

CONFERENCE THREE

THE SACRAMENTS AS PARTICIPATION IN THE TRINITY

The subject of this conference is 1) the sacraments, particularly the sacrament of reconciliation and the Eucharist, and 2) Eucharistic spirituality, which is the key to priestly spirituality.

Our participation in the Trinity through the theological virtues and the sacraments is the work of the Holy Spirit. Its understanding is not only helpful for us priests, but also for the spiritual formation of the laity. In this conference we will consider how the sacraments give us a participation in the Trinity, and how this helps us to make spiritual progress, and to advance to contemplation.

Baptism introduces us to the life of the Trinity. Confirmation strengthens us in this life so that we can bear witness to the Trinity. Penance removes the obstacles to our dwelling in the Trinity, and through the Eucharist we are intimately united with the life of the Trinity. By ordination to the priesthood we are configured more completely to Christ, who is Himself the Image of the Father.

The value of the Sacrament of Reconciliation is illustrated by the experience of Alcoholics Anonymous as related in the so-called Blue Book. In this program of holiness the spiritual experience does not come in the third step, in which, having recognized one's powerlessness to control one's addictions, and having recognized a power greater than oneself through which this control may be attained, one turns one's heart and life over to this power, namely to God. Nor does the spiritual experience normally occur when one makes a moral inventory of one's past, that is, an examination of conscience and resolves to make amends to the extent possible. Rather, it occurs when one tells another person the results of one's moral inventory which, in the case of a Catholic, is ordinarily done by confession to a priest. Here, then, one experiences God. For this spiritual experience it is not enough to turn one's life and will over to God, nor to make a moral inventory and regret one's failings. The experience of AA as expounded in the Blue Book reveals that it occurs in the one-to-one telling of one's faults and failings to another person. This helps us understand both the psychological basis for individual confession and its supernatural effectiveness.

A devout Catholic layman told me that Protestants had an advantage over Catholics. They could tell their sins to God and that was the end of them. The Catholic had, in addition, to tell his or her sins to a priest. It is really the Catholic who has the advantage. When we tell our sins to God in the privacy of our hearts, we may not be as careful in examining our conscience. We may not have true contrition or purpose of amendment. We may regret them for imperfect but good motives such as the fear of Hell or the desire for Heaven, but not because we have offended a loving divine father whose Son has given His life and blood for love of us. On the contrary, in preparing to tell another person or a priest we must formulate with more care our confession, examine our conscience more carefully to do so, and even if our motives are imperfect our sins are absolved, and we have the assurance that they are absolved. True, if we have sorrow for our sins because they offend God who is so good, they are forgiven, but the obligation to

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tell them to a priest remains and gives us further assurance of forgiveness. This explains why the Church only allows general confession, where many are absolved without confessing their sins, in extraordinary circumstances. That is, circumstances where the penitents would be “deprived of sacramental grace or holy communion for a long time through no fault of their own” (c.961.2). In these cases the Church makes the validity of the confession depend on whether the persons “at the same time intend to confess individually the serious sins which at present cannot be confessed (c.962.1). Many lay people may be trapped in their sins by not understanding this, and by not being properly informed by priests who desire to make things easy for them. The conditions for validity of the absolution in general confession should be explained (c.962.2).

This desire to make things easy for the laity explains why in many parishes the whole congregation goes to receive but not many go to confession, even over a period of years. Father Hardon explained to a congregation that those who were cohabitating, those who were in a second marriage without the first being annulled, those who had committed adultery, those who missed Mass on Sundays, should not receive. Only half the congregation went to receive. Those who mistakenly go to receive in the conditions which Fr. Hardon explained, conditions that require abstinence from communion, do not grow through receiving the Eucharist. Their sin in receiving under those conditions may be mitigated or excused because of ignorance or improper and bad instruction, e.g., a failure of the priest to observe c.962.2 mentioned above.

Besides a better preparation for confession and a greater assurance of forgiveness when one goes to individual confession, such as the Church requires even when general absolution is rightly performed, there is the advice of the priest and the opportunity for him to explain what is required of the person. For example, a retreatant who was in an invalid second marriage and who abstained for this reason from going to communion asked what he had to do to go to communion and whether he could be absolved from his sins. It was explained to him that either he had to live with his wife as brother and sister, the internal forum solution, or else place his first marriage before a marriage tribunal to see if it had been valid. With a decree of nullity he could then have his second marriage blessed and receive communion. At a general absolution, this man would not have been given the advice he needed.

It is the great and unique privilege of the priest to confer the Sacrament of Reconciliation. In it he is acting in persona Christ, that is, Christ Himself is acting in and through the priest in giving the absolution, just as he is acting through the priest in the words of consecration of the Mass to bring about the transformation of the bread and wine. Moreover, in this sacrament the priest has the opportunity to give advice and guide the penitent into greater union with Jesus for the penitent's and the Church's welfare. There is a ripple effect. Insofar as the penitent becomes a better person he is influencing others with whom he comes in contact to become better, as well as bringing grace down upon others of whom he is unaware. In hearing confessions, it is good for the priest to murmur the sacred name of Jesus or that of Mary, invoking their light, that he may see beyond the words of the penitent what his or her situation is and what he should say to help him or her, confident that Jesus and Mary are most desirous of responding. In fact, it is from them that the priest's desire to help the penitent comes.

As we know, sufficient matter for the absolution is any sin committed since baptism. Even current temptations which are not sins are fruitfully mentioned in the

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confession, since sometimes that is sufficient to rid the penitent of these temptations. This is not magic, but the operation of the grace of Christ who appreciates humility. The confession of past sins helps to heal and strengthen the penitent. The temptation of venial sins is sufficient matter for confession and these “confessions of devotion” have a healing power. As priests realize, scrupulous people profit by the confessor insisting on obedience, and also advising against general confessions where they arise out of scrupulosity. Holy priests like St. Philip Neri and the Cure of Ars have spent long hours hearing confessions. St. Philip Neri himself went to confession daily. They realized how beneficial this sacrament is. We priests can help not only persons, but society too by encouraging frequent confession.

There is an international Catholic woman preacher who knows how to do this, and at her services there may be as many as seven priests hearing confessions of almost the entire congregation, including people who have not gone to confession for decades, as well as people who are engaged in Church work. This is a gift from God, for which priests should pray, and be willing and eager to exercise.

Dr. Karl Menninger, founder of the famous Menninger Clinic in Topeka, Kansas, wrote a book entitled *Whatever Became of Sin?* The loss of the sense of sin, the lack of confessors, of penitents, and of people who have the humility to go to one-on-one confession is the bane of our society. With the loss of the sense of sin goes the loss of any purpose of amendment for wrongful behavior. This is what Scripture calls hardness of heart. “Today if you hear the voice of God, harden not your heart,” says the psalmist, and these words are addressed to the priest in the liturgy of the hours. He must put the welfare of others above his own convenience and be what he is called, a priest of God, and alter Christus, ready and glad to administer the sacraments which are the keys to Heaven but also to a fruitful life.

With the loss of the sense of sin and of amendment of life go all the sins which afflict families and society: fornication, adultery, abortion, illegitimacy, parental neglect—especially on the part of fathers, drug and alcohol addictions, abuse of children, and violence. Here we see why the renewal of the priesthood is needed for the renewal of society. A concerted effort on the part of holy priests united in the teaching, discipline, and service of the Church and of the faithful is what is necessary. It is up to each one of us to do our part in fulfilling our priestly calling.

The Father has sent Jesus to call us to a wedding feast. But for a wedding feast one must be suitably attired. That is the purpose of the Sacrament of Reconciliation – to clothe the invited guests with grace. First, Jesus calls His servants whom He has washed clean with the water of Baptism and with His blood in the Sacrament of Reconciliation and has fortified by His word, His teaching. Thus, He has dressed them with faith, hope, and charity and the assemblage of virtues, held together in the bond of peace. Then He sends these servants, His priests, out to call others to this wedding banquet by their preaching and by the administration of the sacraments.

As priests we must teach the faithful that the banquet on earth, the Eucharist, is the prototype of the heavenly banquet which lasts forever. In the Eucharist we banquet on the flesh and blood of our Savior. He says to us, “Unless you eat my flesh and drink my blood you will not have life in you. But he who eats my body and drinks my blood has eternal life, and I will raise him up on the last day.” This is the banquet that makes us one with the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, and that makes us one with each other

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forming the Christian community. As *Lumen Gentium* of Vatican II says, the people of God are called into the unity of the Trinity.

This banquet is a sacrifice whose victim is consumed. Christ Himself, the High Priest, offers the unbloody sacrifice using the instrumentality of a priest. The victim is the victim slain on Calvary. The death of Jesus is shown forth by the separate consecration of His Body and His Blood accomplished by Jesus' own words in the institution narrative. Body and Blood consecrated separately show forth sacramentally the death of Jesus. The second person of the Trinity is fully present under each species.

In the death which occurred on Calvary the dead body of Jesus was still hypostatically united with the person of the Word, indestructibly, as also the soul of Christ was indestructibly united with that same Word. Death was the separation of body and soul, but each remained the body and soul of the Word and their reunion was His Resurrection. And it is this resurrected Jesus who comes to merge His total being with the total being of the communicant in a feast of love. This is a true union in which the whole of Jesus in His humanity and divinity merges with the humanity of the communicant. This merging was shown forth in type in the Old Testament by Elijah who raised the dead son of the widow of Sareptha by lying upon him, his mouth pressed against the boy's mouth, his chest upon his chest, body upon body (1 Kings 17:21 NRSV). This is the image of Jesus endowing us with true life, His life, by merging His body with our body in communion.

While the persons of the Trinity are really distinct, they are not separable. When Jesus comes onto the altar at the words of consecration His Father and the Holy Spirit are also present. Jesus has said that He is in the Father and the Father is in Him. Where they are the whole court of Heaven is also present. That is why, even when the priest celebrates Mass privately, it is such a great event. Besides Heaven being present, the whole Church, the mystical body of Christ is present.

Jesus pours His whole life: His living, dying, and rising into the Mass. He does so not only because this is the greatest thanksgiving that can be given to His Father, but also to unite us with this thanksgiving so that it may become our thanksgiving, our prayer, our offering, and our communion with Him. That is why the priest should offer this sacrifice and enter into this communion daily, as the greatest act he can perform. And we must teach the faithful that they are members of the royal priesthood, called to offer their entire life and all that they are and have together with the priest in the sacrifice of the Mass, and to receive the Jesus who comes to merge their lives with His, and them with each other, to form the unity of the Church. This is why Pope Benedict XVI can say that the Eucharist is the Church.

In the ordination of a priest he is admonished to imitate what he performs. This is Eucharistic spirituality. To prepare to celebrate the Eucharist we must follow the example and teaching of Christ who said, "Take up your cross daily and follow me" (Luke).

The secret of advancing in the spiritual life – we either advance or go backward – is abandonment and detachment, two aspects of the same act. This is what the Eucharist teaches, for in it Jesus has placed His dying and His rising. We die by abandonment and detachment and arise to true peace of heart and a genuine love of Jesus and of people. Abandonment is a trusting delivering of ourselves into the hands of God, giving up to Him our life and our will. The third step of Alcoholics Anonymous is to turn one's life

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over to a power greater than oneself, recognizing one's own powerlessness (humility) and that there is a power greater than oneself (confidence). The Mass teaches us abandonment and detachment. This is the spirituality of the Eucharist.



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