

“Why Catholic?” session #2: The Sacraments

And so, we continue our endeavor to answer the rather important question,

“Why Catholic?”

Now, I am not generally one for shortcuts, but I have received a few responses to the question already, which very well may bring this journey of ours to a screeching halt. In other words, a few people may have nailed it.

Why Catholic?

1. “Why not?”
2. “Because.”
3. “My Mamma made me do it.”
4. “There was a sale.”
5. “The retirement benefits are fantastic.”

Before we begin our exploration, properly speaking, of the Sacraments, it would be good to recapitulate what we articulated last week.

- We saw that our journey together is a faith journey. We are on the “Faith Boat” together. And everything that we are considering we are considering *in faith*. The Sacraments are not obvious. They are mysteries that we access in faith. Although wrapped in tangible signs, the One who comes to us in the Sacraments is not visible to the naked eye. You may have noticed! If He were, the church would be packed, and nobody would even *think* of leaving early (!).

Faith is a gift that enables our minds, sustained by love,

to touch the mystery of God,

without the obviousness characteristic of everyday human experience.

Faith is thus characterized by darkness (i.e. not seeing a thing).

Faith can be likened unto “touching in the dark”.

Faith is also characterized, however, by certitude
– that comes from the faith itself.

We activate (and deepen) our faith by exercising it: “Lord, I believe.”

If faith is such, then faith, *per se*, is beyond belief system
– which is paramount to understand.

I recently saw an excerpt (out of context, granted) from an interview with Oprah. It was in conjunction with the new spiritual program, New Earth, that she is offering with Eckhard Tolle (born in 1948 in Germany, now a spiritual leader of sorts, whose influences, from what I can tell, are largely Hindu, although he has a fondness for Christ). As Oprah would say, “Take a look.”

VIDEO

It is very interesting: it is exactly what we are *not* saying.

Her perspective seems to be in response to faith *as belief system*.

She rightly asserts that belief systems arise from human concepts (“God has been defined by man”),
and that we must move beyond doctrine.

She does not grasp faith – as we are speaking of it.

And she proposes that we rise above belief system, oddly,
by *defining* God as “the undefinable” ...yet another belief system.

Her statements are inevitably theological,

i.e. she is proposing an understanding of the Divine.

She rightly asserts that belief system alone does not satisfy the heart,
but wrongly concludes that true religiosity must be a *feeling* experience.

There is a quasi-identification of God with the universe, Who must then be *felt*.

God, if He (She) is *source* of all that is, transcends the universe, and is spirit.

He is, therefore, not necessarily felt. He is “touched” in faith.

You see, faith respects both our natural way of knowing,
and the transcendence of God.

I am sorry: I realize that this may be lofty for some...

I should try to do more like Oprah. Oops: did I just say that?

Faith is a quality that enables the mind to touch the mystery of God – which, of course, to a non-Christian, sounds like subjective justification for the Christian “belief system”: “Oh, you claim that so to sanction your belief system.”

It is difficult to respond to such accusations.

It seems to me that the best way to respond is

- a) to acknowledge the seeming subjectivity of Christianity’s claims.
- b) to articulate that Christianity is not a set of moral teaching or behavioral prescriptions or proscriptions.
- c) to state that there is an unavoidable issue that needs to be addressed: whether or not Jesus Christ is God become human -- which, of course, takes us well beyond the moral issues that so easily distress people.
- d) to articulate that the greater depth of divine intimacy had with Christ is not exclusive and is not a condemnation of other religions – where Christ is at work. Personally, if I preach Christ to a Buddhist, for example, it is not because I fear they will be in hell. It is because I want them to experience the unique intimacy with God had in and through Jesus Christ.
- e) to articulate that the Christian experience is in fact the most respectful of human personhood.

- We also situated the question of Revelation, and how Jesus *deliberately* wrote nothing. Jesus deposits what He shares in hearts, the hearts of believers.

Revelation is not information about God, but a communication of the mystery of God, precisely God *sharing* himself.

How else could the mystics speak in terms of *being in love*?

Jesus shares Himself, shares the life of the Trinity.

Jesus did not write a message.

Although it implies a message, Revelation is more than a message (in a book).

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

Theology is not abstract.

Theology is personal endeavor upon which we embark in the heart of the Church, and which places us in the heart of the Church.

We are *all* theologians!

- We also saw how the Bible emerged from the hearts of believers, believers in communion with one another, and in communion with those entrusted with the responsibility of shepherding.

The Bible, in a sense, “crystallizes” what Jesus shared, Revelation, but the home of Revelation is the hearts of believers.

Revelation received into the hearts of believers is what we call *Tradition*.

Tradition began in Mary’s heart:

“And she kept all these things in her heart” (Luke 2:19; 2:51).

Tradition preceded Scripture.

Tradition envelops Scripture.

There is no Scripture without Tradition.

And Tradition, in turn, deepens, in a unique way, because of Scripture, because it is to Scripture that Believers turn in a unique way to receive, through it, the “word that comes forth from the mouth of God.”

Strictly speaking, the word of God is not the Bible.

The word of God is “every word that comes forth from the mouth of God.”

(Deuteronomy 8:3; Matthew 4:4)

God speaks *through* the Bible in a special way.

The Bible is the word of God

when it is being read with faith

when there is at one end a believer and the other end God, in relationship.

God

.

Bible

.

believer

- We also stated that, from the same community also emerged the celebrations, the special communal liturgical actions we call *Sacraments*.

In Scripture, we do not find a clear expose of seven Sacraments.

The moment of institution for at least three of the Sacraments is fairly clear:

Eucharist: “This is my body. This is my blood” (Last Supper)

Orders: “Do this in memory of me.” (Last Supper)

Reconciliation: “Whose sins you forgive are forgiven them, and whose sins you retain are retained.” (post-Resurrection; John 20:23)

The moment of institution for the other Sacraments is less clear.

Baptism: When Jesus was baptized? When Jesus sent the disciples to baptize?

Confirmation: promised, and emerged in the community at Pentecost?

Matrimony: sometime before Ephesians 5:32 was written, where Paul speaks of marriage as a *mystery*, i.e. elevated above natural institution.

Uction: sometime before James 5:14 was written.

Knowing exactly when they were instituted is perhaps not the important question.

All are entrusted to the Church, the Church in actual unity with Christ the Church as moved by Jesus, i.e. as the Body of Christ, as the Bride of Christ, not some separate entity doing its own religious thing, hoping for the spiritual best.

With all due respect, our evangelical brethren do not have the same sense of the Mystical Body, the Mystical Bride

and of the shepherds who are the service of the Body/Bride.

Jesus said to Peter (three times ! John 21:15, 16, 17), “Feed my sheep.”

There is an *entrusting*.

Note also that they remain *Jesus’* sheep, with whom He shares Himself.

Consequently, because of this mystical bond,

we notice how, in the life of the Church,

doctrines do not fall from the hierarchical sky.

They first emerge from the Body of the Church, from the hearts of believers,

from hearts receiving revelation

(always in conjunction with Scripture, of course).

The Church first lives and what the community lives is later articulated.

It took the Church time to articulate seven Sacraments.

Such is the mystery of Tradition

It was not until the 12th century

that theologians began more explicitly to speak of *seven* Sacraments,
but did so as a given in the life of the Church..

It was at the Council of Lyons in 1274 speaks of seven Sacraments,

and the Council of Trent in 1554 made formal declarations regarding the Sacraments,
as matters of faith.

Session VII: ON THE SACRAMENTS IN GENERAL

CANON I.-If any one saith, that the sacraments of the New Law were not all instituted by Jesus Christ, our Lord; or, that they are more, or less, than seven, to wit, Baptism, Confirmation, the Eucharist, Penance, Extreme Unction, Order, and Matrimony; or even that any one of these seven is not truly and properly a sacrament; let him be anathema.

CANON II.-If any one saith, that these said sacraments of the New Law do not differ from the sacraments of the Old Law, save that the ceremonies are different, and different the outward rites; let him be anathema.

CANON III.-If any one saith, that these seven sacraments are in such wise equal to each other, as that one is not in any way more worthy than another; let him be anathema.

CANON IV.-If any one saith, that the sacraments of the New Law are not necessary unto salvation, but superfluous; and that, without them, or without the desire thereof, men obtain of God, through faith alone, the grace of justification;-though all (the sacraments) are not indeed necessary for every individual; let him be anathema.

CANON V.-If any one saith, that these sacraments were instituted for the sake of nourishing faith alone; let him be anathema.

CANON VI.-If any one saith, that the sacraments of the New Law do not contain the grace which they signify; or, that they do not confer that grace on those who do not place an obstacle thereunto; as though they were merely outward signs of grace or justice received through faith, and certain marks of the Christian profession, whereby believers are distinguished amongst men from unbelievers; let him be anathema.

CANON VII.-If any one saith, that grace, as far as God's part is concerned, is not given through the said sacraments, always, and to all men, even though they receive them rightly, but (only) sometimes, and to some persons; let him be anathema.

CANON VIII.-If any one saith, that by the said sacraments of the New Law grace is not conferred through the act performed, but that faith alone in the divine promise suffices for the obtaining of grace; let him be anathema.

CANON IX.-If any one saith, that, in the three sacraments, Baptism, to wit, Confirmation, and Order, there is not imprinted in the soul a character, that is, a certain spiritual and indelible Sign, on account of which they cannot be repeated; let him be anathema.

CANON X.-If any one saith, that all Christians have power to administer the word, and all the sacraments; let him be anathema.

CANON XI.-If any one saith, that, in ministers, when they effect, and confer the sacraments, there is not required the intention at least of doing what the Church does; let him be anathema.

CANON XII.-If any one saith, that a minister, being in mortal sin,-if so be that he observe all the essentials which belong to the effecting, or conferring of, the sacrament,-neither effects, nor confers the sacrament; let him be anathema.

CANON XIII.-If any one saith, that the received and approved rites of the Catholic Church, wont to be used in the solemn administration of the sacraments, may be contemned, or without sin be omitted at pleasure by the ministers, or be changed, by every pastor of the churches, into other new ones; let him be anathema.

We do need, by the way, to view the Church first and foremost in this spiritual way, which is not top-down, but bottom-up (bottoms up!).

Laity (religious)

priests

bishops

pope

THE SACRAMENTS?

What are these rituals that Catholics celebrate?

As suggested at the beginning of our first session, they are more than rituals.

They involve ritual.

They are wrapped in ritual.

They, in fact, cannot but be “ritualistic”.

Even though the One

- Whom we believe invented and established the Sacraments
- Who works through the Sacraments
- Whom we encounter in the Sacraments

is beyond ritual, we realize that, given what they are,

the Sacraments nonetheless necessarily involve ritual.

Why is that?

Let us first state a few things about ritual.

Ritual is born with the symbolic use of the body,

to signify and bring about various types of relations/relationships.

The body is

- the visible aspect of our person
- what makes us public figures
- naturally able to express symbolically

When we do ritual with respect to God in a communal setting, we call it *liturgy*.

There is some sort of liturgy in every religion.

Now, I mentioned ritual in the context of relations/relationships.

Oddly, when we think of communication in relationships, however,

what most often, most spontaneously comes to mind is the use of *words*:

talking or writing or text messaging...

Think of the hundreds, even thousands of words that you

whisper or scream or calligraphy or scribble or type each day.

Words, words, words.

Words communicate *thoughts*.

If, however, we observe and consider human interaction,
more specifically, deep human *relationships*,
we notice that

- there is more to communication than just words
- we communicate with more than just words
- we communicate more than what words communicate

Since the fundamental human communication tends to be verbal sounds
(from which come written words),

We traditionally situate the *other* communication of which we are speaking
relative to verbal language.

And so we speak of verbal and of *non-verbal* language.

Think for a moment how much non-verbal language you use each day.

Think of how replete your day is with what we call *gestures*:

from waving to kissing to snapping fingers to tapping toes to squinting to...

By the way, have you ever wondered when people started kissing?

It is quite an unusual gesture....

The meaning of gestures is not purely conventional, i.e. not randomly attributed.

For example, at some point,

someone did not randomly decide that a hug was to express care, instead of anger.

The body is naturally symbolic.

Gestures communicate what words communicate only with great difficulty:

our many emotions

Gestures, however, communicate more than emotion.

Gestures communicate deeper, more deliberate things of the heart.

The deepest, most engaging gestures communicate love – beyond emotion.

– which words *surely* communicate only with great difficulty.

Think of the gestures, for example, used to express a *commitment* of love.

The big question is: how does Jesus communicate?

With Jesus, too, what most often, most spontaneously comes to mind is the use of *words*.

We think of the “Good News”.

We think of a message of hope.

We think of words of wisdom.

We think of, for our current experience, the *Bible*.

We think, for example, of the Sermon on the Mount and the Sermon on the Plain.

We think of Jesus saying things.

Part of the difficulty we have seeing beyond words with respect to Jesus,
is simply the challenge inherent to faith.

Because we do not see Jesus, we “lose sight” of the real connection we have with Him,
and find ourselves thinking that we are only reading *about* Him,

And, in the end, we are essentially left with a message.

The Christian experience is sometimes reduced from
a relationship with a person to living by a set of ideals.

Faith binds us to a *person*, or *three Divine Persons*, who share their one mystery with us.

God shares Himself with our whole person.

God who is love and light shares Himself with our whole person.

Jesus, God incarnate,

- speaks to us – in a particular way, through Scripture –
to communicate His *light and*
- uses gestures to communicate his *love*

How complete! How respectful of who we are!

Recall that the home, or the repository, for what God shares is our heart.

If so, there is a place for words and gestures...

The Sacraments are the *gestures of Christ*.

Envision a gesture of love,

and tell yourself that, in the Sacraments, Jesus does something like that.
Each Sacrament is a unique spiritual “hug”, or spiritual “kiss”
– beyond words, beyond emotion.

If this is true, then, without the Sacraments, objectively speaking,

- something is missing in our relationship with Jesus
- there is an intimacy that is lost

Jesus, being very merciful and creative, makes do. Yet....

Jesus Himself says, regarding the most intimate of these gestures, the Eucharist:

“Unless you eat of the flesh of the Son of Man and drink His blood,
you have no life within you.”

Is Jesus suggesting that Christians who do not celebrate and receive the Eucharist
are totally dead inside?

Jesus speaks in relation to our purpose, i.e. to the depth of intimacy to which are invited.

He seems to be suggesting that there will be intimacy with him without the Eucharist,
but that something of the *depth* of intimacy to which we are invited will not be had.

Any intimacy with Jesus is amazing, but Jesus wants total intimacy – hence His gestures.

We do believe that the Sacraments introduce us

– if we desire – into special intimacy.

The Sacraments are gestures of love

and thus special encounters

and thus covenants

with Christ Who binds us to Himself.

2 share group questions:

1. Have you ever thought of the Sacraments as the gestures of Christ?
2. What can we do to make our celebration of the Sacraments a more intimate experience?

