

SHORT CATECHISM

OF

CHURCH HISTORY

BY

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Preface

The *Catechism of Church History* which is herewith presented to the public, will receive a cordial welcome from our Catholic teachers. The educational value of history is universally conceded, and no history has such lessons of wisdom and conduct to teach as that of the Church, which is the continuation of the life and work of Our Divine Lord. It is His permanent, visible presence in the world. It is the continuous verification of His words that the gates of hell shall not prevail. It is all-important, therefore, that the young be made acquainted with the leading facts of Church History, and a *Catechism of Church History* offers the simplest and most effective means of imparting to them this knowledge.

The author of the present volume has had long experience as a pastor and teacher, and it is confidently believed that in publishing this work, he renders a genuine service to our schools.

J. L. SPALDING

Bishop of Peoria

Peoria, 10 March 1899

Introduction

1. What is the central and greatest event in the history of God's dealings with man?

The central and greatest event in the history of God's dealings with man is the Redemption of the world by Jesus Christ, the Son of God.

2. Was this event foretold in ancient times?

The coming of the Redeemer was promised by God to our first parents after their fall, and this promise was renewed to the patriarchs of old.

3. Did the hope of the Redeemer to come remain alive in the ancient world?

The heathen nations, who had apostatized from God and fallen into idolatry, retained only an obscure and distorted tradition of the future Incarnation of God and the Redemption.

Their ancient belief, that their gods had appeared in human form among men, was such a distorted tradition of the mystery of the Incarnation. The Greeks, for instance, preserved in their legend of Prometheus (their name for Adam) an old prophecy that the son of their highest god would become man and be born of a virgin-mother in order to redeem our fallen race. We read that in the

year 64 after Christ Mingdi, emperor of China, sent ambassadors westward to search for the divine teacher, foretold in ancient Chinese books. Having come to India they found there the religion of Buddha, which they embraced, mistaking it for the true. The coming of the wise men from the East proves most clearly that the tradition of a Saviour to come lived among the gentiles. Suetonius and Tacitus, writers of ancient pagan Rome, have left it on record that, at the time of the birth of Christ, the world was full of rumors about a mysterious power, which, according to old traditions, was to rise in Palestine and rule the whole world.

4. Which people was chosen by God in this general apostasy to preserve fully the hope of the coming Redeemer?

The people of Israel was chosen by God to preserve fully the hope of the Redeemer to come, and to prepare and foreshadow the future kingdom of God on earth.

Israel was brought by God to Palestine into the middle of the great historical nations of antiquity. The Babylonian, Assyrian, and Persian kingdoms east and north, Egypt south, the Macedonian and Roman empires west, all made Israel share in their world-moving history. Hence Ezechiel, the prophet, called Jerusalem “gate of the nations.”

Palestine lay on the great thoroughfare, leading from Africa into Asia, while the Red and the Mediterranean seas gave it a waterway to India and the great nations of the west. Thus Israel’s children, bearing the Messianic

hope, eventually spread into all lands, thereby preparing the way for the apostles, who set forth from Jerusalem to evangelize the world.

5. How did God sustain Israel in this mission?

God sustained Israel in this sacred mission by frequent prophecies and by His miraculous protection and guidance of the nation.

6. When did God fulfill His promise concerning the Redeemer to come?

God fulfilled His promise and prophecies about the Redeemer to come, when He sent His only begotten Son, who was conceived by the Holy Ghost and born of the Virgin Mary.

7. How did Christ redeem the world?

Christ redeemed the world by His passion and death on the Cross.

8. What did Christ do in order to insure for all time to the world the fruits of His Redemption?

In order to insure for all time to the world the fruits of His Redemption, He established His Church.

The fruits of the Redemption are two-fold:

1. Divine grace (sanctifying and actual), which is dispensed mainly through the sacraments of the Church.

2. Divine truth, entrusted by Christ and his apostles to the Church and called the deposit of faith. It is contained in the Bible or written word of God, and in Tradition or the unwritten word of God, which is handed down in the uninterrupted teaching and practice of the Church. The witnesses of Tradition are the ordinary teaching of the Church, the decrees of the councils and of the popes, the writings of the Fathers and Doctors, the liturgy, the administration of the sacraments, the feasts of the Church, the acts of martyrs, the documents and relics of the past. From these can be gathered what has been believed in the Church always, everywhere and by all. (St. Vincent. of Lerins)

9. How did Christ establish His Church?

Christ established His Church by choosing and appointing His apostles as bishops over His flock, making one of their number, St. Peter, the supreme head. "Thou art Peter, and upon this rock I will build My Church." (Matt. 16:18)

10. Which powers did Christ give to His Church, in order to bring the fruits of the Redemption to mankind?

Christ gave to His Church a three-fold power:

1. To teach all nations His divine truth. (Matt. 28:19-20)
2. To dispense His grace through the Holy Sacrifice of the altar and the Sacraments. (Luke 22:19; Matt. 28:19; John 20:23)

3. To guide and rule the lambs and sheep of His flock.
(John 21:17)

11. How did Christ enable His Church to fulfill this divine commission?

1. He promised that He would be with His Church even unto the consummation of the world. (Matt. 28:13)
2. He sent the Holy Ghost to abide with His Church forever. (John 14:16)

12. What, therefore, is the character of the Church?

The Church is a divine institution consisting of men, but possessing the abiding presence of Jesus Christ and the continual assistance and guidance of the Holy Ghost.

The divine element of the Church appears in her indestructible existence through all ages, in her unchanging and infallible teaching of divine truth, in her uninterrupted dispensation of God's grace, by which innumerable souls obtain holiness, and in the miracles marking her career through history. The human element of the Church appears in the weaknesses and shortcomings of many of her children, especially in the scandals and sins committed by her unworthy members. Christ Himself tolerated Judas for three years amongst His disciples in order to warn us, that scandals will occur in the history of His Church.

In spite of sin and scandal and in spite of the law of decay overruling all things human, the Church continues forever in her constitution and in her sacred ministry

of grace and truth; this is another proof of the divine element within her.

13. By what titles has the Church been called in Holy Scripture?

1. In the old testament the prophet calls her the kingdom of the Messias, which is to be without end. (Isa. 9:7)
2. Jesus Christ calls her His Church, against which the gates of hell shall not prevail (Matt. 16:18); the one fold under one shepherd (John 10:16); the light of the world, the city seated on a mountain that cannot be hid (Matt. 5:14); the kingdom of heaven (Matt. 16:19).
3. St. Paul calls her the ground and pillar of truth (1. Tim. 3:15); the flock of Christ, over which the Holy Ghost hath placed the bishops to rule (Acts 20:28). In his letter to the Ephesians (Eph. 5) he describes her as the immaculate spouse of Christ, and in 1. Cor. 12 as “the visible body of Christ, of which the faithful are the members.”

14. What was the condition of the world, when the Church commenced her mission?

All nations, except the Jews, adored false gods, idols and beasts, They worshipped them by committing foul crimes and offering even human sacrifices. Immorality prevailed and the rights of God and man were spurned.

Even ancient Greece and Rome, the ruling and most cultured of pagan nations, had gods whom they worshipped

by impurity (Venus), drunkenness (Bacchus) and bloody revenge (Mars). Family life was totally demoralized by divorce and the degradation of woman. War was merciless according to the rule: "Woe to the vanquished." Slavery held over two thirds of the population of the ancient world in such misery, that the question was seriously asked: "Is the slave a human being?" In the public games of the circus thousands of gladiators and captives were forced to kill one another for the amusement of the people.

15. What was the attitude of the Jews?

They retained the belief in the one true God, but rejected and crucified the Son of God, the Messiah, who had been promised to them by God and announced by their prophets.

Note — The history of the Church is the record of her career through time and of the fulfillment of her divine mission on earth. According to His promise Christ is with her, teaches, gives grace and rules through her; and she shares with Him the hatred of hell and the opposition of the world, but she is also destined to share His eternal glory in heaven.

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