

# *Being Catholic Today*

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## **Lecture 2: The Trinity and the Church**

I would like to begin by asking for feedback from last month's talk, so that I have a better idea of what you are thinking or wondering. I'll do it by asking a few questions.

1. Do you agree that Catholicism is rooted in the personal encounter of an individual with Christ, that it is a response to the person of Christ, a Yes or No to him, as one understands him? Are the Protestants' right to insist on the need for a person to accept Jesus as his personal Savior? Or is Catholicism something culturally determined, something you're born into, an acceptance of a certain ethos and tradition? Is it an insurance policy for heaven? A badge of identity?

[Pause for discussion.]

How much conscious confrontation with Christ is necessary? Do you accept that faith should grow with the rest of our lives, with our understanding of the world? Catholics have been said to be more reticent with each other about their spiritual lives than Protestants, who are more willing to talk about their faith in Jesus, their spiritual life and struggles, the impact of faith on business, professional life, family, etc. Is this accurate? If it is, do we want to change that perception?

2. It was said last time that we were being hard on Protestants. Can we find a way to discuss the differences between Protestant and Catholic Christianity that increases understanding rather than drives a wedge between us? The teaching of the Second Vatican Council is enlightening in this area but little known, so I'd like to spend some time looking at it now. Your handout has Sections 14 through 17 of the Document on the Church, *Lumen gentium*. It is well worth reading

carefully, but for now I will summarize its main points.

In its discussion of the nature and membership of the Church, the document states that the Catholic Church is necessary for salvation because it is the Body of Christ, who is the only one through whom we can be saved ("the one Mediator and the unique Way of salvation"). Christ willed that his salvation be passed on to us by baptism, which makes us members of his Body, the Church. In that sense the Church, because of its indissoluble link with Christ, is necessary for salvation. Therefore one who knows the Catholic Church to be necessary for salvation and who refuses to enter her or to remain in her could not be saved. This of course does not mean that outward membership in the Church alone guarantees salvation: one must be cooperating with the freely given life of Christ to strive to bring forth the fruits of love.

But in this world there are all kinds of reasons why men and women should not understand this profound link between Christ and his Church. People can accept many of the teachings of Christ without accepting full communion with the successor of Peter. Even those who do not believe in or even know of Christ can have many elements of goodness. The Council broke new ground in saying that these people too can be saved, and it spells out clearly what is required for that salvation in a passage that I will quote:

*Those also can attain to everlasting salvation who through no fault of their own do not know the gospel of Christ or His Church, yet*

- *sincerely seek God and,*
- *moved by grace, strive by their deeds to do his will*
- *as it is known to them through conscience... [and who]*
- *strive to live a good life.*

It is important for us to understand this so that we don't look down on those outside the Catholic Church or think that they are damned.

Whatever goodness is manifested in their lives is a gift of God to be respected and affirmed.

Does that mean we should not try to convert them, not preach the Gospel of Christ? This would be against the mandate of Christ himself who sent the apostles out to make disciples of all the world, baptizing them, feeding them with the Eucharist, leading them to full unity with Christ's body. One who has received the Good News cannot help telling it, offering it to others knowing that it is the very word of life and everlasting joy. The church will continue to be missionary, offering men and women the fullness of the good gifts they already enjoy. Left to their own, men can easily be led astray from this goodness, and Christ heals us through the medicine of his Church.

A corollary of the Council's teaching on salvation outside the church is that those good persons outside the Catholic Church can indeed be saved but it is precisely through the Church that they are saved. By their efforts to follow their conscience, they are pronouncing that "Yes" to God who they do not yet realize is calling them to himself through his Church. If they are saved it is precisely through the merits of Christ who died for them and whose risen life circulates in the Catholic Church. They might be called implicit members of the Church. Does this make sense of the adage "Outside the Church no salvation"?

Other questions left over from the previous lecture are the following:

3. How can we present in an appealing way to people today the "infinite love that touches us in Christ"? How can we facilitate for others the encounter with Christ?

4. Is the Ratzinger image of the Church as Christ's continuing to eat with sinners an accurate and/or useful one?

5. Does sin enter into the heart of the meaning of Catholicism? Or is that too negative a view?

6. Is "salvation" a term that has meaning today?  
[discussion of these]

We can enter tonight's topic by citing the conclusion of the passage we looked at from *Lumen gentium* just now. In speaking of the Church's missionary work, the Council said: "The Church simultaneously prays and labors in order that the entire world may become the People of God, the Body of the Lord, and the Temple of the Holy Spirit, and that in Christ, the Head of all, there may be rendered to the Creator and Father of the Universe all honor and glory." You hear there the theme of tonight's talk. Catholicism offers to men and women a communion with the three Persons of the Almighty God. We are to become the people of God (by which is meant God the Father), the Body of Christ (the second person of the Blessed Trinity), and the Temple of the Holy Spirit, the third Person of God, of whom we have not yet spoken. The Council envisions the Church as members of Christ, indwelt by his Spirit, giving eternal praise to the Father.

Through faith and baptism, as we saw last time, we are already members of the risen Christ. Listen to Saint Paul: "God loved us with so much love that he was generous with his mercy: when we were dead through our sins, he brought us to life with Christ—it is through grace that you have been saved—and raised us up with him and gave us a place with him in heaven in Christ Jesus" (Eph 2:4-6). Notice the past tense. We're already there, "in Christ" (a favorite phrase of Saint Paul), our "lives are hidden with Christ in God" (Col 3:3). Our being in Christ will be revealed, made visible, at his second coming, when the life that is already working inside us possesses us completely. Our task in this world is to work with the new life we have been given, to use it to fight sin and do good works: "We are God's work of art, created in Christ Jesus to live the good life as from the beginning he had meant us to live it" (Eph 2:10). We do not earn salvation by our good works, but good works are

the result of our salvation by faith. It is because Christ has given us his life by faith that we have the power to perform works of love. Remember “faith works through love” (Gal 5:6).

If we are in Christ, then we are sons of God in him, “sons in the Son” (*Gaudium et spes* 22), sharing his very own sonship of the Father. The Catechism tells us this: “The personal relation of the Son to the Father is something that man cannot conceive of nor the angelic powers even dimly see: and yet, the Spirit of the Son grants a participation in that very relation to us who believe that Jesus is the Christ and that we are born of God” (CCC 2780). We can relate to the Father with the same intimacy which the eternal Son enjoys with him. In other words the inner life of the Trinity is laid open to us. Jesus told the Apostles before his Passion: “I have made known to you all that I have heard from my Father” (John 15:15). Listen again to the Catechism: “By sending his only Son and the Spirit of love in the fullness of time, God has revealed his innermost secret: God himself is an eternal exchange of love, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, and he has destined us to share in that exchange” (CCC 221). We are “adopted” as children of the Father: “Everyone moved by the Spirit of God is a son of God. The spirit you received is not the spirit of slaves bringing fear into your lives again; it is the spirit of sons, and it makes us cry out, ‘Abba, Father!’ The Spirit himself and our spirit bear united witness that we are children of God. And if we are children we are heirs as well: heirs of God and coheirs with Christ, sharing his sufferings so as to share his glory” (Rom 8:14-17). You hear in that passage the three Persons of the Trinity. The Spirit makes us sons of God in Christ, who is our elder brother, “the firstborn of many brethren” (Rom 8:29).

Tonight’s talk was entitled **The Trinity in Everyday Life**, and perhaps the closest I can come to fulfilling that billing is to give you C. S. Lewis’s practical way of depicting to ourselves our relationship with the three persons: “If you think of the Father as something ‘out there,’ in

front of you, and of the Son as someone standing at your side, helping you to pray, trying to turn you into another son, then you have to think of the third Person as something inside you or behind you” (*Mere Christianity*). In daily life we can cultivate the awareness of being always in the presence of the Father, with Christ at our side, and the Spirit of God within us as guide. We’re, as it were, “caught” among the three Persons of God.

The most difficult of the three Persons to grasp is the Holy Spirit, who did not, like the second person, become incarnate. This Holy Spirit comes to us as a power that accompanies Christ. When we look on the risen Christ with the eyes of faith and love, the Spirit is poured into us to give us a new birth from above. (John 3:3, 5-8). When Jesus hung on the Cross water and blood flowed from his pierced side. He had predicted that he would be the source of living water to give man life and quench his thirst. Saint John sees this as fulfillment of a prophecy that living waters would flow from someone’s breast, as rivers flowed from the rock struck by Moses in the desert. The rabbis had speculated that since the people continued to move in the desert that rock must have followed them if they were to continue to have water, and Saint Paul specifically tells us, “All drank from the spiritual rock that followed them as they went, and the rock was Christ” (1 Co 10:4). John then identifies this water flowing from the breast of Christ as the Holy Spirit, poured out on the cross to give men eternal life. Christ’s death, as it were, releases the Holy Spirit from his body to be poured out upon mankind. Saint John presents that giving of the Spirit in another image on Easter night. In his first appearance to the apostles the risen Jesus breathes on them and says, “Receive the Holy Spirit”, just as God breathed into the body of Adam and man became a living soul, and just as the spirit gave life to the dry bones in the vision of Ezekiel. The Spirit is breath and it is water. It is in Baptism that this Spirit comes to us. “It was for no reason except his own compassion that [God] saved us by means of the cleansing water of rebirth and by

renewing us with the Holy Spirit which he has so generously poured over us through Jesus Christ our savior.” (Titus 3:5-6)

The Spirit of God is the principle of life in the Church. At the very beginning he was hovering over the chaotic waters to bring forth creation. It was by his power that the Son of God was conceived in the womb of the Virgin Mary. On Pentecost he gave birth to the infant Church. He makes us sons of God. He empowered Jesus for his ministry; he pours into our hearts the love of God and produces in us the fruits of love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, gentleness, trustfulness, and self-control. He inspires diverse gifts in the church and creates their unity. He inspires our prayer. He is the Spirit of truth and reminds us of all that Christ has said, disclosing to us the very inner deliberations of God. He forms us in the likeness of Christ. (See John 16:13-15, 14:23-26.)

Thus the Catholic vision is that all humanity is drawn into the relationships of love that unite the three Persons of God. We are gathered before the Father’s throne, with the Son on our level, and the Spirit joining us to the Son as he joins the Father and the Son, and joining us to one another in the unity of Church. Thus Saint Cyprian could define the Church as “a people made one with the unity of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit,” a definition cited in the Second Vatican Council (LG 4) and in the Catholic Catechism (CCC 2845).

If there is any theme uniting the Catechism of 1992 it is this vision of the Church in the Trinity. Let me quote only a few passages:

The ultimate end of the divine economy is the entry of God’s creatures into the perfect unity of the blessed Trinity (260).

The ultimate purpose of mission is none other than to make men share in the communion between the Father and the Son in their Spirit of love (850).

The Spirit, who is the Spirit of communion, abides indefectibly in the Church. For this reason, the Church is the great sacrament of divine communion that gathers God’s scattered children together. Communion with the Holy Trinity and fraternal communion are inseparably the fruit of the Spirit in the liturgy (1108).

Whatever point of Christian life is discussed in the Catechism, it is brought into connection with our life in the Trinity.

The result of this entry of man into the Trinity is nothing less than the divinization of man, the raising of mankind to the divine level. As the Catechism says, “It pleased God in his goodness and wisdom, to reveal himself and to make known the mystery of his will. His will was that men should have access to the Father, through Christ, the Word made flesh, in the Holy Spirit, and thus become sharers in the divine nature” (51). Here the Catechism is relying on the Second Letter of Peter, as is clear in another place:

“The Word became flesh to make us ‘*partakers of the divine nature*’ (2 Pet 1:4). ‘For this is why the Word became man, and the Son of God became the Son of man: so that man, by entering into communion with the Word and thus receiving divine sonship, might become a son of God.’ (St. Irenaeus). ‘For the Son of God became man so that we might become God’ (St. Athanasius). ‘The only-begotten Son of God, wanting to make us sharers in his divinity, assumed our nature, so that he, made man, might make men gods’ (St. Thomas Aquinas)”. (CCC 460)

A final quotation shows how this divinization is the work of the liturgy: “The Spirit heals and transforms those who receive him by conforming them to the Son of God. The fruit of the sacramental life is that the Spirit of adoption makes the faithful partakers in the divine nature by uniting them in a living union with the only Son, the Savior.” (CCC 1129)

The last pages of Scripture give us a vivid image of this union of men and women with the three persons of God: "The angel showed me the river of life, rising from the throne of God and of the Lamb and flowing crystal-clear down the middle of the city street. On either side of the river were the trees of life, which bear twelve crops of fruit in a year, one in each month, and the leaves of which are the cure for the pagans. The ban will be lifted. The throne of God and of the Lamb will be in its place in the city; his servants will worship him, they will see him face to face, and his name will be written on their foreheads. It will never be night again and they will not need lamplight or sunlight, because the Lord God will be shining on them. They will reign for ever and ever." (Rev 22:1-5) The Spirit proceeds like a river from the Father and the Son, like water from the rock to give life to the city. One monastic writer has even given to this mystery of our incorporation into the Trinity the name Quaternity: ultimate reality consists of four components: the Father, the Son, the Holy Spirit, and the Church intimately united with them.

Thus Catholicism offers precisely what many people today are seeking in New Age religion, which promises its own kind divinization through a sense of fusion or harmony with the universe. The success of these religions shows that man experiences a hunger for the experience of the divine. Catholics need to show how our tradition provides just this communion with the divine which they look for, and that it is not a union with an impersonal cosmic energy or the "god within," not a "letting one's individuality sink into the great ocean of Being" (*Jesus Christ the Bearer of the Water of Life*, p. 64), but a union with a loving God who comes to meet us in his Son and to join us with all men as brothers and sisters, including the weakest, for whom we must care. The Vatican document on New Age puts it this way: the divinization of man taught by the Church is "an introduction into the life of the Trinity, a perfect case of distinction at the heart of unity; it is synergy rather than fusion. This all comes about as the result of a personal encounter, an offer of a new kind of life. Life in

Christ is not ...merely a new level of awareness. It involves being transformed in our soul and in our body by participation in the sacramental life of the Church" (Ibid, p. 67).

Let me close with one of many profound passages from the Saints on the sublimity of this mystery. This is from the mystic Saint Mary Magdalene de Pazzi. It deserves to be read slowly and meditatively.

*You, the Word, are most wonderful, working through the Holy Spirit to fill the soul with yourself, so that it is joined to God, grasps God, tastes God, and absorbs nothing but God.*

*This Spirit which moves in itself is the substance of the Father and of the Word, and it proceeds from the essence of the Father and the good will of the Word; it comes into the soul like a fountain, and the soul is immersed in it. Just as two rushing rivers intermingle in such a way that the smaller loses its name and is absorbed into the larger, so the divine Spirit acts upon the soul and absorbs it. It is proper that the soul, which is lesser, should lose its name and surrender to the Spirit, as it will if it turns entirely toward the Spirit and is united.*

*This Spirit, dispenser of the treasures which lay in the lap of the Father, and the guardian of the deliberations which pass between the Father and the Son, flows into the soul so sweetly and imperceptibly that few esteem its greatness.*

*You do not, O Holy Spirit, stand still in the unmoved Father or in the Word, and yet you are always in the Father and in the Word and in yourself and in all blessed spirits and creatures. You are the friend of the created because of the bloodshed by the only-begotten Word, who in the greatness of his love made himself the friend of the created. You find rest in creatures who are prepared to receive you, so that in the transmission of your gifts they take on, through purity,*

*their own particular likeness to you. You find rest in those creatures who absorb the effects of the blood of the Word and make themselves a worthy dwelling place for you.*

*Come, Holy Spirit. Consume in us whatever prevents us from being consumed in you.*

Thank you for your attention. I realize I have relied heavily tonight on quotations from Church documents, but I think they contain teachings that deserve to be known by Catholics. I hope you will agree they present an exhilarating vision.