

ONE

Sacraments: Transforming Encounters with Christ

How appropriate that the Church made “faith” the first pillar of the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*. For the Catechism is a book about faith, our faith—the faith of our mothers and fathers. It is a faith that, whether we consciously admit it or not, has sustained us throughout our lives—at moments of new life and at death, at times when we struggle to find meaning in otherwise meaningless situations, at those times of lifelong vocational commitments (be they marriage, consecrated life, vowed or ordained ministry), and all those many moments in between.

Our faith acts, often without our knowing it, as a lens through which we see the world, embrace the world, critique the world, and make efforts to live in a world that can be very challenging. And the Catechism is about faith. It is about faith seeking understanding, the mustering of reasons for our hope (cf. 1 Pet 3:15). It is about recouping a sense of joy in being a Catholic Christian. In faith, there are concrete answers to so many of our problems and challenges. Contemporary life need not simply be a continued and endless barrage of unanswered questions or open-ended confusion.

Christ, after all, is the answer, “the way, the truth, and the life.” And the Catechism helps us understand

how it is that Jesus Christ is the answer to the human riddle. It helps us see this truth in a systematic and accessible way. The Catechism is a fundamental and organic synthesis of our entire faith, of what we believe as Catholics. In the words of John Paul II, it is “a sure norm for teaching the faith.” We continually rejoice—or we should continually rejoice—in the great and mighty deeds God has done in order to save us. That is at the heart of our faith.

How is the Catechism arranged? There are four pillars (or four sections):

1. The Profession of Faith (what we believe, the creed)
2. The Celebration of the Christian Mystery (the sacraments, communal prayer, liturgy)
3. Life in Christ (the commandments, how we live, morality)
4. Christian Prayer (how we pray together and alone)

This pattern—creed, sacraments, morality, and prayer—followed the same format as the Roman Catechism that was published in the late sixteenth century after the Council of Trent. Although following the traditional order, the contents of both catechisms are often expressed in a new way in order to respond to the questions of our age and our American culture. Our precious faith is always old and always new.

Although developed in four parts, the Catechism manifests an interconnectedness among the parts, an organic structure to the presentation of the faith. Unity is, after all, an essential feature of the Christian faith.

Faith must be seen in its totality, not in selected reflections simply on parts that we find congenial, a kind of “a la carte” Catholicism. The Catechism seeks to build a synthesis, an organic view of the faith. This is its special strength.

In this book—the eight chapters that follow—we will look at the second section of the Catechism, a section titled “The Celebration of the Christian Mystery.” The corresponding section in the *United States Catholic Catechism for Adults* is titled “The Sacraments: The Faith Celebrated.” Both catechisms treat the sacramental and liturgical life of the Church. They explain how God’s salvation, accomplished once and for all through Jesus Christ in the Holy Spirit, is made present and prolonged in time and space, in our time and space. It happens in the sacred actions of the Church’s liturgy, especially in the seven sacraments. Both catechisms explain how the liturgy and the sacraments of the Church enable each one of us to become a real part in God’s plan to save the world, to draw life from the risen Lord with each and every sacramental encounter, a life that continues to transform and change us and make us concrete icons of the Lord Jesus for the world to see. The teaching we will study is concrete and not just theoretical. Hopefully, it will answer or at least raise questions that you might have.

Today’s Challenges

Now in my twenty-fifth year of priesthood, I have come to appreciate more and more the statement of the Catechism that “the sacred liturgy [itself] does not exhaust the entire activity of the Church: it must be

preceded by evangelization, faith and conversion” (CCC 1072). So many of our Catholic people fail to understand the rich and life-giving meaning of the sacraments, of the Church’s liturgy—often through no fault of their own. All the more do we have reason to reflect prayerfully on the sacraments: the sacraments as a whole and the seven individual sacraments. The Catechism is a very helpful way to make that study. It is a wonderful gift of the Church.

The following challenges, however, underscore some areas of much-needed attention. They come from my own pastoral experience.

I will always remember a couple whom I helped prepare for marriage shortly after I was ordained. In our first session, before talking about the sacrament of Marriage, I asked them what I thought would be a fundamental and basic question—what is a sacrament? Surprisingly, and to my chagrin, the best answer I could get was: “A sacrament is a gift of God.” When I said that good weather was also a gift of God, I was met by blank stares. Together they could name only four of the seven sacraments. They both had gone to Catholic grade schools, high schools, and even excellent Catholic colleges. I know that, regrettably, this experience of mine is symbolic of a wider phenomenon in the Church, then and now. What is most problematic is that the seven sacraments are distinctively fundamental to the Church that Christ founded. In fact, their celebration helps define us as Catholics.

As Gerald O’Collins and Mario Farrugia stated succinctly:

They [the sacraments] are seven privileged means that have been entrusted to his

Church by Christ and make his saving work personally present for men and women until the end of time. These sacraments are both perceptible signs (which can be seen, heard, tasted, touched, and smelled), central means for the common worship of God, and special vehicles of grace provided by the glorified Christ. They confer and strengthen the life of grace in the particular form that each sacrament symbolizes.

We cannot be discouraged, however, by recent polls about the number of Catholics who attend Mass each Sunday. Some polls have said that only 25 to 30 percent do so. Citing the Code of Canon Law, the Catechism states that “the Church obliges the faithful to take part in the Divine Liturgy on Sunday and feast days” (CCC 1389). Our challenge is always to encourage our friends and family members to come with us to Sunday Mass and to be with us when our parish family gathers each week.

Nor can we ignore the reality that the celebration of the sacrament of Penance has dropped off considerably in the Church since the Second Vatican Council. There are hopeful signs of a renewed interest in this marvelous healing sacrament. By way of example, “The Light Is On for You” Lenten outreach in the Archdiocese of Washington and the perennial “Come Home for Christmas” outreach in many parishes around the country have borne fruit.

Also, there are those who fail to consider, before receiving Holy Communion, whether they are worthy to receive the Body and Blood of Jesus Christ, and whether they should first receive the sacrament of Penance. The

Catechism teaches that “anyone conscious of a grave sin must receive the sacrament of Reconciliation before coming to communion” (CCC 1385).

Many Catholics in their twenties and thirties have not received the sacrament of Confirmation. The Catechism clearly teaches that “Confirmation is necessary for the completion of baptismal grace” (CCC 1285). Together, Baptism, Confirmation, and the Eucharist constitute the “sacraments of Christian initiation.” Since the three form a unity, without Confirmation and the Eucharist, Baptism is certainly valid and efficacious, but Christian initiation remains incomplete. Along with Confirmation and Holy Orders, Baptism imprints an “indelible character” on the soul of the recipient.

It is often unknown that the Anointing of the Sick (what used to be called Extreme Unction or the last rites) “is not a sacrament for those only who are at the point of death” (CCC 1514). It is available for those who are seriously sick, elderly, or facing a serious operation.

Parents sometimes delay having a child baptized, using the so-called argument that they will wait to allow the child to decide which faith he or she chooses to have. They have brought a child into the world. Surely they should also bring their child into the family of God. The Catechism states: “The Church and the parents would deny a child the priceless grace of becoming a child of God were they not to confer Baptism shortly after birth” (CCC 1250).

Not all have learned, moreover, the definition of a sacrament from childhood: “A sacrament is an outward sign instituted by Christ to give grace.” Or as the Catechism states: “The sacraments are efficacious signs of grace, instituted by Christ and entrusted to the Church,

by which divine life is dispensed to us" (CCC 1131). I would suggest that you commit either definition to memory if you do not already know it. This is the only formula that I will ask you to memorize in this entire book.

The Celebration of the Paschal Mystery

In the pages ahead I will emphasize the special aspects of each of the individual sacraments. In this introduction, I wish to highlight what is common to all of the sacraments—a celebration of the Paschal mystery of Christ, of his dying and rising and our encounter with him in each of the sacraments, each bringing with it “some particular grace” (USCCA 169).

To understand the concept of sacrament, it is important to understand its biblical roots. The word *sacrament*, or the Latin word *sacramentum*, was first used by Tertullian, a Christian writer who lived in Africa around AD 200. It is the Latin translation of the Greek word *mysterion*. This word *mysterion* gives us a significant key to the richness of the sacramental and liturgical life. Commonly translated, it means “mystery.” It is not a mystery in the sense of an Agatha Christie novel with complicated plots or clever ploys.

St. Paul uses the word *mysterion* twenty-one times. From it the Latin word *sacramentum* derives. In Ephesians 3:9, he writes of the “plan of the mystery hidden for ages in God.” In Ephesians 5:32, referring to marriage, he calls it “a great mystery.”

The word *mystery* means the “work of God.”

The wonderful works of God among the people of the Old Testament were but a prelude to the work of Christ the Lord in redeeming mankind and giving perfect glory to God. He accomplished this work principally by the Paschal mystery of his blessed Passion, Resurrection from the dead, and glorious Ascension, whereby “dying he destroyed our death, rising he restored our life.” . . . The Church celebrates in the liturgy above all the Paschal mystery by which Christ accomplished the work of our salvation. (CCC 1067)

This Paschal mystery—this dying and rising—is a mystery because it is the action of God. It is a mystery gradually unveiled and revealed in Christ Jesus. This mystery is unveiled to those who have been called to and initiated in the faith—you and me. For those outside the faith, it is still a mystery.

The liturgy, the sacramental life of the Church, puts us in touch with and lets us share in the hidden, inner (mysterious) life of God, revealed in the words and deeds of Jesus, most fully in the Paschal or Easter mystery—his death and Resurrection. Liturgy, from the Greek *leitourgia*, means “public work.” In our context, it means our participation in the work of God—principally in our celebration of his Paschal mystery. Liturgy is the work of the entire Trinity. “At every liturgy, the action of worship is directed to the Father, from whom all blessings come, through the Son in the unity of the Holy Spirit” (USCCA 167). Although the entire body of Christ celebrates the liturgy, within the assembly, the ordained person has a unique function of service (USCCA 171).

It would be a mistake to consider the seven sacraments, those primary liturgical moments in our lives as Catholics, as isolated events with no link to each other or no link to Christ and his Church. They are various aspects of the one Paschal or Easter mystery. Each in their own way, they prolong in time and space the unique mystery of Jesus Christ, above all his passion, death, and Resurrection—out of love for us. Through the liturgy, through the sacraments, Christ himself, along with all he did to save us, is rendered present.

Each sacramental encounter brings us in touch with the living and risen Jesus Christ, an encounter that changes and transforms us, that is, gives us grace. It is God's unique vehicle for reaching and changing you and me. The Catechism emphasizes that "for believers" the sacraments are "necessary for salvation" (CCC 1129). At the same time, even though God works primarily through the sacraments, "he also touches us through the community of the Church, through the lives of holy people, through prayer, spirituality and acts of love" (USCCA 170).

Christian liturgy not only recalls the events that saved us but also actualizes them and makes them present. The Paschal mystery of Christ is celebrated, not repeated. It is the celebrations that are repeated, and in each celebration there is an outpouring of the Holy Spirit that makes the unique mystery present. (CCC 1104)

"He did this once for all when he offered up himself" (Heb 7:27).

The whole liturgical life of the Church revolves around the Eucharistic sacrifice of the Mass and the other sacraments. "Sacraments are 'powers that come forth' from the Body of Christ, which is ever-living and life-giving. They are the actions of the Holy Spirit at work in his Body, the Church. They are 'the masterworks of God' in the new and everlasting covenant" (CCC 1116).

In Pope Benedict's book, *Jesus of Nazareth*, he asks a perceptive question at the outset: What did Jesus actually bring us? He states: "The answer is very simple: God." At the end of the book, he states that "man needs one thing." He states: "He needs God." In the sacraments, each of us encounters God. We uniquely encounter the transforming power of Jesus, the Son of God.

To this end, I invite you to contemplate the beautiful fresco at the beginning of this section of the Catechism. The early Christian depiction of the woman suffering from a hemorrhage, who is healed by contact with Jesus' robe, serves to symbolize the sacramental life of the Church. To understand this passage more fully, remember that a person with a hemorrhage was considered unclean, separated from the faith. By her healing, she became clean and reunited to the faith. So too, the sacraments heal, cleanse, and unite us to the Body of Christ. They continue in our day the works that Christ had performed during his early life. The sacraments are, as it were, "powers that go forth" from the Body of Christ to heal the wounds of sin and to give us the new life of Christ. "Jesus' words and actions during his hidden life and public ministry were already salvific, for they anticipated the power of his Paschal mystery" (CCC 1115). The sacraments uniquely bring us God and the divine power.

In this chapter, I will review the seven sacraments from a very specific angle. Later chapters will expand our understanding of the individual sacraments. Hopefully, they will help us see how each sacrament brings us in touch with the living and risen Jesus, the Jesus who died and rose out of love for us. Hopefully, we will understand more deeply how each one of the sacraments brings us, even now in our day, into the dying and rising experience, the Paschal event accomplished by Jesus out of love for us and our salvation. The sacraments are transforming encounters. They are not isolated events. They are a part of one central mystery, *mysterion*, his Easter mystery.

The Paschal mystery of Christ . . . cannot remain only in the past, because by his death he destroyed death, and all that Christ is—all that he did and suffered for all men—participates in the divine eternity, and so transcends all times while being made present in them all. The event of the Cross and Resurrection *abides* and draws everything toward life. (CCC 1085)

Each sacrament is our transformative share in the dying/rising experience of Jesus, which is essential for our salvation.

Baptism: “The person baptized belongs no longer to himself, but to him who died and rose for us” (CCC 1269). The baptized becomes forever a member of the living Body of the risen Christ.

Confirmation: The person receives the full outpouring of the Holy Spirit, the Holy Spirit who is the Easter

gift given on Pentecost as recorded in the Acts of the Apostles (2:1–36).

Eucharist: It is the sacrament of sacraments, the memorial, the rendering present of the dying and rising of Christ, the sacrament that strengthens our union, our communion, with the risen Christ and each other. It is a growth in the grace of Baptism that makes possible growth in the Christian life.

Penance: It is a dying to sin and in the words of the Catechism “a true ‘spiritual resurrection’” (CCC 1468). Why? It restores us to the life of the risen Lord by bringing death to sin, healing, and reconciliation.

Anointing: “By the grace of this sacrament the sick person receives the strength and the gift of uniting himself more closely to Christ’s Passion: in a certain way he is consecrated to bear fruit by configuration to the Savior’s redemptive Passion” (CCC 1521). In this sacred anointing, the gift of “peace” is received from the Holy Spirit. It gives the recipient the courage to overcome the difficulties of serious illness.

Holy Orders: The priest acts “in the person of Christ” as representative of Christ, head of the Church. He is a vessel for Christ. Christ acts through the person of the priest. The priest is configured to Christ by a special grace of the Holy Spirit, the Easter gift, to serve as Christ. “The ordained priesthood guarantees that it really is Christ who acts in the sacraments through the Holy Spirit for the Church” (CCC 1120).

Marriage: Christ enters a special covenant with a man and woman who become a married couple. “Christ

dwells with them, gives them the strength to take up their crosses and so follow him, to rise again after they have fallen, to forgive one another, to bear one another's burdens" (CCC 1642). This encounter with Christ enables couples to give to each other the same kind of total, free, and selfless love that characterized Christ's love on the Cross for us, a deep share in his Paschal mystery. Referring to marriage as the great mystery, *mysterion*, St. Paul compares it, the love between a man and woman, to that loving relation of Christ and the Church (Eph 5:32).

Each of these sacraments has consequences for the Christian life. Each one shapes how we lead our lives as followers of Jesus. "The saving grace of the dying and rising of Christ are communicated to us in the Sacraments so that we might live more perfectly Christ's truth and virtues such as love, justice, mercy, and compassion" (USCCA 176).

I encourage you to read a part or all of a chapter each day and make it a part of your daily prayer. Use the Scripture references as you read. Please do not become discouraged. Our faith is not simply formulas in a catechism but rather the realities they express. Our trust in the reality of God does not end with the formal or material expression of doctrine. It leads us to the personal reality of God proclaimed by that doctrine. At the heart of this treatment of the sacraments is the mystery of a living person, the mystery of Jesus Christ. That is the challenge of the Catechism: to let God help us to touch him. He continues to reveal himself to each of us in beautiful ways. In the words of Pope Benedict, Jesus came to bring us God.

Reflect

1. How does your faith serve as a lens through which you see the world? How would your perspective be different if you lacked the gift of faith?
2. How have you experienced the Paschal mystery—dying and rising with Christ—in your own life?
3. Reflect on and share a sacramental moment when you experienced the presence of Christ in a personal way.

Pray

Paul's Prayer

Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord
Jesus Christ,
who has blessed us in Christ with every
spiritual blessing in the heavens,
as he chose us in him, before the foundation
of the world,
to be holy and without blemish before him.
For this reason I kneel before the Father,
from whom every family in heaven and on
earth is named,
that he may grant you in accord with the
riches of his glory
to be strengthened with power through his
Spirit in the inner self,

and that Christ may dwell in your hearts
through faith;
that you, rooted and grounded in love,
may have strength to comprehend with all
the holy ones
what is the breadth and length and height
and depth,
and to know the love of Christ that surpasses
knowledge,
so that you may be filled with all the full-
ness of God.
Now to him who is able to accomplish far
more than all we ask or imagine, by the
power at work within us,
to him be glory in the church
and in Christ Jesus to all generations, for-
ever and ever. Amen.

—Ephesians 1:3–4, 3:15–21