

Being Sacramental In Today's World

The relationship between the Catholic Church and the rest of the world is like any other relationship. At times it is very close, and at times the entities seem poles apart. One of our greatest strengths as a Church is our system of sacraments. We often make news on other issues, especially anything pertaining to sexual ethics, because our positions on moral matters are both well-reasoned and controversial in the best sense of that word. But many people relate quite strongly to Catholic worship. They find something mysterious about it, and they cannot always explain why and how it touches them so deeply. People are hungry for something, and even non-believers find that the Catholic sacraments at least offer them a relationship.

What Catholics hold in common with every other person is the mystery of life and death, and what we offer is a way to approach that mystery. Every age and every belief has wrestled with life and death. Often we feel we are unique, that no other generation has faced the particular issues that ours faces; well, others have faced these issues, but under different appearances according to their own culture and time. The Catholic Church has remained in dialogue with the culture partly because we have kept our heart close to the mystery of life and death, because our worship has engaged that mystery on a highly symbolic level, and because we have demonstrated a certain flexibility to adjust to the temperaments and gifts of shifting societies. Our sacraments and our liturgy have sustained a relationship with the world; even when the relationship is not close, it remains in dialogue.

This talk will explore some aspects of today's world, its values and habits, and put them in dialogue with the Catholic tradition, especially what we offer through our sacraments. My conclusion will be that to be sacramental in today's world is to offer precisely the nourishment that society hungers to receive.

There are many ways to conduct this analysis, and I have chosen a four-point matrix that the Church recommends for those in preparation for baptism. Paragraph 75 of the Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults wants the catechumens brought to maturity in these areas: catechesis, community, worship, and mission – or, to use the Greek words that make up this tradition, *kerygma*, *koinonia*, *leiturgia*, and *diakonia*. Although we customarily think of these as religious categories, I believe they are also humanistic categories that can be used to analyze the values of a culture. I will bring you through this matrix twice; first, to explain how it applies to culture today, and second, to show how it explains the Church today. I admit I am speaking as one most familiar with the American culture, both urban and rural. I

have traveled to other parts of the world, but this is my first trip to Australia. I have several good Aussie friends, who impress me with their faith, skill, and wit, but I stepped off the plane here about 30 hours ago, so I do not claim to be an expert. I still hope that these thoughts will stimulate some dialogue that will be fruitful for us all.

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So, let's take a look at society. The first category is catechesis. By catechesis I mean the kind of instruction that forms one's life – not just head knowledge, but the orientation of one's values. I think what people in our society want to know is who they are inside, but they also have a fascination with getting any information from the outside, especially if it quickens them inside – that is, if it feels like entertainment. We have witnessed rapid technological advances in internet capability through computers and mobile phones. Vast amounts of information are now readily available, but it is not always reliable; some people overwhelmed by information become gullible to its less reliable enticements. People are more attracted to stimulus than to concentration, and to impulse than reflection. Units of communication continue to shrink – you can see clickable headlines without reading an article, names without reading obituaries; visual stimuli pass quickly in video, film, and advertising; musical tunes have been reduced to ringtones. The media are flexible enough to work with these preferences. After all, they are in the business of giving us the present, which ever changes. By framing the present as a time of conflict and the future as a time of uncertainty, the media are able to hold our attention to their reports. By giving us opposing points of view even on topics when one argument clearly outweighs another, and doing so on a daily basis, the media can feed our thirst for making decisions quickly without the reason that experience brings. Some media outlets do a very fine job of in-depth reporting, but that is not always attractive to people more content with a series of short stimulations. In this milieu, people coming to the Catholic Church for catechesis are often put off by the length of commitment we expect to prepare for baptism, penance, first communion, and marriage. We even expect adults to continue their lifelong learning about the Church. But a studied approach to catechesis does not fit the more contemporary models of a more immediate, and hence a more shallow learning.

The second category is community. By this I refer to the sharing of a group's life and ethical behavior. Many have lamented that ethical standards in society at large have been lowered, but expectations are still high in many regards. People do not tolerate hypocrisy, for example, and its appearance can damage the reputation of an individual or an institution. A good community has an identifiable source of authority, but it is popular to question and demean authority. For example, people are suspicious of decisions made at the top of a hierarchical structure without consultation of those further down. The media offer a much-needed critique of authority, and they sometimes overtake authority in the minds of the community. Community life intrinsically demands some experience of being with other

people, but this has become more and more virtual with the advance of electronic communication. People can act in isolation while shopping online, getting money from an automated teller, and purchasing gas directly from the pump. They no longer need to attend sporting events to follow their favorite team, nor concerts to hear their favorite music. Even close relationships have become virtual. Actually being present for concerts, sporting events and dates raises the experience to a much higher human standard, but many are opting for the comfort of home instead of the thrill of another's physical presence. One of the valued ethical standards is the right to choose; choice allows an expression of one's personal freedom and personality. Take someone from a third world country into a store sometime and show them the toothpaste; they will be stymied by the myriad of choices, which most of us make based on the cleverness of marketing rather than the science of chemistry. Another source of authority is celebrity; people will buy products based on an endorsement by someone who has no particular knowledge of the field, but with whom we wish to be associated because it puts us in relationship with someone who has achieved value in a different field, such as sports. Children's sporting events have become more important for this reason; sports hold the possibility for unparalleled wealth, esteem from peers and strangers, and the joy of play. A sporting event is a microcosm of conflict and resolution in a world in which the strong should overpower the weak, and preferably within the space of a few hours. Sporting events operate out of their own code of ethics that many find appealing; the rules of the game help them make sense out of struggle and achievement. It is all too easy, then, to see church sacramental events as occasions for people to be celebrities for a day, whether it is children on the occasion of their first communion or couples getting married. When the Catholic Church promotes the community values of education, sexual ethics, or conversion of heart, these seem to get in the way of the celebrity cult, the lens through which these events are often perceived. Ultimately, the community usually determines right from wrong according to another standard, finances. Cohabiting couples often say they are living together in order to save money, as if other pleasures are not involved or at least would not be valued by Churches the way sound economics would be. Others delay their marriage because they cannot afford the one they would like to have. Families choose cremation and private services to avoid the expense of a funeral. The desire for fiscal wealth has driven some people paradoxically to make bad decisions about how to invest, whether or not to gamble, and where to spend money. At their worst, marketing and public relations have become exercises in deception, convincing people they are saving money by making a purchase, whereas in fact they are losing it. People want to be fiscally responsible, but because many do not have the catechetical skills to study the issue in depth nor the ability to avoid the fascination of immediate judgments and results, they are equipped not to thrive but to decline, often within a community that shuns the poor.

The third category is worship. With regard to formal worship, people in society tolerate the coexistence of multiple beliefs. All this sets in relief the Catholic Church's position, articulated by the Congregation on the Doctrine of the Faith as recently as the year 2000 in *Dominus Iesus*, "that the Church of Christ, despite the divisions which exist among Christians, continues to exist fully only in the Catholic Church" (16). Other Christian Churches do not accept that, and society tends to regard the Catholic Church as one religion among equals. The movement away from organized religions with their hierarchy and traditions has been hastened by the abuse of religious fervor in areas such as embezzlement, the sexual abuse of children, the killing of doctors who perform abortions, and international terrorism. When some people become fascinated with more superficial matters of a religion like ours – including vestments, rubrics, and customs recently abandoned – they can look remarkably out of touch with society. People want choices of religions and choices within religions. This feeds their catechetical need to know who they are and to live in accordance with it. At the same time, silence, upon which the spiritual life traditionally depends, is avoided by those who fill the empty spaces of their lives with music, talk radio and the television, whether they are at home, at work, in shops, or in their own cars. People have plenty of private time, but they fill the silence with sound that diminishes introspection. Some even fall asleep to the sound of music and the images of video. The freedom to worship then morphs into a freedom from worship, which some regard as a catechetically enlightened path to pursue.

The fourth category is service. By this I mean doing for others not just because you should but because you want to, because your own inner sense of order demands that you share it with someone else. Service is a kind of evangelization; it comes out of belief to serve others, and it promotes belief in the others who are served. In society, people want a better world. They value development at home and abroad. However, the isolation that technology has developed turns altruism into egoism. We do for others not so much for their benefit as for our own. Our computers come with files already marked My Computer, My Files, My Pictures, My Music, My Scans. Your internet community is called your followers. Savvy marketing makes people think that the product is all about them, but it is usually about the company's own bottom line. This isn't to say that companies don't want your enjoyment and your benefit; they do, but often because it will keep you as a customer. The last issue of *Time* magazine in 2006, the one that traditionally identifies the person of the year, put a mirror on the cover. You. You were the person of the year. It's all about you. So, service of others does happen, but it is often tainted by personal benefit. At worst, we serve others so that they will serve us.

These are the values of our society as I see them across this matrix. I have sounded negative about them because I believe the Church can enrich society. We have what society needs for a fuller expression of life. Of course, we often succumb to the same weaknesses

evident in the rest of society, which make us guilty of hypocrisy, one of the sins that society still hesitates to forgive. But on the whole, we have something to offer. Here's how I see it.

The first category, again, is catechesis, teaching people not just what we believe, but letting these beliefs become the organizing principle of their lives. We believe in some foundational points: that there is a God, that Jesus is the Son of God, that he sent us the Holy Spirit, that he is really present to us in the sacraments and especially in the eucharist, that he offers us life after death, that prayer makes a difference, that the world is good, that sin can be forgiven, and that the most important thing we do each week is to celebrate the mass, the source and summit of our lives. These are our principle beliefs, and they do make a difference in how we live – how we reach decisions, with whom we associate, and how we view the point of our days. We also rely on our tradition; we believe that the ritual and the behavior that we have inherited possess the values of antiquity and universal scope. We get our information from the bible, from the liturgy, from the Magisterium, and from our brothers and sisters in Christ. We believe in the value of preaching, that we will learn from the homiletic proclamation of the word of God. In short, what makes our catechesis different is not just its content but also its method; it comes from tradition, it is handed on in person, it starts in the bible, and it continues in the deep reflection of the Church today. Catechesis does not happen instantaneously, nor is it something that shares equal value with its opposing view. Catechesis is safe shelter in the storms of life.

The second category is community. We believe in the value of the public gathering. We put all our efforts into Sunday mass; that is where the community expresses itself and nourishes itself, not as individuals but as the body of Christ. Within that community we have different roles to play; some see this as a distasteful hierarchy; others as the fantastic diversification of the gifts of the Spirit. As the community gathers, each contributes what each has, and all parts are important, no matter who sits where or wears what. As for our behavior outside of church, we believe that Christ is the judge of right and wrong. We believe that the community's good behavior is to be examined by the gospel. We sometimes fall to society's belief that finances determine what is right and wrong; after all, we usually decide what we will do and not do at the parish based on how much things cost and how strong the contributions are; we expect pastors to be not just good preachers but also good fundraisers, and the same is even more true of bishops. We often promote religious vocations based on materialistic perks – scholarship packages, travel opportunities, comfortable homes, respect from people, servants to clean up, health and retirement benefits, and so on. Priesthood sometimes attracts candidates with debt because they see it as a way of getting care. Our community is not perfect. Behavioral integrity especially among church leaders remains a concern. But in the Church, the very imperfection of community life is its strength. By working with other people, even those with whom we do not always get along, we

experience the body of Christ at a deeper level. If we could choose the individuals with whom we wanted to worship each Sunday, we probably would not choose exactly those who show up with us. But that does not interfere with worship; it enhances it. We value community more than isolation.

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The third category is worship. Whereas the culture continues to promote virtual reality, the Catholic Church is steeped in incarnational piety that prizes human contact with one another and with nature. Our worship uses bread, wine, oil, voice, gesture, posture, ash, birth, sex, death, and burial in the earth. People who say they prefer the great outdoors over church buildings that are nothing but bricks and mortar haven't paid attention to the principles of Catholic worship. Yes, we use buildings, but oh do we ever use nature. We believe in the sacredness of certain places and of certain times. We rely on the transcendental beauty of music and poetry, art and architecture. We treasure the contributions of the past, but we develop these expressions from age to age. We value prayer, dialogue and silence; where people avoid silence in their daily lives, we create it in churches; we believe it helps us reflect more deeply on who we are, and who our Creator is. We also value unity and peace; we pray for them in every eucharistic prayer as the benefit we want God to give those who are present, those who have left isolation to be gathered together as one, in a place and a ritual where that unity and peace can truly happen. Sunday mass, then, is our top priority. There we will hear the greatest word of all in the sacred scriptures, which should challenge preachers and musicians to give the best they have. The experience challenges worshipers to form a community during and after mass, to pray well, to observe silence well, and to shoulder the difficult task of religious formation. The sacraments of the Church are the nexus where these worlds meet. After all, they deal with symbols, and symbols speak more eloquently than words to the human heart. Weddings, first communions, quinceañeras and funerals draw together people who do not otherwise patronize a church; some despair that the Church has thus become irrelevant; quite the contrary is true. The Church is so relevant that people still find one another there when it really matters. Some people treat these events as mere social expressions, but they are never "merely social." If they were, they wouldn't be happening at church. They are infused with spiritual meaning, and it is our responsibility to bring that meaning to the fore. We do this through daily personal prayer that orients us toward the eucharist, which then strengthens us for the work of the week ahead.

The fourth category is service, helping others out of a personal imperative to preach what we believe and to invite others in. As a rule Catholics do not evangelize very well. We think of evangelization as going door to door like salespeople, and we think our Church shouldn't need to do that. Our approach to evangelization is to sit in the parish office and wait for the phone to ring. But when we are convinced with the joy of our faith, it will surface in our

conversation, behavior and relationships. We will want to invite others to join us. Some Catholics just want to defend the faith, as if the point is to show how we are right and everyone else is wrong; but the goal is rather to share the faith, and to invite others to share our joy in Christ. In a society suspicious of organized religion, this takes no little courage, but it is easy to do if our conviction is strong. Especially at worship, we are called to exercise good hospitality toward others. Make the stranger feel welcome. Do not succumb to the temptations of isolation. At daily mass in the US, for example, it is common to see participants sitting so far apart from one another, that when it comes time for the sign of peace, they smile and wave; they cannot possibly make any physical contact because of the distances involved. We can do better than this.

Seekers do not always know what they are seeking. But in the end they are seeking meaning for their lives in the face of inevitable death. They want to grow personally and to contribute something to society, but they often do not know how. Many people cannot articulate the spiritual hungers they have, but they are there. People seek purpose, community, and guidance, and I think the Catholic Church can provide it all. Our best avenue is through Sunday mass. That is where we gather as a people who have been baptized in Christ, leaving behind a former way of life and following him as our center; a people who have been confirmed, strengthened by the gift of the Holy Spirit to bear witness to our faith before others; a people who share the eucharist, the sacrifice of Jesus Christ, who is present among us, and whose love draws us together, offering us hope for a future of peace.

We will best address these needs if we celebrate the liturgy well. We come regularly. We invite others to join us. We join in the singing and the responses. We observe the silences. We listen to the word of God. We reflect on the preaching. We eat the body and drink the blood of the Lord. We establish friendships to build up our faith. And we go out into the world to live according to the gospel and to tell others about Christ. When we do that, we offer food to the spiritually hungry. We will be sacramental in today's world.