

Being Catholic Today

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Lecture 1: The Heart of the Matter

Thank you for coming tonight. I am hoping these evenings will give us an opportunity to reflect together on the Catholic faith and its meaning in our world. If you are Catholic maybe you can learn more about your faith. Converts to the faith often understand it better than those of us who have been born and bred as Catholics. Perhaps you have family members or friends, as I do, who have drifted away from the Catholic faith because they have not experienced its light or its joy, and we want to rekindle our own understanding and joy so that we can speak of it in a convincing and appealing way. According to a recent Vatican document, “What is required of Christians is, first and foremost, a solid grounding in their faith. On this sound base, they can build a life which responds positively to the invitation in the First Letter of Saint Peter: ‘Always have your answer ready for people who ask you the reason for the hope that you all have. But give it with courtesy and respect and a clear conscience’ (1 Pt 3:15f)” (*Jesus Christ the Bearer of the Water of Life* 2003). If you are not Catholic I hope you will keep an open mind and ask questions when something is not clear. I’m publishing my email address if you’d like to send questions or comments between talks so that on these evenings I can address your real concerns. I am an amateur Catholic, both in understanding and practice—I love the faith but am still learning it, and I’m sure I can learn from you.

A word about the handout: Much of what I say will depend on the Scriptures, particularly the New Testament. On the handout are Scriptural and a few other passages I will be alluding to in the lecture. The texts will be most helpful if you take

them home and meditate on them one by one and then on the interconnections between them. Let the Lord speak to your heart through the text. This prayerful approach can gradually lead us deeper into the mystery that lies behind all the texts and of which each text gives a different perspective.

Being Catholic is complex. It takes almost 700 pages and 3000 articles to explain it in the Catechism of 1992. It includes topics like Mary, prayer, the sacraments, faith and love and the other virtues, the Trinity, the Incarnation, the Church, creation, almsgiving, commandments, penance, Scripture, authority, respect for life, spiritual warfare, heaven, judgment and many other elements. It has been said that Christianity is so big that no one generation can assimilate more than about a quarter of it. Thus one age emphasizes social justice, another dignified worship, one age contemplation, another praying in tongues, one age sees the flowering of new initiatives under the influence of the Spirit, another the need for strict adherence to authority and tradition. Heresy and schism are simply the choice of one or other element to the exclusion of others. All of the elements I just mentioned belong together, but we human beings tend to emphasize certain ones and neglect others. I’m sure my own perspective is limited too, but I will attempt to be “catholic.”

In all of this complexity where is our starting place, where is our center? Are we able to find the heart of Catholicism from which emanate all its diverse elements in a proper order? In that case, the apparently complex faith would in fact be simple, even though it may take us some time to appreciate this simplicity. I propose that the center of Catholicism is a person, a man about whom stories are told which show him as a vehicle of divine creativity and love, a man who taught with authority and lived with absolute integrity, sealing his teaching with his blood freely given. Catholicism is

born of the **encounter** of human beings with **Christ**. The core of our faith, of each one of us, beneath all the customs and practices, is a personal encounter with this man. The Christian is one who on hearing the story of this man feels that something deep inside him has been touched. He feels known, like the Samaritan woman who said, "Come and see a man who told me everything I've ever done" (John 4:29). He feels loved with an individual love that calls him by name. He feels that his deepest longings are understood, like the skeptic Nathanael who on meeting Jesus cried, "Rabbi, you are the Son of God, you are the king of Israel" (John 1:49). He feels loved with the love of his Creator, shown in an amazingly discreet, gentle, yet powerful way, a love that washes the feet of sinners, a love that dies for each man to win him new life (Gal 2:20). This encounter is difficult to speak of because it is personal, unique to each individual, and is experienced not as a choice but a gift. We can only lead people to Christ and then let him work. Surrender to Christ has all the mystery of any personal relationship: we can neither impose nor analyze it. The Christian is one who on hearing of Christ feels compelled to say, "My Lord and my God" (John 20:28). He feels—and this will be the theme of our talks—that in Christ infinite love touches us.

This nexus between the individual soul and Christ is the heart of our faith. We need to look more closely at both sides of the relationship. First of all, who was Christ? He was certainly a man who went about doing good (Acts 10:38), spoke of God from the inside, as it were, knew God intimately as Father (Matt 11:27), exercised the power of God in healing the sick, raising the dead, controlling nature, and finally taking up his life after laying it down for men (John 10:17-18). He was a man of whom people said, "He has done all things well" (Mark 7:37), and "No man ever spoke like this man" (John 7:46). From the beginning he was doing things only God could do, yet he called God Father as a

person distinct from himself. He was seen as the hand of God reaching into this world to heal it, as God's way of searching for the lost sheep of humanity. By the end of the New Testament generation the truth that had been obscurely felt from the first was clearly articulated: Jesus was not just a man entrusted with divine power, but a preexisting divine person who had become human, the mirror of the Father (Heb 1:2-3), the Word of God who was God and who became flesh (John 1:1-2, 14). Christians believe that in him dwelt the fullness of divinity (Col 2:9), that God was in Christ reconciling the world to himself (2Cor 5:19)

This is the first great mystery of Christ, the **Incarnation**, and we celebrate it especially at Christmas and pray about it in the Joyful Mysteries. By the fourth century when some were teaching that Jesus was the greatest of all creatures but not God, the Church hammered out the formula we recite every Sunday: Jesus Christ, the only Son of God, eternally begotten of the Father, God from God, light from light, true God from true God, begotten not made, one in being with the Father, through whom all things were made: eight phrases that make perfectly clear that the person of Jesus was God by nature. It was this person who, as the Creed continues, for us men and for our salvation came down from heaven...and became man. There you have it: humanity and divinity were fused into a unity in the person of the Son of God, a mystery called the hypostatic union: in the person (hypostasis) of Jesus humanity and divinity are henceforth indissolubly united, humanity has been penetrated with the divine and raised to the divine level without ceasing to be fully human. This union of the eternal and temporal, infinite and finite, in Jesus is the inexhaustible subject of contemplation: flesh has become the vehicle of divinity. We will never exhaust the wonder of this mystery, and as we will see, Jesus' divinized humanity is not for him but is a mystery to be shared with us.

But Jesus' work was not finished at the Incarnation; it only began. His purpose in becoming man was not simply to dwell among us for a time but to repair the damage done to our nature by Adam and Eve, who preferred their own way to God's plan. Despite centuries of God's trying to win them back through the Law and the prophets, men showed themselves incapable of returning to God with obedience. As the parable of the vineyard tenants shows, only the Son of the vineyard owner could obtain its produce (Matt 21:35-39). This he did in the utterly unexpected way of allowing himself to be slain by the people he came to save. In showing love for his people even when they rejected him he carried out the Father's will that he reveal to men divine love. That act of complete obedience reconciled man to the Father: now one man had shown total love and obedience to the Father, so that human nature is now rendered pleasing to God. This sacrificial act of Christ in accepting death for our salvation is called the **Redemption**, and the person who won it for us we call the Mediator between God and man, Jesus Christ (1 Tim 2:5). As we celebrate the mystery of the Incarnation primarily at Christmas, so we celebrate the redemption primarily at the Easter Triduum, and we pray this mystery in the Sorrowful and Glorious mysteries. The dying and rising of Christ is called the Paschal mystery, the heart of our faith, the passing over of Jesus Christ through death to eternal life so that we could share in his same journey.

Thus the central mystery of our faith could be called the Redemptive Incarnation. The term indicates both the nature of Jesus and his principal action. He became flesh in order to die for us, and his dying has efficacy because it is the action of God made man. The two mysteries are intertwined. All of this may sound complicated, but all we need remember is the sorrowful face of Jesus who is God made man giving himself up in death for love of us. This is the sign of the Creator's love for his people, an infinite

love that sends his own son to repair the damage done to his creature by sin. The risen Christ is humanity restored to its true nature, now sharing in the very life of God and offered to all who will accept it.

That brings us to the other side of the faith relationship: we have looked at the side of Christ, now we must examine more closely the human response to his offer. Human beings confronted with the story of Christ were presented with an option: to let or not let themselves be won over by this man and accept the hand that was offered. Acceptance is what we mean by **faith**, which says yes, Jesus Christ is Lord (Phil 2:11, 1 Cor 12:3, Rom 10:9): he rose from the dead to take away my sins and give me a share in his risen life. This is what I was made for, this is eternal life. I surrender to his lordship, I accept his gift. Hans Urs von Balthasar has defined faith simply as the readiness to receive the love of God as a gift. Faith says this man is authentic; he can deliver the goods.

Jesus captured people by a compelling magnetism. Why else would the first apostles have dropped their fishing nets and followed him before he had worked any miracles (Matt 4:18-20)? In Jesus they felt they were discovering their true selves, a dignity that they could not have expected but which drew out the best of them. After the resurrection those who believed in Jesus were transformed: timid men became bold, glad to suffer humiliation for the sake of Jesus' name (Acts 5:41), committing their whole lives to making him known throughout the Mediterranean world, despite all obstacles and failures. Faith in Jesus was a life-transforming experience. Countless men and women to our own day have found in Christ the strength to meet death cheerfully and overcome violence with love.

The New Testament shows us that the interior act of faith in Christ was immediately accompanied and manifested by an external rite, the submission to water

baptism (Mark 16:16, Acts 2:41, 8:12, 16:14-15, 16:30-33, 18:8). Those who accepted the news about Christ signified that acceptance by immersion in water in the name of Jesus. This action was symbolic of the death and rising of Jesus now applied to the believer. The crossing of the Red Sea was both a death to slavery—a putting to death of the enslaver—and a birth to freedom. Both aspects of water are present in baptism. In Saint Paul’s words, “You have been buried with him, when you were baptized; and by baptism, too, you have been raised up with him through your belief in the power of God who raised him from the dead” (Col 2:12). Note that the new life is attributed to both faith and baptism, one as the expression of the other. Whenever the new life is attributed to one, the other is implied: it was faith signified by baptism that made one a Christian. They are the internal and external elements of a single submission to Christ, corresponding to the spiritual and physical components of the human being. Another passage in Saint Paul indicates this: “You are, all of you, sons of God through faith in Christ Jesus. All baptized in Christ, you have all clothed yourselves in Christ” (Gal 3:26-27). Faith and baptism together give us the life of Christ.

Notice I have been calling the believer a Christian. What makes him a Catholic? We can get at that by looking at the effects of baptism. Does baptism create a spiritual bond with Christ that ensures one’s personal salvation or does it link our body with the body of the risen Christ? If the former then the church is not strictly necessary except to preach the word of God. If the latter, if salvation is of the body as well as of the spirit, if I am linked body and soul to Christ, if my very flesh is sanctified by the Christ life, then all those who believe in Christ and are baptized are linked with that one body, and a body is by nature visible. Baptism incorporates us into the body of Christ, a single visible body that reaches throughout the world. Christ wishes

to make us one in that body, in that visible unity—that is the Catholic understanding. Christ does not save us as separate individuals but as “one body, one spirit in Christ” (Eucharistic Prayer III). From the very beginning faith was an adhesion to Christ who was living in the community of believers. There was no bypassing of the **Church** in a purely spiritual religion. The Christ whom the believer encountered in faith was alive and active in his community. The Church was his body: “God,” says Saint Paul, “has made Christ, as the ruler of everything, the head of the Church, which is his body, the fullness of him who fills the whole creation” (Eph 1:22-23). Christ clearly intended his church, the assembly of those who believed in him, to be a visible unity. He prayed the night before he died that believers “may all be one” with the very same unity which joined him to his Father: “Father, may they be one in us, as you are in me and I am in you,” and to make it perfectly clear that that unity was to be visible, he added, “so that the world may believe it was you who sent me” (John 17:21). People would reason that the kind of unity Christians showed could only be the work of God. So it was said of the first Christian community that they had but “one heart and soul” (Acts 4:32).

Christ made it clear before and after he died that he would be with and in his church (cf. Matt 28:20). He wished to be present in the teaching of the apostles (“He who hears you, hears me,” Luke 10:16) who handed on this responsibility to their successors (2 Tim 2:1-2, 4:1-2, Titus 1:5, 9, 3:8-11, Acts 20:28); he wished to be present in bread and wine transformed into his body by the very words he uttered over bread and wine before he died (Luke 22:19); he wished to be present in the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace (Eph 4:3), a visible unity that would be like a new creation in the middle of this world. In Christ infinite love touches us. The God who loved us so much that he sent his divine Son in human flesh to die for us wishes us still to be touched by that flesh

and saved by it. As the vehicle by which the risen Christ touches us, the Church must be visibly one as his body.

Catholics are those who accept this visible unity, with its other divinely ordained signs of dispensing divine life, its authority to speak for Christ in the interpretation of what he taught, its common worship. Protestants are those for whom faith in Christ as one's personal savior does not have to be so embodied in a visible participation in his Church. At a time when Catholics were giving the impression that external deeds and practices were a means of acquiring or achieving salvation, the Reformers recovered the authentic New Testament teaching that only a personal faith in Jesus Christ can save us. We are saved by believing in Christ's death and resurrection on our behalf. The tragedy was that instead of renewing the Church from within they felt the need to separate themselves altogether from the corrupt institution, with the result that salvation became a primarily interior and subjective affair severed from the living body of Christ. From this rejection comes the continuing proliferation of various Protestant churches claiming to be the church of Christ but really the creation of men. We need to help our Protestant brethren to see is that the truths emphasized by the reformers are at the heart of the Catholic Church and can really only be preserved in that Church. Authentic faith in Christ must allow him to touch us in the way he intended. We must accept sublime eternal life coming through humble creatures of flesh. Pope Benedict has coined the phrase "sacramental mysticism" to convey Catholicism's combining the infinite and finite dimensions of religion. We encounter the divine transcendent through the ordinary.

Faith is a Yes to Christ, an acknowledging him as Lord of one's life, a surrender to him, a willingness to receive life from him through the visible signs by which he graciously wished to mediate that divine life. That is the paradox of

Catholicism: through the humblest creatures we receive divine life: infinite love touches us through flesh. That means our Catholic life is sublime and mundane, a mixture of divinity and humanity, union with God and the ongoing experience of weakness and even sin. Being Catholic means being a child of God cherished and made holy by the Father, and at the same time a sinner in continual need of forgiveness and redemption. It means finding and receiving God in a visible institution of flawed human beings who are relying not on themselves but on the Christ within them for salvation. Catholics know themselves to be continually falling short of God's will for them yet precisely for that reason continually loved and forgiven. They know themselves poor and weak yet strong and rich in the forgiving Christ. They know that God delights in them and are only sorry for not allowing him to delight in them fully, not accepting his love fully, not receiving him into every aspect of their lives. Catholic life is growth in holiness through frequenting the sacraments. It is a harmony of the inner and the outer man: neither can do without the other. The interior alone is not fully human, not fully incarnate; the visible alone is a mere empty shell. Catholic joy is the awareness of God eating with sinners, as Josef Ratzinger put it beautifully in his *Introduction to Christianity*:

Christ has drawn sin to himself, made it his lot and so revealed what true 'holiness' is: not separation but union, not judgment but redeeming love. Is the Church not simply the continuation of God's deliberate plunge into human wretchedness; is it not simply the continuation of Jesus' habit of sitting at table with sinners, of his mingling with the misery of sin to the point where he actually seems to sink under its weight? Is there not revealed in the unholy holiness of the Church, as opposed to man's expectation of purity, God's true holiness, which is

love, love which does not keep its distance in a sort of aristocratic, untouchable purity but mixes with the dirt of the world, in order thus to overcome it? Can therefore the holiness of the church be anything else but the mutual support which comes, of course, from the fact that all of us are supported by Christ?

It is time now to face head-on an essential element of Catholicism that has so far only crept obliquely into our discussion. It is part of the essential confession of faith, the original proclamation at the core of the New Testament which some of you will remember is called the kerygma, that Christ died and rose for the forgiveness of sins. This was his essential mission. As Paul says quite simply, “Here is a saying that you can rely on and nobody should doubt: that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners” (1 Tim 1:15). The angel told Joseph that the child to be born of Mary would be named Jesus, or “Yahweh saves,” because he would “save his people from their sins” (Matt 1:21). He is the lamb of God who “takes away the sins of the world” (John 1:29). His blood was poured out “for the forgiveness of sins” (Matt 26:28); Christians were baptized “for the forgiveness of [their] sins” (Acts 2:38), which required a preliminary act of repentance or recognition of sin. Jesus’ very first words in the Gospel, even before the summons to faith, are a call to repentance: “The time has come and the kingdom of God is at hand; repent and believe in the Gospel” (Mark 1:15; cf. Acts 3:19). If Jesus is the physician come to heal mankind, then you must acknowledge yourself to be sick to benefit from his help: “It is not the healthy who need the doctor but the sick; I did not come to call the righteous but sinners to repentance” (Luke 5:31-32). We will need to recover something of the experience of Saint Peter, who on experiencing the miracle of the great catch of fish, was so overwhelmed with a sense of his unworthiness that he fell at Jesus’ knees and cried, “Depart from me, Lord, for I am a sinful man” (Luke 5:8).

Sin enters into the heart of Christian preaching but only as an evil which has been forgiven. That unmerited forgiveness is what gives us the power to admit sin. When we behold the Lord giving his life for us we cannot but realize we have not deserved this gift. We have not lived our lives in the awareness of this great love, but have secretly put ourselves at the center of life. Not accepting how precious we are in God’s sight, we have constructed our own ways of achieving happiness, filling our lives with creatures or with perfectionist attempts to win God’s favor. This is what is meant by sin, and it is perfectly depicted in the opening chapters of Genesis. Adam and Eve succumbed to the temptation that God was not love, he did not love them and was trying to withhold something from them, so they would have to take matters into their own hands. They sought to become like God instead of letting themselves receive the gifts by which God would fulfill them. They did not believe, they did not trust, they accepted a lie: God is not love.

Repentance is the awareness that we have rejected love, not believed in it, and so have constructed our own way to achieve happiness, trying to keep control over our lives. But we have no control over our lives, we are vulnerable. We have no control over disease, over death, over traffic, over accidents and disasters, over other people—we cannot make anyone love us. Repentance means giving up that attempt to control, that drive for complete autonomy that does not wish to receive life and love as a gift, an admission that we are vulnerable and needy. We have inherited our first parents’ failure to accept love and need to be freed from it: that is what is meant by “salvation,” a key word in our faith (it’s part of the name of Jesus). Many people today aren’t aware of needing to be saved from anything, yet that doesn’t mean they are happy or content. Sin is at the root of all our restlessness, our false pursuits of happiness, the misery we inflict on each other. Our refusal of love brings

fear and defensiveness and hardness of heart from which only God can free us. Repentance is saying I need salvation, I need forgiveness. It was when the prodigal son said, "I have sinned," that he experienced the lavishness of his father's welcoming love (Luke 15:18-24). It was the tax-collector who stood far off not raising his eyes to heaven and saying, "God, be merciful to me, a sinner," who went home friends with God (Luke 18:13-14). Humility is accepting this need for God and a willingness to build one's life on him. André Louf has defined faith as "the act of leaning on the toughness or sturdiness of God," and the root of the Old Testament word for faith means "lean on."

It may be important to say what repentance and humility are not. They are not low self-esteem or self-hatred or thinking oneself worthless but the exact opposite. They are born of the encounter with the love of Christ, in whose presence one sees the universe and oneself bathed in love and realizes how little one has taken account of that love, how little one has ordered one's life in the light of that love. Pope Paul VI put it like this: "We can only approach the kingdom of God by *metanoia* (the Greek word for repentance or conversion). This is a profound change of the whole person by which one begins to consider, judge and arrange his life according to the holiness and love of God, made manifest in his Son in the last days and given to us in abundance." To repent means to admit that in the words of the psalm we "have not known [God's] ways" (Ps 95:10). We have not lived our lives as a response to an infinite, all-encompassing love, and we need to be healed of our lack of trust with its consequent enthronement of self. Christ leads us to true self-esteem, to a valuing of ourselves in our whole being body and spirit, mind and feelings; he leads us to affirm ourselves and see our true potential which is to become images of him, capable of loving with his own kind of love. As Pope Benedict said at Regensburg,

Christ's love is "contagious": when you let yourself experience it, you find yourself "catching" it, loving yourself and seeing your dignity as the capacity to love others as he has loved you (John 15:12). In this way our initial confession of weakness does not leave us infantile but gives us a new accession of strength: "It is when I am weak," said Saint Paul, "that I am strong" (2 Cor 12:10). The Peter who fell at the feet of Jesus and wept for his denials becomes the foundation on which the Church is built. In the Lord's words to him, "When you have repented, strengthen your brothers" (Luke 22:32).

The more we accept God's forgiveness, the more we want to forgive. Saint Paul taught it: "Forgive each other as readily as God forgave you in Christ" (Eph 4:32). So we don't need to be afraid of confessing our sins, but rather see them as the opportunity to experience God's mercy at ever deeper levels. The more we experience ourselves forgiven, the more we love: Jesus said that the woman who washed his feet with her tears could only show such extravagant love because she was forgiven much, and then gave this terrible sentence: "It is the man who is forgiven little who shows little love" (Luke 7:47).

So now we have arrived at the fullness of our faith, which is charity. Charity is the flower of the Church, the perfection of holiness, and all Catholics are called to it. Christ's disciples were to be known by their **love** for one another, by loving one another as he loved them, even to death (John 13:34). And this love was precisely the fruit of the awareness of how much they themselves had been loved. It is through "catching" the love of Christ as we join in his Eucharistic offering that we are slowly transformed in him. It is in his Eucharist that we allow him to touch us most fully, body and soul. It is the celebration of his paschal mystery in the sign that he gave us which is the source of the unity of the Church and of its power to

transform the world, as we saw in our talks on the Eucharist. Most of us remain beginners on the way to this transformation, but the Church has produced shining examples of sanctity, proof that God in Christ can transform the human dough.

Such is the overview of Catholicism I would like to present on this first night. It is very simple: it is the encounter with the saving Christ who touches us through his Church. On God's side it is the Incarnation and Redemption of Jesus, the Paschal mystery made visible and active for us in the sacraments. On our side it is faith in that mystery and a submission to the sacraments of faith which create a visible, united Church. Through our deepening faith and sacramental life we gradually die to sin and grow in love. God saved us because he loved us and his love evokes our love, so Catholic life is a love affair: love responding to love. Here is the heart of Christian life, but that life is realized in many aspects we have still to examine. In further talks we will look more closely at the roles in Christian life of the Trinity, prayer, the vocation of the laity, the importance of Scripture, hope, sexuality. You might find it helpful to bring next time a copy of the Catechism of the Catholic Church, and if you want some homework you might read the Gospel of Saint Mark, hearing it as God's loving word addressed to you today. Once again feel free to let me have your comments, questions, or suggestions by email.