



Catholic Belief and Practice

by
Fr. John Ramsay

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M.A. Associates**

**www.catholicassociates.com
PO Box 636, Enfield, Middlesex, EN2 9HX**

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CHAPTER 1 – THE FOUNDATION OF FAITH IN REASON

This is the text of a series of talks on what we Catholics often call 'The Faith'. Talks on the doctrine and practices of the Catholic Church - what Catholics believe and do and why. This is not a series of disconnected statements of belief but rather a way of life. No picking and choosing is acceptable - all doctrines form part of the whole body of truth revealed to us by God through His Church. Some practices may be unpopular but they are accepted because of our belief that the church has the right to lay down laws.

Those over the age of fifty will recognise the framework I have used - it is drawn from the old 'penny' catechism and I have used it because it is both comprehensive and logical - it covers all the ground clearly. So we shall be talking about God - what He has revealed to us about Himself and His plans for us. His expectations - what He is asking of us and what our future destiny is if we accept His plans, - and if we don't.

First though - and this is essential - we must satisfy ourselves that God exists. We must have a firm foundation for our beliefs; and we believe such a foundation exists and that an unprejudiced mind CAN come to believe God exists:

- That He is almighty, and
- That He created us to share His life for ever

Having said that, most of us, indeed the vast majority of us, heard first of God from our mother. She told us quite simply about God, Jesus, Calvary - the basic beliefs. She taught us what God wanted and did not want - right and wrong. She taught us our first prayers - thus beginning our love relationship with God, and - let's be quite clear - she was RIGHT. Nevertheless, if I am to base my whole life on the belief that God exists, the FOUNDATION for that belief must be stronger than just the fact that my mother said so!

So we always start by satisfying ourselves in an adult, rational way that God exists. Some talk of 'proofs' which is unwise - I prefer 'reasons' or 'arguments' for believing or, and this is better, 'ways' of coming to a knowledge of God. 'Ways' was a word used by the great St. Thomas Aquinas and he used five. I am going to use two of them and the first one goes like this: nothing exists of itself- nothing caused itself. It was caused by something else. Take a table, for instance, it didn't produce itself. It was made by a joiner from wood. That wood came from a tree and that tree came from another tree which came from another tree which came from yet another tree and so on. Or take you and me -we didn't produce ourselves - our parents did. And who produced them? - their parents: and who produced them? - their parents and we are off on the roundabout again. Even the theory of EVOLUTION could only suggest HOW it all came about and not what caused it. The latest theory is that our world began with a big bang caused by exploding gases - perhaps it did but then who struck the match?. True science and true theology are not contradictory but complementary the first is saying HOW things happen and the other is saying WHO made it happen. Here, we are faced with an endless succession of causes and effects.

So we have a 'chicken and egg' situation - in other words, no satisfactory answer. Unless, that is we accept the existence of what I'll call 'SOMETHING OTHER'. 'Something other' that didn't start - didn't have to be caused by another. Something that WAS, IS AND ALWAYS WILL BE - something eternal. Something that always has existed and always will exist.

Revelation comes to our help here and I will give two examples, one from the Old Testament and one from the New. In the third chapter of the Book of Exodus we read how Moses saw a bush burning and, on approaching it, he hears the voice of God which tells him that he is to lead his people out of Egypt. He is hesitant: who will believe him? so he asks God to tell him His name and he receives the answer 'I AM WHO AM: tell them I AM sent you'. Then, in the 8th. chapter of St. John's Gospel there is an account of a confrontation between Our Lord and the Pharisees. Towards the end of it, Our Lord said, 'Your father Abraham rejoiced to think that he would see my day; he saw it and was glad.' The Jews then answered, 'You are not fifty yet, and you have seen Abraham!' and Jesus replied, 'I tell you most solemnly, before Abraham ever was, I AM.'

They knew quite well that he was telling them he was God for they attempted to stone him. Hence it is that St. Thomas Aquinas described eternity as a 'PERPETUAL NOW'. To God, one million years ago and one million years from now are equally present. This 'SOMETHING OTHER' then did not have to begin, to be caused, indeed it caused or started everything else out of nothing. So now we are talking of a 'CREATOR' since creation is the production of something out of nothing. Now creation is limitless because if you don't need materials you can do anything. So the Creator is INFINITE and what is created is not self-supporting so the Creator also conserves or keeps in being, all that has been created. Now, let's take things a stage further: 'Space' is something, so SOMETHING OTHER made it and occupied it and is therefore OMNIPRESENT. 'Knowledge' is something, so 'Something Other' is OMNISCIENT: Power is something, so something other is OMNIPOTENT or ALMIGHTY.

Here we bring in the second of St. Thomas' five ways: Creation is not haphazard, a result of an accident. There is a plan or design here. A mind has conceived it, a will has put it into effect. Now we call a being with a mind and will a PERSON. So the 'Something Other' I've talked about is not just a blind force, but a person, an infinite being, a personal God. So what have we now got? A supreme being, infinite in every possible way - limitless in time, space, knowledge, power. A frightening thought! This is the picture held of Him by primitive people before He revealed Himself. Sadly some still have this picture even after revelation.

However, a little more brainwork on our part can produce a very different picture. Take something we all have experience of: LOVE – from or towards our parents, from or towards our children or friends - and that's just love of humans; then we can love scenery, clothes, sport, or food and drink. All these loves are 'things', they did not just happen, they were created. Their source is the same as all other 'things', GOD THE CREATOR. Put all these together and they make up all that is worthwhile in life. Recall the fact that you're not the only pebble on the beach. Millions of others have all these loves! Put all these loves together, they all come from the same one source and that source is limitless. They are but a drop in the ocean of love that we call God. No wonder St. John said "God is LOVE" Notice here he does not say 'loving' but LOVE - all there is of it..

Now let's get back to us! We are not just vegetables that can't respond at all, nor are we just dumb animals who can respond to love by instinct but are incapable of understanding and decision making. You haven't just heard me like, say, a dog hears a human voice. You recognised the words and I hope understood their meaning! You may even have made decisions to remember what was said and pass it on! That is, you have two faculties which set you immeasurably above animals. You have an intellect or mind which can grasp things, and you have a will which can choose and make decisions.

These two faculties which raise us so far above the animals make us like God. The first chapter of Genesis describes man as being made 'in the image and likeness of God'. and this is WHY - because, like God, we have an intellect and a will. These are spiritual faculties which have no parts and so cannot disintegrate (and that is what death is) so they are immortal. Man is made to live for ever! So our minds have grasped the fact that God IS, that He has made all things, above all US, out of nothing. We can therefore see that He must have a purpose and plan for us. We believe he has told us what it is. He has revealed His will to us.

But we have these two great faculties so we are able to UNDERSTAND His plan for us and we are able to CHOOSE what we are to do about it. We are thus responsible for our acts, free to accept or reject His will, responsible for our eternal destiny.

Now let's get back to God again. If this fabulous being exists and we believe He DOES; and if He is unbelievably good and loving and we believe He IS; and He has asked us to share His life and He HAS; what are we waiting for? We must respond all our lives with all our hearts and souls to the One who is LOVE ITSELF. Striving to increase our knowledge of Him so as to grow daily in love of Him.

Which will drive us to serve Him with all our hearts so that we may share his life of love for all eternity. This 'vertical' relationship between ourselves and God comes before our 'horizontal' relationship with our neighbour. The next world comes before the 'third world'. Indeed, the very quality of our love of our neighbour depends upon the degree of our love for God. And that love for God is the very purpose of our existence. As the Catechism says "Why did God make me? God made me to know Him, love Him and serve Him in this world, and to be happy with Him for ever in the next".

CHAPTER 2 – DIVINE REVELATION

In the last chapter we talked about the foundation for our belief in God. We saw that even before we examine what God has revealed to us about Himself and His plans for us, we can arrive at the conclusion that He exists by reasoning it out for ourselves from the evidence in nature.

So we reasoned that God exists, that He is limitless in every way and that He gave us two faculties which make us like Him. The faculty to know and the faculty to decide - and these faculties show that we have an eternal destiny and that we are responsible for our acts. From that we saw the need to respond and indeed that this was the very purpose in being at all - to know, love and serve God. This 'vertical' relationship between each one of us and God is what gives meaning and power to our 'horizontal' relationship with others.

Now we take things a stage further. What we have worked out for ourselves is, of course, very limited. After all it is only what the mind can deduce from the evidence in creation. What has been revealed, however, goes far beyond what we can work out for ourselves. Indeed it goes beyond what we can even understand since it deals with the mystery of God.

This is not something against reason but something far above and beyond its capacity to grasp. Thus reason tells us there is a God; faith tells us that there are three persons in one God. Clearly therefore we need help - that help, 'faith', is a free gift from God. Now faith or belief in someone is something that we are quite familiar with. We frequently accept as truth things that others tell us. We don't demand proof, we accept what they say. Experience tells us it is safe to believe since people are usually truthful. When the matter is more important however, we tend to seek expert opinion. For example, if our health is not good we seek a doctor. In this case we accept what is said because we trust their specialist knowledge. Notice, however, that our acceptance of the information is based on our good opinion of the informant. Now, when we are dealing with God we are dealing with Truth itself so we not only can but must believe everything He says, because of what we know Him to be. However hard it is to believe, or even understand, it must be so because He says so. Nevertheless we clearly need help, and God Himself offers it to us as a free gift.

In fact He gives us three special gifts: Faith, Hope and Charity - the 'theological virtues' as they are called. The word 'virtue' comes from a Latin noun meaning 'power' - the virtues then are powers given us by God to enable us to do what He asks. Here we are concerned with faith. The Catechism calls faith a "supernatural gift from God which enables us to believe, without doubting, whatever God has revealed". Notice it is a 'gift' freely given, but it also has to be accepted. We can refuse to accept the gift of faith and remain an unbeliever.

Sadly, many do refuse, some through pride since they cannot accept there is anything vastly superior to man. For others the presence of evil in the world presents a stumbling block. While others again (agnostics) will not accept anything that is not subject to proof. Now, as we've seen, we base our belief on the authority or reputation of our informant or revealer. When however the informant is God we cannot pick and choose what we believe. "I believe this but I can't believe that." We believe the lot because He says so. This will involve us in lots of things we don't like because the vehicle for God's revelation is the Catholic Church which is made up of human beings, and human beings can be tiresome!

The Catholic Church then, teaches what has been revealed but that teaching is not just sterile repetition, it is very much alive. Over the centuries the Church has reflected upon the truths entrusted to Her to pass on... That reflection produced deeper knowledge ... More accurate knowledge of what was revealed, but never different. This is called the 'development of doctrine', what is revealed in changeless truth, but there is more of it ... and it becomes clearer. So, my reason for believing is God Himself - TRUTH ITSELF. As the Catechism puts it "I must believe what God has revealed because God is the very truth and can neither deceive nor be deceived".

My guide as to what I believe is the Catholic Church founded for that purpose by Our Lord and commissioned to teach in His name. The authority for that Church to teach what I must believe comes of course from Christ Himself who said: "Going therefore, teach ye all nations And behold I am with you all days, even to the consummation of the world" (Mathew 28: 19,20) and "He that heareth you, heareth me" (Luke 10: 16). Now the Church is the body of Christ (1 Corinthians 12: 27) and Christ is THE REVELATION - all God has to say. And, as we've seen, the Church is continuously reflecting on what has been entrusted to Her.

Confirmation of the truth of revelation comes from Scriptures, archaeology and history. But the reason for believing is God Himself, THE TRUTH, who gave authority to His Church to teach all that He had revealed. The Catechism puts it this way: "I am to know what God has revealed by the testimony, teaching and authority of the Catholic Church". So what must I believe? God's revelation is summarised in the Apostles' Creed. Now faith remains a free act depending on the decision of the will to seek and accept God's grace. Remember the epileptic's father: "I do believe, Lord – help my unbelief." (Mark 9: 23) This act involves humility and trust because we are accepting what we cannot prove and may quite possibly not even understand, purely because of our belief in the trustworthiness of the One revealing it to us - God.

So I came to believe in the existence of God by the light of reason. I didn't require any revelation on God's part or gift of faith at that stage. God has provided enough evidence in nature for an unbiased mind to accept the fact He exists of Himself, entirely independent of all else, that He created out of nothing all other things. That He is limitless in every way - time, space, knowledge, power and love. That He created human beings superior to all other visible forms of life; and what made them superior to all else and like Him were the two spiritual faculties of mind and will. Which two same faculties show us we are destined to live for ever and are responsible for our acts. But that knowledge is still limited, so God has revealed all we need to know. What He reveals goes far above and beyond what I can grasp unaided. So He gives me help in a gift. The help he gives is the virtue of faith enabling me to believe all that He has revealed. Moreover He founded a Church to tell us just what has been revealed. Remember, I am used to taking people at their word though I go to an expert for special knowledge.

Since my informant in revelation is God, I must accept all He reveals with the help of faith which enables me to do so. Remember the Catechism definition of faith. Nevertheless faith is a gift so I am not forced to believe. Indeed I can refuse to believe but I am to some extent responsible. Since it is God revealing I cannot pick and choose, believe this... and not believe that. I make one act of belief in all that God has revealed through His Church. This revelation is not something sterile but alive - a living message constantly reflected upon by the Church which is responsible for delivering it, never changed but re-expressed more profoundly and more clearly. The whole truth will of course only be revealed in eternity by THE TRUTH - God Himself.

Meantime, however, I have more than enough to keep me happy. Happy enough to make me want to share with others what I possess myself. For that, remember, is what I'm expected to do. Not just to keep the Faith, but also to spread it. Christ's command "Going therefore, teach ye all nations..." was addressed to all of us who are members of His Church and share in that teaching role. One last word: we are all naturally attracted to good. The more we see of it the greater the attraction so the greater our knowledge of God, who is goodness itself, the greater will be our love for Him, and the greater the desire to share the good. Put quite simply, the better I know my faith the more I'll love it. The more I love it the more I'll want to pass it on.

CHAPTER 3 – THE TRINITY

We now go on to consider the content of that revelation summarised for us, by the Church, in the Apostles Creed. The first statement or “article” of the Creed covers the very ground already covered by reason, thus providing us with assurance of the Truth of our reasoning. The first article of the Creed is: “I believe in God the Father Almighty, Creator of Heaven and Earth”. “I believe in God”- so what is God? The Catechism puts it this way: “God is the Supreme Spirit who alone exists of Himself and is infinite in all perfections”. Here we have a crystal-clear definition of what Revelation has to tell us about God. We have here an echo of the ‘Way’ of St. Thomas Aquinas given in the first chapter. Remember how it went? Nothing exists of itself, all things owe their being to God who exists in His eternal now, utterly independent of all He has created; and all He has created is totally dependent on Him for its existence and for its continued existence since, if He were to ignore it, it would return to nothing. God not only creates, He also conserves. He permeates them - so He is everywhere; and He knows all that He has made - so He is Omniscient.

This presence everywhere of God, or immanence as it is called, is such a help to us in prayer. We don’t have to go anywhere special and private for prayer. There is a form of prayer we can use anywhere, anytime, all we need do is recall this presence of His. God is here... above me... below me... in front of me... behind me... within me now and always. I just recall that and I’ve started to pray! Now so far, though we’ve turned to Revelation, what we have gathered is not something new. It covers, albeit more clearly, the ground that our reason covered before, confirming and strengthening what my reason told me was true. Now we enter the realm of pure Revelation. We cover ground that reason could not possibly reach. Something that needs the gift of Faith, offered by God and accepted by us, something not only that reason could not reach but which is also beyond its power to understand, namely that in this One Supreme Spirit which is God, there are three persons.

Here we are dealing with mystery, something above reason. It cannot be grasped by reason yet we believe it, not therefore because reason tells us to but because Almighty God has revealed it to us and we know him to be The Truth. This most basic mystery of Christian Revelation we call the doctrine of the Blessed Trinity. That in this one indivisible God there are three distinct persons, each of whom is wholly God and none of whom is either of the other two. Jesus Christ Himself revealed this to us indirectly when he claimed He was God but spoke of the Father as distinct from Him yet also God, and by speaking of the Holy Spirit as distinct from Him yet also God. He revealed it directly when He sent the Apostles out to baptise in the name (not the names) of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.

Though we couldn’t possibly have worked this out unaided, and though we accepted it on the all-sufficient word of Jesus Christ, nevertheless we can ponder on it and gather something of its depth. This is what Catholic theology is all about. In this way, Catholic theology differs from all other sciences. In every other one we are trying to push back the boundaries of knowledge; for example, doctors are forever discovering new drugs, improving surgical technique. But here, all that there is to be revealed has been revealed in Jesus Christ. All we can do is imitate Mary who we are told: “kept all these words, pondering them in her heart” (Luke 2:19). But we can use an analogy - make comparisons - and one of the best ever used in relation to the Trinity was produced by the scholastics in the middle ages. They developed it from pondering on the wonderful beginning of St. John’s Gospel: “In the beginning was the Word..” Inspired by that statement they began to think of God the Father as the Eternal Mind and the Word, God the Son, as the Thought occurring to that Mind.

Now the mind is never vacant so the Limitless Timeless Mind of God must for all eternity have been occupied by a Word or Thought, eternal and limitless like Itself, and Revelation says the Word was God. So the Mind conceiving (God the Father) and the thought conceived (God the Son) are what we would call ‘coincident in eternity’ - neither preceding the other. Between the two - the Mind conceiving and the thought conceived - there is complete identity of Will and Purpose namely God the Holy Spirit. Now identity of will and purpose is what we understand as love. Love is essentially mutual and reciprocal.

Love uniting the Mind conceiving and the Thought conceived proceeds therefore equally from both. This love of Father for Son and Son for Father is as timeless as they are and therefore God. All three, Mind conceiving, Thought conceived and complete unity of Will and Purpose between are all wholly non-material, spiritual. Inevitably we tend to grade the three Persons in order of precedence - Father, Son, Holy Spirit. In fact, of course, the three are simultaneously eternal. We have used an analogy to deepen our understanding of the mysteries of the Trinity.

The Catechism makes use of one too. It asks if there is a likeness to the Trinity in the human soul. And answers: "There is this likeness to the Blessed Trinity in my soul: that as in the one God there are three Persons so in my soul there are three powers - memory, understanding, and will."

In fact it's not a bad analogy, our soul like God is pure spirit - no parts: yet this one soul has three distinct functions, none of which is either of the other two. Thus my memory is not understanding or will, my understanding is not memory or will, my will is not memory or understanding, yet all three are me! In the same way the Father is God but not the Son or the Holy Spirit. The Son is God but not the Father or the Holy Spirit, and the Holy Spirit is God but not the Father or the Son. Yet each is wholly God and distinct from the other two. The most complete statement of this doctrine is the Athanasian Creed.

So: we talked of the foundation of faith in natural reason. We've talked of revelation and the act of Faith whereby we accept it. We have seen that the Apostles Creed is the summary of revelation taught by the Catholic Church. We've dealt with the first article of the Creed: "I believe in God the Father Almighty, Creator of Heaven and Earth", and we've seen how the first half was confirmation of what reason has concluded - that is, one Supreme Spirit infinite in all ways. Then in the second half we dealt with pure revelation - the Trinity, revealed to us by Jesus Christ: indirectly in claiming to be God but distinct from the Father and the Holy Spirit and directly by the instruction to the Apostles to baptise "...in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit". Though this is above reason to grasp, aided by Faith accepted from God, we accept it as true because it has been revealed to us by Jesus Christ - Who is The Truth.

CHAPTER 4 – THE INCARNATION (Part One)

Now we look at the Second Article of the Creed - “AND IN JESUS CHRIST HIS ONLY SON OUR LORD”. Once again, of course, we are dealing with a mystery so we must not expect to find rational grounds for what is being revealed. Yet, aided by faith, we can readily accept it, since it is revealed to us by God who is TRUTH ITSELF. The doctrine we are examining is called the INCARNATION - a word which means the “becoming flesh” of God - the fact that God the Son became a man.

We are going to look at **what** the incarnation means and **why** it happened. Then, later, we shall deal with **how** it happened.

What we mean when we talk of the Incarnation is that God the Son, the Second Person of the Blessed Trinity, the Eternal God, at a certain moment in time became a man - yet without ceasing to be God. He was, therefore, both God and Man. We say that in the One Divine Person, Jesus Christ, there are two natures. The nature of GOD which He shared with the Father and the Holy Spirit, and the nature of MAN which He holds in common with all of us.

It would be helpful at this point, if we cleared our minds about what we mean by the words “NATURE” and “PERSON”. Supposing I was to point at someone and say “who is that?” the answer would be JOHN SMITH or MARY JONES or whoever - a unique person. There may be hundreds of John Smiths and Mary Jones in the world but none of them would be this particular John Smith or Mary Jones. The PERSON, then, is unique. On the other hand, if I were to point at someone and say rather rudely “WHAT is that?” the answer would be quite different - NOT John Smith or Mary Jones but “a human being” - one of millions. So the question “WHO?” indicates a PERSON - someone altogether unique. Whereas “WHAT?” indicates a NATURE - something we all have in common. Notice there is only one answer in each case - “John Smith” for person and “Human Being” for nature. If however we were able to point at Jesus Christ and ask the question “Who is that”? We would get one answer - “Jesus Christ”. But if we were to ask “WHAT is that?” we would get TWO answers - GOD and MAN and both would be equally true because, as the Creed puts it, Jesus Christ is TRUE GOD and TRUE MAN.

So, Jesus Christ is God the Son, the Second Person of the Blessed Trinity and equal to both the Father and the Holy Spirit. He is also Son of Mary, a real human being like each one of us. The name JESUS comes to us through Greek and Latin from a Hebrew word meaning SAVIOUR. And CHRIST, again coming to us through Greek and Latin from Hebrew, meaning ANOINTED ONE. So CHRIST JESUS means exactly what He IS - THE ANOINTED SAVIOUR.

So far we have examined WHAT revelation has to tell us about the Incarnation. Now we ask the question WHY? Why did God go to the almost incredible length of stepping down to our level and becoming one of us? What possible need could there be for such a move on his part? To answer that question we must go back to the dawn of human history. Reason cannot answer it for us so we have to turn to revelation. God has told us why. Reason can, however, give us a hint by asking the questions “How could God, who is utterly good allow evil?” and “Could He not have made a better world?” The answer is He could and did - and man undid all the good!

So now we come to examine the mystery of THE FALL and being a mystery we have to rely on revelation. The account of the fall given in the Book of Genesis was written centuries after the event. To us now it seems both unscientific and unhistoric - points that would have seemed unimportant to the people of that time.

Through His Church, God has revealed that man was once very different to what he is now. He was in full control of himself and lacking that inner conflict between higher and lower, good and bad that we are all so familiar with. St. Paul most movingly describes it in a passage in his letter to the Romans (Rom.7:15-25). The Genesis account describes SIN as “eating the forbidden fruit” - a term we still use today to describe doing something wrong. What the sin actually was is not really important. The temptation was “So you will be like God” - in other words ABOVE the law, deciding for oneself what is right and what is wrong. Are we not aware of that sometimes in ourselves and others?

Anyway, man disobeyed God (ORIGINAL SIN) and the results were simply catastrophic - complete loss of control of himself and death and suffering entered the world. So man offended God but why was the Incarnation necessary? Before the fall, man was in what we call the state of ORIGINAL JUSTICE, sharing in God’s life, enjoying His friendship, able to do what God wanted of him - things which, without God’s grace, he would simply have been unable to do and these were the very things he needed to do to inherit his eternal reward. Now since when he fell he lost God’s grace, he could not pass on to his descendants what he no longer possessed - GRACE and the ability to do what God wanted of him - SUPERNATURAL acts.

The word ‘supernatural’ is usually misused nowadays to describe natural phenomena. The word SUPER comes from the Latin and means ABOVE so for instance if we were to imagine a dog that could write letters and discuss politics we would be thinking of a SUPERNATURAL dog because it is ABOVE the nature of a dog to write and talk. So, following The Fall, the entire human race was destined to be born lacking the one essential thing to enable each one of them to get to heaven. They were enslaved - in pawn - they were in need of a Saviour - a Redeemer - and they were told, through the prophets, that one day ONE would come to redeem them.

So man has offended God and is unable to make up for it. Man is enslaved by sin and needs to be saved from it. Now we shall see how God becoming man provides the answer to everything. Reason can help us here. We measure the gravity of an offence by the importance of the person who has been offended. To strike one’s neighbour is wrong, to strike a priest is worse, since he is a person dedicated to God and to strike the Pope would be worse still. Now with sin, it is GOD who is offended and God is of course, INFINITE. In that respect, therefore, all sin of any kind is infinite in malice since it is an offence against an infinite person.

Now, man though capable of committing this infinite offence, sin, is absolutely incapable of repairing the damage, or making satisfaction as we usually say. Only a DIVINE person, GOD, can make adequate satisfaction for an offence given to God. So, GOD became a MAN ..then, since He is GOD He can make infinite satisfaction by His death on the cross and since He is also MAN He can make satisfaction on behalf of his fellow men. Now we can see how appropriate the Incarnation was!

Over the centuries there have been many HERESIES - errors regarding the truth. The truth is delicately balanced - Jesus Christ is TRUE God yet also TRUE man. An exaggeration of one half causes the other half to suffer. Thus, if one exaggerates the DIVINITY of Our Lord, His HUMANITY suffers. In the fifth century the MONOPHYSITES said He was NOT truly a man. He was truly God but only a phantasm or apparition. If this had been so, then the satisfaction on behalf of men would have been lacking since He wasn’t a man. The NESTORIANS (also dating from the fifth century) put forward the opposite error - one which is very common today. They said that Jesus Christ was truly man but not God - merely a very holy man. If this had been so, then the satisfaction made by his death on the cross would have been inadequate and God’s justice would not have been satisfied. No. The only way in which God’s justice could be adequately satisfied and man restored once more to grace was the way it actually happened. Jesus Christ, God the Son, the Second Person of the Blessed Trinity and, like the Father and the Holy Spirit, eternally God, who had no beginning, at a certain moment in time became a man, like us in all things but sin, so that as MAN He could make satisfaction on behalf of us all and that satisfaction was infinite because He was also God.

CHAPTER 5 - THE INCARNATION (Part Two)

Now we examine how the Incarnation took place, focusing our attention on the HUMANITY of Our Lord - seeing that He was indeed truly a man. The Third Article of the Creed says "WHO WAS CONCEIVED BY THE HOLY SPIRIT, BORN OF THE VIRGIN MARY". This means that God the Son took a body and soul like ours in the womb of the Blessed Virgin Mary, by the power of the Holy Spirit. Only one human being was involved - Our Lady. The Holy Spirit took the place of the human father. Our Lord had no human father: St. Joseph was merely his foster father.

The devotion to Our Lady expressed by Catholics sometimes disturbs and upsets our friends outside the Church. If, however, the doctrine of the Incarnation in its fullness is understood and accepted, then that devotion is entirely understandable. And that doctrine is that the Second Person of the Blessed Trinity, God the Son took his human nature from Our Lady. Flesh of her flesh, bone of her bone. He was NOT a phantasm: He was a genuine man: yet He is God. I used the expression "a body and soul like ours" - Man is composed of body and soul: he is what philosophers call a rational animal and Jesus Christ was just that. He was truly human. Thus He experienced THIRST...HUNGER...EXHAUSTION..., He showed ANGER at hypocrisy, FEAR in Gethsemani, SORROW at the death of Lazarus, his friend and He experienced a FEELING of HAVING BEEN ABANDONED as He was dying on the cross and all this because He was, as everybody knew "the Son of Mary".

That is why, in the year AD 431, one of the earliest Councils of the Church, the Council of Ephesus said, when defending the HUMANITY of Our Lord against the Monophysites (who claimed He was God but only a phantasm) that He was truly son of Mary and consequently Mary was rightly to be called "Mother of God". If Jesus Christ were NOT truly God, then clearly Mary could not be called "Mother of God". On the other hand if Jesus Christ were God but NOT TRULY MAN, then Mary was not a mother at all! As the Council said, Jesus Christ is TRULY GOD and TRULY MAN: He took his human nature from Mary, so Mary is rightly called Mother of God. So, Jesus Christ became a man. Early efforts to date his birth at the beginning of the period we now call "A.D." are slightly out - experts now settle for a slightly earlier date -4 to -6 B.C. We know He died about 30 AD so He lived for 33 years or so. The important facts are that He was born, lived and died. The exact year is really of secondary importance.

From the Gospels we know a great deal about what He said and did in the last three years - His PUBLIC life. Remarkably little is mentioned about His earlier years: so, for instance, St. Matthew's Gospel tells us of His birth and the flight into Egypt. St. Mark and St. John say nothing and St. Luke tells of the birth, circumcision, presentation and finding in the temple. Then, after His return to Nazareth with Mary and Joseph, we hear nothing till the coming of John the Baptist - 18 years of silence! These 18 years or "HIDDEN YEARS" as they are usually called, have great significance for us. We have here a classic example of an "argument from silence". So much can be implied by simply saying nothing. So here we have the four Gospel accounts. Two of them (Mark and John) write nothing at all while the other two (Matthew and Luke) only mention the few incidents I described and NONE of them writes of the 18 hidden years. And all this despite the fact that they could easily discover all they wanted from His family and friends, YET THEY WRITE NOTHING. They are fairly shouting a message at us! "We have written nothing because there was NOTHING REMARKABLE TO WRITE!" In other words, Jesus Christ lived exactly as anybody else of his age and background would have lived at that time and in that place.

What is there in that for us? Just think! He remained God so everything He did was done by God, which gives all these ordinary activities a totally new dignity and value! This means He swept floors..., made beds... washed dishes... worked in a carpenter's shop; He ate... drank... slept... and all these things have a new dignity because He did them! Hence, of course, the dignity of work which the Church is always reminding us of. We are too inclined to think that in order to please God we have to say prayers or else do some "good works". This is not so. To do anything He did, even the humblest and most menial job, pleases God because they were done before us by Jesus Christ.

So far, we have looked at the birth and hidden years. Now let us look at the suffering and death of Our Lord. The Fourth article of the Creed says: SUFFERED UNDER PONTIUS PILATE, WAS CRUCIFIED, DEAD AND BURIED." The account of the sufferings of Our Lord or Passion as they are usually called and of His death on the cross, like the hidden years, underline the HUMANITY of Our Lord.

Thus it was a MAN who suffered the SWEAT OF BLOOD in Gethsemani: it was a MAN who was first SCOURGED and then CROWNED WITH THORNS: it was a MAN who CARRIED THE CROSS from the Praetorium to Calvary where He was crucified between two thieves and finally it was a MAN who, after three hours agony on the cross, during which time He pardoned his executioners, promised the reward of eternal life to the good thief and commended us all in the person of St. John to His Blessed Mother, BOWED HIS HEAD AND DIED.

We say that all these sufferings were endured by Jesus Christ to atone for our sins to purchase eternal life for us. Those who deny the HUMANITY of Our Lord and say He is God but not really a man - just a phantasm, expect us to believe that all these tortures were inflicted by the soldiers on a phantasm and not a real man at all! Moreover, since the sufferings would then be merely apparent, they would, of course, have no value at all. NO. As we often say the BLOOD of Christ was the price of our redemption - real blood and real redemption.

By the way, the SIGN OF THE CROSS that Catholics so often make is a highly significant act - not only is it an act of FAITH in the Trinity because we say "In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit" but, by tracing the cross upon ourselves we remind ourselves that Jesus Christ died on a cross for us.

Having dealt with the fourth article of the Creed which concentrates on the humanity we now turn our attention to the Fifth Article of the Creed which emphasises the DIVINITY of Our Lord. It goes like this, if you remember: "HE DESCENDED INTO HELL, THE THIRD DAY HE ROSE AGAIN FROM THE DEAD." Just as the sufferings and death of Our Lord emphasised His HUMANITY - He could not have suffered and died if He were not a man - So His resurrection from the dead demonstrates His DIVINITY since He could not raise Himself to life if He wasn't the LORD OF LIFE - GOD. Throughout His public life He kept hinting at Who He was and claiming that after His death He would rise again. To have said so too plainly and too soon would have proved too much for his apostles to grasp and would also have resulted in his execution for blasphemy before He was ready.

So He often referred to God as His Father, worked numerous miracles or "signs" as St. John called them, to support His claim to be God - feeding thousands... calming the storm... healing the sick... raising the dead... gradually bringing the apostles to the point where Simon Peter confessed "YOU ARE THE CHRIST: THE SON OF THE LIVING GOD" which brought the immediate response "Simon, son of Jonah you are a happy man! Because it was not flesh and blood that revealed this to you but MY FATHER IN HEAVEN". At the Transfiguration He gave three of them a glimpse of His glory to bolster their faith before His coming crucifixion and then warned them to be silent about it "until the Son of Man IS RISEN FROM THE DEAD".

The resurrection was the last and greatest of the signs - the proof of His divinity. It was THIS message that the apostles carried to the ends of the known world and, in defence of the TRUTH of that message, they laid down their lives.

What the apostles started, the Church continues. The whole life of the Church is centred round the resurrection so, of course. SUNDAY and not Saturday (the old Sabbath) is the sacred day and Easter not Christmas is the most important feast.

Throughout history God gave remarkable powers to certain chosen people but those powers died with them. Had Christ been merely a man so would His powers have died with Him. But, being God, He could not die - His enemies merely destroyed His human life but as God, He lived on and raised Himself to life again after three days. For those three days the Fifth Article says He "DESCENDED INTO HELL" - that statement needs clarifying. "HELL" here does not mean where the damned are separated from God for all eternity, but the place where the just who had died before Our Lord's day awaited Him to free them, through His death, from the consequences of their sins and admit them to heaven.

Man was redeemed by the death of Jesus Christ but not BEFORE it. Unlike us, who 19 centuries after, can say "if I do what is right and repent of my sins, I shall be saved", they had to live out their lives in expectation of the coming of the Redeemer. They had to wait until He died to receive the reward of their good deeds. How grateful we should be that no such delay awaits us! All that can delay us is the consequence of our sins - what greater incentive than that can we have to repent of our past sins and to avoid sin in the future?

The following are relevant paragraphs (no.73-78) from the Compendium of the Catechism of the Catholic Church (in question and answer format):

How should we understand the reality of sin? *Sin is present in human history. This reality of sin can be understood clearly only in the light of Divine Revelation and above all in the light of Christ the Saviour of all. Where sin abounded, He made grace abound all the more.*

What was the fall of the angels? *This expression indicates that Satan and the other demons, about which Sacred Scripture and the Tradition of the Church speak, were angels created good by God. They were transformed into evil because with a free and irrevocable choice they rejected God and His Kingdom thus giving rise to the existence of hell. They try to associate human beings with their revolt against God. However, God has wrought in Christ a sure victory over the Evil One.*

What was the first human sin? *When tempted by the devil, the first man and woman allowed trust in their Creator to die in their hearts. In their disobedience they wished to become 'like God' but without God and not in accordance with God (Genesis 3:5). Thus Adam and Eve immediately lost for themselves and for all their descendants the original grace of holiness and justice.*

What is original sin? *Original sin, in which all human beings are born, is the state of deprivation of original holiness and justice. It is a sin 'contracted' by us not 'committed'; it is a state of birth and not a personal act. Because of the original unity of all human beings, it is transmitted to the descendants of Adam 'not by imitation, but by propagation'. This transmission remains a mystery which we cannot fully understand.*

What other consequences derive from original sin? *In consequence of original sin human nature, without being totally corrupted, is wounded in its natural powers. It is subject to ignorance, to suffering, and to the dominion of death and is inclined towards sin. This inclination is called 'concupiscence'.*

After the first sin, what did God do? *After the first sin the world was inundated with sin but God did not abandon man to the power of death. Rather, He foretold in a mysterious way in the 'Protoevangelium' (Genesis 3:15) that evil would be conquered and that man would be lifted up from his fall. This was the first proclamation of the Messiah and Redeemer.*

CHAPTER 6 - ASCENSION, JUDGEMENT AND THE HOLY SPIRIT

The last two chapters dealt with the Incarnation. First, we saw what it meant and why it happened, and then last time we saw HOW it happened. Now we consider the ASCENSION. The Sixth Article says: "HE ASCENDED INTO HEAVEN AND IS SEATED AT THE RIGHT HAND OF GOD, THE FATHER ALMIGHTY." The special importance of the Ascension for us is that it demonstrates the indissoluble union between the two natures of Our Lord. St. Mark says "HE WAS TAKEN UP INTO HEAVEN: THERE AT THE RIGHT HAND OF GOD HE TOOK HIS PLACE." The point for us to remember here is that God the Son did not leave his humanity behind: He took it with Him, when He returned to His Father and, since He is the head of the Body which is His Church of which we are all members, we have a guarantee that heaven is within reach of all of us.

The Creed, following St. Mark, says He is seated at the "RIGHT HAND" of the Father - this is, of course, a figurative expression since a Spirit has no hands. It means quite simply that He is in the most important place in heaven.

The Seventh Article says: "FROM THENCE HE SHALL COME TO JUDGE THE LIVING AND THE DEAD". This Article completes the cycle of human history. It started with man's rebellion and fall from grace - the opening of an unbridgeable gap with man powerless to close it and enslaved by sin. Then, with the Incarnation we saw that Jesus Christ, by becoming man was able to bridge that gap - able to make adequate satisfaction and to do so on behalf of men. By His death on the cross Jesus Christ made atonement to God and offered redemption to man. Note He "OFFERED" redemption - God does not save all men WHETHER THEY WANT IT OR NOT. He gave us a free will and we saw that makes us responsible for our acts.

Man is free to accept redemption: he is also free to REFUSE it - either way, we are judged. At the end of this world, Jesus Christ will return to judge all men -that is called the LAST OR GENERAL JUDGEMENT. At the hour of our death each one of us is individually judged - this is usually called the PARTICULAR JUDGEMENT. We see the state that we are in - in relation to God - and that state remains for ever. Every thought, word, deed or omission, good or bad, will be revealed to us. We shall see the justice of our fate and we shall enter it. Since it is God judging us, that judgement will be both infinitely just and infinitely merciful. To put it another way, there will be no possible grounds for complaint or appeal. For those who died before it, the GENERAL judgement will merely confirm the PARTICULAR one. Before leaving the subject of judgement let us be quite clear what it really means. God's laws reflect His infinite goodness. They are there for our good. If we ignore them or break them, we inevitably suffer. Let us use an analogy. A child who deliberately ignores its mother's repeated warnings not to put its hand in the fire and does so cannot then say "Mummy is cruel!" If you put your hand in fire it gets burned. It is in the nature of fire to burn. Well, God's laws are there to PROTECT us.

If we flatly refuse to follow them, we get hurt and if that refusal lasts till death, then the hurt is permanent We are all sinners. Sometimes those sins are serious and remember only serious sin damages us permanently. Even then the door is never closed. The ever-open door of God's forgiveness is there to the very end. All we have to do is go through the door - ask forgiveness. The only fatal thing to do is to REFUSE to ask forgiveness - that is closing the door, which only God can re-open.

The Eighth Article of the Creed is "I BELIEVE IN THE HOLY SPIRIT" so now we come to consider the Third Person of the Blessed Trinity which I dealt with in the third chapter. I will remind you now what I said then about MYSTERY. A mystery is something ABOVE and BEYOND reason. You cannot ever fully grasp it but, aided by faith - a free gift from God which we can accept or refuse - we can at least grasp that it must be so because it is God, THE TRUTH, who is revealing it. We saw that Our Lord revealed the mystery of the Trinity INDIRECTLY when He talked of Himself as God, talked of the Father as God yet distinct from himself, talked of the Holy Spirit as God yet distinct from the Father and Himself and He revealed it DIRECTLY when He sent the apostles out to baptise "in the NAME of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit".

So, we have ONE Supreme indivisible Spirit - GOD, yet THREE distinct Persons, each of whom is God yet none of whom is either of the other two. You may remember that I said we must not "grade" them in order of precedence since they are all equal. I then mentioned the scholastics' Analogy - The Father being the eternal MIND and, filling that mind was a thought or WORD no less eternal - the Son. And, proceeding between the two (mind conceiving and thought conceived) was complete identity of WILL and PURPOSE or LOVE -infinite just as the MIND and THOUGHT and so GOD - THE HOLY SPIRIT.

Let me use another analogy - that of the sigh of love between Father and Son Not a bad analogy since the Hebrew word for "BREATH" is the same as for "SPIRIT". We saw that man is made in the "image and likeness of God" because, like God, he has a mind and a will. There was a further resemblance between man and the Trinity, remember, in that in the Trinity there are THREE distinct persons yet making ONE God while in the human soul there are three distinct powers - memory, understanding and will - yet all making up the one person. There is a further similarity between each of us and the Trinity in that none of us is self-sufficient - we need one another: we need to love and be loved - a dim reflection of God who is LOVE ITSELF, eternally so: Father loving Son: Son loving Father and both giving rise to a love which is equal to both yet distinct from both - THE HOLY SPIRIT.

Before we end, I want to try and clarify an apparent contradiction - all three Persons are One God and yet each seems to have a different job to do! Only ONE Person became a man - the Second Person but all three Persons made Him so! All the actions of God outside Himself are the work of all three Persons, but to make things easier for ourselves we ATTRIBUTE certain activities to a certain Person. So, for instance, we associate the Father with CREATION, the Son with REDEMPTION and the Holy Spirit with SANCTIFICATION. With that qualification let us now look at the work of the Holy Spirit. We say that the Holy Spirit came down on the apostles at Pentecost making them individually, and the Church they founded HOLY. We say of those in the state of Grace that they are "Temples of the Holy Spirit" - hence man's dignity. We say that the Holy Spirit dwells in the Church like the soul in a body GUIDING, SANCTIFYING and ENLIVENING it. It is very important to remember this as the Church is made up of VERY HUMAN beings.

Has it ever occurred to you that the presence of so much that is ANYTHING BUT GOOD in the Church is a proof of His presence in it? If He wasn't there it would have sunk without trace years ago! Remember the change that took place in the apostles between the Crucifixion (when they all but one ran out on Him) and Pentecost when all of them fearlessly proclaimed Him - the difference was the work of the Holy Spirit. What He did to them, He can do to us - if we let Him - and that is: He can make each one of us a saint!

CHAPTER 7 – THE CHURCH (Part One)

The Ninth Article of the Creed is “THE HOLY CATHOLIC CHURCH, THE COMMUNION OF SAINTS” so, for the next three chapters we shall be dealing with the Catholic Church. First, we shall examine the INNER LIFE of the Church, its source of life and unity - Christ Himself, the effects that unity has on its members and the manner in which people become members. Then we shall examine the VISIBLE Church: the outward structure, chain of command, the claims it makes regarding the Truth of its message, the powers entrusted to it and the authority it claims for what it says and does. And, finally we shall examine the Communion of Saints or what one might call the EXTENDED Church, including as it does, not only the members here on earth but those who have died yet still remain members of that Church.

First, then, how should we define the word “CHURCH”? The Catholic Church is the union of all the faithful under one “Head” and that head is, of course, Jesus Christ. Let us be quite clear from the start what we mean by the word UNION. A union can be quite a loose thing - you have only to look at the former Soviet Union these days to see how precarious such a union can be.

Now, the union we are dealing with here is utterly different. It is much more intimate - like the union of all the different parts of the same body, so there is no question of life apart from the other parts. Separation of one part from the rest would mean death. A finger cannot exist apart from the hand any more than a body can exist without its head. Now, in fact, we call that “UNION OF ALL THE FAITHFUL” a BODY- the Body of Christ. He is the HEAD of that body and that body cannot exist without Him. Each part of this body depends upon all the others and each contributes to the life and wellbeing of all the others. As the poet John Donne put it, “NO MAN IS AN ISLAND”. We need one another.

Since we are making rather a startling claim here, let us examine our grounds for making it. Remember first that the Church, like the Blessed Trinity is a MYSTERY so we shall not fully grasp it. Like other mysteries, however, we shall grasp enough to be able to say “Yes. It must be so because HE says so!” Our Lord first revealed this mystery to us the night before He died, when He said: “I AM THE VINE: YOU ARE THE BRANCHES”. Now just think! Branches are not separate from the vine or tied to it. They are PART of it, and if cut off from it, they die. If Christ, therefore, is the vine and we are attached to Him, then His life flows in us, ENLIVENS us, and, as He said a few moments later, “CUT OFF FROM ME YOU CAN DO NOTHING.”

How, then, did it start? The birth of the Church was at Pentecost when the Holy Spirit came down on it and entered it. Our own birth into it was at our Baptism, when we were, as the saying is “baptised into Christ”. At our baptism, then, Christ’s life first flowed in my soul: that life which we call Sanctifying Grace. The water that flowed over my forehead symbolised that life. This sharing in God’s life raises us onto a new level - enabling us to do SUPERNATURAL things - things that are ABOVE our nature. It is these supernatural things I have to be able to do if I am to enter Heaven. Later, when we examine sin, we shall see how it cuts off this vital life supply. Our Lord first mentioned this when He called Himself the vine. And later, after His Ascension, He emphasized it. He appeared to Saul just outside the city of Damascus. Saul was persecuting the Church - he was actually carrying warrants for their arrest on him - He was thrown from his horse, blinded, and heard a voice saying: “SAUL, SAUL, WHY ARE YOU PERSECUTING ME?” (Acts 9: 1-9) Saul called out, “WHO ARE YOU, LORD?” The answer came, “I am Jesus and you are persecuting ME”. Our Lord identifies Himself with the members of His Church. We are all parts of His Body, the Church. Saul was converted and, several years later, he became the foremost proponent of this doctrine of the “MYSTICAL BODY” as it is called. Read now what he wrote to the Christians in Corinth. You will find it is his First Letter to the Corinthians chapter 12 verses 12 to 27.

Just think of the implications! If the Holy Spirit is this body’s soul, sanctifying it and guiding it, and Jesus Christ is its head and said He would be with it for all time, then He is STILL its head - His life is still flowing to all its members, His Spirit is still guiding it and, of course, He is still God! That being so, how can that body of His fail?... go into error? - can God make mistakes? Individuals, of course, can, just as the finger of an otherwise healthy person can go septic. But the whole Body of Christ, the Church? No!

It follows from this that there will be certain signs of His presence. We call them the MARKS of the Church - signs that it is truly HIS CHURCH, signs that it is the ONE and ONLY ONE founded by Him. The first mark is that it is ONE. Clearly, Christ has only one body so we are all parts of the one body of Christ. Thus we can expect to find ONE set of beliefs - not various schools of thought. HE is the Head: He revealed the truths to His Church: His Church teaches those truths and we have to accept them. So, then, we are ONE IN BELIEF.

We can expect to find uniformity in sacred actions like the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass and the Sacraments - not each one doing his own thing. In particular you can expect to find ONE MASS - HIS way of worshipping the Father, as we say. (We shall say more about this in a later chapter.) So we are ONE IN WORSHIP. Similarly, we can expect to find obedience to one supreme authority and there would be some visible head so all could see him. So then the Church is ONE in BELIEF, ONE in WORSHIP and obeys ONE SUPREME AUTHORITY.

What other marks would there be? Well, if Christ is the head and the Holy Spirit, the Sanctifier, is the soul, it is bound to be HOLY. This does not mean that all its members will be - Oh dear no! As it is often said, "THE CHURCH IS ALL RIGHT: ITS THE CATHOLICS I CAN'T STAND!". Sanctified by the Holy Spirit, both the Church as a whole and its individual members make up the Body of Christ and as such are holy. A third mark of the Church is that it is CATHOLIC. The word catholic means universal which is exactly what the Church is - everywhere - a GLOBAL Church not a national one. To talk of the "Church of Rome" is to misunderstand what the Church is - it is UNIVERSAL.

Is there another mark by which we may recognise the Church? Yes. We say it is APOSTOLIC. What does that mean? It means that it is the Church 'of the Apostles': the very same one founded by them. It could not be interrupted. Christ did not at any time cease to be and then start again. He is still here as He promised He always would be, and His Body, the Church is still here. It is full of people - millions of them - and some are no credit to it! The Church has always had its bad characters - Judas Iscariot was a Catholic....

So, now we have examined the INVISIBLE Church. We have looked at the inner nature of that body we call the Catholic Church. A body which St. Paul, under inspiration called the Body of Christ. The head of this body is Christ Himself and we are all the members, so parts of Him. Drawing life from Him, intimately bound to Him and one another in a body which is animated by the Holy Spirit.

We often call it the Mystical Body of Christ - a useful title since it reminds us that we are dealing with a mystery and thus need the gift of faith to grasp it. We saw that we received that life, entered that body at baptism, the water poured by the priest over our foreheads symbolising the life that Christ was pouring into us. We saw that because of its union with Christ, its head, that body would have recognisable marks by which we could identify it. It would be ONE in belief, worship and allegiance to AUTHORITY since Christ cannot be divided against Himself. Since it is Christ who is its head and the Holy Spirit is its soul it would be HOLY. It would be CATHOLIC or UNIVERSAL in its extent and appeal, reaching out to all nations in every age from Pentecost to the Second Coming. It would be APOSTOLIC not because it imitates or succeeds to the Church of the apostles but because it is the very same Church founded on them. Christ did not cease to be and then start again. He always is and so is His Body the Church. To look at the Catholic Church is to look at that body which was founded at the First Pentecost and will be here until Christ comes again.

Finally, the presence in it of many unworthy members should neither surprise nor dismay us. It is often called the CHURCH OF SINNERS - big enough and compassionate enough to find room for anyone. Our responsibility is to see that our part of it is healthy and holy and we do that by being faithful to Christ our head.

CHAPTER 8 – THE CHURCH (Part Two)

In the last chapter, we took our first look at the Catholic Church - the INVISIBLE Church which we defined as “the union of all the faithful under one head, Jesus Christ.” We saw that the union was of a very intimate nature - like the parts of a body, in fact that it is called the Mystical Body of Christ, Recognisable for what it is by four clear signs or “MARKS” - it is ONE, HOLY, CATHOLIC and APOSTOLIC. Now we shall examine the outward structure of the Church - the VISIBLE Church.

Almost all Christians say “I BELIEVE... IN THE HOLY CATHOLIC CHURCH” but meanings vary and all but one of them say that the Church is invisible. The exception, of course, is Catholics. We say that not only is Christ present in His Body the Church but that this Body is plain for all to see. It is a visible organisation made up of visible people.

Moreover, it has a visible head - the Bishop of Rome, the Vicar of Jesus Christ, the Pope. Who says so - and what right have we to say so? You may remember that when we were dealing with the Incarnation, I said that Our Lord gradually brought the apostles to realise who He was. That it was Simon Peter who, in answer to the question “who do you think I am?” answered, “YOU ARE THE CHRIST, THE SON OF THE LIVING GOD”. Then, if you remember, Our Lord showed him he was right by answering, “Simon, son of Jonah, you are a happy man because it was not flesh and blood that revealed this to you but my Father in heaven.” So God was telling him that this was something that had been revealed by God! You could not have greater certainty than that.

Our Lord then added further remarks and prefaced them by doing something extremely significant - He changed Simon’s name. To a Jew of that time that meant very clearly that he was being given special work to do. The word He used was KEPHA - a word meaning a rock or stone. As a matter of interest, in French, the word PIERRE means both rock and the name Peter. The point to remember is that the name meant what he was to BE. So Peter was to be a ROCK - the rock on which Our Lord was to build his Church. On another occasion, Our Lord had talked of a house built on rock which could stand up to any sort of bad weather or storm. So the point here, therefore, was that Peter was to be the rock - the firm foundation - on which Our Lord would build his Church and that it would weather any storm: stand up to any opposition.

Our Lord then went on to say, “I WILL GIVE YOU THE KEYS OF THE KINGDOM OF HEAVEN: WHATSOEVER YOU BIND ON EARTH SHALL BE BOUND ALSO IN HEAVEN: WHATSOEVER YOU LOOSE ON EARTH SHALL BE LOOSED ALSO IN HEAVEN”. So, this man, then, PETER, was not just to be a rock, a firm foundation, but he also had the right to admit or exclude whomever he wanted and the right to make or dispense with any law he liked and that those decisions of his would have divine backing. What actually happened? The man who was called the Rock, in order to spread the Gospel most effectively went to what was then the centre of the civilised world - Rome. He chose well, Christianity spread with the march of the Roman Legions. WHERE he went is of secondary importance. What matters is WHO went there - Peter - the ROCK on whom the Church was founded. His position was unique. He was the Rock: he had supreme authority and EVERYBODY RECOGNISED IT. So when he died (by crucifixion in the Vatican Arena) another man succeeded to his position and authority called LINUS and he was succeeded by a man called ANACLETUS who was followed by a man called CLEMENT. The present holder of the post is a German who took the name Benedict XVI – he is the 265th Pope in this continuous line.

Now let’s go back to the beginning again. Peter was not the only apostle. The others were there too. He was the only one declared a ROCK but together with him the others were recipients of two great powers. The first of these powers is described in four different places in the New Testament:- Matthew Chapter 26; Mark 14; Luke 22; and St Paul’s first letter to the Corinthians, Chapter 11. They all describe a meal - the Last Supper - and what happened at the end of it. Remember, Jesus Christ is God, so He can do ANYTHING and He always tells the Truth

Well, what did He do? He took some bread off the table, blessed it, broke it and distributed it to the apostles saying, “THIS IS MY BODY”. Then He took some wine and distributed that saying “THIS IS MY BLOOD”... AND SO IT WAS!

He then added, "DO THIS IN MEMORY OF ME". How could they unless He was giving them the Power to do so? And so of course, He was. And the power was passed on because everybody took Him at His Word and so it was for a thousand years... before anyone even questioned it. To this day, the Catholic Church possesses that power which is passed to priests at their ordination and exercised at the consecration in every Holy Mass.

The other power is described in John 22. It was Easter Sunday evening..., the doors were closed in the upper room where the apostles were... and Jesus walked straight through them and stood among them.... "SHALOM!" He said, "Peace be with you!" and then the Gospel account goes on to say that He BREATHED on them and said: "RECEIVE THE HOLY SPIRIT" (the word for Spirit and Breath are the same in Aramaic) "FOR THOSE WHOSE SINS YOU FORGIVE: THEY ARE FORGIVEN. FOR THOSE WHOSE SINS YOU RETAIN: THEY ARE RETAINED."

There are two points to notice here - First, a POWER is given - the power to forgive sins, and Secondly, they have to make a DECISION - whether to use that power or not. An act of judgement was called for - to forgive or not to forgive. What are the criteria? Well, think! How can you forgive if you don't know WHAT you are forgiving? And secondly, since this is God's power being used in His name, how can you use it on one who is UNREPENTANT? Your decision to forgive, therefore, is subject to two clear conditions. You know what it is you are forgiving and you are satisfied that the person is repentant. But how can you know unless they tell you? So, of course, the one wanting to be forgiven has to CONFESS to one who has the power to forgive - a priest.

You might hear a lapsed or badly-instructed Catholic say "I don't need a priest! I just tell God I'm sorry in my heart." This does not take into account something we shall deal with later - the social aspect of sin. All we shall say here is that this is how Christ demands that we ask for forgiveness for serious sin.

Now, so far we have seen that one man, the Rock, was given supreme authority: all the apostles received two powers and were instructed to pass them on -

the power to consecrate and the power to forgive Sin. Then, He gave instructions to a wider audience (described in Luke 10) and He finished that instruction by saying "He who listens to you, listens to me" so He gave His divine backing to them also. He told His apostles to TEACH all that He had commanded them and to 'teach' means to tell others something that you know which they have not yet learned. Now since that 'something' comes from God, it must be true and you must accept it. There is no room here for private opinion. The Catholic Church alone teaches in this way and demands acceptance of what it teaches, claiming divine authority for doing so. Moreover, as we saw last time, how can that Body of which Christ is the head be in error? So the Church claims the gift of INFALLIBILITY, or freedom from error, when it pronounces solemnly upon doctrine or morals whether through a Council or the Pope on his own speaking officially on behalf of the whole Church.

We can see in all this a definite chain of command - The Rock (and his successors, the Popes) who enjoys supreme authority; the Apostles (and their successors, the bishops) who have two great powers and the ability to pass them on; those who have the powers but cannot pass them on, Priests - and all of them have been commissioned to teach the truth and demand acceptance of it. Since that truth has divine backing, the Church claims it has the gift of infallibility. The Catholic Church alone makes all these claims.

Let us not forget, however, that the Church, the Body of Christ, is nevertheless made up of human beings with all the usual failings and thus it is unreasonable to expect perfection of anyone in it. Our Lord, Jesus Christ never promised that it would be a PERFECT Church... or that ALL would enter it... or that it would be POPULAR. But He DID say that it was the Body of which He was the head: He gave it lavish powers for us to make use of and He promised that it would survive for ever.

How lucky we are! Let us strive to make our corner of it better!

CHAPTER 9 – THE CHURCH (Part Three)

This chapter on the Church deals with what might be called the EXTENDED Church or what is called in the Ninth Article of the Creed, “THE COMMUNION OF SAINTS”. The word “saints” here means not just canonised saints like St. Peter, St. Francis, St. Theresa and so on, nor even those good people who have died and are now in heaven, but ALL the members of the Body of Christ, the Church, including YOU and ME.

St. Paul used the word saints in this sense when writing to the Ephesians whom he described as the ‘saints at Ephesus’. Natural death does not mean that people cease to be part of the Body of Christ. They cease to be part of the VISIBLE church, but they remain intimately united with Christ, the head of the body and so with all the other parts. Indeed, the visible Church forms only a tiny part of the whole Body - the tip of a gigantic iceberg. There is a real union between the visible and invisible members and it is this that we are referring to when we talk of the Communion of Saints - between us who are still on our pilgrim way through this world, those who though dead are still being prepared for heaven since they are not yet ready for it and finally those who are already enjoying the vision of God in heaven - three branches of the One Body of Christ, the Church. All of these members of the Body of Christ contribute to the life and wellbeing of the whole - not just the visible members. Indeed, those who have died now see things in an altogether clearer light and consequently their prayers are directed where they are most needed whereas ours here on earth are so often misdirected. It is comforting to think, for instance, that a mother who, while alive, prayed for all her children, never ceases to do so after she has died.

There is thus a three-way communion of prayer: Those in heaven (usually called the “Church Triumphant” since they have successfully achieved their reward) pray continuously for all of us on earth and for those in Purgatory. Those in Purgatory pray to those in heaven, honouring them and asking for their help and praying to us for our help and asking God to reward us for it. I said earlier that they were “preparing” for heaven. These are the ones (probably the vast majority) who died in a state of grace, in friendship with God, yet due to the consequences of their sins - the AFTER EFFECTS, if you like - are plainly not yet fit to go into God’s presence. Thus they are purified or PURGED of their sins (hence the word Purgatory). What form this purification takes we do not know, but the very fact that they are still separated from God is in itself a form of great suffering . For this reason they are usually referred to as the “Church Suffering” Finally, there are all of us, still on the way, battling it out in this world in the struggle to do good and avoid evil and so we are called, appropriately enough, the “Church Militant”. We honour those in the Church Triumphant and ask for their intercession on our behalf, we pray for the Church Suffering, the Holy Souls, and, of course, we pray for one another. So all three branches are inter-active in a ceaseless effort, contributing to the well-being of the whole Body of Christ.

Just a final word on the Souls in Purgatory - these souls have, of course, had all the serious sins they committed forgiven or they would not be there. But though a sin may have been forgiven, the damage it did to others still has to be compensated for and the after-effects or weakness it caused in the one who committed it still have to be purified and healed. Since the sin itself has already been forgiven, the suffering they endure compensates for the damage they have done to others and purifies the after-effects in themselves thus preparing them for heaven.

THE FORGIVENESS OF SINS

This brings us to the tenth Article of the Creed - “THE FORGIVENESS OF SINS”. We have already seen how the power to forgive sins was given to the Church and is exercised in the Church. The manner in which it is exercised will be dealt with later when we study the Sacrament of Penance (Reconciliation). Now let us consider not the power to forgive but the thing being forgiven, namely sin itself since there is a great deal of ignorance on the subject.

First, then, what do we mean by “SIN”? The catechism definition is: “an offence against God by any thought, word or deed against the law of God”. Sin is a DECISION of the mind and will. It may not necessarily be followed by an act. So, for instance, I may plan to burgle a house. I don’t actually carry it out as, on approaching the house, I spot a Police Car parked nearby and I dare not risk it. But I had already made up my mind so, although I don’t burgle the house, I have committed the sin of theft! Does that surprise you?

What are my grounds for saying this? Where did the idea come from? The answer is Our Lord Himself. What He said on one occasion was: "YOU HAVE HEARD IT SAID OF OLD 'YOU SHALL NOT COMMIT ADULTERY - BUT I SAY TO YOU IF A MAN LOOKS AT A WOMAN LUSTFULLY HE HAS ALREADY COMMITTED ADULTERY WITH HER IN HIS HEART.'" (Matthew 5: 27,28)

Sin is committed when the mind is made up, but not until then. Up till that point it is still temptation.

I want now to make two important distinctions. The first is between ORIGINAL sin and ACTUAL sin. Original sin refers to the fall of our first parents from grace at the dawn of human history, and its consequences in each one of us. You may remember when I was talking about WHY the Incarnation happened I mentioned man's rebellion. That sin had repercussions on all of us. By their sin, our first parents lost that grace which was the life of their souls and thus could not pass on to their descendants what they no longer possessed themselves. So mankind was deprived of the means of getting to heaven since it lacked the grace to perform the necessary supernatural acts.

So, Jesus Christ became a man, suffered and died on the cross, thus providing man with the means of obtaining that grace which had been lost. We are all born, therefore, lacking this grace - which is sometimes called the stain of original sin - but through Baptism that lost grace is restored to us. Nevertheless, man's nature remains damaged - our lower nature is not fully under the control of our higher nature. All of us have experience of this inner battle haven't we? St. Paul describes it most graphically in his letter to the Romans. Read it now for yourself- you find it in Romans 7: 15-24. Actual sin is, of course, the kind of sin we ourselves commit and this is where the second distinction comes in.

It is vitally important for us to know the difference since one has the deadly effect of severing the life-line between Christ and ourselves, depriving us of grace and leaving us as man was before the Redemption - incapable of getting to heaven and, since it is our own fault, heading for that permanent separation from God that we call Hell. So it is vital, then, to know the difference between what is called MORTAL sin and VENIAL sin. It is mortal sin, as its name suggests, that is deadly. Theologians have defined it very carefully for us so that we can be in no doubt whatever if we ever commit one. Before a mortal sin is committed, three clear conditions must be simultaneously present.

First, the matter must be SERIOUS. Secondly, there must be FULL KNOWLEDGE of what I am doing, so if there is ignorance it is not one. (I shall talk more about ignorance when I deal with the Sacrament of Penance). Thirdly, it must be QUITE DELIBERATE. Any sin which lacks one or more of these three conditions is VENIAL. It displeases God and, if unchecked, it can lead to mortal sin but it does not have the catastrophic effect of depriving us of grace - the life of the soul.

You will notice that I have not mentioned any particular SPECIES of sin. This is because ANY species of sin which fulfills all three conditions is MORTAL. One very common error in the old days was that people seemed to think that SEXUAL sin was almost the only mortal sin! Nowadays, one gets the uneasy impression that many people don't think there is such a thing as sexual sin at all! The truth is, of course, as I have said - ANY SIN fulfilling all three conditions is mortal.

CHAPTER 10 - GRACE AND PRAYER

The first nine chapters dealt with the Creed - the summary of what God has revealed to us which, with the aid of faith, we are able to believe. Now we start to deal with the CONSEQUENCES of what we believe - the steps we take in response to what God has revealed. You may remember that I said God gave us three great gifts to help us. We have dealt with the first of them - FAITH, with the aid of which we are enabled to believe what God has revealed to us through His Church. Now we deal with the second of these gifts - HOPE.

Hope is a firm trust in God. We believe He has promised us eternal life: we trust Him to keep His promise and we do our share by using all the helps He has given us. We saw when we were talking about faith that it is a gift which we are free to accept or reject and it is the same here with hope. We can reject hope by choosing one of two false extremes. One is to sit back and do nothing and just rely on God's mercy. That is the sin of PRESUMPTION - we presume on God's mercy. The opposite extreme is to give up hope: refusing to believe we have any chance of being saved - the sin of DESPAIR.

If we accept the gift of hope we are able to trust God to keep His promise to give us eternal life and we willingly use the necessary helps He offers us. We can do nothing, however, without the help of God's GRACE, so I shall now talk a bit about that. I have mentioned it on several occasions already. The first time was when I talked of the Fall of man and loss of grace. Then we saw it was a share in God's life, enabling us to live on an altogether new level - a SUPERNATURAL level. It enables us to respond to God's love and to do those things he asks us to do.

Grace enters us at baptism and remains with us unless we throw it away by committing mortal sin, which we saw severs the link - the life-line with Christ. This supernatural life grows just as our natural life grows and we nourish that life by prayer and the reception of the sacraments. Grace really is the "pearl beyond price" of the Gospel since by it we are in love and friendship with God and able to do all He asks of us. We should never stop thanking God for having shared His life with us in this way and make it our constant concern to nourish it. Before going on to consider prayer, one last word on grace. Theologians distinguish between two different kinds of grace. SANCTIFYING grace, which is what we have been talking about all along - that share in God's life which is permanently there (unless we drive it out by mortal sin) and ACTUAL graces which are particular helps given us by God for special needs and moments in life. We are thus talking about actual grace when we say we are praying for the grace to avoid a particular sin, for instance. It is something given for a particular moment: not something there all the time.

Now let us turn our attention to PRAYER. The catechism has a wonderful definition for prayer. It says it is the "RAISING UP OF THE MIND AND HEART TO GOD". 'Heart' here is a popular term for the will. What makes prayer so special is that it uses those two faculties which liken us to God - the MIND and the WILL. We are directing the two most important gifts we possess to God who gave them to us. Being made of body and soul, we feel the need to express ourselves when we pray. So, we use words and speak or sing: we adopt certain postures so we kneel or stand: we make certain gestures such as the sign of the cross and so on. These are only the outward expression of the inner reality - the raising up of the mind and heart to God. If we remember that, we are likely to pray a great deal more - remember, He actually said, "PRAY ALWAYS" and that must mean that it is possible, as long as we don't insist on outwardly expressing ourselves, that is.

You may remember we considered a certain form of prayer which did not involve words at all, and could be done anywhere and at any time. We just concentrate the mind on the fact that GOD IS... GOD IS HERE... GOD IS HERE NOW.... This wordless form of prayer is called MENTAL PRAYER or MEDITATION while the form that uses words (even if they are not said out loud) is called VOCAL PRAYER.

Having said that mental prayer can be used anywhere and at any time, it is important to note that we still have to set aside time every day for FORMAL prayer - prayer and prayer alone. Otherwise, it will gradually fade out of our lives. That means we need a daily routine and the best way to work that out is to ask ourselves the questions WHEN? and WHERE?

First, then, **WHEN?** The traditional times, of course, are morning and night and certainly we must start the day off with some very short prayer such as the **MORNING OFFERING**. For many people, all they feel like when they first wake is saying: “Oh! God!” and hoping it is a prayer! But if it is **VERY SHORT**, like the morning offering, you won’t neglect it. For many people, then, first thing in the morning is a bad time for serious prayer. Similarly, last thing at night often finds us too tired to pray for any length of time so we should keep that very short too - just a quick run-through of the day with an act of contrition for any sins and thanksgiving for any graces received. When you are deciding the **WHEN?**, therefore, I always advise you to choose a time when you are **WIDE AWAKE, UNLIKELY TO BE DISTURBED, AND REASONABLY COMFORTABLE**.

That point about being reasonably comfortable will also help you to determine **WHERE?** and also what posture, because you can’t be “reasonably comfortable” if you are freezing cold or are kneeling on bare boards (although that could be an exercise in mortification). Maybe, just maybe, God means us to use the squashy part He gave us for sitting on! It is interesting to note that the real “professionals” - monks and nuns - usually sit or stand.

There is, of course, no substitute for the presence of the Blessed Sacrament but most cannot get to a church every day so do whatever is best for you – for example, your bedroom when you first get in from work, or whatever. By the way, I always use a **TIMER** - that stops me looking at my watch all the time and holds me down to a set time. So far, then, we have seen **WHAT** prayer is - the raising up of the mind and heart to God. We’ve seen the two main types - **MENTAL** and **VOCAL**. We’ve thought about **WHEN** and **WHERE**, bearing in mind that we need to be wide awake, undisturbed and reasonably comfortable. Now let’s consider the **PURPOSES** of prayer - **WHY** do we pray?

The first two motives for prayer can be deduced from considering God and His goodness towards us. So, we think of the God who is **LOVE** and **PRAISE** Him for what He is. Then we think of how good He is to us so we **THANK** Him for His goodness. Then we think of how we respond to Him - our lack of effort or downright sin so we ask **FORGIVENESS**. And, finally, **NOT** first, we ask for what we need! Notice, too, I said “**NEED**” not **WANT**! So often we complain ‘My prayers are never answered!’ and the reason for that is probably because I ask for the wrong things - things that God knows would be bad for me or perhaps God is encouraging me to pray more so He doesn’t answer straight away or gives me something different and better. He Himself told us to ask for what we need so if we are uncertain whether it is the right thing we are asking for, we should add the proviso “if it is Your will”.

An easy way to remember the order of priority in prayer is: (1) **I LOVE YOU** (2) **THANK YOU** (3) **I’M SORRY** and (4) **PLEASE!**

One last word on prayer. I have been pretty emphatic about putting the prayers of **PETITION** at the end of the list. I make no apology. Our relationship with God is a personal one - between two persons, one of whom has a limitless love for the other and offers unlimited happiness for ever to the other. Under those circumstances isn’t it the most frightful cheek to be always holding out our hand and saying: **GIVE ME!**

OUR LADY

We have thought about grace and prayer so I think it is highly appropriate to end this chapter by talking about the one who is described as “**FULL OF GRACE**” and must be considered the ultimate expert on prayer since she taught the infant Jesus to pray – namely, Our Blessed Lady, Mary, the Mother of God. In the first of the chapters on the Incarnation, I mentioned the unique part Mary played in it. A part which earned her the title “**MOTHER OF GOD**”. I mentioned then that if you accepted the Incarnation in all its fullness and all its implications then devotion to Mary is entirely understandable. Indeed, the lack of it would be inexcusable.

What we shall do now is to examine some of the implications. We have seen that, as a consequence of the Fall from grace of man, everyone is born deprived of grace, **NOT** in a state of friendship with God, without God’s life flowing in them. So, unless there was a special intervention by God, when Jesus Christ, God the Son, became a man, He would have had to have been born of a woman who was out of love and friendship with God! Such a thought is unacceptable and so, of course, we say that there **WAS** a special intervention by God and we call it the **IMMACULATE CONCEPTION**. From the first moment of her earthly existence in her mother’s womb, Mary was **FREE** from the consequences of Original Sin – she was in the state of grace: in the state of love and friendship with God.

The Immaculate Conception is the classic example of the Church, reflecting upon her teaching and discovering fresh depths in it. Gradually the Church came to realise that it must be so. It could not possibly be otherwise. We say that Mary enjoyed this special privilege due to the FORESEEN MERITS of Her Son's death. The first and greatest fruit of her Son's death was that Mary was spared even the consequences of Original Sin - she was altogether sinless. Now, Mary, conceived free from sin, and sinless throughout her life could not therefore suffer the CONSEQUENCE of sin - namely death. Hence we say that at the end of her earthly existence Mary was taken up body and soul into heaven "ASSUMED INTO HEAVEN" as we say. Though this doctrine of the Assumption was only solemnly defined as being part of Revelation as recently as 1950, the Church had in fact come to believe it from the earliest times. They called it the "DORMITION".

From all that I have said, it is hardly surprising that Catholics pray to and are URGED to pray to, Mary. Since we believe her to be closer and dearer to God than anyone else, so her INTERCESSION is that much more powerful. The most common prayer to Mary is, of course, the "HAIL MARY" - an admirable prayer, since the first half is from Scripture and so the Word of God, and the second half is a plea to help us at two most important moments - NOW - and AT THE HOUR OF OUR DEATH. The only time we can do anything about - NOW - and the moment when our fate is sealed for ever - THE HOUR OF OUR DEATH. There are other lovely prayers too - the "HAIL HOLY QUEEN"... the "ANGELUS" and, of course, THE ROSARY... I shall deal with these at the end when I talk about Catholic Devotions.

There is no such thing as a guarantee for getting to heaven, but the nearest we will ever get to one is to have a strong devotion to Mary who always leads us to her Son.

CHAPTER 11 – THE SACRAMENTS IN GENERAL

You will remember that at the beginning of the last chapter, when we were considering GRACE, we saw that the Sacraments are means of receiving this grace. Christ, the Head of that Body we call the Church, has ways in which He ENLIVENS and NOURISHES His Body. Since His work is all invisible, we visible human beings require visible EVIDENCE of His work among us - signs of His presence that are visible and readily understandable, and that is what the Sacraments are. Over the centuries, the Church has developed these visible signs adapting them from time to time to suit changing circumstances, while the inner reality, of course, remained the same, for the Inner Reality is JESUS CHRIST HIMSELF.

So, we call these signs of Christ's presence among us SACRAMENTS and there are seven of them. Though these visible signs may look very different from one another, they all have this much in common - they point to the presence of Christ. We are all familiar with the road-sign "MEN AT WORK" - well, the Sacraments are all "CHRIST AT WORK" signs and the different things said and done in the signs show us what sort of work Christ is doing. Thus, if the sign is FOOD, Christ is FEEDING us, if the sign is WATER Christ is giving life and so on. So far then, the Sacraments are like other signs - they point at something or, in this case, SOMEONE - and that 'someone' of course is Jesus Christ. But we say they are not just signs; they are EFFECTIVE signs - they don't just point at something: they make it happen. Imagine a revolutionary new type of traffic light which, when it turned from amber to red automatically APPLIED YOUR BRAKES! That would be an effective sign - not just warning you to stop but stopping you as well. The Sacraments are like that - they don't just say "Christ is here" - they MAKE HIM PRESENT, and what is said or done in the sign shows what He is doing, as we've seen.

Now, let's take things a stage further. Since Christ is present and the person who is receiving the Sacrament is present there is a MEETING. How much happens at that meeting will depend upon what sort of meeting it is, of course. Think of the various kinds of meetings we have all had experience of. Sometimes, they are truly memorable - we are completely absorbed by the person, taking in all that they are saying as that person is with us. You might say it is a meeting of minds and hearts - a WHOLE-HEARTED meeting. Then there is the kind of meeting where the person you meet is perhaps in pain... or worried or bored... his attention wanders... he only takes in half of what you are saying. It is what you might call a HALF-HEARTED meeting. Then there is a third kind of meeting when two persons who are not on speaking terms, happen to meet. They may be physically close to one another but don't speak and maybe deliberately look the other way - what we would call a COLD-HEARTED meeting.

Well now, the sacraments are meetings with Christ and He is always WHOLEHEARTEDLY there, but He does not force Himself on us: He leaves us free to respond how we will. If He gets a whole-hearted response then His work in us will have its maximum effect. If the response is half-hearted then the results will be correspondingly less and if He meets with a cold-hearted person, He does not work at all... as I say, He leaves us free. It follows from this that the care I take to make these meetings whole-hearted is of paramount importance.

Having introduced the subject of the Sacraments in general, before going into detail on each individual Sacrament, which will cover the next three chapters, I am now going to make a few distinctions which I think will be helpful.

There are, as I have said, seven Sacraments: BAPTISM, CONFIRMATION, PENANCE, EUCHARIST, MATRIMONY, HOLY ORDER and the SACRAMENT OF THE SICK. THREE of the Sacraments can only be received once. They are the ones that confer what is called a CHARACTER or SEAL - marking us down as a particular kind of person. Baptism is a birth into the Body of Christ: you cannot be born twice. Confirmation makes you a fully mature, adequately equipped member of the Church: you cannot come of age twice over. And Holy Order makes you a priest: you cannot become a priest twice over. TWO of the Sacraments are NORMALLY only received once - Matrimony and the Sacrament of the Sick. It is comparatively rare to outlive a married partner and marry again. It is comparatively rare to be sick enough to be about to die and then survive... The REMAINING TWO are for day-to-day needs - the Eucharist, being the food of the soul; and Penance (also called Confession or Reconciliation) which obtains forgiveness for sins and healing for the damage done by sin. Now, let us examine two of the sacraments in detail.

BAPTISM

“UNLESS A MAN IS BORN AGAIN HE CANNOT ENTER THE KINGDOM OF GOD” was what Our Lord said - so Baptism is the beginning of a new life, the moment when God’s life begins in man. The stain of Original Sin is washed away, all actual sins (if the person being baptised was old enough to commit them) are also washed away, together with the after-effects of those sins. Man is now able to live in love and friendship with God and also able to do all the supernatural things which are required of him. The SIGNS used in the sacrament should therefore in some way indicate all this. What are they? The words used are “I BAPTISE YOU IN THE NAME OF THE FATHER, AND OF THE SON, AND OF THE HOLY SPIRIT.” So the Trinity is invoked, indicating that the one baptised has entered into a new relationship with God. Of the VISIBLE signs the first and most important is WATER, which symbolises LIFE - the new life that has begun in the soul of the one baptised - that share in God’s life which we call GRACE. To us who can obtain water at the turn of a tap, water does not immediately suggest Life, but it was highly significant to those whom Our Lord came to live among. Living, as they did, on the edge of desert, they were only too familiar with death from thirst.

When the priest pours the water over the forehead, Christ is pouring life into the soul, so He is ENLIVENING. Water is also a sign of cleansing so when the priest pours the water, Christ is cleansing the soul of Original Sin. The Paschal or Easter Candle, standing by the font, reminds us of the presence of Christ the LIGHT OF THE WORLD. At one point, a small candle is lit from the Paschal Candle and given to the father of the baby to hold - so Christ is ENLIGHTENING. Two kinds of oil are used - the first is applied with a prayer of EXORCISM. Oil is a sign of strength so Christ is STRENGTHENING and PROTECTING the one baptised from Satan, spirit of evil. The second oil is CHRISM - a word which has the same root as Christ which, you will remember, meant the “ANOINTED ONE”. Three kinds of people were traditionally anointed or set apart - PRIESTS, PROPHETS and KINGS. Now, Christ is the HIGH PRIEST, THE PROPHET and the KING OF KINGS and since we become a part of Him, we share in His priestly, prophetic and royal roles, so we are anointed. A white garment is put on the baby - white is the symbol of innocence reminding us that we must be ‘Clothed in Christ’ and live holy lives. I have talked of a baby but of course the same procedure is followed with an adult. I quoted Our Lord’s words “Unless a man is born again he cannot enter the kingdom of God”. Baptism is NECESSARY for salvation. That is not saying no unbaptised person will be saved. It IS, however, saying that it is through Christ’s Body the Church that all men will be saved even though they do not realise it. So, unbaptised persons who were martyred were said to have received the “Baptism of Blood”, and would-be converts who died before being baptised were said to have received the “Baptism of Desire”. Always, it is the redemption wrought by Christ and applied to men through His Body, the Church, that saves.

The MINISTER or one who gives the sacrament is normally a priest though in danger of death, ANYONE, even an unbeliever, can do it, if he or she does what the church wants. Once baptised, as we’ve seen, there can be no re-baptism though if there is grave doubt about whether it has been properly done or not, then it may be redone conditionally. A SPONSOR or “Godparent” is required to stand in for parents in the event of their death - and to assist by prayer and example. He or she must normally be over sixteen and ALWAYS PRACTISING. How could a lapsed person perform the necessary duty of good example?

Finally, it is impossible to exaggerate the importance of baptism - not just for the one being baptised but also for the Faith Community which he or she now joins as a member of Christ. That community is, of course, the Parish. Unbaptised adults who wish to join the Church have a long period of instruction called the Catechumenate. It is interspersed with services of preparation and the ideal time for their baptism is at the Easter Vigil which in the early church was when all converts were baptised.

CONFIRMATION

At one time this Sacrament was administered at the same time as Baptism - and it still is with adult converts. It completes the process begun at baptism, increasing the life of grace, conferring the fullness of the Holy Spirit and equipping the person to live a fully mature Christian life, able to stand up for and defend the Faith even at the cost of their lives. Children are generally confirmed when they are at Secondary School - which is often the first place they have to stand up for their faith! The audible sign is: "BE SEALED WITH THE GIFT OF THE HOLY SPIRIT." The visible signs are the LAYING ON OF HANDS by the bishop - this is mentioned in the New Testament whenever the Holy Spirit was conferred and the ANOINTING WITH CHRISM while the words mentioned above are said. There is a third visible sign - a tap on the cheek given by the bishop - reminding us that we must be prepared to defend the faith and live like good soldiers of Jesus Christ as part of the Church Militant!

I said we receive the "fullness" of the Spirit and indeed He does not come to us empty handed. He gives us seven GIFTS to equip us to live mature and holy lives. The seven gifts are as follows: WISDOM - which helps us to judge things by God's standards and so get our order of priorities right. UNDERSTANDING - which helps us to grasp the mysteries of the faith sufficiently to be able to accept them. COUNSEL - which enables us to make the right decisions in life. FORTITUDE - which gives us the courage to live good Christian lives no matter what the cost. KNOWLEDGE - which gives us a kind of sixth-sense helping us to see the good and evil in people and things, and finally PIETY and FEAR OF THE LORD - two gifts which are really COMPLEMENTARY because between them they give us a balanced relationship with God - that of a child with its father: - a mixture of LOVE... AWE... and WHOLESOME RESPECT...

The Ordinary minister or one who normally administers the Sacrament of Confirmation is a bishop though when a priest receives an adult into the church he may also confirm them. The Sponsor should have the same qualities as those demanded of one at baptism and, best of all, be the same person.

A Confirmed person will thus have all the assistance required to live a good holy life: the courage to defend and witness to the faith; the light to see things through God's eyes and make the right decisions; and to have the right relationship with God - full of love, awe and obedience. In short, the ability to be good members of Jesus Christ.

CHAPTER 12 – THE EUCHARIST

Now let us examine the greatest of all the Sacraments - The Eucharist. The Catechism defines it as “the Body and Blood of Jesus Christ, together with His soul and divinity under the appearances of bread and wine.” Since the sign is obviously FOOD, then the work that Jesus Christ is doing is FEEDING us. There is, however, this great difference between the Eucharist and the other Sacraments. In the other Sacraments, the signs point to the presence of Jesus Christ. In the Eucharist, the sign IS Jesus Christ, under the appearance of bread and wine. He comes to us as food and drink so that He can NOURISH our souls with His very self: uniting us with Himself in the most unique and intimate union. It goes without saying that our meeting here with Christ - our union with Him should be as perfect as we are capable of making it. The Mass, at which the Eucharist is made present, is called a SACRIFICE and we will examine that aspect of it later. First of all, however, we will look at what is called the doctrine of the REAL PRESENCE - what it is; how we explain it; and our grounds for believing it.

By the Real Presence we mean that Jesus Christ is really and truly present - wholly present - Body, Blood, Soul and Divinity, under the appearance of bread and wine. Notice REALLY and TRULY present NOT symbolically present, not PHYSICALLY present, but SACRAMENTALLY present, under the sign of bread and wine. Unlike Christians of other traditions, Catholics accept and believe what has always been taught. What we see APPEARS to be bread and wine. Our Faith tells us that it is Jesus Christ Himself who is there. Not IN the bread but IN PLACE OF the bread; only the appearance of bread and wine remains. He said it would be so...SO IT IS. To help us grasp what is, of course, a mystery, the Church puts forward a way of EXPLAINING the Real Presence which She calls TRANSUBSTANTIATION. This is not a doctrine of the Church but a way of explaining that doctrine. Mediaeval philosophers made use of two words: SUBSTANCE and ACCIDENTS. Substance meaning what a thing really is and accidents meaning the visible signs of that substance such as its colour, shape, texture and so on. These ACCIDENTS may change but the reality remains the same. Let me give you an example: Mum is giving the family eggs for tea. Dad wants his eggs fried, Tommy asks for scrambled eggs, Jeanie wants an omelette while Mum herself has a boiled egg. When she has finished cooking, all the eggs LOOK quite different but they are all still egg. The accidents have changed: the substance remains the same. Now, in the doctrine of the Real Presence, we say that the opposite has taken place. The accidents or outward appearance looks the same - it appears to be still bread and wine. But the substance or inner reality has changed. It is no longer bread and wine. It is the Body and Blood of Jesus Christ. This change, then, from one substance to another, is what we call TRANSUBSTANTIATION. So - we say that Jesus Christ IS truly present and we believe it because it has been revealed.

What does Scripture say? There is a long passage in the sixth chapter of St. John’s Gospel about Our Lord speaking in the synagogue at Capernaum. In this passage Our Lord describes Himself as the BREAD OF LIFE and that they, His audience, must EAT that bread. I will now take certain verses to show WHAT He actually said, HOW His audience reacted, what He then said by way of clarification and what finally happened. He started by saying (verse 27) “Do not work for food that cannot last, but work for the food that endures to eternal life.” And a little later (verse 33) He said, “The Bread of God is that which comes down from heaven and gives life to the world”. His audience then reacts (verse 34) by saying, “Sir, give us that bread always.” To which Jesus replies (verse 36) “I am the Bread of Life. He who comes to me will never be hungry.”

Now see how His audience reacts, (verses 41,42) “Meanwhile the Jews were complaining to each other about Him, because He had said, ‘I am the living bread which came down from heaven’. Surely this is Jesus, son of Joseph.” they said. “We know his father and mother. How can he now say, ‘I have come down from heaven’.” Jesus answers them (verse 43) “Stop complaining to each other”, and a little further on He says, (verses 48 - 52) “I am the Bread of life. Your fathers ate the manna in the desert and they are dead; but this is the bread that comes down from heaven, so that a man may eat it and not die. I am the living bread which has come down from heaven. Anyone who eats this bread will live for ever; and the bread that I shall give is my flesh, for the life of the world.” Now watch how his audience reacts to that, (verse 53) “How can this man give us his flesh to eat?” - so it seems that they took Him literally! Had He been speaking metaphorically he would have corrected them as He corrected Nicodemus who took literally his remark “unless a man is born again....” However, on this occasion, instead of correcting them, He emphasises His point because He goes on (vv: 54 - 59) “I tell you most solemnly, if you do NOT eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink His blood, you will not have life in you.

Anyone who DOES eat my flesh and drink my blood has eternal life, and I shall raise him up on the last day. For my flesh is REAL FOOD and my blood is REAL DRINK. He who eats my flesh and drinks my blood lives in me and I live in Him. As I, who am sent by the living Father, myself draw life from the Father, so whoever eats me will draw life from me. This is the bread come down from heaven; not like the bread our ancestors ate: they are dead, but anyone who eats this bread will live for ever.”

And what happens? The account goes on (verse 60) "He taught this doctrine at Capernaum. After hearing it, many of his followers said 'This is intolerable language, how can anyone accept it?'" and then a little further on it says (verse 67) "After this many of his disciples left Him and stopped going with Him."

So, well before His death, He said He was the Bread of Life: His body was real food: His blood was real drink: that unless we eat His flesh and drink His blood we would not have life in us but that if we did eat His flesh and drink His blood, We would live in Him and He in us. - A doctrine many of His followers found too much to swallow. Then, the night before He died, as we saw when we were studying the Church, He took a piece of bread and said "THIS IS MY BODY": He took a cup of wine and said, "THIS IS MY BLOOD" and then He said "DO THIS IN MEMORY OF ME" and His Church has done so ever since.

Now let us look at the Eucharist from a different angle - that of SACRIFICE. We describe Mass as the HOLY SACRIFICE of the Mass. What do we mean by 'sacrifice'? The word has become so debased nowadays. So we find ourselves saying that we will have to 'sacrifice' television tonight if we want to attend a talk in the Parish Hall! The word 'sacrifice' comes from two Latin words meaning to 'make holy' in the sense that we dedicate it to God. From the dawn of time man has tried to express his worship of God - his dependence on God - in some tangible way. So he would take something he valued and offer it to God, destroying it, usually by burning it. Thus he might take a lamb out of his flock or a calf from his herd. All these sacrifices unconsciously foreshadowed the one great sacrifice - that of the LAMB OF GOD, JESUS CHRIST. Two things were required for a sacrifice - that which was to be sacrificed - THE VICTIM, and a man specially chosen to make that sacrifice on behalf of everyone - THE PRIEST. And in Jesus Christ we have both. He is the Victim, the Lamb of God, offered to God on the cross and He is also the priest, offering Himself.

And at every Mass, He continues to do so, offering His body and blood, under the appearance of Bread and Wine. So that for all time man would have the privilege of being present at a mystical Calvary. So, we are present when Jesus Christ re-enacts his self-offering to God! The victim is the same - JESUS CHRIST, THE LAMB OF GOD; and the priest is the same - JESUS CHRIST, THE ETERNAL HIGH PRIEST. It is only the MANNER of offering which is different. On Calvary it was offered PHYSICALLY - at Mass it is offered SACRAMENTALLY.

Now, hopefully, we have some idea of the PRIVILEGE it is to be present at Mass. We are witnessing GOD WORSHIPPING GOD - Mass is HIS way of worshipping! So the Sacrament of the Eucharist is the Body, Blood, Soul and Divinity of Jesus Christ under the appearance of bread and wine. It is the Bread of Life, feeding us so that we will live in Him and He in us. It is the Lamb of God, offering Himself to the Father continuously until He comes again so that we can associate ourselves in that perfect act of worship! What can we possibly say but: "BLESSED BE GOD!".

CHAPTER 13 – PENANCE AND RECONCILIATION (Confession)

We come now to the Sacrament which most people call CONFESSION and which the Catechism of the Catholic Church refers to as the Sacrament of Penance and Reconciliation. The word ‘reconciliation’ reminds us of something that is often forgotten - namely the SOCIAL aspect of sin. When I was talking of JUDGEMENT, I mentioned that sin is like a small child disobeying its mother and putting its hand in the fire. The result, of course, was not just that the child disobeyed its mother but, as a consequence, it burned itself. Now we shall look at another consequence of sin.

When I commit sin, three things happen: first, I offend God and so need to be FORGIVEN; secondly, I damage myself and so need to be HEALED; and thirdly, I destroy or damage my relationship with all the members of Christ’s Body, the Church and so I need to be RECONCILED. A septic finger, if neglected, does not just remain a septic finger - the poison spreads and the whole body is infected. The effects of this Sacrament deal with all three of these consequences of sin. So, the sins I have committed are forgiven, the damage I have done to myself is healed and I am reconciled with all the members of Christ’s Body, the Church.

The signs used in this sacrament should, therefore, in some way, indicate these things. THE AUDIBLE SIGN is the ABSOLUTION - the words of forgiveness spoken by the priest. They are. “GOD THE FATHER OF MERCIES, THROUGH THE DEATH AND RESURRECTION OF HIS SON, HAS RECONCILED THE WORLD TO HIMSELF AND SENT THE HOLY SPIRIT AMONG US FOR THE FORGIVENESS OF SINS. THROUGH THE MINISTRY OF THE CHURCH MAY GOD GIVE YOU PARDON AND PEACE AND I ABSOLVE YOU FROM YOUR SINS IN THE NAME OF THE FATHER, AND OF THE SON AND OF THE HOLY SPIRIT.” So this sign clearly indicates that I am forgiven.

Sometimes THE VISIBLE SIGN is not seen by the penitent if he or she is separated from the priest by a curtain or a grill. But, whether it is seen or not, the priest holds his hands, or at least his right hand, towards (or over) the penitent, just as Our Lord stretched out his hand to heal the leper. A clear sign, therefore of healing.

What of reconciliation? Well, the priest is the representative of the Community, the Church, witnessing my desire to be forgiven, healed and reconciled with that Community. And on behalf of that community, he reconciles me. You may remember my mentioning earlier people who say: “I tell God in my heart I’m sorry for my sins.” Such people simply don’t realise that there is a need to “go public” as we say nowadays and the Penitential Rite at Mass when I confess to “you my brothers and sisters” shows that we recognise the need to be reconciled. Here, in this Sacrament, I am reconciled and the priest is the witness. In many parishes there is a weekly or monthly time for Exposition of the Blessed Sacrament with Confession available at the same time. This is an excellent practice since it not only gives the Sacrament the dignity it deserves but, also, it makes it a public ceremony and thus a more meaningful sign of reconciliation.

Here’s one more point. Our Lord told the parable of the Prodigal Son in order to illustrate God’s Compassion, Generosity and Eagerness to forgive the sinner - and it is significant that the story ended with a CELEBRATION.

When I was dealing with the Sacraments in general, I said they were MEETINGS with Christ and that we needed to do all we could to make those meetings as WHOLE-HEARTED as possible. Surely this must mean taking great care over the TIME I go, the PLACE I choose, and the MANNER in which I confess.

I mentioned in the second chapter on the Church, that the forgiveness of sins was one of the two great powers given to the Church and, most importantly, that the one who had been given the power to forgive (i.e. the priest) had to decide whether to forgive or not. So, an act of judgement was called for - shall I forgive or not? And you may remember the two obvious conditions: first, the priest must know WHAT he is forgiving and, secondly, he must be satisfied that the penitent is SORRY (an expression of ‘contrition’ as it is often called). How could he know unless he is told? Hence, of course, the need for CONFESSION.

There are, then, three conditions required of the one forgiving:

- He must obviously have the power - so he must be a priest and have the right to USE that power - called faculties.
- He must know what it is he is forgiving.
- He must be satisfied that the penitent is sorry.

What conditions are required of the one asking forgiveness? The ACTS OF THE PENITENT as they are called. Again, there are three:-

- CONTRITION: that is, genuine sorrow for the sin(s) committed and a firm purpose of amendment.
- CONFESSION: the penitent must confess all post-baptismal mortal sin. To deliberately conceal serious sin is a grievous sin of sacrilege.
- SATISFACTION: the penitent must accept and perform the penance given by the priest.

How often should we go to Confession? There are two guidelines here. First, those conscious of mortal sin not yet confessed are bound to confess as soon as possible and never less than once a year. Those not conscious of mortal sin strictly speaking need not confess. However, to deliberately neglect the Sacrament to this extent is the sign of an extremely lax CONSCIENCE and such people usually end up in mortal sin.

Secondly, the Church recommends frequent confession and She has in mind here people who have not committed mortal sin. Why is this? Well, you may remember that I mentioned earlier that one of the effects of this sacrament is healing. Now there are two kinds of medicine - CURATIVE and PREVENTATIVE. Thus, I take an aspirin to cure a headache. But suppose I am going on business to Kenya - I get an inoculation against yellow fever to prevent my catching the disease. This is the thinking here. I am encouraged to confess frequently not so much to GET OUT of sin as to KEEP OUT of it.

In other words, we need the Grace of the Sacrament to help us to resist temptation and to avoid the occasions of sin. Incidentally, those who take trouble over the choice of WHEN, WHERE and TO WHOM they confess, invariably go regularly! Personally, I recommend at least once a month.

I now want to return to the subject of sin itself. I said I would do so when dealing with the FORGIVENESS OF SINS. You may remember I mentioned three conditions that must be simultaneously present before mortal sin is committed. Commenting on the second condition - that there must be full knowledge - I said that I cannot commit mortal sin if there is ignorance or inattention present.

Sin is a decision of the mind and will. Just as PRAYER is the raising up of the mind and heart TO God so sin is the turning away of the mind and heart FROM God. The essence of sin lies in this turning away from the will of God or - and this is very important - WHAT IS THOUGHT TO BE the will of God. Just as if I do not realise a thing is wrong I do not commit sin, so if I think a thing is wrong and go ahead and do it then I do commit sin! The deliberate turning away is present even though I am mistaken in thinking the thing is wrong.

All this brings me to that much misunderstood thing called CONSCIENCE. Let us clear away common errors first. Conscience is NOT a 'guilty feeling'. I may 'feel guilty' and yet do no wrong at all. Many pious people who are in hospital may say they FEEL guilty at missing Mass! Whereas I doubt if Hitler felt in the least bit guilty when he sent millions of Jews to the Gas Chamber. Conscience is not an infallible guide - either because it did not tell the ignorant person he was doing wrong, or because it failed to tell the misinformed person that what he thought was sin was not. So what, then, is conscience? Conscience, we say, is a FACULTY.

It is a faculty given us by God to enable us to judge the morality of our acts. In other words, to tell us if something is right or wrong. However, in order for it to function properly three things are required:

- It needs SUFFICIENT INFORMATION. This is provided over the years by parents, schools, priests and the teaching authority of the Church.
- The information must be CORRECT. If conscience has been *misinformed* then when it is examined on that point it will invariably *misinform* you. However, provided conscience has SUFFICIENT information - and that information is CORRECT - we say it is AN INFORMED CONSCIENCE. Nevertheless, to function properly it still requires a third thing:
- It must be REGULARLY USED. However well-informed my conscience may be, if I neglect to examine it regularly, it will become LAX and in the end die.

The term “examination of conscience” is often used in an incorrect way. Thus if I were to say to myself just before going to confession: “Lying is a sin - have I lied?” I am not examining my conscience, I am refreshing my memory! For proper examination of conscience, conscience and memory work hand-in-hand. Thus, at the end of the day, MEMORY recalls all the events of the day, while CONSCIENCE makes judgements on those events. So for instance memory says I said such-and-such to Mrs. Smith and then conscience says “That was wrong!” Conscience only requires memory when it is dealing with the past. It can work in the present by telling you that what you are saying or doing now is wrong and it can cover the future by telling you that what you are contemplating doing would be wrong.

Correctly and sufficiently informed - and regularly used - conscience does a great job. Let me just sum up what this wonderful Sacrament obtains for me:

- FORGIVENESS of my SINS.
- HEALING of the DAMAGE they have DONE to me

and

- RECONCILIATION with my brothers and sisters in Christ.

The words of absolution indicate the forgiveness. The hands of the priest indicate the healing. The presence of the priest indicates the reconciliation.

To be able to forgive - one must be a priest, know what has been done, and be satisfied the penitent is sorry. To be forgiven - one requires Contrition, Confession and Satisfaction (that is, performance of the penance imposed by the priest).

To make the meeting with Christ whole-hearted:

- Great care should be taken over when, where, how and to whom I confess.
- Great care should be taken over the examination of conscience beforehand.
- Great care should be taken too over the thanksgiving and performance of the penance afterwards.

So - if I really take trouble, this Sacrament can become for me, what God meant it to be: A SIGN OF HIS COMPASSION, JOY AND EAGERNESS TO FORGIVE. Indeed, A TRUE CAUSE FOR CELEBRATION.

CHAPTER 14 - MATRIMONY, HOLY ORDER AND THE SACRAMENT OF THE SICK

In this chapter we will deal with the remaining three sacraments. Two of them are VOCATIONAL - or SACRAMENTS OF COMMITMENT - namely: Matrimony and Holy Order. The final one is the ANOINTING OF THE SICK - the Sacrament which prepares us for death and union with God.

MATRIMONY

Marriage itself is a universal institution whereby any man and woman, who are free to marry one another, bind themselves to live together as man and wife for the rest of their lives. Christ, as head of His body the Church, makes it the occasion of further grace for His members, so when they enter upon the contract He makes it a Sacrament – the Sacrament of MATRIMONY. The word ‘matrimony’ comes from two Latin words meaning the office, or duty, of a mother. So, quite simply, matrimony is PRIMARILY for children. The main purpose of matrimony is the raising of a family and the fostering of a loving relationship. The very condition of indissolubility is demanded in order to provide the children of the marriage with the security, love, care and education to which they have a right.

It is only too obvious that the real casualties in a broken marriage are the children. The SIGN of the Sacrament of course is the Exchange of Consent - what is popularly called the “Marriage Vows”. The words are:

“I TAKE YOUFOR MY LAWFUL HUSBAND/WIFE; TO HAVE AND TO HOLD FROM THIS DAY FORWARD; FOR BETTER, FOR WORSE, FOR RICHER, FOR POORER, IN SICKNESS AND IN HEALTH, TILL DEATH DO US PART.” Words which comprise a clear statement of intent to live with one another UNCONDITIONALLY till death.

One phrase deserves special mention - “to have and to hold from this day forward”. This means the handing over by each to the other of the exclusive right over his or her body which either has the right to ask for and the other the duty to hand over - what St. Paul called the “marriage debt”. This would be the right moment to say that since that right is EXCLUSIVE, nobody at all has the right to dictate to the couple how often or how seldom they USE that right and thus how many children they have. The Church says they must exercise what is called RESPONSIBLE PARENTHOOD, neither bringing into the world children they cannot provide for, nor selfishly limiting the number in order to raise their own standard of living.

Who administers the Sacrament? The answer to this question often comes as a surprise because it is NOT the priest! The BRIDE and GROOM administer the Sacrament to one another: the priest is merely the official witness. Consequently, if one of the partners is a NON-CHRISTIAN, though they are validly married, NO SACRAMENT IS CONFERRED because an unbaptised person can neither administer a Sacrament nor receive it. MIXED marriages, or marriages between a Catholic and a non-Catholic Christian, are permitted - but not encouraged. The faith of the children is at risk when they see their two parents differ on what is such a vital matter.

People outside the Church often say “the Catholic Church does not allow divorce” as if it were a Church law. The simple truth is that GOD doesn’t allow divorce. Divorce is, therefore, a legal fiction. If a man and woman who are free to marry declare their intention to live together as man and wife for ever, GOD MAKES it SO, and no-one can UNMAKE it. As the words say: “...what God has joined together, let no man put asunder.” The Church merely keeps God’s law and so refuses to “remarry” a divorced person because he or she is still married in God’s eyes. The Church does, however, permit a Catholic whose marriage has broken up to go through a civil divorce to obtain custody and financial provision for the children. He or she cannot of course, marry again since the original marriage stands. (A quick word here on annulment. This is a declaration by an ecclesiastical law court - called a marriage tribunal - that no marriage had in fact taken place. This sometimes occurs when, for example, after rigorous investigation, it is found that one of the parties had defective consent. He or she had said, and been heard to say, “we’ll try it out for a year or two and if it doesn’t work out, we’ll split up.” If this were the case, the consent was defective and there was no marriage. There are, of course, other grounds for annulment.)

In an age when one out of three marriages (even of Catholics) break up, it is worth noting that when God makes the contract of marriage a Sacrament, that means He has provided all that the couple will need to KEEP the contract. The only thing that can break a Christian marriage is when one or both of the parties turns away from God. The Grace of the Sacrament does not guarantee they will “live happily ever after” but it does mean that if they both work at it, they have what they need to make a lasting, loving union until death.

HOLY ORDER

Now let us look at HOLY ORDER. The Catechism states: “Holy Order is the Sacrament by which Bishops, priests and other ministers of the Church are ordained and receive power and grace to perform sacred duties.” In an earlier chapter on the Church I mentioned a ‘chain of command.’ First, there were those who, like Peter, the Rock, received the two powers of consecration and forgiving sins and the power to pass on these powers. These are the bishops, called the successors of the apostles, who enjoy the fullness of the priesthood. Priests, who do not have the *fullness* of the priesthood, have the two powers but cannot pass them on. The SIGNS of the Sacrament are the LAYING-ON OF HANDS by the bishop, the ANOINTING WITH CHRISM of the ordinand’s hands and the HANDING OVER OF THE CHALICE indicating the power to offer Mass. The FORM or words of the Ordination prayer, together with the laying on of hands, confer the power.

When dealing with Baptism, I said that the person being baptised was anointed with chrism to show that they share in the “priestly, prophetic and royal roles” of Christ, their head. This sharing in Christ’s priesthood enables them to share in His sacrifice, uniting their spiritual sacrifices with that of Christ. However, the share in Christ’s priesthood possessed by the priest is essentially different. He shares in Christ’s priesthood in a UNIQUE way - offering the Eucharistic Sacrifice in THE PERSON OF CHRIST. He is the very means by which Christ makes Himself present. The minister of the Sacrament is a bishop - not necessarily the bishop of the Diocese since all bishops as we have seen enjoy the fullness of the priesthood and can pass on the powers they possess.

There has been much talk in recent years of a crisis of identity in the priesthood. Certainly, with the laity being encouraged to accept a greater share in the life of the Church, the priest’s position is not quite so clearly defined as it was in the past. Nevertheless, the Vatican Council spelled out the role of the priest very clearly when it stated that the priest is ordained to: PREACH THE WORD OF GOD, ADMINISTER THE SACRAMENTS and to FORM THE CHRISTIAN COMMUNITY.

One final point. It is a grave mistake to think that the priest is just “like anybody else”. He isn’t. Sadly, he may behave “like anybody else”. Perhaps some of the thousands who have left the priesthood allowed themselves to think they WERE just “like anybody else”. But they are in a unique position. They have two great powers which nobody can take from them and, when offering the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass, they are acting in THE PERSON OF CHRIST. The words of Consecration are clear: “This is MY Body... MY Blood” - NOT “This is Christ’s Body... Christ’s Blood”. Christ uses their vocal chords, their hands as the means of making Himself present. You cannot get anything more unique than that!

THE SACRAMENT OF THE SICK

This used to be called “Extreme Unction” which tended to suggest it was given at the “last gasp”. It is intended primarily for those in danger of death from sickness or old age - though it can also be administered to those whose health is seriously impaired. Its purpose is to prepare the person for death or to assist their recovery - if this is what God wills. The preparation for death involves two things. First, it gives the sick person the strength to face death calmly and, secondly, it removes any barriers between the sick person and God by forgiving any sins for which the person is sorry.

If it is to assist recovery then clearly it should be administered as early as possible. People sometimes hesitate to send for the priest for fear of alarming the sick person - “surely she’s not THAT sick, Father!” is often said. This is a twofold error since one effect of the sacrament is to CALM and the other to CURE! The SIGNS, as you might expect, indicate the effects - OIL, the sign of strength, is used to indicate the spiritual strength given to face death calmly. The WORDS “... MAY THE LORD WHO FREES YOU FROM SIN, SAVE YOU AND RAISE YOU UP.” indicate both the forgiveness of sin and the prayer for recovery. Two small points: First, this Sacrament is for those in danger of death from SICKNESS or OLD AGE so it cannot be given, for example, to soldiers just before going into battle or to condemned criminals before execution. Secondly, REAL DEATH is often separated from APPARENT DEATH by quite a bit so those who have “just died” can be anointed.

Finally, I have anointed many people over the years. Some have made really remarkable recoveries. Almost all have rallied for a while – they have not been cured but have shown an immediate improvement in health because they were calmer than before. Then, when the end comes, the calmness remains. Their last journey into the arms of God is peaceful. What more can we ask for than that?

CHAPTER 15 - THE COMMANDMENTS (Part One)

Now, we turn our attention to the Commandments. You will remember right at the beginning that I mentioned three great gifts that God had given us at Baptism. - FAITH, HOPE and CHARITY. We saw how Faith helped us to believe all that God had revealed - those truths summarised in the Creed. Then we saw how Hope enabled us to trust God to keep the promises He has made and to use the helps He has provided us with – namely, the Sacraments.

Now we shall see how Charity helps us as we consider the Commandments and our response to them. I have often said how the meaning of words has changed or become debased over the years. None more so than Charity - or love - which St. Paul describes as the greatest of all God's gifts.

Charity, or love, means loving God above all things and our neighbour as ourselves for God's sake. Remember that, like Faith and Hope, it is a GIFT offered to us by God which requires ACCEPTANCE on our part.

One of the commonest misconceptions is to think of love as some form of intense or passionate liking. It may INCLUDE it, but it is not to be identified with it. LIKING lies in the FEELINGS which are so liable to get out of our full control. It is an instinctive thing - thus there are people and things we just can't help liking... But, because it is instinctive, automatic, there is NO VIRTUE in it - neither is there anything wrong in it - it is morally neutral.

Now, LOVING is something quite different - it desires the good of the other and thus desires to do all that will be for the other's good. It is an act of the will and it is supremely UNSELFISH since it subordinates its own will to the will of the other. It is important to remember that the one loved may not want what is for their good! Thus, Mum truly loves her children and often she does things which she knows are for their good. THEY may not think so! But she knows they are - so she does them. She is LOVING them though they may not be LIKING that love of hers!

With God, of course, there can be no such conflict of interest. We can unconditionally do all He wants us to do since He cannot will us to do anything wrong. With others, however, there is always that danger. So we always do what is for their good but not necessarily to their liking. Now, if we also LIKE the person, then that makes it all the easier for us, but we don't HAVE to like them in order to love them. We can do all that is for their good even though we DON'T like them.

Now this gift of Charity, or love, given us by God, enables us to do what He wants always - in other words it enables us to keep His Commandments – to correspond to His Divine Will. Moreover, it is a proof of our love when we DO keep His Commandments. As He said Himself - "If you love me you will keep my Commandments." Having prefaced this chapter on the Commandments with an explanation of love, they can now be seen for what they are - not IRRITATING PROHIBITIONS but laws given to us for our good by God who loves us, and proofs of our love for Him when we keep them. We saw when we were examining JUDGEMENT that God's laws reflect His nature and, since He is goodness itself then all His laws will be good, and to break them doesn't just offend God but also damages us in so doing. So, in keeping His Commandments we not only prove our love for God but also do good to ourselves.

The Commandments can be found in the Old Testament Book of Exodus - Chapter 20, verses 2 to 17; and also in the Book of Deuteronomy - Chapter 5, verses 6 to 21.

There are Ten Commandments, and they are as follows:

1. I am the Lord thy God, who brought thee out of the land of Egypt and out of the house of bondage.
Thou shalt not have strange gods before me: thou shalt not make to thyself any graven thing, nor the likeness of anything that is in heaven above or in the earth beneath, nor of those things that are in the waters under the earth. Thou shalt not adore them nor serve them.
2. *Thou shalt not take the name of the Lord thy God in vain.*
3. *Remember that thou keep holy the sabbath day.*
4. *Honour thy father and thy mother.*
5. *Thou shalt not kill.*
6. *Thou shalt not commit adultery.*
7. *Thou shalt not steal.*
8. *Thou shalt not bear false witness against thy neighbour.*
9. *Thou shalt not covet thy neighbour's wife.*
10. *Thou shalt not covet thy neighbour's goods.*

Notice that most of them are framed in a NEGATIVE way: this is to assist the memory - it is easier to remember what NOT to do! We should, however, always try to look upon them in a POSITIVE way. God is asking us to prove our love for Him and to do good to ourselves - and others - by doing something positive.

Now we shall examine the FIRST, SECOND and THIRD Commandments - all of which deal directly with our relationship with God.

THE FIRST COMMANDMENT

“I AM THE LORD THY GOD... THOU SHALT NOT HAVE STRANGE GODS BEFORE ME: THOU SHALT NOT MAKE TO THYSELF ANY GRAVEN THING... THOU SHALT NOT ADORE THEM NOR SERVE THEM.”

That binds me positively to worship the One True God by acts of Faith, Hope, Charity and Religion. I worship God by FAITH positively by believing all that He has revealed to me through His Church. That pre-supposes I have taken the trouble to find out what HAS been revealed. So sins against Faith are disbelief - INFIDELITY; willful DOUBT; DENIAL of any doctrine; FALSE belief or HERESY; rejecting all belief - APOSTASY; and simply not bothering to find out (assuming I have the means and opportunity to do so) - which is called CULPABLE IGNORANCE.

I worship God by HOPE - positively - by trusting Him to keep His promise of everlasting life with Him in heaven, and by using all the helps He gives me: Grace and the Sacraments. So sins against Hope are giving up all hope - DESPAIR, or its less serious form, DISCOURAGEMENT - “losing heart” as we say. Then there is the opposite extreme - giving up all effort and thinking I’ll ‘get by’ simply because I’m a Catholic – that is the sin of PRESUMPTION.

I worship God by CHARITY by loving Him above all things, and my neighbour as myself for His sake. The sins against Charity are threefold: leading my neighbour into sin (SEDUCTION); causing him to sin by my behaviour (SCANDAL); and assisting him to sin (CO-OPERATION).

I worship God by RELIGION by giving due REVERENCE to Him - and all that is His. So I sin against Religion by worshipping a false God - IDOLATRY. By 'worship' here we mean making anything - like wealth or power for example - the OBJECT of our whole lives. It is forbidden to WORSHIP an idol (a graven image) but to have a statue of someone we revere such as Our Lady or one of the Saints is NOT 'worshipping' any more than photographs of one's family are idols.

Other sins against Religion are: giving FALSE reverence - to the devil for instance, practising spiritualism, possessing charms (SUPERSTITION); treating holy people and things with IRREVERENCE (SACRILEGE) (for example: hitting a priest, stabling horses in a church, lying in confession, or receiving Holy Communion in a state of mortal sin). Charging money for spiritual things - called SIMONY after Simon Magus who offered the apostles money in exchange for the power to work miracles. So if we sold rosaries which had been blessed by the Pope for more money than unblessed ones we would be committing Simony!

THE SECOND COMMANDMENT

"THOU SHALT NOT TAKE THE NAME OF THE LORD THY GOD IN VAIN."

That binds me positively to use God's name reverently and only on such occasions as are lawful, such as in prayer or when we take a lawful oath in a court of law or bind ourselves by a vow.

So we break the second Commandment when we talk irreverently or contemptuously about God or Our Lady – this is called BLASPHEMY. When we tell a lie when on oath - PERJURY. When we break a vow - such as when a priest leaves the priesthood or a nun leaves the religious life. So-called "cursing and swearing" (PROFANITY) - is just bad language and comes under the sin of UNJUST ANGER which is a sin against the Fifth Commandment which you will read about in the next chapter.

THE THIRD COMMANDMENT

"REMEMBER THAT THOU KEEP HOLY THE SABBATH DAY."

That binds me positively to worship God in HIS way on HIS day which, of course, is Sunday because of the Resurrection. It also binds me to avoid unnecessary work as I am supposed to RE-CREATE on that day - in other words to rest and build up my reserves of energy, both spiritual and physical.

So I sin against this Commandment when I fail to worship Him in HIS way on HIS day. We saw in the chapter on the Eucharist (chapter 12) that His way is the Mass and that is why the Church has made it one of her commandments as we shall see later on.

So now we have covered the first three Commandments - the ones that govern our relationship with God (the 'vertical' relationship). In the next three chapters we shall cover the remaining seven which govern our relationship with our neighbour (the 'horizontal' relationship).

CHAPTER 16 - THE COMMANDMENTS (Part Two)

Now, let us examine the first two of the Commandments which govern our relationship with our neighbour - the Fourth and Fifth Commandments.

THE FOURTH COMMANDMENT

“HONOUR THY FATHER AND THY MOTHER.”

Positively, that binds us to love, honour and obey our parents who gave us our natural lives: it also binds us to respect and obey all lawful and legitimate authority. Lawfully elected authority has the right to claim obedience for laws made for the common good, whether we voted for the political party in power or not!

Let us examine the family first. Our parents who brought us into the world have an obligation to love and care for, to provide for and educate their children. The children must love, respect and obey those who provide for them.

OBEDIENCE, here, means doing WHAT we are told, WHEN we are told and CHEERFULLY - NOT after much delay and with much grumbling! Notice that there is a two-way duty here - not just binding children but parents as well. The parents loving, providing for and educating: the children loving and obeying. And in old age the roles are reversed - children, now grown up, must care for their parents in their old age.

It obviously follows that parents sin if they neglect their children, fail to provide for them and, above all, fail to educate them in what is right and wrong. Such as by not correcting them when they do wrong and not giving them a good example, or spoiling them and thus failing to teach them self-control or self-denial. Children sin when they fail to respect and love their parents, disobey them, or ignore their good advice and fail to follow their good example.

The fact that the state provides schools does not excuse parents from their duty to educate their children in the Faith. Faith first grows in the home: the school is there to assist - not to take over. The best Catholic school in the world can do very little to foster Faith in the heart of a child from a lapsed home. Parents who think they have discharged their duty by sending their children to a Catholic school have failed to realise that by failing to give good example they make the work of the school next to impossible. But this commandment does not stop there: it binds us to respect all lawful authority. Good Catholics should also be good citizens. Good citizens play their part in their country's affairs by voting, paying their taxes, and above all by doing all they can to influence those around them to work for the removal of injustice, the relief of the poor, the care of the sick and in general to influence public opinion.

So often evil is done or good left undone through the inactivity or indifference of the so-called good. The great Irish statesman, Edmund Burke once said, “for evil to be done all that is required is for good men to do nothing.” Part of “spreading the Faith” - which we are all supposed to do - is making our Catholic views known and, hopefully, respected. The iniquitous 1967 Abortion Act would never have been passed if Christians had made their opposition felt. The State is, after all, PEOPLE and the greater proportion of senior office holders are ELECTED and thus the electorate have a good deal more say than they realise and could have a great deal more influence than they do have if they kept this Commandment faithfully.

One last point here. To make our feelings known, even if that involves outright opposition, it is NOT necessary - and indeed it is wrong - to do so rudely!

THE FIFTH COMMANDMENT

“THOU SHALT NOT KILL”.

Now let's look at the Fifth Commandment. This is a classic example of the negative phrasing of a positive law. POSITIVELY, this commandment binds me to have reverence for life and thus to treat my neighbour kindly, patiently, and with courtesy.

Let us deal first with the word “KILL”. To kill here means killing unlawfully another human being. It does not, therefore, forbid the killing of animals: nor does it forbid the taking of a life if it is in defence of another life whether one’s own or someone else’s. If all peaceful means fail, nations can use force and in so doing kill an unjust aggressor. Clearly, it must be a last resort and this is what is sometimes disputed by Church leaders. The point is, however, that it is NOT absolutely forbidden.

Similarly, the State may, if it believes it is the only way to maintain order, execute the criminal after due trial. Few civilised states still have capital punishment, but it is NOT forbidden. Having said all that, all UNLAWFUL forms of killing are gravely wrong: murder, suicide, abortion - indeed all forms of damage to oneself or another are wrong. This is especially so in the case of alcohol abuse and drug taking as the resulting loss of self-control often involves sin of other kinds being committed.

What has been said of physical violence applies also to VERBAL violence. Our Lord Himself said how far this commandment goes when He said: “You have learned how it was said to our ancestors, ‘You must not kill...’ but I say to you that anyone who is ANGRY with his brother shall be liable to judgement.” (Matthew 5: 21-22).
(n.b. ‘judgement’ in this context means punishment)

Unjust anger (and the language that goes with it) is wrong. We are bound to be patient and kind no matter how provoked we are. Nevertheless there are occasions when we are bound to show anger - what is called JUST ANGER – for example, parents with naughty children.

If we could only remember that just and restrained anger (or displeasure) almost always works whereas unjust abusive behaviour NEVER does. The Epistle of Saint James in the New Testament has a powerful passage which includes these words: “...the tongue is a tiny part of our body, and yet what power it can boast! How small a spark it takes to set fire to a vast forest.....” and so it continues. (James 3: 2 - 12)
It is well worth reading the whole of that passage!

I’ll end with the pithy comment: ‘Better to keep your mouth shut and have people think you’re a fool than to open it and remove all shadow of doubt’!!

CHAPTER 17 – THE COMMANDMENTS (Part Three)

With the Sixth Commandment, “THOU SHALT NOT COMMIT ADULTERY.” and the Ninth Commandment, “THOU SHALT NOT COVET THY NEIGHBOUR’S WIFE”, we come to two Commandments which, by their very nature, require very special treatment since they deal with the most mysterious and profound part of man. They are sometimes called the DIFFICULT commandments - difficult to KEEP and difficult to TALK ABOUT. If ever there were two commandments that need to be seen as POSITIVE, these are they! Yet, sadly, most people think of them in a purely NEGATIVE way. After all that, I am now embarking on the mysterious subject of SEX. Oh! what different reactions that word produces! Especially when it is seriously and *religiously* spoken about. “RELIGIOUSLY”?! How can anyone talk about sex religiously? It’s quite simple, really - the subject is HOLY so it deserves to be treated religiously or carefully.

How do we do this? Well, let’s go back to the first chapter: God created ALL things and God is goodness itself, so this thing, SEX, was created by Him and is therefore good. It is also the means of transmitting life and therefore it is IMPORTANT. And since God intended it to be intensely enjoyable, it is also simply super! When talking to engaged couples, I always say that the correct Christian response to this magnificent gift of God’s is “Whoopee! I can hardly wait!” Seriously, though, that is the CORRECT attitude. It comes from God so it is GOOD. He made it enjoyable so it IS enjoyable. He also made it the means of transmitting life so that purpose must never be PREVENTED but, as we saw in the chapter on marriage, it DOES need to be CONTROLLED. Now - since it is the means of procreation, it follows that ONLY THOSE who can provide any child that might be born with all that it has a right to (i.e. love, food, shelter, education) have a right to use that gift – namely, man and wife as we saw in that same chapter. And that, of course, is exactly where the Sixth and Ninth Commandments come in because they LIMIT the use of that gift, and even the pleasurable desire for it, to husband and wife in marriage.

I think this is the right moment to repeat what I said about sin in the chapter on Judgement (Chapter 6). God is utterly good - Goodness Itself. His laws reflect His nature and so they are good in themselves and good for us to keep and if we don’t keep them we are DAMAGED. But, quite apart from the SPIRITUAL damage they do us, they also do SOCIAL damage. The greatest SUPPORT to marriage is CHASTITY - the right use of the gift in marriage alone - and the great THREAT to marriage are SINS AGAINST CHASTITY - using the gift outside marriage.

It is because it is so hard to keep these two Commandments that God has given a special gift to those who choose to follow Him in the priesthood or religious life - the gift of CELIBACY. Just as the act of FAITH enables us to BELIEVE without doubting all that God has revealed, so CELIBACY enables us to surrender cheerfully all use of the gift of sex. Celibacy is far too often looked upon as an IMPOSITION thrust upon a priest or nun, instead of a gift offered and willingly accepted. It is beyond man’s capacity to remain celibate WITHOUT this help so that is why God offers the gift. That is not to say that it is easy: it is a struggle at times: we are weak creatures after all. You need to pray for priests, especially those poor souls who found the struggle too much for them and left.

Now to return to the Sixth and Ninth Commandments. God has given us a fabulous gift. He has also given us laws governing its use. KEEP THOSE LAWS and the gift will be what God meant it to be - a source of joy. BREAK THOSE LAWS and only harm can come to us.

So, the Sixth Commandment binds us positively to be chaste - using that gift ONLY inside marriage - and forbidding all use of it OUTSIDE marriage. Thus it is forbidden between two unmarried persons (FORNICATION); with another person who is NOT one’s married partner (ADULTERY); between two persons of the same sex (SODOMY); or by oneself (MASTURBATION). In view of the fact that the FIRST CONDITION for a Mortal sin - serious matter - is present (because it deals with the transmission of life) these sins are always potentially mortal and should be confessed. However, because this type of sin is difficult to TALK ABOUT it is also difficult to CONFESS. Hence, the disastrous consequence that it is often concealed in confession and thus the sin is unforgiven and a further grievous sin of sacrilege is committed.

I think, therefore, that this is the moment to correct some false notions on the matter of confessing sins. Many people feel ASHAMED of confessing even when the sins they have to confess are not serious. This is a colossal error. Now I am going to quote Our Lord Himself, “I tell you solemnly, there is JOY among the angels of God when a sinner repents” and again, “there is MORE joy over a repentant sinner than ninety-nine just men that require no repentance.”

Moreover, He told the story of the Prodigal Son to illustrate God's EAGERNESS to forgive the sinner. That story, as I told you before, ended with the words: "AND THEY BEGAN TO CELEBRATE." There can be no argument here. God says that repentance is a CAUSE FOR CELEBRATION in heaven, that in fact they DO CELEBRATE in heaven when a sinner repents. That being so, surely it does not make any sense to be ashamed of something that causes CELEBRATION in heaven.

So, what has gone wrong? We are confusing SIN with REPENTANCE of that sin. We should be ashamed of the sins all right and, because we are ashamed, we resolve to confess them - in other words, to repent of them. But when we confess them, we should be PLEASED because we are doing something good and giving pleasure to God! So why ARE we ashamed? Is it the presence of the priest? Maybe, but remember he KNOWS you are doing something good and causing celebration in heaven so even if you FORGET it, he doesn't! He also knows the struggle you have with your pride - he has the same struggle himself. I can say that I have never known a priest who looks down on his penitents. I think I speak for most priests when I say that we often feel like crawling out of the confessional! So many of our penitents are far better than US! So, forget that false shame! You have something to be PLEASED about! You are about to do something that makes God OVERJOYED! That is why I sometimes say to my penitents: "WALK TALL! HOLD YOUR HEAD HIGH! LOOK THE WHOLE WORLD IN THE EYE! YOU ARE REPENTANT, FORGIVEN, PURE - AND DEARLY LOVED BY GOD!"

And so, briefly, to the Ninth Commandment. This forbids the DESIRE for the pleasure aroused by sins against the sixth Commandment. It includes the deliberate stimulation of sexual THOUGHTS which can result from reading books or watching television programmes and videos.

But now let us end this section POSITIVELY. God has given us this beautiful gift of SEX. We should therefore THANK Him for it - even those of us who may not USE the gift. It is the most perfect expression of that TOTAL GIFT of oneself - which is what love is - and it is thus the perfect means of creating new life. Those who are privileged to use it should thank God for it, ENJOY it, and do all they can to educate their children to see it for the beautiful thing it is. Finally, ALL of us should talk of it always and only with what it deserves - REVERENCE.

CHAPTER 18 - THE COMMANDMENTS (Part Four)

Now, in examining the last three Commandments, we turn our attention to the virtues of JUSTICE and TRUTH. The Seventh and Tenth Commandments - "THOU SHALT NOT STEAL" and "THOU SHALT NOT COVET THY NEIGHBOUR'S GOODS" both have to do with justice. We are bound to respect our neighbour's property (7th) and we are also bound to respect one another's right to OWN property (10th). The malice in envy or jealousy lies in GRUDGING another the right to own property or to have more than oneself, and so to desire to steal or damage it.

Thus, it is clearly UNJUST for the very rich to live side by side with those who lack even the bare necessities of life without lifting a hand to help them. Their very refusal to help is a denial to the others of their right to own property at all through their failure to help them in their need. Everyone has the right to own property but NOT the right to refuse to share that property with those who are in need.

EMPLOYERS are bound to pay a fair wage and the EMPLOYEE is bound to do a fair day's work for that wage. It is sinful, therefore, to pay an inadequate wage or to make a huge profit without sharing it with the workers who have helped to make that profit. On the other hand it is sinful to waste one's employer's time or to help oneself to his property, however little, on the grounds that "he can well afford it".

To STEAL is obviously wrong but so is deliberate DAMAGE to another's property. The gravity of the offence is not just measured by the amount stolen or damaged but also by the degree of hardship inflicted on the victim. Thus to steal ten pounds from a poor pensioner is obviously more serious than to steal the same sum from a wealthy person.

In all these cases, since one has caused damage to one's neighbour, one is bound to make good the damage. This is called MAKING RESTITUTION. Sometimes it is not possible to make restitution to the person concerned. For instance, a PICKPOCKET could not possibly find the person whose pocket he had picked in a crowd. In this case, he would be bound to make restitution in some other way by, say, giving an equivalent sum to charity. Similarly, one who has stolen from the public by travelling on a bus or train without paying the fare, or has damaged public property would have to make restitution in the same sort of way.

From all I have said, it can be readily seen that you can never be a professional thief or vandal and a practising Catholic! - you would always be made to pay back all you have stolen or make good any damage you have done! As priests we are sometimes called upon to act as a go-between in cases of restitution in order to conceal the identity of the repentant culprit!

The tenth commandment covers all internal sins against the seventh commandment. Thus, as we've seen, envy or jealousy are sinful. Simply wishing you had what somebody else has is not jealousy. There is always ill-will present where jealousy is concerned and, if unchecked, it can destroy a person.

The story of King Saul in the First Book of Samuel is a classic example of the harm jealousy can do to a man. From being a humble, likeable man, Saul became insanely jealous of David's popularity after he had killed Goliath. So great did that jealousy become that he attempted to murder David which led in time to the division of his kingdom and his death.

You have heard me say before it is also the SILLIEST SIN since you don't even get any FUN out of it! So my neighbour has more than me? So what? Probably he is DISCONTENTED too! GREED is a bottomless pit - the more you have: the more you want.

Now, finally, the Eighth Commandment - "THOU SHALT NOT BEAR FALSE WITNESS." This commandment binds us to say all those things and only those things which are GOOD, TRUE and FREE TO TALK ABOUT. Does this mean I am bound to tell every nosey-parker something he or she has no right to know? Certainly not: indeed, it is sometimes necessary to say, politely but firmly, "that is none of your business!" There are certain social conventions such as: so and so "is not available for comment". Everyone knows what that remark means and it is perfectly acceptable behaviour. However, the lie of convenience or so-called "white" lie is wrong. Not seriously, perhaps, but nevertheless wrong. If you try hard you can get very good at evading questions - most politicians are experts!

We priests often have to watch our tongues! There are often things we know and cannot talk about, and it is so easy to let something slip out by mistake! The two principal sins against this commandment are CALUMNY (slander) and DETRACTION. Both of them involve saying something unpleasant about another person. In the case of CALUMNY, the thing said is also UNTRUE whereas detraction is saying something unpleasant but TRUE. So, for instance, I say, "of course, you know that Jimmy is a drunk, don't you?" and it is a malicious lie. In this case, I have committed the sin of calumny or slander. Whereas, if I said the same thing and it is TRUE; I still have no right to say it and I am guilty of DETRACTION.

Where something is public knowledge although, strictly speaking, I am not detracting from his good name since he has lost it already, I still should not indulge in such gossip. In the case of both calumny and detraction I am bound to make restitution. Just as I have to make good any theft or damage to another's property, so I have to do the same if I take away or damage his good name.

Let's use the example I gave earlier. If I was guilty of CALUMNY when I said Jimmy was a drunk, all I have to say, to make restitution, is: "When I said Jimmy was a drunk: that was a malicious lie, I'm sorry." But if I was guilty of DETRACTION, I cannot say I told a lie: I didn't. So I have to make restitution in some other way such as saying: "Well, Jimmy may be a drunk but he is a much more generous and charitable person than I am!"

So, true or not, I mustn't say unpleasant things about people. Now, what about SECRETS? There are various degrees of secrecy and thus various degrees of gravity. First, the 'Committed Secret'. Doctors and lawyers, for instance, by their very profession, have access to confidential information concerning their patients or clients. The secrets are COMMITTED to them on the understanding that they will not betray that confidence. They would clearly be seriously in the wrong if they betrayed that confidence. Secondly, the 'Promised Secret'. This is where someone approaches you and says: "If I tell you something, will you promise not to tell anyone else?" and YOU GIVE YOUR WORD, then it would obviously be wrong if you then break your word. Thirdly, and finally, there is the 'Simple Secret'. This is the case when, for instance, you happen by accident to overhear or read something confidential. You certainly should not talk about it, since it is confidential, but clearly the obligation to secrecy is less serious.

Let me give an example. Mary, a young married woman, is in the doctor's consulting room. He is giving her the result of a pregnancy test and says to her, "Mrs. Smith, I am happy to tell you, you are going to have a baby!" Neither he nor Mary notice that, in fact, the door of the consulting room is slightly ajar. Tom, sitting outside in the waiting room overhears the remark and makes a note of it. On leaving the surgery and heading for home to give the good news to her husband, Mary meets a friend and says, "don't tell anyone till I have seen my family, but I want you to know the good news, I'm going to have a baby!" and her friend promises to not tell anyone. Now, if Tom tells anyone the secret he has overheard, it is wrong, but NOT seriously so. But if the friend who promised to keep the secret blurts it out, it is MORE serious, and if the doctor tells anyone, it is a SERIOUS breach of professional confidence.

Under the same heading, comes reading other people's letters which may have been left laying open. They are entitled to their privacy and you have intruded on it. All that I have been saying about this commandment has to do with the tongue, so we must remember always to think before we speak. In this connection you might find it helpful to read the third chapter of the Epistle of St. James in the New Testament – he has some thought-provoking words to say about the use of the tongue!

CHAPTER 19 – THE COMMANDMENTS OF THE CHURCH

Having now dealt with the commandments of God, we turn our attention to what are usually called ‘the Commandments of the Church’ (or ‘Precepts of the Church’ as they are referred to in the Catechism of the Catholic Church paras.2041-2043). The law of the Church is enshrined in a book called the Code of Canon Law. There are one thousand seven hundred and fifty-two ‘canons’ or rules, governing every aspect of church life. Among these, there are six which are of universal application and it is these that are called the Commandments (or Precepts) of the Church.

Before we embark on them, however, I think it might be advisable to recall that Our Lord gave His Church the command to teach all nations: “.....TEACHING THEM TO OBSERVE ALL THINGS WHATSOEVER I HAVE COMMANDED YOU...” (Mt.28: 19-20). In addition He gave them the right to make whatever laws they felt necessary and promised to back them with His divine authority. His actual words were, “WHATSOEVER YOU SHALL BIND ON EARTH SHALL BE BOUND ALSO IN HEAVEN...” (Mt.18:18). People are apt to think that something is ‘only a law of the Church’ as if it meant that it needn’t be taken seriously. If, however, He gave His Church the right to make whatever laws they deemed to be necessary and gave His divine backing for those laws, then we most emphatically MUST take them seriously and if we do not do so, we shall be answerable to HIM. So what are these Commandments of the Church?

THE FIRST COMMANDMENT

The First Commandment binds us to attend Mass every Sunday and Holyday of Obligation. Where the Sunday Masses are concerned (and that, of course, includes the Saturday Vigil Masses) we have an example of the Church taking a Commandment of God (in this case the Third Commandment) and spelling out how it should be fulfilled. It is as though the Church is saying: ‘God says keep the Sabbath holy - that means worshipping Him in His way on His day - so that means Mass on Sundays.’

THE SECOND COMMANDMENT

The Second Commandment binds us to Confess our sins at least once a year. You may remember that I covered this point when talking about the Sacrament of Penance (Reconciliation) but it would do no harm to repeat what I said then. Anyone conscious of mortal sin which has not yet been confessed, SHOULD go as soon as possible and is BOUND by this law to go at least once a year. Those not in mortal sin, strictly speaking, do not have to confess; nevertheless, to neglect a sacrament we are encouraged to receive REGULARLY to the extent that we do not even go once a year is ‘pushing our luck’ to say the least. It indicates a conscience that is so lax that it is hardly functioning at all and, remember, we are responsible for this state. Sooner or later, such people lapse into mortal sin. Often, indeed, they ARE in it already but appear unconcerned about it.

THE THIRD COMMANDMENT

The Third Commandment binds us to receive Holy Communion at least once a year ‘during the Easter season’ – that is, between Ash Wednesday and Trinity Sunday. This law together with the second commandment are often called ‘Easter Duties’. Once again, to go so seldom is to court disaster and is usually a sign of a very lax conscience or, perhaps, awareness of mortal sin but a lack of will to get out of that state. I say ‘usually’ because, in some country districts, customs going back two and three hundred years can be found. In those days, it was the NORM to receive Holy Communion once a year after a most careful period of preparation including, of course, confession. I found this myself in Banffshire - a part of Scotland that never lost the faith. Sadly, of course, there are some who cannot keep this law such as those who have made a so-called second marriage when their previous spouse is still living. If they were to go to Holy Communion, they would be committing a sin of sacrilege and, of course, they are unable to confess either. Clearly, therefore, these unhappy souls are not bound by these two laws. The vast majority, however, are not in this unhappy state and are encouraged to receive Holy Communion as often as possible – provided, of course, that they are in a state of grace.

THE FOURTH COMMANDMENT

The Fourth Commandment deals specifically with holy days of obligation. Over and above the Sundays there are liturgical feasts (holy days) that the Church considers of such importance that we should go to Mass on these days as well. They may vary from country to country because this is one of the matters about which the bishops of a particular country may be permitted to exercise their right collectively to make laws for their own people. The saying, ‘when in Rome do as the Romans do’ applies here, so one follows the laws of a country when one is in that country. Incidentally, ‘attending Mass’ or ‘assisting at Mass’ does mean the WHOLE Mass. This is for our own spiritual benefit. If one arrives so late that the readings are over, how can one say one has been to Mass? We haven’t seen a play if we come in after the interval!

THE FIFTH COMMANDMENT

The Fifth Commandment binds us to keep the laws of FASTING and ABSTINENCE. These laws have changed recently too. Now, FASTING, (that is limiting one's eating to one full meal a day) binds all those between 21 and 59 years of age. The DAYS of FASTING are now reduced to two - Ash Wednesday and Good Friday. ABSTINENCE (that is abstaining from meat) binds all those over the age of 14. The DAYS OF ABSTINENCE are the same as in the case of fasting that is Ash Wednesday and Good Friday.

What about Fridays throughout the year? We are bound to do some form of penance EVERY Friday. Abstaining from meat still fulfills the LETTER of the law though we are encouraged to "fast" in some way - for example, no cigarettes, no drink, no sweets, or no television. Alternatively, or perhaps as well as, some extra prayers. In whatever way we fulfill this obligation one thing is quite clear - we are obliged to do SOMETHING. Is anyone out there feeling uneasy.....?

The faithful also have the duty of providing for the material needs of the Church, each according to their abilities. Money has to be found and so, of course, the Church makes a law (can.222) to ensure it gets sufficient funds to function properly. So, we all have an obligation to contribute to the Church and its pastors. How much? It is quite impossible to give a figure or even a percentage of income as no two people have exactly the same financial commitments, or the same income.

The issue is further complicated by the fact that your contribution is NOT just to help with the paying of the parish bills but it is also the outward, visible sign of your gift of yourself to God. So strictly speaking, one should give just as much in a 'well-heeled' parish as if one was in a parish that was struggling to pay off a debt. It is my gift to God, therefore, that we are considering here NOT the state of the parish accounts! In a word, my contribution should be linked to my ability to pay! Remember the story of the widow's mite (Luke 21:1-4): Our Lord and his disciples were in the temple when they saw people putting money into the treasury (collection box) and it says that some rich people 'put in a great deal' whereas the poor widow put in two small coins. Our Lord's comment was that she was the most generous. The rich gave of their abundance but she gave all she had. Times change: people do not. We still have our 'rich people' and our 'poor widows'.

THE SIXTH COMMANDMENT

The Sixth Commandment (as contained in Canon Law) binds one not to marry within certain degrees of kindred nor to solemnise marriage at the forbidden times. There are many other laws the Church makes concerning marriage so I mention only the main ones here. The Church has always been very strict about close relationships of either CONSANGUINITY (blood relationship) or of AFFINITY (relationship through marriage). Thus, for example, to marry a second cousin one requires a dispensation. One result of close relations marrying can be mental disorder in the children.

The laws governing WHERE and HOW a marriage takes place have altered in recent years. Once upon a time you would be married in the sacristy if you chose to marry a non-Catholic, even a BAPTISED one! Now, though the NORM is unchanged - Catholics are still supposed to marry Catholics - nevertheless you can get permission to marry a non-Catholic Christian and a dispensation to marry a non-Christian. In such cases, the Catholic must promise to do all he or she can to bring up the children in the Catholic Church alone. The non-Catholic must be informed of the promise, and the priest presenting the petition to the bishop, has to be able to say that he thinks the promise will be kept. Now do you see why I have said on various occasions "lapsed Catholics who are engaged to non-Catholics and want to be married in a Catholic church, have GOT PROBLEMS." They won't get the necessary permission since I cannot truthfully say that I think the promise will be kept.

The normal place for a Catholic to be married is, of course, a Catholic church but here again there has been a relaxation of the rule. When the non-Catholic has some specially strong attachment to a church, for example if his or her father happens to be the minister, or if they sing in the choir or are regular attenders, then permission can be granted for the wedding to take place in the Protestant Church. But even if this is permitted the promise regarding the children must, of course, still be made.

Always and everywhere, the Church's concern is the same - the faith of the Catholic and the faith of the children. If that is NOT threatened, She is content. If it IS threatened then, like any concerned mother, She must do all She can to protect it even though those efforts may not be appreciated! Finally, marriages can be celebrated at any time but it is better to avoid Advent and Lent because of the subdued, penitential nature of these seasons.

CHAPTER 20 - CATHOLIC DEVOTIONS AND PRACTICES

There are many devotions or forms of worship that are particularly Catholic in nature. Once upon a time, they were so popular that they almost rivaled the Mass but now some have disappeared altogether while others are, sadly, neglected. It is my intention in this last chapter to give a short account of the origin and purpose of the most common of them and, hopefully, to arouse some interest in them again. Most of them fall under one of two headings: EUCHARISTIC devotions, and MARIAN devotions. Among the former are BENEDICTION and the FORTY HOURS ADORATION whilst among the latter are the ROSARY and the ANGELUS. At the end of the chapter I shall say a word on such practices as GENUFLECTIONS, the use of INCENSE, HOLY WATER, and several other things.

EUCHARISTIC DEVOTIONS

I think a word of introduction would be helpful here and for this I shall go back to the days of the Old Testament. When God's people were in the desert, He gave them two clear signs of His presence among them. First, He gave them a VISIBLE sign of His presence - what they called the SHEKINAH. This was a PILLAR OF CLOUD by day and a PILLAR OF FIRE by night, and secondly He provided them with FOOD which, if you remember, was called MANNA.

We, the NEW PEOPLE OF GOD, the members of His Body, the Church, also have our SHEKINAH and our MANNA and both are to be found in the EUCHARIST. First, we have a visible sign of His continued presence among us in the tabernacle with the sanctuary lamp burning to remind us that He is there, and of course we are fed upon JESUS, THE BREAD OF LIFE, in Holy Communion. In the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass, as we saw in the chapter on the Eucharist, there are two distinct elements: one of SACRIFICE - Jesus, the Lamb of God, offering Himself to the Father; and the other of a MEAL - Jesus, the Bread of life, feeding us upon His body. Jesus Christ, our Shekinah, continuously present among us for our worship and Jesus Christ, our Manna, always ready to nourish us.

Over the centuries, the EMPHASIS has shifted from one aspect to the other. In the eighteenth century a custom was introduced, which is maintained to this day, whereby the priest, visiting the house of a sick person, to give them Holy Communion, used to bless them with the Host. Gradually, the custom arose of placing the Blessed Sacrament in a special vessel in which it could be clearly seen. The vessel in question is called a MONSTRANCE. We say we DEMONSTRATE something when we show it clearly. A Monstrance shows the Blessed Sacrament clearly so that we can see and worship since we are looking at Jesus Christ, God the Son, under the appearance of bread. Various devotions grew up round this practice of EXPOSING the Blessed Sacrament, such as Benediction and 'Quarant Ore' or Forty Hours when the Blessed Sacrament would be exposed for forty consecutive hours.

Some parishes have the Forty Hours in periods of exposition spread over three days. Many parishes have EXPOSITION each week for an hour during which confessions are heard. It is surely unnecessary to say just how precious those opportunities are to have Him all to ourselves in silence with, perhaps, just an occasional piece of sacred music to help us focus our attention on Him. Please don't neglect these opportunities to deepen your love and knowledge of Our Blessed Lord.

I mentioned earlier that one aspect of the Eucharist usually receives more emphasis than the other. Until VERY recently, the Shekinah has been eclipsed by the Manna. The result, I think, is that we lose something very precious. So many of the young say they are BORED at Mass. I believe that this is because they simply have not grasped the fact that they are in the presence of Mystery, NOT an entertainment, and that the only way to solve their problem is to get to know and love more, the ONE who is at the centre of it all - JESUS CHRIST. Those who regularly attend Exposition or pay regular visits to the Blessed Sacrament, come to love the Mass. Their devotion is BALANCED - they WORSHIP the One whom they receive in Holy Communion. During the LAST FEW YEARS the Church has encouraged a return to the Blessed Sacrament Exposed, recommending various readings from Scripture, followed by periods of silent prayer. What better devotion can you have than quiet, prayerful reflection on the Word of God, in the presence of the WORD OF GOD HIMSELF?

THE STATIONS OF THE CROSS

In the Middle Ages, a devotion centred on the sufferings and death or PASSION of our Lord began to appear. This is one of the devotions which has not lost its appeal. I am speaking, of course, of the STATIONS OF THE CROSS or the WAY OF THE CROSS (the Via Crucis). On the walls of Catholic Churches can be seen fourteen pictures or carvings depicting incidents in the last hours of the life of Jesus Christ from the moment when He is condemned to death by Pilate, until His crucified Body is laid in the tomb. A verse of Scripture and a short meditation are read before each station then various prayers are said in unison. Often, a verse of the hymn called the Stabat Mater is sung as those making the devotion move from one station to the next. This devotion can be carried out privately as well as publicly and people are encouraged to do so - especially in Lent.

MARIAN DEVOTIONS

Now, let us look at devotions concerning the BLESSED VIRGIN MARY. The first and easily the best known is, of course, THE ROSARY - a word which comes from the Latin word ROSARIUM meaning a bouquet. The rosary as we know it today is the result of a long period of development starting in the twelfth century when it was devised by St. Dominic following a vision in which Our Lady revealed it to him. The purpose of the Rosary is to help people to MEDITATE, or PRAYERFULLY REFLECT, upon incidents in Our Lord's and Our Lady's lives while reciting the prayers. At first, this consisted of the OUR FATHER together with the greetings of the angel Gabriel to Mary, "HAIL, FULL OF GRACE" and of St. Elizabeth to Mary, "BLESSED ART THOU AMONG WOMEN..." as recorded in the New Testament. The second half of the prayer was added later in order to ask Our Lady to help us by her prayers "NOW AND AT THE HOUR OF OUR DEATH".

Monks and nuns say the Divine Office every day. This comprises all 150 psalms (which are said over the whole week) together with readings from Scripture and writings and lives of the saints. Humble lay brothers and sisters, and the majority of lay people in the Middle Ages could not read and so they were given 150 prayers to say instead which they knew by heart. To help them keep a count of how many prayers they had said, cords with 150 knots or beads were made. Then the custom arose of reading a verse of Scripture before each individual bead. This became the SCRIPTURAL ROSARY. Gradually, this developed into the rosary we now have, with its fifteen prayer-thoughts or 'Mysteries' - five Joyful, five Sorrowful, and five Glorious. The Rosary is a wonderful devotion which encourages us to meditate while asking for Our Lady's powerful intercession. It is equally suitable for individual or group recitation - and, most importantly, in the home with all the family together!

Another Marian devotion is the ANGELUS, which gets its title from the first word of the prayer in the original Latin: 'Angelus Domini nuntiavit Maria' - "THE ANGEL OF THE LORD DECLARED UNTO MARY", with the response "AND SHE CONCEIVED OF THE HOLY SPIRIT", then the 'Hail Mary' is said. The next verse is "BEHOLD THE HANDMAID OF THE LORD" to which the response is, "BE IT DONE UNTO ME ACCORDING TO THY WORD" then the Hail Mary is said again. The final verse goes, "AND THE WORD WAS MADE FLESH" with the response "AND DWELT AMONGST US" then a final Hail Mary and concluding prayer. Traditionally, this is recited at 6 a.m., 12 noon, and 6 p.m. and the monastery or church bell would be rung at intervals so that anyone within earshot might join in.

There are devotions known as NOVENAS - nine consecutive days of prayer in honour of Our Lord, the Holy Spirit, Our Lady or one of the Saints. Then there is the devotion called the NINE FIRST FRIDAYS which entails going to Mass and Holy Communion on the First Friday of each month for NINE CONSECUTIVE MONTHS - an astonishingly difficult thing to do because nearly always something crops up to prevent you completing it, and then you have to start again! All these novenas have this much in common - they not only encourage prayer but also, what is more important, they encourage PERSEVERANCE in prayer.

CATHOLIC PRACTICES

So now we come to deal with Catholic Practices and to introduce them I shall say a word on something not much talked of now - INDULGENCES. Abuse of, and ignorance about, this doctrine and practice was one of the things that triggered-off the Reformation. The word 'Indulgence' means FORGIVENESS but the forgiveness is NOT of sin but of the TEMPORAL PUNISHMENT still due after a sin has been forgiven. Do you remember the chapter on the "FORGIVENESS OF SINS"? When God forgives our serious sins it means we won't go where we deserve to go - Hell - but it does NOT mean that we get off 'Scot Free' as the saying goes. There is still punishment to undergo - PURIFICATION or PURGING to undergo.

In the early days of the Church very severe penances, or CANONICAL penances as they were called, were imposed. FASTING, ALMSGIVING, standing outside church wearing penitential clothing while asking for the prayers of those going in to Mass! Gradually, the Church introduced the practice of 'FORGIVING' or letting people off a certain number of days of this penance if they said certain prayers or gave alms. Thus, for example, an "INDULGENCE" of 30 days attached to some prayer would remit an equivalent amount of punishment that 30 days of the old canonical penances would have done. The Church was able to do this since She is the TREASURY of the infinite merits gained by Our Lord on the Cross which have the power to wipe out sin and the punishment due to sin.

The Church no longer specifies days and years in relation to Partial Indulgences. She now says She will match from her treasury the equivalent remission of temporal punishment that the act to which the indulgence is attached would itself acquire. In other words, you get as much again from the Church as the act you perform earns. Some devotions are so highly RECOMMENDED and ENCOURAGED by the Church that a PLENARY indulgence, that is remission of ALL the temporal punishment due to sin, is given. For example, the 'Stations' or 'Way of the Cross' have a plenary indulgence attached to them.

It is important to remember that Indulgences are always, and only, granted under what are called 'THE USUAL CONDITIONS' - that is: CONFESSION, HOLY COMMUNION, and PRAYERS FOR THE POPE'S INTENTIONS (one Our Father, one Hail Mary and one Glory be...) within eight days of performing the act to which the indulgence was attached. The sins are ALREADY forgiven - the indulgence or forgiveness is for the punishment still due for them.

Here are some of the other more common Catholic practices:

- GENUFLECTIONS, that is, bending the right knee and placing it on the ground beside the left foot. This is normally done before entering your pew in a church where the Blessed Sacrament is 'reserved' - that is, present in the tabernacle. This is a unique sign of the worship due to God alone and it is NOT done, therefore, when the Blessed Sacrament is NOT 'reserved' such as on Holy Thursday, Good Friday, and Holy Saturday when the tabernacle is empty.
- THE DOUBLE GENUFLECTION or going down on BOTH knees and bowing, is always used when the Blessed Sacrament is Exposed.
- THE SIGN OF THE CROSS we have already dealt with. In making the sign of the Cross we are asking for protection 'In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit' - so this should never be done casually.
- BLESSED or HOLY WATER is normally used, with the sign of the cross, on entering a church, to remind ourselves of the waters of baptism (when we received God's life) and also as a sign of our desire to be cleansed of sin on entering God's presence. Many Catholics have a small Holy Water container on the wall by their front door to use each time they leave the house.
- THE BLESSING OF A HOUSE is normally done when Catholics first move into a house and want to ask for God's blessing upon all who are to live in it. Sometimes this is repeated during Eastertide with water blessed at the Easter Vigil and which is called Easter Water.
- STRIKING ONE'S BREAST with one's hand, for example, during the Penitential Rite at Mass when we say the 'I confess...' as this is a traditional sign of humility.
- BOWS FROM THE WAIST are a sign of respect which is used on entry into a church where the Blessed Sacrament is NOT reserved, or during the Creed at Mass, whereas simple bows of the head are a sign of respect used by altar servers when handing something to the priest at Mass.
- INCENSE which was a sign of respect reserved for Royalty, is used on certain occasions as a special sign of respect such as for the Blessed Sacrament at Benediction; for the Book of the Gospels at Mass; or for the Coffin at a funeral. The smoke, rising upwards, symbolises our prayers going up to God.

THE END