

SCRIPTURE, DOCTRINE, AND PROCLAMATION: *The Catechism of the Catholic Church* and the Renewal of Homiletics

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One of the most striking features of the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* is the way that it uses Scripture. It does not use Scripture primarily to back up or to corroborate doctrinal statements, but rather it incorporates Scripture into the very articulation of the doctrine. Scripture is not only cited as a way of authorizing the doctrinal statements, but is woven into the text of the *Catechism*, so that Catholic doctrine is actually articulated in scriptural terms and language.

Like the *Confessions* of St. Augustine, the *Rule* of St. Benedict, or *Lumen Gentium* and the other documents of the Second Vatican Council, the *Catechism* is a Scripture-infused text, where scriptural passages, words, phrases, and sentences simply make up part of the text itself. “I think it would be fair to style this as a *scriptural catechesis*, a catechesis carried out not simply with the support of the words of Scripture but *in* the words of Scripture. It is a catechetical narrative that *relies* on the words of Scripture to speak its main points, so that it almost becomes a kind of glossed scriptural proclamation rather than a scripturally corroborated dogmatic statement.”¹

I believe this practice of the *Catechism* is inspired by *Dei Verbum*, Vatican II’s declaration on divine revelation. In *Dei Verbum* we read that “Sacred Tradition and Sacred Scripture ... are bound closely together and communicate one with the other. For both of them, flowing out from the same divine wellspring, come together in some fashion to form one thing and move towards the same goal.”² You could say that the *Catechism* “performs” this “coming together” of Scripture and Tradition in a textual tapestry whose threads are drawn on the one hand from Scripture and, on the other, from various traditional sources—from the creeds, the writings of the Fathers, and from formulas and teachings of the Church councils. The teaching authority of the Church, or magisterium, is the “servant” of the Word of God, according to *Dei Verbum*; and the magisterium is present

¹ John C. Cavadini, “The Use of Scripture in the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*,” *Letter and Spirit* 2 (2006): 25–26, at 28.

² Second Vatican Council, *Dei Verbum*, Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation (November 18, 1965), 9, in *The Scripture Documents: An Anthology of Official Catholic Teachings*, ed. Dean P. Bécharde (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2002), 19–31.

in the *Catechism* as the authorial voice, “arranging and organizing the texts from Scripture and Tradition.”³

The Church’s teaching authority “serves” these two streams of transmission of the one Word of God by contextualizing Scripture in the Tradition’s rule of faith, and by contextualizing the rule of faith in its original primary character—as a summary of scriptural teaching. This means that the exposition of Catholic doctrine is enlivened by the appeal to the imagination that scriptural texts carry in their images and stories, prophecies, and proclamations.

The scriptural texts and images have a kind of “overplus” of meaning that can never be fully reduced to doctrinal formulas. That “overplus,” as part of the exposition of doctrine itself, keeps the exposition of doctrine from closing in on itself, as though its formulas could ever fully express the lofty mysteries they state. At the same time, unless scriptural texts and images are contextualized or contoured in doctrinal exposition, the “overplus” of meaning in the scriptural text can turn into a kind of indeterminacy of meaning that could not be summarized and “handed on” in any normative way to future generations of Christians.⁴

The *Catechism*’s incorporation of Scripture into the actual exposition of doctrine, then, enacts and implies a kind of pedagogy—a manner and a spirit of teaching. It is that which I would like to characterize more fully in this article.

For various reasons, in recent times there has grown up a gap in the minds of Catholics between “Scripture” on the one hand, and “doctrine” or “dogma” on the other. Doctrine or teaching is seen as a kind of overlay on the scriptural text, in some fundamental way foreign to it. It is as though Catholics had internalized a Protestant critique of Catholic doctrine as “unscriptural,” or as though the dominant academic mode of interpreting the Scriptures—the historico-critical—has engendered the reflex that the only proper way of interpreting Scripture is by reading each book, and each segment of each book, in its own individual historical context. It is interesting to me that both a certain strain of evangelical Christianity and historico-critical scholarship both share the presupposition that doctrine is a foreign overlay on the text of Scripture and cannot be used to discover or illuminate its meaning.

I am not here interested in polemicizing against historico-critical scholarship and its method of contextualizing Scripture. *Dei Verbum* makes clear that historical and literary study of the texts is one of the ways of approaching the meaning of Scripture, and the *Catechism* often reflects an acceptance of the results of historico-critical scholarship.⁵ But interpreting Scripture as the Word of God also involves

3 Cavadini, “Use of Scripture in the *Catechism*,” 30.

4 See the illuminating discussion on the relation between the formulas of doctrine and the realities they express in *The Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 2d. ed. (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1997), no. 170. See also Cavadini, “The Use of Scripture in the *Catechism*,” 28, 31.

5 This acceptance of historical findings can be seen, for instance, in the *Catechism*’s treatment of

contextualizing it within the rule of faith, as I have noted above. If for no other reason, this reflects the fact that the books of Scripture as we know it would not even have been preserved or handed down to us unless the Fathers thought they were united by a common witness to the rule of faith and the creeds that emerged from the rule of faith. Scripture as such, in other words, has a “traditional” form.⁶

However, one of the fruits of an imbalanced reliance on historico-critical scholarship as the only proper way to contextualize Scripture has been an odd convergence with the anti-Catholic view that doctrine is an obscuring overlay upon the pure truth and meaning of the scriptural text, a second order addition or even distortion of its truth. It is as though Lessing’s “ugly ditch” has re-constituted itself in new territory, with Scripture on one side, and doctrine on the other.⁷

This in turn has generated a kind of dichotomy in the way we think about the teaching ministries of the Church, and, in particular, preaching. Those charged with preaching the Word of God feel especially constrained by this dichotomy. The homily is supposed to illuminate the scriptural readings from the lectionary, to “break open the Word” just proclaimed. And who would argue with that? But this aim is too often *contrasted* with preaching doctrinally, as though doctrine had nothing to do with the scriptural text.

The pedagogy exemplified in the *Catechism* recovers the ancient, patristic balance between proclamation of the Word in Scripture and handing on the teachings of the faith in doctrine. This exemplification is at the same time a call to a renewed scriptural and doctrinal pedagogy. I would argue that failing to “hear” this call or to appropriate the example of the *Catechism* results not only in undercatechized Catholics, but in Catholics who are ripe either for proselytizing by the evangelical megachurches or Pentecostal sects on the one hand, or for the agnostic secular *status quo* on the other.

Once you split “Scripture” from “doctrine” and preach on the basis of such a split, you are actually teaching and propagating that very split. In this process, Catholics “learn” that the exposition of Scripture has little to do with doctrine—so why not, then, go to the churches where this split is prosecuted in a much more thoroughgoing and unencumbered way? For Catholic doctrine is embodied in Catholic liturgical action and prayer; and, if Catholic doctrine is held to be essentially unscriptural, then the rest of the liturgy will come to seem also as resting on indefensible doctrinal additions that simply encumber the full expression of Scripture. On the other hand, if people have already begun to doubt the truth of

the relationship between Jesus and the Judaism of his time, *Catechism*, nos. 574–594. See the discussion in Cavadini, “The Use of Scripture in the *Catechism*,” 31–34.

6 This is argued more fully in a paper by Charles Kannengeisser, as yet unpublished.

7 G. E. Lessing, the eighteenth-century philosopher, proposed that there is an “ugly broad ditch” (*der garstige breite Graben*) between historical truths and the religious claims of Christianity. See his “On the Proof of the Spirit and of Power,” in *Lessing’s Theological Writings* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University, 1956), 51–55.

the Scriptures because of popularized versions of historico-critical worries that the real Jesus is buried irrecoverably in the sedimented overlay of the Church's proclamation, they will not get any help from a homiletic practice that essentially accepts the very dichotomy between Scripture and Tradition that is pushing them away.

It is important, then, to cultivate and expand the scriptural pedagogy of the *Catechism*—not only so that Catholics can be better catechized, but also so we stop forming Catholics into the false dichotomy between Scripture and doctrine which is so foreign to authentic Catholic tradition and which actually militates against it.⁸ I would like to spend the rest of this article trying to illustrate what a Scripture-infused doctrinal preaching, or a doctrinally shaped scriptural preaching, would look like.

Preaching About the Birth and Nature of the Church

This new kind of preaching would *not* look like the old fashioned apologetics, that is, a project of how to prove or defend Catholic doctrine from Scripture. Such a method would be a step backwards from the *Catechism*, which, as I have already pointed out, does not use Scripture in this way. Trying to “prove” Catholic doctrine from Scripture only serves to feature the dichotomy between them, as though Scripture itself were not doctrinally shaped in its origin and conception, and as though doctrine were a body of interesting information about the cosmos with no intrinsic connection to scriptural proclamation.

In following the example of the *Catechism*, we are looking at a new kind of apologetics—one that does not try so much to prove Catholic teaching from the Scriptures, but rather tries to articulate doctrine in a scriptural way, and to shape the exposition of Scripture in a doctrinal way. Such a renewed homiletics⁹ would be more trusting of the scriptural images and narratives as suggestive and fruitful in their own right. The *Catechism* trusts them; why shouldn't the preacher? Such a homiletics will also be more trusting of Catholic doctrine as essentially a summation and continuation of the same proclamation we find in Scripture.

But how to help the preacher recover a scripturally infused eloquence of teaching? The project I have in mind is a homiletic commentary on the *Catechism*. This would not be conceived as a line-by-line commentary, but rather would seize on a small number of central passages in the *Catechism*, each of which would head up a small cluster of passages with supplementary import. We could feature especially those elements of Catholic teaching that have a markedly “Catholic”

8 One reason I was disappointed to see the official publication of the shortened version of the *Catechism*, the *Compendium*, was that, just as I suspected, all the Scripture had been removed, thus backing away from the pedagogical challenge and invitation proposed by the *Catechism* itself. See *Compendium, Catechism of the Catholic Church* (Washington, DC: United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, 2006).

9 The same would apply to hymns.

distinctiveness, that is, the very doctrines that are notoriously difficult to “prove” from Scripture though they are all profoundly scriptural. In turn, these are all mostly doctrines connected in some way to the distinctive Catholic doctrine of the Church—the doctrine of the Church itself, the doctrine of the sacraments and especially of the Eucharist and holy orders, the Marian doctrines, and the doctrine of the saints and eschatology more generally.

For example, what does it mean to say that Christ Jesus “instituted” the Church? I think that hidden in the minds of many Catholics is the idea that the Church is something like the United States of America or the Elks’ Club. These are voluntary associations of individuals created by the decision of each one to come together in order to pursue certain common objects of interest, and defined essentially by that joint decision to come together. Their relationship is well expressed in the initial language of the U. S. Constitution: “We the people, in order to form a more perfect union, provide for the common defense . . .”

The person who “institutes” this kind of association is the one who writes or approves a charter, a constitution, or a set of rules defining the structure of the association, perhaps the one who had the idea for this association in the first place. In the minds of most Americans, including many Catholics, a “church” is very much like this. They see “church” as an association of people who come together freely to share certain common beliefs, to reinforce those beliefs, and to pray to God together just like they do at home, only doing it together offers mutual encouragement. According to this way of thinking, Jesus is the one who had the idea for this association, and set up the twelve apostles as its structure, and so “instituted” the Church.

Now, it is true that Jesus chose the Twelve with Peter as their head, and, as the *Catechism* says, thus “endowed his community with a structure that will remain until the Kingdom is fully achieved.”¹⁰ But to emphasize this *in isolation* as the meaning of the Church’s institution, and to cite such passages as Mark 3:14–15 and Matthew 16:18 as “proofs” of it, only serves to reinforce the idea of the Church as a voluntary club which Jesus invented and structured as he saw fit. Scripture, under this model, becomes the historical record of this institution, and very little more; the rest of Catholic doctrine is an overlay on this bare historical account.

The homiletic commentary I have in mind would make this paragraph from the *Catechism* as the place to start:

The Church is born primarily of Christ’s total self-giving for our salvation, anticipated in the institution of the Eucharist and fulfilled on the cross. “The origin and growth of the Church are symbolized by the blood and water which flowed from the open side of the crucified Jesus” (*Lumen Gentium*, 3; John 19:34). “For

¹⁰ *Catechism*, no. 765.

it was from the side of Christ as he slept the sleep of death upon the cross that there came forth the 'wondrous sacrament of the whole Church'" (*Sacramentum Concilium*, 5). As Eve was formed from the sleeping Adam's side, so the Church was born from the pierced heart of Christ hanging dead on the cross (St. Ambrose, *Commentary on the Gospel of Luke*, Bk. 2, 85–89).¹¹

This passage invites us to reflect on three scriptural images as a way of learning about the constitution of the Church—namely, Christ hanging dead on the cross, the blood and water flowing from the pierced side or heart of Jesus (John 19:34), and Eve formed from the side of Adam (Gen. 2:21–23). The *Catechism* suggests that if you ponder these images and preach in such a way that you help others to ponder them, you will come to an image of the Church that allows one to see what it means, most fully, to say that Christ Jesus instituted the Church. The image of Christ hanging dead on the cross is an image of his "total self-giving," and the image of the blood and water flowing from his side is an image of the Church and its sacraments proceeding from that total self-gift. The image of Eve coming forth from the side of Adam provides a kind of theology in pictures: the Church, born of Christ's total self-giving, is created in that very love and is as intimately united to Christ as "bone of my bone and flesh of my flesh," to use another image from the Genesis narrative.

These texts don't "prove" the Catholic doctrine of the Church from Scripture, rather they offer images which the preacher can use to send home the idea that if the Church has a constitution or definition, it is nothing other than the "total self-giving" of Christ on the cross, and the Church is therefore the enduring presence of that total self-giving in time and space, in history. No merely voluntary association could claim that. Far from being essentially defined as a "club" or voluntary association, the Church is here able to be portrayed as what it truly is, Christ's spouse, something as close to him as his own Body.

It could be objected that this passage refers to Scripture passages relatively infrequently read in the liturgy, for example, the passion according to St. John. But that is where the "cluster" idea comes in. This passage could be at the head of a cluster of *Catechism* passages that speak about Christ's total self-gift. This self-gift is covered in a series of stunningly beautiful passages in the *Catechism*,¹² which comprise a rich tissue of scriptural phrases, allusions, and citations woven together with traditional sources and magisterial statements. Any one of these scriptural passages, amply represented in the lectionary, can be the beginning of a catechetical homily on the Church as born out of the total self-gift of Christ, anticipated in the institution of the Eucharist and fulfilled on the cross.

¹¹ *Catechism*, no. 766.

¹² *Catechism*, nos. 606–618.

A preacher could decide that during the course of a given lectionary cycle, he was going to preach on the character of the Church, each time drawing the assembly's attention to Christ's total self-giving as that which creates and defines the Church. In one of these homilies, he can even tie in Christ's selection of the Twelve as a structure, because the sequence permits one to tie this easily into the idea of Christ's self-gift.

The Eucharist that Christ institutes at that moment will be the memorial of his sacrifice (1 Cor. 11:25). Jesus includes the apostles in his own offering and bids them perpetuate it (Luke 22:19). By doing so, the Lord institutes his apostles as priests of the new covenant: "For their sakes I sanctify myself, so that they also may be sanctified in truth" (John 17:19).¹³

A homily on Mark 3:14–15 or Matthew 16:18 (accounts of the election of the Twelve and of Peter), when joined to the ideas in no. 622 of the *Catechism*, show that the Twelve are not simply an organizational rubric for something like the Elk's Club only holier, but are instead themselves defined by their participation in Jesus's total self-giving and by their role in perpetuating it. Someone could preach once a month, on the average, on Scriptures from (or closely related to) this cluster of passages from the *Catechism*. It would fill people's imaginations with the true and full Catholic idea of the Church, and at the same time fill them with images of the total self-gift that is the constitution of the Church.

It is easy to see how you could also have a cluster of similar *Catechism* passages starting with no. 766 of the *Catechism* at the head, and connecting it through the idea of Christ's total self-gift—his sacrifice on the cross—to the later sections on the Eucharist. One could move, for example, from no. 766 to no. 616: "It is love 'to the end' (John 13:1) that confers on Christ's sacrifice its value." This passage could easily be connected to the sections on the Eucharist as a sacrifice (nos. 1362–1372). In turn, these easily connect to the sections on the real presence, via reference to no. 1380 (one of the most beautiful sections of the *Catechism*) and then full circle to no. 1396, which states, "The Eucharist makes the Church," citing in the process 1 Corinthians 12:13, 10:16–17, and *Sermon* 272 of St. Augustine (which itself is full of scriptural references).

What does it mean to say that the Eucharist "makes" the Church? That the Church, in the words at the head of the cluster, is "born primarily of Christ's total self-giving for our salvation, anticipated in the institution of the Eucharist and fulfilled on the cross."¹⁴ Further, we know that "he wanted us to have the memorial of the love with which he loved us 'to the end' (John 13:1) even to the giving of his life," and that "in his eucharistic presence he remains mysteriously in our midst as

¹³ *Catechism*, no. 611.

¹⁴ *Catechism*, no. 766.

the one who loved us and gave himself up for us (Gal. 2:20), and he remains under signs that express and communicate this love.”¹⁵

Then it makes sense that the Eucharist makes the Church because, as the *Catechism* explains, “those who receive the Eucharist are united more closely to Christ.”¹⁶ In other words, we are formed into one Body by his total self-giving on the cross, the same one here present in the Eucharist. That is a far cry from the anti-Catholic stereotype of the Church, and the beauty is that it is all tied, in persuasive scriptural images, to the love of Christ poured out for us on the cross, something intrinsically appealing that needs no apology or defense.

But my main point is that this cluster of short sections from the *Catechism* cites so many different Scripture passages that one would have multiple opportunities during the course of a lectionary cycle to use one of these scriptural passages to draw any of the others or all of the others into play in an exposition of the Catholic doctrine of the Eucharist. One would have a fully orthodox and precise exposition of the doctrine, filled with scriptural images that appeal to the heart as well as to the mind, something that could be used, with variation of course, four or five Sundays out of a year. That would provide effective catechesis that was both doctrinally precise and moving—and therefore persuasive.

Proclaiming Mary as “Eschatological Icon of the Church”

I would like to provide one more (not unrelated) example, and that is the case of Mary. Catholics almost never hear homilies about Mary anymore, except perhaps those delivered somewhat awkwardly on the feast days of the Assumption and the Immaculate Conception. I say “awkwardly” because nowhere does the dichotomy between Catholic doctrine and Scripture seem so glaring as in the case of Mary, and especially these two dogmas of the faith. That is because one has in one’s mind the mistaken idea that for these doctrines to be properly scriptural, they must be “proven” from passages that explicitly mention them.

However, Scripture works with images, and the homilest has to be able to feel comfortable with images and preaching based on these images. For example, John 19:26–27 presents the poignant image of Jesus giving Mary to his beloved disciple as his mother. The passage is not included so that we can realize from the historical record what a good boy Jesus was, model son that he is, thinking about providing for his mother even while he was dying on the cross.

The beloved disciple is imaged here as the new son of a new mother, Jesus’s mother, who is now the mother of Christ’s faithful, herself an image or icon of the Church. Mary in this passage is both herself and, precisely as such, an image of the Church, spiritual mother to all of us. Her motherhood of Jesus is a completely integrated act, both physical and spiritual, perfectly conformed to the will

¹⁵ *Catechism*, no. 1380.

¹⁶ *Catechism*, no. 1396.

of the Father and thus perfectly configured to her Son's total self-gift that is the constitution of the Church. Her very being, as Jesus' mother, is defined by the love revealed and enacted in Jesus's self-giving, and so she is at once an *icon* or image of the Church as it will be when it is itself perfectly configured to this love, and the mother of the Church, our spiritual mother.

This is why, as the *Catechism* says, devotion to Mary is "intrinsic to Christian worship."¹⁷ One would never know this from the low mariology that presents the historical Mary, insofar as we can know her, as a kind of special role model, reducing the scriptural contribution to simple historical reporting, and replicating the old divide between Scripture (here as an historical record) and doctrine (as a later overlay). The image of the woman clothed with the sun in Revelation 12:1–17 is then interpreted as an image of the Church. But the image is multivalent. There is nothing wrong with its representing both Mary *and* the Church, and the Church *because* it also represents Mary. The Son to whom she gives birth in Revelation 12:13 is then Jesus, and "the rest of her children" in 12:17, the members of the Church.

It could be objected that these two passages with their two powerful images, John 19:26–27 and Revelation 12:1–17, are just two passages and come up rarely in the liturgical cycle, and so offer only limited opportunity to preach on Mary. But that is true only if you have a "low" mariology (Mary as "role model" for disciples) in mind. A cluster of *Catechism* sections with no. 972 at the head would easily provide or suggest enough passages that one could include Mary in one's preaching many times in a lectionary cycle.

According to the *Catechism*, Mary is an "eschatological icon of the Church."¹⁸ Especially in alliance with no. 963, "Mary, Mother of Christ, Mother of the Church," and no. 726, "Mary, the new Eve, ('mother of the living'), mother of the 'whole Christ,'" one can find legitimate license to preach on Mary when preaching on any relevant Scripture passage on the Church. In addition, the sections of the *Catechism* on Mary¹⁹ are full of references to Scriptures both in the New and Old Testaments, as well as references to patristic and magisterial documents that themselves contain links to Scripture passages.

A homiletic commentary on the *Catechism* would help preachers to exploit all of these links. Mary is a "wholly unique member of the Church. ... The exemplary realization (*typus*) of the Church."²⁰ She is this, not as a mythological creature or goddess, but as a true human mother in history as we know it, the presence to us in maternal form of the most burning love of the crucified, the total self-gift of Christ that forms us and begets us as his members. How would that not be a moving and

¹⁷ *Catechism*, no. 971.

¹⁸ *Catechism*, no. 972.

¹⁹ *Catechism*, nos. 487–511; 721–726; 963–975.

²⁰ *Catechism*, no. 967.

orthodox homiletic catechesis on Mary, available from many scriptural texts in the lectionary, even if Mary is only part of the homily?

In addition to the example of the *Catechism*, I would like to point to one more salient example of the kind of catechetical preaching I am talking about. That is found in Pope Benedict XVI's first encyclical, *Deus Caritas Est* ("God is Love").²¹ This is essentially a homiletical catechesis on Christian love in the form of a meditative elaboration on certain key Scripture passages, certainly 1 John 4:8, reflected in the title, but even more centrally, the focal image of the pierced heart of Christ, from John 19:34–37.

All of the scriptural texts used in this encyclical radiate out from this latter image as hubs from the center of a wheel. Ultimately, as Hans Urs von Balthasar famously said, "Love alone is credible."²² Benedict, with this encyclical has proposed what we might call an "apologetics of love." If "love alone is credible," that is, if love is the only reality that is its own apology and needs no further defense, it would be easy to create a persuasive apologetics for Catholic doctrine ultimately based on the truth that "God is Love"—a love we see in the pierced heart of Christ on the cross.

I have tried to illustrate how that can be done for catechesis on the doctrine of the Church and on the doctrine of the Eucharist. But all of the major mysteries of the Christian faith go back to the over-arching mystery of the love of God revealed in Christ. Creation, the Trinity, the incarnation—all of the great catechetical themes can be propounded in the moving scriptural vocabulary of God's infinite Love. A homiletic commentary on the *Catechism* would set up "clusters" of passages in the *Catechism* that would guide the reader to key passages in this apologetic of love (such as no. 766), and show the path linking them to the expositions of each major doctrine. Each cluster would also generate a cluster of scriptural passages from which the homilist could authentically preach on any of these doctrines, in a way formed by the eloquence of God's love itself.

21 Pope Benedict XVI, *Deus Caritas Est*, Encyclical Letter on Christian Love (December 25, 2005) (Washington, DC: United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, 2006).

22 Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Love Alone Is Credible* (San Francisco: Ignatius, 2004 [1968]).