

The Seven Pillars of Catholic Spirituality (Part 1) Confession, Daily Prayer, The Mass *Rediscovering Catholicism* Book Discussion Seminar, Session Three
Sunday, February 26, 2012 7:00 PM (What it means to live in Christ)

We have to be clear that **God actually has created each of us to live with him in eternity.** And he is the only—and I use the word “he” out of tradition; I know God is not masculine—but **God is the only possible source of our perfect happiness,** of our fulfillment. So talking about **these three topics, I am going to include them in talking about what it means to live in the kingdom or what does it mean to live in Christ. It has four facets.**

Grace

The first facet is grace because we are invited, we are invited by God, into this relationship, and **all are invited!** Some people reading Scripture have got the idea that only the chosen people are invited or only the chosen people plus baptized Christians, but that is not really what we believe. We believe all are invited, and so the Catholic Church has so taught in *Lumen Gentium*. But *Lumen Gentium*, which only was published in the 60’s, actually goes back to Clement of Rome in the second century, so it is not really a new idea. **God wants all human beings to dwell in his love for all eternity. So grace has to begin everything. It has to accompany everything. It has to follow through everything.**

Learning

But **grace needs to be responded to.** And the first phase or facet of our response is **learning.** Jesus told his disciples, “Go forth. Make disciples of all nations.” That means make learners of all nations. Learning is an absolutely **essential** facet to life in the kingdom, and it’s an **ongoing process.** Many people believe **in heaven** we continue to learn, although maybe that’s not the right word, but **we surely continue to grow in our ability to live with God and live with others in communion.**

Now learning does not only involve learning what the Bible teaches; **learning involves absolutely everything about life.** St. Thomas—and I have gone back to him because of his humanism, his deeply felt sense of the unity of the creation and the Creator, and his sense of purpose in everything. St. Thomas says that **we are created to love the good.** Now **ultimately the good is God,** yes, but not only. **The good is also creation.** The problem is we may not actually know what is truly good. **Our reason is not infallible; we can be deceived, and we can be drawn to what is a false good.**

Now the most obvious, capital example of being drawn to a false good is idolatry—worshipping, holding up as the highest good, something that is false. But in a small way **all sin is a form of idolatry** because we can desire and take pleasure in something that is false and, therefore, something that will not actually help our movement toward God. But we have to learn by our experience. We are born *tabula rasa*, St. Thomas says. In other words, we don’t know when we are born; **we have to learn everything.** We have a conscience, but all that originally means is a love of the good. But what is really good?

Our conscience doesn't tell us that; we have to learn that. And we learn that both from **reason**, our natural capacity to learn, to reflect, to judge; and also we learn **from God's word**, the purpose of which is to perfect reason and **to perfect our consciences**.

Now when we actually want anything or when we are repelled by anything, because actually this process we are talking about, this desire, is also aversion. So it's **attraction and repulsion; it is basic to our souls**. We are born to be attracted to the good, repelled by the bad, although sometimes we are confused about what's really good and what's really bad. **This process involves our experiencing some object**. But we have to keep in mind that it is not the material object itself that actually draws us or repels us; it's **our view of it**. Take, for example, the nature of liver. Liver is liver; a piece of liver is a piece of liver. However, in one person's sense of taste, liver is a delicious meal. I actually have relatives that like liver. But to other people, like me, liver is disgusting. And actually I found out why: there is a chemical reason for this; it's a difference in our chemical makeup. That's an example of how **we see things differently and apprehend things differently**.

So what's very important is that we learn how to reflect on and judge the objects that draw us and the objects that repel us to see whether or not they really fit into a vision, not only of ourselves, but really of **Christ**. As Christ became human he had also sight, taste, hearing, feeling, touch, everything we have. Now the question is: **How does the creation appear to him?** And that becomes a model or exemplar of how we need to learn to look at creation, not that it really matters whether you like liver or not. But I'm using that simply as an example of something a little more deep, whether something really is good or not.

Now we have two different levels because **we have a body and we have a soul**. It's all one. The soul is our life, the life of the whole. But not everything works through the body. We have passions that are actually movements created by something out there that we either desire or hate, and that **movement, when it's of a physical, corporeal nature is called a "passion."** But we also have other feelings, other emotions, called **"affections" that move the soul only, not the body**. And when St. Thomas talks about grace and the influence of grace upon us, he uses the image of affections. **Grace comes to us as an affection. It is a movement of the soul**. It is created by a good—the grace of God—and it moves us toward some end. **It's essential that we learn how to allow ourselves to be drawn to the truly good and repelled by the truly bad, or else we become deceived**—which we can. We can become deceived people. And when Jesus said that the devil is the father of lies, he meant that there is something at work in the creation actively pursuing our own deception. It would be foolish to ignore that. So we can be deceived.

We can be corrupted. The corruption has to do with not only **choosing what is false but sometimes choosing something that's a true good but a small one and always sticking with that**. Sometimes children only like to eat one food: all they want is macaroni. Well, macaroni is good, but if all you eat is macaroni, that is not good. But sometimes that's what we do in the moral life. We choose the same little good all the

time. **We ignore the much greater good that God is trying to draw us to.** Sometimes this is because the good that God draws us to, both in the creation and in himself, **requires effort and struggle and work.** And sometimes we prefer the good with no work, with no effort, to the good that comes with work and effort, but this is a very poor choice; this is a very poor judgment.

Now sometimes actually people can become **depraved when in pursuing whatever good they want they actually use very wrong means, means that cause harm to other people or to themselves.** Now there are such people. There are depraved people who don't think anything of, for example, murder or robbery or theft or fraud—they think nothing of that. Well, that is real malice. To destroy people's lives for your own benefit, however shortsighted that is, is depraved, and we see that in our world as well.

But one thing that St. Thomas insists upon, which may seem a little odd to us, is that **no one can desire or enjoy what is evil to him or her.** We cannot desire or enjoy or find pleasure in anything evil to us. It must be good to us. There has to be some facet or appearance of good to us or we can't even want it. In this way, we must seek the good. **We are put on earth to seek the good;** there is nothing going to stop us. Thomas says that even the demons continue to desire God. They have to. They are created to. It's not a choice.

He also says if God were available in his beatific vision right here and now, we would have to, we would be compelled to, freely accept it. It would not be a limitation of our freedom; it would be a fulfillment of our freedom because we are created for God. And if God were really fully available right now, there would be no doubt that that would be what makes us happy and we would accept it. But God is not so available. He has made himself to some degree unavailable for a while, in disguise for a while. Therefore we are in this world and **we have to make limited choices because the vision of God is not available.** Good is there. In fact, there are all kinds of good, but **we have to find the best good, the better good, the good that is in accord with our own nature and God's plan for us.**

Nonetheless, the passions, and here Thomas Aquinas disagrees with Augustine, the passions remain good and sound. Love of pleasure and desire for the good is good and it is an integral part of human nature. Hatred for, sadness about, aversion for evil is fundamental. It's good. What would be bad would be to be sad about something good, but that's what envy is. Envy is sadness about somebody else's good because it's not our good. But see, that denies the connection we have with others. Or vice versa, what the Germans call *Schadenfreude*, which means to be happy about someone else's misfortune—that is perverse. And I am just using these as examples of how **not everything we spontaneously want is really good or not everything we spontaneously find sad is really bad. We have to discern all this, and this is part of our learning experience.**

However, **without** these movements, which are called **passions, we could not desire, enjoy, abide with, or respond to God.** Augustine made the mistake, according to

Aquinas, of believing that sin had warped desire so that people actually desired evil. Aquinas says no, that's impossible; nobody can desire evil. In fact, Aquinas goes on to say the generic passions—generic passions: what does that mean? That is what everybody always wants. **What everyone always wants and what no one ever wants is the basis for our learning what the natural law is.** We learn the natural law by looking at life and seeing what people always want, what do people never want. That's also the basis of the golden rule if you think about it.

However our apprehension of the natural law is not really the sharpest, most perfect or infallible, so **we need the word of God to enhance that apprehension.** Thus we affirm the fundamental goodness of the world as created by God in reflecting God's goodness. **Forming our consciences means—or could mean, one way of looking at this is—seeing good as Christ sees good in the body and in the soul.**

So now we have looked at two facets of life in the kingdom. Grace always must be present, always must be drawing us. And we also have the issue of learning, how we have to learn. We cannot presume to know.

Struggle

The third interlocking facet in the kingdom of life is struggle. I believe that many times people have been put off, horrified, disedified by the fact that their lives involve struggle, as if somehow they should not. **But struggle is integral to human life both on the natural level and on the supernatural level,** both in regard to attaining good here on earth and overcoming evil on earth and obtaining God eventually. Obviously our earthly experiences serve as an analogue for our movement toward God. **Knowing right from wrong is the first struggle. We have to learn, so learning itself is part of the struggle.** That's why I say it's interlocking. **Listening and attention is needed, and that is already prayer.**

Prayer

Prayer is already the awareness that we need help. It is the expression of this need; it is the openness to this need, because we are not created to be all by ourselves, and we are not even created to live independently as a tribe. And so our reason, especially the **adult reason,** the universal reason, which we are capable of developing, can witness to our inner struggles and our inner conflicts that **we are really in dire need of some power that we do not possess.** And even if God did not reveal himself to us in Scripture, in the life of Christ, in the sacraments, we would still have this capacity to know that something is needed.

Now St. Thomas raises the question, well, what if people aren't Christian and never heard the gospel, can they actually experience salvation? He said yes, provided that they come to believe in **divine providence** and cooperate with it, because **cooperating with something beyond yourself is essential to what it means to be saved,** what it means to live a redeemed life, what it means to live in God. **To listen to God, to humbly ask for help in all our personal decisions is the beginning of prayer.** It acknowledges that we

need help. God's will cannot be accomplished in us without struggle whether in the world of the senses or in the world of the spirit.

Struggle continued

The Irascible Passions

Hope

Now there are specific passions beyond pleasure, pain, desire, and aversion that deal with the world of struggle. These passions help us to attain what is difficult or to conquer evils that are difficult to conquer. They are, first, hope. **Hope**, before it becomes a theological virtue that leads us to God, **is a natural passion we need in order to obtain difficult objectives**. And obtaining difficult objectives is really an essential part of living a full life.

Audacity

The second is daring or audacity. **Audacity** is a very important passion. It is what **gives us the strength to overcome evil, obstacles in our path**. And, of course, it has to always follow a **personal judgment that it's possible**. We cannot be audacious in the presence of something impossible. In the natural world some things are impossible. For example, you might come to the realization that you are not going to pass the bar exam—that's very possible. That's very possible that it's impossible, and then you despair of passing the bar exam in this year, so you have no hope. It's also possible that you might have some sort of obstacle to your path toward life, whatever it is you are doing, whatever it is you believe you need to do. **There could be something you cannot overcome and, therefore, the natural response is fear**.

Fear

Fear is a passion that is aroused in us when we meet evil we can't overcome. Now in regard to the life **in the world there are things we can fear**. For example, even sheep have a particular judgment—and Aquinas does say sheep have judgment, particular judgment—a sheep can judge that a wolf is dangerous, so can a child. Children are actually very reasonable. They cry because they need something. They don't speak yet, but they are in need and so they express their need. That's reasonable. Now maybe some children aren't reasonable; I don't know; I haven't had any. But children are reasonable when they cry. They are asking for something. They are expressing something. Children are not irrational. Children are reasonable; they are rational. But they don't have universal reason, which involves the use of language, symbol, concept, and so on. Animals, as far as we know, don't have that either: language, concepts, and so on. But they do have a particular reason.

Despair

So we may fear something, but **we should not fear God, unless we have made ourselves God's enemy**. Then fear would be reasonable. But other than that, fear of God is not reasonable because **for us to attain God, we need God to bring us along. And since God is perfectly capable of doing that, to fear failure would be irrational**. So we need not rationally fear God ever, unless we have really made ourselves his enemy; then we could fear his justice. We also need never despair in the help God gives us. We

may despair of ourselves and our own abilities to do something, but **we need not ever despair the gifts of God, because God is faithful to all his promises.** So despair of God's help is completely inappropriate and irrational, as is fear of God—but in ordinary earthly life, very appropriate.

Anger

Now the fifth irascible passion—so we have hope and its opposite despair. We have daring and its opposite fear. And then the fifth one is **anger.** Now it's very interesting, St. Thomas says anger is the most reasonable of all the passions. And I am convinced people don't actually know what is right or wrong when it comes to things like anger, because in the confession people come and say, well, I have been very angry. And I'll say, well, at what? at whom? why? And then they will tell me a story of some horrible injustice at work or some terrible imposition in the family or some crude form of rudeness in public. And I will say, "You should be angry about that! That's wrong!" And Aquinas says that not being angry, **habitually not being angry about injustice, itself is a vice.** And I believe he says that the vice of not being angry is more common than being angry wrongly. And we should think about that. **Anger is a power God has given us to thwart evil and as he says to gain reparation for injury.** Now he said it's rational. That means it involves the judgment that I have been injured.

Now, of course, **anger could become inordinate** if I am angry because somebody keeps me waiting for ten minutes. That is not really an injury, although some people think it is. And we also can be angry at the injustices committed against others if we love them. In fact, **we should be angry concerning injustices** committed against our own families and our community members. And even, if we are really motivated by charity, our enemies. The motivation of charity means we are not only concerned about them in themselves, we are concerned about their salvation. **So maybe we are even angry about injustices to our enemies.** The fifth and most reasonable passion!

Now in our society—and I am continuing with the example of anger—in our society people are expected always to "**be nice.**" **That's the secular virtue;** the virtue of virtues is be nice, always be nice. **Anger is not nice, and so for a lot of people it's like intrinsically evil, but that's wrong. So we need to think again about these passions and understand where sin comes in and where it doesn't.**

Confession and Reconciliation

So as we learn what is really good and worthwhile we recognize that **sometimes we have chosen false goods or false values or preferred a small good to a great one,** either by error or by weakness, especially when there's something that required struggle—**we don't want to struggle—or indifference or even malice—that involves really doing harm in the means we choose—or even not bothering to judge at all,** just doing what we want without even thinking. **All these would be examples of sin.**

St. Thomas says that **sin creates the disintegration of the human person.** Now you have to take this carefully. Complete disintegration, loss of love, loss of all virtue—that is serious sin; that's called "**mortal sin.**" That is not very common; at least it's not common

among people who are trying to follow Christ. It may happen, but it would be **something going totally against the grain of following Christ**. But venial sin should not be thought as trivial because **venial sin**, even though it is not really a grave evil, it nonetheless starts to **weaken our interior constitution and we gradually lose some of the harmony that God wants us to have**. The result of losing harmony inside us is inner conflicts. Grace, which starts with sanctifying grace, which brings the love of God, charity, faith, hope, all the moral virtues—that integrates, harmonizes, and heals our nature. So venial sin takes that away by little bits and pieces, but it does really provide a weakening.

The **sacrament of Reconciliation**, also called “Confession” in your book, **reconciles us first to God and to the person God wants us to be and to our brothers and sisters in Christ**. The central feature of this sacrament is the restoration or strengthening of sanctifying grace, which brings with it **faith, hope, love**—that’s divine charity, the love of God—and the four virtues: **prudence, temperance, fortitude, and justice, which seven virtues are the basis of St. Thomas’ moral teaching**. Now you have heard of people that base their teaching on seven deadly sins—not Thomas. It’s the seven virtues. It’s a positive orientation. We cannot live a godly life without the godly powers, and **they have to reign over the parts that make us up: our passions, our ordinary passions, our irascible passions, our intellect, and our will**. So this is the work of the infused virtues.

Sacrifice

Now the fourth facet of our life in God is sacrifice. So we started with grace—there always must be grace. Then we have to learn—respond to grace and grow. Our capacity to learn is built-in to our nature; it is reason. But learning also involves opening ourselves to God’s self-disclosure, which we call “revelation,” which comes to us in the word of God and in the writings of saints, the teachings of the Church, and so on. Then we have to face the fact that struggle is part of life.

Now the next and **last facet is sacrifice**. We learn what is really worthwhile. We struggle to incorporate a good conscience into our lives. And then eventually we come to the point of realizing that ultimately **God is the only good worth striving for**. It doesn’t mean God is the only good we need. In one sense as long as we are living here we do need food, clothing, and so on. But God is the only good really worth striving for and God is a good worth **sacrificing everything for**. So gradually—not all at once, but **gradually—we have to let go of all attachments that don’t serve God’s purpose for us**. It is relative because I may have to let go of something you don’t have to let go of, it’s **whatever doesn’t serve God’s purpose in our lives, and that is specific to each person**. Therefore we need to **develop an awareness of God**: how much we need God and how much we depend upon him.

Again, we already pointed out in learning that **we need prayer**. Prayer is also part of our struggle. But prayer is first and foremost not asking for help and not asking for support, but first and foremost prayer is **lifting our minds and hearts to God**. It is really elevating our consciousness so that we are **aware of God in everything**, so that God can be part of all our business, all our life, all our relationships. That’s the idea of praying

always. **Live a life elevated in the sense that you are aware of God and return to that awareness throughout your day.** I am not here to talk about various ways of doing that; that would be another talk altogether. But essentially all prayer forms are for the same thing: elevating our minds so that all our relationships, commitments, occupations, work, business, whatever, is put in proper perspective and that each part of our lives properly serves the whole so nothing is out of kilter. Without prayer this kind of perspective is probably impossible.

Eucharist

Gradually God's grace transforms our natures molding them to Christ. He is the exemplar. We are called to become like him and it is his love and power that effects this transformation. It is gradual because God works with us freely, so he has to show us what has to be done and let us choose to do it. He does not overpower us. So **God enlightens us to the changes we have to make and then he gives us the power to make them.** The most visible sign of this transformation is the ritual of the Mass itself; **the ritual of the Mass itself is a visible sign of transformation.**

Now you cannot **understand the Mass** unless you keep in mind the two great mysteries of Catholic faith: the mystery of the **Trinity** and the mystery of the **Incarnation**. We believe that the second person of the Trinity, the Word of God, became human. This coming into our life of the very Word of God is an essential component to understanding what the Mass is. The Word takes on human flesh. The Word approaches us. But the Word is one of us. And the Word—which is from God, becoming one of us—now in his human choice, his human will, accepts God's love and mercy for us and with us. **In Christ all conflict between humanity and God is resolved in harmony,** the harmony of his unified will, which is **to serve the Father and give his life to the Father.** This is his sacrifice. Nothing can stand in the way of his giving his life to the Father. "No one takes it from me," he says, "I lay it down." It's a gift.

In times passed sacred meals symbolized human life sharing God, sharing God's bounty. The **eating together was a sense of communion** based on the gratitude of hungry people being fed. Now **in Christ he himself becomes the food,** the bread that comes down from heaven—he is that bread. He incorporates us into his own body through the unleavened bread—of course we are already baptized into his body—but now **in the ritual of the Mass he incorporates us through the unleavened bread of the Passover.** And through that ritual Christ offers himself and draws us and offers us as well as we become part of his offering so that as Augustine did say, "The whole Christ offers the whole Christ to the Father."

Christ begins as the head lifting us, but then his hope is that we will respond by choosing and agreeing to be an offering, to be bread that is broken for others, to be blood that is poured out for others. This doesn't happen all at once, but this is the transformation the Mass is ritualizing. Eventually, **Christ's hope is that we too offer ourselves and him consciously, doing what he does.** He says, "I do what I see the Father doing." His wish is that we do what we see him doing. Now we do what we see him doing. The Holy Spirit descends upon the bread and wine consecrating them so that

we by eating the sacred meal become consecrated ourselves in the sharing. The communion that follows is between us and God, between us and the communion of saints in heaven, between us and the communion of saints on earth, and is also within us as a new harmony of communion whereby all our conflicts, all our powers, all our wishes, all our desires, all our aversions are all united by the power of grace: sanctifying grace, divine charity—all which bring a new unity to our own selves. And this is a foretaste of the life that God wants for us.

Summary

So now we have it: four facets of growth in the kingdom. We have **grace**, of course, at the beginning, in the middle, and at the end. We have a recognized responsibility to become **learners** our whole life long, not only becoming disciples but making disciples of others precisely by the attraction that our lives are. That's a point that Pope Paul VI made very beautifully in *Evangelii Nuntiandi*. Christian life is attractive. It should be attracting people. Our life should be attractive also. And when they are attractive, then we are evangelizing through that attraction. That is part of our learning work. Then, of course, we run into **struggles**, and we all have them. They are different for each of us. But God equips us with both natural and supernatural powers to overcome all obstacles to the good he wants us to have. And he gives us the power to overcome the evil he wants us to overcome, which is never necessarily obvious. Through all of this we have to become men and women of **prayer**, acknowledging our need and our neediness, but mostly lifting our minds up beyond our senses so that we really appreciate the depths within us, the depths of the soul that the senses cannot perceive or appreciate, and carry that into all our endeavors and all our relationships. And then eventually it comes to the **transformation through sacrifice**, the giving up of everything for whatever great good God wants to make of us. Ultimately, we die. The bodies we have inhabited are laid in the earth or cremated or whatever, but we have a new body, a glorified body, that God has promised for us. And in that **glorified body we have the true fulfillment and the true purpose for our living on earth** and our being here in the first place. And this represents the three pillars of Catholic faith and spirituality.