

Cathedral Deanery Course for Catechists

THE SACRAMENTS

I'd like to begin by giving you a brief outline of what I plan to address in my talk this evening. I could talk for hours about the sacraments, in fact I could easily run a whole course for you on just the sacraments, but none of us have the time for that so I need to narrow the focus. I want to begin by acknowledging the context of my words tonight: what I say to a group of catechists will not be the same as what I say to a group of priests, or to a group of teenagers, or to a group of eucharistic ministers. So, we need to situate this talk in the context of this particular meeting. Then I want to talk about the sacraments in general, what sacraments are and how they fit into the life of The Church. Finally I will talk a little about the liturgy. Again, this could be the subject of a whole series of talks all on its own, but you cannot sensibly talk about the sacraments without also talking about liturgy. The sacraments are the way in which the power of Christ's Paschal mystery, the mystery of his death and resurrection, is made real and present for us in the everyday world¹. But this power is focussed and concentrated through the liturgical celebration of the sacraments: we can know all about the theory of baptism, what it effects and how it changes people, but all that is just so much theory, academically interesting but practically irrelevant, unless we know how baptism is celebrated. So, here we come to one of tonight's key propositions.

Theoretical knowledge about the sacraments has little impact on people's lives unless it is linked to knowledge about how the sacraments are celebrated.

Perhaps I am getting ahead of myself here. This talk is being given in the context of a series for catechists about handing on the faith. So let's remind ourselves quickly what catechesis is all about. The General Directory for Catechesis puts it like this:

"The definitive aim of catechesis is to put people not only in touch, but also in communion and intimacy, with Jesus Christ"².

Everything else flows from communion with Christ. Pope Benedict XVI said something similar:

"The proper meaning of catechesis, in fact, must be this: to bring the flame of Jesus' love, even if it is a small one, to the hearts of children, and through the children to their parents, thus reopening the places of faith in our time"³.

Catechesis is not about communicating information; it is not about teaching; it is about introducing people to the person of Jesus Christ. If we want to judge the success (or otherwise) of our catechesis we needn't bother asking ourselves how much people know about The Church, or about Catholicism; we needn't bother asking ourselves how well people know the Catechism, or how familiar they are with the scriptures, or

¹ Catechism of The Catholic Church [Henceforth CCC] 1076

² n. 80, quoting *Catechesi Tradendae* n5

³ Meeting with the clergy of The Diocese of Bolzano-Bressanone, August 6th 2008.

if they understand the different parts of the mass. We just need to ask ourselves, have they experienced the presence of Christ? Do they know him, are they committed to staying close to him, to being his friend? Do they choose to put him at the centre of their lives? In catechesis, then, we are, of course, trying to help people know and understand more, but first of all we are trying to create a place where people can encounter the reality of Christ.

Catechesis is not primarily about knowledge but about experience.

A catechist is someone who has fallen in love with Christ, and who now wants to create the circumstances where other people can do the same. Of course, once we have had that experience of the Lord we want to know more about him - just as we do with anyone we come to love as a friend, but simple knowledge about the Lord is no substitute for an encounter with him. Any catechetical programme, whether for children or for adults, that does not begin with the need to experience the person of Christ will be futile.

Surely now it must be time to move on and talk about the sacraments. Well in a sense we have already begun, because the sacraments are at the same time the object of catechesis - we meet people to be catechised because they want to understand and experience the sacraments, they are presenting themselves for baptism, or confirmation, or marriage, of first communion, but they are also a *means* of catechesis. The sacraments are one of the ways in which we experience the person of Jesus Christ. In each one of the sacraments, although most obviously in the Eucharist, we encounter the living Christ who is our contemporary, a man of today. He is not a historical figure to be read about in books of the past, he is alive and he is available, he wants to meet me today and every day. The Christ who we love, and who loves us, is available to us in the sacraments; the Christ to whom we want to introduce our children, our teenagers, our adult enquirers, is waiting for them in the sacraments; the Christ who they experience in the scriptures, in prayer, in gatherings of the church assembly, awaits them in the sacraments.

Every sacramental celebration is an encounter with the person of Christ, and in every sacrament it is Christ who is at work.

Lets look at a definition of the sacraments. This comes from The Catechism:

"The sacraments are efficacious signs of grace, instituted by Christ and entrusted to the Church, by which divine life is dispensed to us. The visible rites by which the sacraments are celebrated signify and make present the graces proper to each sacrament. They bear fruit in those who receive them with the required dispositions"⁴.

Actually, that is a very good definition, but it is pretty dense and not very easy to follow without breaking it up into smaller chunks, so that is what we will have to do. I'd like to start by picking out the words 'signs', 'visible' and 'make present'. It is very clear from these words that in the sacraments things are happening at two levels. On the one hand there is what we see going on, and on the other hand there is something happening that we do not see. This is extremely important to grasp, but it is also quite

⁴ CCC 1131.

difficult for us, because we live in a culture that tends to see things very much on the surface level only. We have grown up in a world which thinks there is only one kind of knowledge, and that is scientific knowledge, knowledge that can be demonstrated and proved. We have been taught to value only the things that we can see, and hear, and hold and touch. What you see is what you get, that is all there is to it. But Catholicism still holds onto an older and wiser view of the world. We value scientific knowledge, of course, but we also realise there are other sorts of knowledge. There is more to the world than meets the eye. Everything around us, and most especially everyone around us, carries levels of meaning and significance that we cannot perceive with our senses alone. Catholicism challenges us to see the world in three dimensions, and to look below the surface. It very directly challenges our impoverished postmodern world, a world where everything around me is simply an instrument, a tool that I can use to achieve my wishes. No, people and things have a significance that I cannot invent, and that I cannot ignore. There is far more to the world than meets the eye.

If we are really going to be able to appreciate what the sacraments are all about, if we are going to be able to enter into a sacramental view of the world, we have to make a very conscious effort to leave behind the impoverished secular view that refuses to look below the surface, and to search for the hidden significance in things. In fact, instinctively we know that this is a better way to see the world; human nature rebels against a view of the world that sees only the physical. Even outside the Church people recognise this. The lover's hankie under a pillow; the child's first drawing; the battered hat passed on from a loving father; the bunch of flowers tied to a roadside tree; the champagne cork from a special celebration; the pressed flower from a bride's bouquet, these are all objects of no intrinsic value at all, but the fact that we keep them shows that we do understand that ordinary things can sometimes have an extraordinary significance, a meaning that may never be obvious to the naked eye.

So, if we are going to think about the sacraments we have to make a conscious effort to leave behind the 'surface only' view of the world, and see what lies around us with eyes that are always looking for deeper levels of meaning. In the same way we will need to invite those who we accompany as catechists to do the same. The first task of catechesis about the sacraments is to enable people to enter the world of the really real, so that they expect to see things with sacramental eyes, expect to find that physical things have a meaning and significance beyond that which is obvious to the senses alone. St Thomas Aquinas wrote in one of his hymns:

*Seeing, touching, tasting are in thee deceived;
how says trusty hearing? That shall be believed;
what God's Son hath told me, take for truth I do;
truth himself speaks truly, or there's nothing true.*⁵

Ordinary, everyday things, things of no intrinsic value, can sometimes have a meaning, even to the secular mind, that is not obvious to the senses.

Now let's go back to what The Catechism says about the sacraments. They are 'efficacious signs of grace'. Efficacious means that they are effective - something

⁵ Adoro te devote/Godhead here in hiding translated by G M Hopkins.

happens, some effect is produced. The sacraments do not just describe some abstract concept, they bring about some change. So, when a baptised man and a baptised woman exchange their consent to marriage according to the prescribed form, this is not simply words and actions that describe something - they are not simply illustrating or proving their love for each other; their exchange of consent effects something - something happens as a result of it and the couple are changed by it. Quite what the nature of that change is I will talk about in a moment. This is extremely important.

Whenever a sacrament is celebrated, people and/or things are changed, they become different.

So sacraments are efficacious, and they are signs. It is, perhaps, with the word 'signs' that we have the most problems. It is very tempting to try to explain the fact that a sacrament is a sign by saying it is a little bit like a road sign, or an icon on a computer, or whatever. We should be careful of explaining things in terms of 'a little bit like'. If You know 'A' but don't know 'B', I might say to you 'B is a little bit like A'. In your mind you will conjure up a picture of A, and imagine B being like it; but in fact it isn't completely like it, it is only a little bit like it, so unless I go to the trouble of telling you all the ways it is like it, and the ways it isn't, just saying B is a little bit like A actually communicates nothing at all. Let me use an example: I might say to you 'Winchester is a little bit like Chichester', and that is true, they are both small cathedral cities set in countryside, with similar shops and facilities. You might picture Chichester in your mind and think 'yes, I like Chichester, I had better go and visit Winchester'. When you do so you will find it is not at all what you visualised - because you had visualised Chichester. I didn't really communicate much to you at all. So, here is a health warning. It is best to avoid saying the sacraments are 'a little bit like' anything - because in fact they are also very much not like anything else at all.

So, what can we say about the sacraments as signs? Once again, we have to be careful about the word 'sign', because we use the word in so many different ways. A round red metal plate with a horizontal white bar tells me I may not go this way, and we call that a sign; a shop has the words 'Sowerberrys Undertakers' written above it, and we call that a sign; we see a patient in a hospital bed breathing, and we call that a 'sign of life'. These are all very different meanings. In a sacrament the words and gestures are a guarantee that God is at work in a particular way. The words and gestures illustrate what is happening, but they also make it happen (back to efficacious). They are more than just visual aids, acted out dramas to show you what is happening separately, they are essential to the action of God. I can stand in the Church and look at a baby and think beautiful thoughts about it being set free from original sin and incorporated into the new life of grace in the Church, but unless I say the words and pour the water, nothing happens. The words and gestures do bear some relation to the particular sacrament - pouring water is symbolic of cleansing and giving new life, but they are much more than visual aids: the words are spoken, the gestures done, and God acts.

For human beings, who communicate through all the senses and not just through words, sacramental celebrations guarantee that God is at work.

What are the sacraments efficacious signs of? They are efficacious signs of grace. That is to say, through the sacraments we are able to participate in the life of God. Out of his love and goodness, he comes to our help. Our friendship with him is strengthened and we are enabled to live as a holy nation, a people set apart to be a personal possession to sing the praises of God⁶. When we celebrate the sacraments, God acts. In specific ways, ways that we can be absolutely certain of, God intervenes in our lives to strengthen and deepen our friendship with him, to bind ourselves to him more closely. Once again, here we have to renew our resolve to see the world as it really is, which means looking below the surface. The celebration of the sacraments actually has an effect on us. In participating in the sacraments our closeness to Christ (our actual closeness to him, which is not necessarily related to how we feel at the time) is made deeper. This is a real challenge to our faith, and every time we stop to think about this we are forced to confront the ways in which we behave. If we really believe that our participation at mass brings us closer to Christ, how could we ever miss it? If we really believe that confession has the power to put our sins behind us and restore us to friendship with God, what on earth could keep us away? Our consideration of the sacraments is not easy - partly because it is a complex subject, but just as much because it is a real challenge to us, and a repeated call to conversion.

The sacraments are powerful and effective in deepening our union with God, and thus in making us holy.

The definition from the Catechism sums up what we have said so far in the sentence:

The visible rites by which the sacraments are celebrated signify and make present the graces proper to each sacrament.

Each of the sacraments strengthens and deepens our friendship with God, our participation in his life, in very specific ways. The sheet of paper that I will distribute to you, which I have shamelessly copied from the excellent Evangelium Programme⁷, list the sacraments and their effects, as well as the means of their celebration.

The sacraments were instituted by Christ, and what Christ did through his own actions during his earthly life he now achieves through the sacraments. The power of his death and resurrection were anticipated in his life, and are now made real for us in the sacraments. While circumstances may from time to time conspire to make it difficult to celebrate the sacraments in a particular place, or at a particular time, it is impossible to imagine The Church without the sacraments. Pope Benedict wrote:

*The Church receives and at the same time expresses what she herself is in the seven sacraments, thanks to which God's grace concretely influences the lives of the faithful, so that their whole existence, redeemed by Christ, can become an act of worship pleasing to God.*⁸

Returning one last time to The Catechism definition, we read:

⁶ 1 Peter 2.9.

⁷ 'Evangelium' was prepared by Fr Marcus Holden and Fr Andrew Pinsent, and is published by The Catholic Truth Society.

⁸ Sacramentum Caritatis n16.

They bear fruit in those who receive them with the required dispositions.

It is encouraging to hear that the sacraments are fruitful, but what does that worrying phrase about those with the required dispositions mean?

In most cases there are two people to consider here: the minister who confers the sacrament, and the person who receives it. What if the priest or other minister has his doubts about what he is doing, or what if he is himself in a state of sin. Does this affect what is going on? Thankfully, the minister's skill, faith and goodness are not at issue here. In each of the sacraments, remember, it is Christ himself who acts, and 'The Father always hears the prayers of his Son's Church...As fire transforms into itself everything it touches, so the Holy Spirit transforms into the divine life whatever is subjected to his power.'⁹ However holy the minister may, or may not, be, the power of God is at work, so long as he uses the proper form and has the intention to do what the Church does. So Graham Greene's whisky priest, however unappealing he may be personally, and however unworthy he may appear to others and to himself, is not thereby prevented from being a channel of sacramental grace - that is, of restoring and strengthening people's relationship with God.

However, the Catechism also says that 'the fruits of the sacraments also depend on the disposition of the one who receives them'¹⁰. The sacraments bear fruit, that is to say they are effective in deepening our union with God, to the extent that the recipient opens himself or herself up to the action of God. If a person comes to confession but has the internal disposition that he does not wish to be forgiven, or that he does not repent of his sins, for example, then God will not overrule his free will, will not force grace upon him. The more faithfully I open myself up to God's action in my life, the more I accept my need for salvation, and his will to offer it, the more effective the sacraments can be in bringing me into friendship with God.

The sacraments are not dependent on the virtue of the minister, but their fruitfulness can be diminished by the disposition of the recipient (principally a will not to receive the sacrament, or unrepented grave sin).

I think that it might be worth a few words now about the way in which the sacraments are celebrated. I don't intend to go into great detail about the specific liturgies for each of the sacraments any more than I have discussed the specific theology of the different sacraments, but there are a few general points that need to be made.

The liturgy is celebrated by the Body of Christ. It is not my liturgy, or yours, it is the Church's liturgy and Christ's liturgy. We are not celebrating alone, we are celebrating with other Catholics throughout the world, and with the hosts of Heaven who worship in God's presence. Without in any way wanting to get too pompous about this, we must be careful to be very sure that the way in which we celebrate the sacraments is an expression of what the Church does and believes. All of us who are involved in sacramental celebrations, and that means not just clergy but all those who have specific roles in the liturgy, as well as those who are trying to introduce others to the

⁹ CCC 1127.

¹⁰ CCC 1128.

wonder of God through catechesis, have a heavy responsibility here. As we celebrate the sacraments we must be very careful to do so from the heart of the Church. It can be very tempting to offer our own little asides, or explanations, our own little paraphrases of things, or little changes and amendments that we think are improvements. We have to resist this temptation. It is not my liturgy: the words are not mine, and the actions are not mine. However clever I may think my ideas are, and however strongly I may think my way is the best way, actually it never is. The Church's way is the only way, because if I give people something other than that I am depriving them of their birthright, I am stealing from them. As we try to introduce people to the joy and wonder of the sacraments, we must be humble if we are to avoid simply getting in the way. In his book 'A New Song for the Lord' Pope Benedict described this as the danger of being 'a wall instead of a window' and so, far from bringing people close to the Church we alienate them from it¹¹.

If we, as catechists, are going to put people in touch with Christ, and fan the flame of faith in their hearts, we have to do so in a spirit of great humility. We have to take on the Spirit of John the Baptist who pointed to Christ and said 'He must grow greater, I must grow less'¹². Our role is really to throw open a window onto the sacred, through which those who are placed in our charge can catch a glimpse of the holy. In fact, this is quite a demanding exercise. If I want to help people see the power of God at work in baptism, I must take up the challenge to ask myself repeatedly what fruits my own baptism bears; if I want to help people towards the sacrament of confirmation, I must make it my priority to live closer and closer to the heart of the Church and to proclaim the faith in my way of life; if I want to help people approach the Sacrament of Reconciliation I can only do so as someone who is himself a regular penitent, and to open to people the wonders of the mass I must renew my own 'eucharistic amazement'¹³, my own reverence and awe at the bread and wine that truly becomes the Body and Blood of Christ.

However much we know about the sacraments, there is always more to learn, more to read, more to understand, and it is good that we should try to do all these things. But we will have to accept that there will always be a level on which these things cannot be explained, cannot be understood, by our human minds, they must simply be experienced and rejoiced in. As we celebrate the sacraments, we catch a glimpse of Heaven, and the role of the catechist is to make that glimpse possible for people, to create the right conditions for it.

*If the heavens are not open, then whatever liturgy was is reduced to role playing and in the end, to a trivial pursuit of congregational self-fulfilment in which nothing really happens.*¹⁴

¹¹ Pope Benedict XVI 'A New Song for the Lord' Crossroad, New York, 1996 p. 67.

¹² John 3.30.

¹³ John Paul II Ecclesia de Eucharistia n. 6.

¹⁴ Pope Benedict XVI 'A New Song for the Lord' Crossroad, New York, 1996 p. 170.