

Rediscovering and spreading the Mercy of God: Adult Studies of the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*

“Since the baptisms of our three children, my husband and I have been conscious of our responsibility to pass on the gift of faith that was entrusted to us by our parents, and by theirs’ in turn. We know that this is a challenge in Ireland today, and we want to be able to address our children’s questions with consideration and conviction. This was what endeared me initially to the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*. As a full-time mother in the home, I welcomed the opportunity to make new friends-in-faith, and to study in a structured and organised way”.

Gillian Doherty began studying the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (CCC) at the group at the Franciscan Friary in Cork in 2011. “The Catechism introduced me to the wealth and beauty of Catholic tradition, and has, most importantly, taught me to strive to live a Christ-centred life” she says. Through the CCC studies, she and her husband also made new friends with other young families. Gillian is convinced that the completion of the CCC study “was not an ending but only a beginning, the warm-up rather than the race”. Since 2015 she has been working through YOUCAT, the Catechism for young people, with a good group of young people on campus in UCC.

Last year 2015, saw the 50th anniversary of the closing of the Second Vatican Council. Next year 2017, will mark the 25th anniversary of the promulgation by St John Paul II of the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* “prepared following the Second Vatican Ecumenical Council”¹. Pope Francis opened the current Extraordinary Jubilee Year of Mercy on the 50th anniversary of the closing of the Council. The emphasis of the current Holy Father on the mercy of God to be welcomed and spread by all, is in total continuity with the council’s desire to proclaim the perennial truths of the Faith in a positive and accessible way.²

The Adult Studies of the CCC in different parts of the country are leading to a renewed appreciation of the immense mercy of God made flesh in Christ, as well as helping people to become articulate “instruments of mercy” in spreading the Gospel in daily life. These study-groups meet weekly in their local parishes or dioceses and follow a comprehensive, user-friendly course designed by the Maryvale Institute in Birmingham. As well as getting a deeper knowledge of the Catholic Faith, participants have found that the studies help to grow in the spiritual life, to make new friendships, and have a greater confidence in sharing the Good News with others³, starting with family and friends. Some students who have completed the course go on to start new groups, set up informal catechesis in their families or neighbourhoods or help with formation in the Faith within the parish or in schools.

¹ St John Paul II, Apostolic Constitution *Fidei Depositum*, on the publication of the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, prepared following the Second Vatican Ecumenical Council, 11 October 1992.

² Cf. Francis, Bull of Indiction of the Extraordinary Jubilee of Mercy *Misericordiae Vultus*, 11 April 2015, 4.

³ Cf. Irish Episcopal Conference, National Directory for Catechesis *Share the Good News*, Veritas, Dublin 2010, especially Chapter 4: “Adult Faith Formation”.

Each CCC study group has a facilitator whose function is to convene and moderate the session. Maeve Davidson facilitates the group at Foxrock Parish in Dublin, where the CCC studies were first launched in the Year of Faith (2012). “People from all walks of life enrolled: young parents, grandparents, young single people, two former school principals, four members of the choir, one person who had been recently confirmed as an adult, and one who had recently come back to his faith. Some had done some study previously and others had not. They all had one thing in common: they wanted to know their faith, to understand it and to be able to pass it on... There was a joy in discovering a new depth in faith and a real, new sense of mission and zeal to witness to this extraordinary gift to others, especially those closest to us – our family and friends”. Maeve adds that when this first group finished the three-year course, a new group of twenty participants started “and they are just as dynamic and enthusiastic as the first group”.

Each study group also has a priest spiritual director who may lead the prayers and intervene in the discussion to clarify or develop points where necessary. This input is greatly appreciated by the students, but the CCC studies are also very enriching for the priest. Fr Patrick McCarthy, curate in Mallow, Co Cork, says that being spiritual director of a CCC study group has been very beneficial in many ways: “I see doing the studies each week as part of my faith formation and spiritual reading... Teaching is a fundamental part of the ministry of the ordained, and ... I am delighted to be helping to provide a space for people to be taught and formed in the teachings of Christ”.

CCC studies build unity between those who take part and foster an organic collaboration between laity and priests which respects and enhances the specific vocation of both.

Every member of a study group has his or her own story. When Johnny Watters from Sligo saw an advertisement for the CCC study he was keen but he had some doubts: “I thought I would like to attend, though I feared I might not know enough about our Faith. I thought the course might be for people who were seriously committed to studying the Faith and that I might not immediately ‘fit in’. I need not have worried. I learned how to navigate the CCC and this also helped me to approach the Bible... As a clinical psychologist I could see the course was well thought out, and as a parent I valued the encouragement and support the participants shared in helping each of us to strive to live out the values of the Gospel”.

Studying the CCC leads to love for Christ since the presentation of the Faith in this text is profoundly Christological. Love for Christ means simultaneously love for his family, the Church. The CCC studies are always carried out with the blessing of the local bishop, the chief catechist of the diocese. Recent months have seen the establishment of several groups in the Diocese of Waterford and Lismore. The words of Bishop Alphonsus Cullinan can serve to sum up the beauty of this apostolate:

"As a bishop I am delighted to be associated with this programme of the study of the universal Catechism of the Catholic Church. Quite frankly, I have been struck by the number and enthusiasm of 'ordinary' lay faithful who have signed up for this three-year course of study. This is no small commitment. One participant is a mother who needs to get two buses each Tuesday evening to attend her course. When asked why, she said that she wanted to be able to explain her faith to her teenage children who are asking those deep questions on life and faith which trouble every questioning mind. Her commitment is a spur to me and to all to

deepen our knowledge and love of the revealed truths of our faith, so that we can live in holiness and be ministers of mercy to all whom God puts in our paths each day."

For further information, please see: www.catechism.ie

Fr Donncha Ó hAodha