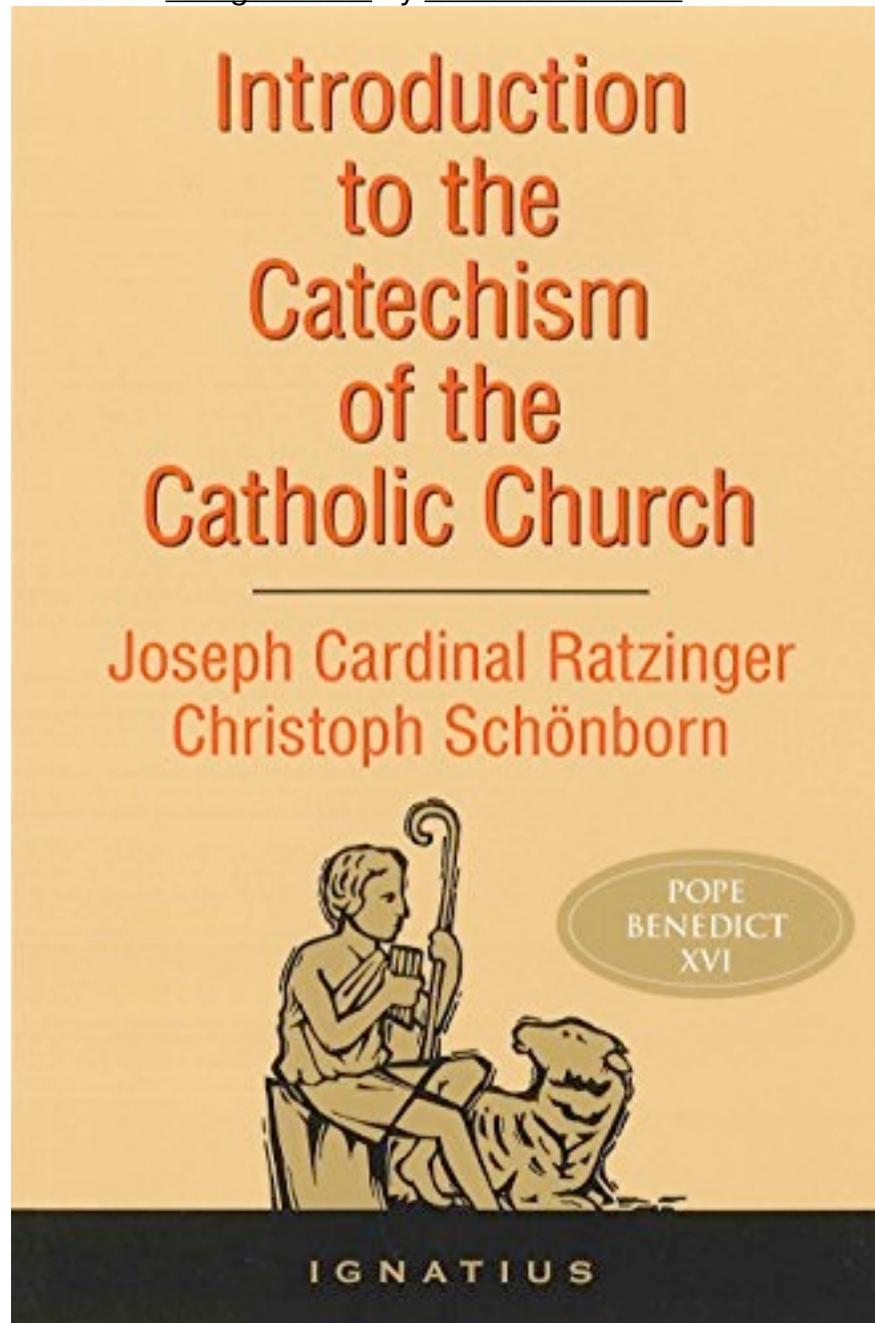


**QUAERITUR: If something is in the Catechism,
do I have to give in, believe it even though it is
different from what the Catechism taught
before?**

Posted on 2 August 2018 by Fr. John Zuhlsdorf



I am getting questions from lots of people about Pope Francis' move to change the Church's doctrine concerning capital punishment.

QUAERITUR:

If this is in the Catechism, do I have to give in and believe it even though this is different from what the Catechism taught before?

QUAERITUR:

What is required of Catholics regarding the change to the teachings on capital punishment? I don't agree with the change, and what's worse, I don't believe what the Holy Father has written is Church teaching.

These changes disturb my peace and cause me to question if I can receive communion.

At the very least Francis seems to have cut the legs out from under the authority of the *Catechism*, if not the Catholic Faith, by introducing something into that *Catechism* which seems to contradict the Church's perennial teaching.

What is the authority of the *Catechism*?

I often tell people that, when they hear something confusing, go to the CCC. That is a bit more difficult now, but I stand on it. Why?

Teachings found in the *Catechism* are not true, reliable and sure *because they are in the Catechism*.

Teachings are true because they're true.

Teachings have authority in themselves, because they are rooted in natural law, revelation, the Church's entire body of teaching and the Rule of Faith, going back to Apostolic Times.

The *Catechism* is a sure reference and authoritative because it has sure teachings in it.

Teachings don't become sure because they are included.

In *Introduction to the Catechism of the Catholic Church* (US [HERE](#) – UK [HERE](#)) Joseph Ratzinger wrote:

The individual doctrines which the Catechism presents receive no other weight than that which they already possess. The weight of the Catechism itself lies in the whole. Since it transmits what the Church teaches, whoever rejects it as a whole separates himself beyond question from the faith and teaching of the Church.

In the same section, Ratzinger said that the CCC is not a “**super-dogma**”, which can repress theologians in their free explorations.

Let's stress: “as a whole”.

It is possible that some point in the *Catechism* will have greater authority on the mind and conscience of a Catholic than another. For example, what the *Catechism* contains concerning the Holy Trinity is far

more binding on the minds and hearts of Catholics than what it says about religious liberty or the death penalty or other matters of *contingent moral decision making*.

Even within matters that concern moral decision making, some issues have more weight than others. For example, the right to life of the innocent is found within the Church's teaching on abortion and euthanasia, which is unquestionable. However, capital punishment concerns NOT the taking of the life of an innocent person, but rather of a guilty person who has in some way demonstrated a lack of respect for the right to life of others. This point about innocence or guilt has always been at the heart of debates about the legitimacy of capital punishment.

So, if you say "I reject the content of the CCC" you reject the Catholic Faith in its entirety: it is comprehensive. If you say that you reject a doctrine in the CCC which is at the very core of the Catholic Faith, such as the Trinity or the Incarnation or the Resurrection, you reject the Catholic Faith: you cannot believe as a Catholic if you reject the Trinity. If you reject some highly controverted teaching that involves moral contingencies, such as the just war teaching of the Church or such as capital punishment, you do not reject the whole of the Catholic Faith, for the Faith doesn't depend on those murky issues.

Let's pretend for a moment – and it doesn't take much – that baseball's designated hitter rule is a matter for the Church's Magisterium. If I, Pope Clement XIV The Second, were to drop into the Catechism a paragraph stating that the designated hitter is wrong and inadmissible, that opinion's presence in the Catechism wouldn't make that statement true and necessary for belief.

Things in the *Catechism* don't *become true* when they are put into the book. They are put into the book because they are true. The fact is, you can argue about the designated hitter forever.

So what happens if something blatantly false is put into the *Catechism*, such as, "abortion is not intrinsically evil". That would be a serious violation of the purpose of the *Catechism* and it would reveal the insertor as a heretic. But what about the insertion of something ambiguous? For example, stick into the CCC that, because of the human dignity of the person, the capital punishment is "inadmissible". I suppose we can argue about what "inadmissible" means. It doesn't manifestly state that capital punishment is intrinsically evil, as abortion and euthanasia is intrinsically evil.

The Church in CCC 2271 teaches what she has always taught from the earliest times: abortion is a grave moral evil. That teaching is in the CCC because the Church has *always* taught that.

The Church in the CCC 2277 teaches that direct euthanasia is, in English, “morally unacceptable”. Not too different from “inadmissible”, right? But it goes on to call it “murder gravely contrary to the dignity of the human person... a murderous act”.

What Pope Francis wrote about capital punishment doesn’t call it intrinsically evil or a murderous act.

But he does say that it is “inadmissible”... “not allowable”.

Is that a hedge? It is hard to take it as a hedge.

There is going to be a lot of ink spilled about this.

Finally, it seems to me that Pope Francis has *emphasized* the Church’s outward, pastoral policy which she desires to argue before the state: don’t put people to death.

Having thought about it, I am not entirely convinced that Pope Francis didn’t attempt to change the Church’s teaching about capital punishment. At the very least, he made it far murkier than before.

It seems to me that someone could place the new paragraph side by side with the rest of the body of the Church’s teachings on capital punishment and then make a well-informed choice to stick with the traditional teaching, while embracing the pastoral policy of diminishing the application of the death penalty.

The admissibility of the death penalty WAS, in fact, in the *Catechism*. And it was there for a reason: it is the traditional teaching of the Church and, therefore, TRUE.

Meanwhile, we seem to be pushing outrage about McCarrick out of the news cycle.

Some sharing options...

Wherein Fr. Z asks a question about “reception” of a controversial doctrine

Posted on 2 August 2018 by Fr. John Zuhlsdorf

Libs are always saying that they don’t have to accept a teaching of the Church when they don’t like it. For example, when it comes to *Ordinatio sacerdotalis* or *Humanae vitae*, they claim that the teachings haven’t be “received”. Hence, they are not binding.

The “faithful” haven’t accepted that women can’t be ordained. Therefore, I don’t have to believe what John Paul wrote. The “faithful”

haven't "received" what Paul wrote about contraception. As a result, I am not bound by it.

However, what will they respond when Catholics don't "receive" this change to the *CCC* about capital punishment?

The argument about "reception" cuts both ways. Will they come to regret it?

Noooooooo.... they'll ignore the inconsistency and turn to raw power, threats, and obfuscation to push what they want.