

Catholic Catechism: Lesson 4

More from *Love That Never Ends: a key to the Catechism*, by DiNoia, O'Donnell, Cessario, and Cameron, Our Sunday Visitor Press, 1996.

Part One of the Catechism illustrates God's "relentless search for man. ... In the same way, God's initiative in drawing close to us and providing all the means required for us to reciprocate, for us to draw close to God, is at the heart of Part Two of the Catechism", 48. God provides the liturgy and sacraments to continue Christ's work in the Church. Our small efforts to agree with God's huge efforts to save us get us going. When we participate in liturgy and sacraments, we accept Christ transforming us from our present sinful condition to our divine destiny. Along these paths, we move from abandoning God to unity with Him. Then "we realize our destiny: ultimate communion with the God who is a community of love, the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit", 48.

"By 'liturgy' the Catechism means God's saving action toward us in Christ, the 'mystery of His will', and our response to God in Christ. Rooted in God's initiative and action, the liturgy is at one and the same time our praise, thanksgiving, and adoration for what God has done for us, and the presence of that saving action again through the mystery of Jesus Christ. 'The dual dimension of the Christian liturgy as a response of faith and love to the spiritual blessings the Father bestows on us' (1093) is perfectly expressed in the mystery of the Incarnation of Christ. Jesus Christ is at the center of the liturgy. As both God and man, He is God's perfect gift to us, and our perfect response to that gift. At the heart of the liturgy are the sacraments, the ways in which Christ continues to be present and effective among His people. Thus the Catechism often refers to the 'sacramental liturgy' of the Church", 48.

It helps to remember that sacrament is the visible sign of an invisible act. If we start with simple natural sacraments, we can move easily to supernatural sacraments. Raising your hand to greet someone is a visible sign of your invisible decision to welcome that person. Hopefully, it makes visible your invisible decision to respect that person. Moving on to Christ's supernatural sacraments, Baptism is visible water and audible words which signify the invisible washing away of Original sin. For adults Baptism washes away any subsequent sins also. Invisibly, the Trinity establishes union instead of division, salvation instead of damnation, and life in Christ instead of death in sin. Baptism redeems each person from Satan, whose property we are by Adam's sin.

Weekly, and even daily, we participate in the Liturgy of the Paschal Mystery. Once is enough per day, but I love to double-dip on occasion. Why? Because the Eucharistic Liturgy, or the Mass, renews everywhere and evermore "the Paschal Mystery of Jesus Christ: His passion, death, and resurrection", 49. Implicit in this list is Christ's Incarnation, without which He could not suffer, die, and resurrect. The Mass is salvation history in a nutshell, reenacting, replicating, and rededicating the Trinity's redemptive act. God is patient, welcoming us even if we are too distracted to realize what's happening at Mass. He doesn't mind if we miss the meaning and value of this Liturgy, so long as we keep returning to try. Eventually, we may get it right!

When we realize what Jesus is doing at Mass, the visible specifics fade away. It doesn't matter who the priest is, or how he does details. Why? Because we see Christ redoing His redemptive act. All the humans acting out the visible sign don't matter, because Jesus is the invisible actor in this divine drama. Along with Him, in top billing, are the Father and the Spirit. All Three make the Mass an everlasting Love Act, calling us forth from nothing, and back from sin, to join their Trinitarian Celebration. It's the eternal Love-Feast.

Our authors express this reality in smaller steps. "The passion, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ is not only an historical event which accomplished our salvation, and offered acceptable worship to God, an event like other historical events that happen once, and then is swallowed up in the past. The Paschal Mystery of Christ cannot remain only in the past, since what Christ accomplished through His cross, indeed all that He is as the Christ, participates in the divine eternity, and thereby transcends the category of time, even while being made present within it. The victory over death, and the consecration of all suffering, continues to exist in the glorified humanity of Christ *now* seated at the right hand of the Father. 'The event of the Cross and Resurrection *abides* and draws everything toward life' (1085)", 49. In this way eternity abides with us here below.

Mass is eternal heaven touching temporal earth. God's own transcendent Being invites us to participate in Eternity. This ongoing Trinitarian Act is ours, if only we accept it. What a Gift! The Father initiates everything by creation. The Son enacts Incarnation, Passion, Death, and Resurrection first in time, then always. The Spirit extends the Son's redemption eternally, encouraging us to partake of it, and thereby advance toward Eternal Union. How can we remain blasé? Why are we not enthused? Redemption "continues to be effective *for* us and *within* us in the sacraments", 49. God does most of the work, if only we do a little bit. If we attend, pay attention, and agree with Jesus, then we grow in His Life, or sanctifying grace. Let's grow until grace flows.

So Mass is supernatural transcendence of natural space and time, making Christ present to us, and us present to Christ. Through Revelation in the Flesh, we contact the Trinitarian One, and participate in Their/His Eternity. "This central theme of the Paschal Mystery links Part Two with the other parts of the Catechism, the other 'pillars' on which the whole structure of the Catechism rests. In part One we learn that the 'Paschal Mystery of Christ's cross and resurrection stands at the center of the Good News' (571). In Part Three, concerning Christian moral life, we learn that Christians 'are called to lead ... a life "worthy of the gospel of Christ" ... made capable of doing so by the grace of Christ and the gifts of his Spirit, which they receive through the sacraments and through prayer' (1692; Phil 1:27). Finally, Part Four, in exploring prayer and the spiritual life, tells us that 'prayer internalizes and assimilates the liturgy during and after its celebration' (2655)," 49.

One could say that the glue holding everything together is Mass. It is the lynch-pin, the meeting place that God sets aside to abide with us. Admission is free. "In this way, all of the distinct parts of the Catechism are closely related to one another. Precisely because worship and sacraments are the common public actions in which all Catholics must of necessity be involved, there is a sense in which Part Two is *the* integrating principle of the whole Catechism. The Second Vatican Council expressed this forcefully by declaring that the liturgy is the 'source and summit' of all of the Church's activity", 49.

No wonder that committed Christians, even non-Catholics, recognize the genius of the Catechism. Many people who take this book seriously develop more formal liturgies at their churches. The most serious join the Church. No other church has the Eucharist. Without nourishing themselves on Christ Himself, people can't grow as close to Him as Mother Teresa or Pope John Paul II. Holiness **is** what holiness **does**. Jesus set up a living community, built around the "breaking of the bread" by which His disciples "knew Him". Our attempts to explain the Mass fail because of its infinity. But each expression should remind us of mystical experiences we have had when Christ invites us to the Trinity through the Mass. God's infinity simply saves and spans His infinite distance from us, locating the contact-point in space-time, but leading us forth from earth to heaven.

"God reveals Himself not only as a community of trinitarian love, but also as one whose love 'overflows' into his work of creation, redemption, and the invitation to ultimate communion, the invitation to participate in the very community of love which is God's own life. In its liturgy and the sacraments, the Church celebrates the Paschal Mystery of Christ's 'Passion, Resurrection from the dead, and glorious Ascension' (1067) as a manifestation of God's true nature, an expression of God's initiative in sharing his life with us, and our response of praise and thanksgiving. Through the liturgy and the sacraments, God accomplishes what he has promised: our transformation in Christ. Only in this way can we be made ready for our life of communion with him, and with each other in him, for all eternity.

"It follows that the Catechism strongly emphasizes the role of the Holy Spirit in the trinitarian 'work' of the Church's liturgy and sacraments. The mystical 'mood' of Part Two is intensified through a theological accent reminiscent of the Eastern Church when the Catechism consistently returns to the central role of the Holy Spirit in accomplishing the ongoing celebration of the Paschal Mystery. Just as the Father sends the Son into the world for its salvation, the Son now sends the Holy Spirit into the world to prepare the Church for the reality of his Paschal Mystery, to make it present, and to effect in each Christian that grace which flows from the side of the crucified Christ now risen and glorious. This is the grace of the sacraments, the grace of the sacred humanity of Christ now made present and effective by the Spirit in the liturgy and sacraments of the Church", 50-51.

Because Trinity is Undivided, each Person works in each step. For simplicity we focus on one at a time. The Spirit is power, energy, action, teaching, transforming, designing and fulfilling. These verbs do not exhaust Spirit-act, but show more fully what the Third Person does. The authors summarize this process eloquently.

“The Father is the source and goal of the liturgy. He fills us with his blessings and ‘pours into our hearts the Gift that contains all gifts, the Holy Spirit’ (1082). The liturgy and the sacraments are the work of the Son, Jesus Christ, who is both priest and victim, for it is his Pascal Mystery which he signifies and makes present in the liturgy. The Holy Spirit prepares the Church for the reception of Christ and makes the mystery of Christ present in the sacramental liturgy of the Church. This trinitarian action is accomplished in order to bring us into communion with Christ: sacramental communion here on earth in the liturgy, and ultimate communion with him in heaven”, 51. Let us than partake, and spread the Good News of the Mass.