including the saints.

Part 14: What is the Bible?



Q.33 What is the Bible?

The Bible, in both the Old and the New Testaments, is the record of God's revelation of himself to humankind through his people Israel, and above all in his Son, Jesus Christ.

The Catechism doesn't take up space with talking about what the Bible is technically. It is, of course, a collection of documents written over the course of several hundred years and some probably composed of much older oral material. This makes it very different from the Quran, for example, composed by one person over a comparatively short period of time. It seems obvious what 'The Bible' is, but even today there are differing collections of texts. The Roman Catholic and Orthodox Churches include the Apocrypha – the books which are in the Greek text of the Old Testament, but not in the Hebrew, while Protestant Churches leave them out. Even the lists of what's in the Apocrypha differ from Church to Church.

The Catechism insists that both Old and New Testaments are important. Some Christians have had a tendency to downplay the Old Testament: Marcion, the first great heretic, who died around AD 160, rejected everything apart from Paul's letters and the Gospel of Luke. Binding it all into one story, given the apparent difficulties, is hard work, but the Church maintains that the whole thing forms a single narrative united by the idea of God revealing himself. Throughout the whole of the Scriptures, Jesus is given the priority and everything is related to him.

Q.34 How was the Bible given to us?

The Bible was given to us by the Holy Spirit who first inspired and guided the writers, and then led the Church to accept their writings as Holy Scripture.

There is a great variety of views among Christians over how to regard the Bible, from treating it as absolutely infallible in every word to something you can take or leave according to what you find reasonable. What the

Anglican Catechism says *could* be interpreted to include both (which is sensible as Anglicans themselves differ), but it suggests gently that the Scriptures come to us filtered through human experience and therefore not every word in them needs to be factually correct, while leaving room for a range of opinions.

The Catechism mentions two stages in the composition of the Scriptures. First God *inspired and guided* the writers. Inspiration doesn't necessarily mean whispering in someone's ear telling them what to write: so there's room for error or argument. If we examine the Gospel of St Mark, for instance, we find that at the very start the very earliest manuscripts ascribe a quote to the Prophet Isaiah when in fact the words come from both Isaiah and Malachi: later manuscripts of Mark said 'it says in the prophets', correcting the mistake. There are several different versions of the ending of Mark, some including the notorious promise to Jesus's followers 'they shall take up serpents and not be harmed', which is what inspires the snake-handling churches of the Appalachians.

Scripture arose out of the experience of the Church (that is, the New Testament writers were already part of the Church when they began writing). But equally the Church only *recognised* Scripture as inspired. It took a long time – until the Council of Pope Damasus in 382 – and some books went in and out of the Canon, but the Church always believed the initiative lay with God (a bit like when it recognises people's vocations). A recent American bishop was reported as saying, 'We wrote the Bible, we can rewrite the Bible' – but the Church of England has *never believed anything like that*.

Pope Benedict puts it beautifully in his book *Jesus of Nazareth:*

> *Modern exegesis has brought to light the process of constant rereading that forged the words transmitted in the Bible into Scripture: older texts are reappropriated, reinterpreted, and read with new eyes in new contexts. They became Scripture by being read anew, evolving in continuity with their original sense, tacitly corrected and given added depth and breadth of meaning. This is a process in which the word gradually unfolds its inner potentialities, already somehow present like seeds, but needing the challenge of new situations, new experiences, and new sufferings, in order to open up.*
>
> *This process is certainly not linear, and it is often dramatic, but when you watch it unfold in the light of Jesus Christ, you can see it moving in a single*

overall direction; you can see that the Old and New Testament belong together.

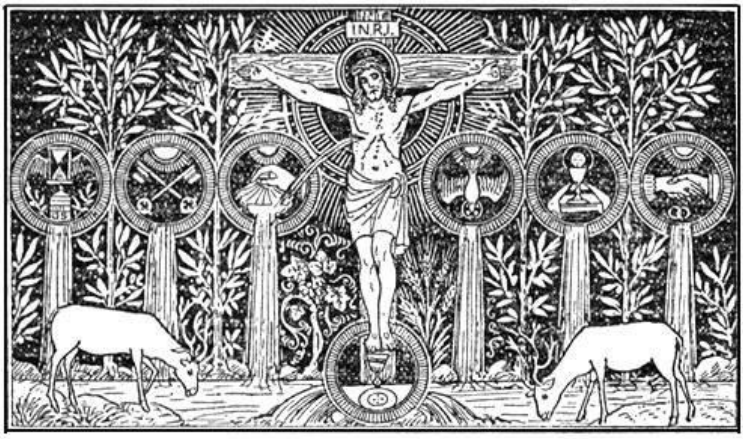
This is why the Canon of Scripture is closed and why the Church can't 'rewrite the Bible': because it all points to Jesus. If God dwells completely in Jesus, there is nothing more for God to say: Jesus is the Word, and the final Word. We have a lot of work to do bringing out all the implications of what God has said in Jesus, but his revelation of himself is sufficient and complete, and needs nothing added.

Q.35 How should we read the Bible?

We should read the Bible with the desire and prayer that through it God will speak to us by his Holy Spirit, and enable us to know him and do his will.

One is tempted to answer the question 'how should we read the Bible' with 'daily' or 'all the way through a couple of times', but the Catechism intends us to think more about our attitude! We may ask, how does God 'speak' through the Scriptures? As with prayer, we very rarely experience God speaking as a thunderbolt-like 'voice'. But people reading the Bible often have the experience of noticing or discovering something that never seemed to be there before. In the time since we read that passage last, perhaps, something has happened to us or changed in us that leads us to discover something new in it. But if we don't *expect* God to speak, we won't find anything at all and the treasures of the Bible will pass us by. The Catechism tells us to read in anticipation of hearing what he wants to tell us.

Part 15: What is a sacrament?



This part of the Catechism is particularly important, because it deals with questions that are quite central to what the Church thinks it's doing when it does what it does – and to some of the deepest arguments of the Reformation in the 16th century. The beliefs of the Church of England as expressed in the Catechism still reflect many of those controversies, and balance the theories of medieval theologians and philosophers such as Thomas Aquinas with the insights of the Reformers.

Q.36 What do you mean by a sacrament?

By a sacrament I mean the use of material things as signs and pledges of God's grace, and as a means by which we receive his gifts.

God works through the ordinary things of the earth – water, oil, bread, wine – to do his work. The Gnostics, a group of heretical Christians who were prominent in the early years of the Church, took over from Greek philosophy that there was something basically wrong with matter itself, but if God works through material things – in the same way that he actually *became* a material being in the Incarnation – this shows that they cannot be essentially bad. The Catechism says that sacraments are *Signs* – that is, they show the presence of something real. It also describes them as *Pledges.* Now, the word 'sacrament' comes from the Latin *sacramentum*, meaning a vow or promise, so at the centre of the idea of a sacrament is that it embodies God's promises to us and, secondarily, ours to him – a two-way pledge. Finally the Catechism states that sacraments are *Means* of God's grace – that is, they are

ways in which God's grace comes to us. That means they're not just symbols, not just poetic ways of expressing a truth, in the way a flag is a symbol of a country or organisation. When the Church carries out a sacramental act, something is really happening as a result of it – exactly *what* that something is, is harder to define!

In the Middle Ages the theologians tried to work out exactly how sacraments worked, and they came up with the phrase *ex opere operato*, 'by the act done'. They meant that, provided the sacraments were properly enacted and the intentions of those involved were the right ones, God's grace comes to us that way regardless of the qualities or merits of the people administering or receiving them. In other words, it all depends on God and not on us. They then went on to think a lot about what 'doing the sacraments properly' meant: what *matter* and *form* (that is, 'things' and 'words') you needed for a sacrament to communicate God's grace effectively. For instance, for baptism you need water (matter) and you need to say the Trinitarian formula (form); for the eucharist you need bread and wine (matter) and to repeat the words of Jesus at the Last Supper (form).

The Reformers regarded a lot of this as magical thinking and superstition, and they put much more emphasis on people's psychological state when receiving the sacraments. So extremists such as the Swiss theologian Ulrich Zwingli were so anxious to deny that anything about the bread and wine *changed* when they were consecrated, that they regarded the eucharist as nothing more than a helpful way of remembering the truths of Christianity, rather than something that actually had a real, objective effect on Christians when they engaged in it. Although things have changed a lot over the course of 500 years, this reluctance is still there sometimes. For instance, the conservative evangelical church of St Aldate's in Oxford not so long ago ran a 'spiritual refreshment' course as a part of which people were encouraged to offload anything bad they might want to admit to and then had water poured over their hands as a sign of forgiveness and cleansing. 'There is no sacramental significance to the water', the leaflet insisted very strongly, whereas you can argue there very much was!

In fact the two positions aren't that far apart from one another. But the different emphases make a difference to how you actually behave: so, if you believe that the sacraments are going to have an effect on souls if people

are basically well-disposed towards God, you won't be too bothered about what they believe in detail.

Why does this work the way it does? We are created as physical beings, and because we are, there is something about speaking words and doing physical acts that does actually affect our thinking and affections, more than thoughts alone.

Q.37 What are the two parts of a sacrament?

The two parts of a sacrament are the outward and visible sign, and the inward and spiritual grace.

These are very familiar words taken straight from the old Catechism of the Book of Common Prayer. In sacramental acts, there's an obvious difference between what appears to happen to us in the ritual, and what goes on inside us: this is most dramatic in baptism where the ritual symbolises a moment of conversion, of turning to God, which in the case of babies *can't* be happening at that time. The sacraments reveal things happening, but they might be happening at other times, speeds and occasions from that of the sacraments themselves.

But the *sign* still means something. If you came across a sign that said 'tea shop', and then when you got in it was an empty space with no tea or cake, you'd be disappointed! The sacraments are signs *that God has put up* and as a result they indicate something real.

Q.38 How many sacraments has Christ, in the Gospel, appointed for his Church?

Christ in the Gospel has appointed two sacraments for his Church, as needed by all for fullness of life, Baptism, and Holy Communion.

This is a very Reformed position because it looks at what's explicitly in the Bible. Baptism and Communion are referred to as the 'Dominical' sacraments, from *dominus*, the Latin word for 'Lord', because Jesus explicitly tells the disciples to carry them out. Even the most radical Reformers couldn't contemplate actually getting rid of baptism or communion, though they interpreted them very differently from Catholic Christians. Jesus's instructions are of course 'Go and baptise all nations' (Matthew 28.19) and 'Do this in remembrance of me' (Luke 22.19).

Q.39 What other sacramental ministries of grace are provided in the Church?

Other sacramental ministries of grace are confirmation, ordination, holy matrimony, reconciliation of a penitent, and the ministry of healing.

With the 2 'dominical' ones, these sacraments make up the traditional seven you can see on East Anglian fonts (they are of course carved on the font because baptism is the entry point to the sacramental life). Parts 1 & 2 of this book dealt with baptism and confirmation; we looked at ordination in Part 7; and we'll cover the others below.

Part 16: What is Holy Communion?

Q.47 What is Holy Communion?

Holy Communion is the Sacrament in which, according to Christ's command, we make continual remembrance of him, his passion, death, and resurrection until his coming again, and in which we thankfully receive the benefits of his sacrifice. It is, therefore, called the Eucharist, the Church's sacrifice of praise and thanksgiving; and also the Lord's Supper, the meal of fellowship which unites us to Christ and to the whole Church.

In Luke's story of the Last Supper, Jesus says 'do this in remembrance of me', and uses the word *anamnesis*: literally this means 'the not-forgetting', a stronger sense than merely 'remembering'. The point is that this is an act that sums up the whole Gospel, the whole saving work of Jesus, his incarnation, life, death and resurrection. A Low Church colleague ordained at the same time as me once complained 'I do this umpteen times a month when Jesus only did it once' – which is true, of course, but the eucharist very quickly became central to Christian experience – the story of the disciples at Emmaus shows this – and in 1Corinthians Paul describes the account of the Last Supper as something 'I received as of the first importance'.

Eucharist means 'thanksgiving' in Greek, but the different titles given to the communion service express different senses of what it means. How it's done now is the result of centuries of meditating on that meaning. It's very striking that, even when Churches try to strip away the rituals around the act of communion because they want to get back to some sort of original purity, those rituals very soon start poking through the surface again when people are carrying out the act with the proper intentions. It has a sort of internal logic or dynamic which pulls Christians in a liturgical direction.

Q.48 What is the outward and visible sign in Holy Communion?

The outward and visible sign in Holy Communion is bread and wine given and received as the Lord commanded.

Q.49 What is the inward and spiritual gift in Holy Communion?

The inward and spiritual gift in Holy Communion is the Body and Blood of Christ, truly and indeed given by him and received by the faithful.

Not long ago a correspondent to the *Church Times* asked the questions-and-answers experts this: if a seagull snatches the Host from the priest's hands at an outdoor Mass does it 'receive the Body of Christ'? That *might* depend on what you think is happening and how: is it our *understanding* that makes the Host 'the Body of Christ', or is something objective going on?

In the Last Supper story, Jesus says emphatically, 'this is my body' – he didn't say 'this is the *sign* of my body', or the *symbol*, even though those words existed. It's obviously not 'his body' in any easy sense, and Christians have struggled to work out what Jesus meant. A 'memorialist' view would argue that it's basically a psychological matter, something that merely enables us to remember Jesus. Then there are positions including 'consubstantiation', which suggests that the bread and wine are changed but still remain natural products, and 'transubstantiation', which means that the whole 'nature' of the bread and wine are changed and they only *appear* to be what they were naturally.

The story goes that, during her imprisonment in the Tower of London, the future Queen Elizabeth I was challenged to state what she believed about communion, and said cryptically: 'Twas God the Word that spake it/ He took the bread and brake it/ And what that word did make it/ That I believe, and take it', which is probably as good as we can get! Article 29 of the 39 Articles of Anglicanism says 'the wicked though they do carnally and visibly press with their teeth the sacrament, yet in no wise are they partakers of Christ'; so the Church's position is that the gift is given to all but not all receive it because they are not in a state to.

Q.50 What is meant by receiving the Body and Blood of Christ?

Receiving the Body and Blood of Christ means receiving the life of Christ himself, who was crucified and rose again, and is now alive for evermore.

That is, we receive the whole of what Jesus is, his birth, work, death and resurrection, and are brought together with him at the crib, the cross, and the empty tomb, and his eternal nature in heaven. As we've said, the whole of the Gospel is contained in this act.

Q.51 What are the benefits we receive in Holy Communion?

The benefits we receive are the strengthening of our union with Christ and his Church, the forgiveness of our sins, and the nourishing of ourselves for eternal life.

This is the whole business of the Christian life, and there is a sense that the Communion enables it to happen.

Q.52 What is required of those who come to Holy Communion?

It is required of those who come to Holy Communion that they have a living faith in God's mercy through Christ, with a thankful remembrance of his death and resurrection; that they repent truly of their sins, intending to lead the new life; and be in charity with all men and women.

As we are both bodies and souls, so both bodies and souls should be prepared, respectfully. When we come to meet Jesus in communion, we should be rested, clean, and ideally not having eaten immediately before. The Orthodox Church still insists that communicants must have made confession and fasted from midnight, which reduces the numbers! But it's not a bad discipline to keep. Sometimes we treat the whole business rather too lightly. Dr Johnson took communion very rarely (in Anglican churches it wasn't celebrated very often in the 18th century), and occasionally he felt so conscious of a sin or failing he didn't go through with it even having prepared himself for weeks beforehand. There have been times when I have come hardly in a peaceful and gracious state, and the Lord treats me generously – but I must not presume on that generosity! Standing at the centre of the whole thing, the priest is in the greatest danger of all.

But on the other hand we can't be too insistent. What degree of understanding or preparation can be expected of people who have learning difficulties? How pure can you expect people to be morally when we are all sinners? How much evidence of faith should you demand before people come to the Lord in this deep and special way? How can you see within? The Church can't judge the states of people's souls. It *is* possible to be excommunicated, to be denied the sacraments because of some sin which affects the whole community of believers – but this is a dramatic and very terrible step and hardly ever happens.

We might say that trying to pick apart exactly what actually occurs in Communion runs the risk of destroying its point, because it hangs on the strange declaration of Jesus which is beyond all human reason. All we can do is kneel and say 'I believe you are present. Forgive me, and free me'. It is, says

the Orthodox theologian Alexander Schmemann, 'the entry of the Church into the joy of its Lord', a joy that incorporates the Cross. Jesus is the heart and core of life, and this act is where he is present *in a way which transforms our life*.

Part 17: What is Holy Matrimony?

Q.54 What is Holy Matrimony?

Holy Matrimony is Christian marriage, in which the man and the woman, entering into a life-long union, take their vows before God and seek his grace and blessing to fulfil them.

The answer is perhaps a lot less obvious than it might have seemed a couple of years ago. The Catechism hints at a distinction between secular marriage and Holy Matrimony in that phrase 'Christian marriage', but in the past we were able to ignore how the two might differ. This arguably covered up the fact that the Church doesn't really understand its own doctrine about marriage and relationships. Now because of same-sex marriage we can't pull that trick off and have to do some hard thinking about what we really mean by what we do. Thinking it through isn't helped by talk of 'rights' as this is completely beside the point of Christian thinking: legal marriage may be a 'right' to which everyone should have access regardless of their sexual orientation, but as in so much else, *Matrimony is not really about 'us' at all.*

Why should marrying two people be a sacrament anyway? The 17th-century Puritans didn't think it should be, and under the Commonwealth there was only civil marriage: church marriage ceased completely. The Church struggled a long time in the Middle Ages to make sure marriages took place in church, but this was so that they were contracted publicly so that marriage partners (especially men) could be held to their promises. However, the theory of what marriage is about only developed out of that. Marriage is the only human relationship that the Church turns into a sacrament. This is possibly to do with the nature of promising. Other life events are natural and inevitable, but only marriage involves a choice, and a promise, and thus carries the potential to become a sign of God's promises.

The Catechism says that Matrimony is contracted between 'a man and a woman', whereas the civil marriage ceremony now, necessarily, talks about 'the union of two persons voluntarily entered into for life to the

exclusion of all others'. Now, 'persons' is a strangely bloodless and abstract term. Perhaps, even though we may not quite yet understand what, there something about the nature of sexual distinction which makes a difference. Marrying two people of different sexes is a declaration that human beings are not interchangeable, and therefore matter as individuals. You might also argue that we have to transcend the limitations of our sex in service to each other, and reserving Matrimony for relations between people of different sexes symbolises sacrifice and transcendence more clearly than between two people of the same sex; it says nothing about other forms of living.

Oddly, the Catechism doesn't mention what the Preamble to the marriage service does, that marriage is an icon, a representation, of Christ's relationship with the Church. If it is, this can't be understood in the sense of the individuals playing roles according to their sex. Both sexes are Brides of Christ and only in that role do they discover their true identities as men and women.

The Catechism says that Matrimony creates 'a life-long union' – yet different branches of the Church have thought differently. In the Orthodox Churches, following the tradition of Roman civil law, you get three goes at marrying in church, although second and third marriages lack some of the ceremony of a first marriage. In the Roman Catholic Church, there is no remarriage in church (but many people have marriages annulled). As for Anglicans – clergy or parishes can refuse to remarry, but they may not refuse to read banns of divorcees. The old rule was that divorcees were barred from communion. Church of Scotland (among other Nonconformist Churches) says baldly that marriage is not a sacrament, so ministers can marry divorced persons without any question arising (though you may ask why, if it's not a sacrament, they should bother marrying people at all).

What should be *done* with divorced people depends what you think happens when they divorce – does the marriage remain despite the separation (which is the Roman Catholic position, following St Augustine), or is it destroyed with the breaking of the promise? It depends what you make of Jesus's statement in Matthew 5 & 19 and Mark 10 about divorce creating adultery. In a way the Church has created this situation by raising the stakes in marriage, making it a very idealistic matter; and yet it still assumes (as the Catholic Catechism does) that one party is usually 'innocent'.

Finally, the couple ‘take their vows before God’. This phrase is a recognition that they need grace to fulfil their intentions, that it’s not just a matter of their own effort and power. A civil marriage is focused on the couple and only them, and there’s no mention in the ceremony of anything beyond them unless they choose to include it. Holy Matrimony, on the other hand, insists that our individuality is only guaranteed (paradoxically) by being part of something bigger than we are. As with all the Church does, the focus is not on us, but upon Jesus – not on our desires, concerns and fantasies, but on how what we do becomes part of his Kingdom.

Part 18: What are Absolution and the Ministry of Healing?

These are two 'minor' and often neglected sacramental ministries, but they are right at the heart of the mission of the Church.

Q.55 What is the ministry of Absolution?

Absolution is the ministry by which those who are truly sorry for their sins, and have made free confession of them to God in the presence of the minister, with intention to amend their lives, receive through the minister the forgiveness of God.

The Ministry of Absolution is what might more familiarly be called *Confession* (although technically both words are each only one part of the overall process). There are, as a rule, two forms: the general confession and absolution made in the context of worship, which doesn't mention anything specific, and the special form involving a minister and individual, the latter being the one which is really referred to in the Catechism.

There are different disciplines prevailing in different Churches. The Roman Catholic Church holds that Christians should make a confession before receiving communion, but this is not often now observed; the Orthodox Church still says this and it *is* often observed; while the Church of England has always taken the view that 'all may, some should, none must'. The chief Anglican provision for the Ministry of Absolution is in the Order for the Visitation of the Sick in the 1662 Prayer Book, where the rubrics advise that anyone who feels the need should 'open his grief' to a minister, 'that … he may receive the benefit of absolution, together with ghostly counsel and advice', but it doesn't lay down the form this might take.

Many of us will have something particular in mind during the General Confession, but it's easy to let it go past and for the business of asking for forgiveness to become unreal. Recognising good and evil is a first step in our move towards God, and recognising that evil resides within us as well as outside is the way we discover that we need him. Making a *particular* confession is like undergoing a conversion again; and we can do it alone, but

making a confession to someone else recognises the harm sin can do to those around us. The Catechism mentions a penitent who seeks Absolution must have sincere repentance and intent to change, an insistence which goes back to controversies about exactly how the sacrament works, and when it is that we are technically forgiven. You can get obsessive about these details, and fundamentally it isn't for us, including the clergy, to judge, only God. The priest only pronounces what God has promised.

It is worth repeating that everything mentioned in confession, once a person says they want to make one and a priest agrees, is absolutely confidential. The priest is actually enjoined to forget what's said to them. Of course a priest can refuse to absolve, but can't say anything about what is said (unless it would involve them in criminal conspiracy). There are continually efforts within the Church to change this, but the rule exists because of the principle that priests are hearing what is said to them without judgement and that has to apply to every sin, no matter how dreadful.

It's a good rule that those who administer absolution should know what it's like to receive it, so I make a confession twice a year in Advent and Lent, the penitential seasons.

Q.56 What is the sacramental ministry of Healing?

The sacramental ministry of healing is the ministry by which God's grace is given for the healing of spirit, mind, and body, in response to faith and prayer, by the laying on of hands, or by anointing with oil.

Healing is even more of a neglected sacrament than Absolution, although something like it is clearly described in the New Testament in the Letter of James. After the Reformation, the idea of healing miracles was felt to be superstitious stuff best left to the Roman Catholics, so it only survives in the Prayer Book in the shrunken form of the Visitation of the Sick: but, even then, that rite kept going the idea of 'extreme unction', the anointing of those about to die as a sign of healing and restoration. However this is only one form of the sacrament, and since the early 1900s the Anglican Church has rediscovered the healing ministry more broadly. Firstly the Guild of Health was founded in 1904, then the more Catholic Guild of St Raphael split from it in 1915: the two were reunited in 2015. Both organisations brought clergy and doctors together to promote the role of the Church in healing. The emphasis is always on 'healing of the whole person', which can include physical, mental and spiritual elements, and the Church stresses that all these things are

interconnected. Common Worship now includes liturgies for anointing and laying-on of hands, and also 'Prayers for those disturbed in spirit', and lots of churches hold healing services of one sort or another.

The rites for healing always include an opportunity for confession and absolution because that's seen as an integral part of being healed, in our relationships with God and with one another. So these two 'minor sacraments' are closely connected. They count as 'sacraments' because they both involve God's promises to bring us wholeness, freedom and 'life in all its fullness' and therefore although they have both been neglected in the past they are a vital element in the life of God's people. They reveal our need of God and his care for all that we are, and they bring about his meeting of that need and his fulfilment of that care.

Part 19: What is the Advent of Christ?

Q.57 What is the hope in which a Christian lives?

> ***A Christian lives in the certain hope of the advent of Christ, the last judgement, and resurrection to life everlasting.***

This question is just an introduction to this final section of the Catechism, 'The Christian Hope'. None of this appears in the 1662 Prayer Book, which is surprising.

Q.58 What are we to understand by the coming (advent) of Christ?

> ***By the advent of Christ we are to understand that God, who through Christ has created and redeemed all things, will also through Christ at his coming again, make all things perfect and complete in his eternal kingdom.***

The Advent of Christ is to bring about the End of the World, which is why many of the set readings for the Eucharist and the morning and evening Office in the Advent season, running up to Christmas, are 'apocalyptic' in a technical sense. The word 'Apocalypse' these days is usually prefixed with the word 'Zombie', but it actually means the unveiling of hidden things, or, in English, 'Revelation'. Many Christians get very fascinated by this, trying to work out the details and therefore when the End is going to happen. Some have famously got caught out by announcing the wrong date. The Catechism keeps things very vague: although the Book of Revelation, right at the end of the Bible, contains many 'events', how many are past, or future, or symbolic and not to be taken literally, is a moot point. For instance, many Christians believe in 'the Rapture', the doctrine that before the final dreadful years of creation, virtuous Christians will be miraculously taken away into heaven so they won't have to suffer the violence and upheaval to come. There is no direct statement about the Rapture in Scripture and you have to bend many statements in the New Testament to make it fit. Instead, Jesus stresses that nobody knows the time of the End, including himself, and his followers should not worry about it (Matthew 24.36, Mark 13.32-3, Acts 1.7). But even if

all these things are symbols, they must still be symbols of real things, and the sense of conflict and violence in the Book of Revelation can't be ignored (as we might prefer to do).

Traditional Christianity has tended to assume that the world will get worse and worse until Jesus returns to sort it all out; liberal Christians have tended to assume that the world will get better and better as we improve morally and socially until it's *ready* for Jesus to return. Looking at the world it's hard to say that it's clearly improving or deteriorating. It may rather be the case that we are learning more clearly what good and evil are and that conflict may be what Revelation is about. Perhaps this is why St Peter says 'it is time for judgement to begin with the household of God' (1Peter 4.17).

Again the actual *mechanism* by which 'Christ makes all things perfect and complete' is not laid out in the Catechism, just asserted as a fact. The more you think about the more separate it seems to be from our current experience and anything we can understand. The imagery the Bible uses is of peace, abundance, joy, light, and the eternal City, and those images are all we get.

Q.59 What are we to understand by the last judgement?

By the last judgement we are to understand that all will give account of their lives to God, who will condemn and destroy all that is evil, and bring his servants into the joy of their Lord.

Once again the Catechism doesn't go into great detail about this. Traditional Catholic (both Roman and Anglican) teaching is that there are two 'judgements', the *Particular* Judgement which decides 'where people go when they die' – Heaven, Hell or Purgatory, all of which are disembodied, spiritual states – and the *Last* Judgement which occurs after the dead have been raised and determines their eternal fate. This picture was reached by trying to tie together all the stray references in Scripture and to combine them in a way that seemed to make coherent sense; but now we have other ideas. For instance, can God and eternal suffering coexist for ever? Do we really find it credible to think of a New Creation in which somewhere there is still a pit of fire in which the damned are tormented forever? We are not as sure now as we once were.

These 'Last Things' are all bracketed together as things we *hope for*, that is, not threats but promises. The eradication of evil from within us as well

as around us in the world is a good thing, something that will truly bring us into divine joy.

Part 20: What is the resurrection and the assurance of Christians?

As usual, when we consider this question we find there is much that the Catechism covers without getting into detail, so in talking about it we have to unpack it without going too far beyond what it actually says. This is something of a contrast with the Roman Catholic version which is much more detailed!

Q.60 What are we to understand by resurrection?

> ***By resurrection we are to understand that God, who has overcome death by the resurrection of Christ, will raise from death in a body of glory all who are Christ's, that they may live with him in the fellowship of the saints.***

Here however the Catechism is absolutely clear in calling attention not to 'life after death' (that picture many nominal Christians have of 'going to heaven when you die') but to *resurrection*. The two are not contradictory, but the first is incomplete without the second. Our sense of what resurrection means is put in the context of what happened to Jesus, and this is conceived absolutely in physical terms: whatever the phrase 'a body of glory' means, it includes the idea of corporeality. In Dante's *Divine Comedy,* the spirits in heaven *before* the resurrection of the dead yearn to be re-clothed with physical bodies, because they're aware that they're not created just to be disembodied spirits. The Catechism insists that what happened to Jesus will happen to Christians, that our resurrection follows the pattern of his.

'Resurrection' can mean many things – the triumph of light over darkness, the death of an old life and the beginning of a new one, our being made 'like Christ', all of which happen within the course of our earthly term

of life. But it can't leave out Jesus's being raised from the dead, because without that all those other things are empty. Jesus's resurrection is the only thing, really, that demonstrates the existence of a God who makes all those other aspects of 'resurrection' real, rather than just secular hopes or aspirations.

The phrase 'all who are Christ's' rather implies that there might be some people who are *not* Christ's, uncomfortable though that may be to think about. 'The fellowship of the saints' reminds us that the future life is not merely about us as individuals, but that we are part of Christ's Body, raised with others to live with others.

Q.61 What, then, is our assurance as Christians?

Our assurance as Christians is that neither death, nor life, nor things present, nor things to come, will be able to separate us from the love of God which is in Christ Jesus our Lord. Thus, daily increasing in God's Holy Spirit, and following the example of our Saviour Christ, we shall at the last be made like him, for we shall see him as he is.
Therefore I pray: May the God of all grace, who has called us unto his eternal glory in Christ Jesus, after that we have suffered awhile, make us perfect, stablish, strengthen, settle us. To him be glory and dominion for ever and ever. Amen.

The words 'Neither death, nor life …' come from the letter of St Paul to the Romans, chapter 8, and they are among the texts read at the start of the Funeral Office. This last text in the Catechism is a short account of the bedrock of the life of a Christian, and wisely it begins with an absolute statement that God will never abandon us. Everything else can be uncertain, but he and his will to save us aren't. The parallel phrases about 'daily increasing' in the Holy Spirit and 'following the example' of Jesus suggest both us and God working together to achieve our salvation, both the passive reception of the Holy Spirit's grace and the active attempt to model ourselves after Jesus. Then, by saying that we will 'be made like him for we shall see him as he is', the Catechism directs our attention beyond this life to the place where we will be in Christ's direct presence, because only in that way can we be made completely like him. The consummation of our hope is necessarily only realised in the world to come.

Finally, very peculiarly, we have a prayer based on 1Peter 5 in rather antique language. It reminds us that those who follow Jesus can only reach perfection by experiencing what it means to suffer, if only to suffer the pangs of repentance and mutual forgiveness, recognising that we are wrong now and again, and so it includes the Cross.

The very last words of the Catechism once again point us back to Jesus. What starts with you – 'What is your Christian name?' and your own experience, the beginnings of faith with baptism, ends with him who was there from the origin of all things, the Alpha and the Omega. If it's managed nothing else, by insisting throughout on Jesus's centrality and presence amid the causes of this life, the Catechism will have done well.

Index

Bible References

St John's Church

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