

THE USE OF SCRIPTURE IN THE CATECHISM OF THE CATHOLIC CHURCH

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What is the role of Scripture in the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*?¹ However we answer that question, one thing is certain: the *Catechism* cites scriptural texts with profusion. The *Roman Catechism*, the only previous official *Catechism* of the magisterium of the Church, does cite Scripture frequently and often to a beautiful rhetorical effect.² However, compared with the *Roman Catechism*, the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* seems almost littered with scriptural sentences, phrases, words, and allusions, found on almost every page. How can we characterize the use to which this rich scriptural apparatus is put? A secondary question might be, what is the relationship between the use of Scripture in the *Catechism* and historical-critical exegesis? Do the fruits of historical-critical exegesis show up in the *Catechism* in any meaningful way?

As is well known, the *Catechism* has been criticized for its use of Scripture as descending to critically uninformed proof-texting, with passages abstracted from their original contexts in the text of Scripture and in the circumstances in which they were written. It is implied that this use of Scripture is a return to pre-critical methods of scriptural citation more characteristic of a certain kind of dogmatic apologetics from an era before the Second Vatican Council.³ With these criti-

1 This paper was presented in an earlier form at a conference held at the University of Notre Dame, June 13–15, 2005, to celebrate the fortieth anniversary of the Second Vatican Council's Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation, *Dei Verbum*. The conference was co-sponsored by the United States Catholic Bishops' Committee on Doctrine and the University of Notre Dame's Institute for Church Life and Department of Theology. I wish to acknowledge their support, and that of the Lilly Endowment, who funded this conference. I would also like to thank Nancy Cavadini, Brian Daley, Scott Hahn, Cyril O'Regan, Michael Signer, and Matt Zyniewicz, who commented on earlier versions of this paper (of course, the errors in it are irremediably my own).

2 See for example Pt. 1, art. 12, §12–13 (cited henceforth in the following form: *Roman Catechism* 1.12.12–13), on the goods to be enjoyed by the blessed. It is also known as the "Catechism of Trent" because it was produced in the aftermath of the Church's Council of Trent (1545–1563). All citations and translations are taken from *The Roman Catechism*, trans. and annot. Robert I. Bradley, S.J. and Eugene Kevane (Boston: St. Paul Editions, 1985).

3 These criticisms are taken up briefly by Pope Benedict XVI, then Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger. See "The Catechism's Use of Scripture," in *On the Way to Jesus Christ*, trans. Michael J. Miller (San Francisco: Ignatius, 2005), 146–53, and "The Biblical Realism of the New *Catechism's* Christological Catechesis," in *Gospel, Catechesis, Catechism: Sidelights on the Catechism of the Catholic Church* (San Francisco: Ignatius, 1997), 63–69, though I believe the glancing criticism

cisms in mind, but without conceding them as the terms of inquiry, I would like to meditate upon the presentation of Scripture in the *Catechism*.

To begin, it is interesting to return to the comparison of the *Catechism* with the *Roman Catechism*. The latter, as has been already noted, uses Scripture with some frequency, but for the most part these uses are in the genre of appeal to authority—citations or allusions to Scripture used to corroborate or verify doctrinal statements made in a different voice, the authorial voice of the text of the catechism. For example, in a passage introducing the incarnation:

[T]he same Person, remaining God as he was from eternity, became man (see John 1:14), what he was not before. That this is the meaning of these words is clear from the profession of the holy Council of Constantinople, which says, *who for us men, and for our salvation, came down from heaven, and became incarnate by the Holy Spirit of the Virgin Mary, and was made Man*. The same truth we also find explained by St. John the Evangelist, who took in from the bosom of the Savior himself the knowledge of this profound mystery. When he had declared the nature of the divine Word as follows, “*In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God*, he concludes, *the Word became flesh and dwelt among us* (John 1:1, 14).”⁴

The article continues in this fashion, ending in a short reflection on the usefulness of preaching on the incarnation. After citing Luke 2:6–7 to show the poverty and humility of the Incarnate Word, the *Roman Catechism* adds, “Could the Evangelist have described under more humble terms the majesty and glory that filled the heavens and the earth? He does not say, ‘there was no room in the inn,’ but there was no room for *him*, who says *the world is mine and the fullness thereof* [Ps. 49:12]. As another Evangelist has expressed it: *He came unto his own and his own received him not* [John 1:11].”⁵ This beautiful meditation explicitly takes the form of a reflection on Luke 2:6–7 as a passage from Scripture (“Could the Evangelist have described . . .”) supplemented by other passages from Scripture; but the whole meditation is used to verify from Scripture the incarnation of the “majesty and glory that filled the heavens and the earth.”⁶

of John Meier is misplaced here. I would like to thank Scott Hahn for drawing my attention to these articles.

4 *Roman Catechism*, 1.3.1.

5 *Roman Catechism*, 1.3.11.

6 I hasten to add that I do not want to overdraw the contrast. The Scripture passage is used in this example not only to verify and corroborate, but to enrich and amplify the doctrinal statement such that one could preach on it more effectively. The scriptural meditation adds to the power of the doctrinal expression. The wonder and awe of the incarnation become more visible and accessible than they were just from the statement of the doctrine. The *Catechism* of

The Catechism's Scriptural Catechesis

Turning now to the *Catechism*, we can examine passages on a similar point of doctrine. At the beginning of the discussion of Christ, preceding and introducing discussions of the articles from the Creed, "And In Jesus Christ, His Only Son, Our Lord" and "He Was Conceived by the Power of the Holy Spirit, and Born of the Virgin Mary," we find:

422. *But when the time had fully come, God sent forth his Son, born of a woman, born under the law, to redeem those who were under the law, so that we might receive adoption as sons (Gal. 4:4–5). This is the gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God (Mark 1:1): God has visited his people. He has fulfilled the promise he made to Abraham and his descendants. He acted far beyond all expectation—he has sent his own beloved Son (Mark 1:11; compare Luke 1:55, 68).*

423. *We believe and confess that Jesus of Nazareth, born a Jew of a daughter of Israel at Bethlehem at the time of King Herod the Great and the emperor Caesar Augustus . . . is the eternal Son of God made man. He came from God (John 13:3), descended from heaven (John 3:13; 6:33), and came in the flesh (1 John 4:2). For the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, full of grace and truth; we have beheld his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father . . . And from his fullness have we all received, grace upon grace (John 1:14, 16).*

424. *Moved by the grace of the Holy Spirit and drawn by the Father, we believe in Jesus and confess, You are the Christ, the Son of the living God (Matt. 16:16). On the rock of this faith confessed by Peter, Christ built his Church (see Matt. 16:18; Pope St. Leo I, Sermon 4, 3; 51, 1; 62, 2; 83, 3).⁷*

Trent, oriented toward the preaching of the Word and attuned to the emphases of the humanist rhetorical culture, is more alert to the rhetorical power latent in the scriptural texts, beyond their usefulness as so-called proof texts, than many later catechetical summaries of the faith. Still, Scripture is used much less frequently than in the *Catechism*. There is retained a much greater sense that Scripture is something being "employed" or "used" in an essentially separate endeavor of doctrinal exposition. By contrast, in the words of Ratzinger, the *Catechism* is "shaped from one end to the other by the Bible. As far as I know, there has never been until now a catechism so thoroughly formed by the Bible." *Gospel, Catechesis, Catechism*, 61.

7 *The Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 2d. ed. (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1997). nos. 422-424. Cited henceforth in the following form: *Catechism*, nos. 422-424.

In these passages, we find Scripture not only cited but actually woven into the text of the *Catechism*. Thus, Galatians 4:4–5 is not a citation supporting a point made in the authorial voice of the text of Section 422, but instead *is* the text of 422. The *Catechism* lets Scripture make its central point rather than taking Scripture as a corroboration of points made in non-scriptural language. The “this” that begins the next sentence has Galatians 4:4–5 as its antecedent, and Mark 1:1 is used to make the point that what Galatians 4:4–5 proclaims is what Mark calls “the Gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God.” The subsequent explanatory text could in no way stand alone without these scriptural texts. In fact, the subsequent text has as its aim to bring out the surprise—“far beyond all expectation”—implied in the phrase from Mark 1:11, “beloved Son.”

The next section, 423, goes on to specify even more fully the terms of the surprising lengths to which God has gone, stating that Jesus of Nazareth, a fully historical figure, is “the eternal Son of God made man.” The rest of the section is expressed entirely in scriptural phrases and sentences woven together into one cohesive catechetical statement thematized by the doctrinal statement about “the eternal Son of God made man.” The next section places the confession of Peter from Matthew 16:16 on the lips of the reader as his or her own, finishing with a use of the scriptural word “rock,” characteristic of the preached exegesis of Pope St. Leo the Great.

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.

We find this strategy employed again and again in the *Catechism*. One could say that Scripture breathes freely in the *Catechism*, or that Scripture’s spirit is allowed to fill the text and determine its form, to carry its own moment and challenge, enlivening the catechesis with its ever-present appeal to the imagination. In another sequence on the incarnation (*Catechism*, nos. 461–463), the text begins with John 1:14 and uses this Scripture to specify the content of the dogmatic word “incarnation”:

Taking up St. John’s expression, ‘the Word became flesh,’ the Church calls ‘incarnation’ the fact that the Son of God assumed a human nature in order to accomplish our salvation in it.⁸

This way of putting it, far from using the scriptural text as a proof-text for an independent dogmatic assertion, places the traditional dogmatic word, “incarnation,” in tandem with the scriptural text. It appears as an *interpretation* of the scriptural assertion. It serves to specify the meaning of the scriptural text for the

8 *Catechism*, no. 461.

purposes of catechesis, but it does not exhaust its meaning. The inspired text has an overplus of meaning, which can never be fully specified in non-scriptural language. By allowing the text to stand on its own, the *Catechism* makes just this point. The scriptural text is not just a “proof” of the doctrinal statement, but rather its context, keeping the doctrinal statement from closing in on itself as though it could ever fully express the lofty mystery it states. And yet we must have a normative way of stating the mystery lest the overplus of Scripture become a kind of indeterminate ambiguity that cannot ever be summarized and handed on. After lengthy citations from Philippians 2:5–8 and Hebrews 10:5–7, the whole sequence ends with a citation of 1 Timothy 3:16 (“He was manifested in the flesh . . .”) as a statement of the mystery under consideration, not as the scriptural proof of an independently stated doctrine.

Perhaps one of the most stunning examples of this scriptural catechesis is the sequence on the redeeming love of Jesus in the passion as it manifests and reveals the loving Trinitarian communion between Father and Son (*Catechism*, nos. 606–609).⁹ The passage is woven from texts from John, 1 John, Hebrews, Isaiah,

9 606. The Son of God, who came down “from heaven, not to do [his] own will, but the will of him who sent [him]” (John 6:38), said on coming into the world, “Lo, I have come to do your will, O God.” “And by that will we have been sanctified through the offering of the body of Jesus Christ once for all” (Heb. 10:5–10). From the first moment of his incarnation the Son embraces the Father’s plan of divine salvation in his redemptive mission: “My food is to do the will of him who sent me, and to accomplish his work” (John 4:34). The sacrifice of Jesus “for the sins of the whole world” (1 John 2:2) expresses his loving communion with the Father. “The Father loves me, because I lay down my life,” said the Lord, “[for] I do as the Father has commanded me, so that the world may know that I love the Father” (John 10:17; 14:31).

607. The desire to embrace his Father’s plan of redeeming love inspired Jesus’ whole life (see Luke 12:50; 22:15; Matt. 16:21–23), for his redemptive passion was the very reason for his incarnation. And so he asked, “And what shall I say? ‘Father, save me from this hour?’ No, for this purpose I have come to this hour” (John 12:27). And again, “Shall I not drink the cup which the Father has given me?” (John 18:11). From the cross, just before “It is finished,” he said, “I thirst” (John 19:30; 19:28).

608. After agreeing to baptize him along with the sinners, John the Baptist looked at Jesus and pointed him out as the “Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world” (John 1:29; Luke 3:21; Matt. 3:14–15; John 1:36). By doing so, he reveals that Jesus is at the same time the suffering Servant who silently allows himself to be led to the slaughter and who bears the sin of the multitudes, and also the Paschal Lamb, the symbol of Israel’s redemption at the first Passover (Isa. 53:7, 12; Jer. 11:19; Exod. 12:3–14; John 19:36; 1 Cor. 5:7). Christ’s whole life expresses his mission: “to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many” (Mark 10:45).

609. By embracing in his human heart the Father’s love for men, Jesus “loved them to the end,” for “greater love has no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends” (John 13:1; 15:13). In suffering and death his humanity became the free and perfect instrument of his divine love which desires the salvation of men (Heb. 2:10, 17–18; 4:15; 5:7–9). Indeed, out of love for his Father and for men, whom the Father wants to save, Jesus freely accepted his passion and death: “No one takes [my life] from me, but I lay it down of my own accord” (John 10:18). Hence the sovereign freedom of God’s Son as he went out to his death (see John 18:4–6; Matt. 26:53).

and the synoptic Gospels. Reading this sequence, one cannot help feeling moved by the unexpected beauty of the truth of God's love in Christ as it is proclaimed here in pervasively scriptural language. It serves to engender understanding of the importance of the doctrine, previously expounded, of the two natures in one person, clarifying why it is important to specify our belief in just this way. At the very same time it opens our mind to the principle that doctrine is not an end in itself, or, as the *Catechism* itself expresses it, that "[w]e do not believe in formulas, but in those realities they express, which faith allows us to touch" (*Catechism*, no. 170).

The "Rule of Faith" and the Context of Scriptural Interpretation

One could argue that, even if these scriptural texts are not being used as proof-texts in the narrow sense of the word, they are still being taken out of their context in the particular biblical books from which they come. The question of what is the context for a scriptural passage, however, is complex, as the Second Vatican Council's constitution on divine revelation, *Dei Verbum*, makes clear. On the one hand, in a passage both cited and paraphrased by the *Catechism*, "Rightly to understand what the sacred authors wanted to affirm in their work, due attention must be paid both to the customary and characteristic patterns of perception, speech, and narrative which prevailed in their time, and to the conventions which people then observed in their dealings with one another."¹⁰ That is, one must pay attention to historical and literary context.

On the other hand, *Dei Verbum* continues, "since sacred Scripture must be read and interpreted with its divine authorship in mind, no less attention must be devoted to the content and unity of the whole of Scripture, taking into account the tradition of the entire Church and the analogy of faith, if we are to derive their true meaning from the sacred texts."¹¹ As the inspired Word of God, the context for any passage of Scripture is the whole of Scripture within the living tradition of the whole Church. In the scriptural rhetoric of the *Catechism*, Scripture is contextualized by what the fathers of the Church called the "rule of faith"—the living confession of the Church's faith which summarized and thematized, as it were, Scripture, even as its content found inspired expression in sacred Scripture.

The scriptural tapestries that are woven in the *Catechism* juxtapose texts that, in their very juxtaposition, interpret each other, enrich each other,¹² and call

10 Second Vatican Council, *Dei Verbum*, Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation (November 18, 1965), 12, in *Vatican Council II: The Conciliar and Post Conciliar Documents*, ed. Austin Flannery, O.P. (Northport, NY: Costello, 1986); see also *Catechism*, nos. 109–110.

11 *Dei Verbum*, 12; see *Catechism*, nos. 111–114.

12 On this idea, I feel indebted to the excellent point made by Robert Wilken in oral comments at a conference called "Handing on the Faith," held at Boston College in September 2004. His point, if I can paraphrase it, was that some so-called proof-texting actually represents creative juxtapositions of scriptural texts with other Scripture or with new material, and is meant to invite the imagination to make connections unimagined before. I would add that this is not a license to juxtapose any text with any other text, but that there is perhaps a lost art here,

forth new meaning from each other, as they are contextualized by the rule of faith, the tradition of the Church, which is also a stream of transmission for revelation. The interplay between the threads drawn from Scripture and threads drawn from traditional sources—the creeds, the writings of the fathers, and the teachings of the Church councils—is the interplay between Scripture and tradition which, in the words of *Dei Verbum*, “come together in some fashion to form one thing and move towards the same goal.”¹³

The role of the magisterium as “servant” to the Word of God¹⁴ is present in the *Catechism* as the authorial voice, arranging and organizing the texts from Scripture and tradition. It serves them both by allowing the interplay which precludes the formulas of tradition from closing in on themselves as though they were fully equivalent substitutes for the mysteries they express, while also precluding the “overplus” of meaning in the scriptural passages from appearing as an indeterminacy of meaning. In other words, the key to the usage of Scripture in the *Catechism* is the dogmatic constitution, *Dei Verbum*, as its words are cited in the early sections of the *Catechism* itself.

Historico-Critical Scholarship and the Catechism

But what about the literary and historical context of the texts used in this way? Are they forgotten? Are the fruits of historico-critical scholarship evident in the text of the *Catechism*? Staying with the treatment of Jesus and the incarnation, with regard to the Gospels themselves, the *Catechism* is aware that these are not biographies in the contemporary sense: “Almost nothing is said about his hidden life at Nazareth, and even a great part of his public life is not recounted. What is written in the Gospels was set down there so that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that believing you may have life in his name” (*Catechism*, no. 514). The evangelists wrote in order to share faith in Jesus with others. According to the *Catechism*, “they could see and make others see the traces of his mystery in all his earthly life,” and they portrayed Jesus in such a way that his humanity appears clearly as “‘sacrament,’ that is, the sign and instrument, of his divinity and of the salvation he brings” (*Catechism*, no. 515). Following this evangelical impulse, the *Catechism* claims that the Creed’s “articles of faith concerning his incarnation and passover . . . shed light on the whole of his earthly life” (*Catechism*, no. 512). In this way, the whole method of scriptural catechesis according to the rule of faith is seen to arise in part from an awareness

a patristic practice which can be done well or poorly, in response to the Spirit of the text or against it. I believe the *Catechism* is trying to recover or to recall this lost art. Wilken also made the larger point that it is important to let scriptural words and images retain some primacy in “handing on the faith,” and his way of putting this helped me to read the *Catechism* in a new light.

13 *Dei Verbum*, 9; *Catechism*, no. 80.

14 *Dei Verbum*, 10; *Catechism*, no. 86.

of the literary genre of the Gospels produced by work in contextualizing historical scholarship. Going through the incidents of Christ's life, the *Catechism* attempts, not a biography of Jesus, but to further the proclamation of the mystery of Christ taken up by the Gospels and summarized by the Creed.¹⁵

In the treatment of Christ's life, we notice one of the most salient points of development from the *Roman Catechism*—the *Catechism's* treatment of Jesus as a Jew and its consideration of first-century Judaism in general. Surely one of the most enduring fruits of historico-critical examination of the Bible is a deeper awareness of the "Jewishness" of Jesus and of what it meant to be a Jew in the sectarian environment of the first centuries before and after the birth of Christ. We have already seen the emphatic identification of "Jesus of Nazareth, born a Jew of a daughter of Israel," and, precisely as such, as the "eternal Son of God made man" (*Catechism*, no. 423).

The *Catechism* acknowledges that the word "Messiah" would not have been heard fully univocally at the time of Jesus. This means, among other things, removing the stereotype that all Jews would have thought of the Messiah as an "essentially political" figure. The fact that it would be understood in this way by "some of his contemporaries" explains the reserve with which Jesus accepted this title, as well as his efforts to revise this expectation, or, in the *Catechism's* words, to "unveil the authentic content of his messianic kingship" (*Catechism*, nos. 439–440).

The same is true for the phrase "Son of God." The *Catechism* acknowledges that this title, in and of itself, would not have been heard by contemporaries as a statement of the divinity of Jesus in any way: "When the promised Messiah-King is called 'son of God,' it does not necessarily imply that he was more than human, according to the literal meaning of [certain Old Testament] texts. Those who called Jesus 'son of God,' as the Messiah of Israel, perhaps meant nothing more than this" (*Catechism*, no. 441).¹⁶

The *Catechism* goes on to argue that this is not the case for Simon Peter's confession, that he recognizes "the transcendent character of the Messiah's divine sonship" (*Catechism*, no. 442). But it does not use language taken from the doctrinal formulations of four and five centuries later. It also recognizes that Peter's faith at the time of his confession could not have been what it would be after the resurrection, when "the apostles can confess: *We have beheld his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth*" (*Catechism*, no. 445, citing John

15 "The *Catechism* trusts the biblical word. It holds the Christ of the Gospels to be the real Jesus . . . We rediscover as if for the first time how great the figure of Jesus is, how it transcends all human measures and precisely thus meets us in true humanity. Acquaintance with this figure evokes joy: this is evangelization." Ratzinger, *Gospel, Catechesis, Catechism*, 64, 68–69.

16 Ratzinger notes, in general, that "the *Catechism* quietly incorporates the truly solid results of modern exegesis," and he gives as an example the historically informed use of christological titles, drawing attention especially to *Catechism*, nos. 109–19. Ratzinger, *Gospel, Catechesis, Catechism*, 65.

1:14). Even here, the confession is left in scriptural terms—with all of their richness, resonance and, in some ways, indeterminacy.

The *Catechism* does not say that after the resurrection “the apostles can confess that ‘the same Christ, Lord and only-begotten Son, is to be acknowledged in two natures without confusion, change, division or separation,’” though it will go on later to cite this formula of the Council of Chalcedon as constitutive of the Church’s faith (*Catechism*, no. 467). The point is, the *Catechism* recognizes a legitimate trajectory of doctrinal development, and it does not repeat some of the patristic characterizations of what Peter believed, which frequently put a two-nature, one-person confession on his lips.

Turning to some of the events in Jesus’ life as recorded by the evangelists, the *Catechism* comments on the coming of the Magi: “Their coming means that pagans can discover Jesus and worship him as Son of God and Savior of the world only by turning toward the Jews and receiving from them the messianic promise as contained in the Old Testament.”¹⁷ Jesus does not save as someone who renounced his own religion, Judaism, to found another one, Christianity, or who in any way saves apart from his status as a Jew. Nor does Jesus reject Judaism as a dry, literalistic legalism devoid of spiritual content.

In this regard, the *Catechism*’s treatment of the Pharisees is of particular interest. The *Catechism* points out that Jesus endorses “some of the teachings imparted by this religious elite of God’s people” (*Catechism*, no. 575). More strikingly, it notes that the “principle of integral observance of the Law not only in letter but in spirit was dear to the Pharisees.”¹⁸ Not only are the Pharisees not demonized, but their spiritual view of the Law is presented as the context out of which Jesus’ integral understanding of the Law and its fulfillment could have developed, even if his conflict with them over “certain human traditions” and over his own status as acting with authority appropriate only to God is real enough (*Catechism*, nos. 581–82). And, although the *Catechism* certainly accepts the traditional presentation of the prophets as foreshadowing and predicting the Messiah as Jesus Christ, it also understands that the actual fulfillment of the promises, when it came in Jesus, was “so surprising a fulfillment” that it “allows one to understand” the Sanhedrin’s “misunderstanding of Jesus” as “tragic” (*Catechism*, no. 591).

The religious authorities are not presented as unanimous in their assessment of Jesus (*Catechism*, nos. 595–96); nor are the “Jews” as a people, in Jesus’ time or thereafter, ever assigned responsibility for Jesus’ death. The crowd’s cry, “His blood be upon us and on our children” (Matt. 27:25), is specifically disclaimed as justification for extending responsibility for Jesus’ death to Jews of different

17 *Catechism*, no. 528, cited by Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger in *Many Religions—One Covenant: Israel, the Church, and the World* (San Francisco: Ignatius, 1999), 25.

18 *Catechism*, no. 579, also pointed out by Ratzinger as a passage which resists simplifying Jesus’ conflictual history as one of “an ostensibly prophetic attack on hardened legalism.” *Many Religions—One Covenant*, 31–32.

times and places, and the disclaimer is explained on the basis of a historico-critical observation—this is simply a “formula for ratifying a judicial sentence” (*Catechism*, no. 597). As the *Catechism* observes, all sinners were the authors of Christ’s passion, and even as it quotes the *Roman Catechism* to show that this is a constant teaching, it also shows the distance that doctrinal development, much of it on the basis of historical scholarship, has taken.

The *Roman Catechism* states that our crime is greater than the Jews, who *would not have crucified the Lord of glory* if they had known who he was,¹⁹ but the *Catechism* never uses any language that would suggest that the crucifixion is the “crime of the Jews.”²⁰ And, if the Gospel of John talks about the “Jews” in a negative way, this, the *Catechism* points out, is not usually meant as a reference to the “ordinary People of God” but to the “religious authorities for whom the words and deeds of Jesus constituted a sign of contradiction” (*Catechism*, no. 575). Jesus’ positive relationship to and respect for the Temple at Jerusalem is also highlighted (*Catechism*, nos. 583–86).

In all of these ways, we find that the *Catechism* has reaped and affirmed the enormous benefits of the literary and historical contextualizing scholarship of the last decades of Catholic biblical study, without at the same time reducing the scope of what counts as “scriptural” to a context any less wide than that proclaimed on the basis of the rule of faith. One could style this a critically aware scriptural catechesis, using the results of critical scholarship to help strain out anachronisms and clarify theological views in order to make the proclamation of the Word made flesh ever more persuasive and attractive in our own time.

The Scriptural Rhetoric of the Fathers

What is the model for this scriptural catechesis of the Word of God? The frequency of patristic citations in the text of the *Catechism* should be a clue here. Patristic homilies often employ scriptural texts, woven together in a tissue of citation and allusion, not simply to corroborate points made in non-scriptural language but to carry the points themselves. Augustine’s homilies on the Creed are an excellent example of this technique, and, in particular, his treatment of the incarnation (Sermons 212–214); but the scriptural rhetoric of the fathers is too familiar a practice to belabor here. Further, one of the distinctive characteristics of the Second Vatican Council was its departure from the dialectic, conciliar style favored by Trent and subsequent Church councils, in favor of the rhetorical style of the fathers. John O’Malley has recently commented on this change in style:

That style did not, of course, spring out of nowhere. In Germany

¹⁹ *Roman Catechism*, 1.4.11, cited at *Catechism*, no. 598 (cited incorrectly as 1.5.11).

²⁰ Note also how, by contrast with the *Catechism*, the *Roman Catechism* presents the messianic expectations of the Jews as homogenous and political: “But the kingdom of Christ is not what the Jews expected, an earthly one, but a spiritual and eternal kingdom” (1.6.5).

and Belgium but especially in France, theologians had for several decades been trying to find alternatives to the rigidity of the dominant style, and a number of them turned to the Fathers in what they called a *ressourcement*, a “return to the sources.” As it turns out, the documents of the council often read like a commentary or homily by one of the Fathers—or by Erasmus. A greater contrast with the style of the discourse of the Council of Trent would be difficult to find.²¹

Commenting further on this style, he notes:

The documents published by the council manifest many of the characteristics of epideictic rhetoric, for they want to raise appreciation for the issues at stake and to celebrate them. They abound in metaphor and analogies.²²

We could add to O'Malley's observation that the texts of Vatican II, just as the texts of the fathers, abound in scriptural vocabulary and phraseology, and their metaphors and analogies are often drawn from scriptural images. Consider, for example, paragraph 17 of *Dei Verbum*. This is the paragraph that most closely parallels the sections of the *Catechism* on the incarnation and I have chosen it for the purposes of comparison:

The Word of God, which to *everyone who has faith* contains God's *saving power* (Rom. 1:16), is set forth and marvelously displays its power in the writings of the New Testament. For *when the time had fully come* (Gal. 4:4), *the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, full of grace and truth* (John 1:14). Christ established on earth the kingdom of God, revealed his Father and himself by deeds and words and by his death, resurrection and glorious ascension, as well as by sending the Holy Spirit, completed his work. *Lifted up from the earth he draws all people to himself* (John 12:32), for he alone *has the words of eternal life* (John 6:68). This *mystery was not made known to other generations as it has now been revealed to his holy apostles and prophets by the Holy Spirit*

21 John O'Malley, *Four Cultures of the West* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University, 2004), 175. Though, as I have already implied above, I think this contrast can be overstated when it comes to the *Roman Catechism*, concerned as it is, above all, with forming preachers. In some ways one can think of the *Catechism's* use of Scripture as developing a practice that responds even more fully to the intention of the *Roman Catechism*, because it provides an opportunity for preachers to preach on doctrine *while* preaching on Scripture, and *vice versa*. Because of its use of Scripture, the *Catechism* obviates the false dichotomy of wondering whether to preach on Scripture or to preach catechetically.

22 *Four Cultures of the West*, 176.

(see Eph. 3:4–6), that they might preach the Gospel, foster faith in Jesus Christ the Lord, and bring together the Church. The writings of the New Testament stand as a perpetual and divine witness to these realities.²³

The use of the Bible in this passage is exactly analogous to its use in the *Catechism*—not so much to corroborate points but to fully inform the vocabulary and imagery of the main text itself, thus appealing to the imagination and seeking in this way to persuade readers of the truth of the teachings presented.

From this perspective, far from being a throwback to a pre-conciliar use of the scriptural text, the *Catechism's* use of Scripture cannot be understood apart from the Second Vatican Council's adoption of what we could call the scriptural rhetoric of the fathers. The *Catechism*, as did the Council in general, very clearly states the basic and necessary doctrines of the Catholic faith. But it does so with the help of a language drawn heavily from Scripture—pressing into service the richness and beauty of scriptural language in an attempt to make those doctrines appeal to the imagination and ideals, to the “joys and hopes,” of people in the modern world, believers and seekers alike.²⁴

23 *Dei Verbum*, 17. See also, the first chapter of *Lumen Gentium*, Dogmatic Constitution on the Church (November 21, 1964), 1–8, in *Vatican Council II*. Here we have another particularly compelling example of this technique as it seeks not only to define, but also to impart, an understanding of the Church in scriptural image, analogy, and metaphor.

24 The phrase “joys and hopes” is an allusion to the first line of the Second Vatican Council's Constitution on the Church in the modern world, *Gaudium et Spes* (December 7, 1965), in *Vatican Council II*, 903. Also, see section 3 of Pope John Paul II's Apostolic Constitution *Fidei Depositum*, printed as the dedicatory letter to the *Catechism*, which mentions as among the *Catechism's* intended audience all the Church's pastors and faithful, as well as separated Christians and indeed “every individual . . . who wants to know what the Catholic Church believes.” *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 6. We could indeed think of these individuals as including the “accidentales,” seekers who have not enrolled as catechumens, but who are interested enough to come to a catechetical lecture (or, in this case, pick up a catechetical text). It could also include all people of good will with deeper questionings about human life to whom *Gaudium et Spes* is addressed. *Gaudium et Spes*, 10.