

Sacramental Theology and Catechesis

The Catholic Church recognizes seven “Sacraments” which were introduced to us by our Lord Jesus Christ during the unveiling of His New Covenant. Marthaler describes a sacrament as “an outward sign of an invisible reality. In Catholic theology a sacrament is both a source and an expression of special grace.”¹ The Catholic Encyclopedia says that, “Sacraments are outward signs of inward grace, instituted by Christ for our sanctification.”² Finally, the Catechism explains as follows:

“As she has done for the canon of Sacred Scripture and for the doctrine of the faith, the Church, by the power of the Spirit who guides her ‘into all truth,’ has gradually recognized this treasure received from Christ and, as the faithful steward of God’s mysteries, has determined its ‘dispensation.’ Thus the Church has discerned over the centuries that among liturgical celebrations there are seven that are, in the strict sense of the term, sacraments instituted by the Lord.”³

What is clear from these definitions is that Christ gave the Sacraments to the Church for the purification, edification, and salvation of the members of His own body. Not only are they everything described above, they are events in the lives of God’s people – events which mark transitions in the stages of our faith journey in the footsteps of Jesus and which are celebrated with special rites, much fanfare, and, usually, with the Church community.

Of the seven Sacraments, three are fundamental: Baptism, Confirmation, and Eucharist. Indeed, these three are both literally and figuratively the foundation and core of the Church. Without them, the Church could not exist and God’s people would wander aimlessly through the wilderness in search of meanings hidden from human view.

¹ Marthaler, p. 439

² Knight, Sacraments

³ CCC, n. 1117

About baptism, The Catholic Encyclopedia says that:

“[Baptism is] [o]ne of the Seven Sacraments of the Christian Church; frequently called the ‘first sacrament’, the ‘door of the sacraments’, and the ‘door of the Church.’”⁴

Baptism was instituted by Jesus Himself:

Matthew 3:13-15 (NRSVA) ¹³Then Jesus came from Galilee to John at the Jordan, to be baptized by him. ¹⁴John would have prevented him, saying, “I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?” ¹⁵But Jesus answered him, “Let it be so now; for it is proper for us in this way to fulfill all righteousness.” Then he consented.

Again, it is clear that Baptism is a holy and beautiful event, a rite of passage into the body of Christ and the welcoming arms of the family of God. Because Baptism confers God’s grace of the forgiveness of sin, the Church must not delay the Sacrament of Baptism any longer than required for the preparation of the parents of infants or the catechesis of adults who ask to be accepted into the Church. In the case of infant Baptism, Jesus seems to want them in His house:

Luke 18:16 (NRSVA) ¹⁶But Jesus called for them and said, “Let the little children come to me, and do not stop them; for it is to such as these that the kingdom of God belongs.”

In the early Church, confirmation quickly followed Baptism as shown by Jesus:

Luke 3:21-22 (NRSVA) ²¹Now when all the people were baptized, and when Jesus also had been baptized and was praying, the heaven was opened, ²²and the Holy Spirit descended upon him in bodily form like a dove. And a voice came from heaven, “You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.”

The Sacrament of Confirmation is another rite of passage and a continuation of the development of the individual into full membership with the Church:

[Confirmation is a] sacrament in which the Holy Ghost is given to those already baptized in order to make them strong and perfect Christians and soldiers of Jesus Christ⁵

Third, Holy Eucharist is the most blessed and sacred of all the Sacraments and is the most important single event offered by the Church. The Catechism expresses it best:

⁴ Knight, Baptism

⁵ Knight, Confirmation

1324 The Eucharist is "the source and summit of the Christian life." "The other sacraments, and indeed all ecclesiastical ministries and works of the apostolate, are bound up with the Eucharist and are oriented toward it. For in the blessed Eucharist is contained the whole spiritual good of the Church, namely Christ himself, our Pasch."

1327 In brief, the Eucharist is the sum and summary of our faith: "Our way of thinking is attuned to the Eucharist, and the Eucharist in turn confirms our way of thinking." We speak of the Most Blessed Sacrament because it is the Sacrament of sacraments.

1391 Holy Communion augments our union with Christ. The principal fruit of receiving the Eucharist in Holy Communion is an intimate union with Christ Jesus. Indeed, the Lord said: "He who eats my flesh and drinks my blood abides in me, and I in him." Life in Christ has its foundation in the Eucharistic banquet: "As the living Father sent me, and I live because of the Father, so he who eats me will live because of me."⁶

Simply because it is so important to having life within us, First Communion should not be delayed longer than necessary for the instruction of the faithful who are called to the Table. For that reason, the Church in Canon Law has wisely included children in the banquet so long as they are carefully prepared:

The administration of the Most Holy Eucharist to children requires that they have sufficient knowledge and careful preparation so that they understand the mystery of Christ according to their capacity and are able to receive the body of Christ with faith and devotion.⁷

One is never sure that one is fully prepared to meet our Lord in the Eucharist. Christians find themselves in a constant state of growth and maturation, which will not be complete until they enter into eternal life with the Father in Heaven. The lack of perfect preparation, however, has never been, nor should it ever be, an obstacle to sharing in the Eucharistic meal with one's brothers and sisters and Jesus Himself. For that, all who believe in transubstantiation are exceedingly grateful especially as we meet Christ during the liturgy. Jesus, who took meals with sinners and imperfect people, heartily approves of the Church's position of less-than-perfect preparation.

Luke 5:30-32 (NRSVA)³⁰The Pharisees and their scribes were complaining to his disciples, saying, "Why do you eat and drink with tax collectors and sinners?"³¹Jesus

⁶ CCC, ns. 1324, 1327, 1391

⁷ CIC, 913

answered, “Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick; ³²I have come to call not the righteous but sinners to repentance.”

However, there is a problem: Roman Catholics in the United States are leaving the Church in record numbers. They are going to non-denominational “mega-churches” or abandoning church attendance altogether. Many forsake their faith because they simply do not understand it. Some feel offended by a “silly” rule or regulation, others have been put off by clergy, and still others have been upset by a fellow member. Trivial reasons, all, but nonetheless, enough to cause them to turn away – a symptom of a less-than-complete catechesis. In short, they do not completely understand the Eucharist.

Teaching the basic elements of our faith to all members of the body has been stressed over and over to the clergy, religious, and lay catechists from the beginning of Christianity:

In fulfilling its educational role, the Church, eager to employ all suitable aids, is concerned especially about those which are her very own. Foremost among these is catechetical instruction,(16) which enlightens and strengthens the faith, nourishes life according to the spirit of Christ, leads to intelligent and active participation in the liturgical mystery(17) and gives motivation for apostolic activity.⁸

Furthermore, in today’s world of declining numbers of priests and sisters, the laity must be fully informed in order to serve in their roles as witnesses and missionaries to the world and especially to their own children:

[The laity] live in the ordinary circumstances of family and social life, from which the very web of their existence is woven. They are called there by God that by exercising their proper function and led by the spirit of the Gospel they may work for the sanctification of the world from within as a leaven. In this way they may make Christ known to others, especially by the testimony of a life resplendent in faith, hope and charity. Therefore, since they are tightly bound up in all types of temporal affairs it is their special task to order and to throw light upon these affairs in such a way that they may come into being and then continually increase according to Christ to the praise of the Creator and the Redeemer.⁹

⁸ GE, n. 16-17

⁹ LG, n. 31

Confirmation is viewed by most U.S. Catholics as *THE* rite of passage and, for that very reason, even less-than-fervent parents desire to have their children confirmed. In fact, there were 632,000 confirmations in the United States last year and only half of them were students in Catholic schools.¹⁰ But, as we have seen, many parents are not good models for their children. Thus, the Church stresses even more energetically that formal catechesis is necessary:

– *The catechist for children and adolescents* continues to be indispensable. This catechist has the delicate mission of giving "the first notions of catechism and preparation for the sacrament of Penance, for First Communion and Confirmation." This responsibility is all the more pressing today if children and adolescents "do not receive adequate religious formation within the family".¹¹

The Code of Canon Law clearly states that Confirmation is to take place after the age of reason:

Can. 891 The sacrament of confirmation is to be conferred on the faithful at about the age of discretion unless the conference of bishops has determined another age, or there is danger of death, or in the judgment of the minister a grave cause suggests otherwise.¹²

Thus, it seems that we are doing it right. Confirmation now takes place in the seventh grade or later. It is not, however, that it is so important that the children have reached an age appropriate to the reception of the Sacrament as it is that they are of sufficient maturity to benefit by the catechesis that precedes the event. It is a critical time in their lives and it is our last best chance to teach them the faith and open the possibility of continuous diligence in loving the Lord, perhaps saving generations in the future. Pope John Paul II recognized this problem almost twenty years ago:

38. Next comes puberty and adolescence, with all the greatness and dangers which that age brings. It is the time of discovering oneself and one's own inner world, the time of generous plans, the time when the feeling of love awakens, with the biological impulses of sexuality, the time of the desire to be together, the time of a particularly intense joy

¹⁰ Almanac

¹¹ GDC, a. 232

¹² CIC, 891

connected with the exhilarating discovery of life. But often it is also the age of deeper questioning, of anguished or even frustrating searching, of a certain mistrust of others and dangerous introspection, and the age sometimes of the first experiences of setbacks and of disappointments. Catechesis cannot ignore these changeable aspects of this delicate period of life. A catechesis capable of leading the adolescent to reexamine his or her life and to engage in dialogue, a catechesis that does not ignore the adolescent's great questions - self-giving, belief, love and the means of expressing it constituted by sexuality - such a catechesis can be decisive. The revelation of Jesus Christ as a Friend, Guide and Model, capable of being admired but also imitated; the revelation of this message which provides an answer to the fundamental questions, the revelation of the loving plan of Christ the Savior as the incarnation of the only authentic love and as the possibility of uniting the human race - all this can provide the basis for genuine education in faith. Above all, the mysteries of the passion and death of Jesus, through which, according to St. Paul, he merited His glorious resurrection, can speak eloquently to the adolescent's conscience and heart and cast light on his first sufferings and on the suffering of the world that he is discovering.¹³

To strongly reiterate: Adolescent Confirmation is our last best chance to catechize the next generation of Roman Catholic Christians in the hope of saving them from the dangers of alienation and the abandonment of the practice of their faith. While it might be liturgically sound to revert to the elements of the early Church and follow Baptism with Confirmation before first Communion but, as tempting as it seems, such a shift would be a mistake. The Rite of Initiation of Christian Adults utilizes the proper order and it can because it is dealing with catechumens already of the age of reason. If we Baptize infants, we can give them first Communion in the early grades of school but we must insist on the educational opportunities which precede later Confirmation because *THEY* will be our next generation of witnesses and missionaries. They must understand the Eucharist.

¹³Catechisi, a. 38

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