

Introduction to “Why Catholic?”

Faith, Revelation, the mystery of the Church

What are these more or less elaborate rituals that Catholics celebrate called Sacraments?
What are these liturgical actions that are typically Catholic,
which tend to disappear the further one moves away from Catholicism
on the spectrum of Christian churches?

In observing them, what we see are indeed rituals.

In observing them, what we see are *repeated* rituals, rituals that are,
aside from a few changes and adjustments, seemingly the same thing each time.

Consequently,

- If the celebrant is boring or seemingly disengaged,
- If the assembly is unresponsive and seemingly elsewhere (e.g. at brunch),
- If we are not attuned to the One at the heart of the ritual,
it can easily be experienced as only a ritual.... been there, done that ...*boring*

Although they always imply a ritual – because they are by design *communal*
(which is not to say that they are not eminently personal...)

they are not simply rituals.

We will return to this.

We first need to articulate a few things which will provide us with perspective
and appropriate context, so to speak, in order better to explore the Sacraments:

Faith, Revelation, the mystery of the Church

1) We need to understand that we are considering something *in faith*. That which is
properly Christian, i.e. *Jesus* and what He does in us who are the Church and what He

invents for us who are the Church, is not *obvious* like the sunset or your car or dinner. They are things in which we *believe*.

This is important for us to situate. We will be proceeding these six weeks

- based on what we, as Catholics, believe to be *revealed*
- in reference to what, as Catholics, we *believe* and thus *in faith*.

We, therefore, need to activate our faith along the way, as we proceed:

“Lord I believe; help my unbelief”.

Such is the perfect activation of one’s faith: exercising it with respect to

- the One who is the object of it
- the One whom it enables us to touch.

Although psychologically at times it may seem to be,

this is not the same thing as saying to oneself,

“Just shut up and but into it. Don’t make waves.”

We can have moments when, at church, we wonder, “What am I doing here?”

Faith is not automatic, like hunger and eating.

In fact, our faith is largely dormant unless we *choose* to believe, and thus activate faith

God designed it this way so as to respect our freedom,

for freedom is paramount in love, being the necessary condition for love

Strictly speaking, faith transcends our psyche,

and so we can be *feeling* all sorts of things seemingly contrary to faith.

By faith we are connected to Christ, and yet we can be

- confused about which candidate should get our vote
- struggling with yet another annoying case of the blues
- upset over the dirty dishes or because broke the remote.

As we will see, faith is at a deeper level – although it is meant to influence all the rest.

The latter perspective of “buying into it” can also stem from the misunderstanding that faith is simply a belief system.

We easily reduce faith to a belief system.

Indeed, at Mass even we “profess our faith” and say the Creed together, which easily leads us to conclude that faith is simply a belief system.

“I believe in God, the Father almighty, etc, etc. etc.”

And there you have it: the tenets of the faith, articles of faith.

You go down the street 500 yards to the new Wisconsin Synod Lutheran church and they have a creed, they have their set of beliefs – which are somewhat different.

You go down the road 3-4 miles in the *other* direction to the Mosque and they have a creed, they have *their* belief system – which differs much more.

You go to the Buddhist Temple in White Oak and they have a creed, they have their belief system – which differs *even more*.

And there you have it: a wide array of belief systems with just four (well, three) religions: Catholic Christian, Lutheran Christian, Moslem, Buddhist.

So, our faith is just one of many, right? *Wrong*, or so we dare claim!

Our belief system *is* one of many.

Our *faith*, however, being more than a belief system, is *not* one of many.

Christians believe faith to be something *unique*.

Now, this may sound arrogant.

And this may sound like

- splitting hairs
- the dog chasing after its tail.

We *believe* it to be unique. We make use of *faith* to make claims about *faith*.

Hmm: a unique something that can only be asserted from within itself.

Now that is sound thinking! Exteriorly then, faith seems purely subjective.

And so to affirm the uniqueness of faith by means of faith is understandably problematic for those who do not have faith. Indeed!

- Which means: one can never blame someone who does not have faith for finding our claims almost arrogant (“What we believe is revealed; what you believe,

although noble, is the fruit of human development – with perhaps a dose of merciful divine intervention, granted, for God responds to all sincere seekers of truth, but nonetheless...”).

- Which means: one can never blame someone who does not have faith for finding what we believe to be weird; e.g. three persons/one God. Non-Christians have a right to say: *weird!*

Exteriorly speaking, faith seems to be an *opinion*.

But we can proceed in no other way. We will proceed in faith, i.e. choosing to believe, asking the Holy Spirit to activate our faith, and illumine us with His gifts, and making use of our minds to probe as soundly as possible.

Placing our minds, ennobled by faith, at the service of what we believe to be revealed, *Revelation*, is what we call *theology*.

During this session, all of us are theologians!

Given its object, and given that it leans on faith, theology does not/cannot seek to prove anything, for example, theology does not/cannot seek to prove the Trinity.

Theology tries to show that what Christians believe to be revealed is not impossible, is not contrary to human intelligence, but instead transcends human intelligence.

Again, one still needs faith to do theology, *Christian* theology.

Christian theology therefore activates our faith! We will be doing Christian theology.

Our particular exploration, consequently, will not *prove* what is articulated about the Sacraments.

Our exploration is meant to be a placing of our minds, gifted with faith, *in* faith, at the service of what we believe to be revealed about the Sacraments.

Always keep this in mind. I cannot prove what I will be sharing with you.

I will first be appealing to your minds gifted with faith, and also capable of thinking soundly, capable of being used to try to dissect Revelation, making use of notions based on human experience in order to do so.

For example, we receive “God is love” as Revelation, and we make use of the notion of love (which we draw from human experience) to dissect it, and come to an understanding of what God is revealing about Himself.

It can, of course, get a little tenuous at times.

Thus, in our theological labor, which is centered on Scripture, we appeal to whole of Scripture *and* to what has surfaced in the hearts of believers, where Revelation is ultimately deposited. The latter we call Tradition.

As we labor theologically, we delve into and receive and *are* Tradition.

Develop Tradition

Theology is a long, loving process. Theology is ongoing.

As Marianne Faustich once said, “Theology is like walking into a room where a conversation has been going on for 2000 years.”

We are ever deepening our reception and our grasp of Revelation.

But this does not mean, however, that we have to await the end of the process to receive and to grasp.

As we labor to understand, we are in contact with the One who reveals Himself.

The purpose of our labor is greater intimacy, not clear concepts – which does not mean that we will not come to some greater clarity!.

Clarity, however, is for the sake of greater, truer intimacy.

And so, we will proceed in faith, as intelligently as possible.

Instead of the “love boat”, we are all together on the *faith boat!*

Let me, therefore, summarily “explain” what faith is, *beyond belief system.*

As mentioned, faith is a *gift.*

We believe that the Word became flesh, i.e. the Second Person of the Trinity became human, and, in so doing, draws humanity, i.e. every human being, into greater intimacy with God.

In order to respect the autonomy of human beings, God created grace,

a divine something deposited in our souls
whereby human beings participate in the very life of God.
From grace, three “flowers” blossom,
which enable us actively to participate in this relationship: faith, hope, and love.
Without these “theological virtues” there would be little two-way relationship
with the Triune God.

Faith is a gift gratuitously bestowed by God. It takes root in our minds.
Now, because the act of faith requires a choice, faith is moved and sustained by love;
but, strictly speaking, faith is rooted in our minds,
and the act of faith is an act of the mind.

By and in faith we can know God. God bestows faith because

- He wants to be known
- He wants us to engage Him with our whole person
- He wants our minds to participate in His light

The knowledge of faith is, however, *peculiar*.

It is not ever-day knowledge, what we call “experiential” knowledge.

It is not always easy to believe, precisely because we believe in that which is not obvious.

If it were obvious, it would not be object of faith.

You do not need to believe in the pizza you ate for dinner.

You directly embrace it with your mind, and then your belly

– and make it disappear: poor pizza!

It was so obvious to you that it now no longer exists!

As suggested, and as we come to realize in our personal faith experience,

faith knowledge lacks the obviousness so characteristic of common human knowledge.

The Pizza Hut pizza was obvious. You saw and touched and tasted it.

You may even now experience a reminder of it: indigestion!
(Oh, those Italian bistros will do it to you almost every time...).

Now, we believe that we are indwelt by the Trinity. It is *not* obvious.
There are no necessary signs. And you will never get Trinitarian indigestion.

Obviousness leads to *certitude*.

I am *certain* that I ate pizza because it was *obviously* pizza;
moreover my trust in Pizza Hut is boundless.

In the experience of faith, in faith knowledge, there is certitude,
but it does not come from any sort of obviousness. It comes from the faith itself.

Otherwise put, faith enables our minds to touch the mystery of God Himself,
without grasping what He is, without “getting it”.

In the realm of human experience, our minds both touch that which we experience
(e.g. the pizza) *and* grasp what it is.

Faith does not do the latter. Faith can be likened to the sense of touch – *in the dark*.

Only when we see God face-to-face and are perfectly illumined by Him
will we grasp what He is.

That is what we traditionally call the “Beatific Vision”, to which faith is ordered.

In the meantime, God is unsearchable,
and yet we can and do approach Him with our minds.

We probe what we believe He reveals of Himself.

God makes use of natural and human realities – to which Scripture and Tradition refers –
that we are to make use of, by intelligent comparison (analogy),
to grasp a little something

- little in comparison with the Beatific Vision
- big, nonetheless, for the human mind.

The words of Scripture refer to realities (love, light, water, body...)
which serve as a springboard, or rope, for the mind.

Although our minds touch God, our grasp of *who/what* God is, is analogical, not direct.

This cooperation with Revelation wherein the human mind intervenes

– more or less well! – is, once again, *theology*. God surely guides such work.

But He does not control our thinking, and so our theology can be more or less deep,
more or less respectful of Revelation.

And it is *here* that Christians can part ways.

All Christians touch, in faith, the same Christ.

In the deepest sense, we are, with all of our Protestant sisters and brothers,
on the same page: the Jesus page!

But we differ *theologically*, i.e. in how we appropriate Revelation.

2) One of the ways in which we differ theologically
is in our understanding of *Revelation* itself.

It is not my intention to pick on them,

but the contrast with evangelical Christians highlights this quite well.

For me, evangelical Christians crystallize the Protestant perspective.

Does everyone know what I mean by “evangelical Christians”?

A very simple principal guides (most of) Protestantism: *Sola Scriptura*, Scripture only.

It sounds wonderfully simple: Jesus, my Bible and me.

This formula/arrangement is what you find in the evangelical churches of today.

And many ex-Catholics who are now members of such churches – the majority of which I would venture to say before leaving never asked and thus answered the question “Why Catholic?”, think they are breathing a deep sigh of relief in their newfound spiritual family and its “simplicity”.

They believe this because they accept the preaching of these churches.

I can say this because I have been there and done that!

Testimony:

Conversion experience

1 ½ years in evangelical setting

I bought the whole package...

“All these Catholic rituals are human additions.

Jesus never intended for there to be all of this.

We have succeeded in stripping away all these layers

to uncover the true Christian experience/church.”

... Whoever would have guessed that true Christianity was “made in USA”?

I presumed that the vibrancy of these churches testified to the soundness of their teaching.

I no longer do.

I think that their vibrancy testifies to the mercy of God who works through everything.

There is a certain appeal to this seemingly simplified version of the Christian experience.

I deliberately say “seemingly”.

It is interesting to observe how many of the things that are eliminated creep back in through the back door:

- the need for some teaching authority
- the appeal to saintly thinkers on order to understand Scripture (i.e. Tradition)
- the “sacramentalization” of Scripture

I could go on and on.

Suffice it to say that *Sola Scriptura* is intellectually impossible.

Sola Scriptura presupposes that

- Christ *wrote* Scripture
- that Scripture is self-explanatory
- there is no interpretation involved in reading Scripture

False on all three counts.

Jesus wrote nothing.

Scripture does not “contain” Revelation. It is the privileged *vehicle* for Revelation.

We cannot *but* interpret Scripture.

And so there is a need for an inspired reference outside Scripture for interpretation.

That reference is the hearts of believers illuminated by faith,
the hearts which are the place where Jesus deposits Revelation (not in a book),
in conjunction with those entrusted with the care of leading the flock..

Revelation was thus first deposited in the Church.

Jesus established a living body, the Church, not a book.

Tradition thus precedes and envelops Scripture.

And we receive Revelation today through Scripture, and in this *are* Tradition.

This is important to understand.

As we do theology, we refer to Tradition necessarily,

to see how the community of believers has deepened its reception and understanding.

We are not limited to the Bible, and to the first century and a half.

The Sacraments also emerged from the heart of the Christian Community.

And in Scripture which emerged from the heart of the Christian Community,

the Sacraments are recorded as established by Jesus or as promised by Jesus.

The latter are obviously more implicitly present in Scripture

– which is not a problem for us!

If ever we are haunted with it,

we need to let go of thinking that only *explicitly* mentioned things are valid.

Tradition means *gradual emergence*.

The Church *lived* before recording anything.

And what Jesus said was recorded (not necessarily literally...), and we now read it.

And what Jesus celebrated the community continues to celebrate.

Scripture is now the place of prayerful listening and probing.

The celebrations are places of personal encounter in the midst of the community.

These latter we call *Sacraments*.

3) The Sacraments oblige us and help us, in a particular way,

to grasp the mystery of the Church as Body and as Bride of Christ.

Jesus deposited Revelation in human hearts.

Such deposit

- transformed them
- bound them to others

Jesus formed a Mystical Body and Mystical Bride
and gave it/her visible guardians

The visible structure of the Church is at the service of the members.

The Church, in its deeper reality, in its everlasting reality, is

- the Body of Christ and
- the Bride of Christ

The Church is all those who, by grace, are bound to Christ.

This, of course, is particularly those who have been baptized,

But it includes all those whom Christ, out of mercy, joins to Himself otherwise, and may not even know it.

The two images of Body and Bride suggest *relativity* to Christ.

Next week we will consider a few things regarding the Church,
and then look at the Sacraments in general.

2 discussion questions for share groups:

1. How do we move beyond faith as a belief system?
2. What have been my experiences of Revelation, of God who reveals Himself?