

## Why Catholic?

### Session #1 year 2 (2009)

The question is very pertinent.

Why the Catholic experience?

It is a pertinent question because only purposeful activity has real meaning.

Otherwise, it is largely filler.

We all know that “why?” is a key question.

And we all know that church filler, i.e. going through the motions,  
rote obligation, is deadly.

Fortunately, as we will see, when it comes to the church

—even though we do miss much

and we can easily disengage if we know not why we are here

—God’s work precedes and transcends our grasp of His work,

and thus the church experience is never only filler.

In other words, when we are “out to lunch” God still works.

Of course, so much more happens when we become aware

and, in turn, seek intimacy with Him...

I would like for our time together to be about awareness and intimacy.

The question “Why Catholic?” is also pertinent

because we live in a religiously pluralistic society.

In fact, we live in a pluralistic Christendom.

There are many Christian choices on the market,

and some of the products are quite different—to say the least!

All you need do is survey this area.

It is, in fact, *very* striking.

We are talking about the same Jesus,  
but how he is approached and understood and communicated  
can vary quite dramatically.

Who is right?

Which church approaches Him the most respectfully?

Which church understands Him the most deeply?

Which church communicates Him the most richly?

### **Why Catholic?**

Let me begin by saying that I am not here to *convince* anyone of anything.

We are not going to engage in what we call “apologetics”, that is,

- defensive coercion
- attempting to highlight why we may be better than the Methodists,  
or the Lutherans, or mega church this or mega church that.

Firstly, in some ways, we are not better than the Methodists,

or the Lutherans, or the nearest mega church.

There are a few parishioners who periodically go to the nearest mega church.

In a sense, I can understand.

And yet, perhaps they have not understood something.

With all due respect, I say this,

and these reflections will hopefully articulate what I mean.

As we will see, it is, in fact, not really a question of being better.

Secondly, if something is real, it needs no defense.

For example, if I were to place on the table freshly picked, local organic strawberries, I would need not defend them.

I would just point at them.

Something real stands on its own, on its own merit, and *attracts*.

Together we will explore the reality or “realness” of the Church.

Of course, the reality or “realness” of the Church

is not as obvious as strawberries.

It is seen with eyes of faith.

This brings me to my next point:

I am not here either to *prove* anything to you.

I cannot prove anything of what we will explore.

We are precisely to explore matters of *faith*.

Matters of faith can not be proven.

Matters of faith are, well, touched in faith.

They are not visible *per se* to the naked eye.

Thus they can not be proven—which means that doubt is never far away (do not be surprised by moments of doubt).

And so, I will be appealing to the gift of faith that each of you has.

It will be your responsibility to actuate the gift, to exercise the gift.

Throughout our time together,

ask the Holy Spirit to help you “see” with eyes of faith.

I will also be appealing to your *minds*.

I will be appealing to your minds because what we believe to be revealed  
is not self-explanatory.

This does not mean, of course, that we grasp nothing,  
And have just to “buy into it”.

Otherwise, we would not be here.

Matters of faith are properly speaking mystery, mysterious,  
but they do have a certain “inner logic”, so to speak.

In other words, in probing matters of faith, we can uncover a certain sense,  
a “fittingness”—as we sometimes call it.

If I may detour somewhat:

I had dinner recently with a friend, raised Catholic, at this point not Catholic,  
cynical regarding things Catholic, who, intellectually,  
finds speaking of a transcendent Supreme Being difficult.

So how does one engage in conversation  
with someone like this on matters of faith?

- Firstly, by articulating that they are matters of faith  
and thus cannot be proven. Go prove the Trinity to someone!
- Secondly, by comparing the vision or understanding  
of various aspects of *human life* in relation to or in the light of  
such differing religious views.

The temptation is often—as is this person’s perspective—just to say  
“We have different views and that is that.

You have yours and I have mine.”

We can and ought to meet on the turf of human life and compare.

This second aspect is important.

He and I chose (or maybe, I chose for us!)

to compare views on an aspect of human life: the question of suffering.

One cannot make another person without faith see what is believed in faith.

But one can take the inner logic of a faith perspective,

view an aspect of human life in the light of it,

and discern how respectful

—in comparison with another religious perspective—

it is of human personhood.

So, in this case, that of this friend and myself,

what do each of our views say about suffering?

His view is that we are to detach ourselves as much as possible.

We suffer because we are too attached.

Inside my head, I was thinking, “Such BS”.

But, of course, I would never say that

—unless maybe if I had had a glass of wine!

I responded, “Interesting. The view to which I subscribe says

that we sometimes do bring suffering upon ourselves and, in such cases,

detachment would perhaps do us well; but also that there is suffering

that is unavoidable, i.e. from which we cannot detach ourselves.

The loss of a loved one is unavoidable suffering.”

In fact, I also expressed, in the course of our conversation (if I may *further* detour), that, in the Church,

- we always have two perspectives
- we always respect another perspective.

We have a theological or faith perspective  
and we have a philosophical or human perspective.

The Church always respects the latter, for

- God does not replace our minds
- faith does not replace our minds

The role of the mind in our spiritual journey is, in fact, very important.

This latter perspective is, by the way (if I may *even further* detour), the one we bring to the political arena, to the public square.

This is a whole other issue.

Let me say—at least in passing—that, strictly speaking, we do not go to Annapolis to make sure our politicians  
take into consideration Catholic values.

Now, hear me out! I am sure some of you are squirming in your seats.

Strictly speaking, Catholic values are from a *faith* perspective  
and faith does not guide politics.

The separation of church and state is intellectually sound.

*Sound human understanding* of the human person  
and the human community and the common good  
—and the philosophical principals derived therefrom  
—guide politics—or *ought* to.

We are, for example, understandably very uncomfortable with abortion—in our hearts, ultimately because of the Creator.

Our public discourse, however, can not and *need* not make reference to God, for He is unseen.

We go to Annapolis (or wherever) and we discourse in reference to what we see, to what *all* see, and we argue that abortion is *in-humane*.

Does this make sense?

And so, to summarize:

We have been given the gift of faith, which enables us to receive what we believe to be Revelation.

We are asking “Why Catholic?” from a faith perspective.

Faith can be trying for the mind, precisely because we do not see.

Faith invites probing.

Together let us probe!

### **Why Catholic?**

A *great*, pertinent question indeed.

How many times have I heard “I don’t need the church to be close to God.”

Largely agreed.

I like to respond, “You have the Church, you are the Church, *because* you are close to God. In other words, instead of dispensing you from a need for the Church, your closeness to God *de facto* makes you Church, and thus do you ‘need’ the Church”.

To ask the question “Why Catholic?” obliges us to ask the fundamental question “Why church at all?” It is, therefore, important to bring into focus the deeper, lasting reality of the church.

When we think church, when we think Catholic Church, we often think hierarchy. Am I right?

We think tired, old, frustrated because celibate, men.

And so we think gender misrepresentation and age misrepresentation.

I can understand the discomfort some experience.

You know those experiences when you momentarily step outside of what is happening and consider it with a different eye?

At the Chrism Mass this year (the big annual Mass celebrated Holy Thursday marking the institution of the priesthood), for a moment, I sat staring at the bishops (four of them) seated, mitered (wearing those long pointy hats), and I thought “How odd.”

Depending on the shape of the individual bishop’s face, it can be *really* odd. I mean, imagine someone wearing a miter at an Orioles game or in the mall. I wondered, “Are these hats really what Jesus intended?”

This, as we will see, is actually a tricky question.

Why? Because Jesus did not articulate, in detail, everything that we are to do as a community.

Jesus did not write a guide book.

The hierarchy is an unusual thing and requires much faith, and its fruit, trust.

We believe and trust that Jesus guides the Church  
 —which does not make everything, in detail, willed by Jesus,  
 but we can rest assured—in faith!—for the essential things.

The hierarchy is entirely relative to the deeper, lasting reality of the Church:  
 the Mystical Body, *us* as brothers and sisters.

The hierarchy is serving us.

It is not we who are serving the hierarchy

—save, insofar as they are Brother in Christ.

We respectfully cooperate with the hierarchy, in faith.

Holy Orders is a Sacrament of *service*.

And so when you think church, do not first think Vatican,

think the person next to you in the pew.

When you ask the question “Why do I need the church?” or “Why catholic?”

first think of the person next to you in the pew.

Answering the question “Why Catholic?” then  
 surely invites first to consider the Mystical Body.

We are one in and with Christ, who is Head of the Church.

We are bound to one another—forever—by everlasting love.

These ties, this reality, is to deepen, however.

Such is the purpose of our earthly pilgrimage, of our lives.

And Jesus, being the awesome guy that He is, nourishes these ties.

*He* himself deepens the love that binds us.

Thank you Jesus!

In order to do so, Jesus comes to us in various gifts.

He establishes covenants with Him,

covenants within the great New Covenant in Him.

Interestingly, the Scriptures (the Old Testament), in a certain sense, already existed as a covenant.

He established three, clearly new covenants:

1. He promises to be with us in those who serve us (the hierarchy), when He says to Peter, **“You are Peter, and upon this rock I will build my church, and the gates of the netherworld shall not prevail against it. I will give you the keys to the kingdom of heaven.”**  
(Matthew 16:18-19)
2. He promises to be with us in Mary when, atop the cross, he says to John (and, through John, to each one of us), **“Behold your mother”**.  
(John 19:27)
3. He promises to be with us in these unusual, unusually Catholic things called Sacraments—in particular, the one we consider the sacrament of Sacraments, the Eucharist:  
**“This is my body, which will be given for you; do this in memory of me.”** Luke 22:19  
(which Paul recalls in I Corinthians 11:24)  
**“I am the living bread that came down from heaven; whoever eats this bread will live forever; and the bread that I will give is my flesh for the life of the world.”**  
(John 6:51)

## Why Catholic?

These covenants!

These covenants are promised ways of being with us.

If I am a Christian, it is because I know, in faith,  
that Jesus is God, the God-man.

And, as a Christian, I want to be where Jesus promises to be the most.

This, of course, is not a judgment about any Christian community.

Au contraire.

Although these covenants are Jesus' initiative,  
they are for the sake of relationship.

Relationship is mutual, and so the intensity and ramifications  
of Jesus' presence depend on the partner, i.e. *us*!

And so, what is this last covenant, the Sacraments,  
these "things" in which not all Christians believe?

Thus, you can have a Catholic parish

(a church with all these covenants) that is rather sleepy,

right next to a non-Catholic church (a church without these covenants)

that is seemingly much more alive.

It is like after the Resurrection.

Jesus goes first to Mary Magdalene and not Peter,

with whom he has a covenant.

Jesus goes there where hearts thirst most.

I am not going to defend the Sacraments or prove the Sacraments.

They need not be defended.

They stand on their own merit.

And they cannot be proved.

As I said, I will appeal to your faith,  
and I will try to uncover their inner logic, i.e. how they make sense.

Sacraments can be considered from different perspectives,  
or, rather, different aspects of the sacraments can be considered.  
As suggested, they are a covenant, but a very particular covenant.  
Human covenants are generally a *statement about* relationship,  
or *means to* relationship.

This covenant is uniquely a place of guaranteed encounter.

The Sacraments are places of guaranteed encounter  
because Jesus, who is God, designed them as such.

The Sacraments are the initiative of Jesus,  
and built on a promise that He makes.

Human covenants are mutual.

This covenant—as with the whole New Covenant—first depends on Jesus.  
And Jesus makes Himself guarantor of the covenant.

As we have said, this unique type of covenant suggests that  
the proper context in which to understand the purpose  
or the “why” of the sacraments—which is always the ultimate question,  
(that of final cause—to use a more philosophical phrase)  
—is that of relationship.

It is because we are called to relationship with Jesus  
that we have the Sacraments.

To be more precise—and this is, of course, a question of faith,  
it is because we are called to intimacy with Jesus  
that Jesus established the Sacraments.

How do we know this?

How can we be sure that Jesus established Sacraments?

There is a temptation into which many Christians fall  
(again, keep in mind: this is a question of faith).

Sometimes you will hear,

“Show it to me in the Bible. Tell me where it says it in the Bible.”

The temptation is that of *Sola Scriptura*, “Scripture only”.

The temptation is to reduce everything to documents.

We live in world where, if it is not in black and white, it is invalid.

“I need it in writing!”

We developed this last year.

Allow me briefly to may reiterate.

I think it helps us to recall

- how God deliberately reveals
- how Jesus deliberately proceeds

If we but consider how God reveals,

we realize that *Sola Scriptura*, “Scripture only”, the “Bible alone”  
does not work.

*Sola Scriptura* would presuppose that

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

All three are false.

- Jesus wrote nothing.
- Scripture is not self-explanatory does not “contain” Revelation.  
Scripture is the privileged *vehicle* through which God reveals.
- We cannot *but* interpret Scripture as a Church.

The Scriptures emerged from the Church.

The Church envelops the Scriptures.

It is important to know that, when confronted with such a request (“Show it to me in the Bible.”), it is not a lost argument—even though we may be at a loss at the time of conversation.

For a Catholic this is rather, in a sense, a non-conversation.

This is a conversation with incomplete reference and thus a conversation that is very difficult to have.

We are not a community, a people of the lone book of documents.

Our reference is never solely the Bible.

The Bible is a *unique* reference, not the *only* reference.

We refer also to the first and last place of the deposit of Revelation:

the hearts of the members of the community.

We call this place “Tradition”.

Tradition, of course, continues to this day

and will continue until the end of time.

Tradition continues today to the extent that we receive Revelation, to the extent that we allow God to share Himself with us,

and we keep what he shares in our hearts.

Such keeping we see exemplified in Mary,  
in whom we can say Tradition begins.

We *are* Tradition.

We do gather around the Bible, of course.

We probe the Bible as a unique place through which God speaks to us.

The Bible, however, is never the final place of the deposit of Revelation.

We are!

Maybe someday, someone will refer to you

as they try to understand the Bible: Tradition!

This shows us that the context for the Scriptures as well

—as suggested is the context for the Sacraments—is *relationship*,  
relationship with Christ.

God speaks to *us* in the here and now

—in a special way—*through* the Scriptures.

The Bible is the living word of God when read with faith.

Otherwise, it is just another interesting book.

In other words, there is no Revelation in a vacuum.

God does not just ‘put himself out there’, in some encapsulated form

and we are then to swallow the pill.

God communicates to real people, God communicates to us,

God shares himself, God reveals himself.

This is why Jesus wrote nothing.

And so, we do not approach the Bible in order to read the sacred message.  
That would presuppose that the message is a done deal.  
God *is* speaking.

We approach the Bible not to read the sacred message but to hear God,  
the God of eternity who reaches us in the present,  
the God of light who touches our mind and heart.

The nature of faith is actually at stake here.

Faith is not a mechanism that convinces an individual  
of the veracity of a message supposedly from God.

Faith is a quality that ennobles and enables the mind  
to touch God Himself, as He reveals, i.e. share Himself.

Now, hearing God is not easy.

We do so personally, and always communally.

Communally means with the whole Mystical Body.

We are necessarily Church—like it or not.

And so, we try to hear God in communion with,  
in conjunction with Tradition—in other words, Brothers and Sisters.

I read the Bible with St. Thomas Aquinas, St. Therese, and my grandmother,  
and my Bible Study group.

This I do precisely because of how God chooses to work,  
He Who shares Himself, and does not simply communicate a message,  
and Whose sharing binds us to one another.

The Sacraments are covenant, a place of guaranteed encounter.  
In the context of the relationship to which we are called  
and whose purpose they serve,  
the Sacraments can also be considered *gestures of Christ*.  
We developed this analogy in last year's series.

A relationship is built on communication.

We all know this when there is a communication breakdown!  
When we think communication, we generally think language,  
we generally think verbal communication.

We think of everything that we say (or write—or text!).

But, if we consider more closely,  
in particular the more intimate relationships in our life,  
we realize that we do a whole lot of communicating without the use of  
words, without saying a thing.

Words communicate thoughts.

And we want to communicate more than our thoughts.

We seek to communicate the things of the heart.

Think of what a hug communicates.

Words communicate thoughts.

Gestures communicate love.

Jesus, who seeks to communicate with us,

communicates precisely with *us*.

In other words, He communicates with our minds and hearts  
and thus uses words (Scripture) and gestures (Sacraments),

It is really quite amazing.

“God is light” and “God is love”.

In God they are one, but, in our attempt to grasp, we distinguish the two.

And God, Who is respectful of who we are, communicates accordingly.

The Sacraments can thus be considered gestures of Christ,  
gestures for which Christ ultimately always takes the initiative.

(show picture of Jesus embracing),

The sacraments are also something *we* do, something we *do*.

They are a “doing” of the church.

They are all liturgical.

In other words, as the word “liturgical” suggests in its etymological root,  
they are a “public doing”.

Because the Sacraments are a “doing” of the church, one of the criticisms  
(or condemnations) that we hear is precisely is that the Sacraments are

- man-made
- extra baggage that Jesus never intended.

This perspective, of course, is obviously that of *Sola Scriptura*,  
which considers anything outside the parameters of the Bible  
(read rather literally, of course) superfluous.

They are a doing of the church, *at Jesus command*: “Do this”,  
a doing of the church done with Jesus, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit.

We believe that the same Holy Spirit guided

- the emergence of the Scriptures
- the emergence of the Sacraments

We believe that the same Holy Spirit today guides

- the reading of the Scriptures
- the “doing” of the Sacraments

Not everything that the Church does, not everything that *we* do,  
is under the guidance of the Holy Spirit.

But the sacraments: *Holy Spirit* !

Let us consider another aspect of the Sacraments.

In this doing of the Church that are the Sacraments,  
we bring something to the table.

Each Sacrament has “matter”

Think about it:

- For Baptism, we need water.
- For Eucharist, we need unleavened wheat bread and wine.
- For Anointing of the Sick, we need oil.
- For Reconciliation, we need sins!
- As we will see, for Matrimony, we need human love.

I find it so marvelous that Jesus invite such active participation.

With the Scriptures alone there is not the same level of participation.

With the Sacraments, Jesus takes hold of the fruit of our labor,  
and, in the person of the minister, brings about something utterly divine.

As Saint Augustine says in his “Commentary on the Gospel of John”

**“The word is added to the element, and this becomes a sacrament.”**

It is very interesting.

The matter

(which, when physical, is deliberately chosen for its symbolic value)

lends itself to our understanding of what the Lord is doing.

Words are added also to help our understanding.

But the words are added not just for purposes of understanding.

Words bring about the Sacrament.

This does not make the words magic.

The words presuppose the intention of the minister.

The minister is truly a participating *instrument*, in the heart of the Church.

Of course, what occurs, and what is communicated,

is not visible to the naked eye.

That is why Saint Thomas Aquinas, amongst other things,

defines the Sacraments as “sacred secrets.”

This suggests, amongst other things, that they are immensely intimate,

and are really married only by those who love the One who shares the

secrets,

the Lord of all love.

**How blessed we are.**

**Alleluia!**