

Rev. Paul A. Hottinger

**Adult Understanding of Sacraments** Thursday, October 7, 2004 7:00 p.m.  
Sacramental Formation Parent Gathering (Opening Prayer 1 Cor 13:1-3)

As parents and teachers we participate together in this very important enterprise of bringing children into the sacraments. You are, as Marta mentioned, the **first teachers of your children**; and you are also at the same time children yourselves, as **we are all children of God**. We are always learning; and so however you have understood things up until now, we would expect the Lord to continue to lead you into **new insights and a new understanding as to the actual meaning and message of the gospel**.

In the Catholic tradition sacraments are of paramount importance. St. Thomas Aquinas says that God works through signs. Now the signs that are sacraments are different from ordinary signs. A stop sign is a sign, but it's static. **A sacrament** is not static. It's a **dynamic sign**. It is full of **gestures**—in the plural—and **words**—again in the plural—and all of this constitutes a message that is **aimed both at the mind and at the soul**. In our Church we believe that the signs which are sacraments **effect what they signify**—they effect what they signify. In this way they **empower us to live a life that is different from ordinary human life** as it might simply arise on the earth through nature. So tonight's talk is really meant to help us perhaps see this more clearly or more deeply.

If we are going to talk about the sacraments of Confirmation and Eucharist, we must also look at Baptism. And incidentally, in the original order Confirmation came before Eucharist. It's one of the, you might say, oddities of modern times in the United States and many other countries that we give Eucharist first. Even in Italy today Confirmation comes first. It's bestowed, let's say, in the second grade, but before First Communion. Also in Spain Confirmation is often conferred on children even much younger than grade school age. But here we have it later. That in itself should not concern us, but it is simply interesting to realize that there are different customs in different countries.

**But all sacraments rely on the meaning of Baptism for their fundamental meaning.** If we don't understand Baptism, if Baptism is something that we are very vague about, then we are going to be vague about everything else. And Baptism is the only necessary sacrament as defined by the Church. Since we understand Baptism as necessary, we might ask **why is it necessary?** Well, first and foremost Baptism is necessary because we believe, the Church believes and teaches, that it is in Baptism that **we are brought into union with Christ**.

**Jesus himself was baptized.** This we should never forget. And his baptism was a momentous point in his life. For him it did not signify conversion because from the very moment of his earliest recollections and earliest consciousness and earliest exercise of will, he was always aware of the Father in a way that others of his age were not. This does not mean, however, that Jesus even as a child had a human knowledge of God that would be inappropriate for a child. No, he was fully human; and in his human nature he grew in an understanding of God. And so Scripture says, "He grew in age and wisdom before God and man."<sup>1</sup> It means that he had to grow in his humanity, in his human

understanding of God and his human ability to express it and to carry it out—carry out God’s will. **His baptism was the point in which his human will chose irrevocably to accept the role of God for himself, for his human destiny within his human framework.** And so this was not just a show for others. This was a moment in his own life.

And we might think about that in our own lives: **whether we have really come to that point yet of actually accepting God’s will for us, God’s will for each of us.** It involves, as Jesus seemed to realize from the very beginning, **it involves accepting our mortality.** So Baptism is intimately connected to death. So we are baptized into death. Jesus was baptized into his own death—willingly!

Now Jesus spoke of Baptism when he talked to Nicodemus. We perhaps don’t have his exact words, but we can’t forget that all four gospels are inspired by the Holy Spirit. And in that dialogue with Nicodemus he speaks of the **need for a new begetting.** And this gets to the very core of what Baptism is about. He says, “Unless a person is begotten from above he cannot enter into God’s kingdom.”<sup>2</sup> Now by “God’s kingdom” we mean, in general, the realm where God’s rule and God’s plan and God’s purpose completely direct and energize all aspects of human life. This kingdom, you might say, broke through in the life of Jesus; but it does not dominate or have dominion over earthly life at the present time, as we all can tell. But without this begetting from above, this new birth of which he speaks of, there could be no kingdom; there could be no other way of living other than under the constraints of life as we know it. However with a new beginning, **then there can be a new life. And that’s what Baptism initiates.** So he says, “Unless a man be born again of water and Spirit, he cannot enter into the kingdom of God.” And so we look at Baptism and the font of Baptism as the womb of this new kind of existence, this new life.

And later this is described as **“eternal life.”** What does eternal life mean? Well, in the Bible it means **the life of God because only God is eternal**—only God is eternal! For that matter, in the Bible, according to the gospels, only God really is. Everything else exists only in God because God creates and sustains it. If God were not to sustain anything for one second, we would not continue to exist.<sup>3</sup> So we are existing in God at all moments, although we are not aware of this.

The new life that is brought about in the womb of Baptism is also called by St. Paul an **“adoption,”** because in this event we are taken up by God as his own children, and you know if you are a child, you get to inherit<sup>4</sup>. So we become **co-heirs with Jesus** in whatever it is that God has in mind for Jesus. Jesus being the God Man, the Son of God who has become human, he has a destiny. His destiny becomes our destiny when we are adopted by the Father in Baptism. So we can really say that Baptism is the beginning of a new creation, that is, in each case we all become part of a new creation because we are all incorporated now into Christ.

Now it’s important that when we talk about eternal life and when we face our mortality, that we **contrast true Christian faith with two other views that are very**

**different.** The one we might actually confuse with the Christian view: **the view of primitive peoples**, the view that we are immortal, that some part of us survives death and that we float into some sort of afterlife. This is apparently the belief of most primitive people, and we see signs of it by simply excavating ancient sites where people lived. When human people died their areas are marked with orderly burying of the dead. And very often, particularly in China and Egypt, we see that they are buried with the accouterments of earthly life; and we know now through study that they believed that there was a complete continuation of earthly life in some other afterlife. So if you were an emperor in this life, the Chinese believed, you would be an emperor in the next life; if you were a slave in this life, you would be a slave in the next life. And as late as the seventeenth century the Chinese were asking concubines to volunteer to commit suicide so they could be buried with the emperor and be his concubine in the next life. That is not our belief. In fact, there may be absolutely no continuity between this life as we know it in its structure and life in God. But **where there is continuity has to do with our faith, our good works, our prayers, the relations we enter into, especially if they are sanctified by God. Those all are part of then what we have in God, in eternity.**

Now there is another view, which is also prevalent today, **materialism.** In materialism, materialists, even some supposedly great intellectuals and scientists, seem to actually believe that the universe just happened by accident, and equally by accident life just emerged from inorganic matter, and then some day it just stops! That of course is not our belief either, but it does have one thing correct. **It does have one shred of truth: that when we die there is an abrupt end of what we are familiar with** and what we know. And it's important that we realize that's true.

Jesus when speaking to Nicodemus says, "The flesh begets flesh; the spirit begets spirit."<sup>5</sup> Flesh begets flesh is what we are familiar with: human reproduction. Spirit begets spirit is something else. We are not familiar with this. God is Spirit, and God begets his own through a process that's very different from human generation. The point is that whatever God has in store for human life that does not come ineluctably or naturally through some process of evolution or through some other natural process. It is a supernatural gift, and it is bestowed by God freely. And it has to be freely accepted. And therein we see the very specific meaning of sacraments. **Sacraments are moments where the gift of God is bestowed and received freely!**

Now St. Paul on reflecting on the meaning of this says, "In Christ there is no male or female, slave or freeman, Jew or Greek."<sup>6</sup> Those **descriptions refer to the social structure of human life, not to the essence of who we are in Christ.** So in that way the materialist is right: there is an abrupt end to our maleness, our femaleness, our slavery, our liberty, our Jewishness, our Greekness. All those things mean nothing. Those are merely human modifiers. They are not the essence of who we are. Now we might make a note that **many people spend almost their entire lives identifying with these very superficial attributes** and don't think of themselves in any deeper way. And this is a great tragedy for a believer. It's almost as if belief doesn't really enter into my understanding of who I am. We do not want to reach our judgment with that sort of a record. We want to go more prepared.

Now Jesus taught many new things that were not in the Old Testament, but there is one thing taught that is in the Old Testament, namely, that all **God's gifts are invitations**; and the only way to respond to an invitation—or rather the only thing you can do with an invitation is respond to it! So every time God beckons us we have to send an R.S.V.P. **We have to actually respond.** And many times Jesus uses the image of a banquet to talk about what God has destined for us. A banquet indicates abundance. It indicates conviviality. It indicates feasting. It indicates even intoxication. And all of those are intended to talk about the **great, overwhelming generosity of God.** But at the same time, we see from many of Jesus' parables a lot of those invited don't come. They don't respond. They stay home. They even mistreat the messengers who bring the invitations.

Now in the Old Testament we see the invitation was an earthly one to form a community of justice here on earth and, therefore, to witness to God's justice. In one sense it is a spiritual idea, but it's not a spiritual idea that transcends earthly life as we know it. It was an invitation to a covenant of peace. It was a new relationship between God and the creation. But in the New Testament we see something far different, something that transcends all human conditions and therefore also lasts. The whole idea of eternal life is that **eternal life is God's life.** It has no beginning. It has no end. **We are inserted into it; and if we live a life of faith, that insertion is forever.** So we can say that the new life we are given in God is truly a new creation, and **Baptism is its sign.**

Now in our church we have a font with actually moving water, and that's another symbol we find in the New Testament. When Jesus talks to the Samaritan woman he says, "If you only knew who was asking you for water, you would ask him. He would give you living water."<sup>7</sup> What is "living water"? **Living water means an experience of God.** That's a biblical term.<sup>8</sup> Whenever you see living water in the Book of Ezekiel or any of the prophets, it means an experience of God. So what this is saying is that not only does God establish a new relationship with us, but he gives us the opportunity or the potential to experience him, **to experience the divine being even while we are still on earth.** So we are begotten into a new relationship with God and we can really experience this!

In 2 Timothy St. Paul says, "Stir into flame the gift you received when I laid hands on you."<sup>9</sup> Now this probably refers to the sacrament we call today "Confirmation." The sacraments didn't emerge exactly as they are today at the very first moment of the Church's life. They grew and developed. But what St. Paul talks about in 2 Timothy does refer very much to what we call "**Confirmation.**" **Here faith and the life of God's Spirit in us is pictured as hot embers.** Now you probably know that if you neglect a fire—a campfire, for example—if you let it be, it will go out. And what St. Paul is saying is that happens too with the gifts God gives us. This happens with the Spirit. Jesus says, "I have a baptism to receive, and would that it were ignited."<sup>10</sup> But very often in the life of Jesus' disciples, in the life of his body, the Spirit is not too well ignited. **The embers tend to get cool because we don't fan into flame the gifts that God gives us.**

You might want to think about that because the gifts of Baptism and Confirmation are given only once, and there is no necessary relationship between the fruits or the gifts of these sacraments and the moment we receive them. **We can receive the gifts and the fruits of the sacrament of Baptism or Confirmation ten, twenty, thirty years after the moment in which that sign was originally performed for us.** But if we think about this, we can see that and know that there are many Christian people who seem to have no spiritual vitality. This is not normal in a true Christian life. **There are people who have no sense of Spirit or divine spark.** This is not in accord with God's wishes for us, which is that we thrive. St. Irenaeus says, "The glory of God is man fully alive." And that includes all people—**people fully alive: this is the glory of God.**

As adults in charge of the young, we do more good for them not directly telling them anything or teaching them anything or doing anything for them. **We do the most for them when we fan the flame of our own gifts and our own faith.** That is really when **we come alive, and then we are a witness.** And witnessing is the primary ministry of the Church; the primary role of the Church is to witness. **So your primary role to your children is to witness to them,** not to tell them things, although you have to do that too, but to witness. And in regard to witness, St. Francis of Assisi said, "Preach always; when necessary, use words." Words not linked to witness, of course, are cheap and empty. **Witness without words still can have great effect.** So we need to take seriously God's invitation and respond. That's how we live out our Baptism and Confirmation.

Now when it comes to the sacraments of **Reconciliation and Eucharist**, they are somewhat different because they do not bestow a permanent mark or character, "stigma" in Greek, on our souls. They are **sacraments we can receive often.** And Eucharist we need to receive it—often! And reconciliation we need to receive whenever—that's a matter of judgment. In fact, the reception of Reconciliation and Eucharist are meant to **strengthen the gifts given in Baptism and Confirmation.** In fact, Reconciliation used to be called "Second Penance." Well, what was first Penance? Baptism. **The purpose of Penance is to reflect upon our Baptism and our vocation in a devout and serious way, to examine our conscience.** How do our choices reflect God's new life, the life God gave us in Baptism, the life Jesus purchased by his death on the cross, the life Jesus manifested in his resurrection? How do my choices, how do my priorities, how does the way I live, how does the way I spend my money and my time, reflect that gift? That's what the examination of conscience is.

When we bring our children to Reconciliation it is not like dropping them off to grade school. You have already been through grade school. You are finished with grade school. But we are not finished with our formation in Christ! We never graduate from a constant learning about what it is to follow the Spirit of Christ. We never graduate from needing healing, reconciliation, forgiveness. Those are constants in the life of all of us on earth because earth is a period of transition and temptation and trial. And if we pretend otherwise, we are kidding ourselves and perhaps doing ourselves—not perhaps—certainly doing ourselves great harm! **So when we bring our children to Reconciliation it would be good if we also became reconciled, if we show them that we also need forgiveness, healing, the love of God, expressed in signs.**

**Eucharist itself is a learning experience.** Jesus invites us to his table first to **share his life with us**, but not only that, also to teach us **how we can share our lives with him**. Communion is not a one-way street. Too many people have the strangest idea that they come to Mass to get something, which is true partially; but they also come to give something because Jesus really wants our lives! He wants our pain, our suffering, our work, our play; he wants that to go onto the altar with the bread and the wine to be consecrated by the power of the Holy Spirit. He wants our joys and our achievements. He wants our struggles because he has gone through life and he has turned away nothing. He rejected no joy. He rejected no struggle. He rejected no suffering, and he rejected no pain because all of it is part of life. And he wants us to bring all of that to him and to place it upon the altar and to **join in his self-offering to the Father. This is the meaning of the Mass.**

The Church really asks us to come weekly to Mass on the Lord's day. And I ask children, "Well, do you go to Mass on Sunday?" And sometimes they say, "No, only on Saturday." I say, "Well, that's the same, because in the old tradition Sunday begins at evening hour on Saturday." How can we really expect our lives to be sanctified without our active participation in this intimate commingling of the human and the divine, which is the Eucharist, which is the Mass? **We need to place our practice of the faith as a major priority.**

Finally, Jesus spoke of the seed that falls on various types of ground. There is the seed that bears a great deal of fruit, and there is the seed that is lost and wasted. Now I hate to tell you, but as parents you cannot determine the quality of soil that your children will be. You cannot do that. That is not in your purview. But what you can do, and which you will do, what you shall do, whether you like it or not, is **determine what kind of soil you are! That you do determine in your choices and in your priorities.** And one final thought: **we cannot pass on what we do not have ourselves.**

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<sup>1</sup> Lk 2:52

<sup>2</sup> Jn 3:3

<sup>3</sup> Jn 1:3

<sup>4</sup> Rom 8:15

<sup>5</sup> Jn 3:6

<sup>6</sup> Gal 3:28

<sup>7</sup> Jn 4:10

<sup>8</sup> Jn 8:37

<sup>9</sup> 2 Tim 1:6

<sup>10</sup> Lk 12:49