

Catechism

From my earliest school years, I have been a whiz at catechism answers. Hardly would the question be finished, when I was spouting out the answer. In one form or another, I studied catechism from the time I could read until I left the Catholic religious order of the Christian Brothers 25 years later.

Question and answer, question and answer. It wasn't much different from modern-day Jesus freaks quoting scripture, chapter and verse, relating to a list of canned topics. In either case, there is no need for discussion; just provide the catechism answer or the scripture quote.

Every week I peruse the *Catholic Herald*, the local Catholic diocesan newspaper. Part of my interest stems from my religious cultural upbringing and part is the need to keep current with contemporary Catholic thinking, especially as it affects the work of Loaves & Fishes, which serves the homeless and hungry of Sacramento. We are not an official Catholic organization, but our support is deeply rooted in the local parish churches.

The Catholic bishop is a throwback to my childhood era, the 1940's. I am a year or two older, but we both came from small towns, were raised with strict religious observance, had devout mothers, attended Catholic schools, and studied catechism. I stopped studying catechism shortly after I turned 30, but I'm confident he is still a student because his newspaper reflects the church teachings of the 1940's.

There is an article about the need to return to the true Eucharistic observance. We should return, he says, to practice the devotions that worship and pay homage to the Holy Presence in the Eucharist. A Presence made possible because of the church dogma known as transubstantiation, that is, the belief that bread and wine are turned – literally and miraculously – into the body and blood of Christ himself.

There is an article reminding readers about church teaching that prohibits divorced (and remarried) Catholics from receiving the Holy Eucharist because they are living in the state of sin. Another article reaffirms the Church's prohibition against women becoming, or even aspiring to become, priests.

Women have a “vital and important” role in the church, he writes, but that does not include admission to the priesthood.

How weary I become, turning the pages of this newspaper, scanning the lead paragraphs. The religious terminology – novena, rosary, devotion, benediction, and confession – jumps out at me. Vatican warnings and prohibitions directed at Catholics are laced throughout the articles. These words, these admonitions, take me back to my childhood, but it is too late, I cannot go back. I now view most of these church doctrines as irrelevant and nonessential to living, loving, coping, and dying. Catechism questions and answers, developed by church authority, are simply a test of Catholic glibness.

I don't believe I know better, or even know at all, but I have experienced moral dilemma. I have witnessed human suffering caused by all manner of addictions. I have seen human abuse at every level. I have been confronted by anger, despair, loneliness, and grinding poverty. I do not have the answers. I find it nearly impossible to frame the questions about the reasons for and the causes of so much human suffering in this city.

I cannot bear to turn these pages anymore. I will try again next week.