

DIVINE REVELATION AND OUR FAITH RESPONSE (RCIA) (C 50-100, 142-184, USC Ch. 1,2,4)

The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (the universal catechism) has four parts:

1. *Creed*: Faith Professed
2. *Sacraments*: Faith Celebrated
3. *Christian Morality*: Faith Lived
4. *Prayer*: Faith Prayed

The first eleven lessons of this series focus on the Creed—Faith Professed. These lessons use the universal catechism and the *United States Catholic Catechism* as resources. The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* is referenced as **C**, followed by the paragraph number/s, (e.g., **C142-150**), and the *United States Catholic Catechism* as **USC**, followed by the chapter/s and/or page number/s (e.g., **USC ch 1, p.2**).

It pleased God, in his goodness and wisdom, to reveal himself and to make known the mystery of his will, which was that people can draw near to the Father, through Christ, the Word made flesh in the Holy Spirit, and thus become sharers in his divine life.

(Divine Revelation #2)

The desire for God is written in the human heart because man is created by God and for God; God never ceases to draw man to himself.

(C27)

This lesson is divided into two parts:

Part One: How God reveals himself to us through creation, Israel and in Jesus. How God’s Revelation of himself is transmitted through Scripture and Tradition

Part Two: Faith: our response to Divine Revelation

PART ONE: DIVINE REVELATION

The Good News is that we come from the loving hands of a God who wishes to *reveal* himself to us and draw us into a *loving relationship* with him, into an intimate relationship with the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Even though God is essentially mystery, a mystery so profound that we cannot comprehend, yet this God has not removed himself from us. In fact in him “we live, move and have our being” (Acts 17:28). Not only that, but our loving God has placed within us a capacity to respond to his outreaches to us. In the scriptures, we have numerous examples of men and women responding to God’s Revelation of himself.

How God reveals himself in creation (C31-33, USC p.3)

God’s fingerprints are all over his creation. It is for us to open the eyes of our soul and see this presence of God in all that he has made. The author of Psalm 19 who lived about 1,000 years before Christ shares with us his sense of God’s existence and presence in creation when he wrote:

The heavens proclaim the glory of God and the firmament shows forth the work of his hands. Day unto day takes up the story and night unto night makes known the message. (Ps 19:1-2)

Throughout history, people with open minds have seen the universe as evidence of God’s existence. The order, harmony and beauty of the world point to an intelligent creator.

Pause: Some people love the great outdoors and find it easy to see God in creation. Others just go about their lives and pay very little attention to creation. What about you? To what extent do you find God’s fingerprints in creation?

Contemplating the human person (C33-35 USC p.4)

The *Catechism* tells us that certain traits in the human person can also lead us to belief in God: openness to truth and beauty, desire for moral goodness, the way we treasure freedom, the voice of conscience, and our longings for the infinite and for happiness (C33). All of these yearnings within the human spirit or soul can draw us to the reality that people call God. After rejecting God for many years and then allowing himself to be found by God, Augustine said: “*You have made us for yourself, O Lord, our hearts are restless until they rest in you*” (C30). This yearning for God found in the history of people in all places and times leads us to believe that in the core of his being, man is fundamentally a *religious* being (C28). We possess within us a religious impulse and drive toward God.

In the seventeenth century, the French philosopher Blaise Pascal said: “*There is light enough for those who want to see and darkness enough for those who are otherwise inclined.*” He also said that faith in God is life’s best wager: “*If you win, you win everything.*” With atheism or unbelief, one risks losing everything.

While “through reason we can come to know God with certainty on the basis of his works” (C50), it is

only with *Divine Revelation* that we can come to know the inner life of God and develop a personal relationship with him. To this Divine Revelation we will now turn.

Pause: What have you or might you underline in the above section?

God reveals his loving plan of salvation through “deeds” and “words” (C51-67, USC p.12)

By natural reason man can know God with certainty, on the basis of his works. But there is another order of knowledge, which man cannot possibly arrive at by his own powers: the order of divine Revelation. (C50)

As we look at the dynamics involved in human relationships, we see the truth of the above statement. Human beings reveal themselves to each other by *deeds* and *words*, both of which are linked. The truth of what we say is borne out by our deeds.

When Adam and Eve sinned by disobeying God, they rejected his offer of friendship and alienated humanity from their Creator (Gen 3). But God did not stop loving us, his sons and daughters. Rather, he created a plan to restore our friendship with him. Again and again God offered friendship to man and taught him to hope for salvation.

The *Catechism* outlines for us God’s gradual Revelation of himself and his plan to save the world, beginning with covenants with Noah, Abraham, and the people of Israel (C54-65).

The two most significant revelatory events in Israel’s history were the Exodus and the Sinai Covenant. In and through the *Exodus* event, God showed himself to be a liberator and savior, a God mighty in deeds on behalf of his people who were in bondage in Egypt. In the *Sinai Covenant*, God revealed his plan to have a covenant relationship with Israel. The Ten Commandments would show Israel how they should relate to God and each other. The *words* of the prophets would further reveal who God was for Israel and what he expected of them. The prophets also spoke of a New Covenant that God would enter into with Israel and all humanity (Jer 31:31-34). They spoke of a messiah who would bring salvation to God’s people.

Pause: The two most important events in Israel’s history and relationship with God are the Exodus and the Sinai Covenant. Looking at your life and relationship with God, can you name one key event or experience?

Jesus, the fullness of God’s public Revelation

In times past, God spoke in partial and various ways to our ancestors through the prophets; in these last days he has spoken through his Son. (Heb 1:1-2)

Christ...is the Father’s one and unsurpassable Word. In him he has said everything; there will be no other Word than this one. (C65)

In and through Jesus’ *deeds* (miracles, outreach to sinners and the marginalized, his Passion, Death and Resurrection) and *words* (e.g., Sermon on the Mount, [Mt 5-7]), God spoke a perfect, complete and final word to humanity. During his time on earth, Jesus revealed to us that within the one God, there is a trinity of persons, that God is infinitely loving, forgiving, generous and many, many other things which we can read about in the pages of Scripture.

With Jesus, public Revelation ended. By stating this, the Church is not saying that God went silent with the Ascension of Jesus into heaven. While public Revelation ended with Jesus, our *understanding* of Revelation did not end. In his book, *The Essential Catholic Catechism*, Alan Schreck writes:

The truth that is found in Jesus Christ is something like a gold mine. We have discovered the mine (or rather, God has revealed the mine to us), yet we still have the task of digging out all the gold. This means that the Holy Spirit is enabling the Church over the course of centuries to “uncover” the truth revealed in Christ, and at times along the way to define the truth that she has come to understand.

So until the end of time, the Holy Spirit will be helping the Church to:

- *grow in her understanding* of what Jesus said and did;
- *state in new and fresh ways* her growing understanding of Divine Revelation. (The *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 1992, is an example of the Church’s most recent understanding of herself and her beliefs.)

Private Revelation. While the Catholic Church believes that public Revelation ended with Christ, she also believes that one form of the Holy Spirit’s ongoing activity in the Church occurs through what has been termed “private revelation,” e.g., apparitions of Mary to members of the faithful. The *Catechism* states: “Throughout the ages, there have been so

called ‘private’ revelations, some of which have been recognized by the authority of the Church. They do not belong, however, to the deposit of faith. It is not their role to improve or complete Christ’s definitive Revelation but to help live more fully by it in a certain period of history. Guided by the Magisterium of the Church, the *sensus fidelium* (sense of the faithful) knows how to discern and welcome in these revelations whatever constitutes an authentic call of Christ or his saints to the Church” (C67).

The apparitions at Lourdes, Fatima, Guadalupe and many other shrines, have withstood the test of time because their content has consistently reinforced the Good News of Jesus Christ.

Pause: What have you or might you underline in the above section?

Handing on the faith: transmission and protection of Divine Revelation (USC p. 23)

How is Divine Revelation, sometimes called the “deposit of faith,” transmitted from one generation to another and protected from erroneous interpretations? Our Protestant brothers and sisters would answer with one word, namely, Scripture. Martin Luther coined the phrase *“sola scriptura”* (Scripture alone). The Catholic Church teaches that Divine Revelation is transmitted through *Sacred Scripture and Sacred Tradition* and is protected from erroneous interpretations by the *Magisterium* (the teaching authority of the Church—the bishops in union with the Pope). All three work like three legs on a tripod.

Without Sacred Scripture we would have no written record of God’s dealings with Israel and his Revelation in Christ. *Without Sacred Tradition* we would not know how the scriptures were understood down through the ages and especially in those early centuries of Christianity. It would be like interpreting the American Constitution without any knowledge of the milieu in which it was born and how it was interpreted over the past two centuries. The bishops assembled at Vatican Council II stated:

Sacred Tradition and Sacred Scripture are like a mirror in which the pilgrim church on earth looks at God, from whom she has received everything.
(Dei Verbum)

Without the Magisterium or the teaching authority of the Church to guide our interpretation of Scripture, we would have everyone acting as his/her own infallible interpreter. Because this is what happened after the Protestant Reformation, we have hundreds of

Christian churches, each one interpreting Scripture in its own way.

They looked to church leadership. In the early decades and centuries of the Church, the laity looked to Church leaders rather than to the Bible when it came to inquiring about the truth that Jesus revealed and commanded the Apostles to teach and pass on. We must remember:

- The first books of the New Testament were not written until twenty years after Jesus’ death.
- The twenty-seven books of the New Testament were not completed until at least the end of the first century.
- The Canon of Scripture was not decided until the fourth century.

The *written record* of Divine Revelation was not available to most people and it was never intended to contain all that Jesus said and did (Jn 20:25). For all these reasons, we say that the faithful looked more to the Church than to Scripture for knowledge of the truth that Jesus came to bring. 1Tim 3:15 states that “the *Church* of the living God helps us to uphold the truth.” In stating this, we are not saying that the Church is more important or above Scripture. She is not. Daily, the Church is called to listen to Sacred Scripture and be converted by it. Yet at the same time, it is her solemn duty to protect the scriptures from false and erroneous interpretations—something the great Apostle Paul was very aware of (Acts 20:28-30; 1Tim 4:1-16). (Article Two will look more fully at *how* Divine Revelation is transmitted through Scripture and Tradition, and guarded and protected by the Church’s Magisterium.)

Pause: What struck you most in the above section? Do you have any questions?

PART TWO: FAITH—OUR RESPONSE TO DIVINE REVELATION (C142-184, USC p. 37)

Faith is, first of all, a personal adherence of man to God. At the same time, and inseparably, it is a free assent to the whole truth that God has revealed. (C150)

People of deep faith see God in everything and in everyone. No burden is too heavy for them and no task is too difficult for them, because they are upheld by the power of God. (Desmond Forristal)

We exercise *natural* faith many times everyday. We believe the food we eat will not poison us. We trust that the buildings we enter will not fall down. *Supernatural* faith is the name Christians give to our response to the God who reveals himself to us. It is a gift of God usually given to us through prayer, the sacraments and other faith-filled people.

Faith relationship with God. The Bible is full of examples of people making a *faith response* to God's Revelation of himself. When God revealed himself to Abraham and called him to leave his country, we are told Abraham went as God had told him (Gen 12:1-4). When the angel Gabriel came to Mary and invited her to be the Mother of the Messiah, she responded: "Let it be done to me according to your word" (Lk 1:38). As God makes himself known to us, we have the opportunity to say 'yes' to God and enter into a personal faith relationship with him, or we can ignore his outreach to us. As we grow in faith, we are, with the grace of God, able to entrust our whole lives, body, mind and spirit to God trusting that no matter what happens to us, all will be okay because he will be with us. So when the *Catechism* states that faith is, first of all, our "personal adherence to God," it means that we respond to God by submitting and committing our lives to him, recognizing that he is the *Source* of our being, the One who daily *sustains* us in being and the One who is the *final goal* of our lives.

Faith engagement with the message of Divine Revelation. The *Catechism* tells us that "faith also involves giving free assent to all that God has revealed" (C150). In other words, we say 'yes' not only to God but also to the *truth or message* that he has revealed—the truth which we see above is given to us in Sacred Scripture and Tradition, and protected for us through the Church's *Magisterium*. Needless to say, coming to a point of total faith in God, total surrender to him and his ways, and total adherence to his revealed truth, is a lifelong journey demanding tremendous cooperation with God's grace.

Pause: Sometimes we hear people say "so-and-so has a very strong faith." What do you think people mean by that? For you, what are characteristics of a strong faith?

Other characteristics of faith (C153-184)

The *Catechism* names ten aspects of Christian faith (C150-175). We will look briefly at most of them, often joining two of them together.

- *Faith is both personal* ("I believe...") and *communal* ("We believe..."). We are called to give

God a 'personal yes' like Abraham and Mary, and also called to give him a 'communal yes'—faith shared as a member of the Body of Christ. The latter is sometimes called "ecclesial faith."

- *Faith is both a gift of God (grace) and a free human act.* We only come to faith as a result of God's initiative and nudging. Yet God will not force us to believe. We must freely choose God, just as spouses must freely choose each other.

- *Faith seeking understanding.* Faith seeking understanding" is the classic definition of theology. The person of faith seeks to understand what he/she believes. Aided by grace, the Holy Spirit, gifted teachers, prayer, and personal study, we grow in our understanding of God and his truth. One of the exciting developments in our Church in recent years is that more and more Catholics are joining faith formation programs. As a result, they are growing in their understanding and appreciation of their Catholic faith, and also in their ability to see and respond to God in all aspects of their lives.

The *Catechism* also speaks about the necessity of faith for salvation, the importance of nourishing our faith with Scripture, works of charity and justice, and participation in the life of the Church. Finally, faith gives us a taste of the life that is to come.

Pause: Some people have what is sometimes called 'blind or non-questioning faith.' They accept what the Bible and the Church teach. Others find themselves questioning God and his ways and the Church and her teachings. What about you?

Obstacles to faith (C29, USC p. 16 & 14)

Despite God's desire to draw us into a personal and communal relationship with him, many people, sadly, do not develop a faith relationship with God. Why? The *Catechism* names several things that can hinder us from having a faith relationship with God: "the presence of evil in our world, religious ignorance and indifference, preoccupation with the cares and riches of the world, the scandal of bad behavior of believers, currents of thoughts hostile to religion, the sinful attitude in man that makes him hide from God out of fear and flee his call" (C29).

Helps. How can these obstacles be overcome? By perseverance in prayer, study, spiritual direction and fellowship with other faith-filled people.

Pause: Atheism is on the rise. Why are more and more people, especially the younger ones, embracing an atheistic or godless stance towards life?

Suggested action

This week, make a special effort to be aware of God's Revelation in your daily life and be open to sharing your faith with others.

Meditation

Nothing is more practical than finding God, that is, than falling in love in a quite absolute, final way. What you are in love with, what seizes your imagination, will affect everything. It will decide what will get you out of bed in the morning, what you do with your evenings, how you will spend your weekends, what you read, whom you know, what breaks your heart, and what amazes you with joy and gratitude. Fall in love, stay in love, and it will decide everything.

(Pedro Arrupe, S.J.)

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THE CREEDS

The Apostles Creed

I believe in God, the Father Almighty,
Creator of Heaven and earth;
and in Jesus Christ, His only Son Our Lord,
Who was conceived by the Holy Spirit,
born of the Virgin Mary,
suffered under Pontius Pilate,
was crucified, died, and was buried.
He descended into Hell; the third day He rose again from the dead;
He ascended into Heaven, and sitteth at the right hand of God, the Father almighty;
from thence He shall come to judge the living and the dead.
I believe in the Holy Spirit, the holy Catholic Church,
the communion of saints, the forgiveness of sins,
the resurrection of the body and life everlasting. Amen.

The Nicene Creed

I believe in one God,
the Father almighty,
maker of heaven and earth,
of all things visible and invisible.
I believe in one Lord Jesus Christ,
the Only Begotten Son of God,
born of the Father before all ages.
God from God, Light from Light,
true God from true God,
begotten, not made, consubstantial with the Father;
through him all things were made.
For us men and for our salvation
he came down from heaven,
and by the Holy Spirit was incarnate of the Virgin Mary,
and became man.
For our sake he was crucified under Pontius Pilate,
he suffered death and was buried,
and rose again on the third day
in accordance with the Scriptures.
He ascended into heaven
and is seated at the right hand of the Father.
He will come again in glory
to judge the living and the dead
and his kingdom will have no end.
I believe in the Holy Spirit, the Lord, the giver of life,
who proceeds from the Father and the Son,
who with the Father and the Son is adored and glorified,
who has spoken through the prophets.
I believe in one, holy, catholic and apostolic Church.
I confess one Baptism for the forgiveness of sins
and I look forward to the resurrection of the dead
and the life of the world to come. Amen.

SACRED SCRIPTURE, SACRED TRADITION AND THE CHURCH (RCIA) (C 101-141, USC Ch. 3)

Sacred Scripture and Sacred Tradition form one sacred deposit of the Word of God which is committed to the Church... The task of authentically interpreting the Word of God, whether written or handed on, has been entrusted exclusively to the living teaching office of the Church, whose authority is exercised in the name of Jesus Christ. This teaching office is not above the Word of God but serves it, teaching only what has been handed on.... with the help of the Holy Spirit: it draws from this one deposit of faith everything which it presents for belief as divinely revealed. (Divine Revelation 10)

In article one on *Divine Revelation*, we saw that *divinely revealed truth*, also called the “deposit of faith” is transmitted from one generation to another through Sacred Scripture and Sacred Tradition. The Church is the *guardian* and the *authentic interpreter* of this divinely revealed truth. In this article, we will look more fully at how the tripod of Scripture, Tradition and the Church are interrelated and support each other in the task of transmitting, guarding and interpreting the living Word of God.

The Bible: the Church’s book

Until Vatican Council II (1962-1965), the Bible was often seen by some Catholics as a Protestant book. Few Catholics read the Bible. Instead they read the Baltimore Catechism for information on what Catholics believed. Many clergy were afraid to put the Bible into the hands of the ‘simple laity’ in case they would misinterpret it. Thankfully, since Vatican II all this has changed and now Church leaders strongly recommend that the faithful read the Bible for spiritual nourishment and join Bible study groups in order to better understand and appreciate the inexhaustible riches of the Word of God.

The Church inherited from the Israelites, our spiritual ancestors, the 46 books of the Old Testament, and gave birth to the 27 books of the New Testament. In 393 AD at the Council of Hippo, the Church decided which sacred books in circulation should be admitted and not be admitted to the *Canon* of the New Testament (Canon is the term used to refer to the 73 books of the Bible). Catholics trust that the Holy Spirit was guiding the Church when she made the very important decision concerning the Canon of the New Testament. It was a decision based on which books best captured the vision and message of Jesus, which books best nurtured the faith of the people. The Church recognized her own image in these books. So without the Church, we would not have a Bible.

Seven extra books in the Catholic Bible

The Catholic Old Testament Canon contains seven books not found in Protestant Bibles. These books are Judith, Tobit, Baruch, Wisdom, Sirach and 1 & 2 Maccabees. In addition, the Catholic Bible has longer versions of the books of Esther and Daniel. Catholics sometimes call these books *deuterocanonical* (meaning “second” canon). Protestants call them *apocryphal* (meaning ‘counterfeit’ or ‘hidden’). Why the extra books? Space only allows for a brief explanation. The Old Testament books were written in both Hebrew and Greek, the latter having the seven above named books. As the gospel spread to Greek speaking Jews and Gentiles, the Church generally used the Greek edition, also called the Septuagint. When Martin Luther, the founder of Protestantism, translated the Old Testament in the sixteenth century, he used the Hebrew canon which did not contain the above seven books.

Pause: Was there a time when you didn’t read the Bible? If so, has that changed? What got you interested in reading the Bible?

Scripture interpretation—reading the Bible within the Church (C 109-119, 124-141, USC p. 27)

“In order to discover the sacred author’s intention, the reader must take into account the conditions of their time and culture, the literary genres in use at that time, and the modes of feeling, speaking, and narrating then current. For the fact is that truth is differently presented and expressed in the various types of historical writing, in prophetic and poetical texts, and in other forms of literary expression.”
(C 110)

After reading the above statement, we may be a bit overwhelmed or discouraged about approaching the Bible. We may wonder if we need a degree in biblical studies to read the Bible correctly. We do not.

Just as one does not need to be an expert in musical composition to enjoy music, neither does one need to be an expert in Scripture to enjoy and benefit spiritually from reading the Word of God. If we approach Scripture, especially the Psalms and New Testament, with faith and prayer, we can assume that the Lord will bless our time with his Word. Yet we can also say that just as a course or several courses in musical appreciation will most likely increase our capacity to enjoy music, so will some courses in Scripture increase our understanding and appreciation of God’s Holy Word.

In Acts 8:26-40, there is a lovely account of an encounter between Philip and an Ethiopian. The Ethiopian is reading a passage from the Book of Isaiah. Philip asks him if he understands what he is reading. The Ethiopian responds: "How can I unless I have someone to guide me?" Then the Ethiopian humbly asks Philip to be his guide. Helped by the Holy Spirit, Philip is able to break open the meaning of God's word for the Ethiopian. When it comes to understanding and appreciating Scripture, all of us need not only the help of the Holy Spirit but also the help of human guides.

Pause: Can you see why we need not only the help of the Holy Spirit, but also the help of human guides when it comes to growing in our understanding of the Bible? Do you have a favorite Scripture verse or story?

Distinguishing the "intended meaning" from the "apparent meaning" of Scripture

When it comes to reading Scripture, one challenge is to get at the *meaning* of a text *intended by the author*, and distinguish it from the *apparent meaning* of the text. This is where reading Scripture can become a bit challenging for sometimes the *apparent* meaning of a text is not the meaning *intended* by the author.

One example of how the *apparent* meaning could be confused with the *intended meaning* is Genesis chapters 1 & 2. The *apparent* meaning is that God created the world in *seven* days and in the exact manner described therein. But the *intention* of the author was not to give us a scientific account of *how* the world was created. Rather, his intention was *religious, i.e.* to tell us that (a) God created the world; (b) God created the world *good*; (c) God created *man* and *woman* in his *image* and *likeness*, and he created them to be *partners* or *helpmates* in the journey of life.

In addition to helping us distinguish the *intended meaning* of Scripture from its *apparent* meaning, recent advances in biblical studies can also help us to separate the *timeless Word of God* from the *culturally timebound* passages of Scripture, e.g., when Paul commands slaves to obey their masters (Eph 6:5) or Paul's instructions on how women should behave in church (1 Tim 2:9-15). Advances in biblical studies will also help us to deal with some of the violent images of God found in the Old Testament.

As we read the Bible, we must keep in mind that there is an immense historical and cultural gap between the time when the books of the Bible were written and our time. One of the purposes of biblical scholarship is to help us recognize, understand and interpret the various literary forms in which the books of the Bible are written. When reading the newspaper, we approach the

editorial page, sports section and cartoons with different mindsets. We can be grateful that we have available to us today many user-friendly resources that make available to us the fruits of advances in biblical studies.

The Holy Spirit who inspired the original authors to write the books of the Bible continues to guide the Church in her role as guardian and interpreter of Scripture. Hence, we do well to read Scripture within our Church community, looking for her guidance as we dig deeper into the inexhaustible treasures of the Bible. (For more information on the Catholic approach to biblical interpretation, see [Article One](#) of my [series](#) on the books of the Bible).

Pause: What did you underline in the above section or what spoke to you most?

Sacred Tradition (USC p. 23)

The term Tradition is not an easy one to get one's arms around, mainly because it is used to connote several different things. Yet, understanding Tradition and its role in the *transmission* and *interpretation* of Divine Revelation is very important especially as we dialog with Christians who have what we might call a "Bible only" approach to what God has revealed to us. These are fellow Christians who do not accept the role of Sacred Tradition in the transmission and interpretation of divinely revealed truth. When it comes to the truths of Divine Revelation, they only look to the Bible. In contrast, for Catholics "Sacred Tradition and Sacred Scripture are like a mirror in which the pilgrim church on earth looks at God, from whom she has received everything" (*Divine Revelation* #7). Hopefully, the following will enhance your understanding of Tradition and the important role it plays in the life of our Church.

- The word Tradition literally means "what is handed on." Tradition refers to the process by which the message of Christ is transmitted from one generation to another. In the early days of Christianity, the transmission of God's Word occurred through the oral preaching of the Apostles, through the communal and worship life of the first Christians and through anything that contributed to the sanctification of the people (*Divine Revelation* #8).

In the early decades of Christianity, the Word of God (*Divine Revelation*) was not transmitted in *written form* because the books of the New Testament were not yet written. And after they were written, they were not available to all of the Christian communities, and they were not intended to contain *all* that Jesus said and did. John ends his gospel with these words: "There are many other things that Jesus did, but if they were to be described individually, I do not think that the whole

world would contain the books that would be written” (21:25).

When the books of the New Testament were written, they became an invaluable and infallible source of Divine Revelation. But Divine Revelation also continued to be passed on *orally* and in the communal and worship life of the Church. In his second letter to the Thessalonians, Paul writes: “*Hold the teachings that you have learned whether by word or letter of ours*” (2:15). When the term Tradition is used in the context of the early decades of Christianity, it is referred to as *Apostolic Tradition* because of its closeness to the time of the Apostles.

- In time, Sacred Tradition came to include the *writings of the early Church Fathers*. These writings are very important for a true and authentic understanding of God’s Word (both oral and written) because these men lived and wrote in the generations after the apostles. They were the recipients of what we called above *Apostolic Tradition*. They wrote and interpreted it for the people of their time. We can safely say that any interpretation of God’s Word that ignores the writings of the early Church Fathers is on shaky ground. When one reads today the stories of what is leading a significant number of Protestant ministers to journey home to the Catholic Church, one will quickly see that a big factor in their journey is the study of the early Church Fathers. (For more on this, see the *Journey Home* program on EWTN TV/Radio and the *Surprised by the Truth* books. For more information on the Fathers of the Church, see *The Fathers of the Church - An Introduction to the First Christian Teachers* by Mike Aquilina.)
- *Creedal statements of faith by early Church councils also became a part of Sacred Tradition*. As aspects of Christian belief were erroneously or falsely interpreted, the Church formulated creedal statements of faith like the Nicene Creed and the Apostles’ Creed. Such creedal statements helped the faithful to steer clear of false teachings and profess what was true doctrine.

Pause: Any questions or comments?

- The *dynamic element* of *Sacred Tradition*. The Catholic understanding of Tradition not only refers to a set of Christian beliefs received from the past, it also refers to how the Church throughout the centuries has, through prayer and study, *grown in her understanding* of what is passed on and handed down from one generation to another. This *growth in understanding* is always a “growth from partial to fuller vision, so what was believed continues to be believed, though its depths and consequences are more fully realized” (*The Teaching of Christ*, p.218). Each of us personally participates in this

growth in understanding of our Catholic faith whenever we take time to study and contemplate it.

For our global Church family, Vatican Council II and the years following it was a wonderful experience of growth in understanding Sacred Tradition. At the Council, the bishops aided by brilliant and dedicated theologians (and the Holy Spirit) came to a deeper understanding of every aspect of the Church’s life. This *growth in understanding* led to a host of new practices such as a greater involvement of the lay faithful in the liturgy and the life of the Church. We started to relate to and pray with other Christian churches and even with non-Christian religions. Our attitude towards the world was more open and less defensive.

Another aspect of Sacred Tradition is that Catholic beliefs that are only found in *seed form* in Scripture later blossomed as the Church continued to meditate on Scripture. Examples of this are beliefs about Mary (Art. 10) and about Purgatory (Art. 11).

- Having stated how some beliefs in our Church only fully developed over the centuries, it is very important to note that for Catholics, nothing in Tradition can be contrary to what is contained in the Bible. In fact, the Church must often examine her beliefs and practices in the light of Sacred Scripture. Having said that, it is also important to note that for Catholics, a belief or practice is only considered *non-scriptural* if it contradicts or is not in harmony with Scripture. For example, the pastoral practice of baptizing infants is not explicitly stated in the Bible. But neither is it forbidden. It is implied in Acts which speaks of whole households being baptized (Acts 16:33).
- The term Tradition is also used to refer to the whole *milieu in which the Scripture emerged and how the Church has interpreted* the Word of God down through the ages. It is a bit like the American Constitution. Scholars of the Constitution would not dream of interpreting it outside the context in which it was born or without studying how scholars have understood this document in the past 200 years. Of course, the one big difference in this analogy is that the Supreme Court does not have the Holy Spirit to guide it, whereas Jesus did promise the Holy Spirit to the Church to lead her to a greater understanding of his message and life (Jn 16:13).
- *Distinguishing Tradition from human traditions*. As we use the term Tradition, it is important that we distinguish it from human traditions (sometimes called tradition with a small ‘t’). The latter refers to man-made rules, customs and practices that are connected to core teachings of the Church but are not in themselves core Church teachings. For example, Catholic belief in the real presence of Jesus in the bread and wine at Mass is a

core Church teaching that cannot be changed. But *how* we celebrate the Mass belongs to human tradition. It can change from generation to generation. The Mass can be said in Latin or in the language of the people. People can receive Holy Communion in their hand or on their tongue. The sacrament of Holy Orders belongs to Tradition with a large T. The Church has no authority to state that it will no longer have this sacrament. But the practice of mandatory celibacy for all seeking ordination is a human tradition or belongs to tradition with a small t. The Church could and has ordained married men. When Jesus condemned traditions in the Bible (Mt 23), he was condemning human traditions that were an obstacle rather than a help to people in their relationship with God.

Pause: Any questions or comments? Can you see from the aforesaid that the written Word of God found in Scripture can only be fully appreciated and properly interpreted in the context of Sacred Tradition?

The role of the Church

When it comes to the transmission and interpretation of Divine Revelation, the role of the Church is to be protector and interpreter of God's Word. We can say that the Church's role is twofold: to protect the deposit of faith from false and erroneous interpretations (Acts 20:28-32) and to draw forth a deeper understanding of the spiritual treasures found in Divine Revelation.

When it comes to the Church protecting the deposit of faith from false interpretations and discovering its rich treasure, the lay faithful, theologians and the Church's Magisterium each has a valuable role to play.

The lay faithful. In the fifth century in Constantinople, Bishop Nestorius started to preach that Mary was not *Theotokos* (the Greek word for "Mother of God") but only the mother of the human Jesus. The lay faithful virtually revolted against their bishop's heretical teaching. When the Council of Ephesus condemned Nestorius and declared Mary the Mother of God, believers took to the streets enthusiastically chanting, "Theotokos! Theotokos!"

In our own time, we can say that the lay faithful involved in the Charismatic Renewal movement have helped our whole Church rediscover a new appreciation for the Holy Spirit and his gifts.

Theologians. Every era of the Church, beginning with the early Church Fathers, have been blessed with holy and brilliant theologians who have helped the whole Church come to a deeper understanding and appreciation of Catholic beliefs. The wonderful fruits of Vatican Council II were largely due to dedicated theologians who, in the decades previous to the Council, were

germinating many of the wonderful insights that eventually filled the documents of the Council.

The Magisterium. Catholics believe that the Holy Spirit enables the bishops in union with the pope to recognize God's Revelation. The Magisterium is a living source of discernment for our Church family. When it comes to the protection and interpretation of Divine Revelation and the life of the Church, the role of the Magisterium (the bishops' teaching in union with the Pope) is that of a watchdog of orthodoxy (right belief). Down through the ages, great theological battles have taken place concerning Church beliefs and practices. Sooner or later, it is the role of the Magisterium to step in and proclaim what theological opinions, pastoral practices or devotions are faithful or unfaithful to Sacred Tradition. (Hence the saying: *Roma locuta est, causa finita est*, or "Rome has spoken, the case is closed.") A recent example of this is the issue of the ordination of women to the priesthood. After much debate, the late John Paul II firmly stated that the Church had no authority to ordain women to the priesthood (more on this issue in Article 17 on Holy Orders). Since the beginning of Protestantism in the sixteenth century, Christianity has been divided into hundreds of new churches usually concerning the interpretation of Scripture. One of the inherent strengths of Catholicism is the ministry of the Pope who works with the Magisterium to protect the unity of our faith. Having a Bible without the Magisterium is like having a Constitution without the Supreme Court.

Pause: Any questions or comments? What might you have underlined?

Suggested action

If you are not a student of the Bible, consider purchasing a commentary on one or more books of the Bible to help your study. Or consider getting a daily devotional like *The Word Among Us* which has the readings used at daily Mass with a brief reflection on one of the two readings. (Tel. 1-800-775-9673)

Meditation

It is clear, therefore, that Sacred Tradition, Sacred Scripture and the teaching authority of the Church in accord with God's most wise design, are so linked and joined together that one cannot stand without the others, and that all together and each in its own way under the action of the one Holy Spirit contribute effectively to the salvation of souls. (Dei Verbum 10)

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INTRODUCTION TO THE CREED (C 185-197) (RCIA) THE MYSTERY OF GOD (C 198-267, USC Ch. 5)

I believe in one God.... (Nicene Creed)

Oh, the depths of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God! How inscrutable are his judgments and unsearchable his ways. (Rom 11:33-35)

“To fall in love with God is the greatest of all romances: to seek him, the greatest adventure: to find him, the greatest human achievement.” (St. Augustine)

In this article we will look at:

- Introduction to the Creed
- God’s Revelation of himself to Moses
- God of Truth and Love
- The Mystery of the Trinity
- Thomas Aquinas’ five proofs for the existence of God
- Other beliefs about God

Introduction to the Creed

In the Sept. 2009 issue of *Catholic Update*, Professor Scott Hahn writes:

A creed is an authoritative summary of Christianity’s basic beliefs. In the articles of the creed, we profess our faith in mysteries – doctrines that could never be known apart from divine revelation: that God is a Trinity of persons, that God the Son took flesh and was born of a virgin, and so on. If God had not revealed the mysteries of Christianity, the mysteries we rehearse in the creed, we could never have figured them out on our own.

A creed is not the totality of Christian faith. It’s a summary that stands for everything that is taught by the Catholic Church, which is itself one of the mysteries we proclaim in the creed. A creed is a symbol of something larger – and, ultimately, of Someone we love, Someone who loves us and makes us who we are, by means of creeds and other graces.

Most Catholic missals include the texts of the Apostles’ Creed and the Nicene Creed.

The *Apostles’ Creed* is based upon the most ancient formula used by the Church in Rome. We find it in various forms dating back to the 200’s.

The *Nicene Creed* is based upon the faith expressed at the first two ecumenical councils of the Church: the fourth-century Councils of Nicaea (325) and Constantinople (381).

The focus of lessons 3 through 11 will be the articles of the Nicene Creed.

God is Holy Mystery (USC p. 50-51)

To speak of God is a daunting task. Anything we say about God is very inadequate, for God is a Being always way beyond our human comprehension. The great

medieval doctor of the Church, St. Thomas Aquinas (1225-1274), knew this better than most. After writing several volumes of theology, Aquinas suddenly stopped writing after celebrating Mass one morning. When asked why he stopped, he replied, “I cannot go on...all that I have written seems to be like so much straw compared to what I have seen and what has been revealed to me.” Thomas also said, “This alone is true knowledge of God—to know that God is beyond knowing.”

Stating the above does not mean that the mystery of God is total darkness that shuts us out completely. After all, God became one of us in Jesus. In doing so, God unveiled for us something of the mystery of his being.

God reveals his name to Moses (C 203-227)

“God, who reveals his name as “I AM” reveals himself as the God who is always there, present to his people in order to save them.” (C 207)

“To disclose one’s name is to make oneself known to others; in a way it is to hand oneself over by becoming accessible, capable of being known more intimately and addressed personally.” (C 203)

When God appeared to Moses in the burning bush, he asked God his name. God answered: “I AM who AM.” The *Catechism* (C 206) tells us that this divine name is mysterious just as God is mystery. “It is at once a name revealed and something like the refusal of a name...” It tells us that God “is infinitely above everything that we can understand and say... and yet he comes very close to us.”

God’s mysterious name tells us that he is living and personal; that he is very close to us, in fact closer to us than we are to ourselves. No one could be closer to us than the God who creates, sustains and loves us. At the same time, God is “totally other,” totally beyond our comprehension, he is divine and perfect in every way. In theology, these attributes of God are often referred to as *transcendence* and *immanence* of God, the God who is beyond us and at the same time very close to us.

Pause: Do you have a favorite image of God? How has your relationship with God changed over the years?

Our God communicates himself to us through *deeds* and *words*. He reveals himself to us through creation. “The heavens declare the glory of God” (Ps 19:2). He most especially reveals himself to us through *Jesus*. God communicates with us in the depths of our hearts. Our challenge is to develop inner ears for God’s communications. In his spiritual autobiography, *The Confessions of St. Augustine*, Augustine writes about God’s closeness and his deafness and absence:

“Behold, you were within, and I abroad,
and there I searched for you;
I was deformed, plunging amid those fair forms,
which you had made.
You were with me, but I was not with you.
Things held me far from you – things which,
if they were not in you, were not at all.
You called, and shouted, and burst my deafness.
You flashed and shone, and scattered my blindness.
You breathed odors and I drew in breath
And I pant for you. I tasted, and I hunger and thirst.
You touched me, and I burned for your peace.”

Pause: How does the above quote speak to you?

A God of Truth and Love (C 214-221)

“He is the Truth, for ‘God is light and in him there is no darkness’; ‘God is love,’ as the apostle teaches.” (C 214)

God is Truth. Psalm 119:160 reads: “The sum of your word is truth; and every one of your righteous ordinances endures forever.” Since God is Truth, his words cannot deceive. His Word can be trusted and hence we can totally abandon ourselves to him. The *Catechism* (215) reminds us that the beginning of sin was Adam and Eve’s seduction by the tempter (“the father of lies”) who led them to believe that God’s Word could not be trusted. God’s Truth was fully revealed to us in Jesus who said: “I am the Way, the Truth and the Life” (Jn 14:6).

God is Love. In his first letter, John writes: “God is love ...this is the love I mean: not our love for God, but God’s love for us when he sent his Son to be the sacrifice that takes our sins away” (4:9-10). In the Old Testament, God’s love for Israel is compared to a father’s love for his son. His love for his people is stronger than a mother’s love for her children. God loves his people more than a bridegroom his beloved; his love will be victorious over even the worst infidelities...” (C 219). The core of God’s being is Love, the love the Father has for the Son and the Son has for the Father, a love so strong it becomes a third divine Person of the Trinity. To this central mystery of our faith we will now turn.

Pause: The Good News that Jesus came to bring is that God loves us unconditionally. What blocks us from believing this truth? What helps us to believe it not just in our heads but in the depths of our being?

The Trinity (C 238-267, USC P. 51-53)

“The mystery of the Most Holy Trinity is the central mystery of the Christian faith and life. It is the mystery of God in himself.” (C 234)

The mystery of the Trinity is not something to be understood, a puzzle to be solved. Rather it is a mystery

in terms of depths. It means that we can never say a final word about God; there is always more to discover and understand, always more to experience. Concerning the Trinity, the mystic Blessed Julian of Norwich said: “The Trinity is our Maker. The Trinity is our Keeper. The Trinity is our Everlasting Lover. The Trinity is our endless Joy.” Through study, faith, prayer, and community, we journey into the inner life of the Trinity. Let us now look at how God revealed himself to us as a trinity of persons.

God the Father. The Old Testament scriptures called God *Father* because he was the creator of the world: “Is he not your father who created you?” (Dt 32:6) God is also Father because of his covenant with Israel. “Israel is my son, my first born” (Ex 4:22).

The Father revealed by the Son (C 238-242). In John’s Gospel, Jesus calls God ‘Father’ forty-five times. In John 10:30, Jesus says: “The Father and I are one.” In John 14:8-10, Philip says to Jesus: “Master, show us the Father and that will be enough for us.” In response, Jesus says: “...To have seen me is to have seen the Father... Do you believe that I am in the Father and the Father is in me?” In these verses we see two things: a) that Jesus is the One who reveals the Father to us; b) that Jesus and the Father are one. Jesus is the divine Son of God. The *Catechism* (240) states: ‘Jesus revealed that God is Father in an unheard-of sense; he is Father not only in being Creator; he is eternally Father in relation to his only Son who, reciprocally, is Son only in relation to his Father: ‘No one knows the Son except the Father and no one knows the Father except the Son and anyone to whom the Son chooses to reveal him’.’”

The *Catechism* (239) also reminds us that the image of *mother* can also be applied to God – to express ‘the parental tenderness’ which the Creator has for his creatures. Of course, God, being pure spirit, is neither male nor female. He transcends human fatherhood and motherhood.

Pause: “Unless a child finds a little bit of God in his earthly father, he/she may have a difficult time connecting to God as Father.” Comment. Is it easy or hard for you to image God as mother?

Jesus reveals the Spirit (C 243-248). Towards the end of his public ministry, Jesus started to speak about the third person of the Trinity, the Spirit, whom he promised to send upon his followers: “I will ask the Father and he will give you another advocate to be with you always, the Spirit of Truth” (Jn 14:26). The fulfillment of this promise occurred on Pentecost when the Holy Spirit descended on the disciples gathered in the Upper Room (Acts 2:1-4). The *Catechism* (243) states: “...the Spirit will now be with and in the disciples, to teach them and guide them ‘into all truth’. The Holy Spirit is thus

revealed as another divine person with Jesus and the Father.”

The *Acts of the Apostles*, sometimes called the “Gospel of the Holy Spirit,” is a powerful account of the revelation of the Holy Spirit. (See article 7 for more on the Holy Spirit.)

While we will not find in the New Testament epistles a developed articulation of the doctrine of the Trinity, it is clear that the early Church community did believe in the mystery of three divine Persons in one God as the following two quotes testify. Paul ends his second letter to the Corinthians with this Trinitarian greeting:

“The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ and the love of God and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all.”

The opening verse of 1 Peter also expresses belief in a triune God. *“Peter, an apostle of Jesus Christ to the chosen sojourners of the dispersion... In the foreknowledge of God the Father, the sanctification by the Spirit, for obedience and sprinkling with the blood of Jesus Christ; may grace and peace be yours in abundance.”*

In the very early days of Christianity, belief in the Trinity was expressed in the sacrament of Baptism. In his Great Commission statement, Jesus told his Apostles: *“Go make disciples of all nations; baptize them in the name of the Father, and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit...”* (Mt 28:19).

Articulation of trinitarian dogma or belief (C 253-256)

During the first centuries, the Church sought to clarify its Trinitarian faith, both to deepen its own understanding of the faith and to defend it against the errors that were deforming it. This clarification was the work of the early councils, aided by the theological work of the Church Fathers and sustained by the Christian people’s sense of the faith. (C 250)

The *Nicene Creed*, (more accurately called the Nicene/Constantinople Creed after two important Church councils: Nicea 325 AD and Constantinople 381 AD), is one of the early Church’s first attempts to express the inexpressible. The *United States Catholic Catechism for Adults* states that the doctrine of the Trinity includes three truths of faith:

- *The Trinity is One. We do not speak of three Gods but of one God. Each of the Persons is fully God. They are a unity of Persons in one divine nature.*
- *The Divine Persons are distinct from each other. Father, Son and Spirit are not three appearances or modes of God, but three identifiable persons, each fully God in a way distinct from the others.*
- *The Divine Persons are in relation to each other. The distinction of each is understood only in reference to the others. The Father cannot be the Father without the Son, nor can the Son be the Son without the Father. The*

Holy Spirit is related to the Father and the Son who both send him forth. (p. 52-53)

Speaking about the doctrine of the Trinity, the late Pope John Paul II said: *“Even after Revelation it remains the most profound mystery of faith, which the intellect by itself can neither comprehend nor penetrate... The intellect, however, enlightened by faith, can in a certain way grasp and explain the meaning of the dogma.”*

Pause: Recognizing that the doctrine of the trinity — three distinct persons in one God — is beyond human comprehension, can you think of any images or analogies that you could use to give an inquirer some insight or glimpse into this great mystery?

The missions of the Persons of the Trinity (C 257-59)

Theologians often speak about the special missions or roles of each of the Persons of the Trinity in relationship to our eternal salvation. Hence, we speak of God the Father as *Creator*, the Son as *Redeemer*, and the Holy Spirit as *Sanctifier*, even though all three work together in carrying out these missions. When we praise and glorify one Person of the Trinity, we are praising and glorifying all three.

As stated earlier, the doctrine of the Trinity is not something to be understood, but to be revered and adored. In God who is Father, Son and Holy Spirit we live, move and have our being (Acts 17:28). God revealed his inner nature to us out of a motive of love and because his plan is to draw us into intimacy with the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. The *Catechism* (221) beautifully states: *“God’s very being is Love. By sending us his only Son and the Spirit of Love in the fullness of time, God has revealed his innermost secret: God himself is an eternal exchange of love, Father, Son and Holy Spirit and he has destined us to share in that exchange.”*

Trinitarian spirituality. If we pay attention to the official or liturgical prayers of the Church, e.g., the *eucharistic prayers* of the Mass, we will find that they are very trinitarian. We usually address our prayers to God the Father. We go to the Father through Jesus who is always praying in us. The Holy Spirit is the one who joins our prayers to the prayer of Jesus. Ideally, our personal spirituality is also trinitarian allowing us to have a personal relationship with the Father, Son and Holy Spirit, “remembering that the Trinity is our Maker, our Keeper, our Lover and endless Joy.”

St. Thomas Aquinas’ five proofs for the existence of God

During his life, Thomas Aquinas developed five proofs” for the existence of God. The *Catechism* (31) frames the Thomistic proofs with these words: *“These are called proofs for the existence of God, not in the sense of proofs in the natural sciences, but rather in the sense of ‘converging and convincing arguments’ which*

allow us to attain certainty about the truth.” The following is a brief summary of Aquinas’ five proofs.

The Unmoved Mover. Life is in motion (e.g. neutrons, electrons, protons, atoms, etc.). For life to be in motion, there must have been a “first mover” to get everything going. That “First Mover” is God.

First Cause. Nothing causes itself. An egg needs a chicken; children are caused by parents who are caused by their parents. If we keep going back, we must conclude that there must be a First Cause or Uncaused Cause which is eternal and whom we call God. Even those who accept the “big bang” theory as the origin of the universe must explain where the primeval matter that started everything came from. The only logical answer is an “Uncaused Cause.”

Everything Comes from Something. “Nothing” cannot create “something.” For the possibility of everything else to exist, by necessity there had to be something in existence first. That something we call God.

Supreme Model. There is something we call truest and best against which we measure everything else that is true and good. We can compare *degrees* of qualities like goodness, truth, beauty, justice, etc., to a Supreme Model. This perfect Model of goodness, truth and beauty is the perfect Being we call God.

Grand Designer. The order in nature isn’t just a happy accident. Reason moves us to conclude that there is a Grand Designer or a Great Intelligence who made it all. One we call God. C.K. Chesterton once said, “Show me a watch without a watchmaker, then I’ll take a universe without a Universe-Maker.”

Pause: Which of Aquinas’ “proofs” for God’s existence appeals to you most? How would you go about proving God’s existence to an unbeliever who is open to believing in God?

Other beliefs about God

There are many views of God held by people in our world. The following are some of them.

Deism. Deism is a child of the Enlightenment in the eighteenth century. Deists believe in God but deny that he plays any active role in their creation. He is like an absentee landlord. Some hold that *Deism* has been replaced today by *secular humanism* which sees no need for God or religious belief. We are self-sufficient and self-explanatory. Secular humanists make people and their achievements the center of their world.

Agnosticism. Agnosticism comes from a Greek word which is translated as “don’t know” or “no knowledge.” Agnostics hold that God’s existence cannot be proved or disproved.

Pantheism. Pantheists believe that God is in everything and that everything is God or is an aspect of God. Pantheists do not believe in a God who is separate from his creation. They do not believe in the transcendence or ‘otherness’ of God.

Atheism. Atheists deny the existence of God. They hold that God is just an excuse for what cannot be explained. As scientists explain the “mysteries” of the universe, we will have no need for the belief in God.

Polytheism. Polytheists are people who believe in many gods and goddesses. Polytheism was popular in ancient Rome and Greece.

Theism/Monotheism. Theists or monotheists believe in one God. Jews, Christians and Muslims are theists or monotheists. All of these three religions accept Abraham as their spiritual father and believe in the God of Abraham.

Christianity. Christians are Trinitarian theists. They believe in One God in whom there are three divine Persons.

Pause: What causes people today to lose all faith in the existence of God?

Suggested action

Take some time to contemplate the awesome truth that through baptism, the Trinity dwells in us and we dwell in the Trinity. Take time to not only read but contemplate this beautiful prayer by St. Catherine of Siena.

Meditation

*You, Eternal Trinity, are a sea so deep
that the more I enter in, the more I find;
and the more I find, the more I seek of you;
for when the soul is satisfied in your abyss,
it is not satisfied,
but it ever continues to thirst for you, Eternal Trinity,
desiring to behold you with the light of your light.
As the heart desires the springs of living water,
so does my soul desire
to leave the prison of this dark body
and to behold you in truth.
O how long shall your face be hidden from my eyes?
O abyss, O eternal Godhead, O deep sea!
Clothe me with yourself, Eternal Trinity,
so that I may run this mortal life
with true obedience,
and with the light of your most holy faith.
Amen.*

(St. Catherine of Siena)

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CREATION OF ALL THAT IS VISIBLE AND INVISIBLE (RCIA)

(C 279-421, USC Chs. 5-6)

In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth. (Gen 1:1)

*I believe in one God, the Father almighty,
Maker of heaven and earth, of all things visible
and invisible.*

(Nicene Creed)

In this article we will look at:

- Creation and evolution
- Creation of angels and fallen angels
- Creation of man and woman
- Mystery of evil and suffering
- The Fall – original sin

Creator of heaven and earth (C 279-301, USC p. 53)

The *U. S. Catechism* tells us that catechesis on creation is of major importance for it answers two important questions: where we came from and where we are going. As we search for meaning, these two questions are very important (p. 53).

God did not need to create the world. He was perfectly complete without it. God freely created our vast, majestic, and beautiful universe out of love. God also created the world out of nothing. He needed no pre-existing materials to do his marvelous work. We humans are here to enjoy God’s truth, goodness and beauty. God’s plan is that we should enjoy eternity in perfect union with him.

Creation and evolution (C 283-286, USC p. 57-58)

The German astrophysicist, Wernher von Braun, once said: *“Through science, man strives to learn more of the mysteries of creation. Through religion, he seeks to know the Creator.”* Catholics can believe that the human body evolved from lower forms of life – all part of God’s plan to form the world from the dust of the earth. But we do not believe that the soul evolved from matter. We believe that God breathes a soul into every person at the moment of conception (Gen 2:7). The *U.S. Catechism* states: *“Christian faith does not require the acceptance of any particular theory of evolution, nor does it forbid it, provided that the particular theory....does not deny....that God creates each human soul directly to share immortal life with him”* (p. 60).

Providence (C 302-308, USC p. 63). ‘Providence’ is the term used to describe the way God lovingly and mysteriously acts in creation to move it towards its final destination. (See also Mt 6:25-30 for a beautiful

description of God’s providential care of creation. See USC for examples of God’s providence at work in the lives of the late Pope John Paul II and Blessed Teresa of Calcutta.)

Pause: Do you tend to be a creationist (God created the world in seven days as Genesis states) or an evolutionist (humans developed from lower forms of life)?

Angels – creation of the invisible (C 328-336, USC p. 54)

Another fascinating aspect of the creation story is that we believe a reality exists that lies beyond our senses. The *Nicene Creed* tells us that God is the “maker of all that is visible and invisible.” Angels (from a Greek word meaning “messenger”) are a part of God’s invisible creation. The work or ministry of angels is described throughout the pages of Scripture. An angel prevented Abraham from sacrificing his son Isaac (Gen 22:11). An angel announced to Mary that she was chosen to be mother of the Messiah (Lk 1:26-38). An angel comforted Jesus in Gethsemane (Lk 22:43).

Angels were present at Jesus’ resurrection and ascension. Mt 18:10 indicates that each of us has been given an angel to protect and guide us here on earth. The *Catechism* (330) tells us that angels are spiritual beings with intelligence and will. Angels glorify God and work for our salvation. It is a wonderful and important spiritual practice to frequently seek the guidance and protection of our guardian angel.

Pause: Do you have a special angel story? Do you believe in guardian angels? Do you have a relationship with your guardian angel?

Demons – fallen angels

Even though God created all angels perfectly good and loving, some angels used their free will to rebel against God (C 392). They were driven out of heaven forever and into hell. Their leader is called Satan (a word meaning “accuser”) and the other fallen angels are called devils or demons. We might wonder if it is unfair of God to allow fallen angels to suffer in hell forever. Where is God’s mercy? The Church would respond that Satan and his fallen angels, with their great intelligence, fully realized the possible consequences of their actions. The *Catechism* (393) states: *“It is the irrevocable character of their choice, and not a defect in the infinite divine mercy that makes the angels’ sin unforgivable.”* Why God allows Satan and other fallen angels to tempt us and attack us is a mystery. If Jesus was not protected

from the temptations of Satan, neither should we, his disciples, expect to be spared from Satan's seductive influence. In battling Satan and all forms of evil in our world, we are participating in Jesus' battle against these forces.

When it comes to this piece of Christian belief and practice, we need to be aware of two things. First, the existence of Satan. Scripture tells us that he is the "most cunning" of God's creatures (Gen 3:1), that he is the "father of lies" (Jn 8:44), that he sometimes comes to us as an "angel of the light" (2 Cor 10:14). Satan's purpose is our destruction. The second thing we need to be aware of is that Satan cannot pull us away from God without our cooperation. If we keep our eyes on Jesus and put on the "armor of God" (Eph 6:10-17), we can resist the temptations and attacks of Satan.

Pause: Do you believe in the existence of Satan, in an evil being that wants to destroy us and our relationships, especially our relationship with God? Why might people not believe in the existence of Satan?

Creation of man and woman (C 355-384, USC p. 67-68)

*God created man in his image...male and female
He created them. (Gen 1:27)*

In figurative and symbolic language, scripture describes God creating the first man and woman, Adam and Eve, and placing them in Paradise. They were created for friendship with God and in harmony with creation. (USC p. 37)

Human beings are the crown of God's visible creation because we are created "in the image and likeness of God." What does this mean? It means that we have capabilities that go beyond all other creatures. We have self-awareness and self-knowledge. We alone are capable of knowing God and freely choosing to love him with our whole being. This is why God created us – to know and love and serve him here on earth and to enjoy him forever in heaven.

Physical and spiritual beings (C 362 - 368). At the time of our conception, the combined DNA of our human parents created our *physical body*. At the same moment, God breathed a *soul* into us, a spiritual principle that animates our whole being and gives us the capacity to know and love God. Our soul is immortal and completely united to our body, forming a single human nature.

Created for Love (C 372). Preface three of the *Marriage Ritual* states: "Love is our origin, love is our constant calling, love is our final fulfillment in heaven." God created us for friendship with him and to form a loving community with other men and women. God created the

woman because "it was not good for the man to be alone." Man and woman were **created equal** and intended to be helpmates to each other in the journey of life. They were not created to compete with each other but to form a **loving partnership**. When men and women live in loving community, they reflect the communal life of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

Stewards of creation (C 358, 373). Creation is God's gift to us (C 358). Our call is to enjoy and appreciate this gift of God and allow it to draw us closer to our Creator. In the creation story, the man and woman are given "dominion over the birds of the air and over every living thing that moves upon the earth" (Gen 1:28). *Dominion* over the earth does not mean that we are to use the earth selfishly and destructively. Rather, it means that we are to be **good stewards** of God's creation. God is counting on us to protect and use the earth's resources wisely and to share them especially with the poor and the hungry. In their pastoral letter, *Faithful Citizenship* the United Conference of bishops state: "We show our respect for the Creator by our stewardship of God's creation. Care for the earth is a duty of our faith and a sign of our concern for all people.... We have a moral obligation to protect the planet on which we live... we should work for a world in which people respect and protect all of creation and seek to live simply in harmony with it for the sake of future generations."

Pause: How important to you is protecting the environment? Should the Christians be talking more about this issue?

The reality of evil (C 309-314, USC p. 56-57)

The *Catechism* speaks of *two* kinds of evil: physical and moral. *Physical evil* has to do with physical and mental diseases and the destructive forces of nature, e.g. hurricanes, tsunamis, etc. *Moral evil* refers to sin, the way we misuse our freedom to bring evil into our world. When God created us, he gave us a free will so that we could *freely* choose to love him and follow his ways. By the same token, we can choose to reject God and his ways thereby bringing *moral evil* into the world. There is no mystery here – only the perplexity of why humans choose self over God.

On the other hand, *physical evil* is a great mystery – the mystery of why an all-good and all-powerful God would allow disease and the destructive forces of nature to sometimes wreak havoc on our lives. As creation moves towards its final state of perfection, God allows physical evil to coexist alongside physical good (C 310-311). Why is this?

The *Catechism* (309) tells us that there is no easy answer to this question. But we do know that a full and active involvement in our Christian faith will help us immensely, not only to cope with evil and suffering, but also even grow as we deal with them, helping us to become more like Christ who suffered so much at the hands of sinful humanity.

While we do not know why God permits evil and suffering, we do know that he wishes to draw good out of them. For example, when Joseph met his brothers who sold him into slavery, he said to them: “*It was not you who sent me here. It was God.... You meant evil for me, but God meant it for good, to bring it about that many people should be kept alive*” (Gen 45:4-8). Joseph’s faith perspective helped him to see the hand of God bringing good out of intended evil. This is also our challenge. We also know from the greatest moral evil ever (the crucifixion of Jesus) came the greatest good, namely, the salvation of humanity. Because of the resurrection, Christians believe that the forces of good will eventually triumph over the forces of evil. As creation journeys towards its final destination and perfection, our challenge is to trust in God’s providential care for us, to trust that God knows what he is doing. Our challenge is to develop a faith perspective that will help us to embrace the wisdom found in this poem:

The Weaver

*My life is but a weaving between my Lord and me.
I cannot choose the colors he worketh steadily.
Oft times He weaveth sorrow and I in foolish pride
Forget He sees the upper, and I, the underside.
Not till the loom is silent and the shuttles
cease to fly, shall God unroll the canvas
and explain the reason why
the dark threads are as needful
in the Weaver’s skillful hand
as the threads of gold and silver
in the pattern He has planned.*

(Author Unknown)

Finally, we should remember that Satan always wants to use our experience of evil and suffering to separate us from God. God wants to use them to draw us closer to him.

Pause: When you witness great suffering or evil in the world or in your life, what helps you to cope with it and to make sense out of it? What are your thoughts on the ‘Weaver’ poem?

The Fall – original sin (C 385-421, USC p. 68-70)

*By one man’s disobedience many (that is all)
were made sinners.* (Rom 5:12)

We have seen how God created the world good and created the man and the woman very good. We might say that prior to the fall, “all was rosy” in the garden of Paradise. Then as we move to chapter 3 of Genesis, we read the sad account of how Adam and Eve used their free will to disobey God’s command to not eat the fruit of the tree in the middle of the garden (Gen 2:15-17). The tree of knowledge of good and evil symbolizes the limits human beings have as creatures. We are not free to do as we like.

We do not need to believe that Genesis is a historical account of how sin entered the world. The *Catechism* (309) states: “*The account of the Fall in Genesis 3 uses figurative language, but affirms a primeval event, a deed that took place at the beginning of the history of man.*”

The purpose of the author was not to give us an eye witness account of *how* sin entered the world, but rather to tell us that sin or moral evil entered the visible world when our first parents used their gift of free will to disobey their creator. Evil entered the unseen world when some angels rebelled against God.

Adam and Eve’s sin of disobedience had consequences for them personally and for all of humanity. The following are five consequences that Adam and Eve experienced: (Before reading the consequences, the group should pause and read Genesis 3.)

- The harmonious relationship which existed between God and them is destroyed. They fear God and hide from him (Gen 3:8).
- The loving relationship between the man and the woman is damaged. There is tension as they refuse to take responsibility for their sin. The “blame game” sets in (Gen 3:11-13).
- The *inner* harmony which the man and the woman enjoyed prior to the fall is shattered. They are ashamed of their bodies and sexuality. They cover themselves with fig leaves (Gen 3:7). The body and soul which previously enjoyed a peaceful relationship, now war against each other. St. Paul frequently speaks about the conflict between body (flesh) and soul (spirit) in his writings (e.g. Rom 7:14 – 8:13).
- The peaceful relationship with creation is also shattered (Rom 8:13-23). Creation and nature becomes a hostile environment. Henceforth, the woman will experience pain in childbirth and work will be a burden for man (Gen 3:16-19).
- Finally, because of original sin, suffering and death enter the world: “You are dust and to dust you shall return” (Gen 3:19).

In short, we might say that the *harmony* that God intended for all of his creation was badly damaged by Adam and Eve's sin. Gen 3 ends with the expulsion of Adam and Eve from the Garden. But before their expulsion, there is a ray of hope announced in Gen 3:15, often called the *Protoevangelium* (the first good news). The offspring of a woman of our race would strike at the head of Satan and ultimately defeat him. Many of the early Church Fathers have seen the woman mentioned in Gen 3:15 as Mary, the "new Eve" who would give birth to the new Adam, Jesus, who would offer salvation to a fallen humanity.

Pause: What spoke to you most in the section that we have just read? Why?

Born with original sin, born with a wounded human nature

"Adam and Eve transmitted to their descendants human nature wounded by their own first sin and hence deprived of original holiness and justice; this deprivation is called "original sin." (C 417)

The phrase "original sin" was coined by St. Augustine in the fifth century – a reality which Paul speaks about in Rom 5:12-21. The Church teaches that the sin of Adam and Eve had consequences for all of humanity. This is a mystery that we cannot fully comprehend. A partial answer lies in the fact that the whole human race is connected. *"Because of the unity of the human race, everyone is affected by the sin of our first parents"* (USC p.70). Just as a physical defect in a parent's DNA can be transmitted to a child, so did Adam and Eve transmit to their descendants a *spiritual defect*.

What is the nature of this spiritual defect, or what is original sin? It means that each of us is born with a human nature that has a certain *inclination towards sin*. Original sin means that our natural powers for relating to God and choosing good have been weakened, and our emotions and passions are disordered. We live with a certain resistance to the Holy Spirit.

As a result of original sin, we find ourselves engaged in a spiritual battle between the forces of good and evil. Paul shares with us his own struggle in this area in Rom 7:14-25 where he talks about his "failure to do the good he wants to do and how he finds himself doing the evil he hates." As we ponder the impact of original sin on us, we may ask: Doesn't the Church teach that baptism removes original sin from our soul? Responding to this question, Fr. McBride in his *College Catechism* (p.63) writes: *"The Church, following the development of St. Augustine on this matter, teaches that we are born good, but flawed, because we are deprived of the gifts of original holiness and justice. Hence there is need to be born again of water and the Holy Spirit in Baptism.*

The sacrament removes the deprivation caused by original sin and introduces us to the life of God in grace. But Baptism does not erase the damage due to original sin. That is why we speak of the traces or wounds of the primal sin that remain. We require growth in spirituality and moral virtues to be liberated from the damage" (P 63).

As we who are baptized struggle with our own selfish, greedy, revengeful and lusty tendencies and with our resistance to the Spirit, we quickly see how the traces of original sin remain within us.

Pause: The Church's doctrine on original sin means that while we are born loved by God, we are also born flawed or with a tendency towards sin. Do you find this doctrine easy or hard to believe?

The gift outweighs the fall

In Rom 5:12-21 Paul states that "Adam prefigured the One to come" and that the gift of grace and salvation brought by Jesus "considerably outweighs the fall." During the Easter Vigil *Exultet*, we sing, 'O happy fault, O necessary sin of Adam, which gained for us so great a Redeemer.'" In fact, we can say that Jesus by his life, death and resurrection, has won the battle against sin and evil. We just need to decide which side we are on. In our next two articles, we will focus on Jesus, his ministry, death and resurrection.

Suggested action

Take time to appreciate the beauty and majesty of God's creation. Also reflect on how you and others are created in God's image.

Meditation

*Father, all-powerful and ever-living God,
we do well always and everywhere
to give you thanks.
All things are of your making,
all times and seasons obey your laws.
But you chose to create man and woman
in your own image,
setting them over the whole world in all its wonder.
You made us stewards of creation,
to praise you day by day
for the marvels of your wisdom and power,
through Jesus Christ our Lord,
we praise you, Lord, with all the angels
in their song of joy.*

(Creation Preface, Sunday Missal)

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JESUS (PART ONE) (RCIA)
SON OF GOD, SON OF MARY, FULLY HUMAN, FULLY DIVINE
(C 422-486, 512-570, USC Ch. 7)

The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us... (Jn 1:14)

... *I believe in one God,
the Father almighty,
maker of heaven and earth,
of all things visible and invisible.
I believe in one Lord Jesus Christ,
the Only Begotten Son of God,
born of the Father before all ages.
God from God, Light from Light,
true God from true God,
begotten, not made, consubstantial with the Father;
through him all things were made.
For us men and for our salvation
he came down from heaven,
and by the Holy Spirit was incarnate of the
Virgin Mary, and became man.*

(Nicene Creed)

“At the heart of Christianity is a provocative claim: *In Jesus Christ, God has become a creature, without ceasing to be God and without compromising the integrity of the creature he becomes.*”

(Francis Cardinal George, O.M.I.)

In this article we will look at:

- Why the Word became flesh
- Jesus’ hidden years
- His public ministry
- His humanity and divinity
- His names and titles

In his book *Catholic Christianity*, Peter Kreeft writes: “The Incarnation was the most astonishing of all God’s acts, the most surprising, unforeseeable, unimaginable thing that ever happened. The immortal God, who has no beginning or end, became a mortal man, with a beginning (he had a mother!) and an end (he died). The Author of all of history stepped into the drama he created and became one of his own characters, without ceasing to be the Author. The Creator became a creature. He whom the world could not contain was contained in a mother’s womb’ (St. Augustine). No man ever dreamed this could happen” (p. 69).

Why the Word became flesh

The *Catechism* (457-460) gives us four reasons:

- *The Word became flesh in order to reconcile us to the Father.* “It is as if the governor voluntarily became a prisoner and went to the electric chair in place of the condemned murderer, to set the murderer free” (ibid. p. 74).
- *The Word became flesh to reveal to us God’s love.* “God’s love for us was revealed when God sent into the world his only Son so that we could have life through him...” (1 Jn 4:9).
- *The Word became flesh to be our model of holiness.* Jesus came to show us how to love God and others, especially the sick and marginalized members of society.
- *The Word became flesh to make us partakers of God’s divine nature.* When the priest or deacon pours drops of water into the wine during Mass, he quietly prays: “By the mystery of this water and wine, may we come to share in the divinity of Christ who humbled himself to share in our humanity.”

The hidden years

We know very little about the first thirty years of Jesus’ life. He was born in a stable in Bethlehem. With his parents he was a migrant (perhaps an undocumented one) in Egypt for some years. Then he returned to Nazareth where he lived with his parents as a member of a local community.

Commenting on these hidden years of Jesus’ life, the *Catechism* (531) states: *During the greater part of his life Jesus shared the condition of the vast majority of human beings: a daily life spent without evident greatness, a life of manual labor. His religious life was that of a Jew obedient to the law of God, a life in the community. From this whole period it is revealed to us that Jesus was “obedient” to his parents and that he “increased in wisdom and in stature, and in favor with God and man.*

Before Jesus exploded on the public scene, it is good for us to remember that he lived thirty years of his life in obscurity, becoming holy in and through the daily tasks of life.

Did Jesus have brothers and sisters? There are references in the scriptures to the brothers and sisters of Jesus (Mk 6:3). What are we to make of this? Catholic Tradition holds that Mary was always a virgin and did not give birth to other children. Also,

scriptures that refer to Jesus' so-called brothers and sisters use a word that also means *cousins*. Even in our own day, some cultures refer to relatives as brothers and sisters. If Mary had other children, it is unlikely that Jesus would have asked John to care for his mother (Jn 19:27). Another explanation of the reference to Jesus' brothers and sisters is this: that Mary married a widower, Joseph, who had children from his first marriage. The first book written about Mary in 150 AD, *Protoevangelium of James*, states that Mary married a widower, Joseph, who had children from a previous marriage. In this case, the brothers and sisters of Jesus were in fact his stepbrothers and stepsisters. The Eastern Church, which dates back to the Apostles, has always accepted this interpretation.

Pause: What can we learn from reflecting on the private or hidden years of Jesus' life?

The public ministry

Jesus' public life or ministry begins with his Baptism. Amazingly, Jesus chooses to stand in line on the bank of the River Jordan to receive a "sinner's baptism" (Mt 3:13-17). In and through this action, Jesus was joining himself to sinful humanity whom he would free from sin through his embrace of the cross and his Resurrection. Jesus' reception of the Holy Spirit would empower him to preach and teach with authority in a way that touched the minds and hearts of people, heal the sick, cast out demons, embrace the sinner and outcast, confront secular and religious leaders and, most of all, embrace the will of the Father in all things, even to the point of dying as a criminal on a cross.

The Kingdom of God. Scholars tell us that the theme of Jesus' teaching and mission was the inauguration and proclamation of the Kingdom of God, sometimes also called the "reign of God" or the "kingdom of heaven." In Mk 1:15, Jesus says: "*This is the time of fulfillment. The kingdom of God is at hand. Repent and believe in the gospel.*"

The kingdom of God is not an earthly or territorial kingdom. It is a spiritual reality that exists wherever men and women embrace Jesus and his gospel vision of life. God's kingdom is "*a kingdom of truth and life, a kingdom of holiness and grace, a kingdom of justice, peace and love*" (Preface for *Solemnity of Christ the King*).

"The Kingdom of God is his presence among human beings calling them to a new way of life as

individuals and as a community. This is a Kingdom of salvation from sin and a sharing in divine life. It is the Good News that results in love, justice, and mercy for the whole world. The Kingdom is realized partially on earth and permanently in heaven. We enter this Kingdom through faith in Christ, baptismal initiation into the Church, and life in communion with all her members" (USC p. 79-80).

In Lk 13:18-19, Jesus says: "*What is the kingdom of God like? To what can I compare it?*" Then he goes on to compare it to a mustard seed that grows into a large bush. Jesus created several parables to reveal to us something of the nature of the reign of God. In Mt 13:44-46, Jesus says: "*The reign of God is like a treasure buried in a field which a person finds and hides again, and out of joy goes and sells all that he has and buys that field.*" From these verses we can see that becoming part of God's kingdom is the most important decision one can make. It is worth giving up all so that one can be a part of God's kingdom.

To enter the kingdom of God, one has to undergo a radical change of mind and heart. In Mt 7:21, Jesus says: "*Not everyone who says to me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only the one who does the will of my Father in heaven.*" While all were invited to join the kingdom—Jew and Gentile, rich and poor, saint, sinner and outcast—not all would accept. Ironically, the religious leaders who should have helped to open the hearts of their people to Jesus, very often resisted Jesus and his message. Others allowed the worries of the world and the lure of riches to distract them from embracing Jesus and his Word (Mk 4:15-18). Finally, the kingdom or reign of God will be brought to fulfillment when God gathers all humanity around his Son in union with the triune God (C 541-542).

Pause: What speaks to you or challenges you most in this section? Why?

Jesus as Teacher. The Gospel of Matthew presents Jesus as the New Moses coming to inaugurate the kingdom of God on earth—to give us a New Law or teaching intended to bring the teaching of the Old Testament to fulfillment (Mt 5:17). In all of Jesus' teaching, his *Sermon on the Mount* (Mt 5-7) holds a privileged place, and within the Sermon on the Mount, the *Beatitudes* (Mt 5:1-12) holds a special place. The radical nature of Jesus' teaching is found in his Great Sermon and in other parts of his Gospel.

For example, the truly blessed are not the powerful and rich but the little ones, the unimportant people,

the meek, the peacemaker, the compassionate. Those who wish to belong to the kingdom of God must be ready to forgive not once or twice but seventy times seven. They must understand the passing value of earthly possessions and be always ready to share them with the less fortunate. Leadership in God's kingdom is not an opportunity to dominate others but to serve them. Children of the kingdom must be ready to embrace the cross knowing that in laying down our lives, we gain abundant life.

Pause: What words of Jesus do you find most comforting? What words do you find most challenging?

Miracles and exorcisms. *Jesus accompanied his words with signs and miracles to bear witness to the fact that the kingdom is present in him, the Messiah.* (Compendium Catechism of the Catholic Church # 108)

During his public ministry, Jesus healed the sick, raised the dead, calmed mighty storms, walked on water, and cast out demons. In and through these mighty deeds, Jesus was communicating many things:

- Jesus' miracles and exorcisms were a tangible sign that the kingdom or reign of God had come into the world in the person of Jesus, the long awaited Messiah. In *John's* Gospel, miracles of Jesus are called *signs*, signs of a deeper reality. For example, the miracle of the loaves and fishes (Jn 6:1-15) is a sign of God's abundance and of Jesus' desire and readiness to satisfy the spiritual hunger of people.
- Miracles, healings and exorcisms were a sign of God's compassion for suffering people and of God's desire to bring wholeness to their lives. When Jesus healed lepers, it was a sign of God's desire to restore the outcast to society and to their communities.
- Miracles, healings and exorcisms were also a sign of Jesus' power over sickness, death, nature and evil.

Pause: What is your favorite miracle story in the Gospel? Why?

Jesus - fully human, fully divine (C 464-483, USC 81-83)

The unique and singular event of the Incarnation of the Son of God does not mean that Jesus Christ is part God and part man, nor does it imply that he is the result of confused mixture of the divine and the human. He became truly man while remaining truly God (C 464).

Fully human. Nine months after his conception, Jesus was born just like any other baby. He *gradually developed* in his human nature. He had to learn to walk and talk and learn all the other human skills. He had a normal human body with five senses. He got hungry, thirsty, laughed, cried, felt pain. He had a human soul which possessed an intellect and will. Jesus had human emotions like we do. He had DNA, genes, chromosomes, etc. Only in his divine nature did he enjoy divine powers, such as the ability to walk on water, multiply bread, give sight to the blind, raise the dead.

His divine nature did not give him a "leg up" on us when it came to dealing with human difficulties like grief, fear, rejection. His temptations not to follow God's will were real; otherwise, they would not have been true temptations. In Heb 4:15-16, we read these words: "*For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but one who has similarly been tested in every way, yet without sin.*"

Fully divine. Even though Jesus possessed a divine nature from the moment of his conception in the womb of Mary, no one knows for certain at what point in his life Jesus became aware that he was the eternal Son of God. We can say that he did know during his public ministry. In Mt 11:27, Jesus says: "*All things have been handed over to me by my Father. No one knows the Son except the Father and no one knows the Father except the Son and anyone to whom the Son wishes to reveal him.*"

In Jn 8:58, Jesus says: "*I tell you solemnly, before Abraham ever was, I AM.*" The term "*I AM*" was reserved for God (Ex 3:14). Jesus' Resurrection from the dead is of course the great testimony of his divinity. Billions of people throughout history have staked their belief in the divinity of Christ on this event.

Pause: What events in Jesus' life manifest his humanity? How might a passionate belief in the humanity of Christ impact one's prayer life and relationship with Jesus?

The struggle to protect an important truth and express it in human language. As Christianity spread and developed, some people in the community started to question the true identity of Christ. A priest call Arius denied the divinity of Christ, teaching instead that Jesus was the "adopted" Son of God. He had a *similar* substance to God the Father, but *not* the *same* substance. This heresy called *Arianism* was very widespread in the fourth century and embraced by many bishops, priests and laity.

Another heresy called *Docetism* denied the *humanity* of Christ. It maintained that Jesus only pretended to be human. Early church councils (Nicaea, Chalcedon & Constantinople) met to deal with doctrinal issues, like the true identity of Christ and the doctrine of the Trinity. Long debates and theological battles took place as theologians and bishops fought over the identity of Christ.

Finally, those who believed that Jesus was fully and truly human and fully divine won the day. Then they were faced with the unenviable challenge of finding human language to express the mystery of Christ's humanity and divinity. The *Nicene Creed*, which was written at the Councils of Nicaea in 325 and Constantinople in 381, is one of the first attempts of our Church leaders to express the inexpressible. This is the Creed that we recite every Sunday at Mass.

It is important to state that creeds and other doctrinal statements that deal with the mysteries of our faith are *not* an attempt to *explain* a particular doctrine, but rather they are statements of faith intended to *protect* the faith of the Church. If anyone teaches anything contrary to our creedal formulations, they are regarded as false teachers or heretics. Having said that, we can also say that it is the challenge of theologians in every age to find new and fresh ways to *express* in human language the truths of our faith.

Pause: What is your favorite image of Jesus in the gospels? Why?

Names and titles of Jesus (C 430-455)

In the Scriptures, we notice that the second person of the Blessed Trinity is given several names and titles. Let's look briefly at some of them and see what they tell us about Jesus and his mission.

Jesus. The name Jesus comes from a Hebrew word which means "God saves" or "God is salvation." At the Annunciation, the angel Gabriel gave this name to Mary— a name which reveals to us Jesus' mission, namely, to save humanity from sin and death.

Christ. Christ means "Anointed One" of God or *Messiah*. The Messiah was the anointed one through whom all God's promises made through the prophets were fulfilled.

Lord. In the Hebrew Scriptures, the title Adonai (Hebrew for Lord) referred to God. As Christians became aware of Jesus' divinity, they started to call him *Lord*.

Son of God, Son of Man. Jesus is the unique Son of God. "*The Father and I are one*" (Jn 10:30). The title 'Son of Man' is borrowed from Dan 7:13 which means two things: the humanity of Christ and his role as Judge and Savior through whom God will fully establish his kingdom at the end of time.

Suggestions for action

1. This week, confine your prayer to the Second Person of the Trinity.
2. As you go about your daily work and chores, talk to Jesus and check to see if you really believe that he appreciates everything you are going through.

MEDITATION

Christ, the Son of God made man, is the Father's one, perfect, and unsurpassable Word. In him he has said everything; there will be no other Word than this one. St. John of the Cross, among others, commented strikingly on Heb 1:1-2: *In giving us his Son, his only Word (for he possesses no other), he spoke everything to us at once in this sole Word—and he has no more to say....because what he spoke before to the prophets in parts, he has now spoken all at once by giving us the All Who is His Son. Any person questioning God or desiring some vision or revelation would be guilty not only of foolish behavior but also of offending him, by not fixing his eyes entirely upon Christ and by living with the desire for some other novelty.*

(Catechism of the Catholic Church, 65)

*As I begin this day
become flesh again in me, Father.
Let your timeless and everlasting love
live out this sunrise to sunset
within the possibilities and impossibilities
of my own, very human life.
Help me to become Christ to my neighbor,
food to the hungry, health to the sick,
friend to the lonely, freedom to the enslaved,
in all my daily living.*

(J. Barrie Shepherd)

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JESUS (PART TWO) (RCIA)

SALVATION IN CHRIST – DEATH RESURRECTION AND ASCENSION

(C 571-667, USC Ch. 8)

*... For our sake he was crucified
under Pontius Pilate;
he suffered, death and was buried,
and rose again on the third day
in accordance with the Scriptures.
He ascended into heaven
and is seated at the right hand of the Father.*

(Nicene Creed)

In suffering and death his humanity became the free and perfect instrument of his divine love which desires the salvation of men. (C 609)

Unless a grain of wheat falls to the ground and dies, it remains just a grain of wheat, but if it dies it produces much fruit. (Jn 12:24)

In this article we will look at:

- Death of Jesus - was it God's will?
- "He descended into hell"
- Resurrection and its meaning
- Ascension and its meaning
- "Are you saved?" - a Catholic response

Chapters 1 and 2 of Genesis tell us about the creation of the first man and woman. God created them not because he needed them but in order to share his divine life with them. Paradise is the image often used to speak of the peace and harmony that Adam and Eve enjoyed before they sinned.

Chapter 3 of Genesis recounts the sad story of their fall from grace. They choose to allow Satan, imaged as a cunning serpent, to trick or seduce them into disobeying God. The result is that they are banished from paradise. They have broken their relationship with God. Gen 4-11 tells the story of the spread of sin. "*God saw that the wickedness of man was great on the earth, and that the thoughts in his heart fashioned nothing but wickedness all day long*" (Gen 6:5-6).

History of salvation. "History of salvation" is the phrase often used to describe God's plan to redeem the human race that had forgotten its Maker and rebelled against him.

- The first step in God's plan to save humanity was the call of Abraham, as recounted in Gen 12:1-4.
- The high point in the history of our salvation is the Incarnation, death and Resurrection of Jesus. In some of his writings, Paul calls Jesus the New Adam (1 Cor 15:45).

The Church teaches us that Jesus saved and reconciled humanity to God in and through his death and Resurrection. Since God could have saved humanity in any number of ways, one may wonder why he would choose the cruel death of his Son. We may wonder what kind of a God would save his people by having his only Son die like a criminal. In Rom 11:33, Paul reminds us of the "inscrutable and unsearchable ways of God."

To be executed on a cross even though one is innocent is *the worst* thing that can happen to a human being. God is willing to allow this to happen to his only Son to show his solidarity with suffering humanity. Only the worst criminals are crucified and now the all-holy God is executed between two of them. Such is the extent of God's outreach to humanity. *As the mediator of salvation, Jesus endured torment of body and anguish of spirit. He knew agony, terror and depression... He was truly one with the human condition*" (Diane Bergant).

Pause: What are your thoughts on God's choice of a cruel death on the cross as his way to save humanity? What might have been in God's mind?

In what sense was it not God's will for Jesus to die on the cross? (C 606-623, USC pp. 91-94)

Jesus is executed because he is a big threat to the Jewish establishment (C 574). *Some* of the leadership want to get rid of Jesus and they manipulate Pilate into doing their dirty work. Needless to say, it would be a gross error to blame *all* the Jewish people for the death of Jesus. So Jesus is executed because his enemies want to get rid of him. In this sense, his death is an evil act. It would be a contradiction to say that our all-good God would desire such an evil act. Secondly, it would be wrong to say that God wants a human sacrifice as a price for the sins of humanity. We know from the incident with Abraham and his son, Isaac, that God is very much opposed to human sacrifice (Gen 22:1-19).

In what sense is Jesus' death God's will?

It is God's will that Jesus be faithful to his mission even if it means dying a cruel death. Jesus could easily have escaped death by *not* saying or doing things that threatened the religious leaders. He could have preached a safe gospel. But then he would not have been faithful to his mission. A true prophet says and does what he believes to be true even if it will cost him his life. We see this with the Old Testament prophets.

The examples of Mahatma Gandhi, Dr. Martin Luther King and Archbishop Oscar Romero, will be helpful here. All three felt called by God to carry out a certain mission—to be liberators of their people and to speak truth to power. All three were assassinated or executed for their “crime.” All three knew that they, like Jesus, would most likely pay the ultimate price for their fidelity to their mission. They could easily have escaped death by preaching a safe message. But in doing so, they would be unfaithful to God and to their mission. So they continued to preach a message that endangered their lives.

Did God will for them to die? “No” and “yes.” All three people died because their enemies wished to get rid of them. It certainly was not God’s will that evil people kill good men. God’s heart would be deeply grieved by such an event. But it was God’s will that all three be faithful to their mission even if it meant sacrificing their lives for the liberation of their people. In this sense God willed the death of Gandhi, King and Romero. But we also know that God always turns the table on such evil acts. The deaths of Gandhi, King and Romero brought about significant progress in the liberation of their people from oppression.

Their sacrificial deaths give us some glimpse into the significance of the death of Jesus. Because he is God in human form, his death is infinitely more valuable for all of humanity. Looking at the death of Jesus in this way does not make God a bloodthirsty God. Rather, it makes him someone who wants us to be faithful to the truth we know. Looking at Jesus’ death in this way helps us to see that we are saved by an act of *sacrificial love*. God takes what is intended as an evil act and uses it to save the world.

In one of his poems, Irish poet William Butler Yeats uses the phrase “Terrible Beauty” to speak about the death of Christ. It is *terrible* in the sense that it symbolizes what evil people will do to stop goodness from moving forward. The cross is *beautiful* in that it symbolizes what Jesus is willing to do to show his love for sinful humanity.

Pause: What speaks to you most in the section that we have just read? Can you call to mind an example of sacrificial love and how it impacted your life?

The meaning of the cross for us

- Never again need we look upon sacrificial love as useless. Sacrificial love always bears fruit whether we live to see it or not. The world is always better because of sacrificial love.
- The cross might scare us from speaking truth to power. But it should also *inspire* us to do so. St.

Rose of Lima once said: “Apart from the cross, there is no ladder by which we get to heaven.”

Pause: Before Jesus died, he cried out: “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” What might Jesus have been experiencing at that moment? Can you name other examples of spiritual suffering?

“He descended into hell.”

The Apostles’ Creed states that Jesus “descended into hell.” What does this mean? When addressing this issue, we need to distinguish *Sheol* or *Hades* (the realm of the physically dead) from *Gehenna* (the realm of the spiritually dead, the eternally damned). The *Catechism* states: “*Jesus, like all people, experienced death and in his soul joined the others in the realm of the dead* (632).

The *Catechism* further states: *Scripture calls the abode of the dead, to which the dead Christ went down, “hell”—Sheol in Hebrew or Hades in Greek—because those who are there are deprived of the vision of God. Such is the case for all the dead, whether evil or righteous, while they await the redeemer: which does not mean that their lot is identical, as Jesus shows through the parable of the poor man Lazarus who was received into “Abraham’s bosom.” “It is precisely these holy souls, who awaited their Savior in Abraham’s bosom, whom Christ the Lord delivered when he descended into hell.” Jesus did not descend into hell to deliver the damned, nor to destroy the hell of damnation, but to free the just who had gone before him* (633).

So the phrase “descended into hell” means that Jesus really died and rested among the dead for some time.

In addition, Jesus in his spirit went to preach the good news to all who had died prior to his Resurrection (1 Pt 3:18-19). Commenting on these strange verses in Peter’s letter, the *Catechism* states: “*The gospel was preached even to the dead.*” *The descent into hell brings the Gospel message of salvation to complete fulfillment. This is the last phase of Jesus’ messianic mission, a phase which is condensed in time but vast in its real significance: the spread of Christ’s redemptive work to all men of all times and all places, for all who are saved have been made sharers in the redemption* (634).

Pause: Any questions or comments on the *Catechism’s* explanation of the phrase ‘he descended into hell’?

Resurrection – an historical and transcendent event (C 639-647, USC pp. 94-95)

“If Christ has not been raised, then our preaching is in vain and your faith is in vain ... and you are still in your sins” (1 Cor 15:14-19). The Catechism calls the Resurrection of Jesus from the dead an historical and transcendent event (639-647).

A historical event. The Resurrection was a *historical event* in that it really happened. Even though Jesus, during his earthly life, did speak about his Resurrection from the dead, his Apostles were in no way expecting it to happen. In fact, it took them some time to believe what seemed unbelievable (C 644). In 1 Cor 15:5-8, Paul testifies to the many appearances of Jesus: to Peter, to the Twelve, to more than 500 people, to James and to himself. His Resurrection was so real for these people that many of them were willing to be martyred rather than deny the truth which they witnessed.

A transcendent event. While the Resurrection of Christ is believed by Christians to be a real historical event, it is also regarded to be a transcendent event, one beyond the realm of history. No one witnessed the Resurrection; none of the evangelists described it. Though Jesus could be seen, heard and touched, his Resurrection is, in the end, a religious mystery which requires the gift of faith to accept.

Christ’s glorified body— what was it like? Christ’s glorified body was both the *same* and *different* from his pre-Resurrection body. It was the same in that he could be seen and touched and able to eat a meal (Jn 21:12-14). In Lk 24:38-39,41, the disciples are startled when Jesus appears to them. Jesus says to them: *“Look at my hands and my feet, that it is I myself. Touch me and see, because a ghost does not have flesh and bones as you can see I have.”*

Yet Jesus’ glorified body is *very different* in that he is not limited by time and space. In Jn 20:19-20, Jesus appears to his disciples even though the doors are locked. As he walks with the two disciples on the journey to Emmaus, they do not know who he is (Lk 24:16). But a little later, when he breaks bread in front of them, “their eyes are opened” as to who he is. But then he suddenly “vanishes from their sight” (ibid.24:31).

The Resurrection— its meaning for Jesus, for the Apostles and for us (C 651-55)

For Jesus: If Good Friday is the world’s big “No” to Jesus and all that he said and did, Easter morning is God’s big “Yes” to Jesus and all that he said and did. It is God’s affirmation of Jesus’ life, passion and death.

“The Resurrection above all constitutes the confirmation of all Christ’s works and teachings” (C 651).

For the Apostles and disciples of Jesus, the Resurrection is, among other things, hope restored. In the alternate *Opening Prayer* for Easter Sunday Mass, we find these words: *God our Father, creator of all, today is the day of Easter joy. This is the morning on which the Lord appeared to men who had begun to lose hope and opened their eyes to what the scriptures foretold: that first he must die, and then he would rise and ascend into his Father’s glorious presence.* For the Apostles and for us with the eyes of faith, Christ’s Resurrection is the great testimony to his divinity (C 652).

For us, Christ’s victory over sin, evil and death gives the promise and power to share in his victory. Baptism is our participation in Christ’s victory. Fidelity to our baptism gives us the promise of sharing in Christ’s life here on earth and sharing his life forever in heaven. We may only realize how great this promise and gift is when we meet a person who has no faith in Christ and no belief in an afterlife.

Christ’s passion, death and Resurrection are the pattern for our own journey. With the eyes of faith, we find meaning for our sufferings in the sufferings of Christ. We trust that at the end of every dark tunnel, Christ’s light awaits us. Furthermore, as we lay down our lives in the service of others, we open ourselves to receiving God’s abundant life. In the same way, as we empty ourselves of all selfish tendencies, we are filled with the life of the risen Christ. As we struggle to overcome addictions and sin in our lives, we share in Christ’s victory over sin and destruction.

Pause: What are some examples today of good overcoming the forces of evil (e.g., Nelson Mandela overcoming the evil system of Apartheid)?

Ascension into heaven (C 659-662, USC p.96)

“So then the Lord Jesus, after he spoke to them, was taken up into heaven and took his seat at the right hand of God” (Mk 24:19). When we hear the phrase “took his seat at the right hand of God,” it is not intended to paint heaven as some place in the sky where Jesus is seated by God’s right hand. The phrase is intended to convey that Jesus, the glorified Christ, is Lord of the universe and is equal in power and dignity to God the Father. From there he constantly intercedes for us with his Father.

The Ascension event concludes Jesus’ ministry on earth. It brought his human body and soul into the Trinity. As a result of the Ascension, the second Person of the Trinity is forever human as well as divine.

The Ascension event does not mean that Jesus has abandoned us. The last words of Matthew’s Gospel has Jesus saying: *“Know that I will be with you always until the end of time.”* Jesus is present to us through the Holy

Spirit, in and through the liturgical celebrations of our Church, and wherever two or three are gathered in his name.

What is the paschal mystery? (C 571-573, USC pp.93-94). In Catholic theology, *paschal mystery* refers to Jesus' passion, death, Resurrection and Ascension. The term "paschal" refers to his "passover" from death to new life. The term "mystery" reminds us that when we speak and write about these events, we are dealing with events too profound for the human mind to grasp. Finally, theologians remind us that Jesus' paschal mystery, his dying, rising and glorification, should be seen as one event. They are interconnected. Without the Resurrection, Christ's death would have been in vain. In our Christian journey, there can be no Easter without calvary. Death to sin and selfishness is the precondition to sharing in the new life in Christ (Jn 12:24-26). We live the paschal mystery when, in cooperation with God's grace, we do the hard work of dying to sin and selfishness so that his new life can grow in us.

Pause: The Church tells us that the spiritual life is patterned after the dying and rising of Christ. God always wants to bring good out of the bad and painful events of our lives. Can you think of a time when this happened in your life?

What is salvation in Christ? We often say that Jesus saved us or brought us salvation by his death and Resurrection. What do we mean by this? In his book *This is our Faith*, Michael Pennock answers the question in this way:

"When we speak of salvation we mean the good and happiness that God intends for us, the healing of our hurts, the attainment of God's peace. Salvation is the mending of broken relationships that keep us alienated from God and other people. It is the showering of God's blessings and attention, God's grace, adoption into the divine family, the sharing of his life with us. Salvation means the forgiveness of our sins and redemption from the power of evil and death" (p. 64).

Are you saved?—a Catholic response

Many Protestants can tell you the date they were saved. And most of them believe "once saved, always saved." What about Catholics—what do we believe about this issue? To the question: "Have you been saved?" Catholics have a threefold answer:

- *Yes, I have been saved* by Jesus in whom I have placed my faith. In and through Baptism, I am a new creation in Christ.
- *Yes, I am being saved* by the grace of my Lord whom I look to for the grace of perseverance.

- *Yes, I hope to be saved* and trust that I will if I remain faithful to my God. Having said that, many Catholics today can point to some experience or period of time when God, Jesus and the Holy Spirit became real and personal to them. In fact, we can say it is essential that everyone baptized as an infant ratify or say a personal "yes" to their baptism into the Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

As to the ism "once saved, always saved," Catholics believe that one can lose one's salvation. It only makes sense to believe that if one can freely choose Jesus as Lord and Savior, one can also reject him. In the book of Ezechiel, we read these words: *"If the virtuous man turns from the path of virtue to do evil – he shall die"* (18:34). In Ph 2:12, Paul encourages his readers to persevere, "to *continue* to do as I tell you and work for your salvation in fear and trembling."

Pause: When did God's or Jesus' presence in your life become real for you? What difference did the new relationship make in your life?

Action suggestions

1. Spend sometime this week praying before the cross of Christ.
2. Be aware of times when you are asked to die to yourself for the sake of a better good.
3. Be aware of little victories or triumphs or resurrections in your life, e.g. victory over a selfish tendency or over an addiction, resurrection from dark moments.

Meditation

Let us stretch ourselves, going beyond our comfort zones to unite ourselves with Christ's redemptive work. We unite ourselves with Christ's redemptive work when we make peace, when we share the good news that God is in our lives, when we reflect to our brothers and sisters God's healing, God's forgiveness, God's unconditional love. Let us break bread together. Let us relive the holy and redemptive mystery. Let us do it in memory of him, acknowledging in faith his real presence on our altars. (Words from Sister Theresa Bowman, a week before she died of cancer.)

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THE HOLY SPIRIT - Our Divine Guide and Strength (RCIA) (C 687-747, USC Ch. 9)

The Advocate, the Holy Spirit that the Father will send in my name ...he will teach you everything and remind you of all that I told you. (Jn 14:26)

*...I believe in the Holy Spirit,
the Lord, the giver of life,
who proceeds from the Father and the Son,
who with the Father and the Son is adored
and glorified,
who has spoken through the prophets...*
(Nicene Creed)

In this article we will look at:

- The Spirit in the Old Testament
- The Holy Spirit in the life of Jesus
- The Holy Spirit in the early Church
- Gifts of the Holy Spirit
- Fruits of the Holy Spirit
- Names, images, symbols of the Holy Spirit
- Developing a relationship with the Holy Spirit

The Holy Spirit is God's *greatest gift* to help us transform our lives into the likeness of Christ. To be unaware of the Holy Spirit or not to have a relationship with him would be a huge loss in our spiritual lives.

The Spirit in the Old Testament (C 705-716)

The word spirit is from the Hebrew word *ruah*, which is usually translated as *breath, air* or *wind*. In Gen 2:7 we read: "... *the Lord God formed man out of the clay of the ground and blew into his nostrils the **breath of life**, and so man became a living being.*" In the Old Testament, the Spirit of God is not revealed as a person, but as a divine force which transforms people and makes them capable of exceptional deeds, and acts as God's instrument in the lives of the people of Israel. "*Breath and spirit*" signifies the dynamic force under which a person acts. In 1Sm 6:13 we read how the "Spirit of the Lord comes mightily upon David" when Samuel anoints him.

The Spirit of the Lord is seen as a charismatic force when it comes upon the Judges of Israel (Jgs 3:10, 6:34, 11:29). The Spirit of the Lord settles upon the prophets enabling them to proclaim God's Word (Is 61:1, Jer 1:4). In the Old Testament, the Spirit of God is only given to *some* people: prophets, priests and kings, and only *partially*. After Pentecost, the Spirit is bestowed on *all* the people and no longer "by measure" but in his *fullness*. In Isa 11:2-3, the prophet says: "*The spirit of the Lord shall rest upon him, a spirit of wisdom and of understanding, a spirit of counsel and of strength, a*

spirit of knowledge and of fear of the Lord." These are the seven Gifts of the Holy Spirit that we learned about when preparing for the sacrament of Confirmation. These are permanent blessings that incline us to respond to the Holy Spirit's promptings and movement in our lives.

- **Wisdom** helps us to look at reality from God's point of view.
- **Understanding** enables us to reflect on the deeper meaning of our faith.
- **Knowledge** shows us how God is working in our lives and in the world.
- **Counsel** (right judgment) helps us to form our conscience in the light of Scripture and Church teaching.
- **Strength** (fortitude) emboldens us to follow our convictions.
- **Piety** moves us to respect the dignity and worth of others.
- **Fear of the Lord** (wonder and awe) instills in us respect for God and awareness of sin in our lives.

A climactic reference to the Spirit in the Old Testament is found in Joel 3:1-3. Writing about 400 BC, Joel prophesied a great new age of the Spirit: "*After this I will pour out my spirit on all mankind. Your sons and daughters shall prophesy, your old men shall dream dreams and your young men shall see visions. Even on slaves, men and women, will I pour out my spirit in those days.*"

Pause: Which of the above-mentioned gifts of the Spirit do you most desire in your life? Why?

The Holy Spirit in the Life of Jesus (C 727-730)

Jesus comes to inaugurate this new age of the Spirit. Lk 1:35 tells us that Jesus is conceived in the womb of Mary through the power of the Holy Spirit. During John the Baptist's preaching ministry, he baptizes people with *water* but tells them that the one coming after him will baptize with the *Holy Spirit* (Mt 3:1-12). At the beginning of Jesus' public ministry, he is anointed with the Holy Spirit (Mt 3:16).

In Lk 4:14, we are told that Jesus returns to Galilee in *the power of the Spirit*. Shortly after that, he pays a visit to the synagogue in his hometown. He unrolls the scroll and quotes a passage from Is 61:1-2: "*The Spirit of the Lord is upon me because he has anointed me to bring glad tidings to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim liberty to captives and recovery of sight to the*

blind, to let the oppressed go free and to proclaim a year acceptable to the Lord.”

Rolling up the scroll, Jesus says: *“Today this Scripture passage is fulfilled in your hearing”* (Lk 4:14-21).

The Spirit has empowered Jesus in many ways throughout his public ministry, e.g., to preach and teach with authority, heal the sick, raise the dead, cast out demons, spend nights in prayer, speak God’s truth to both religious and secular authorities, embrace the will of God no matter what the cost. As Jesus’ ministry progresses, he starts to speak about sharing his spirit with his followers: *“I will ask the Father, and he will give you another advocate to be with you always, the Spirit of truth”* (Jn 14:26). *“The advocate...will teach you everything and remind you of all that I told you”* (Jn 14:25). In Acts 1:5, Jesus says: *“John baptized you with water, but in a few days you will be baptized in the Holy Spirit.”* Jesus even exhorts: *“It is to your advantage that I go away, for if I do not go away, the Counselor [the Holy Spirit] will not come to you...”* (Jn 16:7).

The Spirit’s presence in our lives is even better than if we had Jesus physically present with us. Why is this? “Christ himself can be more intimately present to us through his Holy Spirit than he was bodily to his Apostles. They knew him better— more intimately and more accurately *after* he left them and sent his Spirit. This is clear by comparing the Apostles, especially Peter, in the Gospels, with the same Apostles in Acts” (Peter Kreeft). Jesus promises to send the Holy Spirit as teacher, guide and consoler.

Pause: How have you experienced the Holy Spirit’s presence in your life?

The Holy Spirit and the early Church

“When the time for Pentecost was fulfilled, they were all in one place together. And suddenly there came from the sky a noise like a strong driving wind, and it filled the entire house in which they were. Then there appeared to them tongues as of fire, which parted and came to rest on each one of them. And they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in different tongues, as the Spirit enabled them to proclaim” (Acts 2:1-4).

These verses are the fulfillment of Joel’s prophesy and Jesus’ promise to baptize (immerse) people with the Holy Spirit. The impact of the Spirit on the disciples is so powerful that Peter had to give a homily explaining what is happening (Acts 2:14-41). He tells them that people are witnessing the fulfillment of God’s promise in their lives. Peter’s first homily is a great success. *“Those who accepted his message were baptized and*

about 3,000 persons were added that day” (Acts 2:33). Not bad for the gruff fisherman who has never spent a day in a homiletics class.

The *Acts of the Apostles*, sometimes called the “Gospel of the Holy Spirit,” is a wonderful account of how the Holy Spirit is indeed a real mover and shaker in the early years of Christianity. As in the case of Jesus, the Holy Spirit empowers the Apostles to:

- teach and preach with authority (2:4)
- work signs and wonders (5:12)
- be fearless when arrested by the authorities (5:17-32)
- accept martyrdom for the sake of Jesus and die forgiving their executioners (7:54-60)
- develop a wonderful fellowship, moving many to sell all they had and give to the community (2:32-37)

Acts 15 is an account of the first Church Council, the Council of Jerusalem. During this important event, the Apostles are very aware of the presence and guidance of the Holy Spirit (15:28).

Pause: Assuming that you have a personal relationship with the Holy Spirit, what helped you to become aware of the Holy Spirit’s presence in your life? How would you describe your current relationship with the Holy Spirit?

Gifts of the Holy Spirit

A Spirit who gifts his Church for ministry (C 799-801, 1987-1989). *“As each of you has received a gift, use it to serve one another as good stewards of God’s varied grace. Whoever preaches, let it be with the words of God; whoever serves, let it be with the strength that God supplies, so that in all things God may be glorified through Jesus Christ ...”* (1Pet 4:10-11).

To enable the universal Church, the diocesan Church and local Church to be truly the Body of Christ and carry forth his mission in the world, the Holy Spirit blesses the Church with a multitude of gifts for ministry. The Gifts of the Holy Spirit are sometimes called *charisms*, a Greek word which means gift. A charism enables us to build up the body of Christ in our local or global world. In the New Testament Epistles, we find several references to the gifts or manifestations of the Holy Spirit.

The most extensive teaching on the Gifts of the Holy Spirit is found in 1Cor 12-14. In these important chapters, Paul makes many significant points concerning the Gifts of the Holy Spirit and their role in the Church which he calls the Body of Christ.

1. In 1Cor 12:7, Paul declares: *“to each individual the manifestation of the Spirit is given for some benefit.”* Traditionally, the phrase “for some benefit” has been interpreted to pertain to the local

church or community. As such, the Holy Spirit does not give us gifts to build up *our* own kingdoms, but to build up the *Kingdom of God* to strengthen the Body of Christ.

2. There is a *diversity* of gifts. Paul names some of the gifts in 1Cor 12:8-10, e.g. wisdom, healing, prophecy, tongues, mighty deeds. Other Gifts of the Spirit are named in 1Pt 4:10-11 and Rom 12:3-8.
3. Unity and diversity. In 1Cor 12:4, Paul stresses that all gifts come from the same Spirit. *“There are different kinds of spiritual gifts but the same Spirit, there are different kinds of service but the same Lord, there are different workings but the same God who produces all of them in everyone.”* In the Corinthian community, the exercise of the Gifts of the Spirit has become divisive and a cause for jealousy. In his body analogy (12:7-26), Paul tells us that all the parts of the body are important, and all are needed for the proper functioning of the whole body. So it is in the Body of Christ that the many Gifts of the Spirit are to be used—not to cause division but to bring unity and strength to the Body of Christ.
4. In 1Cor 13, Paul reminds the Corinthians and us that all gifts must be used with love and that the greatest gift of all is love. Without love, we are nothing but “noisy gongs” (13:1). A challenge for each of us is to spend some time in prayer reflecting on what gift(s) the Holy Spirit has blessed us with, what we are doing, or what we can do to develop our gifts, and how we are using our gifts to bless our parishes and communities.

Pause: What gift of the Spirit has the Lord blessed you with? Is there a particular gift that you wish you had?

Can we imagine how powerful our parishes would be if every baptized person was in tune with his/her manifestation or gift(s) of the Spirit, and if everyone worked and prayed hard to *develop* his/her gifts and then shared them generously with the local communities. Our parishes would be blessed with gifted teachers and preachers, gifted administrators, prayer warriors, leaders, hospitality ministers, people to lead and organize social justice ministries, etc. Most parishes today need a lot more formation when it comes to helping people to be aware of the Gifts of the Holy Spirit and helping them to *develop* and *share* their gifts.

Pause: What Gifts of the Spirit do you see in operation in our parish? What Gift of the Spirit is not in operation, that you wish it was?

Fruits of the Holy Spirit - signs of holiness (C 2012-2016)

The presence and operation of the Gifts of the Spirit are *not* necessarily tangible signs of holiness. If we want to see what a *holy* person looks like, look for the presence of what St. Paul calls the ‘*Fruits of the Spirit*.’ Paul lists nine fruits: *love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control* (Gal 5:22-23). In contrast to these tangible signs of holiness, Paul lists fifteen signs of the “fruits of the flesh”: envy, selfishness, anger, divisiveness, hate, etc. (5:18-21). Paul gives us these “two orchards” to help us to see if we are living our lives in the spirit of Christ or in the spirit of the world.

Pause: Which of the nine Fruits of the Spirit is most operative in your life? Which fruit do you wish you could do better at?

Names, images and symbols of the Holy Spirit (C 691-701)

In the scriptures we find several names, images and symbols referring to the Holy Spirit and his activity in the world. The following are some of them:

Wind. The Spirit is frequently symbolized as wind: the wind blowing through the valley of dry bones, reconnecting them and breathing new life into them (Ez 37:4-10); the wind blowing through the house where the disciples are gathered at Pentecost (Acts 2:1-4). In Jn 3:8, Jesus says: *“The wind blows where it chooses, and you hear the sound of it, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. So it is with everyone born of the Spirit.”* In these words, Jesus is saying to us that the Spirit is present among us in an invisible but very active way. We cannot control the Spirit’s presence, but we can experience his presence and activity in our lives and in our world.

Fire. Fire has the potential to destroy, purify and transform. So does the presence of the Spirit within us. He can help us to overcome the destructiveness of sin, purify us of ungodly behaviors, and transform us into the likeness of Christ. Fire also gives light. Jesus gave us the Holy Spirit to enlighten us about the true ways of God. He is our divine inner light. On Pentecost Sunday, the “tongues of fire” which descended on the Apostles gave them the power to speak in many languages.

Water. Water, like wind and fire, has no definite shape, but it is the nourishing matrix of all life. Life on earth began in the seas and human life begins in the water of the womb. In Ez 36:25-26, God promises that the people will be renewed in the Spirit as by a refreshing shower: *“I will sprinkle clean water upon you ...”* In

Jn 4:14, Jesus promises the Samaritan woman the gift of the Spirit through the metaphor of “living water.” In Jn 3:5, Jesus says to Nicodemus: “*Amen, Amen I say to you, no one can enter the Kingdom of God without being born of water and the Spirit.*” The Church has taken these words to refer to the sacrament of Baptism which destroys sin in us and floods us with the new life of God. The waters of Baptism initiate us into the Church, the Body of Christ, and bestows on us the Gift of the Holy Spirit.

Dove. In the story of the Great Flood (Gn 7-8), a dove released by Noah returns to the Ark with an olive tree branch to show that the flood waters are receding. At Jesus’ baptism, the Holy Spirit descends on him in the form of a dove. The dove image may have symbolized the end of the reign of sin and its destruction. It also symbolizes peace. In Jesus, harmony between heaven and earth will be restored and the waters of death will recede before him.

Advocate/Paraclete. *Advocate* is a term ascribed to a defender in court, a vindicator (Job 19:25). Jesus tells his disciples not to worry on what they will say in court for he would grant them an Advocate who will inspire them. The Advocate is also called the Spirit of Truth (Jn 16:14-26), the one who will lead the Church into the fullness of the truth that Jesus comes to bring. This Advocate is our comforter and guide as we journey through life.

Laying on of hands. The gesture of laying on of hands is usually performed by one or more persons praying for one or more persons for the imparting of the Spirit (Acts 8:17, 19:6). It is also associated with ordination (1Tm 4:14) and with invocation for healing of the sick (Acts 9:12).

Pause: Which of the above images or symbols of the Spirit appeals to you most? Why?

Developing a relationship with the Holy Spirit

Attentiveness and responsiveness to the Spirit. One way to describe the goal of spiritual life is to become more attentive and responsive to the promptings of the Holy Spirit in our daily lives. The more attentive and responsive we grow to the invitation of the Holy Spirit, the more we will become like Jesus. How can we facilitate this growth in our lives?

- *Develop a reflective lifestyle.* It has been rightly said that an unreflective life is not worth living. Take time out for “reflective pauses” in the flow of our day to ask the questions: What is going on in this situation? What might God be saying to me in this experience? Taking time to sit with these questions is an excellent

way to develop a reflective lifestyle which will help us to become more in tune with and responsive to the Spirit’s presence and activity in our lives and in the world.

- *Connect with others who have a strong relationship with the Holy Spirit.* We can make this connection through reading or by joining a small group of people who seek to live God-centered lives.

Pause: Name one thing you can do to improve your relationship with the Holy Spirit.

Action suggestions

If you have a strong relationship with the Holy Spirit, be grateful and pray that it continues to grow. If not, consider acting on some of the suggestions in this article to develop a formidable bond with the Third Person of the Holy Trinity.

Meditation

The Spirit comes gently and makes himself known by his fragrance. He is not felt as a burden, for he is light. Rays of light and knowledge stream before him as he approaches. The Spirit comes with a tenderness of a true friend and protector to save, to heal, to teach, to counsel, to strengthen, to console. The Spirit comes to enlighten our mind and through [us], the minds of others....

As light strikes the eyes of one who comes out of darkness into the sunshine and enables him to see clearly things he could not discern before, so light of the Spirit floods our souls and enables us to see clearly things...beyond the range of human vision, things hitherto undreamed of.

(St. Cyril of Jerusalem)

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THE CHURCH (PART ONE) (RCIA)

Sacrament of God's Love and Salvation

(C 748-810, USC Ch. 10)

You are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people of his own so that you may announce the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light. (1Pet 2:9)

The church is essentially both human and divine, visible but endowed with invisible realities, zealous in action and dedicated to contemplation.

(Catechism of the Catholic Church 771)

This is the first of two articles on the Church. In this article we will look at:

- The Church as planned by God, founded by Jesus, and led by the Holy Spirit
- The Church as mystery
- Images of the Church
- Membership and ministries in the Church
- Leadership and authority in the Church

In Part Two, we will look at the *Four Marks of the Church: one, holy, catholic and apostolic.*

In English we use the word “church” to refer to a building where people gather to worship, or to a community of believers. The community of believers may be a local parish or diocese, or a universal community all connected because of their faith in Jesus as Lord and Savior. The word *church* originated from Hebrew and Greek words which can be translated as “assembly” or “called forth.” Through Jesus and his message, God calls forth a community of believers who enter into a covenant relationship with him and with each other. Within the context of Catholicism, “the word church means the people gathered by God into one community, guided by bishops who are successors of the Apostles and whose head is the Bishop of Rome, the Pope” (USC p.113).

Planned by God, founded by Jesus, led and sanctified by the Holy Spirit (C 758-769, USC 113-115)

The Catholic Church believes and teaches that God created the world so that we could share in the life and love that exists between the Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

God the Father prepared for the Church with the call of Abraham (Gen 12:1-4) and the formation of the people of Israel (Ex 19 & 20). Israel, as a consecrated people, foreshadows the Church.

In God's own time, he sent **Jesus** into the world to establish the Church which came about as a result of Jesus' preaching and his suffering, death and Resurrection. In Mt 16:17-19 Jesus explicitly speaks of his plan to establish the Church: “*You are Peter and upon this rock I will build my church and the gates of the netherworld shall not prevail against it.*” The *Catechism* states that the Church was born on the cross: “*As Eve was formed from the sleeping Adam's side, so the church was born from the pierced heart of Christ hanging on the cross*” (C 766).

But the Apostles and disciples of Jesus need the enlightenment of the **Holy Spirit** to awaken them to what Jesus has done on the cross, and to help them realize that they are the New Israel who has now entered into a new covenant relationship with Christ.

In Mt 28:19-20, Jesus commissions his Apostles to go forth and make disciples and baptize them in the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. In *Acts* we see Peter and other disciples acting on Jesus' command. His message is preached and people are called to repent. Those who respond are baptized and a community of disciples is born.

Today we refer to this process as the beginnings of the Church. As we read the *Acts of the Apostles*, sometimes called the “Gospel of the Holy Spirit,” we notice how much the Holy Spirit is present and active in the early Church. Down through the 2,000 years of her history, the Holy Spirit continues to guide the Church despite the sinfulness of her members and despite attacks from without. *The Holy Spirit maintains the stability, durability, and continuity of the church both in favorable and unfavorable historical circumstances*” (USC p. 115).

Pause: *What strikes you as most important about the origins of the Church?*

The Church as mystery (C 770-773, USC 112)

When the bishops of the world gathered together in Rome for Vatican Council II (1962-65), they produced sixteen documents, the most important of which is the *Dogmatic Constitution on the Church*, also called *Lumen Gentium*, or “Light of Nations.”

The opening chapter of *Lumen Gentium* is called *The Mystery of the Church*. The Church, like the Trinity, is a mystery which human reason alone cannot comprehend. The mystery of the Church lies in the reality that she is one and, at the same time, both visible and spiritual. It is easy to see the *visible* dimensions of the Church—buildings, the pope, bishops, priests, lay faithful, ministries, etc. But only a person of faith can recognize the invisible or spiritual dimension of the Church—the presence of the Trinity in her.

Jesus proclaims that he will be with the Church at all times to the end of the world. Jesus sends the Holy Spirit to guide and empower the Church to continue his mission. Without faith, we are unable to see this presence of God in the Church.

Five images of the Church (C 781-786)

Because the Church, like Jesus her founder, is a mystery where the human and divine meet, she cannot be defined; she can only be described or envisaged. *Lumen Gentium* (paras. 6,7,9) offers many beautiful scriptural images of the Church. We will now look at some of these images that help us to gain some insight into the mystery of the Church.

***The Church as the people of God* (C 791-786, USC p.116).** The primary image used by the bishops at the Second Vatican Council to describe the Church is “People of God” (*Lumen Gentium*, ch 2). This representation is deeply rooted in Scripture. In the Old Testament, we find God calling and forming the people of Israel into his own special people and entering into a covenant relationship with them. The people of Israel understood themselves to be the people of God (Ex 6:7).

The first Christians who were Jews continued to see themselves as God’s “Chosen People” who had now entered into a new covenant relationship with him. Speaking to the first Christians, Peter says: “*You are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, and God’s own people*” (1Pt 2:9). This new people of God was to be universal in nature embracing all races and cultures. One is not born into this people through physical birth but through faith and baptism.

***The Church as the Body of Christ* (C 787-795, USC p. 118).** The “Body of Christ” image of the church is drawn from the writings of St. Paul. In 1Cor 12:12, 27, Paul writes: “*For just as the body is one and has many members and all the members of the body though many, are one body, so it is with Christ... Now you are Christ’s body and individually parts of it.*”

This image of the Church especially stresses the intimate connection between Christ and the Church—something Paul experiences firsthand when he had his conversion moment on his journey to Damascus. During his trip, Jesus appears to Paul and says: “*Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?*” (Acts 9:4). In persecuting the Church, Saul is also persecuting Christ.

This image of the Church should help us to remember that when we separate ourselves from the Church, we are also separating ourselves from Christ who is the Head and life of the Church (Eph 4:15). The Body of Christ representation of the Church also reminds us that every member of the Church is important to her life and mission (1Cor 12:15-17). Everyone is endowed by the Holy Spirit with gifts needed for building up of the Body of Christ.

***The Church as the Bride of Christ* (C 796).** In his letter to the Ephesians (5:21-33), Paul compares the relationship between Christ and the Church to that between husband and wife. “*Husbands, love your wives just as Christ loves the Church and gave himself up for her*” (5:25). This spousal image of the Church also reflects the wonderful intimacy that exists between Christ and his Church. It is the Bride of Christ image that the Church is traditionally referred to as “she.”

***The Church as the Temple of the Holy Spirit* (C 797-798).** Quoting St. Augustine, the *Catechism* states: “*What the soul is to human body, the Holy Spirit is to the Body of Christ, which is the Church*” (C 797). The Holy Spirit is the source of the Church’s life, unity, gifts and special graces—given to the Church so that she may proclaim Jesus and his message to the world. Just as one cannot separate the Church from Christ, neither can one separate the Holy Spirit from the Church. An early Church Father, St. Irenaeus states: “*Indeed, it is to the church itself that the ‘Gift of God’ has been entrusted...for where the Church is, there is also God’s Spirit; where God’s Spirit is, there is the Church and every grace*” (C 797).

The Church as the sacrament of God’s love and salvation. The *Catechism* states: “*The Church in this world is the sacrament of salvation, the sign and the instrument of the communion between God and men*” (C 780). A sacrament is defined as an “*efficacious symbol,*” which means that it brings about what it points to and embodies the reality it represents. In this context, Jesus is often described as the sacrament of God’s love and salvation.

When people encountered Christ with the eyes of faith, they were encountering the invisible God in a visible way and experiencing his love and saving grace. Since the Church is the Body of Christ, the Bride of Christ and the Temple of the Holy Spirit, we too meet Christ in a visible and tangible way in the Church. Thus the Church is the sacrament of God's love and salvation in our world. Professor Thomas Groome of Boston College calls the Church "the instrument that God uses to come looking for us and that which we use to go looking for God."

Pause: Of the five images of the church mentioned above, which one appeals to you most? Which one best describes the church as you experience it?

Membership and ministries in the Church (C 888-931, USC p. 134-135)

In the Catholic Church, we distinguish three categories of membership: the hierarchy, the consecrated life and the lay faithful. The *hierarchy* refers to ordained ministers, bishops, priests and deacons. *Consecrated religious* include both ordained and non-ordained persons (e.g., ordained Franciscans, religious Franciscan brothers or sisters, and lay Franciscans). Consecrated religious devote their whole life to God in a special way. Most of them also embrace what is called the *Evangelical Counsels of poverty*, (renouncing ownership of property), *chastity* (abstaining from sexual activity), and *obedience* (submission to a superior in community). All the above persons join together to respond to Jesus' Great Commission to make disciples of all nations. The three main roles or ministries of the hierarchy, especially of the bishops assisted by their priests, are:

- To *teach* the truths of the Catholic faith faithfully and fully;
- To *sanctify* the members of the Church especially through the celebration of the sacraments;
- To *govern* the Church wisely as caring shepherds of God's people.

These three roles of the clergy are similar to the priestly, prophetic and kingly roles of Christ which all the baptized are called to actively participate in.

Priestly role (C 901). Through baptism every member of the Church shares in the priesthood of Christ (1Pet 2:9). While the priesthood of the laity differs in essence from the priesthood of the ordained, they are nevertheless interrelated (Lumen Gentium, 10). Through participation in the prayer of the Church, especially

in the Eucharist, by works of charity and by living good Christian lives, the laity not only grow in holiness but they also help others to become holy, thus sharing in the bishops' role of sanctifying the Church.

Prophetic role (C 904-907). The lay faithful share in the prophetic ministry of Christ and the Church both by teaching and witness of life. The most effective prophet or teacher is the one who *witnesses* to the teachings of Christ in their daily life. St. Francis of Assisi used to say: "preach the gospel always, if necessary use words."

Today, more and more lay people are engaged in the prophetic or teaching ministry of the Church as Directors of Religious Education, the R.C.I.A. (Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults) and as catechists to children, teens and adults. This is a very exciting development in our Church.

Within the prophetic ministry of the Church, bishops in union with the Pope, hold a special role. They are the official teachers of the Church, sometimes called the *Magisterium* (from the Latin "to teach"). In the earliest days of the Church, Paul and others warn their people that false teachers will arise in their midst (1Tim 4:1-4, Acts 20:26-27).

Kingly role (C 908-913). Jesus is called Christ the King because he is the King of the universe and the source of all authority. During his life on earth, Jesus modeled for us a servant style of leadership. He said that the son of man came not to be served but to serve and give his life for others (Mk 10:41-45). Clergy and laity alike exercise their baptismal kingly role in a Christ-like way when they carry out their ministry within the Church in a humble servant-like manner.

Pause: Why do you think the Church encourages all members of the Church to be involved in some form of active ministry? Is there a particular type of ministry that appeals to you?

Leadership and authority in the Body of Christ (C 874-877, USC p. 119)

In the Church, all members through baptism have equal status: all are equally important and are called to promote the message of Christ to those who do not know him. In the New Testament, leadership and authority are presented as a call to serve others. Once when some of the Apostles are competing for the places of honor in the kingdom that Jesus is inaugurating, he tells them that in his kingdom, leaders and those in authority are not to lord it over

others. Rather, their leadership is to be a form of humble service to others (Lk 22:24-27, Mk 9:30-37). Jesus models this form of servant leadership when he washes the feet of the apostles at the last supper (Jn 13:1-15).

A hierarchical form of leadership (C 874-886). The Catholic Church has a hierarchical form of leadership as opposed to a democratic form where issues are decided by a vote. The dictionary defines *hierarchy* as a ruling body of clergy organized into orders and ranks, each subordinate to the other one above it.

The Pope, our universal shepherd. In our hierarchical form of leadership, the *Pope*, the successor of St. Peter, is our universal shepherd or pastor. He has the final say when it comes to matters of doctrine, morals and discipline. The development of the papacy into what it is today, is a long and complex story. Gradually, the bishop of Rome, where tradition tells us Peter and Paul died, came to be recognized as the head Bishop of the Church.

By the fourth century, the Bishop of Rome was called "Pope" (Papa). Sometimes the Pope's ministry is referred to as the *Petrine Ministry* (Peter). In this role, the Pope is the symbol of *unity* in the universal Church and his role is to protect the unity of the Church and to work for reconciliation among all Christian churches.

Bishops – successors of the Apostles. When it comes to the governing of the Church, bishops work very closely with the Pope. In Catholic tradition, bishops are recognized as successors of the Apostles. Bishops are pastors of local churches called *dioceses*, which oversees the functioning of many *parishes*. The whole body of bishops is referred to as the "College of Bishops."

Priests and deacons are co-workers of the bishop in his role of *teaching, sanctifying and governing* the Church. Both of these ordained ministries have their roots in the New Testament.

Lay faithful play a leadership role in the Church by sharing with her their baptismal gifts and graces and by serving on various councils and committees within the Church.

Gift of infallibility (C 888-892, USC p. 123-124). The gift of infallibility was given to the Church when Jesus promised to be with her at all times until the end of the world (Mt 28:20), and when he promised to send the Holy Spirit to lead the Church into the fullness of the truth (Jn 16:13). It would be pointless for Jesus to

give his Church an infallible Bible, if he did not also give her infallible teachers to protect her from teaching error when interpreting the Bible and teaching the core beliefs of the Church. The gift of infallibility which Christ gave to his Church is often misunderstood. It does not mean that popes cannot sin; obviously they can. It does not mean that they cannot err when speaking about non-Church matters. It does not mean that they cannot err in Church matters when writing a book as a private member of the Church. The gift of infallibility only comes into play when the Pope is speaking "from the chair" that is, *ex cathedra*, or is speaking as universal shepherd in matters of faith and morals. The College of Bishops, when speaking as a body in union with the Pope, can also teach infallibly about matters of faith and morals. The Pope uses the gift of infallibility very rarely.

Pause: The Catholic Church has a hierarchical form of leadership and authority. Many Protestant churches have a democratic form of authority. What are the advantages and disadvantages of each form?

Action suggestion

If you are actively engaged in your parish, help one person to get involved in the activities of the church. If you are not, consider taking that step.

Meditation

Look for a moment at the whole great panorama of twenty centuries of the Church. It begins in the wounded side of Christ on Calvary, goes through the "tempering" of Pentecostal fires and comes onward like a burning flood to pass through each era... Fresh living water springs up in us and new flames are lit. By virtue of the divine power received from her Founder the Church is an institution which endures; but even more than an institution, she is a life that is passed on. She sets the seal of unity on all the children of God whom she gathers together.

(The Splendor of the Church, Henri De Lubac, S.J.)

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THE CHURCH (PART TWO) (RCIA)

The Four Marks of the Church (C 811-962, USC Ch.11)

You are Peter and upon this rock I will build my church and the gates of the netherworld will not prevail against it. (Mt 16:18)

...I believe in one, holy, catholic and apostolic Church... (Nicene Creed)

In this article, we will look at:

- The Four Marks of the Church
- Who Belongs to the Catholic Church
- Salvation of Non-Catholic Christians
- Salvation of Non-Christians

The Four Marks of the Church

Reality and challenge. Since the Council of Constantinople 381, the Church has spoken of herself as “*one, holy, catholic and apostolic,*” words found in the Nicene Creed. One, holy, catholic and apostolic are known as the “marks” or “signs” of the Church, four traits that identify the Church before the world. In ancient times, these “four marks” of the Church served to distinguish her from heretical or false churches that developed in time. They also refer to the *divine* element—Christ and the Holy Spirit at work in the Church.

Because the four signs or marks of the Church are never lived out fully, they are seen as both *reality* and *challenge* (USC p.127). For example, the Church is *one* and yet wounded because of many Christian denominations. The Church is *holy* and yet sinful in her members. The Church is *catholic* (universal) and yet she can be uninviting to outsiders. Individual Christians can show prejudice to nonbelievers. The Church is *apostolic*, yet many denominations ignore the belief of apostolic succession. So while in a real sense the Church is one, holy, catholic and apostolic, in another sense, these marks or signs of the Church may sometimes not be very evident. Let us now look more closely at each of the four marks or signs of the Church and their countersigns.

The Church is One (C 813-822, USC p.127)

May they all be one, as you Father, are in me and I in you...that the world may believe that you sent me. (Jn 17:21)

The Church “acknowledges one Lord, confesses one faith, is born of one Baptism, forms one Body, is given

life by one spirit, for the sake of one hope, at whose fulfillment all divisions will be overcome.” (C 866)

The source and model of the Church’s unity or oneness is the unity of Father, Son and Holy Spirit in the Trinity. Jesus died on the cross to gather all people to himself. Jesus spoke of “one flock and one shepherd” (Jn 10:16). The Holy Spirit present in the Church seeks to bring about an intimate communion between all of God’s people (C 813).

Within the unity of the Church, we find a wonderful and rich diversity, a multiplicity of peoples, cultures, spiritualities, gifts and liturgical rites (C 1200-1203). What keeps our rich diversity from creating chaos in the Church? The *invisible bond* of charity and the *visible bonds* of a common creed and sacraments. For the Catholic Church, the Pope—successor of St. Peter—is also a very important visible symbol of our unity.

Countersign: *division in the Body of Christ.* Tragically, down through the history of the Church, some members of the Church have offended the unity that Jesus prayed for. The two main events that inflicted serious wounds on the Body of Christ are: the split between Rome and Constantinople in 1054 (a wound that had been festering for centuries) and the Protestant Reformation in the sixteenth century.

Today, Eastern Christians separated from communion with Rome are called the “Orthodox Church,” its two main branches being the Greek and Russian Churches. The Protestant Reformation proved disastrous as its attempt to bring about much needed reform in the Catholic Church only led to more brokenness in the Body of Christ. Today, there are over 300 churches in the membership of the World Council of Churches.

Pause: What do you like most about the Catholic Church? If you are a convert what caused you to join the Church/

Ecumenism (C 817-822). The word ecumenism comes from a Greek word meaning *universal*. The goal of Christian ecumenism is a common commitment among Christians to live out the Gospel more fully and to be open to the unifying work of the Spirit. Its goal, in the words of the late Pope John Paul II, is to work towards making the *partial unity* that exists

between Christian Churches grow into *full communion* (That All May Be One #14).

Disunity amongst Christian Churches is both a sin and a scandal that weakens the witness of Christianity in the non-Christian world. Catholic leaders recognize that the Church is partially to blame for the divisions in the Body of Christ and has asked for the forgiveness of other Christians' leaders. Working and praying for reunification of Christianity is not an option but an essential activity of the Church.

How to work for reunion of the Church (C 820-822). "The desire to recover the unity of all Christians is a gift of Christ and a call to all Christians" (C 820). Para. 821 of the *Catechism* names some of the ways we can respond to the call to work for the reunion of the Church.

- *A permanent renewal of the Church in greater fidelity to her vocation.* A hurting marriage is healed when both spouses get back to living out their marriage promises. The best gift to ecumenism that the Church can make is to get her own house in order. In doing this, her life will be a clearer witness to her teachings.
- *Conversion of heart.* If sin caused the divisions, only holiness of life will heal them.
- *Prayer in common* should be regarded as the soul of the whole ecumenical movement. "When Catholics and Protestants put their knees together in common prayer, God will put their heads together to understand common truths" (Peter Kreeft).
- *Fraternal knowledge of each other* will help to dispel ignorance and misunderstandings about each other's beliefs.
- *Collaboration among Christians in various areas of service to mankind.* Hands working together can educate the head.

The *Catechism* (822) states that, in the end, the work of reconciliation transcends human powers and gifts. This is God's work. Only Christ can save us from sin and only Christ can heal the divisions amongst Christians.

Pause: Do you sometimes discuss your religious beliefs with people from other faith traditions or with non-believers? Has this helped to deepen your faith?

The Church is Holy (C 823-829, USC p. 129)

Christ loved the Church and handed himself over for her to sanctify her...that she may be holy and without blemish. (Eph 5:25-27)

The Church has her origin in the Holy Trinity and that is the source of her holiness. (USC p. 129)

In his book *Catholic Christianity*, Peter Kreeft writes: *The Church is "holy" in a way her members are not. Her doctrine, her moral principles, and her sacraments are pure because they are from Christ. But her human members, clergy as well as laity, are far from pure in their understanding of those doctrines, in their living according to those principles, and in their participation in those sacraments. For Christ established his Church, not as a museum for saints, but as a hospital for sinners. "I came not to call the righteous, but sinners"* (Mk 2:17).

Christ through the Church offers each of us wonderful means to become holy. We see the proof of this in the thousands of holy men and women the Church has produced down through the ages.

Countersign of holiness. The countersign of this mark of the Church is, of course, the sinfulness of her members, both clergy and lay faithful. The presence of sin in the Church can tempt one to quit attending church or to join what we perceive to be a less imperfect church. To act on such a temptation would be sad and destructive to our spiritual lives. If we feel that our parish has failed us in our desire to grow spiritually, we would be much better served to look for another catholic parish than to break ties with the Church by staying at home or by choosing to join a non-church.

Pause: According to C867, the Church is the "sinless one made up of sinners". In your opinion what is the best way to counteract the sinfulness of the Church?

The Church is Catholic (C 830-856, USC p. 129)

"Catholic," as used in the Nicene Creed, means "universal" or "all-embracing"—referring to the totality or whole which is embraced. This mark of the Church has three dimensions:

- "Catholic Church" can simply mean the whole Church. This is what St. Ignatius of Antioch meant when he said in 110 AD, "where Christ Jesus is, there is the Catholic Church." Where

Jesus is proclaimed and accepted, the Catholic Church exists in some form.

- The Church is *catholic* in that she seeks to embrace all peoples and cultures at all times and places. Just as Christ, the founder of the Church, reached out to all, so must the Church. The *Catechism* states “*the Church is catholic because she has been sent out by Christ on a mission to the whole human race*” (C 831).
- The Church is *catholic* in that she includes all of what Jesus has entrusted to her—the “fullness of truth” and the fullness of the means of salvation” subsist or reside in the Church.
- St. Cyril of Jerusalem in 387 described the Church as “*catholic because it extends to the ends of the earth, teaches all doctrines necessary for salvation, instructs all people, heals every kind of sin and possesses every virtue.*”

The title ‘*Roman Catholic Church*’ highlights the importance of the unity of the Catholic Church with the successor of St. Peter, the Bishop of Rome. Particular churches are fully catholic through their communion with the Church of Rome. Regarding union with the Church of Rome, St. Irenaeus in the second century said: ‘For with this church, by reason of its pre-eminence, the whole church, that is, the faithful everywhere must necessarily be in accord’ (C 834).

Who Belongs to the Catholic Church? And Who Will Be Saved? (C 836-845)

Catholic Christians. People are fully incorporated into the Catholic Church who accepts her entire system and means of salvation given to her (creed, sacraments, ecclesiastical governance). In order to be saved, it is not enough to belong to the Church. *Lumen Gentium* 14 states: “*He is not saved who does not persevere in charity.*”

What About Non-Catholic Christians?

The Church teaches that Christians who believe in Christ and are properly baptized are to be received with the affection of brothers. Through baptism and their belief in Christ, they are in *partial* communion with the Catholic Church (Vat.2, *Decree on Ecumenism* 3). These brothers and sisters in Christ are saved if they persevere in following the ways of Jesus as they understand them. While we Catholics may believe that we have the “fullness of truth,” we should remember that there is a difference between “having”

the fullness of truth and “living” whatever truth we have grasped.

What About Non-Christians?

Non-Christians do not belong in any direct sense to the Church. Yet this does not mean that the grace of Christ is not at work in their hearts.

Judaism. The Catholic Church acknowledges her special relationship with the Jewish people. The Christian religion has its roots in Judaism. The Jewish people were the first to hear the word of God (Rom 9:4-5). They have not ceased to be God’s Chosen People. We share with them the faith of Abraham, the Ten Commandments and the books of the Old Testament.

Islam. The Church also recognizes that she has a unique relationship with Muslims. The plan of salvation also includes those who acknowledge the Creator, in the first place amongst whom are the Muslims; these profess to hold the faith of Abraham, and together with us they adore the one merciful God, mankind’s judge on the last day” (C 841).

Other non-Christian religions. The church also engages in dialogue with Hindus and Buddhists. ‘She has a high regard for the manner of life and conduct, the precepts and doctrines which, although differing in many ways from her own teaching, nevertheless often have a ray of that truth that enlightens all people. (Nostra Aetate 2).

Regarding the possibility of the salvation of non-Christians, *Lumen Gentium* (16) states: *Those also can attain everlasting salvation who, through no fault of their own, do not know the gospel of Christ or his church, yet sincerely seek God and, moved by grace, strive by their deeds to do his will as it is known to them through the dictates of conscience.*

What about non-believers? In a similar way, the church believes that “*Divine Providence does not deny the help necessary for salvation to those who without blame on their part, have not yet arrived at an explicit knowledge of God, but strive to live a good life, thanks to His grace*” (*Lumen Gentium* 16).

Finally, a saying attributed to St. Augustine: “God has some people whom the Church does not have. The Church has some people whom God does not have.”

Pause: How do you feel about the Church’s attitude towards non-Catholic religions and their salvation? Would you want the Church to change her attitude in any way?

Countersign. One way the Church has failed in the past, and continues to the present time, to live more fully this mark, is in the area of *inclusivity*. For example, in the sixteenth century, the Church lost a great opportunity to evangelize China and Japan due to failure to permit missionaries to adapt Church beliefs and liturgies to Asian mentalities and customs. Of course, such adaptations should never involve falsifying or watering down the essentials of the faith. Even though the Church since Vatican II has become more inclusive and appreciative of women's gifts, she still has a ways to go in this area. Nearly all of the important decisions in our Church today are still made by men.

Pause: What can the Catholic Church learn from other Christian churches and/or non-Christian religions?

Missionary mandate (C 849-856). While the Catholic Church very much respects the beliefs of other Christian churches and non-Christian religions, she also has a deep sense of her obligation to continue to share the fullness of the Gospel with all who are willing to listen. This missionary mandate is carried out with a spirit of prayer, love and respect for the beliefs of others. The *Catechism* (856) states: "Believers can profit from respectful dialogue by learning to appreciate better those elements of truth and grace which are found among people, and which are, as it were, a secret presence of Christ."

The Church is Apostolic (C 857-865, USC p.132)

The Church is apostolic in a threefold way:

Origin. The Church is "built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Christ Jesus himself being the cornerstone" (Eph 2:20).

Teaching. The Church is apostolic because she teaches and defends the teachings of Christ and guards them against false teachers. The Church seeks to act on Paul's exhortation to Timothy: "You must keep to what you have been taught and know to be true..." (2Tim 3:14-17).

Structure. The Church is apostolic because she continues to be taught by the bishops who are the successors of the apostles, assisted by all involved in the catechetical ministry of the Church and united with the Bishop of Rome, the successor of Peter. This mark or characteristic of the Church has led many Protestant clergy and laity to enter into *full communion* with the Catholic Church. (For their stories, see *Surprised by the Truth* edited by Patrick Madrid.)

Countersign. The main countersign of this mark is the large number of ecclesial communities that ignore the importance of apostolic succession.

Pause: Hundreds of Christian churches only started in the past one or two hundred years. They have no historical ties to the Apostolic Church. Why is this characteristic important to the Church?

Suggestions for action. Continue to take small but real steps towards becoming an informed and transformed Catholic Christian. Read one book each year that will help to deepen your understanding of catholic beliefs and practices. Participate in an annual retreat that will help you to live more fully the teachings of Christ.

Meditation

...To be holy is not to be perfect yet. The Church's obvious human imperfections have been an occasion for scandal and apostasy for...centuries. But paradoxically this very fact is also a powerful argument for her divine nature. This is cleverly brought out in Boccaccio's story of Abraham, the medieval Jewish merchant in The Decameron. Abraham is contemplating becoming a Catholic. He tells his friend, the bishop of Paris, who has been trying unsuccessfully to convert him, that he has to go to Rome on business. The bishop is horrified: "Don't go! When you see the stupidity and corruption there, you'll never join the Church." (This was the time of the Medici Popes who were notoriously worldly and corrupt.) But Abraham is a practical man. Business calls. Upon his return to France, he tells the bishop he is now ready to be baptized. The bishop is astounded, but Abraham explains: "I'm a practical business-man. No earthly business that stupid and corrupt could last fourteen weeks. Your Church has lasted fourteen centuries. It must have God behind it."

(Peter Kreeft, Fundamentals of the Faith)

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MARY, MOTHER OF JESUS, MOTHER OF THE CHURCH (RCIA) (C 487-511, 963-975, USC Ch. 12)

Behold, I am the handmaid of the Lord. May it be done to me according to your word. (Lk 1:38)

What the Catholic faith believes about Mary is based on what it believes about Christ, and what it teaches about Mary illumines in turn its faith in Christ. (C 487)

In this article we will look at:

- Mary in Scripture
- Mary as “Woman of Faith” and “Model Disciple”
- Mary, Mother of the Church
- Four Marian Doctrines
- Veneration of Mary

The Vatican Council II document on the Church, called *Lumen Gentium* (“Light to the Nations”), ends with a chapter on Mary. This is to highlight Mary’s role in our salvation and in our Church family. When we Christians understand more clearly Mary’s unique role in God’s place of salvation, we will also have a better grasp of the role that God wants her to play in our spiritual lives so that we can honor Mary as God intends us to. The only reason we honor Mary is because God honored her in a very unique way when he chose her to be the Mother of God Incarnate, Jesus Christ.

Mary in Scripture

While the Bible does not mention Mary a lot, it does place her at some critical points in Jesus’ life, beginning with his conception by the Holy Spirit in the womb of Mary. At the end of the Annunciation story, Mary uttered her *Fiat*, “Let it be done unto me” (Lk 1:38). At that moment, she said ‘yes’ to being the Mother of the Messiah, the Incarnate Word of God. She also said ‘yes’ to playing an important role in the story of our salvation.

Having reflected on the wondrous thing that God was doing in her, Mary responded with her beautiful prayer called the *Magnificat* (Lk 1:46-55) in which she proclaimed “*all generations will call me blessed.*” Mary fully understood that her greatness was *not* due to *her* great deeds, but rather to what she allowed *God* to do in and through her. True sanctity is not us doing great things for God. Rather, it involves us allowing God to do his work in us.

Because of Mary’s ‘yes,’ she also shared in the sufferings of her son beginning with her giving him birth in an abandoned stable, then fleeing with her

husband from the murderous threats of Herod, living as an immigrant in a foreign country and, finally, accompanying Jesus through his passion and death. We can only imagine how painful these events were for Mary.

During her life, Mary, among other things, had to cope with the experience of being an unwed mother, a refugee, a widow and single parent, and the mother of an innocent son who was executed as a criminal. Meditating on the trials and tribulations of Mary should bring her closer to us. When we consider that Mary, from among all women, was the one chosen to be Mother of Jesus, and when we consider the completeness of her ‘yes’ to God, we should have no problem honoring her.

Pause: *What strikes you most about the trials and sufferings of Mary?*

“Woman of Faith” and “Model Disciple”

Over the centuries, many titles have been given to describe Mary’s role in Christianity. In recent decades, the titles “Woman of Faith” and “Model Disciple” have been used a lot. Mary is called “Woman of Faith” because in and through all the trials of life, she never doubted God. She *trusted* that God would be faithful to her. At the Annunciation, Mary was called to trust that she would conceive a child through the power of the Holy Spirit. If Mary could trust God on that word, she could trust him on anything she did.

The Church also presents Mary to us as *Model Disciple* because she was totally open and responsive to God’s Word. It has been well said that long before Mary conceived Jesus in her womb, she had conceived him in her heart. Mary is *Model Disciple* because she trusted God when it was not easy to do so. When nearly all of Jesus’ disciples had fled in fear, Mary remained faithful to him all the way to Calvary.

Mary, Mother of the Church (C 963-965, USC p. 146)

The Catechism (964) states: “*Mary’s role in the Church is inseparable from her union with Christ and flows directly from it.*”

Just as the Israelites called Abraham “our Father in the Faith,” so does the Church call Mary “our Mother in the Faith.” When Jesus was dying on the cross, he looked at John (the symbol of all disciples) and said: “*This is your Mother*” (Jn 19:27). At that moment,

Jesus made Mary the spiritual Mother of all believers, the Mother of the Church. St. Augustine says that Mary “*is clearly Mother of the members of Christ...for she has cooperated with love in the birth of the faithful in the Church, who are members of its Head.*” In giving Mary to us as our spiritual Mother, Jesus is saying to us individually and as a Church: “Here is the model disciple. If you want to learn how to hear and respond to my word, look at Mary. She will teach you and help you to make yourself totally available to God. She will teach you fidelity, obedience, compassion and prayerfulness.” Catholics affectionately call Mary “Our Blessed Mother.”

Pause: As you ponder Mary in Scripture, what can you learn from her about being a disciple of Jesus?

Four Marian Doctrines

Very few Christians should have a problem with anything that we have written thus far. The problem that most, if not all, Protestants have with Mary, is connected with certain beliefs that Catholics hold about her which are not stated *explicitly* in the Bible, and with the veneration we give to Mary. Let us now turn to the four doctrines Catholics hold about Mary.

The Immaculate Conception (C 490-94, USC p. 143). The Catechism (491) states: “*The most Blessed Virgin Mary was, from the first moment of her conception, by a singular grace and privilege of Almighty God, and by virtue of the merits of Jesus Christ, Savior of the human race, preserved immune from the stain of original sin.*” This Church dogma was proclaimed by Pope Pius IX in 1854.

The Catholic Church also believes that Mary, due to her total cooperation with God, remained free of all *personal sin* during her life on earth. As we pray on her feast day, “Father, you let her share beforehand in the salvation Christ would bring by his death and kept her sinless from the first moment of her conception.”

The biblical support for this doctrine is found in Angel Gabriel’s greeting to Mary: “Hail, full of grace” (Lk 1:28). Mary was not just graced like the rest of us. She was “full of grace,” i.e., she was totally free of sin and totally full of God. Her union with God was never spoiled. The Church reasons that it was only fitting that the one who housed the sinless Savior of the world would, by the grace of God, be free of all sin. “In preserving Mary from original sin, God was choosing a perfect door for a perfect God to enter an imperfect world” (Peter Kreeft).

As we reflect on the immaculate conception of Mary, three other things need to be noted:

- Even though Mary was conceived free from original sin, and even though she remained sinless throughout her life, this does not mean that she had no need for God’s saving grace. She did. The *Catechism* (491) states: “*Through the centuries, the Church has become ever more aware that Mary, ‘full of grace’ through God, was redeemed from the first moment of her conception.*” We might say that just as Jesus was conceived in a most unusual way, Mary was saved from original sin in a most unusual way.
- Even though Mary did not sin, she could have. She could have said ‘no’ to the angel Gabriel and she could have said ‘no’ to God in other ways.
- Even though Mary was conceived free from original sin, she was not preserved from experiencing the effects of original sin, namely, the experience of suffering and death (followed by her assumption into heaven), living in a world where there was evil and temptation. Just as Jesus was tempted to do evil, we can assume that Mary also experienced temptation. We have seen above some examples of the sufferings of Mary.

A striking confirmation of the doctrine of the Immaculate Conception happened in 1858, four years after the dogma was declared infallible. It happened when Mary appeared to a young, uneducated girl named Bernadette Soubirous in Lourdes, France. When Bernadette asked the strange lady her name, Mary responded, “I am the Immaculate Conception.” Hundreds of medically verified miracles and many other healings have happened in Lourdes. The Church celebrates the Solemnity of the Immaculate Conception on Dec. 8th.

Pause: Do you have any questions or comments on this Marian belief?

Assumption of Mary into heaven (C 988). “*A great sign appeared in the sky, a woman clothed with the sun, with the moon under her feet, and on her head a crown of twelve stars*” (Rev 12:1).

The *Catechism* (966) states: “*The Assumption of the Blessed Virgin is a singular participation in her Son’s Resurrection and an anticipation of the resurrection of other Christians.*” This Church dogma was defined by Pope Pius XII in 1950 in which he declared: “*Having completed the course of her earthly life, Mary was assumed body and soul to heavenly glory and exalted by the Lord as Queen over all things, so that she might be more fully conformed to her Son, the Lord of lords and conqueror of sin and death.*”

The above words mean and affirm that at the end of her life on earth, Mary experienced immediately the resurrection of the body that is promised to all faithful followers of Christ. We can say that Mary's Assumption flows from and completes her Immaculate Conception. If Mary was preserved from original sin by the unique gift of God, then it is only fitting that when her life on earth was finished, she would be taken to heaven.

As with the Immaculate Conception, the Church reasons that it is only fitting that the body that bore the Savior of the world should not suffer decay when her life on earth was completed. Mary's Assumption into heaven foreshadows what we all hope to experience one day. The Church celebrates the *Solemnity of the Assumption of Mary* into heaven on Aug. 15th.

Mary, Perpetual Virgin (C 496-507). All Christians believe in the virgin birth—that Mary was a virgin when she gave birth to Jesus. But not all Christians believe that Mary *remained* a virgin all her life. One reason for this is that there are references in the Bible to the brothers and sisters of Christ. (We addressed this issue in Article 5.) Even though there is no reference to the perpetual virginity of Mary in the Bible, it has always been held in sacred Tradition. The liturgies of the East and West from the early centuries of Christianity affirm Mary as “ever virgin.” The founders of Protestantism (Luther and Calvin) believed that Mary remained a virgin all her life.

“God’s one purpose for Mary was to be the Mother of his Son. That was the divine goal. For that she was conceived, born and lived. Her undivided heart and body were meant for God alone” (Fr. Al McBride). Mary’s perpetual virginity should not be seen as a put-down on sex. After all, God created sex. Only something good and beautiful could be offered up to God in sacrifice. Some writers point out that Mary’s physical virginity is an outward sign of her *spiritual virginity*, a phrase used to describe a life totally open and totally consecrated and devoted to God. Only with the eyes of faith can we begin to appreciate Mary’s perpetual virginity.

Mary, the Mother of God (C 495). As the early Church continued her reflection on the scriptures and on Mary’s role in our relationship to Jesus, she concluded that since Mary is the Mother of Christ, human and divine, she could rightly be called *Theotokos*, the Greek word for “God-bearer” or Mother of God. The Council of Ephesus (431 AD) which solemnly declared Mary to be the Mother of God, was careful to state that Mary is the Mother of God “according to the flesh,” to clarify that Mary is *not* the source of Jesus’ divinity.

Mary’s cousin Elizabeth, inspired by the Holy Spirit, was perhaps the first person to recognize Mary’s special privilege. When Mary visited her cousin, Elizabeth, she greeted her with these words: “How does it happen that the Mother of my Lord should come to me?” (Lk 1:43). The Church celebrates the Solemnity of Mary, the Mother of God, on Jan. 1st.

We look to Scripture and Tradition. In article two in this series, we learn that the Catholic Church looks to both Scripture *and* Tradition for the source of her beliefs. We note that there is nothing in Scripture to support the *sola scriptura* (Scripture alone) stance which maintains that “as Christians, we should *only* believe what is explicitly stated in the Bible.” We also acknowledge that for the Catholic Church, a belief is only “non-scriptural” if it contradicts what is stated explicitly in the Bible.

Pause: Do you have any questions or comments on the above three Marian beliefs?

Veneration of Mary (C 971, USC p. 146)

The Church rightly honors Mary with special devotion... This devotion differs essentially from the adoration given to the Father, Son and Holy Spirit” (C 971).

Catholics venerate Mary because she is the Mother of God. We honor her because God honored her. When we kneel before statues of Mary or carry her in a religious procession, we are *not* worshipping her. Rather, we are honoring and showing our affection for the one who is closest to Jesus, the one who was most faithful to him.

The heart of Marian spirituality is not in the reciting of particular prayers in honor of Mary, but in “doing what Jesus tells us to do” (Jn 2:5). True devotees of Mary are those who listen to God’s Word and act on it.

Seeking Mary’s intercession. Catholics often ask Mary, as their spiritual Mother, to pray for them. Non-Catholics have a problem with this because they look upon Jesus as their *one and only intercessor* and *mediator* before God. In 1Tim 2:5-6, Paul says: “*There is only one mediator between God and the human race, Christ Jesus....*” Catholics understand that God *alone* grants us blessings and graces. But just as *all* believers share in the priesthood of Jesus (1Pet 2:5), all can share in his intercessory and mediatory role.

On behalf of one another, we join our prayers of intercession to those of Jesus. If we do not hesitate to ask our sinful brothers and sisters on earth to pray for us, why would we hesitate to ask Mary, the preeminent

member of our community, to intercede for us. *Lumen Gentium* (60) states: *The maternal duty of Mary toward people in no way obscures or diminishes the unique mediation of Christ, but rather shows His power. For all the salvific influence of the Blessed Virgin on humankind...flows forth from Christ, rests on His mediation, depends entirely on it, and draws all its power from it.* Without her connection to Christ, Mary is nothing. But because she is so very intimately close to him, her prayers on our behalf are very powerful. Due to Mary's intercession, Jesus performed his first miracle (Jn 2:1-12).

Finally, when you hear Catholics speak about "praying to Mary," translate that to mean "asking Mary to pray for us." In the 'Hail Mary' prayer, we say: 'Holy Mary, pray for us sinners.' In singing the praises of Mary, we are singing the praises of God who did great things in her. We should never think that God is in any way slighted because we love and venerate his Son's Mother.

Pause: How would you describe your relationship to Mary? Do you seek her intercession? Do you have a problem with the way Catholics venerate Mary?

The Rosary. In his spiritual classic *True Devotion to Mary*, St. Louis de Montfort writes: *"The holy rosary is a gift come down from heaven, a great present that God gives to his most faithful servants. God is the Author of the prayers of which it is composed and of the mysteries it contains."*

In his *Apostolic Letter on the Rosary* (Oct. 2002), the late Pope John Paul II shared with us his special love for the rosary when he wrote: *"The Rosary has accompanied me in moments of joy and in moments of difficulty. To it I have entrusted any number of concerns; in it I have always found comfort. The Rosary is my favorite prayer. It is marvelous in its simplicity and its depths"*(#2). During her many apparitions to us on earth, our Blessed Mother has encouraged us to pray the Rosary. The exhortation alone should be reason enough for us to seek to develop a love for this form of prayer.

The Rosary is a *Christ-centered* and *biblically-based* prayer to help us worship Christ and honor Mary. We say that the Rosary is Christ-centered and biblically based because we meditate on events in the life of Jesus. (For commentary on the "Hail Mary" prayer, see USC p. 470.)

Statues and medals of Mary. For Catholics, statues, images and medals of Mary are visible reminders of

someone very special in our spiritual lives. If we can carry pictures of loved ones in our wallets and place them on the walls of our homes and offices, surely it is okay for us to have visible reminders of the most perfect Christian who ever lived. If we lay wreaths before our national heroes, surely it is right for us to lay a wreath or bouquet before Mary, the Mother of our Redeemer. Catholics kneel and pray before statues as a mark of respect. But we do not worship statues, nor do we believe that statues have any spiritual power in or of themselves.

A concluding word. After Joseph found out that Mary was with child, an angel of the Lord appeared to him and told him not to be afraid to take Mary into his home (Mt 1:20). Neither should we hesitate to take Mary into our homes and hearts and to ask her to befriend us and pray for us as we seek to follow in the footsteps of her son, Jesus.

Pause: Are you familiar with the Rosary? Why do Catholics consider the Rosary "Christ centered and biblically based" ?

Suggestion for Action

If you do not have a relationship with Mary, pray to learn the steps to develop such a relationship.

Meditation

Gracious God, in Mary you have given us a model of true holiness. Hers was a loving heart, one rich in hospitality and prayerfulness. She responded fully to the call to be the Mother of your Son and she was faithful to the end. Though at times her heart ached, she never allowed bitterness to reside there. Help us to be warmhearted people, a family committed to hospitality and service. Grant this through Mary's intercession. Amen.

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WHAT HAPPENS AFTER DEATH THE LAST THINGS (RCIA)

(C 988-1065, USC Ch. 13)

*...I look forward to the resurrection of the dead
and the life of the world to come. Amen*

(Nicene Creed)

In this final article on the Creed, we look at:

- Preparing for Death
- Particular Judgment
- Heaven, Purgatory, Hell
- Resurrection of the Body
- Second Coming of Jesus
- Last Judgment
- Communion of Saints

The final article of the Creed proclaims the Church's belief in life after death, her belief in an age to come. Christians believe that our final destiny is a heavenly state in which we will live forever with God. For Christians, the question is not *whether* we will live forever, but *how*.

Eschatology (from the Greek word *eschata*) means "last things." Eschatology is a branch of theology that focuses on what is called the *four last things*, individually (death, judgment, heaven and hell) and universally (Second Coming of Christ, resurrection of the dead, Last Judgment, and the end of the world leading to a new heaven and a new earth).

Preparing for Death

Death is not something most of us like to think about. In fact, there is a great denial about death in our culture. Many wonder if there is anything after death. For the Christian, death is the gateway to eternal life with God. Paul the Apostle looked forward to death: *"I want to be gone and be with Christ"* (Phil 1:23).

During his life on earth, Jesus demonstrated his power over death when he raised Lazarus from the tomb (Jn 11:43-44). During that event, Jesus said: *"I am the Resurrection and the Life. He who believes in me, though he dies, shall come to life"* (Jn 11:25). Jesus gave a "live demonstration" of this teaching on Mount Tabor when Moses and Elijah joined Peter, James and John. They were not dead, but very much alive (Mk 9:2-4).

The presence of one's own family members and our Church family should bring us much comfort at the time of our dying. The *Catechism* states: *"The dying should be given attention and care to help them live their last moments in dignity and peace. They will be helped by the prayer of their relatives, who must see to it that the sick receive at the proper time the sacraments that prepare them to meet the living God"* (2299). It also

states: *"The bodies of the dead must be treated with respect and love... Burial of the dead is one of the corporal works of mercy"* (2300). Furthermore, *"The free gift of organs after death is legitimate and can be meritorious. The Church also permits cremation provided it does not demonstrate a denial of faith in the resurrection of the body"* (2301).

Reincarnation. The *Catechism* (1013) states: *"When the single course of one's life is completed, we shall not return to other earthly lives."* [As the Letter to the Hebrews 9:27 states:] *"It is appointed for men to die once."*

Pause: What is the closest you have gotten to death personally or with a loved one? What was that experience like for you? Have you made plans for your death? How do you want to be remembered?

Particular Judgment: What Happens After Death (C 1021-1022)

"In death, the body separates from the soul, the human body decays, and the soul goes to meet God, while awaiting its reunion with its glorified body" (C 997).

Drawing from the riches of Scripture and Tradition, Catholics affirm the following beliefs of what happens after death.

At the moment of death, the soul is separated from the body and the human person is judged and continues to exist, even though the person's body has ceased to function. At the time of the Last Judgment, one's body will be reunited to its soul. The judgment that takes place immediately after death is called in Catholic theology the *"particular judgment."* In 2Cor 5:10, Paul states that each of us *"must appear before the judgment seat of Christ, so that each one may receive good or evil according to what he did in the body."*

The Church's belief in the particular judgment immediately after death is based on the parable of the rich man and Lazarus (Lk 16:19-31) and the words of Jesus to the repentant thief on the cross (Lk 23:43). At the particular judgment, there is *"no condemnation for those who die in Christ Jesus"* (Rom 8:1-2). Nevertheless, those who die in Christ but with some remaining unrepented sin or with selfishness in their hearts, will go through some period of purification known as "purgatory." For those who have deliberately rejected God and the saving grace of Christ, there will be total separation from God, which is called "hell" (Mt. 18:7-9,

Mk 9:47). We will now look a little more at the Catholic belief about heaven, purgatory and hell.

Pause: When judgment time comes, what do you think you will be judged on?

Heaven—Beatific Vision (C 1023-1029, USC pp. 153-154)

The *Catechism* states: “*Those who die in God’s grace and friendship and are perfectly purified live forever with Christ. They are like God forever, for they see him as he is, face to face*” (1023). *The Church calls this contemplation of God in his heavenly glory “the beatific vision”* (1028). *This perfect life with the Most Holy Trinity—this communion of life and love with the Trinity, with the Virgin Mary, with the angels and all the blessed—is called “heaven.” Heaven is the ultimate end and fulfillment of the deepest human longings, the state of supreme, definitive happiness*” (1024). *Heaven is the blessed community of all who are perfectly incorporated into Christ*” (1026).

The goal of our existence on earth and the reason God created us is to enjoy him forever in heaven. We have no lasting city here, but we seek the city that is to come (Heb 13:14).

What will heaven be like? Golfers wonder if there will be golf courses in heaven, and shoppers wonder if there will be ‘out of this world’ shopping malls. Jesus did not comment on either. But Jesus did describe heaven as a joyous wedding feast (Mt 22:1-14) and a great banquet (Lk 14:16-24). The Book of Revelation (21:4) states that in our heavenly glory, “*God will wipe away every tear from our eyes and there will be no more death or mourning, wailing or pain.*” But in the end, we must say that we cannot begin to imagine the joys in store for us in heaven. Paul writes: “*What eye has not seen, and ear has not heard, and what has not entered the human heart, what God has prepared for those who loved him*” (1Cor 2:9). Finally, we should remember that here on earth, we get a foretaste of heaven as we learn to live in Christ and love one another.

Who will attain heaven? The Book of Revelation speaks of 144,000 elect. This is a symbolic figure suggesting a perfect number. Rather than speculating about who or how many will be in heaven, we can say two things for certain:

- No one just drifts into heaven. Our final eternal destiny—heaven or hell—depends on the choices we make here on earth, choices that will lead us to either heaven or hell.
- No one enters heaven without cooperating with the grace of Christ. We are saved by God’s grace through

his gifts of faith and love, a self-sacrificing love that is expressed in witnessing him and serving others.

Pause: What would some ingredients of a perfect week or month be for you? What do you hope heaven will be like? What do you think it will be like?

Purgatory—Final Purification (C 1030-1032, USC p. 154)

The *Catechism* (1030-1031) states: “*All who die in God’s grace and friendship, but still imperfectly purified, are indeed assured of their eternal salvation; but after death they undergo purification, so as to achieve the holiness necessary to enter the joy of heaven. The Church gives the name purgatory to this final purification of the elect, which is entirely different from the punishment of the damned.*”

Speaking about Purgatory, Blessed John Paul II said: “Those who live in this state of purification after death are not separated from God but are immersed in the love of Christ. Neither are they separated from the saints in heaven...nor from us on earth... We all remain united in the Mystical Body of Christ, and we can therefore offer up prayers and good works on behalf of our brothers and sisters in purgatory” (General Audience, August 4, 1999).

The Church’s belief in purgatory is one not shared by most other Christians. They say it has no basis in Scripture. One does not find the word ‘purgatory’ in the Bible. But neither will one find the words ‘incarnation’ or ‘trinity’—two central doctrines of the Christian faith.

Catholic belief in purgatory is rooted in *Sacred Tradition* and *reason*. It is implied in Scripture. Let’s look briefly at all three.

Scripture. Catholics believe the reality that we call purgatory is hinted at in Scripture texts like 2Mac 12:42-46, 1Cor 3:11-15 and 1Pet 1:7. In the Maccabees text, people are urged to pray for the dead. Prayers for the dead only make sense if our prayers benefit the dead in some way. If the dead have reached their final destination, praying for them makes no sense. The Christian text speaks of a purifying fire that the saved will experience. Those early Christians believed that Christians who died in an imperfect state would undergo a purification process before entering heaven.

Sacred Tradition. As we saw in Article 2, Sacred Tradition, along with Sacred Scripture, is, for Catholics, their source of Divine Revelation. Catholics believe that Sacred Tradition affirms our belief in purgatory. Around 211 AD, Tertullian wrote that Christians offered prayers and mass for deceased loved ones. Sainly and

scholarly pastors in the early church urged their people to pray for the dead. As stated earlier, such prayers would make no sense if souls had already reached their final destination.

Reason. The Book of Revelation (21:27) tells us that “nothing unclean will enter heaven.” Most of us will die with some imperfection, making us unworthy of heaven—hence, the need for final purification which the Church calls purgatory. Purgatory is God’s way of purifying us from all sin, from the effects or wounds of sin and any attachment we may have to particular sins. Purgatory is God’s way of cleansing us of imperfections that would hinder us from fully enjoying heaven.

The pain and joy of purgatory. The pain of purgatory will probably involve the sense of horror we will feel as we become fully aware of the ugliness of sin. The joy of purgatory will be the joy we will feel as we get closer to God. St. Catherine of Genoa, a fifteenth century mystic, wrote that the “fire” of purgatory is God’s love “burning” the soul so that, at last, the soul is wholly aflame.

The Church does urge us to pray for the souls in purgatory. The Church prays for them at every Mass. Nov. 2 is the *Feast of All Souls* when we pray for *all the faithful departed*. In summary, we can say that Catholic teaching on purgatory is twofold: (a) purgatory exists and (b) our prayers can help the souls in purgatory move through their purification process.

Hell Eternal Separation from God (C 1033-1037, USC p.154)

The *Catechism* states: “To die in mortal sin without repenting and accepting God’s merciful love means remaining separated from him forever by our own free choice. This state of definitive self-exclusion from communion with God and the blessed is called ‘hell’” (1033). *The chief punishment of hell is eternal separation from God, in whom alone man can possess the life and happiness for which he was created and for which he longs*” (1035).

Many people have a difficult time reconciling the existence of hell with the all-loving and merciful God. How could our all-loving God send someone to a place of endless torment and unhappiness? Jesus could not be clearer about this issue. The reality of hell, of eternal separation from God, is mentioned many times in Scripture (Lk 16:19-31, Mt 5:30, Mk 9:43-48). The best known Scripture text is probably Mt 25:31-46 dealing with the Last Judgment in which the just are taken to heaven and the wicked ~~are~~ sent to hell.

It is important to note that God does not send anyone to hell. Rather, he allows persons to live forever with their

free choice to reject God. God’s will is that *all* be saved, but he is not going to force anyone to accept his offer. In Jn 3:19, Jesus says: “*The verdict is this, the light came into the world but people preferred darkness to light because their works were evil.*” God does not send us to hell; unrepentant mortal sin does.

The Church’s teaching on the existence of heaven and hell is a call to responsibility and to ongoing conversion of heart (C 1036). Awareness of our eternal destiny should motivate us to cooperate with God’s saving grace to avoid sin and do good.

Pause: What are your thoughts on this aspect of Christian belief? In your opinion, what type of person will end up in hell?

Resurrection of the Body (C 988-1004, USC pp. 155-156)

The *U.S. Catechism* (p.155) states: *Faith in the resurrection of our bodies is inseparable from our faith in the resurrection of Christ’s body from the dead. He rose as our head, as the pattern of our rising, and as the life-giving source of our new life.*”

At the moment of death, our body will separate from our soul and begin its process of decay. “You are dust and unto dust you shall return” (Gen 3:19). The soul will go to meet God for the *Particular Judgment*. When Christ comes again, God will “grant incorruptible life to our bodies by reuniting them with our souls through the power of Jesus’ Resurrection” (C 997).

What will the resurrected body be like? We can assume we will be like Jesus, who is “the first fruits” of the Resurrection. Jesus was raised with his own body (“See my hands and my feet” [Lk 24:39]), yet he had a *glorified* body that could walk through closed doors (Jn 20:19) or appear out of nowhere as on the road to Emmaus (Lk 24:15). The new and unimaginable life that we will enjoy in the age to come has begun in seed form in the sacrament of Baptism.

The Second Coming— Parousia (C 668-678, 1038-1041, USC p. 156)

In Catholic theology, the Second Coming of Christ is sometimes referred to as the “*parousia*,” a Greek word meaning *presence*. There is much that one could write about when it comes to the Second Coming of Christ, an event that will bring human history to an end. For example, some Christians believe that the Second Coming will inaugurate a thousand-year reign of Christ on earth, often called the Millennium (Rev 19-20). The Bible also speaks about a time of great tribulation or trial prior to Christ’s return, a time when Satan’s power will increase. The Bible also speaks about the rise of an antichrist, an evil person who will try to destroy God’s

work on earth (2Thes 2:3-10, Rev 20:7-8). The Catholic Church has not officially spoken about how to understand all of the above. Instead, she emphasizes “readiness” for the return of Christ. “*Be on guard; stay awake, because you never know when the time will come*” (Mk 13:33-34).

Last Judgment (C 1038-1041, USC 156)

The *Catechism* (1040) states: “*The Last Judgment will come when Christ returns in glory. Only the Father knows the day and the hour; only he determines the moment of its coming. Then through his Son Jesus Christ he will pronounce the final word on all history. We shall know the ultimate meaning of the whole work of creation and of the entire economy of salvation and understand the marvelous ways by which his Providence led everything towards its final end. The Last Judgment will reveal that God’s justice triumphs over all the injustices committed by his creatures, and that God’s love is stronger than death.*”

The best known description of the Last Judgment is found in Mt 25:31-46—Jesus will come in his glory and judge all people. Those who showed compassion to those in need will be taken to everlasting life. Those who ignored the needs of the poor will go to everlasting damnation. The *Catechism* (1039) states: “*In the presence of Christ, who is Truth itself, the truth of each man’s relationship with God will be revealed.*”

Pause: Any questions or comments on the Church’s teaching on the resurrection of the body, the Second Coming of Christ, or the Last Judgment?

Communion of Saints (C 946-962, USC p. 160)

I believe in the communion of saints.
(*The Apostles’ Creed*)

The term “communion of saints” refers to the bond that exists between all members of the Body of Christ: those still living (the pilgrim church on earth), those being purified in purgatory (the church suffering), and the blessed in heaven (the church glorified). These are not three different churches. They all belong to Christ and are united with him.

From very early on in the Church’s history, Christians have believed that our love and help for one another could extend beyond death. Early inscriptions in the Roman catacombs show that some of the first Christians prayed for those who had died, and also asked for their prayers. Those who had died were still part of the Christian family, loving and being loved, only temporarily hidden from the sight of those here below.

On his death bed, St. Dominic said to his brothers: “Do not weep, for I shall be more useful to you after my death and I shall help you then more effectively than during my life.” St. Therese, the Little Flower, said before she died: “I want to spend my heaven doing good on earth” (C 956).

As stated in *Article 10 on Mary*, Catholics do not pray to the saints as if they can give us grace and help. We know and believe that Jesus is our *one* Mediator before God. The saints, through their prayers for us, join their prayers to the ongoing prayer of Jesus. If we do not hesitate to seek the prayers of our brothers and sisters here on earth, why would we hesitate to seek the prayers of those who are now living a deep personal relationship with God in heaven?

“**Amen**” (C 1061-1065). The Creed, like the last book of the Bible, ends with the Hebrew word “Amen.” The Church, likewise, ends her prayers with “Amen.” The word means “I believe.” “*To believe is to say Amen to God’s words, promises and commandments; to entrust oneself completely to him who is the “Amen” of infinite love and perfect faithfulness.*” [As St. Augustine used to say to his people:] “*May your creed be for you as a mirror. Look at yourself in it, to see if you believe everything you say you believe. And rejoice in your faith each day*” (C 1064).

At the end of our lives, “Amen” would be a suitable final word.

Pause: Do you have a devotion to the saints? Do you have a favorite saint? If so, why is that saint special to you?

Suggested Action

If you do not have a Last Will & Testament drawn up, do so as soon as possible. Consider tithing a portion of your Will to the church and to organizations that seek to improve the lot of the poor. Think about your final end and what you want your legacy to be.

Meditation

*The souls of the just are in the hands of God,
and no torment shall touch them.
They seemed, in the view of the foolish, to be dead;
and their passing away was thought an affliction
and their going forth from us, utter destruction.
But they are in peace.*

(Wisdom 3:1-7)

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INTRODUCTION TO THE LITURGY AND THE SACRAMENTS

(C 1066-1209, USC Ch. 14)

Part II of the *Catechism* focuses on the worship life of the Church and how we celebrate our faith. It is divided into two sections:

Section One: Introduction to the Liturgy
Section Two: The Seven Sacraments

In this article, we will look at:

- What the Catechism Teaches about the Liturgy
- Introduction to the Sacraments

Introduction to the Liturgy (c 1066-1075, USC p. 167)

The *Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy* (Vatican 2 document) says: *‘The liturgy is the summit toward which the activity of the Church is directed; at the same time it is the fountain from which all her powers flow’* (10). *It is the primary and indispensable source from which the faithful are to derive the true Christian spirit’* (14).

The word *liturgy* comes from a Greek term meaning “public work” or “a service on behalf of the people.” In the church world, liturgy is the participation of the People of God in the work of God.

The work of God is the salvation of the human race. God, through Jesus’ passion, death, resurrection and ascension (often referred to as the *paschal mystery*), has achieved salvation for a sinful humanity. God, through Jesus, has “opened the gates of heaven” for all who wish to change their lives and become disciples of Jesus.

In the celebration of the liturgy, we rejoice and give thanks to God for what he has done for us in Jesus. But liturgy is more than the commemoration of an event that happened 2,000 years ago; it also celebrates the belief that Jesus’ once-and-for-all saving event is *extended in time* and continues to happen every time we gather for liturgy. In the liturgy, time collapses, the past becomes present.

Furthermore, liturgy has a future dimension. It looks forward to the Second Coming of Christ. Hence, after the consecration of the Mass, we sometimes sing: *‘Christ has died, Christ is risen, Christ will come again.’* All of this is made possible through the power of the Holy Spirit.

So liturgy, which is the celebration of the sacraments but not confined to them, is at the heart of the Church’s life. As stated above, liturgy is:

- *The summit towards which all the activity of the Church is directed.* On Sundays we bring to the liturgy all that we are about, individually, and as a Church.
- *The liturgy is the fountain from which all her powers flow.* From the liturgy, we receive the strength to go out and continue our efforts to live as faithful disciples of Christ; we receive the power to participate in the Church’s mission to bring the Good News of the Gospel to all creation.

Pause: During the Mass what parts of the liturgy most move you and why?

The Liturgy—Work of the Trinity (C 1077-1112, USC p.167). The *Catechism* (1082) states: *“In the Church’s liturgy the divine blessing is fully revealed and communicated. The Father is acknowledged and adored as the source and the end of all the blessings of creation and salvation. In his Word who became incarnate, died, and rose for us, he fills us with his blessings. Through his Word, he pours into our hearts the Gift that contains all gifts, the Holy Spirit.”*

In the liturgy, God the Father, Son and Holy Spirit are the primary characters. Our role is to be active participants in what *God* does for us in the liturgy.

In his book *Fr. McBride’s College Catechism*, the author summarizes the work of the Trinity in the liturgy in this way:

- The Father, the source and goal of the liturgy, blesses us.
- The Son, at the heart of the liturgy, redeems us.
- The Spirit, the soul of the liturgy, sanctifies us.

The Father blesses us (C 1077-1083). From the beginning of creation until the end of time, God *blesses* us, i.e., he offers us a share in his life and goodness. This happens especially when we gather for liturgy. In the liturgy, God blesses us and we celebrate his blessings and respond with thanks, singing: *“Praise God from whom all blessings flow.”*

The Son redeems us (C 1084-1090). John 3:16 tells us that *‘God so loved the world that he sent his only Son...’* The Son is sometimes called the sacrament of God. During his life on earth, Jesus was a visible, tangible sign of God’s love for humanity. In and through Jesus, people could touch the face of God and hear God speak to them in an audible way.

Catholics believe that the actions and words of Jesus foreshadow what happens in the sacraments. For example, Jesus feeding the multitudes anticipates what happens in the Eucharist; Jesus welcoming sinners and forgiving them anticipates what happens in the sacrament of Reconciliation.

Of course, the pinnacle saving event in Jesus' life was his passion, death and resurrection. Through his dying and rising, Jesus destroyed the power of sin, death and evil, and opened for us the gates of heaven. Our participation in the sacraments is a participation in the new life of Christ which God offers to us. Our participation in the sacraments is our constant opportunity to allow God to touch our lives, nourish us, heal us and draw us closer to him, and our opportunity to sing our praises to God.

The Spirit sanctifies us (C 1091-1109). When speaking about the role of the Holy Spirit in the liturgy, two Greek words are often used: *Anamnesis* (C 1103-1104) and *Epiclesis* (C 1105-1106).

Anamnesis is a Greek word for remembering. In the context of Christian liturgy, *anamnesis* is a special kind of remembering, one that makes a past event present today (C 1104). The Holy Spirit is sometimes called the "memory of the Church." He helps her especially in the Liturgy of the Word to remember God's marvelous deeds on our behalf.

Epiclesis is a Greek word for "calling down upon." During the *epiclesis* of the Mass (prior to the consecration), the priest asks the Father to send his Spirit upon the gifts of bread and wine to "make them holy so that they may become the body and blood of Christ." As we enter into the prayer of the Mass, the Holy Spirit is at work in us, sanctifying us and making us a little bit more like Jesus.

Pause: *When you participate at Mass, how aware are you of its Trinitarian dimension? What one thing could we do to help us make our participation in the liturgy more Trinitarian, more centered on all Three Persons of the Trinity?*

WHO Celebrates the Liturgy (C 1136-1144, USC p. 170). The whole Body of Christ celebrates the liturgy with Christ our High Priest. By the "whole Body of Christ," we mean the Church on earth and the Church in heaven. In the celebration of the liturgy, earth unites with heaven. Jesus is present and so are Mary, the angels and the saints. In the liturgy, all present are celebrants because of their baptism into Christ. Through ordination, certain members of the Church preside at the celebration of the seven sacraments.

HOW is the Liturgy Celebrated (C 1145-1162). Just as in daily life we use signs and symbols to communicate, we celebrate liturgy through signs and symbols. These signs and symbols come from creation around us as well as from our culture. In liturgy, "God speaks to us" through the most basic elements of life: water, bread, wine, oil, a touch, a word. The following four symbols are used in liturgy:

Actions (C 1153). The actions that occur during liturgy are called *ritual actions*, e.g., processing, kissing the book or altar, breaking bread, pouring wine, washing hands or feet, anointing with oil, extending hands, bowing.

Words (C 1154). Ritual actions are often accompanied by words, e.g., "I baptize you"; "I absolve you." Also, each sacrament is accompanied by a liturgy of the Word, a reading(s) from Scripture.

Song/Music (C 1156-1158). Paul exhorts us to sing psalms and hymns and to make melody to the Lord with all our heart (Eph. 5:19). St. Augustine says: "he who sings once prays twice." Singing in the liturgy has great power to touch hearts. Prior to Augustine's conversion, he would visit a church to listen to the music and sermons. In his *Confessions* he writes: "*How I wept, deeply moved by your hymns, songs, and the voices that echoed through your Church*" (C 1157).

Holy Images (C 1159-1162). All sacred images and icons principally represent *Christ*. Images of Mary and the saints point to Christ who is glorified in them (C 1159, 1161). Beautiful stained glass, sculptures and statuary can also lift our minds and hearts to God.

WHEN is the Liturgy Celebrated - Liturgical Seasons (C 1163-1173). *By means of the yearly cycle, the church celebrates the holy mystery of Christ, from his incarnation until the day of Pentecost and the expectation of his coming again.* (General Norms for the Liturgical Year Calendar, #17)

The Liturgical Year is the way Mother Church places before us the main events and teachings in the life of Jesus. When we remember the events and stories in the life of Jesus, we make them as real to us as they were to those who first experienced them. We bring past events into the now. So the Liturgical Year is not an historical look at past events, but the way our Church invites us to enter and experience Christ who continues to be present and active in the events of our lives in the here and now.

(For more on the Seasons of the Liturgical Year, see my booklet *The Liturgical Year*, available at the parish on the parish website: www.ascensioncatholic.net. Click on Welcome, then Archives, Topical Index of Writings, then Liturgy.)

WHERE is the Liturgy Celebrated (C 1179-1186). Because all creation is sacred, we can worship God anywhere. Where freedom of worship is allowed, Christians normally gather in churches to celebrate the liturgy.

Liturgical Diversity and Unity (C 1200-1209). The *Catechism* states: “The mystery of Christ is so rich that it cannot be exhausted by its expressions in any single liturgical tradition” (1201). The Catholic Church is blessed with a variety of beautiful rites (1203). “The celebration of the liturgy should correspond to the genius and culture of different peoples.... It must be celebrated, and lived in all cultures in such a way that they themselves are not abolished by it, but redeemed and fulfilled” (1204). Having recognized the rich diversity of liturgical rites within the Church and the many cultures in which the liturgy is celebrated, the *Catechism* (1206) also states that all adaptations of the liturgy must express fidelity to the common faith received from Christ and to hierarchical communion, i.e., be in unity with the local bishop and the Pope.

Pause: Any questions or comments on what we have just read?

Introduction to the Sacraments (C 1113-1134, USC p. 168)

In a broad sense, a sacrament is any visible person, place or thing through which we experience our invisible God. For example, in contemplating nature or stained glass in a church, we may experience God. An encounter with another may be a God experience. Events like the birth of a child, the death of a loved one, some suffering or joy, may put us in touch with God.

We stated above that Jesus is sometimes called the *Sacrament of God*. In Jesus, people experience our invisible God in a tangible way. The Church, the Body of Christ, is sometimes called the *Sacrament of Jesus* because she is the visible extension of his presence here on earth. In and through the Church, Jesus continues his ministry among us. The Church believes so deeply in the presence of Christ in her midst, and especially in the sacraments, that she says: “whatever was visible in our Savior has passed over into his sacraments” (Pope Leo the Great).

The Seven Sacraments. The *Catechism* (1131) states: “Sacraments are efficacious signs of grace, instituted by Christ and entrusted to the Church, by which divine life is dispensed to us.”

The above definition of sacraments contains four elements. Let’s look at each of them.

- **“Efficacious Signs” of Grace** (C 1127, 1145-1152). Sacraments are accompanied by special signs or symbols that produce what they signify. A wedding ring is a symbol of the love which exists between a husband and wife but it is *not* the love; it only points to the love. The symbols or rituals used in the sacraments effect or produce what they signify. Hence, water, an outward sign of washing, not only points to an inner reality occurring in the soul but actually accomplishes it. In the ritual washing that occurs in Baptism, the soul is cleansed of sin and filled with the grace presence of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. The *Catechism* (1127) states that the “sacraments are efficacious because in them Christ himself is at work; it is he who baptizes, he who acts in his sacraments in order to communicate the grace that each sacrament signifies.” More accurately, sacraments are actions both of Christ and the Church. In the celebration of the sacraments, the Church performs certain rituals (pouring of water on a child, anointing with oil, etc.) during which Christ is present bringing about an interior change in the recipient.

Pause: What are one or two very sacred symbols for you? What do they represent? Any questions on the difference between a symbol like a ring or country’s flag and a sacramental symbol?

- **“Instituted by Christ”** (C 1117). If one looks in the Gospel for a passage which lists the seven sacraments, one will look in vain. (When we study each individual sacrament, we will point out its biblical roots.) We may wonder how the Church ended up with seven rather than six or ten sacraments.

It may surprise you to discover that the Church did not finally decide on the number seven until 1215 AD at the *Fourth Lateran Council*. Prior to that, the Church had many rituals which were regarded as sacramental in that they bestowed God’s grace to the recipient.

We may wonder why it took the Church so long to decide on the number seven and how it decided on that number. In the same manner, it took the Church over 200 years to decide which books in circulation should be admitted to the New Testament. In the end, the Church decided on 27 books rather than 25 or 29. Actually, some books barely made it into the New Testament. We trust that the Holy Spirit, whom Jesus gave to the Church to guide her and “lead her into

the truth,” was guiding church leaders when they made their decision about the canon of the New Testament.

When it comes to the Church’s decision regarding the seven sacraments, we trust that just as the Holy Spirit guided church leaders on the number of books to include in the New Testament, he also guided them in deciding on the number of sacraments. The number seven is symbolic of perfection or wholeness. In the seven sacraments, Christ has left his Church with seven signs of his love to touch us during key moments of our lives and to empower us to be his priestly people. In this regard, it is good to recall Jesus’ words to his Apostles: “Whatever you bind on earth shall be considered bound in heaven...” (Mt 16:19).

- **“Entrusted to the Church”** (C 1118). Just as the scriptures are entrusted to the Church, so are the sacraments. By Christ’s will, the Church oversees the celebration of the sacraments. The sacraments make the Church and the Church makes the sacraments.
- **“Sources of Divine Life.”** When sacraments are validly celebrated, God always shows up offering us a share in his divine life.

Pause: Were you surprised to hear that the church did not finally decide until 1215 on the number of sacraments? Why are the sacraments so important in Catholicism?

The Sacraments “bear fruit in those who receive them with the required dispositions” (C 1131). For the sacraments to produce their true effect in our lives, we must come to them with faith and receive them with faith. Remember the woman with a bleeding problem in the Gospel? Many people were crowding around Jesus and many touched him that day, but she was the only one to come to him with faith. As a result, she was healed (Lk 8:43-48). At times, the faith we bring to the sacraments may be very weak. In those times, we can pray: “Lord, I believe. Help my unbelief.”

Purpose of the Sacraments. The *Catechism* (1123) states the threefold purpose of the sacraments: a) to sanctify the recipient; b) to build up the Church, the Body of Christ; and c) to give worship to the Father.

Three Groupings. *Sacraments of Initiation:* Baptism, Confirmation and Eucharist. Until all three sacraments are received, one is not a full member of the Church. *Sacraments of Healing:* Reconciliation and Anointing of the Sick. *Sacraments of Christian Service:* Holy Orders and Matrimony.

Sacramentals (C 1671-1679). The *Catechism* (1167) states: “*Sacramentals are sacred signs instituted by the Church. They prepare us to receive the fruit of the sacraments and sanctify different circumstances of life*”.

Sacramentals resemble the sacraments, but they are not the sacraments because Christ did not institute them. They are instituted by Mother Church to help us make holy every aspect of life. “*Among sacramentals, blessings (of persons, meals, objects and places) come first. Every blessing praises God and prays for his gifts*” (C 1671). (For more on the various forms of sacramentals, see the *Catechism*, 1671-1679.)

Pause: How do you feel about the Catholic use of sacramentals? Do you have a favorite sacramental, e.g., miraculous medal, rosary, prayer book?

Suggested Action

Keep in mind that sacraments are true encounters of meetings with Christ. In the sacraments, God comes to meet us and share with us his divine life. In the sacraments, we have the opportunity to worship God in spirit and in truth.

Meditation

Mother Church earnestly desires that all the faithful be led to that full, conscious, and active participation in liturgical celebrations which is demanded by the very nature of the liturgy. Such participation by the Christian people as “a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a purchased people” (1 Pet. 2:9; cf. 2:4-5), is their right and duty by reason of their baptism.

In the restoration and promotion of the sacred liturgy, this full and active participation by the people is the aim to be considered before all else; for it is the primary and indispensable source from which the faithful are to derive the true Christian spirit. Therefore, through the needed program of instruction, pastors of souls must zealously strive to achieve it in all their pastoral work.

(Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy, 14)

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BAPTISM & CONFIRMATION: Sacraments of Initiation (RCIA)

(C 1212-1321, USC Chs. 15 & 16)

In this article, we will look at the first two sacraments of initiation: Baptism and Confirmation.

The Sacraments of Christian Initiation (C 1212, USC p. 183). The *Catechism* (1285) states that *Baptism, the Eucharist and Confirmation together constitute the “sacraments of Christian initiation,”* whose unity must be safe-guarded. The three sacraments of initiation are closely related. Baptism brings the new life of Christ; Confirmation strengthens the new life of Christ; and the Eucharist nourishes the new life of Christ. Together they make us full members of the Church and they bestow the fullness of the Holy Spirit so that we can live more like Christ.

THE SACRAMENT OF BAPTISM (C 1213-1284 USC Ch 15)

In what may have been a baptismal homily, St. Paul writes: *“Are you unaware that we who were baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? We were indeed buried with him through Baptism into death, so that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might live in newness of life”* (Rom 6:3-4).

The word baptism is from a Greek word which means to “plunge” or “immerse.” In Baptism, the recipient is plunged or immersed into Christ’s death and Resurrection. In Baptism, we symbolically go into the tomb with Christ, dying to sin and self, and we rise to new life in the Spirit of Christ.

Biblical Roots of the Sacrament (C 1217-1225). Many events in Israel’s salvation history point to the saving grace received in the waters of baptism, e.g., the Great Flood, Israel Crossing the Red Sea, Israel crossing the River Jordan into the Promised Land.

At the beginning of Jesus’ public ministry, he was baptized by John in the River Jordan. In and through this event, Jesus, the sinless One, identified himself with sinful humanity whom he came to liberate from the slavery and power of sin. In stepping into the River Jordan, Jesus filled the waters with his divine presence just as he does when the water is blessed during the sacrament of Baptism.

Before he returned to his Father, Jesus issued the Great Commission: to preach in his name, make disciples and baptize in the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit (Mt 28:16-20). Since the day of Pentecost, when about 3000 adults were baptized, the Church has initiated

new members into her midst through the sacrament of Baptism.

Four Effects of Baptism (C 1262-1274, USC 192). The *Catechism* lists the following four effects of the sacrament of Baptism on those who receive it.

- *All sin is wiped away.* For the infant, this means original sin. For children over the “age of reason” (seven years) and adults, this means both original and personal sin. In the early church, adults removed all clothing prior to entering the waters of Baptism, symbolizing their intention to shed a sinful or old way of life. They went down into the tomb with Christ, signaling their intention to die to sin and to all that is not of Christ. Hence, the decision to seek Baptism was a very radical one. It involved a radical conversion of heart and mind, a decision to turn away from all that was not of Christ.

While the waters of Baptism wash away all sin, original and personal, it does not remove the tendency or inclination toward sin that all of us struggle with. This wound of original sin causes us to be sometimes confused about what is and isn’t sin, and it leaves us with a weakened will when it comes to resisting the temptations of the world, the flesh and the devil. But through the grace received in this sacrament and other sacraments, and through prayer and spiritual direction, we can grow in our ability to deal with the wounds of original sin which afflict our soul and mind.

- *We become adopted children of God.* Through Baptism we become royalty; we are transformed into children of God. We are taken into the household of God and share in God’s divine life. We become temples of the Holy Spirit. Whenever we suffer from self-image problems, all we need do is spend time meditating on who we are because of the sacrament of Baptism.

- *We are initiated into the Church.* Through Baptism, we become members of the Church, the Body of Christ. We share in the priesthood of Christ as well as in his prophetic and royal mission. “You are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people of his own, so that you may announce the praise of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light” (1Pet 2:9).

- *We bond with other Christians.* Through Baptism, we share a common bond with all who have been baptized into the Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

Pause: What struck you most about what we have just read? What did you underline, or what might you have underlined?

Baptismal Character of Seal. Baptism seals the Christian with an indelible spiritual mark or character. Baptism marks us permanently as belonging to Christ, whose image we bear. We can only be baptized once.

Necessity of Baptism (C 1257-1261). Jesus taught the necessity of Baptism when he said “unless a man be born again of water and the Holy Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God” (Jn 3:3). Also, before he ascended into heaven, he commanded his disciples to “go forth and teach all nations baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit” (Mt 28:19). Therefore, Baptism with water is the necessary first step to eternal salvation for all who believe in Jesus and know the importance of Baptism. But what of those who have never heard of Christ? For people in this situation, the *Catechism* (1260) makes this crucial distinction: “God has bound salvation to the sacrament of Baptism, but he himself is not bound to the sacraments.” While salvation in water and the Spirit is the normal way to salvation (which of course assumes faith and conversion of heart for the adult), the Church believes that God in his infinite mercy may save unbaptized persons.

Traditionally, the Church recognizes other forms of Baptism.

Baptism of Desire. The *Catechism* (1259) states: “For catechumens who die before their Baptism, their explicit desire to receive it, together with repentance for their sins, and charity, assures them the salvation that they were not able to receive through the sacrament.”

Baptism of Blood. The *Catechism* (1258) states: “The Church has always held the firm conviction that those who suffer death for the sake of the faith without having received Baptism are baptized by their death for and with Christ. This Baptism of blood, like the desire for Baptism, brings about the fruits of Baptism without being a sacrament.”

Baptism of Implicit Desire. The *Catechism* (1260) states: “Every man who is ignorant of the Gospel of Christ and of his Church, but seeks the truth and does the will of God in accordance with his understanding of it, can be saved. It may be supposed that such persons would have desired Baptism explicitly if they had known its necessity.”

Unbaptized Infants. The *Catechism* (1261) states: “As regards children who have died without Baptism, the Church can only entrust them to the mercy of God, as she does in her funeral rites for them. Indeed, the great mercy of God who desires that all should be saved, and Jesus’ tenderness toward children which caused him to say: ‘Let the children come to me, do not hinder them’ [Mk 10:14, 1Tim 2:4], allow us to hope that there is a way of salvation for children who have died without Baptism.”

Who Can Baptize? The ordinary ministers of Baptism are bishops, priests and deacons. In cases of emergency, when an ordained minister is not available, the *Catechism* (1256) states that “any person, even someone not baptized, can baptize, if he has the required intention. The required intention is to will to do what the Church does when she baptizes, and to apply the Trinitarian baptismal formula. The Church finds the reason for this possibility in the universal saving will of God and the necessity of Baptism for salvation.”

Pause: Any questions or comments on what we have just read? Were you aware of the four types of Baptisms that the article has just described?

Why Does the Church Baptize Infants (C 1250-1252). In the very early days of Christianity, only adults were normally baptized. The practice of infant baptism developed spontaneously in the early church. Adults who had adopted the Christian way of life wanted the same for their children. There is explicit testimony that infant baptism took place in the second century. It is possible that it occurred earlier when “whole households” received baptism (Acts 16:15). In 215 AD, the writer Hippolytus stated: “When they come to the water, let the water be pure and flowing. And they shall put off their clothes. And they shall baptize the little children first. And if they can answer for themselves, let them answer. But if they cannot, let their parents answer or someone from their family.”

But shouldn’t the person being baptized have explicit faith in Jesus and have repented of sin? Infant Baptism reminds us that we cannot “earn” or “merit” salvation, even through our faith. The *Catechism* (1250) states: “The sheer gratuitousness of the grace of salvation is particularly manifest in infant Baptism.” At the Baptism of an infant, faith is supplied by the parents, godparents and the community. It is a bit like the healing of the paralytic in the Gospel. It seems that this poor wounded man did not have faith to be healed, yet Jesus healed him because of the obvious faith of his friends.

Seeing *their* faith. Jesus healed him” (Mk 2:1-7). Needless to say, in the case of infant Baptism, the assumption is that the child will receive post-Baptismal catechesis and be led to come to know and practice the ways of Jesus and his Church. The Church also teaches that the Baptism of an infant may be postponed if there is not a “well-founded hope” that the child will be raised in the Catholic faith (USC p.191).

The Principal Symbols of Baptism (C 1234-1245, USC p. 184). The principal symbols of Baptism tell us much about the meaning of this sacrament.

Water. Water can both destroy and save life. In the sacrament of Baptism, the pouring of the blessed water is the outward visible sign of the interior transformation being brought about in the soul. All sin, original and personal, is washed away and the soul is filled with the grace presence of Christ. The recipient becomes a temple of the Holy Spirit. The pouring of the water on the recipient’s head or his/her immersion in water, accompanied by the Trinitarian formula, is the central rite of this sacrament.

Oil. In the Old Testament, kings and queens were anointed to symbolize the coming of God’s Spirit to enable them to be godly leaders of God’s people. The anointing of the candidate at Baptism with sacred chrism, blessed by the bishop, symbolizes an interior anointing in the soul. The recipient receives the Holy Spirit to empower him/her to live out his/her Baptismal promises to say ‘no’ to the world, the flesh and the devil, and to say ‘yes’ to Jesus and his Gospel.

White Garment and Candle. In the early church, adults, prior to entering the waters of Baptism, shed all their clothes to symbolize that they were leaving behind the old way of life, that they were shedding sinful ways. After they emerged from the baptismal waters, they were draped with a white garment to symbolize that they were clothing themselves with Christ (Gal 3:27).

The reception of a *Baptismal candle*, lit from the Easter candle, signifies that the newly baptized has been *enlightened* by Christ and is now called to live as a child of the light.

Pause: *What are your thoughts and feelings about infant Baptism? Do you think there are some advantages to those who seek Baptism as adults?*

THE SACRAMENT OF CONFIRMATION (C 1285-1321, USC Ch. 16)

Confirmation is the second sacrament of initiation. Concerning this sacrament, the *Catechism* (1285) states: “By the sacrament of Confirmation, the baptized are perfectly bound to the Church and are enriched with a special strength of the Holy Spirit. Hence, they are as true witnesses of Christ more strictly obliged to spread and defend the faith by word and deed.” “Confirmation” comes from a word which means to make fast or to secure. This sacrament confirms and strengthens the gift of the Holy Spirit received in Baptism. To use a military analogy, to receive Confirmation is to be empowered and sent on active duty as a servant and witness of Christ.

Biblical Roots of the Sacrament (C 1286-1289). The biblical roots of this sacrament go back to the Old Testament when the prophets foretold that the Spirit of God would rest upon the Messiah, the future Savior of the world. During Jesus’ Baptism, the Spirit did come upon him signifying that he was the awaited Messiah, the Son of God. From the moment of his conception, the Spirit was intimately linked with Jesus, empowering him to speak with authority, cast out demons, perform healings and miracles, and embrace God’s will even unto death on the cross.

Several times during his public ministry, Jesus promised to send the Spirit on his followers so that they would be empowered to continue his work. This promise was most dramatically fulfilled on Pentecost Day (Acts 2:1-4). Immediately, the previously fear-filled Apostles then became fearless in their proclamation of the Good News. Like Jesus, they performed healings and cast out demons (Acts 5:12-16). The presence of the Holy Spirit was so tangible that in one situation, the house where the people had gathered, rocked (Acts 4:31).

After baptizing new converts, the Apostles laid hands upon them to impart the gift of the Holy Spirit who completes the grace of Baptism (C 1288). This act of “laying on of hands” is recognized in Catholic tradition as the *essential rite* and *origin* of the sacrament of Confirmation – a ritual which perpetuates the grace of Pentecost in the Church (C 1288).

By the second century, anointing with *perfumed oil* (chrism) coupled with the “laying on of hands” became the essential or central rite of Confirmation. *Perfumed oil* was used to symbolize the fragrance of Christ which every Christian was expected to manifest.

Two Traditions Emerge (C 1290-1292). In the first centuries of Christianity, Baptism and Confirmation were

conferred in one ceremony, usually administered by a bishop. But as the Church spread to rural areas, the bishop could not be present at all the baptisms. The custom developed in which the priest baptized infants but the completion of the sacrament was reserved for the bishop—a ceremony involving a second anointing with holy chrism.

In the Eastern Catholic Church, the practice of retaining the *unity* of the two sacraments has continued—the priest who baptizes infants also confirms them, but only with oil consecrated by the bishop.

Pause: Do you have any questions or comments on what we have just read?

The Liturgy of Confirmation (C 1297-1301, USC p. 204). Confirmation is usually conferred within the Eucharist. The liturgy of Confirmation begins with a renewal of baptismal promises and a profession of faith by the *confirmandi*. This renewal of Baptismal promises within the context of the Eucharist connects all three sacraments of initiation. The bishop or his delegate then extends his hands over the *confirmandi* and prays for an outpouring of the Holy Spirit. Then the *essential* or central rite of the sacrament follows. The bishop lays his hands on the *confirmandi* and anoints his/her forehead with sacred chrism, invoking the words: “*Be sealed with the gift of the Holy Spirit.*” In the Eastern church, several other parts of the body are anointed: eyes, ears, nose, breast, back, hands and feet.

Effects of Confirmation (C 1303). The reception of the sacrament of Confirmation roots us more deeply in love, unites us more closely to Christ and the Church, and increases in us the gifts of the Spirit. Because of Confirmation, we receive a special strength to live our faith more fully, to witness to what we believe, and to never be ashamed of the cross of Christ.

Sacramental Seal or Character (C 1304). As with Baptism, Confirmation can only be received once, “for it too imprints on the soul an *indelible spiritual mark*, the ‘character,’ which is the sign that Jesus Christ has marked the Christian with the seal of his Spirit by clothing him with power from on high so that he may be his witness” (C 1304). We may reject our covenant with Christ but he never stops loving us.

Who May Receive Confirmation (C 1306). Every baptized person can and should receive the sacrament of Confirmation. One is not a full member of the Church until one has been confirmed.

Preparation for Reception of the Sacrament (C 1309-1310). Since most candidates for Confirmation have been baptized as infants, it is very important that they are adequately prepared for the reception of the sacrament. It is a wonderful opportunity for parents, sponsors and the parish to help young persons to more fully “own” their Catholic faith and grow in it. The *Catechism* outlines quite concretely what preparation for the reception of the sacrament should involve:

- It should lead the candidate toward a more intimate union with Christ.
- It should also pave the way toward a more lively familiarity with the Holy Spirit, his actions, his gifts and his biddings, so that he/she may be more capable of assuming the apostolic responsibilities of the Christian life.
- Catechesis for Confirmation should seek to awaken a sense of belonging to the Church on a global and local level.
- To receive Confirmation, one must be in a state of grace.
- One should receive the sacrament of Penance in order to be cleansed for the gift of the Holy Spirit.
- More intense prayer should prepare one to receive the strength and graces of the Holy Spirit with docility and readiness to act.

Pause: Do you think more can be done to help prepare candidates for the sacrament of Confirmation? Suggestions?

Suggested Action

Be aware that Christ is depending on you to attract others to him and his Church. Be conscious of this call. Pray that you may recognize opportunities God gives you to win souls to him.

Meditation

The famous king and saint, Louis IX of France, knew that his life began when he was baptized. The saintly king used to sign his documents “Louis of Poissy,” not Louis IX, King.” His reason was that Poissy was the place of his Baptism. He held it in higher regard than Rheims Cathedral, the site of his coronation. “It is...greater...to be a child of God than to be the ruler of a kingdom: this last I shall lose at death, but the other will be my passport to an everlasting destiny.” (Quoted in *This is Our Faith*)

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THE EUCHARIST: Source and Summit of the Christian Life (RCIA) (C 1322-1419, USC Ch. 17)

Writing to Christian converts in Corinth around 60 AD, St. Paul describes the institution of the Eucharist in this way:

I received from the Lord what I handed on to you, namely, that the Lord Jesus on the night in which he was betrayed took bread and after he had given thanks, broke it and said, "This is my body, which is for you. Do this in remembrance of me." In the same way, after the supper, he took the cup, saying, "This cup is the new covenant in my blood. Do this, whenever you drink it, in remembrance of me." Every time, when you eat this bread and drink this cup, you proclaim the death of the Lord until he comes! (1Cor 11:23-26)

Reception of the Eucharist completes our initiation into the Church. Vatican Council II called the Eucharist the "source and summit" of the Christian life and the "center of the Christian community." Through the Eucharist, the Church unites herself to Christ in offering God the Father perfect worship, and through the Eucharist we receive heavenly food and drink to help us live like Christ.

In this article, we will look at:

- Biblical Roots of the Sacrament
- The Eucharist as a Holy Meal and as a Sacrificial Meal
- 'Real' Presence of Christ in the Eucharist
- Fruits of the Eucharist
- Five Behaviors that Help Us to be Active Participants in the Mass

Biblical Roots (C 1333-1344, USC p.215)

The *U.S. Catechism* (p.215) states: "The use of bread and wine in worship is already found in the early history of God's people. In the Old Testament, bread and wine are seen as gifts from God, to whom praise and thanks are given in return for these blessings and for other manifestations of his care and grace. The story of the priest Melchizedek's offering a sacrifice of bread and wine for Abraham's victory is an example of this (Gn 14:18). The harvest of new lambs was also a time for the sacrifice of a lamb to show gratitude to God for the new flock and its contribution to the well-being of the family and tribe."

These ancient rituals were given a historical meaning when God delivered the Israelites from the slavery of Egypt. They celebrated their Passover from slavery to freedom with a Passover meal which always involved a young lamb usually called a Paschal lamb. (See Ex 12:1-

14 for a detailed account of the Passover Meal.) At the time of their deliverance or Passover from Egypt, God commanded the Israelites to celebrate each year their freedom with a Passover Meal. During the meal, the father of the family told the story of his people's deliverance by God. As they celebrated a historical event, it had a new dimension. They believed that the God who delivered their ancestors continued to deliver them year after year (Deut 26:5-11).

During their celebration of the Passover Meal, each Israelite family shared the lamb that had been slain or sacrificed and the bread over which a blessing had been proclaimed. They also drank from a cup of wine over which a similar blessing had been proclaimed.

Institution of the Eucharist (C 1337-1340, USC p. 216)

When Jesus instituted the Eucharist, he gave a final meaning to the blessing of the bread and the wine, the sacrifice of the Lamb, and the Passover celebration. Jesus showed himself to be the High Priest of the New Covenant, the Paschal Lamb who was slain. He offered himself as the perfect sacrifice to the Father. During his Last Supper which took place in the context of the annual Passover meal, Jesus changed bread and wine into his Body and Blood, given now as an offering for the salvation of all people (USC p.216).

"Do this in memory of me." Towards the end of his Last Supper with his apostles, Jesus said: "Do this in memory of me," thereby commanding them and their successors to repeat his actions and words, his Eucharistic celebration, "until he comes." From the earliest times, the Church has remained faithful to the Lord's command—a practice that has continued for 2,000 years.

Pause: *What struck you most about this section? What did you underline?*

The Eucharist as a Sacrificial Meal (C 1356-1372, USC p.220)

Catholics speak of the Eucharist as both a *meal* and a *sacrifice*, or as a sacrificial meal.

The Mass as a Holy Meal. It is easy enough to see the Mass as a meal. After all, the Last Supper was, among other things, a sacred meal between Jesus and his Apostles. All the paintings of this event show Jesus sitting around a dinner table with his Apostles sharing in the Passover meal.

The meal aspect of the Eucharist points to its communal dimension. We gather together as a community of disciples and not as isolated individuals. *Together* we sing, pray, listen to God speak to us, and together we come forth to receive the Body and Blood of Christ. In the Mass, we participate in a sacred banquet with Christ our Savior.

The Eucharist is also seen by our Church as a **covenant meal**. Just as the Passover meal celebrated Israel's covenant agreement with God, so does our participation in the Eucharist celebrate our covenant agreement with Jesus. In and through the Eucharist, we renew and rededicate ourselves to Christ and we receive the divine strength to be faithful to our covenant with him.

The Eucharist as a Sacrifice (C 1362-1372, USC p. 220) Catholics believe that the Mass is a *sacrificial* meal. As we examine the words of institution or consecration recited at each Mass, we clearly notice their *sacrificial* language. They speak about "a body that was broken" and about "blood that poured out" for the forgiveness of sins. For Jesus, the reality of what was to happen the next day on Calvary was a part of the meal that he was celebrating with his Apostles. They were participating in a sacrificial meal, a meal that was clearly linked and made present in the sacrifice that Jesus was to make the next day on Calvary. When the early Christians gathered to celebrate the Eucharist, they were aware that Jesus, the *slain Lamb of God* (Rev. 5:12), and also their *risen brother*, was in their midst.

Our Protestant brothers and sisters deny the sacrificial dimension of the Mass, often quoting Heb 9:25-26, which states that "Christ does not have to offer himself again and again, like the high priest going into the sanctuary year after year with the blood that is not his own, or else he would have had to suffer over and over again since the world began."

When Catholics state that the Mass is a sacrifice, we are *not* saying that Jesus is being sacrificed again and again. Rather we are saying that Christ's sacrifice is being *re-presented* (made present), *prolonged* or *continued* in time in a way that we will never fully comprehend. There are millions of masses but only *one* single sacrifice of Christ. The *Catechism* states: "The sacrifice of Christ and the sacrifice of the Eucharist are the one single sacrifice." It is the same victim (Christ), the same priest (Christ now works through the ministry of the priest). In the Mass, the same Christ who offered himself once in a bloody manner on the altar of the cross is contained and offered in an unbloody manner (C 1367).

"If our eyes could see what is really happening at any Mass, we would see Christ at the altar and among us, leading us and drawing us all into himself. Then, with him, we would ascend to the Father's presence. We would also see the Holy Spirit within each of us, uniting us, inspiring our offering. We would see the Father giving us in return his Son, Jesus Christ, the best gift God can give mortal beings, and we would see ourselves being drawn into an indescribable union with divinity." (Christ Among Us p. 248)

Pause: *What struck you most about what we just read?*

The Real Presence of Christ in the Eucharist (C 1373-1377, USC p. 223)

At Mass, Christ, by the power of the Holy Spirit, is present in the proclamation of the Word, in the gathered assembly, in the presider, but above all and in a wholly unique manner, in the Eucharist. The presence of Christ in the bread and wine is called 'real,' not to exclude other types of presence which are also 'real,' but to emphasize that the presence of Christ in the bread and wine is a presence in the fullest sense; it is a *substantial* presence (C 1373-1374).

In the sacred species of bread and wine, Christ comes to us in the fullest possible expression and communication of his love. "Since the Middle Ages, the change of bread and wine into the Body and Blood of Christ has been called "transubstantiation." This means that the substance of the bread and wine is changed into the substance of the Body and Blood of Christ. The appearances of bread and wine remain (color, shape, weight, chemical composition), but the underlying reality—that is, the substance—is now the Body and Blood of Christ" (USC p.223). What looks like and tastes like bread and wine is now filled or taken over with the presence of our divine Savior. An early Father of the Church, St. John Damascene, writes: "*If anyone wishes to know how the bread is changed into the body of Christ at Mass, I will tell him. The Holy Spirit overshadows the priest and acts on him as he acted on the Blessed Virgin Mary, when the angel Gabriel visited her.*" During the Eucharist Prayer of the Mass, the priest prays: "*Let your Spirit come upon these gifts to make them holy so that they may become the body and blood of our Lord Jesus Christ.*" The bread and wine remain changed until consumed.

Pause: *Catholics believe that Christ is truly present in the bread and wine at the Eucharist. Is this aspect of Catholic belief a challenge for you? What might help us to grow in our appreciation of Christ's presence in the Eucharist?*

As we saw in the previous article on the sacraments of Baptism and Confirmation, each sacrament has what the Church calls an *essential or central sign*. In Baptism, the *essential sign* is water. In Confirmation, it is the laying on of hands and the anointing with chrism. In the Eucharist, the essential or central signs are the wheat bread and wine on which the blessing of the Holy Spirit is invoked by the priest. Then the priest speaks the words that Jesus uttered at the Last Supper: “*This is my body which will be given up for you...this is the cup of my blood.*”

Finally, it is good to note that this presence of Christ in the Eucharist is not a passive one; rather it is a *dynamic presence*. In the Eucharist, Jesus is reaching out to us, meeting us, seeking to draw us closer to him and fill us up with his life and love. In the celebration of the Eucharist, we too should be reaching out to Christ, opening our hearts to him. The more we try to be aware of Christ and what he is doing for us, and the more we try to give ourselves to him as we meet him in the Eucharist, the more intimate will be our union with him, the greater will be the love and grace we will receive, and the more we will be transformed into him by this experience.

Grace Effects of Receiving Christ in the Eucharist (C 1391-1405, USC p. 224)

The *Catechism* lists several effects or spiritual benefits that come to us when we participate in the Eucharist. Four of these are:

- Holy Communion deepens our relationship with Christ (C 1391).
- Holy Communion separates us from sin and helps us to do battle with the forces of evil (C 1393).
- Holy Communion deepens our relationship with our Church family (C 1396).
- Holy Communion commits us to caring for the poor (C 1397).

Of course, all of the sacraments presuppose that the recipient has been converted to Christ and has some understanding of the sacraments and receives them with faith. There is nothing magical about the sacraments. We don’t just come and grace is automatically poured into our souls.

In the *Constitution on the Liturgy*, a Vatican II document, the bishops state: “*In order that the sacred liturgy may produce its full effect, it is necessary that the faithful come to it with proper dispositions, that their thoughts match their words, and that they cooperate with divine grace lest they receive it in vain*” (11).

Pause: One of the implications of partaking in the Eucharist is that it calls us to be Eucharist for others. What are some ways that you can live the Eucharist by being Eucharist for others?

Five Behaviors that Help Us to be Active Participants at Mass

The *Constitution on the Liturgy* states that “full and active participation by all the people is the aim to be considered above all else” (14). It also states that “Pastors of souls must realize... that it is their duty to ensure that the faithful take part in the Mass knowingly, actively and fruitfully” (11). The following are five behaviors to develop for all who wish to be active participants in the Mass.

Behavior #1—Hospitality. Everyone enjoys coming to a place where there is a spirit of welcome and hospitality. A spirit of hospitality does not mean a lot of chatter before Mass. Rather, it calls for an attitude that says to those around us: “I am glad to see you.” A simple “good morning” or a smile communicates a spirit of hospitality. We help the presence of Christ in the assembly to come alive when we are hospitable to those around us at Mass.

Behavior #2—Participating in the Sung Prayer of the Church. Prior to his conversion to Christianity, St. Augustine used to come and sit in the back of the Church while the Mass was going on. Concerning the singing, Augustine wrote:

How I wept, deeply moved by your hymns, songs, and the voices that echoed through your Church! What emotion I experienced in them! Those sounds flowed into my ears, distilling the truth in my heart. A feeling of devotion surged within me, and tears streamed down my face —tears that did me good. (C 1157)

Augustine’s words speak to the power of music and song to touch hearts. An important part of active participation in the Mass is joining in the “*sung prayer.*” Ideally, at Mass we don’t just sing the songs, but we *pray* the songs. We do this by paying attention to the text of the song and making an effort to lift our minds and hearts to God during our singing.

Behavior #3—Active Listening. During the proclamation of the readings and the homily, we are especially called to listen attentively. This demands a real effort on our part. It is so easy to allow our minds to be distracted.

Behavior #4—Spirit of Generosity. The following are four ways that we can allow a spirit of generosity to impact the way we participate in the Eucharist.

- Getting to Church on time and remaining until the end of the final song
- Giving of ourselves to the songs and prayers of the Mass
- Giving of our financial resources to the Church during the collection
- Bringing food for the poor—if your parish has such a project

Behavior #5—Spirit of Thanksgiving. At each Mass we participate in, we come primarily to *give* of ourselves and not to receive. Though of course, in our giving, we will receive. When we come to Mass with a “what’s in it for me” attitude, we are bringing a consumerist mentality into the house of God.

Our Behavior at Mass is Contagious. It is important to remember that our behavior at Mass is contagious. When we are *hospitable* to those around us at Mass—*sing* enthusiastically, *pray* devoutly, *listen* attentively to the readings and homily, place our *money offering* in the basket, receive the Body and Blood of Christ with *love* and *faith*, move with a sense of *reverence* that reflects awareness that we are on holy ground—we demonstrate that we are participating in something very important, and our good example may impact those around us more than we can ever imagine. On the other hand, when we miss Mass for no good reason, we give a poor example to our family and others. When we come rushing into Mass, show no hospitality to those around us, behave in a distracted and uninvolved manner, and leave early, we diminish the whole worship atmosphere. We communicate to others that “the Mass is not important, I’m bored and not mentally here.”

Pause: Which of the above mentioned behaviors are you strong and weak at when it comes to actively participating in the Mass?

Why Non-Catholic Christians are not Invited to Participate at our Eucharistic Table (C 1398-1401). This is a painful issue for Catholics and non-Catholics—especially where there is a mixed religion marriage. The “lack of unity in matters of faith” is one key reason our Church does not invite other Christians to participate in Holy Communion.

For Catholics, the Eucharist is, among other things, a celebration of our *unity in matters of belief* (e.g. the Trinity; Jesus as God and man; the scriptures as the

inspired word of God; the necessity of faith in Jesus for salvation; the seven sacraments; the pope as the successor of Peter; devotion to Mary and the Saints). With the above named beliefs, Catholics share a “partial communion” with other Christians. We hold *some* of the same beliefs, but not all. For as long as the differences and disunity in matters of faith exist, it would not be appropriate to share the same table. This painful disunity should motivate all Christians to pray and work towards full communion in matters of belief.

Pause: What are your thoughts and feelings about the Church’s stance on not inviting non-Catholic-Christians to the Eucharist?

Suggested Action

Look at the five behaviors that lead to active participation in the Mass. Choose one you are weak at and work at it. Remember that participation in the Eucharist calls us to *be Eucharist* for hurting people around us.

Meditation

Was ever another command so obeyed? For century after century, spreading slowly to every continent and country and among every race on earth, this action has been done in every conceivable human circumstance for every conceivable human need, from infancy and before it, to extreme old age and after it, from the pinnacles of earthly greatness to the refuge of fugitives in the caves and dens of the earth. Men have found no better thing than this to do for kings at their crowning and for criminals going to the scaffold; for armies in triumph or for a bride and bridegroom in a country Church...for the famine of a whole province or for the soul of a dear lover...and best of all, week by week, and month by month, on a hundred thousand Sundays, faithfully, unflinching, across all the parishes of Christendom, priest and people continue to work together in order to carry out this command, “Do this in Memory of me.”
(Don Gregory Dix, O.S.B.)

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THE SACRAMENT OF RECONCILIATION (RCIA)

(C 1422-1497, USC Ch. 18)

“On the evening of that first day of the week...Jesus showed himself to his disciples... He breathed on them and said to them, Receive the Holy Spirit. Whose sins you forgive are forgiven them, and whose sins you retain are retained.” (Jn 20:19, 22-23)

“The forgiveness of sins committed after Baptism is conferred by a particular sacrament called the sacrament of conversion, confession, penance or reconciliation.” (C 1486)

In this lesson we will look at:

- Biblical Roots of the Sacrament
- A Brief History of the Sacrament
- The Essential Elements of the Sacrament
- Seven Questions Often Asked about the Sacrament

Biblical Roots of the Sacrament (USC p. 235)

As we read the gospels, it is very clear that a central part of Jesus’ ministry is reaching out to sinners and extending God’s mercy to them. When a sinful woman kneels at his feet in the house of Simon the Pharisee, Jesus forgives her sins because she “loved much,” unlike the Pharisee who has little or no sense of his need for God’s mercy (Lk 7:36-50). In Lk 15:3-31, the religious leaders are complaining because Jesus “welcomes sinners and eats with them.” Then Jesus goes on to tell three wonderful parables, each of which speaks of God’s mercy.

While the Church teaches that only God can forgive sins, she also teaches that Jesus willed that the Church continue his ministry of forgiveness and reconciliation on earth. We see this desire of Jesus expressed in Jn 20:21-23 (see opening quote).

A Brief History of the Sacrament (C 1447)

The *Catechism* (1447) states: “Over the centuries the concrete form in which the church has exercised this power received from the Lord, has varied considerably.”

In the history of this sacrament, one will not find reconciliation rooms for many centuries. In the early years of Christianity, the Church exercised her ministry of reconciliation in a variety of ways. Three such ways were:

- *Participation in the Eucharist removed sin.* The *Catechism* (1393) states that “the Eucharist cannot

unite us to Christ without at the same time cleansing us from past sins and preserving us from future sins.”

- *Anointing of the Sick.* Jas 5:13-15 states that the prayer of faith prayed during the anointing “will save the sick person, and the Lord will raise him up. If he has committed any sins, he will be forgiven.”
- *Works of charity.* Scripture tells us that charity covers over a multitude of sins (Lk 7:47, 1Pet 4:8).

During the second to the fifth century, an *Order of Penitents* developed to help the Church deal with serious sins like murder, idolatry and adultery. Penitents had to perform rigorous penances to show that they had converted from their sinful ways.

In the seventh century, Irish monks introduced to Europe the practice of private confession, which also introduced people to spiritual direction. This was the beginning of private or one-to-one confession that we know today.

In 1974, the Vatican promulgated a new *Rite of Penance* for the Church. The new *Rite* has three forms.

- *Private, one-to-one* confession with an option to confess face-to-face to a priest.
- *Communal penance service with individual confession.* This form emphasizes the communal nature of sin and reconciliation. No matter how secret sin is, it is never private. It not only hurts our relationship with God but also diminishes our relationship with our Church family. When we are less than we can be, our community is diminished by our failure.
- *Communal penance service with General Absolution.* This form, which is rarely used, occurs when there is a large number of people and an insufficient number of priests present to administer the sacrament.

Pause: What struck you most about what we have just read? What did you underline or might have underlined?

The Essential Rite (C 1448)

Despite changes and developments in the way the sacrament has been celebrated over the course of the Church’s history, we note a fundamental structure comprising two essential elements: the acts of the

penitent and the acts of Christ through the ministry of the Church. We will now look at both of these.

The Acts of the Penitent (C 1450-1460, USC pp. 237-240). The acts of the penitent are threefold: contrition, confession of sin, and satisfaction or penance for sin.

Contrition (C 1451-1454). The *Catechism* (1451) states that “among the penitent’s acts, contrition occupies first place.” Contrition and repentance are the terms used to speak of sorrow for our sins.

A sense of sorrow or repentance for sin is a wonderful blessing and is only possible through the grace of God at work in our soul. Many people sin and have little or no sense that they are doing wrong, or little or no sorrow for sins that they are aware of. Without the grace of God, our conscience will be asleep to sinful behaviors and attitudes. This was the situation of King David. He committed adultery and then arranged for the murder of the husband (2Sam 11:1-27). He was asleep to both sins until the prophet Nathan came and helped him to wake up (2Sam 12:1-14). It is always a good spiritual practice to ask the Holy Spirit to help us to be aware of the existence of sin in our lives and to pray for the grace of true repentance.

Pause: *Have we lost the sense of sin today? If so, what are some of the reasons?*

Confession of Sins (C 1455-1458). The second action of the penitent is confession. Once we are aware of our sins and are blessed with the grace of repentance, we confess them to a priest. We must confess all mortal sins. It is recommended that we also confess venial sins, though it is not strictly necessary.

Confession of faults is good for the soul spiritually and psychologically. Naming our sins and confessing them to another can be quite humbling. Such an act of humility is good medicine for the pride that may lead us to think that we are morally and spiritually superior to others. Confession is also good for us psychologically. The very act of naming and sharing our faults, some of which may be causing us to experience a lot of guilt and shame, can be very healing especially when the confessor can effectively communicate to us God’s love and mercy.

Pause: *If confessing our sins to a priest is good for the soul, why are so many Catholics reluctant to take advantage of this great sacrament?*

Satisfaction/Penance (C 1459-1460). The third action of the penitent is satisfaction. The *Catechism* (1459)

states that “*absolution takes away sin, but it does not remedy all the disorders sin has caused. ...the sinner must try to recover his full spiritual health by doing something more to make amends for the sin: he must ‘make satisfaction for’...his sins. This satisfaction is also called ‘penance.’*”

Contrary to what some think, when Catholics perform a penance after confession, it does *not* mean that we are somehow paying a price for God’s mercy. God’s mercy is a gift, freely given and it cannot be earned (Eph 2:8-10). The only “price” we have to pay is a repentant heart—for God cannot give his gift of mercy to an unrepentant heart.

While all sin that we are sorry for is forgiven in confession, the wounds or consequences of sin are not miraculously removed. These wounds or consequences of sin are sometimes called the “temporary punishment” connected to sin. For example, if we break into our neighbor’s house and steal some of his property, he may be kind enough to forgive us. But it doesn’t stop there. We must also return the stolen property or pay to repair damages.

Sin wounds our relationship with God, with others and with ourselves. The repairing of the damage done by sin begins with an appropriate penance given in the confessional. If we confess neglect of our relationship with God, God through the priest totally and happily absolves us. But a decision to take more time to pray will help to repair our relationship with God. If we have hurt our bodies through the abuse of food and alcohol, those sins are forgiven in the confessional. But a penance to fast and exercise restraint in those areas will help to restore balance and moderation in our lives.

God’s Action—Absolution (C 1461-1467, USC p. 239). As stated above, the core or essential acts of the sacrament of reconciliation are the *acts of the penitent* (contrition, confession and satisfaction) and *God’s action* administered through the Church’s representative.

The phrase “God’s action” seeks to make clear the belief of the Church that God alone has the power to forgive sin (C 1441). But the Church teaches that God through Jesus has given the Church the power to forgive sin in his name. “Whose sins you shall forgive, they are forgiven them” (Jn 20:23). The priest says the following words of absolution:

God the Father of mercies, through the death and resurrection of his Son has reconciled the world to himself and sent the Holy Spirit among us for the forgiveness of sins; through the ministry of the

Church, may God give you pardon and peace, and I absolve you from your sins in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.

Pause: *Does the penance you receive in reconciliation normally fit the sin?*

Effects of the Sacrament (C 1496, USC p. 242). Each sacrament has spiritual effects for the one receiving it. The spiritual effects of the sacrament of reconciliation are threefold:

- Reconciliation with God and the Church
- Restoration of peace to the soul
- Reception of divine strength to fight the battle against temptations to sin

Seal of Confession (C 1467). The seal of confession refers to the fact that a priest cannot reveal anything he hears during a person's confession. This refers to the sins confessed, and any other matters discussed during confession. The seal of confession admits of no exceptions.

Seven Questions Frequently Asked about this Sacrament

1. Why confess to a priest? Why the need for a middleman?

Isn't it interesting that no one asks this question when it comes to the other sacraments, three of which also cleanse us of sin: Baptism, Eucharist and Anointing of the Sick. In Catholic tradition, grace is mediated (comes to us) through persons, signs and symbols.

But the main reason we bring our sins to a priest is the Church's deep sense that sin diminishes our relationship not only with God but also with others. Hence, the need for us to confess not only to God but also to the Church. In the confessional, the priest represents both God and Church.

2. How often should one celebrate the Sacrament of Reconciliation?

Strictly speaking, one only has to go to confession when one has committed a mortal sin. But the Church recommends a more frequent use of the sacrament. Automobile engines run more smoothly if they have a regular tune-up, and teeth stay healthier if they are cleansed regularly by a dental hygienist. In a similar way, our spiritual lives are enhanced by the frequent use of the sacrament of Reconciliation.

3. Is there an unforgivable sin?

Mk 3:28-29 implies that blasphemy against the Holy Spirit is an unforgivable sin. The only unforgivable sin is the sin we are not sorry for. If we are not sorry for a particular sin, God cannot forgive us.

4. Why are some people afraid of confession or find it very hard to go to this sacrament?

There may be one or more reasons for the fear. We may have had a bad experience as a child in which a priest yelled or shamed us or even refused to give us absolution. We may have a difficult time being vulnerable before another or we may be ashamed of some sins. Or pride may be at work in us—making it very hard for us to admit that we have failed. If we are fearful of going to the sacrament, we should pray for a healing of the fear and pray for courage. We could also visit with a priest and share with him our fear of the sacrament.

Pause: *Any questions or comments on what we have just read?*

5. Why do so few Catholics go to the sacrament of Reconciliation today?

Loss of the sense of sin is widespread in our culture today. People can be mean and nasty to others and think they have not done wrong. Many Catholics believe that sin is a private matter between God and them. Some are fearful of the sacrament. Many Catholics who have not gone to the sacrament for years have a strong resistance to returning. Finally, priests are partially to blame because of their failure to preach about sin, to stress the value of confession and to offer more opportunities for people to celebrate the sacrament.

6. Do you have any suggestions for those of us who seem to confess the same sins all the time? What can I do if I am stuck in some recurring sin?

If we confess the same sins repeatedly, we may have to take a deeper look at *how* we examine our conscience. Perhaps our examination of conscience is very narrow and superficial. Do we ever examine our conscience in the light of Scripture, especially passages like Mt 5, 6 and 7, or in the light of the good that we could have done (sins of omissions)?

As for dealing with a recurring or habitual sin, here are five suggestions:

- Begin each day by admitting you are powerless in dealing with your particular area of weakness. Pray: "Jesus, I admit my total weakness or addiction to this

sin (name it). But I also believe that you can help me to overcome this sin. Please help me to do so *today*.”

- As you go through the day, be aware that you are engaged in a spiritual battle and Jesus is on your side. Be determined to avoid whatever leads you into the occasion of committing this sin.
- At night do a brief examination of conscience. For the successes, say: “Thank you, Lord.” For your failures, say an act of contrition and then resolve to fight the battle again tomorrow.
- Go to the sacrament of Reconciliation regularly until you experience victory in this area of weakness and, ideally, go to the same priest who can counsel and encourage you.
- Do some appropriate form of fasting which will train your inner muscles to say “no” to sinful habits.

The main reason we repeat some sins over and over is because we never get serious about eliminating them. If we commit ourselves to acting on the above five suggestions, we will be surprised at how quickly we may experience victory over an area of weakness.

7. Do you have a suggestion for a way to examine our conscience?

Remember that sin is not only “choosing to do wrong,” but also “failing to do good.” As disciples of Jesus, we are called not only to keep the Ten Commandments, but also to live according to the new commandment of love.

- What am I doing to express my love for God? To what extent do I seek to discover God’s will when it comes to how I use my time, treasure and talent, and make decisions? Is fostering a relationship with God through prayer a priority in my life? If it is, we will gradually become ever more aware of sinful habits in our lives. Remember that the loss of the sense of sin is nearly always connected to a loss of the sense of God. Committing to being honest with God in prayer is the best thing we can do to have a clear sense of God and his ways alive in our heart.
- To what extent do I seek to live the Golden Rule (treating others as I wish to be treated)? To what extent have I developed a compassionate heart for the marginalized members of society? Are the poor included in my budget or do they only get loose change or my leftovers?
- To what extent am I aware of my call to develop my talents and use them to some extent to bless the communities I belong to?

Pause: *Should we use a guide when examining our conscience? What are some sins that many, if not most, people do not regard as sin today?*

Suggested Action

If you have not been to the sacrament of Reconciliation for many years, pray that the Holy Spirit would lead you to return and discover the spiritual value of the sacrament. If you presently frequent the sacrament, consider focusing on one area of weakness using the five suggestions offered in the response to question #6 above.

Meditation

*Coming to his senses the prodigal son thought,
“How many of my father's hired workers have
more than enough food to eat,
but here am I, dying from hunger.
I shall get up and go to my father
and I shall say to him,
‘Father, I have sinned against heaven
and against you. I no longer deserve
to be called your son;
treat me as you would treat
one of your hired workers.’”
So he got up and went back to his father.
While he was still a long way off,
his father caught sight of him,
and was filled with compassion.
He ran to his son, embraced him and kissed him.
His son said to him, “Father, I have sinned against
heaven and against you;
I no longer deserve to be called your son.”
But his father ordered his servants,
“Quickly bring the finest robe and put it on him;
put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet.
Take the fattened calf and slaughter it.
Then let us celebrate with a feast,
because this son of mine was dead,
and has come to life again;
he was lost, and has been found.”
Then the celebration began.*

(Lk 15:17-24)

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ANOINTING OF THE SICK – SACRAMENT OF HEALING (RCIA) (C 1499-1532, USC Ch 19)

If anyone among you is sick, he should summon the priests of the Church, and they should pray over him and anoint him with oil in the Name of the Lord, and the prayer of faith will save the sick person, and the Lord will raise him up. If he has committed any sins, he will be forgiven. Confess your sins to one another, and pray for one another, that you may be healed. The servant prayer of a righteous person is very powerful. (Jas 5:14-16)

‘Heal the sick!’ The Church has received this charge from the Lord and strives to carry it out by taking care of the sick as well as by accompanying them with her prayers of intercession. She believes in the life-giving presence of Christ, the physician of souls and bodies.” (C 1509)

In this article we will look at:

- Illness in Human Life
- Jesus’ Response to Sickness
- Jesus Transmits His Power to His Disciples
- Sacrament of Healing Becomes Sacrament of the Dying
- Reform of a Sacrament
- Effects of the Sacrament
- Church’s Ministry to the Dying
- Care of the Sick—Responsibility of the Whole Church
- Redemptive Suffering

Illness in Human Life (C 1500-1501)

*The Catechism (C1500-1501) states: **Illness and suffering have always been among the gravest problems confronted in human life. In illness, man experiences his powerlessness, his limitations, and his finitude. Every illness can make us glimpse death. Illness can lead to anguish, self-absorption, sometimes even despair and revolt against God.***”

The Church teaches that sin, sickness, suffering and death came into the world when Adam and Eve rebelled against God. Since then, sickness has been a part of our lives here on earth. It afflicts saint and sinner alike. As the *Catechism* states above, sickness can be very destructive. It can lead to mental depression, feelings of isolation, discouragement, despair, self-absorption and, worst of all, a sense of feeling of abandonment by God.

On the other *hand*, an encounter with sickness can become a point of great spiritual awakening. *The Catechism* (1501) states that sickness *“can make a person more mature, helping him discern in his life what is not essential so that he can turn toward that which is. Very often illness provokes a search for God and a return to Him.*

It was during a time of recuperation from injuries that St. Francis of Assisi and St. Ignatius of Loyola turned their lives over to God. Many people who have had a brush with death decide to live a life more focused on God and in service of others.

Jesus’ Response to Sickness (C 1503-1505, USC pp. 251-252)

Jesus’ care for the sick is the focus of a great number of stories in the four gospels. Again and again, Jesus is a visible, tangible sign of God’s special care for all who are struck down with sickness. Moved by the suffering of the sick, Jesus makes their pain his own: *“He took our infirmities and bore our diseases”* (Mt 8:17).

While Jesus’ concern for the sick was legendary, his compassion pointed to a deeper concern, namely, the healing of the soul, one’s relationship with God. This is especially shown when Jesus heals the paralytic. Before even treating the paralytic’s physical infirmity, Jesus heals his spiritual paralysis: *“Your sins are forgiven”* (Mk 2:5). The worst form of illness is sickness of the soul, the sickness that keeps us disconnected from God and causes us to think that God has abandoned us.

Pause: Have you ever had to cope with a serious illness? If so, how did it impact you emotionally and spiritually? What helped you the most during that difficult time? If you never had to deal with a serious illness, how do you think physical illness impacts people emotionally and spiritually?

Concern for the whole person. While the worst kind of illness is spiritual sickness, it is important to stress that Jesus in his ministry proclaimed God’s concern for the *whole* person— body, mind and spirit. In Jn 10:10, Jesus tells us that he came to share with us God’s abundant life. St. Irenaeus, an early Church Father, stated: *“The glory of God is man fully alive.”*

In his groundbreaking book on *Healing* published in 1974, Francis McNutt states that “every time a sick person came to him in faith, Jesus healed that person. Jesus did not divide the person, as we so often do, into a soul that is to be saved and healed, and a body that is to suffer and remain unhealed. Sickness of the body was part of the kingdom of Satan that Jesus came to destroy” (p. 62-63).

In his ministry, Jesus sought to free people from anything that would hinder them from fully receiving the abundant life that he wanted to share with them. Nowhere in the New Testament do we read that Jesus only came to “save souls.” Jesus came to save, heal, and liberate the whole person. He healed those whose spirits were in bondage to evil spirits and sin. He also healed those whose bodies were lame, blind, and leprous.

When Jesus spoke about our willingness to carry our cross, he was primarily referring to the persecution Christians would have to endure for being his disciples. Jesus’ cross was not the cross of sickness, but that of persecution.

While we can assume that Jesus did not heal all the physically or mentally sick people of his time, never once do we find Jesus say to the ill, “Carry your cross of sickness, it will make you a better person.” As a result, we can only assume that God wants to heal us of our physical or mental illness. Sure illness can bring about a spiritual awakening and draw one closer to God, but it can also hurt or even destroy one’s relationship with God.

Jesus Transmits to His Disciples His Power to Heal (C 1506-1510 USC p. 252)

In Mk 6:7-13, we read that Jesus “*summoned the Twelve and began to send them out two by two, and gave them authority over unclean spirits... So they went off and preached repentance. They drove out many demons, and they anointed with oil, many who were sick, and cured them.*”

As we read through the pages of the Acts of the Apostles, we see many examples of the Apostles, empowered by the Holy Spirit, healing the sick (Acts 2:43, 3:1-10, 4:29-31, 5:12-16). The opening quote in the article from James, traditionally used as the scriptural foundation for the Sacrament of Anointing of the Sick, suggests that the recipient of the sacrament could expect both spiritual and physical healing.

Pause: What spoke to you most in the section we have just read? What did you underline or might have underlined?

Sacrament of Healing Becomes Sacrament of the Dying

Between the ninth and sixteenth centuries, the sacrament of anointing gradually became a sacrament to prepare people for death. While the prayers of the sacrament did mention healing of the body, the faith of the sick person was directed almost exclusively to the spiritual preparation for death shown by the fact that the sacrament was only ministered when a sick person was close to death. The name of the sacrament was changed to *Extreme Unction* (Last Anointing) or Last Rites. We may wonder how a sacrament intended to bring healing to the whole person now became almost totally focused on the spiritual needs of a dying person. What happened to the simple gospel view of Christ healing the whole person? The explanation for the shift in emphasis is complex. One of the reasons was the development of a more negative attitude towards the body. (For more on this, see F. McNutt’s *Healing*, p. 64.)

Reform of a Sacrament (USC p. 253)

Vatican Council II (1962-1965) led to a reform of all the changeable elements of each of the seven sacraments. The following are the key ways that the Sacrament of Anointing of the Sick was reformed.

- *Old name restored.* The sacrament received back its old name, Anointing of the Sick. The restored name points to a change in focus. Now it is a sacrament not just for the dying, but also a sacrament of healing for the sick.
- *A wider use of the sacrament.* Prior to Vatican II, this sacrament was only given to the dying. Now it is ministered in a wide variety of situations. Anyone seriously ill may be anointed. A person who, after having been anointed recovers, but then falls gravely ill again, may receive the sacrament a second time. The sacrament may also be repeated in a case where the person’s condition has deteriorated.

A person may be anointed before surgery. Elderly people may be anointed if they have become notably weakened even though no serious illness is present. Mentally ill people may be anointed. People who have lost consciousness or the use of

reason may be anointed as long as there are reasonable grounds to believe that they would have asked for the sacrament if they had full use of their faculties. Finally, sick children may be anointed if they have been baptized.

Since sacraments are for the living, it is not permissible to anoint a person who has been pronounced dead. Other suitable prayers of commendation can be prayed for the deceased.

- *Anointing of the Sick ministers to the whole person.* While the Vatican II reform of the sacrament did mention the healing of the body, the focus was almost exclusively on the spiritual preparation of the soul for passage into everlasting life. In the 1972 reform of the sacrament, the focus is more clearly on the body as well as on the soul.
- *Celebrated in a communal context.* When possible, Anointing of the Sick should take place within the context of the Eucharist. If this is not possible, it is very much desired that some members of the sick person's family or Church family be present. The presence of others communicates to the sick person: "You are not alone in your illness. We are with you."

Celebration of the sacrament (C 1517). If circumstances permit, Anointing of the Sick may be preceded by the Sacrament of Reconciliation. After the introductory rite, there is Liturgy of the Word, followed by a litany and concludes with the laying on of hands. This is followed by an anointing on the forehead and on the hands, by other prayers and possibly with Holy Communion.

Pause: What spoke to you most in the section we have just read? What did you underline or might have underlined?

Effects of the Sacrament (C 1520-1523, USC p. 254)

Regarding the effects of the sacrament, the *United States Catholic Catechism for Adults* (p.254) states:

- "When the Sacrament of Anointing of the Sick is given, the hoped-for effect is that, if it be God's will, the person be *physically healed* of illness.
- "But even if there is *no physical healing*, the *primary effect* of the Sacrament is a *spiritual healing* by which the sick person receives the Holy Spirit's gift of peace and courage to deal with the difficulties that accompany serious illness or the frailty of old age. The Holy Spirit renews our faith

in God and helps us withstand the temptations of the Evil One to be *discouraged and despairing* in the face of suffering and death. A sick person's sins are forgiven if he or she was not able to go to Confession prior to the culmination of the Sacrament of the Anointing of the Sick.

- "Another effect of this sacrament is union with the Passion of Christ. By uniting ourselves more closely with the sufferings of Our Lord, we receive the grace of sharing in the saving work of Christ. In this way, our suffering, joined to the Cross of Christ, contributes to building up the people of God.
- "This sacrament also prepares us for our final journey when we depart from this life. The Anointing of the Sick completes our identification with Jesus Christ that was begun at our Baptism. Its grace and power fortify us in our final struggles before we go to the Father's house."

Church's Ministry to the Dying

Dying is the last thing we get to do well. It is our final legacy to our family and friends. It is always inspiring to witness a dying person face his/her death with confidence and trust in God. It is a good practice to often pray for the grace of a happy and peaceful death. Some ingredients of a happy and peaceful death are: acceptance of one's dying, a sense of God's presence and closeness, the presence of loved ones and of one's Church, and freedom from severe pain.

Sacraments ministered to a dying person (C 1524-1525). *The Catechism* (1525) states that "just as the sacraments of Baptism, Confirmation, and the Eucharist form a unity called 'the Sacraments of Christian Initiation,' so too it can be said that *Penance, the Anointing of the Sick and the Eucharist as viaticum constitute at the end of Christian life* 'the sacraments that prepare for our heavenly homeland' or the sacraments that complete the earthly pilgrimage."

When ministered during the dying process, the Eucharist is called "Viaticum" (food for the journey). In his discourse on the Eucharist (Jn 6:54), Jesus said: "*Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood will have eternal life, and I will raise them up on the last day.*" As soon as a person is deemed to be in danger of death, he/she should be given Holy Viaticum. To wait until a person may become unconscious is to deprive him/her of the spiritual benefits that come with the reception of the Eucharist, the divine food offered to us to help us

make a peaceful passage from this life to the next. We should never underestimate the power of the sacrament to help the dying come to terms with the reality of the situation and prepare them spiritually for their passage into everlasting life.

Pause: Many people do not ask for this sacrament during a time of serious sickness. In your opinion, why?

Care of the Sick—Responsibility of the Whole Church

The General Introduction to the Pastoral Care of the Sick (32-33) states: “If one member suffers in the Body of Christ, which is the Church, all the members suffer with that member” (1Cor 12:26). For this reason, kindness toward the sick and works of charity and mutual help for the relief of every kind of human want are held in special honor. It is fitting that all baptized Christians share in this ministry of mutual charity within the Body of Christ by doing all that they can to help the sick return to health, by showing love for the sick, and by celebrating the sacraments with them.”

From the above, we can see that every member of the Church has a responsibility to be concerned and helpful to the sick members of their parish family. All of us can pray regularly for the sick and for their caregivers. We can also support families with a sick member by cooking meals for them, offering to sit with the sick person and, if needed, offering transportation to the doctor’s office.

In addition to the above, pastors should encourage the formation of prayer teams who could support the sick with their prayer. Can we imagine what a wonderful thing it would be if every parish sets in motion a process that would help its members to discover their God-given charisms or gifts in this area of the Church’s life. Such parishes would have individuals or teams of people who would be available to pray with those who are physically ill, people who feel abandoned by God, people suffering from past wounds and hurts, and even those discerned to be oppressed by evil spirits.

Redemptive Suffering

There is a long tradition in our Church concerning what is called *redemptive suffering*—uniting one’s sufferings to those of Christ on the Cross. This indeed can be a wonderful and grace-filled act when we are sick or have any other kind of difficulty, e.g.

a painful relationship. But it should not be allowed to obscure the Good News that Christ came to heal the sick and not tell them to carry it as a Cross. Redemptive sickness should be seen as an exception and not as normative.

Sometimes people hesitate to ask for prayers for healing in case their sickness is God’s will. Yet at the very same time, they will not hesitate to go to the doctor to receive help. In the face of sickness, it would seem that the best attitude to have is to do all that we can, spiritually and medically, to restore ourselves (or a loved one) to health and, in the meantime, to make the best use of our sickness to bring us closer to God and other hurting people.

Pause: Have you ever cared for a very sick person? If so, what were those experiences like for you? Why is this such an important ministry for the Church?

Suggested Actions

Consider becoming more involved with and supportive of sick people in your parish. The next time you are sick, ask for people to pray with you for healing.

Meditation

Healing is essential to the gospel message and carries us all the way back to our very idea of God. What kind of a being is God? If we truly believe that God is Love, then it should be easy to believe that healing is an ordinary, not an extraordinary sign of his compassion. Any other attitude toward healing robs the gospel of the reality of God’s revelation of himself as a loving father: “If you, then, who are evil, know how to give your children what is good, how much more will your father in heaven give good things to those who ask him!” (Mt 7:11). What is at stake here is not something out on the periphery, but something right at the heart of Christianity: When I speak of God’s love for me, do I speak of it in terms that I, a human being, can understand? Or am I talking about some unreal concept of “divine love” or “charity” that does not touch my real life? (Francis McNutt)

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HOLY ORDERS: Sacrament of Ministerial Service to God's People (RCIA) (C 1536-1600, USC Ch. 20)

In the Church's sacramental system, Baptism, Confirmation and Eucharist are called sacraments of initiation; and Reconciliation and Anointing of the Sick, the sacraments of healing. The other two sacraments, Holy Orders and Matrimony, are called the sacraments in service of communion because they minister to our salvation. *The Catechism* (1534) states that if these sacraments help us with our personal salvation, it is because of our service to others.

In this article we will look at:

- Biblical Roots of the Priesthood
- Two Participations in the One Priesthood of Christ
- Bishop, Priest and Deacon
- Who May Be Ordained
- Effects or Graces of Priesthood

Biblical Roots (C 1539-1553, USC p. 264)

The Church borrowed the word *order* from the Roman Empire, which used the term to designate a governing body. In the sacrament of Holy Orders, the Church speaks of three degrees or "orders": bishop, priest and deacon.

The origin of the priesthood goes back to the Old Testament. The first priest figure we encounter is Melchizedek, who offers a sacrifice of bread and wine on behalf of Abraham (Gen 14:18-20). He symbolizes the *permanence* of priesthood: "Like Melchizedek you are a priest forever" (Ps 110:4).

When God chose Israel, he calls them to be "a kingdom of priests and a holy nation," a people who would offer God true worship. "Within the people of Israel, God chose one of the twelve tribes, that of Levi, and set it apart for liturgical service..." (C 1539). The role of the tribe of Levi is to guard the Ark of the Covenant and to offer sacrifice and gifts for the people's sins. They also proclaim God's Word and interpret the Law of the Covenant and lead the people in communal worship of God. These priests of the Old Covenant prefigure the priests of the New Covenant.

The priesthood of the Old Covenant finds its perfect fulfillment in the priesthood of Jesus Christ, who is the one Mediator between God and us. Jesus' sacrifice of himself on the Cross is a priestly act of perfect self-offering accepted by the Father and culminating in his Resurrection from the dead so that,

as Risen Lord and High Priest, he continues to offer salvation to all" (USC p. 264).

Two Participations in the One Priesthood of Christ (C 1546-1553, USC p. 264)

Just as the whole of Israel was a priestly people, so is the whole Church a priestly people. The Church speaks about two priesthoods: the "priesthood of all the faithful" and the "priesthood of the ordained." The common priesthood is exercised by the unfolding of baptismal grace (C 1547). The ministerial priesthood is rooted in the sacrament of Holy Orders. Both priesthoods share in the priesthood of Christ.

While the two priesthoods differ from each other, they are interrelated. The ordained priesthood is at the service of the common priesthood and is the means by which Christ builds up and leads his Church (C 1547). Both the baptized and ordained are called to live a life of holiness, a life surrendered to God, a life of service to others. Both are called to participate in Jesus' saving work by living holy lives, by witnessing to Gospel values.

While every Christian by reason of baptism, represents Christ and acts in the person of Christ, only the ordained priest represents Christ as *head* of his Church—teaching, shepherding and sanctifying God's people (C 1549). The priest also *represents the whole Church and acts in her name* when he offers the sacrifice of the Mass, in his whole ministry and, hopefully, in the way he lives his life. The priest is not a stand-in for Christ like a substitute teacher in a school. The priest, by reason of his ordination, makes Christ present in a way similar to the way Christ is truly present in the bread and wine at Mass. "While the sacrament of Holy Orders does not preserve the ordained from weakness and sin, the Holy Spirit guarantees that the minister's sin does not impede the effectiveness of the Sacrament and its graces" (USC p. 265).

Pause: To what extent do you have a sense of your priestly status? Do you try to bring Christ to others and to bring others to Christ?

Origin of Bishop, Priest and Deacon

As we read the Acts of the Apostles and letters of the New Testament, we learn that the Apostles took on a leadership role in the early Christian communities.

They represented Christ in these communities. In Lk 10:16, Jesus says to his representatives: “Whoever listens to you, listens to me. Whoever rejects you, rejects me and rejects the one who sent me.”

When the Apostles started to die, they appointed successors who came to be known as bishops. Bishops acted as overseers of the first Christian communities.

When the Apostles were still alive, they appointed some men to assist them, especially in caring for the needy. These men became known as deacons. In 1Tim 3:1-13, Paul outlines the qualifications needed for bishops and deacons, indicating that these two ministries had become established in the early decades of the Church.

The development of the order of priest is less clear in the New Testament. But by the end of the first century, three roles or ‘offices’ of leadership and service came to be recognized in local Christian communities: the bishops, presbyters, and deacons (C 1554). In 110 A. D., early church Father Ignatius of Antioch states: “*I exhort you to try and do all things with a divine harmony, while your bishop presides in the place of God, and your presbyters in the place of the assembly of apostles, along with your deacons, who are most dear to me, who were entrusted with the ministry of Jesus Christ*”. Also, certain New Testament verses testify to the beginnings of what became known as the *Sacrament of Holy Orders*. For example, in 1Tim 3:1, Paul speaks about the office of bishop being a worthy way to serve God’s people. In 2Tim 1:6, he speaks about the laying on of hands. In Titus 1:5, Paul directs his collaborator Titus to ordain priests to assist the Church in Crete. Let us examine these three ministries a little closer.

Bishops (C 1555-1561, USC p. 265). Church teachings speak of the bishop as having the “fullness of the priesthood.” This does not mean that he has *more* priesthood than the lay person or a priest or deacon. Rather, it means that he has received the *fullness of the responsibilities* of Holy Orders. Through the Ordination Rite, the bishop becomes a successor to the original Apostles and takes on all the responsibilities Christ entrusted to them: teacher, shepherd, guardian of the flock and the Gospel of Christ. A bishop is ordained by another bishop who must be assisted by two other consecrating bishops. Every bishop belongs to the College of Bishops, and with them and in union with the Bishop of Rome, he has responsibility for the entire mission of the Church. He usually oversees a territory called a

diocese. A bishop is the ordinary minister of Confirmation (which can be delegated to priests). Only a bishop can ordain priests and deacons. He also blesses the sacred oils used in the sacraments.

Priests – coworkers of the bishops (C 1565-1568, USC p. 266). When a bishop ordains a priest, he is extending to him a portion of his apostolic authority. This makes the priest a coworker with the bishop of a diocese. With the bishop, priests are responsible for preaching and teaching the Gospel, shepherding God’s people, and leading the community in worship, especially in the celebration of the Eucharist. The priest promises obedience to the bishop in service to God’s people. Priests normally serve in parishes or in other diocesan ministries.

Diocesan and religious priests. Most priests are diocesan priests. They belong and serve within a particular diocese. Other priests belong to a religious community, e.g., Benedictines, Franciscans, Jesuits and Dominicans. They belong to a religious order founded by a priest or brother in response to a special need of the Church at a particular time in the Church’s history. Religious order priests belong to a Province, which in this country normally includes several states. With the permission of the bishop, they may serve as parish priests.

Permanent deacons (C 1569-1571, USC p. 266). Deacons receive the Sacrament of Holy Orders from a bishop and are ordained, not to ministerial priesthood but to the ministry of service. Through ordination, the deacon is conformed to Christ, who came to serve and not to be served” (USC p. 266). Deacons can baptize, bless marriages, preside at funerals, proclaim the Gospel, preach, and dedicate themselves to other works of charity. The Church has “transitional” deacons (men on their way to priesthood) and permanent deacons. Both married and single men can be ordained to the permanent diaconate.

Pause: What qualities do you look for and hope to see in the ordained, be it bishop, priest or deacon?

Essential rite of Holy Orders (C 1573). The essential or central rite of the ordination ceremony for bishops, priests and deacons occurs when the bishop lays hands on the head of the person being ordained and invokes a special prayer of consecration during which he asks God for an outpouring of the Holy Spirit and

his gifts upon the ordained so that he may serve God and his people with love and fidelity.

Who May Be Ordained (C 1577-1580, USC p. 267)

Only male baptized Catholics may be ordained in the Sacrament of Holy Orders. Even though Jesus often broke with the customs of his time in his attitude towards women, he only chose men to become part of the twelve Apostles – the ones who would become the foundation of the ministerial priesthood. After the Ascension of Jesus, Mary played a special role amongst the leaders of the Church. Yet, she was not invited to enter the college of the Twelve when Matthias was appointed to replace Judas (Acts 1:12-26). The Apostles chose men to be their successors and this tradition continued down through the centuries.

One may ask the question: What about women who feel called to ordination to the priesthood? In a *Pastoral Letter* on the subject of **Ten frequently asked questions about the reservation of priestly ordination**, the United States Catholic bishops state: “*The only calling that is universal – embracing all women and men – is the call to holiness*” (para 9). In paragraph 8, the *Pastoral Letter* states: “*No one has a right by baptism to ordination, for this sacrament is not essential for any person in his response to the call to holiness. The Church has clearly affirmed the equal dignity of women and men, and the equality of baptized women with baptized men. Ordination to the ministerial priesthood, however, is a distinct gift. It is not essential for salvation and is given not for one’s own salvation but for the service of God and of the Church.*”

Paragraph 8 further states: “*The Church must follow the example of Christ who called women to discipleship but not to membership in the Twelve.*”

When the late Pope John Paul II reaffirmed the long tradition of the Church in reserving priesthood for men, he also spoke about the wonderful achievements of women in promoting the mission of the Church. He writes: “*The New Testament and the whole history of the Church give ample evidence of the presence in the Church of women, true disciples, witnesses to Christ in the family and in society, as well as in total consecration to the service of God and of the Gospel. By defending the dignity of women and their vocation, the Church has shown honor and gratitude for those women who, faithful to the Gospel, have shared in every age in the apostolic mission of the whole People of God. They are the holy martyrs, virgins and mothers of families, who bravely bore witness to their faith and passed on the*

Church’s faith and tradition by bringing up their children in the spirit of the Gospel” (USC p. 269).

The *Catechism* also states that no one has a right to ordination. One who believes he has a call to the priesthood must submit his desire to the Church, which has the responsibility to discern whether the call is genuine or not. Normally, this process takes place during the period the candidate spends in a seminary, where he receives theological, pastoral and spiritual formation. The bishop has the final say as to the suitability of the candidate.

Pause: The article gives the reason why the church cannot ordain women to the ministerial priesthood. What do you think about this issue?

Celibacy (C 1579-1580). Even though bishops, priests and deacons were married in the early centuries of the Church, since the twelfth century, bishops and priests in the Latin Rite may not be married. But the practice of a celibate priesthood in the Latin Rite started in the fourth century. In recent years, Rome, under a special Pastoral Provision, has made it possible for some married Anglican and Lutheran clergy who have converted to Catholicism, to be ordained as Catholic priests. The rule of priestly celibacy is a *discipline* of the Church and not a doctrine. This means that the Church, for grave reasons, could make priestly celibacy optional.

Men who are married may be ordained deacons. But they cannot remarry if their wife dies. Nor can men, ordained as deacons while single, ever marry.

In the Eastern Church, only bishops must remain celibate. Priests and deacons may marry. In the Eastern Church, the practice of celibacy is highly regarded. Many priests freely choose this option.

The symbolic and practical meaning of celibacy

- By choosing not to marry, the priest is conforming himself more to Christ who was not married, so that he can totally dedicate himself with undivided heart to the Lord.
- In living a celibate life for the sake of the Gospel, the priest is a living manifestation of our state in the next life, where there will be no marriage.
- In not having to care for a wife and children, a celibate priest can dedicate himself more fully to Christ and to the service of God’s people (1Cor 7:32-34).

Pause: For many centuries, the Church admitted married men to the priesthood. Should the Church rethink its stance on this issue considering the shortage of priests?

Effects/Graces of the Sacrament of Holy Orders (C 1581-1589, USC p. 271)

- Holy Orders, like the sacraments of Baptism and Confirmation, confers an indelible spiritual character (often called a “seal”) on the soul of the recipient. These three sacraments configure the recipient to Christ in a special way, enabling him to act for the Lord in his threefold office of priest, prophet and king. These three sacraments can only be received once.

In the case of the priest, the special indelible character enables the priest to celebrate Eucharist and to represent Christ as Head of the Church and to act in the name of the whole Church.

A priest who has left active priesthood, or who has been forbidden to exercise his priestly duties, or who has been laicized, is still a priest and, in cases of emergency, could hear confession and administer the Anointing of the Sick.

- Since it is ultimately Christ who acts in the sacraments through the ordained minister, the sinfulness or unworthiness of the ordained person does not prevent Christ from giving us his graces in the sacraments. St. Augustine writes: “*The spiritual power of the sacraments is indeed comparable to light: those to be enlightened receive it in its purity, and if it should pass through defiled beings, it is not itself defiled*” (C 1584).
- The Holy Spirit offers each bishop, priest and deacon the graces and gifts necessary to live a holy life and to faithfully carry out the duties of his state in life. Having said that, ordination does not automatically confer holiness. Holiness is the lifelong call of every baptized person. It only occurs when one generously cooperates with the movements of the Holy Spirit in one’s life.

Suggested Actions

Pray for all ordained persons. Pray that those who are being called to ordained ministry and religious life may hear and answer God’s call. If your parish does not have a vocations committee, approach your pastor about starting one.

Meditation

*To live in the midst of the world
with no desire for its pleasures;
to be a member of every family
yet belonging to none;
to share all sufferings;
to penetrate all secrets;
to heal all wounds;
to daily go from men to God
to offer him their homage and petitions;
to return from God to men
to bring them His pardon and His hope;
to have a heart of iron for chastity
and a heart of bronze for charity;
to teach, instruct, pardon and console;
to bless and be blest forever!
O God, what a life, and ‘tis thine –
O priest of Jesus Christ!*

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SACRAMENT OF MARRIAGE (RCIA)

(C 1601-1690, USC Ch. 21)

The *Catechism* (C 1603) states: “*The intimate community of life and love which constitutes the married state has been established by the Creator and endowed by him with its proper laws.... God himself is the author of marriage.*” The word “matrimony” comes from the Latin word *matrimonium*, which means “wedlock.”

In this article we will look at:

- Biblical Roots of the Sacrament
- Jesus’ Teaching on the Sacrament
- Twofold Purpose of Marriage
- Celebration of Marriage
- Matrimonial Graces
- Mixed and Interfaith Marriages
- Domestic Church
- Divorce and Pastoral Care
- Declaration of Nullity (Annulment)

Biblical Roots (C 1603-1605, USC p. 279)

In the *Book of Genesis*, we read how God saw “it was not good for the man to be alone,” so God created for him a woman who would be his special companion (Gen 2:18). The two would form a “love union” or partnership which would be expressed, celebrated and symbolized by their sexual union: “The two shall become one body” (Gen 1:24). In time, the ‘love union’ or partnership between the man and the woman became known as marriage. The man and the woman received their new titles ‘husband’ and ‘wife’ to symbolize their new calling or vocation. The “love union” between a husband and wife is also sometimes called the *unitive* dimension of marriage.

We also read in the *Book of Genesis* how God intended the union between the man and the woman to be fruitful, to lead to the procreation of new life. “Be fruitful and multiply...” (Gen 2:8). This is often called the *procreative* dimension of marriage.

It took Israel centuries to grasp God’s plan for marriage. The patriarchs and kings of Israel practiced polygamy just like their neighbors. Moses permitted men to divorce their wives due to “the hardness of their hearts” (Mt 19:7-9).

The prophets of ancient Israel prepared the hearts of their people to receive Jesus’ teachings on marriage, which was a restoration of God’s plan for marriage. They described marriage as a visible sign of God’s invisible and faithful love for Israel. Just as God

faithfully loved Israel, so should husbands and wives faithfully love each other (Is 62:2-5).

In its treatment of marriage, the *Catechism* points us to the books of Ruth and Tobit because they describe the ideals of fidelity and tenderness that should exist between spouses. The Song of Solomon depicts a human love that mirrors God’s love, a love strong as death.

Jesus’ Teaching on Marriage (C 1612-1617, USC p. 280)

Jesus brought to full awareness God’s plan for marriage. In John’s gospel, Christ’s first miracle occurs at a wedding. The Church sees in Jesus’ presence a confirmation of the goodness of marriage.

In his teaching, Jesus was very clear about God’s plan for marriage. In Mt 19:3-6, we read: ‘*Some Pharisees approached him, and tested him, saying, Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife for any cause whatever?*’ He said in reply, ‘*Have you not read that from the beginning the Creator made them male and female,*’ and said, ‘*For this reason a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh.*’ So they are no longer two, but one flesh. Therefore, what God has joined together, no human being must separate.”

St. Paul reiterates Christ’s teaching on marriage when he says: ‘*A wife should not separate from her husband and a husband should not divorce his wife*’ (1 Cor 7:10-11). In his letter to the Ephesians, he states: “*For this reason a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh. This is a great mystery, but I speak in reference to Christ and his church*” (Eph 5:31-32). Paul is saying that the union of a husband and wife is like the union of Christ with his Church, and Paul calls this reality a *mystery*, a word translated by St. Augustine as “sacrament.” Christian marriage is a visible sign of Christ’s love for his Church. In this sense, marriage is what the *Catechism* calls an *efficacious sign* or sacrament of Jesus’ presence. (For more on the term “efficacious sign”, see Art 12.)

Marriage as a covenant relationship. The sacrament of marriage is a covenantal relationship and not just a contractual one. What is the difference? In a contractual relationship, one person is free to break the bond if the other person breaks the commitment in some way. In a covenantal relationship, both spouses promise “to love each other in good times and in bad,

in sickness and in health, until death do us part.” A covenant relationship mirrors God’s love for us. He keeps loving us even when we stop loving him.

Pause: What spoke to you most in the section of the article that we have just read?

Marriage in the early centuries of Christianity. While from the early centuries of Christianity, marriage between two Christians was looked upon as a sacred union, it did not take place in church. Christians were married according to local civil custom. The consent of the man and the woman was all that was needed. By the end of the fourth century, the practice began in which a priest or bishop offered a blessing to the newly married couple and took an active role in the civil ceremony, though this was not required.

During the Middle Ages, Christian marriage was recognized as a sacrament. In 1208, Pope Innocent III called marriage a sacrament. In 1563, the Council of Trent reaffirmed that marriage was a sacrament and that a Catholic marriage had to take place in the presence of a priest. (The Protestant Reformers, while believing that marriage was sacred, rejected it as a sacrament.)

Twofold Purpose of Marriage (C 1643-1651, USC p. 283)

The *Catechism* (1660) states: “*The marriage covenant, by which a man and a woman form with each other an intimate communion of life and love...is by its very nature ordered to the good of the couple, as well as to the generation and education of children.*” So the two purposes of marriage are the welfare of the couple through their love for each other and the procreation and education of children. These two purposes of marriage are protected and fostered when the couple clearly commits to a permanent relationship. These two ends of marriage are often called the *unitive* and *procreative* dimensions of marriage.

The Church, of course, knows that not all couples can have children. Such marriages can be fruitful in other ways: in charity, hospitality and sacrifice (C 1654).

Challenges to the Church’s understanding of marriage. Speaking on this issue, the *United States Catholic Catechism* (p.280) states: “*There are attempts by some in contemporary society to change the definition or understanding of what exactly constitutes marriage. Efforts to gain approval for and acceptance of same-sex unions as marriages are examples. While the Church clearly teaches that*

discrimination against any group of people is wrong, efforts to make cohabitation, domestic partnerships, same-sex unions, and polygamous unions equal to marriage are misguided and also wrong. The Church and her members need to continue to be a strong and clear voice in protecting an understanding of marriage, which is rooted in natural law and revealed in God’s law.”

Pause: What are some anti-marriage forces at work in our society today?

Celebration of Marriage (C 1621-1632, USC p. 282)

The marriage of two Catholics takes place in a Catholic Church. Celebrating marriage in a church helps to underline its sacred and religious dimension. It also helps to emphasize that marriage is a public state of life.

Marriage between a Catholic and a baptized Christian from another religious tradition also normally takes place in a Catholic church. Permission may be requested to have the marriage take place in a non-Catholic church. When a Catholic marries a person from a non-Christian faith tradition, permission can be requested to have the ceremony take place outside a church.

Marriage between two Catholics or between a Catholic and a baptized Christian of another faith tradition takes place in a Church in the presence of a priest or deacon, two witnesses, and ideally, in the presence of family and friends and other members of the Christian community. The wedding ceremony can take place within or outside the context of the Eucharist. It is especially desirable that two active Catholics celebrate their marriage within the context of the Eucharist. Either way, there is a Liturgy of the Word prior to the exchange of vows and rings.

Essential rite. The essential or central ritual in the marriage ceremony is the exchange of marriage vows, the promise “to love each other in good times and in bad, in sickness and in health, til death do us part.” In the Latin tradition, the spouses are the ministers of the sacrament. They actually confer the sacrament on each other (C 1623). Just as the priest is God’s instrument in bringing about the Eucharist or ministering God’s mercy in the sacrament of Reconciliation, so the husband, in the celebration of marriage, ministers the sacrament to his wife and she to him. They actually confer the sacrament upon each other (C 1623).

After the exchange of vows, there is usually a blessing and exchange of rings which helps to symbolize and underline the commitment which the couple has just made. In the exchange of rings, the bride and bridegroom say: "Take this ring as a sign of my love and fidelity, in the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit." The Irish have a wedding ring called the *claddagh* (the name of a small town in Ireland). It shows the hands folded in prayer around a heart of love beneath a crown of fidelity. The ring of fidelity, the heart of love, and the hands folded in prayer are the three dispositions needed to sustain a marriage.

If the marriage ceremony takes place outside the Eucharist, the presider concludes the ceremony with the nuptial blessing.

Matrimonial Graces (C 1641-1642, USC p. 285)

Each sacrament confers graces upon the recipients to help them live the Christian life. Concerning the graces bestowed upon couples when they receive the sacrament of Matrimony, the *Catechism* (1661) states: "*The sacrament of matrimony signifies the union of Christ and the Church. It gives spouses the grace to love each other with the love with which Christ has loved his Church; the grace of the sacrament thus perfects the human love of the spouses, strengthens their indissoluble unity, and sanctifies them on the way to eternal life.*"

The graces received in the sacrament of Matrimony are intended to offer divine assistance to couples as they seek to grow in their love for each other in good times and in bad. Matrimonial graces should help couples to be more trusting and forgiving, and help them to carry the crosses connected to marriage and family life. Matrimonial graces are given to couples to help them love and care for their children and to raise them to be faithful followers of Christ and his Church. Growing in love for each other and for their children is the primary way that couples grow in holiness.

It is important that married couples remember that they do not walk alone in their marriage journey and that they frequently pray for the graces of the sacrament to be operative in their relationship, especially during difficult times. At the beginning of the day, a spouse may pray: "Lord, help me this day to be a loving wife/husband and parent. Grace me with the strength to live the sacrament of Matrimony in a way that will give you glory."

Pause: *In your opinion, what are three keys to a healthy marriage?*

Mixed and Interfaith Marriages (C 1633-1637, USC p. 289)

The term *mixed marriage* refers to a union between a Catholic and a baptized non-Catholic. The differences in religious traditions can enrich or hurt the marriage and children depending on how the couple handles the issue. Couples can learn from each other's respective tradition how to be more faithful to Christ. The mixed religions situation will hurt the marriage and confuse the children if the couple is in conflict concerning the faith formation of the children.

An *interfaith* marriage is a marriage between a Catholic and a non-baptized person. When one of the parties is unbaptized, it should be noted that while the marriage is valid and is blessed by the Church, it is not a sacrament. Baptism is our entrance into the Christian community and is required for one who wishes to receive the other sacraments. If the unbaptized party is baptized later during the marriage, the marriage becomes a sacrament.

The Domestic Church (C 1655-1658)

The Vatican II document *Lumen Gentium* (11) states: "*In what might be regarded as the domestic church, the parents, by word and example, are the first heralds of the faith with regard to their children. They must foster the vocation which is proper to each child with special care.*" The home is the first school of Christian life and human enrichment. In a Christian household of faith, parents and children learn together to grow in the ways of Jesus. In a society which often fails to support Christian family values, the challenge for parents and children is very demanding. Couples have to be very aware of the forces in society that weakens marriage and family life. Addressing this issue, the *United States Catholic Catechism for Adults* (p.286) states:

"Cultural changes in recent times have undermined God's will for marriage. The so-called sexual revolution, aided by artificial contraception, has made it more culturally acceptable for men and women to have sexual relations without having to marry each other. The legalization of abortion has reduced the pressure on men and women to worry about the consequences of unwanted pregnancies. The casual acceptance of unmarried cohabitation—

and of couples entering marriage without permanent commitment—contradicts the very nature of marriage. The political pressure for the legalization of same-sex unions is yet another step in the erosion of God’s plan for marriage and the understanding of marriage in the natural moral order of creation.”

Divorce and Pastoral Care (C 1649-1651, USC p. 287)

Even though the Gospel ideal is that married couples remain married until one of them dies, the reality is that many couples end up separated or civilly divorced. Though the civil authority may dissolve the legal aspects of a valid marriage (called in civil law a divorce), the state has no authority to dissolve a true Catholic sacramental marriage. A legally separated Catholic (divorced under civil law) may not remarry while his/her spouse is alive. *“What God has joined together, no human being must separate”* (Mk 10:9).

When it comes to the issue of marriage and divorce, the Church is in the challenging position of upholding Christ’s teaching on the indissolubility or permanency of marriage and, at the same time, showing the mercy and compassion of Christ towards her members whose marriages have failed and broken up.

The Church today shows her concern for people whose marriages have failed by inviting them to some form of a divorce recovery program which can help tremendously to heal the wounds of the breakup of a marriage. The Church also reassures separated/divorced Catholics that they can be full members of the Church and participate fully in the sacramental life of the Church.

What of Catholics who have remarried outside the Church? They are encouraged to participate in the life of the parish and to attend Sunday Eucharist even though they cannot receive Holy Communion. The *Catechism* (1651) states: *“They should be encouraged to listen to the Word of God, to attend the Sacrifice of the Mass, to persevere in prayer, to contribute to works of charity and to community efforts for justice, to bring up their children in the Christian faith, to cultivate the spirit and practice of penance and thus implore, day by day, God’s grace.”*

Declaration of Nullity—Annulment (USC p. 288)

In explaining what an annulment is and is not, the *United States Catechism* (p.288) states: *“When a church court issues a declaration of nullity, it does not mean there was no civil, sexual, or emotional marital relationship, nor does it mean that the*

children of the union are illegitimate. The declaration means that no sacramental bond—or, in the case of one party’s being unbaptized, no natural bond—took place because at the time of the wedding, the standards for a valid marriage were not met.”

Pause: *Current church law states that Catholics married outside the church should not present themselves for Holy Communion. What are your thoughts on this issue?*

Suggested Actions

If married, name one attitude or behavior that would enhance your marital relationship and begin to practice it. If divorced and unclear of your status in the Church, go speak to a priest. If single, know that you are a valuable part of the Church’s family, and support in whatever way you can, married couples whom you are friendly with.

————— **Meditation** —————

Most Christians live out their baptismal commitment within the context of Christian marriage and family life. In Christian marriage, couples commit themselves to a life of equal and intimate partnership in abiding love, and form a kind of domestic church where faith is nurtured and where they continue to grow in discipleship, fidelity and love of neighbor. Marriage is a community of life and love which promotes the mutual love of husband and wife and is open to the possibility of children. As a sacrament, marriage provides the family with the means to grow in holiness, and provides the Church with a living witness to the presence of Christ through the ministry of married couples to the Church and the world. The sacramental celebration of marriage is the beginning of a lifelong journey. All of the Church’s efforts to promote, encourage and support Christians in their vocation of marriage contribute to a healthy state of conjugal and family life for the Church and the world.

(Pastoral Foundations of the Sacraments, p. 143)

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CATECHISM PART III

CHRISTIAN MORALITY: THE FAITH LIVED (RCIA)

Introduction: Part One (C 1691-1876, USC Ch. 23-24)

Part III of the *Catechism* is divided into two sections: (1) Foundations of Christian Morality, and (2) The Ten Commandments.

In Section 1, we will look at the ten foundation stones or building blocks of Christian morality. In this article, we will examine the first six blocks.

What is Christian Morality?

Part Three of the *Catechism* is called “Life in Christ.” Christian morality is all about living like Jesus. The focus of Christian morality is our response to a God who created us out of love and keeps us in being every moment of every day and never ceases to love us unconditionally. Christian morality is the faith lived in the daily circumstances of our lives. It is about appropriate and inappropriate responses to a God who loves us.

Before delving into the specifics of morality through the lens of the Ten Commandments, the *Catechism* lays out for us ten foundation stones or building blocks of Christian morality.

BUILDING BLOCK 1: CREATED IN THE IMAGE OF GOD (C 1701-1715, USCp. 310)

To be created in the image and likeness of God means that every human person in our global family, born or unborn, is endowed with infinite dignity and should be treated with reverence and respect. Because we are created in God’s image, we are blessed with intellect and will. Because we have an *intellect*, we can distinguish good from evil. Because we have a *will*, we can freely choose to follow God’s law of love.

But because we have inherited original sin, we are less than we could be. Due to original sin and personal sin, *our minds suffer from a certain darkness* which can make it difficult for us to distinguish good from evil. We make bad judgments. *Our will is weakened* making it difficult for us to choose what is right and good. But the good news is that through the sacrament of Baptism, we have received divine grace and life into our soul which enable us to resist the temptations of the world, the flesh and the devil.

BUILDING BLOCK 2: CREATED FOR THE BEATITUDE OR HAPPINESS (C 1716-1724)

Those of us raised with the *Baltimore Catechism* learned that God created us to know, love and serve him here on earth, and to enjoy him forever in heaven. The *Catechism* calls this “our vocation to beatitude,” a word which means happiness. The problem is that because of the influences of the world, our own tendency towards sin and the temptations of the flesh, we may believe that true happiness is *not* found in a life committed to God, but rather in the passing things that the world holds out to us. Frequently, people say: “I’d be happy if I could have....”

The *Catechism* tells us that the beatitude or happiness that God offers us “confronts us with decisive moral choices” (C 1723). It teaches us that the key to happiness is following the law of love as spelled out in the Ten Commandments, the beatitudes and the teachings of the Church.

The beatitudes (Mt 5:3-12) are at the heart of Jesus’ teaching. Many scholars tell us that the eight beatitudes are summed up in the first one: “*Blessed are the poor in Spirit*” (Mt 5:3). The “poor in spirit” are those who know their absolute need for God and live their lives in radical trust and dependence on God. Because the poor in spirit have learned to trust God in all things, they are called “blessed” and “truly happy.”

In order to embrace the beatitudes as the key to a happy and blessed life, we must undergo a deep conversion of heart. Prior to such a conversion, the beatitudes do not seem to make sense as they are not a recipe for happiness but for sadness.

Pause: *What is your understanding of a moral life? Has this understanding changed over the years?*

BUILDING BLOCK 3: RESPONSIBLE USE OF FREEDOM (C 1730-1742, USCp. 310)

Freedom of will means the ability to freely choose to live our lives or not to live our lives, as God would

have us live. Christians believe the more we follow God's path, the freer we become.

The flipside of freedom is responsibility. Freedom is not the freedom to do as we *want*, but to do as we *ought* as creatures of God. When we abuse our freedom to do only as we want, we will gradually become slaves to selfishness, sin and evil. The Church recognizes that sometimes our freedom is diminished or nullified due to ignorance, fear or other psychological factors (C 1746).

BUILDING BLOCK 4: THREE ELEMENTS OF A MORAL ACT (C1749-1761, USCp. 311)

The fourth block or foundation stone of Catholic morality concerns the three elements of a moral act: the *act* (what we do), the *intention* (why we are doing this act), and the *circumstances* in which we perform a particular act (where, when, how, with whom, etc.). Let's look briefly at these three elements of a moral act.

Objective act (what we do). For an individual act to be morally good, the object, or what we are doing, must be objectively good. Some acts, irrespective of the motive or intention for doing it, are always wrong because they go against a fundamental or basic human good that ought never to be compromised, e.g., the direct killing of an innocent person, torture or rape. "Such acts are called *intrinsically evil acts*, meaning that they are wrong in themselves, apart from the *reason* they are done or the *circumstances* surrounding them" (USC p. 311).

Intention or motive (why we are doing this act). This is usually called the subjective element of a moral act because the intention for doing the act lies within us. Two things should be noted here:

- A good intention can never make an intrinsically evil act good. For example, the killing of an unborn child to protect the mother's reputation is always seriously wrong. Hence, the saying: "The end *does not* justify the means."
- A bad intention can turn a good deed into an evil one, e.g., giving money to a charitable organization for the sole purpose of being recognized and praised.

Circumstances surrounding the act. Circumstances can and do contribute to increasing or diminishing goodness or evil of the act, e.g., how much money was stolen. Circumstances can also lessen or increase a person's blameworthiness for a particular act. For

example, there is considerable difference in degree of guilt between a teen who has an abortion, not fully aware that the unborn child is truly a human being, and someone who clearly knows that the fetus is an unborn child but decides anyway to terminate the pregnancy because having a child would be costly and a great inconvenience. There is a difference between missing Mass on Sunday because one is lazy and missing Mass because the nearest church is 60 or 100 miles away.

In summary, for an act to be morally good, all three elements: the *act* (what I do), the *intention* (why I do it), and the *circumstances* surrounding the act, must be good.

Pause: The article offers some examples of how circumstances can diminish one's culpability in an immoral situation. Can you think of other examples?

BUILDING BLOCK 5: FORMATION OF CONSCIENCE (C1776-1802, USCp. 314)

"Conscience is a judgment of reason whereby the human person recognizes the moral quality of a concrete act that he is going to perform, is in the process of performing, or has already completed" (C 1778).

The voice of true conscience is like a law written in the core of our being by God calling us to do good and avoid evil. This inner voice helps us to distinguish right from wrong and nudges us to do what we believe to be good.

Eight types of conscience

Over the centuries, moral theologians have distinguished several types of conscience. The following are eight of them.

1. A *true* or correct Catholic conscience is one that has made a sincere effort to discover the truth and one that acts in accordance with the Word of God and the teachings of the Church.
2. An *erroneous conscience* is one that is contrary to God's Word and the teachings of the Church. One may have an erroneous conscience and not know it. For example, a couple may think that their marriage is recognized by the Church when in fact it is not. A couple may think that "living together" prior to marriage is morally correct when in fact it is contrary to the teaching of the Church.

3. A *bad conscience* is one that has not even inquired about what is right or wrong. It is a conscience that has no regard for objective truth.

4. A *weak conscience* is one that may know what is right but has not the courage or spiritual power to do what is right. Or it may know what is wrong and sinful and yet does it. For example, a woman may know abortion is wrong but she may not have the psychological or moral strength needed to carry the baby to full term. A weak conscience is also easily swayed by the opinions of other people.

5. A *scrupulous conscience* is one that frequently thinks that it is sinning when in fact it is not. For example, because of deformative and perfectionistic training in a particular area like sexuality, one may think that he is constantly sinning against the virtue of chastity. It has been said that a scrupulous person thinks that God is a tyrant. His God has an all-seeing eye that watches his every move and is ready to pounce on him for every wrong act. A person with a scrupulous conscience needs to place himself under the guidance of a competent and compassionate confessor who will help to introduce him to the love and mercy of God.

6. A *lax conscience* is one that is insensitive to the good that ought to be done and the evil that ought to be shunned. For example, one may be a racist, or may have little or no social conscience, or be very permissive in sexuality issues.

7. A *rebellious conscience* is one that shows little or no respect for Church teaching, a conscience that says: "I don't care what the Church (or maybe even the bible) says; I will do what I want to do."

8. A *formed conscience* is one that has sought to inform and educate itself about a particular moral issue. For Catholics, forming one's conscience will always involve a prayerful reflection on what scripture and the official teaching of the Church have to say on a particular issue.

Any of us may have several of the above conscience types at the same time. For example, we may have a *scrupulous conscience* concerning sexuality issues and a *lax conscience* about justice issues. We may be well informed about some moral issues and be quite uninformed about other issues. Then again, there may be a moral area where we suffer from a weak conscience. We know what is right but we fail to do it, or we know what is wrong and yet we do it.

Education of conscience. The *Catechism* states that "the education of conscience is a lifelong task" (C 1784). Some helpful aids in the formation of conscience are: scripture and other spiritual reading, knowledge of Church teaching, daily examination of conscience, regular use of the sacrament of reconciliation.

Should one always follow one's conscience? One should always follow a *well formed* conscience, a conscience that we take time to educate about a particular issue. The *Catechism* states: "A human being must always follow the certain judgment of his conscience. If he were to deliberately act against it, he would condemn himself" (C 1790).

Pause: Building Block 5 addresses the issue of conscience. Which of the above-listed eight types of conscience had you not thought about or were you not aware of?

BUILDING BLOCK 6: REALITY OF SIN AND GOD'S MERCY (C 1846-1876, USCp. 312)

"If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just, and will forgive our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness." (Jn 1:8-9)

We live in an age when the reality of sin is denied and in which there is much confusion about sin. Facing sin in our lives demands courage. Denying it is as dangerous as denying cancer. It can lead to spiritual death. Karl Menninger, a well-known psychiatrist and author of the book *Whatever Became of Sin*, recognized that when his patients took responsibility for wrongdoing in their lives, their mental health improved and vice versa.

What is sin? (C 1849-1851)

In general, sin is our failure to live the Great Commandment to love God, others and self. The Confiteor, which we sometimes pray at the beginning of Mass, offers us a good description of sin.

"I confess to Almighty God and to you, my brothers and sisters [a recognition that sin is not only an offense against God but it also wounds the Body of Christ and our church community], that I have sinned through my own fault [I take responsibility for the wrong I have done], in my thoughts and in my words, in what I have done [sins of commission], and in what I have failed to do [sins of omission]." Too

often, we forget sins of omission, the failure to do the good we could have done.

Mortal and venial sins (C 1852-1864)

While all sin is serious and ought to be avoided, some sins are more serious than others, just as some offenses between two people are more hurtful or damaging to the relationship than others. Some offenses are so serious that they can kill a relationship. So it is with us and God.

Mortal sin fatally damages the relationship between us and God. The *Catechism* states that “mortal sin destroys charity in the heart of man...it turns us away from God...” (C 1855). Traditionally, the Church has taught that for a sin to be mortal, three conditions must be present.

- *Grave matter*, e.g., murder, adultery, rape, torture.
- *Full knowledge*: we clearly know that our action is gravely sinful.
- *Full consent of the will*: we freely and under no duress choose to do the evil. Factors that diminish full consent are fear, compulsion, and addiction (C 1860).

The first of the above three elements of mortal sin is easy enough to determine since “grave matter is specified by the Ten Commandments” (C 1858). But the other two conditions can be very difficult to properly discern, even in oneself, much less in others. Hence, we should never assume that someone is guilty of mortal sin (C 1861).

Venial sin wounds but does not destroy our relationship with God. “All wrongdoing is sin, but there is sin that is not deadly” (1 Jn 5:17). All sin should be avoided for it weakens our relationship with God. Ignoring venial sin is like ignoring a minor cancer that can become a serious one. “Deliberate and unrepented venial sin disposes us little by little to commit mortal sin” (C 1863). We know the truth of this statement as we consider how a gradual neglect of a relationship can eventually lead to divorce.

The seven capital sins. Some sins are called “capital” or “deadly” because they can lead us to other sins (C 1866). They come from the writings of St. John Cassian who lived in the fourth century. The seven capital sins are *pride, avarice (greed), envy, wrath, sloth, lust, gluttony*. An excellent 36-page book on the “Big Seven” is *Liberation from the Seven Deadly*

Sins by Fr. Kevin Joyce (www.SpiritSite.org) tel. 408-247-9237).

Social sin. In addition to personal sin, the *Catechism* also speaks about “structures of sin,” sometimes called institutionalized sin, e.g., unjust political and economic laws that favor one segment of the population over another.

God’s mercy. “Where sin increased, grace abounded all the more” (Rom 5:18). We cannot speak about sin without speaking about God’s mercy. His mercy is always greater than our capacity to sin. One of the best ways to deepen our sense of God’s mercy is to meditate on the wonderful mercy stories in the scripture (Lk 7:36-50, 15:1-32, 23:39-43). But to receive God’s mercy, we must first sincerely repent of sin. The above scripture readings are wonderful stories about God’s mercy and about people turning from sin.

Pause: Building Block 6 deals with sin. What are some prevalent behaviors today that are sinful but are washed over as being acceptable, e.g., missing Mass for no good reason, racism?

Suggested action

This week, spend some time with the above six blocks of Christian morality. Be aware of how they may apply to your daily life and daily decisions.

————— Meditation —————

Thomas More (1478-1535) was a well- educated man, had a rich family life, was a devout Catholic and the Chancellor to King Henry VIII of England. We might say, ‘He had everything going for him.’ His only problem was that his friend the King wanted him to take his side when he broke with Rome over his divorce. The King also demanded that Thomas acknowledge him as the supreme head of the Church in England. Thomas refused. As a result, he was in prison for fifteen months, lost all his titles and land, and was convicted of treason in a bogus trial and was beheaded. Before he died he said: ‘I die the King’s good servant, but God’s first.’ Thomas chose to die rather than violate his conscience.

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CHRISTIAN MORALITY (RCIA)

Introduction: Part Two

(C 1877-2051, USC Ch. 23-24)

In the previous lesson, we touched upon the first six building blocks of Christian morality. In Part II, we continue with four more building blocks.

BUILDING BLOCK 7: CARDINAL AND THEOLOGICAL VIRTUES (C 1803-1845, USC p. 315)

“Whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is gracious, if there is any excellence, if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things.” (Phil 4:8)

“Growth in virtue is an important goal for every Christian, for the virtues play a valuable role in living a Christian moral life.” (USC p. 317)

We will look at the four cardinal virtues and the three theological virtues.

What is a virtue?

“A virtue is a habitual and firm disposition to do good... The goal of a virtuous life is to become like God” (C 1803). Simply put, a virtue is a good habit that helps us to practice Christian ideals in daily life.

The Cardinal Virtues

There are many human virtues but from ancient times, four of them have been considered principal or *cardinal* virtues. The term “cardinal” comes from the Latin word *cardo* meaning hinge. All human virtues are related to or hinged to one of the cardinal virtues. The four *cardinal virtues* are prudence, justice, fortitude and temperance. Wis 8:7 reads: *“If one loves justice, the fruits of her works are virtues. For she [Wisdom] teaches temperance, prudence, justice and fortitude.”* We will briefly examine each one of these key human virtues.

Prudence (C 1806). “The *natural* virtue of prudence assists people to organize their lives and activities in order to achieve the goal of a happy life in this world... The *supernatural* virtue of prudence helps us organize our activities, desires, possibilities, resources, and behavior in such a way that we may come to eternal life. We may do many things that are imprudent from a worldly perspective but are prudent for eternal life. The only time we need to be *naturally imprudent* for the honor and glory of God is when the

supernatural virtue of prudence contradicts the natural.” (*The Virtue Driven Life*, pp 30-32: see Chapter 1 of this book for an example on how the natural and supernatural virtue of prudence may clash.)

Justice (C 1807). *“When justice is done, it is a joy to the righteous, but dismay to evildoers”* (Prov. 21:15). The human virtue of justice calls us to be fair and honest in our relationship with God and others. From a Christian perspective, justice must always be tempered with *mercy*. God is our model in this regard. If God treated each of us as we justly deserved, who would be saved? The cardinal virtue of justice calls us to fight injustice wherever we see it. A small way to bring justice into our world is to be generous in tipping those who work for menial wages. Another way is to advocate and vote for laws that will help the poor.

Fortitude (C 1808). This moral virtue gives us the courage and strength to do the right thing even in the face of difficulties and temptations as, for instance, when we lose our job or even when we face death for the sake of justice, e.g., St. Thomas More.

Temperance (C 1809). This moral virtue is sometimes called moderation. Temperance “moderates our appetite for pleasure and secures the balance in created goods, and helps us control our instincts and desires in a Christ-like way” (*This is Our Faith*, p. 253).

Ways to acquire human virtues (C 1810-1811, USC p. 317)

All of us have heard the saying “practice makes perfect.” Through frequent repetition of a particular act, we will acquire virtuous behavior. As we seek to grow in virtue, we will need the help of the Holy Spirit and, when possible, fellowship with people who are also seeking to live a virtuous life.

Pause: Can you name a practical situation where we need one of the cardinal virtues to assist us?

The Theological Virtues (C 1812-1813, USC p. 317)

“Faith, hope and love remain, these three, but the greatest of these is love” (1Cor 13:13). In the sacrament of baptism, each person is infused with special

graces and gifts to help him/her be a faithful disciple of Christ. Some of these graces have been called “infused virtues,” the most important of them being faith, hope and charity. These virtues are called “theological” (“theos”=God) because they have God as their origin and object. We acquire these gifts not by human effort but from God. They help us to have an intimate relationship with God.

Faith (C 1814-1816). Faith is the gift that enables us to believe in God and in what he has revealed. Through a mature faith, we are able to commit ourselves totally to God. True faith expresses itself in good works. St. James says “faith apart from works is dead” (Jas 2:26). We must be ready to “confidently bear witness to our faith and spread it” (C 1816). (For more on faith as our response to Divine Revelation, see my Catechism Article 1, Part 2.)

Hope (C 1817-1821). Hope is the virtue that enables us to trust that God’s promises to us will be fulfilled. Faith and hope enable us to relate to and deal with unseen reality. “*Only faith can guarantee the blessings that we hope for, or prove the existence of realities unseen*” (Heb 11:1). One way to *distinguish* faith from hope is to view faith as a “now virtue,” and hope as a virtue that enables us to deal with the future. Faith and trust in God help us to deal with our present struggles. Hope helps us to trust that God will save us or, more immediately, that there will be a successful outcome to a present problem, e.g., sickness. Two sins against hope are *despair* (losing all hope) and *presumption* (believing God will save us with little or no effort on our part).

Love (C 1822-1829). Love is the greatest of all virtues (1 Cor 13:13), the greatest of the commandments (Mt 22:36-37) and it is the very nature of God (1 Jn 4:16). The *Catechism* states that “charity is the theological virtue by which we love God above all things for his own sake, and our neighbor as ourselves for the love of God” (C 1822). (For more on the four cardinal virtues and the three theological virtues, see *The Virtue Driven Life* by Fr. Benedict Groeschel, C.F.R.)

Pause: *Can you recall a time where your faith helped you to get through a difficult situation?*

BUILDING BLOCK 8: A COMMUNITY OF LOVE AND JUSTICE

“This is what Yahweh asks of you: to act justly, love tenderly and walk humbly before the Lord.” (Mic 6:8)

Previous building blocks or foundation stones of Catholic morality dealt mainly with how *we as individuals* are called to live the great commandment of love. In this building block, we will focus on how we are to live the great commandment in community—local and global. We can say that it is God’s dream that every person in our global family is lovingly cared for and treated justly and respectfully. In God’s family, there is no such thing as “us and them.” There is only “us.”

Promoters of the common good (C 1905-1912)

The *Catechism* states that “the common good comprises the sum total of social conditions which allow people, either as groups or as individuals, to reach their fulfillment more fully and easily” (C 1924). Governments and individuals are called to promote the common good, to create social conditions in which all are treated with dignity and respect, all have an opportunity to grow spiritually and materially, and all have basic human rights including the right to food, shelter, health care, education, employment and freedom of expression.

On a global level, promotion of the common good involves the sharing of resources by developed nations with underdeveloped nations. “*If a man who was rich enough in this world’s goods saw that one of his brothers was in need but closed his heart to him, how could the love of God be living in him?*” (1 Jn 3:17)

Employers promote the common good when they pay their employees just wage and create fair and safe working conditions. Employees promote the common good when they do an honest day’s work and care about their employers and co-workers. Parents promote the common good when they provide food, shelter and emotional support for their children.

Christians promote the common good when they become involved in politics and public life. In doing so, they can fight to create social structures that are respectful of persons, and fight structures that dehumanize the members of society. The Church promotes the common good when she models justice and love by the way she lives, by being a prophetic voice for all who have little or no voice, and by speaking out against all forms of social injustice.

Sins against the common good

Even though it is God’s dream that all his children live in peace and harmony and have the opportunity to develop their human and spiritual potential, the reality is very different. Some flagrant examples of sins and

crimes against the common good are world hunger, abortion, outsourcing of work to poor nations, unjust wages, etc.

Pause: Name some ways that our country promotes the common good and ways that it fails to do so.

Christian response to social injustice

In the Old Testament, the prophets were very harsh in their condemnation of social injustices, and so was Jesus. Jesus was the champion of the outcast and the marginalized. In his famous Last Judgment scene (Mt 25:31-46), *the saved* are those who *showed compassion* to those in need and the *condemned* are those who *lacked compassion*.

The Church's response to poverty and injustice is twofold: *social action* and *works of justice*. The former seeks to give immediate help to those in need, e.g., food, clothing, medicine, etc.; the latter seeks to remove unjust structures that are designed to keep the poor poor, and favor the rich. We can say that Mother Teresa is the patron saint of all involved in social action, and Martin Luther King the patron saint of those involved in removing from society those sinful structures that favor some and oppress others. *Social action* ministries give a person a fish for today; *social justice* ministries seek to teach a person how to fish for himself. Both initiatives are needed.

Three large organizations within the Catholic Church in the United States that carry out works of charity and justice are: *Catholic Relief Services*, *Catholic Campaign for Human Development*, and *Catholic Charities*.

We should note that many non-church groups are involved in social action and social justice activities, e.g., NGO'S (non-government organizations), human rights watch groups, the media when it does stories on justice issues. Wherever there is social injustice, all of us have a responsibility to be a voice for the oppressed and to do what we can to remove such injustice. (For more on the social teachings of the Church, see article #25.)

Pause: In your opinion, what is one of the greatest social injustices in the United States and in our global family today?

BUILDING BLOCK 9: THE ROLE OF LAW IN CATHOLIC MORALITY (C 1948-1986, USC p. 327)

In general, we can say that laws are meant to enlighten and guide us, teach and protect us, and challenge us with regard to the more important values in life. Good laws are like good teachers and good road maps: they point us in the right direction. They show us which roads to take (good values to embrace) and which roads to avoid (values to resist).

Moral law (C 1950-1953)

Moral law is the work of Divine Wisdom (C 1950). It is God's instruction for right human conduct. It teaches us what is good and how to act in order to attain earthly and eternal happiness. It also points out to us the choices that lead us away from God. We will look briefly at four different types of laws, all of them interrelated: natural law, civil law, revealed law (Old and New Testament), and church law.

Natural law (C 1954-1960, USC p. 327). When God created human beings, he built into their nature an innate sense of what is right and wrong behavior. This original moral sense is called *natural law* (C 1955). Natural law provides the whole human race with certain principles to guide behavior – principles which may be interpreted and applied in a variety of ways in different cultures and circumstances. Natural law is the foundation of human community and from it arises civil law. An example of natural law is the "law of fair play." When we say something is not fair, we assume the existence of a universal moral law. Because natural law is placed by God in the heart of man, it applies to all people in all places and at all times. Natural law provides the foundation for civil law.

Civil law. Without civil law, we would have chaos. In general, we can say that the purpose of civil law is to apply the principle of natural law to a particular society. If some civil laws are unjust, we need to fight to replace them with just laws, e.g., *Roe v. Wade*, which allows a doctor the right to kill an unborn child.

Revealed law (C 1961-1974, 1981-1986). Revealed law spells out more concretely the central principle of natural law, i.e., "Do good and avoid evil."

The *Catechism* speaks of two stages in revealed law: the law of the Old Testament which is summarized in the Ten Commandments, and the law of the New Testament which is summarized in the Sermon on the Mount (Mt 5, 6 & 7).

The Old Law is imperfect and a *preparation* for the New Law of Christ. The New Law or the Law of the Gospel “fulfills, refines, surpasses and leads the Old Law to perfection” (C 1967). In Mt 5:1-11, Jesus tells us that he came “not to abolish the old law but to bring it to fulfillment.” Jesus makes several contrasts between what was said in the Old Law and what he is now proposing as the New Law of love, i.e., “You have heard it said, you shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy. But I say to you, love your enemies, and pray for those who persecute you...” (Mt 5:43-44). We cannot live the New Law of love without God’s grace (the focus of our next building block).

Church law (C 2030-2021, USC p. 330). Living as active members of our Church family helps us to live a good moral life. Through her teaching ministry, the Church helps us to better understand our call to holiness, better understand what is asked of us as disciples of Jesus, and better understand what are appropriate and inappropriate responses to Christ’s law of love. In the Church, we have outstanding and inspiring witnesses of Christian living.

The Magisterium, the supreme teaching office of the Church, has a special role to play as moral teacher in our Church family. Briefly, her role is twofold:

- to faithfully protect and interpret the moral teachings of the Church. The Magisterium must protect moral truth from erroneous interpretations.
- to deal with new moral issues (e.g., medical ethics) that previous generations did not have to contend with. The Church must seek guidance in her moral wisdom tradition and apply it to new questions raised in every age.

Pause: *It is sometimes difficult to practice Christian values in today's society? How do you try to practice your faith in the "Public Square"?*

BUILDING BLOCK 10: GRACE
(C1987-2005, USC p. 328)

The word “grace” literally means gift. The *Catechism* defines grace as “*the help God gives us to respond to our vocation of becoming his adopted children. It introduces us into the intimacy of the Trinitarian life*” (C 2021). Grace is the free gift of God’s presence, life, and love living within us, for the purpose of transforming us into his likeness which we lose when we sin.

The way grace works is a bit like what happens when a man who drinks too much and eats too much, and is rough around the edges, falls in love with a beautiful woman who loves him unconditionally. Her love transforms him. He quits drinking, begins to eat in moderation, and gradually becomes a very nice person to be around. All this happens because he allows the woman’s love to enter his heart and motivates him to change his whole way of living. He is free to accept or reject the love of his lady friend. So it is with us – God’s grace presence – God’s love – totally embraces us. It enables us to open our hearts to God, gives us the strength to change and transform sinful habits, and moves us in God’s direction.

Our role is to allow God to do his transforming work in us and to cooperate with his grace. Our part may seem easy but it is not. Dying to self and to sinful attitudes and behavior is never easy. We must be strongly motivated and very generous in our response to God’s grace.

Pause: *How have you experienced God’s grace in your life?*

Suggested actions

Try to be more in tune with injustices that exist in our local, national and global society. Be more aware of God’s grace presence that envelops your whole life.

Meditation

Amazing grace! How sweet the sound that saved and set me free. I once was lost, but now am found, was blind but now I see.

‘Twas grace that taught my heart to fear, and grace my fears relieved; how precious did that grace appear the hour I first believed!

Through many dangers, toil, and snares I have already come; ‘tis grace has brought me safe thus far, and grace will lead me home.

The Lord has promised good to me, His word my hope secures; He will my shield and portion be as long as life endures.

When we’ve been there ten thousand years, bright shining as the sun, we’ve no less days to sing God’s praise than when we first begun.

(John Newton)

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FIRST AND SECOND COMMANDMENTS (RCIA) PUTTING GOD FIRST (C 2084-2167, USC Ch. 25, 26)

The *Catechism* states: “In fidelity to Scripture and in conformity with Jesus’ example, the tradition of the Church has always acknowledged the primordial importance and significance of the Decalogue” (C 2078).

In this lesson we will:

- Introduce the Ten Commandments
- Examine what the first and second commandments call us to and forbid

The Ten Commandments – Introduction (C 2052-2082)

The Ten Commandments were given by God to Moses on Mount Sinai. We can read about the Sinai event in Ex 19:3-20:1-17. Moses leads the former slaves out of Egypt to Mount Sinai where they enter into a covenant relationship with God. He will be Israel’s God and they will be his people. When Moses tells the leaders of his conversation with God, they respond in one voice: “All that God has said, we will do” (Ex 19:8). Then God gives Israel the Decalogue (“Ten Words”) which become known as the Ten Commandments.

Moral theologian Fr. Timothy O’Connell writes that “the genius of the Ten Commandments...is the tight, clear way they sketch hard-won wisdom of life. We are not forced to spend a lifetime finding this wisdom; it is given to us on a platter. Woven together, the Ten Commandments are a great, inspired poem, drawing lines around a way of living that can make us whole and keep us holy, a way of living that in the end is the only way we can be happy.”

Sports fields are marked by areas that are inbounds and out-of-bounds, and players must abide by them. These markers are precisely that: markers delineating boundaries. They do not tell athletes how to excel at their sports.

The Ten Commandments serve a similar purpose. They name expectations or, to use a stronger word, the demands of a relationship. They clearly state what is out-of-bounds in our relationship with God and neighbor. But like other boundaries in life, they do not necessarily tell us how to excel or be virtuous in these relationships.

Jesus and the Ten Commandments (C 5052-5054). In his dialogue with the rich young man, Jesus stresses the importance of the Ten Commandments when he

says, “If you would enter life, keep the commandments” (Mt 19:16-19). Later in Matthew’s gospel, Jesus summarizes the Ten Commandments and places them in the context of love. In response to an inquiry about which commandment is the greatest, Jesus says: “*You shall love the Lord, your God, with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind. This is the greatest and the first commandment. The second is like it. You shall love your neighbor as yourself.*” (Mt 22:37-39).

The first three commandments focus on our call to love God with our whole being and the other seven focus on our relationship with others. Both commandments are inseparable. One cannot love God without loving one’s neighbor, and love of neighbor is one central way for us to love God.

The list of the Ten Commandments is found in two places in the Old Testament: Ex 20:2-17 and Dt 5:6-21. When naming each of the Ten Commandments in this article, we will use the familiar catechetical formula that most of us grew up with.

Pause: *It has been well said that the Ten Commandments are commandments, not ten suggestions. Why do so many people treat the Ten Commandments as outdated or at most suggestions for moral living?*

The first commandment (C 2084-2141, USC p. 341)

“I am the Lord your God: you shall not have strange gods before me” (Ex 20:2-3).

In our treatment of each commandment, we will look at what the commandment calls us to do, what it forbids and condemns.

The first commandment calls us to acknowledge the existence of God and worship him. The first commandment calls us to make God and his values the number one priority in our lives. More concretely, the first commandment calls us to express our belief and worship of God through our practice of the three theological virtues of faith, hope and love.

Faith. “The first commandment is more than a reference to an abstract idea of God. It is an announcement of the presence of the most holy God, both in outward creation and within the human soul. His existence does call for a faith response” (USC p. 346). Faith is the

supernatural gift that enables us to believe in God's existence, to accept his divine truths, and to trust in his word. True faith works hand in hand with reason. Faith enables us to accept divine truth even when we cannot fully understand it. Reason helps us to explore the truths of our faith and come to a deeper understanding and appreciation of them. Theology is often described as "faith seeking understanding." As we grow in faith, we will be moved to share it with others. Jesus says, "Whoever acknowledges me before others, I will acknowledge before my Father in heaven" (Mt 10:32-33).

It should be noted that *involuntary doubt* is not a sin against faith. Many holy people have been plagued with doubts concerning God's existence and other truths of our faith. When young people start to explore Christian beliefs, they may go through a period of doubt. When people are going through a period of spiritual or theological doubt and pray for divine help and do not seem to receive it, it can be very difficult and painful. At such times, it is very important for us to seek out a spiritual or theological mentor who can lead us through a time of doubt and to a deeper understanding of our faith.

Some people do not come to believe this because they cannot overcome objections to faith in God, the Church or a particular belief, or because they do not know how to handle the mystery which is at the heart of Christian belief.

The *Catechism* also speaks about other forms of incredulity:

Heresy is the denial or refusal by a baptized Catholic to believe in a truth that is held by the Church.

Apostasy is the repudiation or abandonment of the Christian faith by a baptized Catholic.

Schismatics are Catholics who break away from the Church and refuse to accept the authority of the Pope.

Hope. The virtue of hope enables us to believe that God accompanies us on our journey through life and will lead us to eternal life with him. Two sins against hope are *despair* and *presumption*. Despair causes us to stop believing in God's love and mercy. Presumption is the sin that leads us to believe that we will be saved without any commitment to living a moral life.

Love. The *Catechism* states: "The first commandment enjoins us to love God above everything and to love all creatures for him and because of him" (C 2093). We manifest our love for God by our sincere worship of him, by seeking his will in all things, by allowing his

word to be a lamp that guides our steps by loving what he loves, by loving our neighbor and by appreciating and protecting his creation.

One sins against God's love in various ways such as indifference, ingratitude, lukewarmness, spiritual laziness and hatred of God.

Pause: *Have you ever doubted God's existence or his love for you?*

Sins against the first commandment (C 2110-2132, USC 343)

Idolatry. The *Catechism* states: "Idolatry consists in divinizing what is not God. Man commits idolatry whenever he honors and reveres a creature in place of God, whether this be gods or demons, power, pleasure, race, ancestors, the state, money" (2113).

It has been well said that we become like what we worship. In his book *Catholic Christianity*, Peter Kreeft writes: *"If we are absolute about God the Absolute, we are free from absolutizing anything else. Reality offers only one absolute good: God. Everything is good if it leads to God or comes from God as his will, and evil if it leads away from God or his will. Obeying "the first and greatest commandment" gives us a meaning, point, goal, and direction in life and a liberating simplicity. It is like a single lighthouse in a confusing storm"* (p. 28).

As we consider the question of false gods, it will be good to be aware of incomplete images of God that we may have that will not be helpful to a loving relationship with God, e.g., Lawgiver and Judge. Although these titles capture some truth about who God is, they will ultimately lead us to a poor relationship with God if they become our *primary* image of God—which should, of course, be that God is love (1Jn 4:8).

Superstition is the belief or practice that attributes supernatural or magical powers to certain objects or ritual actions. Sometimes it involves believing that objects have secret powers or it may involve using religious devotions in a superstitious way, e.g., "chain prayers" or certain prayers said for a particular number of days to obtain a favor from God. Refusing to fly on the 13th of the month is based on superstition and manifests a lack of trust in God to protect us. Another superstitious belief is the placing of medals or other religious objects in the car to prevent accidents. These objects can remind us of God and our need to pray often to him for safety. But we also need to practice good driving habits.

Divination is the act or practice of attempting to learn what is hidden in the future by invoking Satan, conjuring up the dead, reading horoscopes, consulting mediums, reading palms, playing with the Ouija board, etc. Such practices do not show respect for our loving God who asks us to place our trust in him.

Magic or sorcery is the attempt to deal with the occult and to gain control over hidden powers to help oneself or another, or worse still, to curse them. The Church condemns these practices as contrary to the humble submission to God required of true religion.

Irreligion. The *Catechism* names three forms of irreligion:

- **Tempting God** by challenging him by word or deed to manifest his goodness, e.g., Satan asking Jesus to throw himself down from the Temple, thereby forcing God to act (Lk 4:9);
- **Sacrilege** involves treating the sacraments or other sacred actions, persons or things in a profane way.
- **Simony** is the buying or selling of spiritual things. God's graces are free gifts and cannot be purchased or sold. Although it is permissible for ministers to accept a donation for certain services, it is very wrong for someone to try to buy or sell spiritual powers or con unsuspecting people with promises of God's favor. No sacrament or spiritual good should be denied due to lack of money.

Pause: What are the false idols that can easily become more important than God in our lives? What can be done to give such idols their rightful place?

Atheism is the denial of God's existence and it is the ultimate violation of the first commandment. Atheism can have many forms or faces: *Materialists* live their lives as if the only thing that matters is material realities. *Secular humanists* live as if humans are the center of the universe and are the supreme good; that they are not dependent on God. *Atheistic political systems*, like communism, believe that "religion is the opium of the people" (Marx), and look to the state as the ultimate good.

Agnosticism. Another way to evade the call of the first commandment to believe in and worship God is agnosticism, which means "I don't know." Agnostics admit that there is or may be a god, but we can know nothing about him. Some agnostics are genuine seekers of God; others are too lazy to even seek him. Still others are

practical atheists who believe that God exists, but act as if he doesn't exist.

Vatican Council II states that believers are sometimes partially to blame for the rise of atheism. "*Believers can have more than a little to do with the rise of atheism. To the extent that they are careless about their instruction in the faith, or present its teaching falsely, or even fail in their religious, moral, or social life, they must be said to conceal rather than reveal the true nature of God and religion*" (Gaudium et Spes 19).

The veneration of sacred images (C 2129-2132)

The first commandment states: "You shall not carve idols for yourselves in the shape of anything" (Ex 20:4). Most Christian churches have taken this verse of the first commandment very literally. Hence, one will not find in their churches statues, vigil lights or Stations of the Cross. Do Catholics disobey the first commandment when they venerate religious images? The ancient Israelites, like their pagan neighbors, had a tendency to create and worship false idols like the golden calf. Because of this, God forbade them to make any idolatrous images. Yet God did permit Israel to make images like the bronze serpent, the Ark of the Covenant and the cherubim.

When the Word became flesh, God took on a visible form. Since then, the Church has seen that it is most fitting for Christians to venerate (not worship) icons and religious images of Jesus, Mary and the saints. These sacred images remind us of and point us to the persons they represent.

The Church is quick to point out that God *alone* is to be worshiped and adored. Mary, the saints and statues are *venerated*, i.e., shown honor and respect.

Pause: Do you have a favorite icon or holy image? Why is it special to you?

The second commandment (C 2147-2167, USC Ch. 26)

"*You shall not take the name of the Lord your God in vain*" (Ex 20:7).

The *Catechism* states: The second commandment requires respect for God's name... more particularly it governs our use of speech in sacred matters" (C 2142).

In the Old Testament, when Moses encounters God in the burning bush, he asks God his name. God replies, "I am who am..." This is what you shall tell the Israelites. "I AM sent me to you" (Ex 3:14). "The name I AM (YHWH) asserts God's uniqueness, infinite and undefinable mystery and ever-present reality. God

cannot be defined. He does not limit himself to being *this* or *that*, he is just 'I AM.' God has no dead past ('was') or unborn future ('will be'), just living present ('am')" (*Catholic Christianity*, p. 210).

By revealing the divine name YHWH to them, God enters into a personal relationship with the people of Israel. In knowing God's name, they can call upon him in time of need. Prophets and all others who speak in God's name are called to speak truly (Dt 18:15-22).

What the second commandment calls us to do

The second commandment calls us to show reverence and respect for God, his holy name, and for people, places and things. The second commandment also has *social* implications for all who are sons and daughters of God. In its deeper and more positive sense, it is a call to the Israelite community to live their identity as a people who bear God's name. The resident alien is to be welcomed and treated as one of their own. They are to be honest in their business dealings with others. They are to tithe so that no one among them lives in need. They are to care for the widow, the orphan, and the dispossessed (Dt 10:14-22). These are some of the ways they are to honor God's name.

The second commandment also calls us to know and preserve the difference between Creator and the creature. Respect for God's name keeps us from reducing him to a mere fact, or even a thing that we can control or manipulate. At the same time, our gracious God desires to be intimate with us, even becoming incarnate in Jesus Christ and dwelling in us through the Holy Spirit" (USC p. 353).

At our baptism, we were initiated into the Church "in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit." To be baptized in the name of the Trinity means that we are immersed into the life of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

Pause: *Have you ever considered the social implications of the second commandment? How do you feel about this aspect of the commandment?*

Sins against the second commandment

The second commandment forbids the wrong use or misuse of God's name. Sometimes today we hear people say, "Is there anything sacred anymore?" The comment shows that God has planted in our hearts a sense of the sacred which we want to preserve and celebrate. To speak "in vain" means that what we say has no positive result or value. Using the name of God

improperly is a subtle sign that we are losing our sense of awe and reverence due to God.

Wrong uses of God's name. To call upon the name of God to support us in activities that are contrary to the nature of God, e.g., to ask God to support us in a lie as in the case of perjury, to ask God to strike down our enemies in cruelty, or to condemn someone to hell for all eternity.

Cursing and vulgar language. By definition *cursing* is calling down evil on another person. If the curse involves wishing serious harm on another, it is a grave sin. *Vulgar or crude language* can erode our respect for God and religion. It should be avoided. It is immature more than sinful (see James 3:7-10) for his words to us concerning what we often call "sins of the tongue").

Blasphemy. The *Catechism* teaches that blasphemy consists "in uttering against God—inwardly or outwardly—words of hatred, reproach, or defiance" (C 2148). This is gravely sinful. It is also blasphemous to use God's name to justify criminal practices, the enslavement of people, torture, and murder. Tragically, people, including Christians, have used God's name to justify wars and the killing of enemies.

Oaths/perjury. For morally correct and serious reasons, e.g., a legal trial, one may take an oath for the purpose of serving justice. *Perjury* is lying under oath.

Pause: *Why is there a rise in vulgar, obscene and blasphemous language in our time? What can Christians do to counteract this trend?*

Meditation

Jesus taught that he would be present to those who come together in his name. "Where two or three are gathered together in my name, there am I in the midst of them" (Mt 18:30). St. Peter staked his entire ministry on the utter uniqueness of Jesus, the only Savior, by employing the power of his name: "There is no salvation through anyone else, nor is there any other name under heaven given to the human race by which we are to be saved" (Acts 4:12, USC p. 357).

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THIRD AND FOURTH COMMANDMENTS (RCIA)

Rest, Community Worship & Family Life

(C 2168-2257, USC Ch. 27-28)

In this lesson we will look at:

- Third commandment
- Sabbath rest
- Sabbath worship
- Duties of children
- Parental duties
- Fourth commandment and civic authorities

The third commandment (C 2168-2195)

“Remember to keep holy the Lord’s Day” (Ex 20:8).

The *Catechism* states: “The third commandment of the Decalogue recalls the holiness of the Sabbath: ‘The seventh day is a Sabbath of solemn rest, holy to the Lord.’” (C 2168).

The two-fold purpose of the Sabbath Day is rest from work and worship of God, more specifically, *community* worship of God.

Sabbath rest

The *Catechism* begins its teaching on the third commandment by reflecting on the meaning of the Sabbath in the Old Testament. Ex 31:15 states: “The seventh day is a Sabbath of solemn rest, holy to the Lord.” Dt 5:12 stresses that the Sabbath is a day to renew our covenant with God. Hence, the Sabbath is linked to both creation and covenant, two major events in the history of salvation.

Gen 2:2 tells us that God “rested on the seventh day.” Of course, God never gets tired. But as the inspired storytellers of Genesis imagined the work of creation, they could not image it without a pause for rest.

Why rest? For the people of Israel who did slave labor in Egypt, the thought of a whole day of rest was a wonderful new blessing. It was and is also a reminder to us that life is not all about *doing*, but also about *being*.

Concerning the Sabbath, scripture scholar John Craghan writes: “Sabbath is derived from the Hebrew root meaning ‘to stop, cease,’ namely from work. This is the institution of the Sabbath, not as a day of worship, but as a day of rest. It is a celebration of trust in God, who does not spend the final day in exhausting activities but in peace and quiet. The Sabbath is, therefore, an invitation to the Israelite to enter into the entire rhythm of creation.

Essentially, the *Sabbath rest is the sanctification of time*. It boldly asserts that there are limits to our feverish pursuit of goods, that there should be a pause at this special time to recognize God’s gift-giving. As Ex 31:17 puts it, on the Sabbath we should not only rest but also be refreshed. It is hardly an accident that the sacred author has God bless and hallow the seventh day.

The rest or being aspect of life is beautifully emphasized in the Mary and Martha story in Lk 10:38-42. Martha is busy *doing* many things and complains to Jesus about Mary’s failure to help her. Jesus responds: “Mary has chosen the better part, which shall not be taken from her.” In this story Jesus is telling us that there is a *time to do* and also a *time to be*, a time to rest from doing and a time to sit to contemplate God. Resting gives us the opportunity to recreate ourselves and get ready for another week of work.

The *Catechism* notes: “God’s action is a model for human action. If God “rested and was refreshed” on the seventh day, man, too, ought to “rest” and should let others, especially the poor, “be refreshed.”

The *United States Catholic Catechism* (p.368) states: “Sunday rest puts our whole life into perspective. It helps us stand back from material concerns and reflect on spiritual values. Taking a breather from the pressures of the workplace, we are freed to open our souls to matters that have eternal significance. Sunday rest allows us to look again at the wonders of nature and experience the harmony and peace placed there by God. It is a precious time for rediscovering the fundamental goodness of creation as it comes from God’s providential hand. Sunday also provides the opportunity for families to be together and to engage in common activities. Weekday schedules often require members of the family to spend much time away from each other.”

Pause: How did you spend Sunday when you were growing up? How do you spend Sunday now? Has our society lost its sense of the Sabbath—a day to stop work, and to rest and worship God?

Sabbath worship

Sunday is the Christian Sabbath for on this day, Jesus rose from the dead. Sunday is sometimes called the “*Eighth Day*” – a day which transcends time and points to eternity. Sunday is also called the “*Lord’s Day*.” This title had special meaning for the early Christians because it called to mind Jesus’ victory over death. If, for the Jews, the Sabbath calls to mind God’s creation of the world, for Christians, Sunday calls to mind our new creation in Christ.

For Christians, the central and most important way to keep holy the Lord’s Day is through participating in the Eucharist. We know from the *Acts of the Apostles* and the writings of the Early Church Fathers that from the beginning of Christianity, Christians gathered together on Sundays to celebrate the Lord’s Supper, to do what he had done the night before he died.

Because the Eucharist is the foundation and heart of the Christian life, Church law requires Catholics to participate in Sunday Mass or its vigil. One can, of course, be excused for not attending Mass for some good reason, e.g., sickness, travel or mandatory work on a Sunday.

Pause: *What are some things you might do to better prepare for Mass?*

The fourth commandment (C 2196-2257, USC Ch. 28)
“*Honor your father and your mother.*”

The first three commandments help us to understand how we are to love and honor God with our whole being. The remaining seven commandments tell us how we are to love and relate to others. The fourth commandment addresses family relationships, especially the respect and honor that children should have for their parents. The fourth commandment also addresses the duties of governments and citizens.

Today, families come in many shapes and forms: the traditional family of husband and wife and children, single parent families, blended families, families in which grandparents are the primary caregivers of their grandchildren, families made up of adults with foster children.

“The family is the original cell of society” (C 2207). It is prior to the state in origin. The state did not invent the family. Therefore, it has no right to reinvent it. The Christian family is a community of persons equal in dignity and a living symbol of the

unity of the Blessed Trinity. It is a “domestic church” in which the gospel of Jesus is taught by word and deed.

Duties of children (C 2214-2220, USC p. 377)

On *Holy Family Sunday*, we listen to the following reading from the book of Sirach.

*The Lord sets a father in honor over his children;
a mother’s authority he confirms over her sons.
He who honors his father atones for sins;
he stores up riches who reveres his mother.
He who honors his father is gladdened by children,
and when he prays he is heard.
He who reveres his father will live a long life;
he obeys the Lord who brings comfort to his
mother.
My son, take care of your father when he is old;
grieve him not as long as he lives.
Even if his mind fail, be considerate with him;
revile him not in the fullness of your strength.
For kindness to a father will not be forgotten,
it will serve as a sin offering—
it will take lasting root.*

(Sir 3:2-6, 12-14)

It is a wonderful and inspiring thing to see children love, honor and respect their parents. It is very sad and painful to see parents and children who are alienated from each other. Ideally, children are raised in a home by a mother and father who love each other and also love and cherish their children. But life being what it is, sometimes children are raised in very dysfunctional and unhappy home atmosphere. When this happens, it is much more challenging for children to live the fourth commandment which calls them to honor their father and their mother. Fortunately, there are many inspiring stories of adult children who were failed badly by their parents as youngsters and who were able, with the grace of God, to forgive their parents and reconcile with them.

In the home, children should be taught to respect, honor, love and obey their parents. This is usually a much easier task for children to achieve when they feel loved and cherished by their parents than for children who grow up in a home in which parents do not respect each other and are neglectful of their children.

Pause: *What is your opinion on how parents are raising children today in contrast to how your parents raised you?*

Parental duties (C 2221-2231, USC p. 378)

The awesome privilege and responsibility of parents is to allow themselves to be led by the Holy Spirit to help their children become the person God created them to be. As all parents know, no two children are the same. Each is unique and special. God has a special plan for each child. Parents who often seek the guidance and wisdom of the Holy Spirit will play a very important role in helping their children discover and become the person God created them to be. More specifically, parents live out the parental aspect of faithful discipleship when they:

- *Attend to the physical, spiritual, intellectual, emotional, and moral needs of their children.* It is a big challenge to keep these FIVE needs of children in proper balance. It is very easy for parents to over-emphasize one set of needs to the detriment of others. For example, if children are very involved in sports, (which can be very helpful to the character formation of a child), a particular sport may become more important than Sunday Mass. If the intellectual development of a child is overly emphasized, the emotional and social development may be neglected.

- *Develop the virtues.* In his letter to the Colossians, Paul says “You are God’s chosen ones, he loves you and you should be clothed in sincere compassion, in kindness and humility, gentleness and patience. Bear with one another, forgive one another... Over all these clothes put on love” (Col 3:12-15). One of the most important and challenging roles of parents is to help their children grow in virtues that will help them follow God’s ways, help them to be responsible citizens and generally all around good people. Writing about this aspect of parental duties, Fr. Al McBride writes: “It will be hard to keep the commandments without the acquisition of virtues, grooved habits that incline the person to virtuous behavior. Children need training in virtues, through storytelling that inspires them to virtue, through good parental example, and finally through repetitive acts of virtue which ingrain these acts into their behavior and attitudes. Virtues also become the source of self-fulfillment.”

(Fr. McBride’s College Catechism, p. 219)

- *Praying together.* It has been well said that “the family that prays together stays together.” Blessed are the children who know that prayer is important to their parents and who have parents that pray with them in their homes and church family.

- *Sacramental life of the Church.* An important part of a child’s formation is introducing them to the

sacramental life of the Church, helping them to grow in their appreciation of the Eucharist and the Sacrament of Reconciliation. This can be especially challenging in parishes where little efforts are made to involve children in the liturgy.

Pause: *What are three or more characteristics of a strong family?*

The fourth commandment and civic authorities

(C 2234-2246, USC p. 379)

Church teaching on the fourth commandment extends beyond family relationships to the duties of civic authorities and the duties of citizens within society. All authority—whether within the family, the Church or society—is from God and should be exercised in a way that is respectful of the dignity of others. No human authority should seek to establish any law that is contrary to the dignity of others or to the natural law. Government leaders should defend and protect the family as created by God. On the other hand, citizens have a duty to respect and obey legitimate civic authorities and to obey the laws of the state that promote the common good. This includes our moral obligation to pay taxes, exercise our right to vote, and defend the nation if attacked.

Civil disobedience. Citizens are not obliged to obey laws that are contrary to moral order (C 2242). In our time we have had outstanding examples of citizens refusing to abide by laws that discriminated against some persons because of race, color of their skin, etc. e.g., Mahatma Gandhi, Nelson Mandela, Martin L. King and their supporters.

Charter of family rights. In his apostolic exhortation *On the Role of the Christian Family in the Modern World*, Pope John Paul II cites a Bill of Rights for the family. As we read John Paul’s Bill of Rights, we can ask ourselves: where are some of these rights being denied or challenged in our world today?

“The political community has a duty to honor the family, to assist it, and to ensure especially:

- the freedom to establish a family, have children, and bring them up in keeping with the family’s own moral and religious convictions;
- the protection of the stability of the marriage bond and the institution of the family;
- the freedom to profess one’s faith, to hand it on, and raise one’s children in it, with the necessary means and institutions;

- the right to private property, to free enterprise, to obtain work and housing, and the right to emigrate;
- in keeping with the country's institutions, the right to medical care, assistance for the aged, and family benefits;
- the protection of security and health, especially with respect to dangers like drugs, pornography, alcoholism, etc.;
- the freedom to form associations, with other families and so have representatives before civil authorities" (Art. 46).

Pause: *Negotiating the aging process and caring for elderly parents is a big issue today. What are your thoughts on this aspect of family life?*

Suggested actions

If you tend to work too much, find a way to build times of relaxation into your week.

Pray for Catholics who no longer go to the Eucharist. If you know Catholics who are disconnected from Church, find ways to invite them to events at your parish.

Pray often for family members who are going through difficult times.

Consider fighting legislation that hurts the dignity of family life.

Meditation I

Was ever another command so obeyed? For century after century, spreading slowly to every continent and country and among every race on earth, this action has been done in every conceivable human circumstance for every conceivable human need, from infancy and before it, to extreme old age and after it, from the pinnacles of earthly greatness to the refuge of fugitives in the caves and dens of the earth. Men have found no better thing than this to do for kings at their crowning and for criminals going to the scaffold; for armies in triumph or for a bride and bridegroom in a country church...for the famine of a whole province or for the soul of a dear lover...and best of all, week by week, and month by month, on a hundred thousand Sundays, faithfully, unfailingly, across all the parishes of Christendom, priest and

people continue to work together in order to carry out this command, "Do this in Memory of Me."

(Don Gregory Dix O.S.B.)

Meditation II

*Lord God, we thank you for the gift of family.
We acknowledge that our image and name
as family come from you.*

*We believe that within our family
lies a homemade holiness.*

*We affirm that it is in this household of faith
that we experience your presence,
your forgiveness, and your love.*

We are family.

*We give thanks to you for the many joys and
blessings that have come to us through our family.*

As family, we sometimes feel pain.

*And so we offer to you our disappointments,
frustrations and hurts.*

*Help us to forgive those members of our family,
including ourselves, who have caused pain.*

*We pray for the strength
to be a light within our family.*

*May we open our hearts, our eyes and ears
and carry our light to those in need.*

*God, Creator of the earth and all its people,
help us to be mindful that,
as members of one global family,
we are equal in your eyes.*

*Help us to continue to appreciate the diversity
of persons in our homes and in our world.*

*As members equal in human dignity,
may we build a better world
and proclaim our willingness
to be the holy people you call us to be.*

Amen.

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FIFTH COMMANDMENT (RCIA)

PROMOTING A CULTURE OF LIFE
(C 2259-2330, USC Ch. 29)

The *Catechism* (2258) states: “*Human life is sacred because from its beginning it involves the creative action of God and it remains forever in a special relationship with the Creator, who is its sole end. God alone is the Lord of life from its beginning until its end: no one can under any circumstance claim for himself the right directly to destroy an innocent human being.*”

In this lesson we will look at:

- Murder
- Abortion
- Euthanasia
- Suicide
- Death penalty
- Stem-cell research
- War
- Domestic violence

Looked at in a positive way, the fifth commandment calls us to promote a culture in which all life—born and unborn—will be safe, welcomed and nurtured. The principal thrust of this commandment is the sanctity of every human life. The fifth commandment opposes all that threatens the sacredness and dignity of human life. The Vatican II document *Gaudium et Spes* enunciates a long list of threats to life: “*Whatever is opposed to life itself, such as any type of murder, genocide, abortion, euthanasia, or willful self-destruction, whatever violates the integrity of the human person, such as mutilation, torments inflicted on body or mind, attempts to coerce the will itself; whatever insults human dignity, such as subhuman living conditions, arbitrary imprisonment, deportation, slavery, prostitution, the selling of women and children; as well as disgraceful working conditions, where people are treated as mere instruments of gain rather than free and responsible persons; all of these things and others like them are infamies indeed*” (27).

Murder. Murder is the intentional killing of another human being. Scripture says: “Do not slay the innocent and the righteous” (Ex 23:7). The murder of an innocent person is an affront to our Creator and a grave crime against human dignity. Jesus forbade murder and the attitudes of anger, hatred and revenge that lead to murder. During his passion, Jesus told Peter to put away his sword and while dying on the cross, he forgave his executioners.

Self-defense. Killing another in self-defense is morally permissible. The *Catechism* (2265) states: “Legitimate defense can be not only a right but a grave duty for someone responsible for another’s life, the common good of the family or of the state.”

Abortion. The *Catechism* (2270) states: “Human life must be respected and protected absolutely from the moment of conception.” From the earliest years of Christianity, the Church has condemned abortion as morally wrong. In the *Didache*, written towards the end of the first century and revered as an honored guide for Christian life, we read, “You shall not kill the embryo by abortion.” This teaching has not changed and will not change (C 2271).

Despite the Church’s long held position on this controversial issue, many people, including many Catholics, hold that while they are personally opposed to abortion, they would not want to see the state take away that right from those who believe differently from them. When the Church believes and teaches that no state has the right to permit the killing of an unborn child, is she seeking to impose her moral beliefs on others, especially on those who believe that abortion is a woman’s right to choose or not to choose?

The argument of “being personally opposed to abortion but not disposed to taking away other’s right to choose” is flawed. Would any of us say today: “I am personally opposed to slavery, but if others would want to have slaves, I would not want to remove that right from them”? In the same vein, would any of us say: “While I am personally opposed to allowing a mother to kill her unwanted six-month old child, I would not want to take away that right from her if she believes differently from me.”

Just because an act is *legal* does not mean that it is *morally acceptable*.

At a Prayer Breakfast in the White House in 1994, Saint Teresa of Calcutta spoke the following words: “If we can accept that a mother can kill her own child, how can we tell other people not to kill one another? Any country that sanctions abortion is not teaching its people to love, but to use any violence to get what it wants.”

Compassion for those who have had an abortion. In his encyclical *Gospel of Life*, the late Pope John Paul II

states: “I would like to say a special word to women who have had an abortion. The Church is aware of the many factors that may have influenced your decision, and she does not doubt that, in many cases, it was a painful and even shattering decision. The wound in your heart may not yet have healed. Certainly, what happened was and remains terribly wrong. But do not give in to discouragement and do not lose hope. Try, rather, to understand what happened and face it honestly. If you have not already done so, give yourselves over with humility and trust to repentance. The Father of mercies is ready to give you his forgiveness and his peace in the Sacrament of Reconciliation. You will come to understand that nothing is definitely lost and you will also be able to ask forgiveness from your child, who is now living with the Lord” (94).

Ministries like *Project Rachel* seek to bring healing to all who have been connected with an abortion. The Church also has ministries to help women who are pregnant with an unwanted child.

Pause: Why do women have an abortion? What can be done to lower the number of women who choose to end their pregnancy?

Euthanasia (sometimes called “mercy killing”). “Whatever its motives [whether selfish convenience or unselfish mercy] and means [whether harsh or gentle], direct euthanasia... is morally unacceptable” (C 2277). In moral issues, the end does not justify the means. A good motive (mercy) does not justify an intrinsically evil act (killing). Mercy killing is killing and the fifth commandment forbids it.

Active euthanasia should be distinguished from “aggressive medical treatment,” sometimes called “extraordinary means” of treatment for the ill, such as respirators and feeding tubes. Such “extraordinary means” need not be used if they impose an excessive burden on the patient or on his/her family. However, even if a person is close to death, he/she should receive “ordinary means” of care, e.g., food, water, painkillers. The latter can be used even if they shorten a person’s life for in such a situation, death is not willed as a means or an end; it is merely tolerated as inevitable.

Suicide is a grave wrong. It is the ultimate rejection of love of self, love of God and love of neighbor. It is a rejection of God’s absolute sovereignty over life and death. It can also bring scandal.

Even though suicide is always wrong, the Church recognizes that grave psychological problems and overwhelming fear in the face of anticipated suffering or torture, can reduce blameworthiness for the one who takes his/her own life.

Concerning the salvation of such persons, the *Catechism* (2283) states: “We should not despair of the eternal salvation of persons who have taken their own lives. By ways known to him alone, God can provide the opportunity for salutary repentance. The Church prays for persons who have taken their own lives.”

Assisted suicide. The Church also teaches that assisted suicide is a grave sin. In his encyclical *The Gospel of Life*, John Paul II states: “To concur with the intention of another person to commit suicide and to help in carrying it out through so-called “assisted suicide” means to cooperate in, and at times to be the actual perpetrator of, is an injustice which can never be excused, even if it is requested” (66).

Pause: What causes a person to commit suicide? Have you ever been close to a person who took his/her life? What was that experience like for you?

Death Penalty. The death penalty, sometimes called capital punishment, remains a controversial issue in our society and Church today. Most Americans, including the majority of practicing Catholics in the U.S., are in favor of retaining capital punishment for criminals who kill innocent persons. While admitting the state’s right to use the death penalty in extreme cases (C 2266), the first edition of the *Catechism* (1992) had been revised to reflect the teaching of Pope John Paul II in the *Gospel of Life*. The encyclical does not state that capital punishment itself is unacceptable. However, it is seen as an extreme measure that should not be taken except “in cases of absolute necessity.” This would be the case when it is impossible to defend society without putting the prisoner to death, the Pope explains. But these cases, he notes, “are very rare if not practically nonexistent” (C 2267).

In 1999, the U.S. Bishops issued a Good Friday statement on the death penalty, part of which states: “Increasing reliance on the death penalty diminishes all of us and is a sign of growing disrespect for human life. We cannot overcome crime by simply executing criminals, nor can we restore the lives of the innocent by ending the lives of those convicted of their murders. The death penalty offers the tragic illusion that we can defend life by taking life. Through education, through advocacy, and through prayer and contemplation on

the life of Jesus, we must commit ourselves to a persistent and principled witness against the death penalty, against a culture of death, and for the Gospel of Life.”

In Ezekiel 18:23, God, speaking through the prophet, says he desires not the death of the sinner, but that the sinner repents and lives.

Pause: What are your thoughts on capital punishment? Why are so many church going Christians in favor of it?

Stem-cell research (USC p.392). When discussing the issue of stem-cell research, it is important to make a distinction between stem-cell research associated with human embryos and stem-cell research obtained from adult tissue. In a 2005 statement on the moral issue of stem-cell research, Archbishop Favarola of Miami writes: *Most stem-cell research today involves cells obtained from adult tissue, umbilical cord blood and other sources that pose no ethical dilemma since they do not entail the killing of human beings. Adult stem-cell research has already yielded actual treatments for conditions such as Parkinson’s disease, spinal cord injury, sickle cell anemia, heart damage and corneal damage. Bone-marrow transplants to cure leukemia are an example of the successful results already achieved with adult stem cells.*

In stark contrast, embryonic stem cells are harvested by a procedure that destroys live human embryos. Experiments have shown that, even though they are able to make virtually any kind of cell, embryonic stem cells are extremely unstable, readily cause uncontrolled tumors and have yet to lead to any beneficial application in any human patients.

This experimentation with embryonic stem cells is what the Church opposes, because it entails the direct destruction of innocent human life. That is a moral evil that cannot be brushed aside even when the laudable goal of alleviating the suffering of others is invoked.

The reasoning that these embryos are ‘going to die anyway’ is also absurd. We will all die anyway. That does not give others the right to kill us. In opposing embryonic stem-cell research, the Church is not choosing the lives of embryos over suffering patients. We are called to respect them both. In other words, we must help those who are suffering—and the Church witnesses to this in many ways—but we may not use a good end to justify an evil means.

The choice is not between science and ethics, but between science that is ethically responsible and science that is not. History is rife with examples of

failures to properly channel research and the terrible, broad social repercussions that follow.

Similarly, *cloning*, whether for reproductive or therapeutic uses, is immoral on many levels, not the least of which is because it too involves the destruction of human embryos.

Immoral medical procedures. Procedures like bodily mutilation, amputation, and sterilization are immoral unless they are done to benefit a person medically. (An excellent book on all these issues is *Life Issues, Medical Choices, Questions and Answers for Catholics* by Janet Smith and Christopher Kaczor.)

War. The Church is both idealistic and realistic when it comes to the issue of war. The *Catechism* begins its treatment of war by emphasizing the obligation of governments and individuals to work for peace. “Because of the evils and injustices that accompany all war, the Church insistently urges everyone to prayer and to take action so that the divine goodness may free us from the ancient bondage of war” (C 2307).

But recognizing the sinfulness of humanity, the Church knows that sometimes a country may need to go to war in its own self-defense as a last resort. The *Catechism* outlines strict conditions for what is often called a “just war” (C 2309). At one and the same time, the following conditions must be present:

- *The damage inflicted by the aggressor on the nation or the community of nations must be lasting, grave and certain.*
- *All other means of putting an end to it must have been shown to be impractical or ineffective.*
- *There must be serious prospects of success.*
- *The use of arms must not produce evils and disorders graver than the evil to be eliminated. The power of modern means of destruction weighs very heavily in evaluating this condition.”*

War may never be undertaken from a spirit of vengeance, but rather from motives of self-defense and of establishing justice and right order. The government has the right and duty to enlist citizens in defense of the nation. Special provisions should be made for those who refuse to bear arms for reasons of conscience. These men and women should serve the country in some other way” (USC p.396).

Just because a war has regrettably broken out does not mean that “all is fair in love and war.” The Church condemns the targeting of civilian population by military forces. It also condemns kidnapping, hostage-

taking and terrorism as gravely wrong. “Non-combatants, wounded soldiers, and prisoners must be respected and treated humanely. Actions deliberately contrary to the law of nations and to its universal principles are crimes, as are the orders that command such actions. Blind obedience does not suffice to excuse those who carry them out... One is morally bound to resist orders that command genocide” (C 2313).

The arms race. “The *arms race* does not ensure peace. Far from eliminating the causes of war, it risks aggravating them. Spending enormous sums of money to produce ever new types of weapons impedes efforts to aid needy populations; it thwarts the development of peoples” (C 2315).

Pause: What can government leaders do to diminish the need for war as a way to resolve conflicts? How do you feel about countries involved in the arms race?

Scandal is “an attitude or behavior which leads another to do evil” (C 2284). Scandal is a especially serious sin when brought upon by those in authority, e.g., parents, teachers or clergy, who are supposed to teach and give good example. Jesus issued one of his harshest condemnations against those who bring scandal. *“If any of you put a stumbling block before one of these little ones who believe in me, it would be better for you if a great millstone were fastened around your neck and you were drowned in the depths of the sea”* (Mt 18:6).

Domestic violence. Respect for life is also disregarded when domestic violence occurs. Research shows that people are more likely to be physically assaulted, beaten or even killed by a family member in their own home than any place else or by anyone else. All forms of domestic violence are a grave sin against the fifth commandment.

Concluding remarks

The fifth commandment calls us to respect the life of all persons, born and unborn. It calls us to promote a culture of life in our society. The truly pro-life person is going to be concerned about any attack on any life. Fr. Frank Pavone, founder of *Priests for Life*, writes: *While no one person or group can be expected to be actively involved in all life issues, no one person or group is free to be unconcerned about any attack on the dignity of human life, nor are we free to ignore the interdependence of all the efforts on behalf of human*

life. There are numerous activities being carried out in defense of human dignity. While there may not be room for all of them in our schedule, there must be room for all of them in our heart.

Pause: Domestic violence is a huge issue in our society today. What causes people to be emotionally or physically abusive? What can be done to diminish this problem in our society?

Suggested actions

Choose one of the life issues mentioned above and become actively involved in it. Pray often for “life warriors” who are daily seeking to protect the unborn and overturn the Roe v. Wade decision, as well as prevent laws that permit euthanasia and stem-cell research of human embryos. Pray also for people who work to end capital punishment and those engaged in promoting peace between nations at war.

RESPECTLIFE PRAYER

*Loving God, Creator of all,
we recognize that life is a gift from you.*

*Open our hearts to your Holy Spirit
and renew in us a deep respect for all persons:
the family, the unborn, the young, the adult,
the sick, the disabled, the abused, the imprisoned,
the aged, the dying, the homeless, the unemployed,
and the oppressed in any way.*

*Bless all of us and instill in us a deep
love for your gift of life.*

*Through the intercession of Mary, Mother and
Virgin, may all our words and actions foster
reverence for human life.*

*May we be true witnesses to the truth that all life is
precious and has sublime dignity.
Lead our nation and our world to this understanding
so that we may be a people dedicated to the protection
of all your sons and daughters.*

*We ask this through your Son, Jesus Christ, the Word
Who became flesh and lived among us.*

Amen.

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SIXTH AND NINTH COMMANDMENTS (RCIA)

SEXUAL MORALITY

(C 2331-2400, 2514-2533, USC Chaps. 30 & 33)

Note to small groups: This lesson is eight pages long and is divided into three parts. It may take you two sessions to cover all the material.

Online course-takers: This lesson has six sets of questions spread throughout.

Sixth Commandment (C 2331-2400, USC Ch 30)

“You shall not commit adultery.”

Ninth Commandment (C 2514-2533, USC Ch 33)

“You shall not covet your neighbor’s wife.”

This lesson is divided into three parts:

- Part One: Introduction to Human Sexuality
- Part Two: Chastity
- Part Three: Family Planning

Part One: INTRODUCTION TO HUMAN SEXUALITY

The sixth and ninth commandments deal with the gift of our sexuality and how we are to use it in accordance with God’s plan.

The *Catechism* states: *“Sexuality affects all aspects of the human person in the unity of his body and soul. It especially concerns affectivity, the capacity to love and to procreate, and in a more general way the aptitude for forming bonds of communion with others”* (C 2332).

From the above statement, we can say that our sexuality touches every aspect of our being— physical, emotional, mental, social and spiritual. Our sexuality is the energy in us that makes us attractive and attracts us to other men and women. Sexually alive people are those in touch with their bodies and with their feelings, are able to relate to other men and women in healthy ways, and have a yearning to connect with the transcendent or spiritual dimension of life.

Three Characteristics of Human Sexuality

Gender dimension. Male and female he created them,” so writes the author of the Book of Genesis. The gender dimension of our sexuality has to do with our “maleness” and “femaleness” as persons,

and how men and women interact with each other and approach life.

Experiencing and enjoying male and female relationships and friendships are key ways for us to become the person that God created us to be. In the book of Genesis, God tells us that “it is not good for us to be alone.” This does not mean that all of us should be married. After all, Jesus was not married, but he did experience and enjoy both male and female relationships.

The challenge for men and women (in the family, in Church and in the work place) is to see each other as *partners* and *companions* in the journey of life. When God created men and women, he did not create one gender to dominate the other. Rather, God created men and women to complement each other. To the extent that men and women succeed in being partners and companions in the journey of life, they will reflect to the world a true image of God.

Affective dimension. This dimension of our sexuality refers to our capacity as human persons to be loving, compassionate, vulnerable, trusting and responsive in our interpersonal relationships with persons of the same and opposite sex. To the extent that the affective dimension of our sexuality is developed, we have the capacity for emotionally intimate relationships.

Genital dimension. This refers to the capacity of men and women to have genital or sexual intercourse. True genital expression can have a physical, pleasurable, relational, procreative and spiritual dimension to it. The “playboy culture” recognizes or emphasizes only the physical and fun dimension of sex.

Having looked at the above three characteristics of human sexuality, we can say that persons committed to a life of celibacy can enjoy a lot of intimacy in their lives if they have developed their capacity for close and loving relationships. On the other hand, others may experience a lot of genital intimacy but very little emotional intimacy because they have failed to develop the affective dimension of their sexuality.

Impact of Positive and Negative Experiences on our Sexual Formation

If we were raised in an environment in which we received positive and wholesome messages regarding our sexuality, our bodies, and our male and female relationships, we are indeed very blessed. We are also blessed if during our teenage years, sexuality issues were openly discussed and talked about, and if we had mature adults in our lives to help us to negotiate the challenges of growing through our adolescent years.

On the other hand, if we grew up in an environment in which there was a “great silence” around sexuality issues, or in which sex was always spoken about with overtones of warning and danger, or if we were told by parents or church teachers that all sexual feelings were wrong and sinful, we would most likely have picked up lots of negative messages about sex and sexuality. Worse still, if the key relationships in our childhood formation were dysfunctional or abusive, we are, most likely, deeply wounded in this important area of our lives.

Such woundedness would have made it very difficult for us to feel positive about our bodies and sexuality. It would also have wounded our capacity to enter into healthy relationships with other men and women. Furthermore, if we were raised in a home or church environment in which we were told that all sexual thoughts and feelings were sinful and that the *worst* sins were the sins against the sixth and ninth commandments, our capacity to relate to a loving God would also have been negatively impacted. As a result of negative experiences and messages in childhood, many of us may have grown into adulthood with a certain amount of confusion, guilt, shame and awkwardness in the area of our sexuality.

Pause: How would you rate the formation you received at home and at church on sexuality issues? How could it have been more helpful? When it comes to relationships, what are some things men can learn from women, and vice versa?

Women: What is one thing you would want men to remember when relating to women?

Men: What is one thing you would want women to remember when relating to men?

Part Two: CHASTITY

The *Catechism* (2337) defines chastity as “*the successful integration of sexuality within the person and thus the inner unity of man in his bodily and spiritual being.*” The virtue of chastity helps us to integrate our sexuality with our whole being—body, mind and spirit. It helps us to celebrate and appreciate our God-given gift of sexuality and to relate to other men and women in a caring and respectful way, and helps us to avoid all forms of manipulative and exploitative relationships.

Developing a Pure Heart (C 2517-2527, USC p. 441)

The *Catechism’s* teaching on the ninth commandment looks at how we can develop a heart that will help us to be chaste and pure in our relationships with others and self. The sixth beatitude says: “*Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God*” (Mt. 5:8). According to the *Catechism*, the “pure in heart” are those who have attuned their intellect and will to the demands of God’s holiness in three areas: charity, chastity and the love of truth and orthodoxy of faith (C 2518).

The heart is the scriptural term for the very center of the soul, as the physical heart is the center and lifeblood of the body. “The heart is the seat of moral personality” (C 2517). Out of the heart flows evil thoughts such as murder, adultery and fornication, as well as noble thoughts such as charity, mercy, justice and purity (Mt 15:9).

Obstacles and Helpful Ways to Living a Chaste Life

Dr. William Kraft, Ph.D., who has degrees in Spirituality and Psychology, outlines in his book *Whole and Holy Sexuality*, healthy and unhealthy ways to deal with sexual thoughts and feelings. Three of the unhealthy ways mentioned by Kraft are:

Repression. Through this negative defense mechanism, a person seeks to deny and/or repress sexual thoughts and feelings.

Insulation and isolation. Some people cope with sexual feelings and the fear of genital involvement by withdrawing into themselves, by becoming very detached and emotionally uninvolved, and by living “from the neck up.”

Acting out. The other extreme to the above disorders is a promiscuous lifestyle whereby a person becomes involved periodically or regularly in “one-

night stands,” short-term relationships, compulsive masturbation and pornography. Individuals who constantly repress all genital feelings and desires may sometimes go on an acting-out spree of these sexual behaviors. Dr. Kraft notes that many of us learn only two ways of dealing with sexual feelings and desires, namely, repression and gratification.

Healthy Ways to Integrate Sexual Thoughts and Feelings into our Lives

Suppression is acknowledging sexual thoughts and feelings but not paying attention to them or acting on them. Whereas repression is a denial of our sexuality, suppression involves acknowledgment and control of our sexuality.

Sublimation is rechanneling or investing our energy into an activity that is in harmony with our values. This could mean some physical activity like exercise or gardening or some intellectual activity such as reading.

Anticipation is planning activities or strategies to prepare oneself when vulnerable times are foreseen as, for instance, when a woman knows that at certain times during her monthly cycle, she may feel lonely or in need of more affection, affirmation and understanding. The same is true when one anticipates a big event, which could be especially challenging, such as a birthday, anniversary, or even the different seasons of the year. It is not unlike the person dealing with the loss of a loved one or with some occurrence that was totally unexpected. One good way to cope with difficult and challenging times is by making the necessary plans in advance.

Friends. Having one or more friends with whom we can openly and honestly share our struggles with our sexuality or other areas of our lives is surely one of life’s great blessings. Being genuinely listened to increases our sense of well-being, decreases stress, and helps us to feel freer and more hopeful.

Discipline. Every good athlete knows the importance of discipline in sports. Likewise, anyone who has tried to lose weight or give up smoking knows the importance of self-control. In a similar way, anyone who seeks to develop the virtue of chastity requires discipline. Discipline enables us to say “no” to what impedes our growth and to say “yes” to what helps us become a fully alive spiritual and sexual person.

Humor. Life can become so serious and rigid that we lose our capacity to enjoy the journey. William

Kraft writes: ‘Humor brings life into perspective. Zest and hilarity affirm our true place in life. Humor is the springboard to the divine. Moreover, humor heals: it activates processes that promote health’ (ibid p. 97).

Counseling. If we are deeply wounded in our sexuality, we will most likely need a good and understanding counselor to help us deal with past painful experiences and integrate them into our lives.

Prayer. Being able to pray to God openly and honestly about sexuality issues is a wonderful blessing. Unfortunately, many people wounded in this area are also wounded in their relationship with God, which makes it hard for them to see God as the One who can bring healing to this area of their lives. If this is our situation, we will need the help of a good spiritual director. For Catholics, regular use of the sacrament of Reconciliation can also be helpful.

The more we develop the discipline of keeping our eyes on Jesus, the more purified our hearts will be, and gradually will we be able to look at and relate to others and ourselves in a respectful and loving way. Growing in chastity and purity of heart is a lifelong task.

As we journey through life, we need to learn the fine art of balancing *gentleness* with *firmness*. We need to be gentle with ourselves when we fall or go astray. At the same time, we need to be firm with ourselves realizing that growth does not happen without tough choices, self-denial and daily struggles to stay on the straight and narrow.

Pause: The above section mentions eight ways that can help us to live chaste lives. Which of them speak to you most? Which ones are most lacking in today’s culture? What is one message you would like to offer young people struggling to become healthy sexual human beings?

Sins against Chastity (C 2351, USC p. 406)

Even though we live in a sex-saturated society, hardly anyone spends time *thinking* about the *meaning* and *purpose* of sex. How often do we ask: What did *God* have in mind when he implanted a sexual faculty in the human person?

Catholic Tradition would respond that God had a twofold purpose, namely, the continuation of the human race (the *procreative dimension* of sex) and the strengthening of the love bond between the man and the woman, the husband and the wife, so that

they could raise their child/children in a loving environment (the *unitive dimension*). We might add that in the language of love, genital sex is a way for two people to say: “I give myself totally to you. I am totally committed to our relationship and if God blesses us with a child, I will be here to love and raise that child with you.” The Church believes that the best context for that kind of relationship is marriage.

As much as they might like to do so, no couple can rewrite the meaning of sexual intercourse. It is tied to *committed love* and to a love that creates new *life*. To let on that sexual intercourse is something else is to separate it from the design of our Creator. When our Church speaks about “openness to new life,” it is, of course, only speaking about couples for whom this is a biological possibility. Now that we are clear about the Creator’s design for sex, we can look at some of the ways that people can fail to live out God’s purpose.

Recreational or casual sex. Recreational or casual sex often occurs between people who want the *pleasure* that comes with genital sex but don’t want the *responsibility* of an intimate relationship which of its very nature demands much self-giving and sacrifice. In her book *The Thrill of the Chaste*, Dawn Eden (who spent many years involved in recreational sex) writes: “If you hunger for intimacy but fear rejection, it is much easier to let a man touch your body than to let him touch your heart” (p. 83).

Recreational or casual sex is morally wrong not only because it trivializes God’s gift but also because it completely separates sex from its proper context, namely, that of love and marriage, and uses the other person as a means of sexual gratification. The fun and pleasure dimension of recreational sex ends quickly when a pregnancy occurs or when sexual disease is contracted.

Dating couples. Many dating couples engage in premarital sex as a way to express their love and to see if they are sexually compatible. Others move in together because they believe it is a smart way to prepare for marriage. What can be said about these two modern-day aspects of dating?

It is normal for dating couples who are growing in their love for each other to want to express their love in a physical way. But when dating couples become sexually active with each other, they are usually allowing their bodies to say much more than their hearts are ready to give.

For a Christian couple, the dating period is a time to discern if God is calling them to the sacred vocation of marriage. It is a time to see if a particular person would make a lifelong partner. It is a time to see what qualities, gifts, values and goals a person would bring to the marriage table. It is a time to see how mature and good-hearted that person is, how he/she handles pressure and difficult situations, how well he/she communicates and deals with conflict.

However wonderful sex might be during this period of the relationship, it might also get in the way of two people making a good decision about their readiness for marriage. One woman who had lived with her fiancé during the dating period decided to move out. She said: “I had come to the point that my judgment of the relationship was based on sex. When sex was on and good, I judged the relationship to be good and vice versa. So I moved out and stopped having sex to see how the relationship would be without the sex.” Often the sexual dimension of a dating relationship makes it very difficult for a couple to break up even though there are very good reasons for doing so.

Cohabitation. As stated above, many couples today think that cohabitation is a good way to prepare for marriage. But all the research shows that couples who cohabit prior to marriage have a much higher rate of divorce than couples who choose to go the traditional route. Perhaps the old saying is correct; “Easy to move in, easy to move out.” In addition, cohabitation can be a source of scandal to younger siblings and to friends. It also weakens the respect that we, as a Christian community, should have for the sacred institution of marriage.

The gospel ideal of saving sex for marriage is not an easy one and will make little or no sense to couples who do not have a personal relationship with Christ and are not serious about following his gospel message in this area.

Living the Church’s message of “saving sex for marriage” is very contrary to the world message of “safe sex.” But as we ponder the consequences of the world’s way—AIDS, sexually transmitted diseases, increase in abortions, unwed pregnancies, and divorce—we begin to see the wisdom of the Church’s message in this area of Christian life.

Pause: Cohabitation is regarded by most young people today as a good way to prepare for marriage. What do you think? How do you think parents should respond when their young adult tells them that he/she has moved in with his/her girlfriend/boyfriend?

Extramarital sex. Extramarital sex, or sex outside of marriage, is wrong because it is a violation of the marriage covenant. It is a grave sin against the sixth commandment which says: “Thou shalt not commit adultery.” Within marriage, couples can also be unchaste without becoming involved with a third person. They could have loveless sex or use sex as a weapon to either punish or get what they want. William Kraft writes: “Chaste people, married or unmarried, are respectful and loving people. They abstain from exploitative, manipulative, and deceptive behavior. They do not regard sexuality as something to use or as simply a source of pleasure. Rather, they see and celebrate in chastity the mystery—the spirit—of sex” (ibid p. 58).

Lust. The *Catechism* states that “lust is disordered desire for...sexual pleasure” (C 2351). In his book *Catholic Christianity*, Peter Kreeft writes: “Lust does not mean sexual pleasure as such, nor the delight in it, nor the desire for it in its right context. Contrary to what the world thinks, the Church teaches that sexual pleasure is good, not evil. For God created sex and its pleasure... No spontaneous thoughts and feelings can be sins until they are willed or consented to by the will. Thoughts and feelings of sexual arousal are not lust: “lust is *willing* the thoughts and feelings just for the pleasure, without the purposes of the marriage union” (pp 246-247).

Masturbation (C 2352). Masturbation involves the intentional stimulation of the genital organs for purposes of solitary pleasure. Concerning this activity, William Kraft writes: “Masturbation is particularly seductive because it is an easy and accessible way to reduce tension and to explore genital feelings and fantasies without interpersonal vulnerability, responsibility, and accountability. It seems we have a license to masturbate almost whenever we feel like it. We need not worry about other people or social consequences; it can be kept to oneself” (ibid p. 104).

The Church teaches that masturbation is morally wrong because God intended sexual activity to be relational and within the context of marriage. Furthermore, masturbation separates sex from its unitive and procreative dimensions. But the *Catechism* also

wisely teaches that certain factors can lessen or even erase one’s guilt or moral blameworthiness in the case of masturbation. These include immaturity, anxiety, force of an acquired habit, and other social or psychological factors like compulsion (C 2352).

Pornography. The *Catechism* states that “pornography consists in removing real or simulated sexual acts from the intimacy of the partners, in order to display them deliberately to third parties” (C 2354). Today, pornography which is now more accessible through the internet, also includes the “sexploitation” of children. It is a multi-billion dollar industry in which huge numbers of adults, especially men, as well as teenagers, are addicted to it.

Writing on this issue in their Pastoral Letter *Love is for Life*, the Irish bishops state: “Never in pornographic material, and all too rarely in modern advertising, are women represented as persons to whom men might look for intelligent conversation or interesting ideas or equal companionship. For the pornographer, and all too often for the advertiser, women are assumed to be of interest to males only as desirable sexual bodies, to be seized and possessed for male sexual pleasure. Pornography is morally wrong because it places sex in a context of lovelessness, of exploitation, of taking without giving, of pleasure without commitment” (p. 35).

Homosexuality (C 2357-2359, USC p. 407). Homosexuality is the term used to refer to men and women who have an exclusive, enduring and predominant sexual attraction towards persons of the same sex.

In its three paragraphs on homosexuality, the *Catechism* makes the following five points:

- The genesis of same-sex attraction remains largely unexplained.
- Persons with same-sex attraction do not choose their condition or sexual orientation.
- Persons with same-sex attraction must be accepted with respect, compassion and sensitivity. Any form of unjust discrimination towards persons with same-sex attraction is morally wrong and should be condemned.
- Sexual relations between homosexual persons is morally wrong. Why? Catholic newspaper columnist and author, Amy Wellborn, writes: “To put it rather bluntly, the parts (i.e., our genital parts) were made to fit and fit for a purpose...namely, the creation of a family in the physical and spiritual sense. The purpose of genital sex is to create

communion between a man and a woman (more specifically between a husband and a wife) and to procreate new life. Homosexual acts can never fulfill the twofold design of the Creator for genital sex.” In stating that homosexual acts are morally wrong, we are not saying that homosexual desires are morally wrong, unless of course, we deliberately will them.

- ”Homosexual persons are called to chastity” (C 2359). Just as single persons with a heterosexual orientation are called to live a chaste life, so are persons with a homosexual orientation. Of course, a major difference is that marriage is always an option for the single person with a heterosexual orientation. Persons with same-sex attraction can and should cultivate warm, loving and caring friendships with persons of the same and opposite sex. Such friendships are usually tremendously life-giving.

(*Courage* is a Catholic organization that ministers to persons with same-sex attraction.)

Pause: Pornography is a multi-billion dollar industry that leads many teens and adults, especially men, to become sex addicts. What should or can be done about this issue? Are there benefits to children being raised by opposite sex parents?

Part Three: FAMILY PLANNING (C 2366-2372, USC p. 409)

Co-creating a child with God is surely one of the great joys of married life. On the other hand, working with God to determine the number of children a couple should have can be a big challenge. Regarding this issue, three points can be made.

- The Church encourages couples to engage in family planning or responsible parenthood. In considering how many children to have and when to have them, a husband and wife, according to a Vatican II document, “will thoughtfully take into account both their own welfare and that of their children, those already and those who may be foreseen” (*Gaudium et Spes* 50). Some couples may decide to have many children. Other couples may decide on a smaller number of children for reasons of health, temperament, energy or finances. Either way, the Church encourages parents to be prayerful and responsible when it comes to this decision.

- The Church teaches that parents should only engage in *natural forms* of birth control. Hence, all unnatural or artificial forms of birth control are contrary to natural law and not morally permissible. These include the use of condoms, diaphragms, the pill, and sterilization.

The Church sees the use of unnatural forms of birth control as separating the procreative dimension of sexual intercourse from its unitive dimension (the aspect that nourishes the love of husband and wife). The Church believes that when couples are using natural methods of family planning (e.g., the *Billings Natural Family Method*), they are using the means God and nature have given them.

- On hearing the Church say that contraception is wrong because it interferes with nature, some people ask: “What is the difference between using eyeglasses or corrective surgery and contraception? All three interfere with nature.” To this objection, the Church responds: “This line of reasoning is false because the intervention of a lens or a medical surgeon is intended to *restore* a sick body or organ to what nature intended it to be, whereas, the use of contraception is intended to *prevent* a healthy body from operating as it was intended to by God.”

While the Church’s teaching on this issue may seem totally out of date, the following are worth considering:

- All Christian denominations embraced the Church’s traditional teaching until 1930.
- Some Christians, including those who are non-churchgoing, are drawn to *Natural Family Planning* because it is more in tune with nature and because they want to avoid the negative consequences of using artificial methods of family planning.
- There is a very low rate of divorce (about 3%) amongst couples who practice natural family planning methods of birth control. Many couples have found that natural family planning strengthens their relationship. Of course, it should also be stated that there are equally dedicated Catholic couples who have experienced natural family planning as hurtful to their relationship. This is especially true when one spouse is resistant to using natural family planning methods of birth control.

Sadly, all too many Catholics have seriously disregarded the Church’s teaching on this issue. All too many have not explored the *Billings Natural*

Planning method of birth control. For more information on this issue, contact their website at www.billingsnaturalfamilyplanning.org.

Negative Consequences of a Contraceptive Mentality

When Pope Paul VI issued *Humanae Vitae* (*On Human Life*) in 1968, he warned of “grave consequences” that would follow if the use of contraceptives became widespread. Now forty+ years later, we can look back and see if the Pope might have had an eye into the future.

Hardly anyone would deny that there has been a widespread decline in sexual morality in the past forty years. All we have to do is look at the increase in the number of divorces, abortions, out-of-wedlock pregnancies and sexually-related diseases.

Of course, it would be wrong to say that contraception is the only cause of this decline, but it would also be a grave error to think that the widespread use of contraception has nothing to do with the decline in sexual morality. The easy availability of contraceptives has led teenagers and adults to believe that they can engage in non-marital sex “responsibly.” Popular wisdom supposes that the easy availability of contraceptives would protect teenagers and young adults from becoming pregnant which, in turn, would decrease the number of abortions. The fact is that easy access to contraceptives has done the exact opposite. As the number and proportion of teenage family planning clinics increase, so do the number of teenage pregnancies and abortions.

Writing on the connection between the widespread use of contraceptives, abortion and non-marital sex, Janet Smith, Professor of Ethics at Sacred Heart Major Seminary in Detroit, states: *Most abortions are the result of unwanted pregnancies; most unwanted pregnancies are the result of sexual relationships outside marriage; and most sexual relationships outside of marriage are facilitated by the availability of contraception. To turn the “progression” around: contraception leads to an increase in non-marital sex; an increase in non-marital sex leads to more unwanted pregnancies; more unwanted pregnancies lead to more abortions. Not many women intend to use abortion as a “back-up” to failed contraception, but it is often undeniably used for just that purpose* (The Catholic World Report, July 1993).

Pause: Why do so few couples today embrace the Church’s teaching on natural family planning? Should parishes be doing more to promote natural family planning?

In Vitro Birth Methods (C 2375-2379, USC p. 409)

Some couples have physical problems that prevent normal conception or childbirth, and yet they deeply desire to have a child together. The question arises: does the desire for children have any limits? Do parents have a right to have a child in any way possible? This question has become very real since biomedical research has discovered new ways of conceiving outside the womb. This fast-changing technology bypasses the normal conception process by taking a woman’s egg and a man’s sperm and joining them together in a laboratory dish. Sometimes the egg and sperm belong to a married couple, sometimes not. Other couples hire or use a donor womb or surrogate mother to carry and bring about a new life. What does the Church have to say about all this?

- The Church is very sympathetic towards couples who are trying to conceive but are unable to do so. For their sake, it is very important that biomedical research continue to find ways to reduce human infertility and to discover new ways to treat couples who are unable to conceive. Such research is encouraged by the Church. After all, the father of genetics, George Mendel, was a Catholic priest.
- When it comes to the procreation, a basic Catholic principle is that children are a *gift* from God; they are not *owed* to the couple. The couple has no right to a child; the child is the one who possesses genuine rights: the right “to be the fruit of the specific act of the conjugal love of his/her parents,” and the right “to be respected as a person from the moment of his/her conception.” So, if we apply this principle to our practice of medicine, what can we do to help infertile couples? We are encouraged to support methods that *assist* the marital act to achieve conception, not methods that *replace* the marital act.
- Addressing the use of reproductive technology to help couples to have a child, Thomas Wenski, former Bishop of Orlando, writes: “Science, if it is to truly serve humanity, cannot separate itself from the demands of ethics: the ends do not justify the means. The process of *in vitro* fertilization very frequently involves the deliberate destruction of embryos. Some 80 percent of embryos produced artificially are sacrificed in efforts to secure successful implantation. Each embryo, however, is an individual human being and not just simply a mass of cells to be used, selected or discarded. Pope John Paul II observed: “The various techniques of

artificial reproduction, which would seem to be at the service of life and which are frequently used with this intention, actually open the door to new threats against life” (“*Evangelium Vitae*,” 14; Florida Catholic, March 13-26, 2009).

- A 2008 Vatican Instruction, *Dignitas Personae* (Dignity of the Person), states: “The desire to have a child cannot justify the “production” of offspring; just as the desire not to have a child cannot justify the abandonment or destruction of a child once he or she has been conceived” (16). Again, we recall that just because something can be done does not mean that it should be done. “The origin of human life has its authentic context in marriage and in the family, where it is generated through an act which expresses the reciprocal love between a man and a woman...” (DP).
- What about homologous artificial insemination and fertilization (where the sperm and ovum of a husband and wife are combined outside the womb)? While the Church finds this procedure to be less objectionable than the situation which involves a third party, it still finds it to be morally unacceptable because the procreative dimension is separated from intercourse. In other words, the existence of the child is entrusted to science; it is not the result of the gift of husband and wife to each other.

Concluding Remarks

This article places before the reader the Church’s teaching on many issues that our society rejects and that many good Christians struggle with: premarital sex, cohabitation, same-sex unions, artificial contraception and *in vitro* fertilization.

As we struggle with some of these issues, it may be helpful to remember that many of Jesus’ teachings are also hard to embrace, e.g., forgiving life’s hurts not just seven times but seventy times seven times, dealing with the cross whereby bad things happen to good people, or trying to live a simple life in a materialistic society. The truth is that the Gospel of Jesus is no easy street religion. Rather, it is a call to radical discipleship, a call that demands much generosity of us and a call that demands tremendous cooperation with God’s grace.

Will we always respond perfectly to all of the above issues? Of course not, and our Church realizes that very well. That is the reason we have confessionals in every church. There we can humbly confess our failures and weaknesses, and receive the grace to

start all over again. When it comes to the radical call of Jesus’ message, we can be sure that the devil wants to discourage us or even cause us to quit trying. But God is with us every step of the way. He is there to show us his mercy every time we fall down. He is with us to encourage us to keep trying when we feel weak and discouraged, and when we fall down. As we struggle with any of the issues in this article, we might consider speaking with an understanding priest who can accompany us in our struggles and pray with us as well.

Pause: How do you feel about couples using *in vitro* methods to conceive a child?

Meditation

We are both sexual and spiritual creatures; one without the other makes us less than God intends us to be. God calls us to use our minds and wills to maintain and nourish our sexual selves in congruence with authentic spiritual values. How we do this will be highly dependent on our vocational life-style—married, single, or vowed celibate—as well as individual and environmental factors. Whatever our situation, we are foolish to pursue less than holistic sexual lives.

The saving grace in this adventure is that we are in it together. We are not isolated individuals alone in our efforts; rather, we are integral members of the same community of humankind. The more you and I grow in a healthy sexuality, the more we will positively impact and help each other.

It is eminently wise to acknowledge a Power that is greater than us and yet intimately related to us—a God who will help us on the journey. To deny God, however we understand God, is to reject a power that is the source of and means to healthy and holy sexual/spiritual living. To turn over our minds and wills to the care of God is a wise, practical decision. It will give us the vision and strength to become whole and holy mavericks who celebrate and live the unity of sex-and-spirit.

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SEVENTH AND TENTH COMMANDMENTS (RCIA)

A FAITH THAT DOES JUSTICE
(C 2401-2463, 2534-2557, USC Ch 31 & 34)

In this lesson we will look at:

- Common good and private property
- Seven principles of Catholic social teaching
- Forms of stealing
- Greed and envy

Seventh Commandment (C 2401-2463, USC Ch 31)
“*You shall not steal.*”

The *Catechism* deals with the seventh commandment as it pertains to the issue of stealing as well as the broader issue of the Church’s social teaching. We will first look at some of the broader issues and then examine how we can violate this commandment.

Common Good and Private Property

The *Catechism* seeks to strike a balance between our call to be concerned about the common good of all God’s people and our right to own and enjoy private property (C 2402-2406).

The *Catechism* reminds us that in the beginning, God created the earth and its resources for the enjoyment of all people. “*The goods of the earth are destined [intended] for the whole human race*”(C 2402). At the same time, people have a natural right to own property to help them take care of their own basic needs and the needs of those placed in their care.

But the right to private property is not an absolute one. Private property owners have a responsibility to keep the needs of the common good in mind as they develop, manage and use their goods. In reality none of us own anything. God is the sole owner. We who are blessed with private property are merely stewards or caretakers of God’s blessings (C 2402). It will always be a gross irresponsibility and serious sin for owners of private property to live in utter luxury while millions of our brothers and sisters are starving to death or lack the most basic of human needs. In an ideal world, the common good fosters private property, and private property fosters the common good.

Pause: In today’s society, many wealthy people have a total disregard for the common good. How and why does this happen? Can you give examples of people who have a deep concern for the common good?

Catholic Social Teaching

Modern Catholic social teaching is generally thought to have begun with the 1891 papal encyclical *Rerum Novarum* (Conditions of Workers) by Pope Leo XIII. In that letter, the Pope addressed squarely the horrendous conditions of workers in what had become industrialized and urbanized Europe. Many workers, including children, worked *long hours* in sometimes *horrific conditions* for *paltry wages*. In addition, their *housing* and *living conditions* in the large industrial cities of Europe were appalling.

What was new about Leo’s letter was that he not only advocated *works of mercy* but also *justice*. He demanded a change in the social structures and institutions of the day that were the causes of poverty. He called for just and decent wages, for safe working conditions, and for laws that would protect adults and children from abuse in the workplace. Leo insisted that the God-given dignity of all workers throughout the world must be respected.

Since Leo’s letter, his successors have addressed other issues like hunger, poverty, prejudice, discrimination, war and peace. Over the past one hundred years, the Church has developed an impressive body of social teaching, sometimes called the Church’s best kept secret.

In 1995, sub-committees of the Catholic Conference of U.S. Bishops came together to summarize our Church’s body of social teaching. After much work, the committees distilled the main points of this teaching into *seven themes* (listed below). These key themes or principles of Catholic social teaching give us much food for thought.

1. Life and dignity of the human person. All humans (born and unborn) are sacred, created in the image and likeness of God. People do not lose their dignity because of disability, poverty, age, lack of success, or race. This principle places persons above things being above having. It calls us, individually and as a community, to protect human life at all stages and to advocate on behalf of all whose dignity is mistreated.

2. Call to family, community, and participation. We are reminded that we are not only sacred but also social persons. How we organize our society—in economics, politics, in law and policy—directly impacts the dignity of the human person and his/her

capacity to grow in community. St. Paul tells us: “We are one body, when one suffers, we all suffer.” The family, being the heart of society, must especially be protected and strengthened, and not undermined.

3. Rights and responsibilities. Catholic tradition teaches that human dignity can only be protected and a healthy community achieved if human rights are protected and responsibilities are met. Key human rights are the right to life, food, shelter, healthcare, education, and employment. Corresponding to these rights are duties and responsibilities to one another, to our families, and to the larger society. All must work for the common good.

4. Option for the poor and vulnerable. The moral test of any society is how it treats its vulnerable members. While Jesus loved all people, he had a special love and concern for the poor, the oppressed and the sick. So must we his disciples. The poor have the most urgent call on the conscience of a nation. As a nation and individually, we are called upon to look at public policy decisions and our own personal decisions in terms of how they affect the poor.

5. The dignity of work and the rights of workers. The economy must serve people, not the other way around. Work is more than a way to make a living; it is also a way to participate in God’s ongoing creation of the world. Every person has a right to decent and productive work, fair wage and good working conditions, not to mention private property and economic initiative.

6. Solidarity. We are all brothers and sisters in God’s family. We are our brothers’ and sisters’ keepers, wherever they live. We are one family, whatever our nationality, racial, ethnic, economic or ideological differences. Learning to practice the virtue of solidarity means understanding that loving our neighbor” has global dimensions in an interdependent world.

7. Care for creation. The earth and all that is in it belong to God. As stewards and trustees of God’s creation, we are called to protect people and planet. We are not just consumers and users of the earth and its resources; we are called to live our faith in relationship with all of God’s creation.

(If interested in exploring more fully the above Seven Principles of Catholic Social Teaching, read *The Challenge and Spirituality of Catholic Social Teaching* by Marvin Krier Mich.)

Pause: What are your thoughts and feelings on the Seven Themes of Catholic Social Teaching? What is the principle of *Subsidiarity* in the Catholic social justice tradition?

Simply put, Catholic social teaching helps us to understand and put into practice the two great commandments: love of God and love of neighbor. The parable of the Good Samaritan and the ministry of Jesus teach us that our neighbor is everyone in need. Catholic social teaching makes it clear that our love of neighbor can express itself through *works of mercy* (e.g. donating to food pantries) and through *works of justice* (e.g., advocating for legislation that will help the poor). Catholic social teaching is about applying the Gospel message to the social issues of our time.

Capitalism and socialism. The *Catechism* refuses to give an unqualified endorsement to either “hard” capitalism or “hard” socialism (C 2425).

While socialist governments are not necessarily evil, there is a danger in a socialist form of government. The *Catechism* (2423) states: “A system that subordinates the basic rights of individuals and of groups to collective organization of production is contrary to human dignity.”

While the Church does not reject capitalism, “she has refused to accept, in the practice of capitalism, individualism and the absolute primacy of the law of the marketplace over human labor” (C 2425). The *Catechism* points out that the danger in capitalism is that it “makes profit the exclusive norm and ultimate end of economic activity” (ibid.), which is morally unacceptable.

International economics. The *Catechism* (2439) states: *Rich nations* have a grave moral responsibility towards those which are unable to ensure the means of their development by themselves or have been prevented from doing so by tragic historical events. It is a duty in solidarity and charity; it is also an obligation in justice if the prosperity of the rich nations has come from resources that have not been paid for fairly.” In the sixth century, Pope Gregory the Great said: “When we attend to the needs of those in want, we give them what is theirs, not ours. More than performing works of mercy; we are paying a debt of justice” (C 2446).

In his book *What Your Money Means*, entrepreneur Frank Hanna writes: “We need to find out what it means that you and I have money, and others do not.

Can it be that God or Providence or Chance merely intends to bestow on me the means to have greater ease and pleasure? Have I been singled out by the universe to take it easy? If so, why? What have I done to deserve to be pampered while others, not far from here, fall asleep hungry, or die destitute in the streets of Bangladesh? Can that be the meaning of my money: that I have a good time while others suffer?" (p. 112)

When we look at the strong emphasis the Church in our time places on social justice, we may wonder why. The answer is simple: we know more today because we live in a global world. We also know more about the structural causes of social injustices, the dynamics of society that often give the rich and the powerful unfair advantage over the hard working poor.

Pause: "When we attend to the needs of those in want, we give them what is theirs, not ours. More than performing works of mercy, we are paying a debt in justice." Comment.

Forms of Stealing

The *Catechism* has a long list of the various ways that we can steal and thereby sin against the seventh commandment, e.g., business fraud, unjust wages, overpricing, tax evasion, poorly done work, forgery of checks and invoices, excessive expenses and waste, damaging private or public property (C 2409). Other forms of stealing are scams, embezzlement, money-laundering, white-collar crime, wasting taxpayer's money. True repentance includes making restitution for stolen goods.

Gambling. Like so many issues in this commandment, the *Catechism* has a two-sided approach. On the one hand, "games of chance...or wagers are not in themselves contrary to justice." On the other hand, excessive gambling is morally unacceptable (C 2413).

Animals. The *Catechism* (2416) states: "Animals are God's creatures...by their mere existence they bless him and give him glory. Thus people owe them kindness." "On the other hand, it is legitimate to use animals for food and clothing...and for medical and scientific experimentation if it remains within reasonable limits...and if it contributes to caring for or saving human lives" (C 2417). The *Catechism* further states that "it is wrong to cause animals to suffer or die needlessly." On the other hand, "it is also wrong to spend money on them that should as a priority go to the relief of human misery" (C 2418).

Tenth Commandment (C 2534-2550)

"*You shall not covet your neighbor's goods.*"

"*Where your treasure is, there also will your heart be*" (Mt 6:21). While the seventh commandment concerns the external acts of stealing, the tenth commandment pertains to the inner attitudes, that of greed and envy, that lead us to steal and act unjustly.

We humans are born with lots of appetites and desires. For example, we eat when we are hungry and drink when we are thirsty. In and of themselves, appetites are good but they can lead to excess and a desire to have what is not ours.

The tenth commandment deals with two appetites, namely, *greed* and *envy* (also called covetousness) which can get us into trouble and keep us from truly enjoying the material things of life that God has blessed us with.

Greed. In the New Testament, Jesus frequently warns his audience about the danger of material riches. In Lk 12:15, Jesus says: "*Watch and be on your guard against avarice of any kind, for a man's life is not made secure by what he owns, even when he has more than he needs.*" Then Jesus goes on to tell the parable of the greedy man who decides to pull down his barns to build bigger ones to store his grain. The rich man thinks he will have years to eat, drink and be merry. Then comes the story punchline when Jesus says: "*Fool, this night your life will be demanded of you... Thus it will be for one who stores up treasure for himself but is not rich in what matters to God*" (Lk 12:16-21).

We might say that Jesus called the rich man a "fool" not because he was rich, but because of his failure to share his wealth. There is an enormous difference between the "greedy rich" and the "generous rich." The latter know that they are merely stewards or managers of their material riches. In sharing their wealth with the poor and for good causes, they store up treasures in heaven for themselves.

Envy. The *Catechism* (2537) states: "Envy is a capital sin. It refers to the sadness at the sight of another's goods and the immoderate desire to acquire them for oneself, even unjustly. When it wishes grave harm to a neighbor it is a mortal sin."

"St. Augustine saw envy as 'the diabolical sin.' From envy are born hatred, detraction, calumny, joy caused by the misfortune of a neighbor, and displeasure caused by his prosperity" (C 2539).

Pause: What causes us to be greedy and envious? What helps you to deal with greedy tendencies?

Suggestions for dealing with greed and envy

Generosity. The best way to curb greedy and covetous tendencies is by developing a generous and giving spirit. Today, many Christians have adopted the biblical practice of tithing 10% or more of their income to their Church family and the poor (see Mal 3:7-10). While not all are able to give the full 10%, all should be *intentional givers*. In other words, the Church and the poor should not just receive our loose change and leftovers. Ideally, giving to one’s Church and to the poor is a line item in every disciple’s budget.

Simple lifestyle. Blessed Teresa of Calcutta once said: “Live simply so that others may simply live.” One of the blessings of an economic recession is that it forces almost everyone to take a good look at how they are spending their money. In a booming economy, it is very easy to misuse our financial blessings and to lose sight of the millions of people who live daily in dire poverty.

In short, the tenth commandment condemns greed and envy, and calls us to be responsible stewards of God’s material blessings.

Pause: What are your thoughts on the biblical concept of stewardship—that God owns everything and that our duty is to be faithful and responsible stewards of his blessings?

Suggested Actions

Spend some time reflecting on the biblical concept of stewardship and on your attitude towards money and material possessions. If you are presently not tithing, consider setting aside a percentage of your monthly income to support the Church and poor.

Meditation

We are all really God’s children. We have been dreamt by God to spend time here on earth, to awaken to the kingdom that is before us and within us, and to love. We are all here to love, to care for, to feed, to teach, and to protect each other.

Dorothy Day, founder of the Catholic Worker, has said that all of our work is a “work of mercy.” That is, mother, father, bus driver, mechanic, secretary,

teacher, sister, priest, nurse, doctor, gardener; by the grace of God, we care for each other and hold each other together in many ways. We are called to give of the gifts we have been given. The only thing we take with us from this life is what we have given away...

Many Americans just do not know how much power they have to respond to the tremendous needs of so many people who suffer so much in so many ways. The problem is that many don’t even know the name of anyone who is desperately poor. They don’t know the name of anyone dying of starvation, working at the garbage dump, or in need of medical care so their child will not die. They have never talked with the lonely in a nursing home or prison. They don’t know the name of a bright child with no access to education. And so they do not have the will or the know-how to connect. Americans do respond generously when they know who suffers and how they suffer. The problem is we do not know...

A good first step is to look for opportunities to meet people who suffer injustice. If we stay in our small communities and never get to meet the oppressed person, we will probably never awaken to the tremendous injustices around us. However, if we have the courage to reach out to the oppressed, we will find that there is tremendous power in the encounter. It can cause a transformation within, leading to compassionate action. It can change the face of the earth...

Most who have journeyed into poor communities are wonderfully surprised to find that they are almost always welcomed with open arms. Missionaries invariably relate that they were not only welcomed with great hospitality, but found that they had much to learn from the people they went to serve. They often say they found great faith, hope, generosity, and humility among the poor. There is a wonderful, powerful conversion and transformation that frequently takes place in the encounter.

(The True Cost of Low Prices – The Violence of Globalization, p. 133-134)

Pause: What spoke to you most in the above meditation?

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EIGHTH COMMANDMENT (RCIA)

WITNESSES TO THE TRUTH
(C 2464-2513, USC Ch. 32)

Eighth Commandment (C 2513-2664, USC Ch 32)

“You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor.”

Jesus said, “If you remain in my Word, you will truly be my disciples, and you will know the truth and the truth will set you free.” (Jn 8:31-32)

In this lesson, we will look at:

- What the eighth commandment calls us to
- God is Truth
- Called to be witnesses to the truth
- Three obstacles to living in the truth
- Sins against the eighth commandment
- The media and truth
- Truth, beauty and sacred art

What the Eighth Commandment Calls Us To

The *Catechism* (2505) states: “Truth or truthfulness is the virtue which consists in showing oneself true in deeds and truthful in words, and guarding against duplicity, dissimulation and, hypocrisy.”

In his book on Catholic Christianity, Peter Kreeft writes: “This commandment is one of the most neglected and most disobeyed of all the commandments. For like the first commandment, it is disobeyed whenever any commandment is disobeyed. Just as all sin is some kind of idolatry (choosing some false god), so all sin is some kind of falsehood, some kind of choice of darkness over light” (p.269).

The eighth commandment calls us to live in the truth that God has revealed to us in Jesus and to communicate truthfully with others. Truthfulness is the virtue or good habit that makes one a person of integrity, one who can be trusted. Trust is the key to strong and healthy relationships and to the common good. The eighth commandment forbids all forms of lying and misrepresentations of the truth.

God is Truth

Just as God is love, we can also say God is truth. In him there is no darkness or falsehood (C 2464). Jesus came to reveal to us the true nature of God which is love and truth. “Truth and love coincide in Christ...in him truth and love are blended. Love without truth would be blind. Truth without love would be like a clanging cymbal” (Pope Benedict XVI). Jesus not only taught God’s truth; he personified it. He said: “I am the *Way*, the *Truth* and the *Life*” (Jn 14:6). He also said: “To have seen me is to have seen the Father” (ibid, v.9). Towards the end of his time on earth, Jesus promised to send his disciples the *Spirit of truth* who would lead his followers into the truth that he had revealed to them (Jn 16:12-13). Despite the weaknesses and sinfulness of her members, the Holy Spirit has empowered the Church to be a protector and teacher of God’s truth in every generation.

Born with an innate desire for the truth. The *Catechism* (2467) states: “Man tends by nature towards the truth.” We instinctively hunger to know the truth. We want others to say what they mean and to mean what they say. We want our Church leaders and political leaders to speak the truth. We want truth in all areas of life.

Pause: What is the biggest challenge(s) we face today as we seek to be truthful people?

Called to be Witnesses to the Truth

Just as Jesus was a witness by word and deed to God and his truth, so are we called by baptism to be witnesses to Jesus and his Gospel (Acts 1:8, C 2472). In the now famous words of St. Francis of Assisi, all of us are called to “preach the Gospel always and if necessary to use words.” Timothy tells us: “Do not be ashamed of your testimony to our Lord” (2Tm 1:8). We can testify to the truths of our faith in our daily lives especially when we come into contact with those who do not believe in God or Jesus, or in the fullness of faith taught by the Catholic Church. St. Peter exhorts us to be “always ready to give an

explanation of your faith to anyone who asks you for a reason for your hope, but do so with gentleness and reverence” (1Pt 3:15-16). To be authentic and credible witnesses to Christ requires that we know him and actually believe the truth he teaches. It also requires that our actions be coherent with the truths we believe. To bear effective witness to the truth, we must be truthful people whose lives are centered on seeking first the kingdom of God.

“*Martyrdom* is the supreme witness to the truth of the faith: it means bearing witness even unto death” (C 2473). Peter Kreeft writes: “Martyrdom is a sign of the spiritual warfare between Christ and antichrist, light and darkness, truth and falsehood, which is scripture’s persistent theme from Genesis to Revelation, because it is the central drama of human history and of each individual life.”

Obstacles to Knowing and Living the Truth

As followers of Christ, we have a serious obligation to seek the truth and to live our lives according to the truth we know. This is not easy because we are always doing battle with the *secular world*, the *flesh* and the *devil*.

The *world* we live in has a low regard for truth-telling and does not believe in *objective* truth. Just before he was elected Pope, Joseph Ratzinger gave a homily about “the “dictatorship of relativism” that does not recognize anything as definitive, and trusts solely one’s own ego and desires. Relativism is the belief that there is no objective truth, only opinions, and that “my truth” is as good as “your truth.” In a culture where relativism reigns, it becomes more and more challenging to hold on to religious truth. Even Christian doctrine is downplayed as someone else’s opinion.

Relativists who claim that there is no objective truth have an untenable position, as shown by the following piece by Peter Kreeft, a professor of philosophy.

“All forms of skepticism of objective truth refute themselves.”
“There is no truth.” Is *that* true? “Truth is not objective.” Is that truth objective?
“Truth is not universal.” Except *that* truth?

“No one can know truth.” Except you, I suppose?
“Truth is uncertain.” Is *that* uncertain?
“All generalizations are false.” Including that one?
“You can’t be dogmatic.” You say that very dogmatically.
“Don’t impose your truth on me!” But you just imposed your truth on me!
“There are no absolutes.” Absolutely?
“Truth is only opinion.” So..that’s only your opinion?”

(Fr. Al McBride’s College Catechism, p.251)

The *flesh* is that part of us that has not yet submitted to Christ nor to the truth of his Gospel. Because of original sin, our minds are clouded and our wills are weakened (see Article 4). Because of our own sinful tendencies, there is a part of us that does not want to know the truth; or when we do know it, we resist acting on it.

The *devil* which Jesus calls the “father of lies” (Jn 8:44), is the one that deceives and sows chaos. In Gen 3:4-5, Satan bears false witness against God, accusing him of having deceitful motives. In his first letter, Peter reminds us that “our opponent, the devil, is prowling around like a roaring lion looking for someone to devour” (5:8). In his letter to the Ephesians (6:10-17), Paul reminds us that our struggle is not just against the darkness of the world or the sinful tendencies of the flesh, but also against evil spiritual powers. The devil’s job is to confuse us and lie to us about what is and isn’t true.

Despite these three enemies of the truth, we can, with the help of the Holy Spirit and the Church, discern what is truthful and act on it.

Pause: Relativism is the belief that there are no objective truths, only opinions, and that “my truth” is as good as “your truth.” How widespread is this relativism today? How does one go about refuting it?

Sins Against the Eighth Commandment (C 2475-2487, USC p. 431)

The *Catechism* (2483) states that “lying is the most direct offense against the truth. To lie is to speak or act against the truth in order to lead someone into error.”

"The *gravity of a lie* is measured against the nature of the truth it deforms, the circumstances, the intentions of the one who lies, and the harm suffered by its victims" (C 2484). Lying is a mortal sin if it causes grave harm to another's reputation.

Reparation. When our lies have hurt the good name of another, we must do everything in our power to undo the harm we have done (C 2487).

False witness and perjury. False witness in court and perjury (lying under oath) violate justice. They are seriously wrong because they cause innocent people to suffer or to be unfairly punished.

Rash judgment, detraction and calumny. *Rash judgment* is snap judgment of someone's blameworthiness without sufficient information. *Detraction* is revealing the faults of another with no good reason. *Calumny* is spreading rumors or lies about another.

A life dedicated to the truth and lived in service of love of God and neighbor frees us from human motivations that tempt us to engage in slander, gossip, rash judgment, perpetuation of false stereotypes, spreading of rumors, and dissemination of misinformation.

Is it legitimate to sometimes withhold the truth? The *Catechism* (2489) states: "The good and safety of others, respect for privacy, and the common good are sufficient reasons for being silent about what ought not to be known or for making use of a discreet language. The duty to avoid scandal often commands strict discretion. No one is bound to reveal the truth to someone who does not have the right to know it."

The seal of confession. A priest can never, under penalty of excommunication, reveal what he hears in confession. The seal of confession is so sacred that it binds a layperson who acts as an interpreter during confession (C 2490).

Professional secrets. Professional secrets shared by physicians, politicians, lawyers, and psychologists should not be revealed unless the secret is bound to cause great harm to the one who confided it, the one who heard it, a third party, or

where serious harm can only be avoided by telling the truth (C 2491).

In general, we must honor everyone's right to privacy and must balance that right with the public's right to information without harming the dignity of the person/s concerned. This includes those who work in the media who may be tempted for profit to reveal to the public details about someone else's life.

Pause: How do you handle people who ask direct questions about matters they have no right to know?

The Media and Truth (C 2493-2499, USC p. 434)

Within modern society, the media plays a major role in our lives and in the shaping of public opinion. From an evangelization point of view, the media, including the internet, gives the Church enormous opportunities for presenting the Good News of Jesus Christ to the world.

The *Catechism* (2494) states: "The information provided by the media is at the service of the common good. Society has a right to information based on truth, freedom, justice, and solidarity."

We are blessed in the West to have freedom of the press, freedom to express ideas that may contradict the government and even the Church. But such freedom must always be balanced with responsibility to seek the truth and to avoid half truths, lies and misinformation.

As *users* and *consumers* of the mass media, we also have a responsibility to be discerning about what we hear and not to passively accept all that is reported. Parents have a responsibility to protect their children from the unhealthy and immoral aspects of the media which can so easily damage young, developing minds.

In his chapter on the eighth commandment, Fr. Al McBride, O Praem, writes: *Truth works better than lies for the good of the family and society. Journalists and entertainers should get beyond the superficial need to shock, scandalize, and degrade by appealing to sex and violence. Just tell the truth and use imagination to build up the virtues that make for wholesome families and a healthy society. Politicians will lose the trust of people if*

they persist in half truths, evasiveness, and manipulation of people. Business leaders who want a loyal workforce will succeed more by being honest with employees than by bulldozing them with misinformation. Spouses will have better marriages when they insist on being truthful with each other (p.150).

Truth, Beauty, and Sacred Art (C 2500-2503)

The *Catechism* has a final section on the eighth commandment that deals with the connection between truth and beauty. Fr. McBride writes: *Real art is truthful. True art invites us to contemplate the beauty of God and the divine reflection in creation and human beings. Art expresses beauty in a language that is beyond words. In its best expression, art touches the depths of the human heart, exalts the soul, and opens the person to the mystery of God* (ibid pp 250-251).

Pause: Is there a piece of art that speaks to you in a special way? If so, explain.

Suggested actions

This week, pay special attention to your conversation with others. To what extent are you truthful in what you say? Be attentive to opportunities you may get to share the truth of the Gospel with others.

Meditation I

Lying is linked to the tragedy of sin and its perverse consequences, which have had, and continue to have, devastating effects on the lives of individuals and nations. We need but think of the events of the past century, when aberrant ideological and political systems willfully twisted the truth and brought about the exploitation and murder of an appalling number of men and women, wiping out entire families and communities. After experiences like these, how can we fail to be seriously concerned about lies in our own times, lies which are the framework for menacing scenarios of death in many parts of the world. Any authentic search for peace must begin

with the realization that the problem of truth and untruth is the concern of every man and woman; it is decisive for the peaceful future of our planet.

(Message for World Day of Peace,
Pope Benedict XVI, Jan. 1, 2006)

Meditation II

The words “image,” “appearance,” and “outwardly” are crucial to understanding the morality of the evil. While they seem to lack any motivation to be good, they intensely desire to appear good. Their “goodness” is all on a level of pretense. It is... a lie. This is why they are the “people of the lie.”

Actually the lie is designed not so much to deceive others as to deceive themselves. They cannot or will not bear the pain of self-reproach...Yet the self-deceit would be unnecessary to tolerate that sense. At one and the same time, [evil people] are aware of their evil and desperately trying to avoid the awareness... [They sweep] the evidence of their evil under the rug of their consciousness... We become evil by attempting to hide from ourselves...

(People of the Lie, Scott Peck)

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Part IV of the *Catechism* is divided into two sections: (1) Prayer in the Life of Christians, and (2) The Lord's Prayer, the "Our Father."

In this article, we will look at:

- What is prayer
- Lessons from scripture
- Five traditional forms of prayer
- Occupational and spousal prayer
- The battle of prayer – four problem areas

What is prayer?

St. Therese of Lisieux writes that "prayer is a surge of the heart; it is a simple look turned toward heaven, it is a cry of recognition and of love embracing both trial and joy" (C 2558). Prayer is our graced effort to be *open, attentive* and *responsive* to God whose presence fills the universe and sustains us every moment of every day. Prayer is being vigilant for the God who comes and is present in the events and encounters of daily life. Prayer is the term Christians use to describe their personal relationship with God.

When it comes to prayer, the *initiative* is always with God. We don't find God. Rather, we let ourselves be found by him. We call out to God only because he has been calling out to us.

Prayer: an encounter with our Triune God (C 2565). Prayer is our journey into the mystery of the Blessed Trinity. In prayer we encounter God as the loving *Father* who patiently waits for us, his children, to notice him and respond to him (Lk 15:11-32), or as the mother who loves us as a mother loves the child in her womb (Is 49:15). Prayer is conversing with *Jesus* who reveals to us the heart of God – a God of love and mercy. In prayer we converse with the *Holy Spirit*, our divine guide, strength and sanctifier. It is the Holy Spirit who teaches us how to pray. He is always praying in us and he helps us to pray when we are weak and do not know how to pray (Rom 8:26-27).

Pause: *Who have been your teachers when it comes to prayer?*

Lessons from scripture (C 2568-2589, USC p. 464)

In the pages of scripture, we are privileged to be able to catch a glimpse of many people's relationship with God.

Abraham teaches us the importance of faith and obedience in prayer. When God tells him and his family to leave their homeland and go to a land that he will show them, Abraham places his *trust* in God and goes as God has told him (Gen 12:1-4). True prayer will always lead us to a place of greater trust in God and to greater obedience to his directives.

Moses. Ex 33:11 tells us that "the Lord used to speak to Moses face to face, as a man to a friend." What a beautiful description of the intimacy that exists between God and Moses. But like every close relationship, God and Moses have their stormy moments. The *Catechism* states that Moses balks, makes excuses, and above all, questions (C 2575). Ex 5:22-23 gives us a wonderful example of Moses "having it out with God." Moses says: "Lord, why do you treat this people so badly? And why did you send me on such a mission? Ever since I went to Pharaoh to speak in your name, he has maltreated this people of yours, and you have done nothing to rescue them." When it comes to prayer, we can learn from Moses how to be truly *honest* with God about our real thoughts and feelings.

Hannah. If we have been raised to keep our emotions in tight check, there is a good chance that we will have a difficult time giving expression to our emotions in prayer. In the Old Testament, Hannah is someone who can teach us to pray not only with our head but also with our heart. 1 Samuel 1:10 tells us that Hannah "in her bitterness prayed to the Lord, weeping copiously." The prayer of Hannah reminds us of a verse in Heb 5:7 that Jesus "offered prayers and supplications with loud cries and tears to the one who was able to save him."

The Psalms. The *Catechism* states: The Psalms constitutes the masterwork of prayer in the Old Testament. Prayed and fulfilled in Christ, the Psalms are an essential and permanent element of the prayer of the Church. They are suitable for people of every condition and time" (C 2596-2597). Every mood of the human heart is expressed in the Psalter. The Psalms are a school of prayer for anyone seeking how to speak to God and respond to his action in their lives.

Jesus at prayer (C 2598-2606, USC p. 466). Jesus learned the ways of prayer from Mary and Joseph. From his people he learned the value and importance of *communal* prayer. He was well-versed in the scriptures and often prayed the Psalms.

Jesus desired to share with his disciples the intimate relationship he had with his Father. He taught them to approach God as ‘Abba,’ as loving father. The *Catechism* states that Jesus taught his disciples to pray with a purified heart, with lively and persevering faith, with filial boldness (C 2621).

Prayer in the Church. “The infant church was born in prayer, lived in prayer and thrived in prayer” (USC p. 467). The Letters of Paul show him to be a man of intense prayer. During the Church’s 2,000 years of history, great schools of prayer and spirituality have developed. Hence today, our efforts to pray are enhanced by the prayer traditions of the Benedictines, Carmelites, Franciscans, Jesuits and many others.

Pause: *What can we learn about prayer from the above named biblical figures?*

Traditional forms of prayer (C 2626-2649, USC p. 467)

In time, the Holy Spirit led the Church to pray in many different ways. The following are five of them.

Prayer of adoration and praise. Adoration is a basic and fundamental prayer gesture of us creatures before our Creator. When we reflect on what God has done and is doing in creation and in us, our response is one of awe, adoration and praise. Adoration and praise are our heartfelt response to who God is. It is our response to God’s magnificence. The final six psalms of the Psalter are beautiful examples of the prayer of praise.

Prayer of thanksgiving. In the prayer of thanksgiving, we give gratitude to God for his loving activity in creation and in our redemption, in the lives of others and in our own lives. When we take time out to recognize and give thanks to God for what is good in life, we not only recognize God as the source of all good things, but we also grow in our experience of God as a loving and generous person. In turn, this experience of God leads us to a more generous giving of ourselves to God. Our acts of gratitude to God deepen our relationship with him; hence, the vital importance of taking time out for the prayer of thanksgiving. Without the prayer of thanksgiving, we may think that the blessings of life are not connected to the God from whom all blessings flow.

In recent years, mental health studies have shown that the “attitude of gratitude” is also very helpful to our psychological well-being. For Catholics, the Eucharist is our greatest prayer of thanksgiving.

Prayer of contrition. The *Catechism* states that “asking forgiveness is the prerequisite for both the Eucharistic liturgy and personal prayer” (C 2631). To be careless about sin is to be careless about what separates us from

God and others. Refusing to deal with sin is like refusing to deal with a cancer in our bodies.

If sin is a spiritual cancer that can destroy our relationship with God and others, contrition or prayer of repentance is the gift God gives us to help us to see the ugly nature of sin and the grace to be truly sorry for our sins.

Prayer of intercession. “It is only at the end of this world that we shall realize how the destinies of persons and nations have been shaped, not so much by the external actions of powerful men and by events that seemed inevitable, but by the quiet, silent, irresistible prayer of persons the world will never know” (Anthony de Mello, S.J.).

Prayer of intercession is when we pray for *others* and their needs. In intercessory prayer, we do what Mary does at Cana. We go to God or Jesus on behalf of others. We speak our concerns and trust that God will do what is best. People who cannot be involved in the front lines of the Church’s mission due to age or illness, need to be aware that their role as intercessor or prayer warrior is indispensable for the success of the Church’s mission.

Prayer of petition. Prayer of petition is conversing with God about our own needs, both spiritual and material. Petitionary prayer deepens our awareness of how much we need God at every moment of our lives. When we pray in this way, we can always expect some change in ourselves if not in the external circumstances which prompted our prayer.

What should we pray for? Some people say, “I never pray for myself.” That would be a big mistake. All of us should often pray for the following:

- for the grace to know the will of God and to carry it out faithfully;
- that the Holy Spirit will help us to seek and follow the will of God and to discover and become the person God created us to be and to avoid trying to be a carbon copy of someone else;
- for the grace to be faithful to our *vocation* in life as married, single or religious person; for the grace to fulfill faithfully the duties and responsibilities of our state in life (*career*);
- for God’s help with the nitty details of life, such as decisions, relationships, finances, health issues, etc.

Thank God ahead of time. Before Jesus raised Lazarus from the dead, he gave thanks to God with confidence: “Father, I thank you for hearing my prayer. I know that you always hear me” (Jn 11:41). When we thank God ahead of time, we are placing our trust in him to

answer our prayer and expressing our confidence in him who always has our best interest and the best interests of others in his heart.

Pause: How do the above traditional forms of prayer feature in your prayer life?

Spousal and occupational prayer

In his book, *The Human Adventure*, William McNamara, O.C.D., speaks about spousal and occupational prayer. Both of these forms of prayer are important and interdependent.

Occupational prayer. As we sit at our desk, walk or drive from one place to another, as we work in the kitchen, garden or garage, or play some sport, we can call to mind the presence of God. Occupational prayer does not mean that we drop to our knees in the middle of these tasks. But it does mean that we should frequently seek to have a sense of God's presence and commune with him. Growing in occupational prayer, enables us to act on Paul's exhortation to "pray without ceasing" (1Thes 5:17). Occupational prayer is one of the simplest and easiest ways to grow in holiness.

Spousal prayer. Like Jesus, we withdraw from the busyness of the day so that we can be totally available and present to God, our *divine spouse*. If Jesus and all the great saints felt a need to spend periods of quiet time with God, then we who are weak and imperfect must seek to do no less. There are 96 fifteen-minute periods in every day. Surely it should not be a problem for us to give God our total attention for one or two of those fifteen-minute periods. If our occupational prayer is not complemented by regular periods of spousal prayer, it will lack depth and most likely fizzle out.

The battle of prayer - four problem areas

The *Catechism* tells us that sometimes prayer can be "a battle against ourselves and against the wiles of the tempter who does all he can to turn man away from prayer, away from union from God" (C 2725). We will now examine four areas that can make prayer or our relationship with God seem like a battle. As you will see, the four areas are connected.

1) Unanswered prayer. When God seems deaf to our prayers of intercession or petition, we may experience a spiritual or faith crisis. We may conclude that God is distant and disinterested to our concerns. Unanswered prayer can cause us to quit praying.

Firstly, when dealing with unanswered prayer, we need *wisdom, honesty and faith*. We need the *wisdom* to know that no prayer goes unanswered. We can always expect God to give us the strength to deal with the circumstances of our lives even if he does not change

them. This seemingly was the experience of the author of Psalm 138:3 who writes: "When I called, you answered me; you built up strength within me." What the psalmist is telling us is that "having God answer our prayers" sometimes involves "having him build up his strength in us."

Secondly, when our prayers seem to go unanswered, we need to be *honest* with God about our thoughts and feelings. We need to know that it is okay to get mad with God when we are feeling frustrated about his seeming deafness to our prayer. Some spiritual guides believe that when our prayer goes flat and boring, it may be because we are not being honest in our relationship with God. Learning to be honest with God about our real thoughts and feelings is a big growth step in our prayer life. People like Abraham, Moses, Hannah, Jeremiah and the psalmists can be our teachers in this area.

Thirdly, when God seems to be deaf to our prayers of petition and intercession, we need the grace to be able to *trust* that he has our best interest in mind. If loving parents expect their little children to trust that they will only do what is in their best interest, how much more should we place our trust in our God? This, of course, is where a *deepening faith* can help us immensely. An important aspect of faith is trusting that God knows what is best for us. A deepening faith will gradually help us to embrace the wisdom expressed in the piece called "The Weaver."

*My life is but a weaving between my Lord and me.
I cannot choose the colors He worketh steadily.
Oftimes He weaveth sorrow, and I in foolish pride,
forget he sees the upper, and I, the underside.
Not till the loom is silent and the shuttles cease to fly,
shall God unroll the canvas and explain the reason why.
The dark threads are as needful
in the Weaver's skillful hand,
as the threads of gold and silver
in the pattern He has planned.*

(Author Unknown)

Pause: How have you experienced God answering and not answering your prayer?

2) Distractions. The *Catechism* tells us that distractions are a "habitual difficulty" in prayer and that they can reveal to us what we are attached to (C 2627). We can assume that the vast majority of prayerful people experience distractions in prayer especially if they live very busy lives. In an age when we have become used to "multi-tasking," we find it even more difficult to focus on one thing. During prayer, our challenge is to try to be as fully present as we can to the Lord. This is

not easy. When we experience lots of distractions in prayer, we may be tempted to cut short our prayer time or to even quit praying, concluding that it is a waste of our valuable time. This would be a mistake. When it comes to the challenge of distractions in prayer, we should take much comfort from these words by St. Francis de Sales: “If the heart wanders or is distracted, bring it back quite gently and place it tenderly in God’s presence. And if you do nothing else while at prayer but bring your heart back again and again and place it in God’s presence,..though it went away every time you brought it back, your time of prayer would be very well spent” (*Introduction to the Devout Life*).

3) Prayer in painful times. Prayer can be especially difficult during painful times of life, e.g., sickness, loss of a loved one, guilt, when life is not going well for us. During such times, we may experience God as distant and disinterested. We may conclude that God is the reason for our bad times. Worse still, we may think that God is punishing us for something. At such times, prayer can be a big challenge. The way we normally pray may not work for us. In painful times, we are called to tough it out with God, just as couples tough it out with each other in times of difficulty. As stated above, we must be honest with God about our true thoughts and feelings. We may find some comfort in praying the psalms or seeking the support of faith friends or a spiritual director.

4) Spiritual dryness. In times of spiritual dryness, we feel a sense of the absence of God. We pray but feel nothing. During such times, we can be sure that Satan will be very active, trying to get us to quit praying. But in these times, God may be doing his best work in us, purifying us of attachments to spiritual consolations. In prayer there is always a danger that we may be more attached to the spiritual consolations of our God than to the God of our consolations. It is easy to love God when all is going well and when God is blessing us abundantly. The challenge is to stay faithful to God during those dark times when we have no felt sense of his presence. In times of spiritual dryness, we need to remember that our prayer is good when our hearts are fixed on God, even if it is filled with boring aridity or passionate turmoil.

In times of dryness, it is good to speak with a spiritual director or seek the support of faith friends. It may also be helpful to reflect on the following prayer by the late Fr. Henri Nowen.

Dear Lord, in the midst of much inner turmoil and restlessness, there is a consoling thought: maybe you are working in me in a way I cannot yet feel, experience or understand. My mind is not able to

concentrate on you, my heart is not able to remain centered, and it seems as if you are absent and have left me alone. But in faith I cling to you. I believe that your Spirit reaches deeper and further than my mind or heart, and that profound movements are not the first to be noticed.

Therefore, Lord, I promise I will not run away, not give up, not stop praying, even when it all seems useless, pointless, and a waste of time and effort. I want to let you know that I love you even though I do not feel loved by you, and that I hope in you even though I often experience despair. Let this be a little dying I can do with you and for you as a way of experiencing some solidarity with the millions in this world who suffer far more than I do. Amen.

Pause: Do you presently have the practice of spending 15 or 20 minutes in quiet prayer? If not, why not?

Action suggestions

If you do not presently have a daily quiet prayer time, consider setting aside one fifteen-minute period every day when you seek to be totally available to God. Spend time with the question: How are my efforts to pray impacting the way I live my daily life, my relationships, the way I spend my time, treasure and talent?

Meditation

*Lord, I do not know what to ask of you.
You alone know what are my true needs.
You love me more than I myself know how to love.
Help me to see my real needs
which are concealed from me.
I do not ask either a cross or a consolation;
I can only wait for you.
My heart is open to you.
Visit and help me;
cast me down and raise me up.
I worship in silence your holy will
and your inscrutable ways.
I offer myself as a sacrifice to you.
I put all my trust in you.
I have no desire other than to fulfill your will.
Teach me how to pray.
Do you pray yourself in me? Amen.*

(Philaret of Moscow)

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(C2759-2865, Ch. 36)

This lesson is divided into two parts: (1) Vocal Prayer, Meditation and Contemplation, and (2) The Lord's Prayer.

PART ONE: Vocal prayer, meditation and contemplation (C 2700-2719, USC p. 473-474)

We can and should relate to God with our whole being, body, mind, and heart. Three ways to do this is through vocal prayer, meditation and contemplation.

Vocal prayer – praying with our bodies. By means of vocal prayer, the prayer in our heart is given outward expression. This spoken prayer may take the form of liturgical prayer, shared prayer with others, charismatic or personal prayer alone in our home, vehicle or some other place. In vocal prayer, we are not only using our lips but other parts of our bodies to bow, genuflect and raise our hands and whole being to God.

Meditation – praying with our minds. By use of our mind, we can meditate on the scriptures, the truths of our faith, spiritual books, religious icons, or the events and encounters of our lives. In the scriptures, we find Mary pondering the events of her life (Lk 1:66, 2:19).

As followers of Christ, we are encouraged to especially meditate on the Gospel so that we can come to know and love Jesus and his word ever more deeply. Without regular meditation on the scriptures and other sacred texts, we run the risk of becoming victims of passing fads and of allowing ourselves to be guided by the "wisdom" of the secular world rather than by the "surpassing knowledge of Jesus Christ" (Phil 3:8).

It should be pointed out that Christian meditation has its own particular mindset. In this form of prayer, we put aside what is sometimes called our "computer intelligence" which we use to gather information, analyze it and manage it. In meditative reading, we don't attack a text as we might when studying. Rather, we prayerfully and humbly sit with a text asking the Holy Spirit to help us hear its message for us.

The same approach applies to our meditation of icons or the events and encounters of our lives. Like Mary, we ponder to discern their meaning and message.

Contemplation – praying with our hearts. In the prayer of contemplation, we are not *talking* to God or *thinking* about God or Jesus and his message. Rather, we are *resting* in his presence, much like a couple in each other's company in wordless communion. In Psalm

46:10, God tells us "to be still and know that I am God." In the prayer of contemplation, we embrace the words of a medieval mystic: "*While we rest in him, he works in us.*"

There is always the danger that we become too busy in prayer. We may feel that our quiet time with God is a waste unless we read ten pages of a book, read our favorite prayers and pray the Rosary. We bring the busyness of our workday in our time of prayer. We may think that if we are not *doing* something, our prayer is a waste of time. When we are too busy in prayer, we have embraced the heresy which maintains that our spiritual transformation depends on *our* efforts. When we spend time in wordless communion before God, we are saying that we believe that while we rest in him, he does indeed work in us. Blessed Teresa of Calcutta once said: "I always begin my prayer in silence, for it is in the silence of the heart that God speaks."

Contemplative moments. We don't have to be in a quiet time of prayer to experience contemplation. Contemplative moments can happen to us at any time and place. Suddenly and unexpectedly, we find ourselves embraced and cherished by God. We have a deep feeling of inner peace and a sense of connectedness with all of creation. Such graced moments may happen as we walk down the street, take a stroll on the beach, sit at our desk, hold a small baby in our arms, sit alone in church, paint a picture, dance, look into a microscope, or whatever. Fr. William Barry, S.J., gives us the following example of a contemplative moment in his book *God and You*.

"A man was walking along a beach at night and saw the moonlight touch with silver the crest of a wave. He was delighted and felt at peace and in the presence of someone who himself delights in such things. He felt that God was close and loved him even though he often drank too much and got angry with his family. He knew that God knew all about him and yet loved him, and he felt freer than he had in years."

Developing the art of reflective living is the best thing we can do to facilitate contemplative moments.

Pause: Do you tend to be active in prayer or do you tend to be more contemplative? Can you see the importance of the latter?

PART TWO: The Lord's Prayer (C 2759-2865, USC Ch. 36)

Medieval theologian Thomas Aquinas says: "*The Lord's Prayer is the most perfect of prayers. In it we ask, not only for all the things we can rightly desire, but also in the sequence that they should be desired. This prayer not only teaches us to ask for things, but also in what order we should desire them*" (C 2763).

The Our Father is called the "Lord's Prayer" because Jesus, our Lord and model of prayer, is its author. The prayer is Christ's response to his disciples' plea to "Teach us to pray" (Lk 11:1). There are two versions of the Lord's Prayer. The shorter version by Luke (11:2-4) has five petitions while the longer version by Matthew (6:9-13) has seven petitions. Matthew's version is the one the Church has adopted in its liturgical tradition. The conclusion we pray at Mass: "For the kingdom, the power, and the glory are yours now and forever," comes from the *Didache*, a first century catechetical textbook.

As prayed by the Church, the Lord's Prayer or "Our Father" has seven petitions. The first three glorify God, express reverence for his name, pray for the coming of his kingdom and for the fulfillment of his will on earth. The last four petitions focus on our needs: the daily nourishment we need to live, healing of our sins, victory over temptation, and protection against evil. Because Jesus is the creator of these petitions, they are more than simple requests. They teach us what we truly need to live happy, holy and moral lives. Before we look at the seven petitions, let us understand the opening words: "*Our Father who art in heaven.*"

"Our Father"

When St. Teresa of Avila prayed the Our Father, she found it almost impossible to get beyond the first two words. They were like a beautiful country that she wanted to dwell in forever.

"The opening address of the Lord's Prayer reveals to us the deepest truth about ourselves: We are a relationship with God. Before all else, we belong to God, and that belonging is our very identity. Therefore, the most reasonable – the most human – the thing that we can do is cry out to the Mystery who made us" (Peter Cameron O.P.).

We call God "Father" because Jesus revealed him as such and because he also called God his Father. The Hebrew word "Abba" is more accurately translated as "daddy," a term of endearment. Through our union with Jesus through baptism, we are adopted children of God, and with Jesus we too can call God "daddy" or "dada."

The word "Our" is very important in the Lord's Prayer. It signifies that here on earth; *all* other humans are our brothers and sisters. All of us are sons and daughters of the one God. What happens to any one of us should concern each of us. We are our brothers' and sisters' keepers. In the Lord's Prayer, the word "Our" expresses our solidarity with everyone in our human family.

The word "Our" should draw us away from any tendencies towards individualism and isolation from others, and move us in the direction of communion with all humankind. In our global family, there should be no "us" and "them," only "us."

"Who art in heaven"

The word heaven does not refer to some faraway place on another planet, but to a state of being with God who is both very close to us and yet totally transcendent from all of our concepts and images of him. Even though heaven refers to our eternal destiny, we experience a foretaste of it in our celebration of the Eucharist and when we experience moments of deep love with another. (For more on heaven, see Article 11, *What Happens after Death.*)

<p><i>Pause: What forms of prayer attract you the most?</i></p>

Petition #1 – "Hallowed be thy name"

The term "hallowed" means "to be made holy." *We* do not make God's name holy; God is the source of his own holiness. But we give witness to God's holiness by living holy and loving lives. So the first petition of the Our Father is a call to holiness, a call to honor God by the quality of our lives. (For more on this petition, see Article 21 on the First and Second Commandments.)

In his book *Holy Longing*, Fr. Ronald Rollheiser writes: "*Hallowed be thy name...may we always acknowledge your holiness, respecting that your ways are not our ways, your standards are not our standards. May the reverence we give your name pull us out of the selfishness that prevents us from seeing the pain of our neighbor.*"

Petition #2 – "Thy kingdom come"

The kingdom of God is not an earthly or territorial one. It is a spiritual reality. It is "a kingdom of truth and life, a kingdom of holiness and grace, a kingdom of justice, peace and love" (*Preface for Solemnity of Christ the King*). Jesus preached and embodied the kingdom of God when he was here on earth. But God's kingdom is not yet fully realized because we live in a world where there is still much violence, injustice and lies.

This petition of the Lord's Prayer calls us individually and as a Church to pray for and work to build a society imbued with love, justice and peace.

Petition #3 – “Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven”

In this petition we face one of the big challenges of the spiritual life, namely, to embrace God's will in all things. In John 4: Jesus says: “My food is to do the will of him who sent me.” In Gethsemane, he sweat blood as he struggled to embrace his Father's will. In this petition, we are praying for the grace to be seekers and doers of God's will. This petition, like the previous one, raises the fundamental challenge for individuals and societies to build God's kingdom and not our own kingdom, and to seek and follow God's will, not our own will. Daily, we can choose God's way or our way.

Commenting on this petition, Ronald Rollheiser writes: “*May the work of our hands, the temples and structures we build in this world, reflect the temple and the structure of God's glory so that the joy, graciousness, tenderness, and justice of heaven will show forth within all of our structures on earth.*” (ibid)

Petition #4 – “Give us this day our daily bread”

In the second set of petitions, we pray for four key needs of the human heart.

The *Catechism* states: “Our daily bread’ refers to the earthly nourishment necessary to every one for subsistence, and also to the Bread of Life: the Word of God and the Body of Christ” (C 2861).

“*Give us*” reminds us that we, like little children, are radically dependent on God for what we need to make it through *each day*. “*Give...life and love to us and help us to see always everything as gift. Help us to know that nothing comes to us by right and that we must give because we have been given to. Help us realize that we must give to the poor, not because they need it, but because our own health depends upon our giving to them*” (Rollheiser).

“*This day*” reminds us that we are only to be concerned about today and not tomorrow. Jesus says to us: “Do not be anxious about tomorrow. ...Let today's trouble be sufficient for the day” (Mt 6:34). Tomorrow we return again to God for the bread we need tomorrow. When the Israelites journey through the desert, God provides them daily with manna, enough for each day. Moses commands them “not to keep any of it for tomorrow” (Ex 16:19). This petition of the Lord's Prayer reminds us of our call to place our trust in God for our daily needs.

“*Our daily bread*” is invoked “*so that each person in the world may have enough food, enough clean water, enough clean air, adequate health care, and sufficient access to education so as to have the sustenance for a healthy life. Teach us to give from our sustenance and not just from our surplus*” (Rollheiser).

Petition # 5 – “Forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us”

The *Catechism* states: “This petition is astonishing... for the two parts are joined by the word ‘as’” (C 2838). The challenging implication of this petition is that God's mercy towards us is dependent on our willingness to forgive *all* those who have hurt us. Just as God stands in readiness to forgive us *all* of our sins, we too must be willing to forgive others all of the ways they may have hurt us. Is it possible to forgive *all* hurts? Not if we depend on our own strength. But with God's grace, all things are possible. We know the truth of this statement when we hear inspiring stories of ordinary people forgiving heinous crimes. Finally, let us remember that the best way to obtain God's mercy is by showing mercy. The fifth beatitude states: “*Happy are the merciful, they shall have mercy shown them*” (Mt 5:7).

“*And forgive us our trespasses*” – our blindness toward our neighbor, our self-preoccupation, our racism, our sexism, and our incurable propensity to worry only about ourselves and our own. Forgive our habit of watching the evening news but doing nothing about it.

“*As we forgive those who trespass against us.*” “*Help us to forgive those who victimize us. Help us to mellow out in spirit, to not grow bitter with age, to forgive our imperfect parents and systems that wounded us...*” (Rollheiser). (For practical steps on how to live the message of forgiveness, see my book *How to Forgive Yourself & Others*, Liguori Publications.)

Pause: What speaks to you most in the first five petitions of the Lord's prayer?

Petition # 6 – “Lead us not into temptation”

This petition may be puzzling as it seems to imply that God leads us into temptation. But St. James (1:13) says: “God cannot be tempted by evil and he himself tempts no one.” In the original Greek, *lead us* means both “do not allow us to enter” and “do not let us yield” (C 2846). So we can restate the petition in this way: “God, do not allow us to enter situations of temptation” or “let us not yield to temptation.”

‘Do not enter’ and ‘yield’ are like road signs. In this petition, we ask God not to allow us to take the road that leads to sin. “The Holy Spirit acts like a ‘do not enter’ sign in the hearts of those who pray, by helping us to identify and respond to temptations” (*The Catholic Faith Handbook for Youth*, p. 366).

Temptations are invitations or enticements to do unwise or immoral acts. The problem with temptation is that it often presents itself as good, desirable and ‘delightful to the eyes’ (Gen 3:6). Paul warns us that “*Satan himself goes disguised as an angel of the light*”

(2 Cor 10:14). It is a good daily practice to ask our guardian angel to protect us from false and evil ways. A good one-liner prayer is “Jesus, protect me this day from false and evil ways. Keep me in your truth.”

Petition # 7 – “But deliver us from evil”

The final petition of the ‘Lord’s Prayer’ continues the theme or focus of the previous one, namely, the struggle against evil. The petition moves us away from our personal struggle with evil to pray with the whole church that our world would be delivered from the false and treacherous ways of Satan whom Jesus calls the “father of lies” (Jn 8:44). For the Christian, Satan is not an abstraction. He is a real evil being who seeks our destruction (1 Pt 5:8-9).

In this final petition of the Lord’s Prayer, we ask “God the Father to deliver us from the snares of Satan and a sensuous, materialistic, and violent society that ignores God and tempts us to rely solely on ourselves. We pray that God may spare us from the evil of accidents, illness, and natural disasters. We pray that God will strengthen us to confront the evil for which we too share some blame - using others, injustice, prejudice. And we pray that no situation arises that might tempt us to deny our loving Creator. This would be the worst evil of all” (*This is Our Faith* p. 330).

The *Catechism* tells us that “one who entrusts himself to God does not dread the devil. If God is for us, who is against us?” (C 2852, Rom 8:31).

Doxology

The word “doxology” means “word of praise.” The Lord’s Prayer has a doxology which was added on by the early church: “*For the kingdom, the power and the glory are yours, now and forever.*” It is recited during Mass by Latin Catholics after the line “deliver us from all evil.” These words of praise echo the first three petitions and we use them as words of adoration in union with the liturgy of heaven.

Amen

We conclude the Our Father with the “Amen,” which means “so be it.” In our “Amen,” we joyfully ratify or say “yes” to the seven petitions of the Lord’s Prayer. We make them our own.

The connection between prayer and belief

The *Catechism* reminds us that the Lord Jesus asks us to believe in order to pray, and to pray in order to believe. There is a complementarity in which knowing God and loving God support each other. Belief in the Father, Son, and Spirit should be essentially and immediately connected to a prayerful and loving communion with the Trinity.

“Belief in Catholic doctrine draws us to prayer and to a divine reassurance about the validity of these revealed truths of God to which we have responded in faith. We give ourselves to prayer to deepen our personal relationship with God in a loving communion. Experiencing God in prayer shows us the vitality of the truthfulness of doctrine and puts energy into our spiritual and moral witness” (USC 491).

Action suggestion This week spend some time praying the Our Father slowly and meditatively.

Pause: How do you see the connection between prayer and belief?

Meditation

Anointed by our morning light I lift my spirit to receive the gift of this new day.

Open my eyes to the beauty that surrounds me that I may walk through this day with the kind of awareness that calls forth grateful living.

In all of creation let me see the brightness of your face.

Shine in my heart and on my life, filling me with joy, creativity, hope, and laughter.

Draw me into the radiant glory of your presence and into the small lights of those with whom I live and work.

Inspire me to take time for those who are discouraged.

May I live with the kind of presence that enables others to feel at home.

Great Dawn of God, hear my prayer.

(Macrina Wiederkehr, O.S.B.)

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