

From the desk of Fr. Jim

On the Foundation of the Sacramental Life

Part 2: Re-Presenting Christ Crucified

Catholics are sometimes rather timid in their understanding of the importance of the sacraments. Fifty years ago, Catholics stood above the crowd in the important use of ritual, symbols and ceremonial. Even today, Catholics are more inclined than some in the use of these in our worship, but the comfort with ceremonial is growing in our culture.

In fact, the need to ritualize events in our life is common. Since the use of the sacraments also includes the use of ritual, some people have concluded that this is all they are, unique perhaps, but merely one more form of ritual, among many others. This is, of course not the case. The sacraments are instruments, in the hand of the church, that make Jesus Christ present to us in our time, in our need, to remake our lives.

In recent years there has been an explosion of interest in the study of the Sacred Scriptures in the Catholic Church. We know that these writings contain important instruction for us. What may not be realized is that our approach to the Scriptures is different than that of some non-Catholics.

The scientific study of the Scriptures has a place in the life of the Church, but that is usually not the focus of parish Bible studies. There, the need is to hear the proclamation of the Good News, to find the application of the Word of God to our daily life, but we may note that there is sometimes something missing from these efforts.

I recently heard a Catholic priest comment that he had been watching a television evangelist and wondered if he could not adopt some of his rather flamboyant style. I personally recognize the temptation to use certain devices to keep people's attention, but then, is that the purpose of our approach to the Bible? Is its use in any way similar to a textbook in a class or a lecture?

St. Paul especially used the word "proclamation" to describe his missionary efforts. He was, of course, following angels who announced Jesus' birth (**Luke 2:10**) and Jesus himself (**Luke 4:43**). But St. Paul's use of the word in one particular phrase is very important for us here:

"For as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the death of the Lord until he comes."

(1 Corinthians 11:26)

The Catholic approach to the Scriptures is that of a harmony and a friendship between the proclaimed Word of God and living out of that proclamation in our use of the Sacraments. Word and Sacrament are not just two things that we do in the Church. They are intimately united.

As well, the sacraments are not merely the making visible what we read about in the Bible. We might think that about all of the Sacraments, that they are like the re-enactment of the baptism that we read about in the Bible, or that the Mass is a reenactment of the Last Supper or the “breaking of the bread” in the Acts of the Apostles.

This would reduce the Sacraments to intellectual devices used to assist us in telling the story, much like non-Catholic worship at Christmas-time consists of a flamboyant pageant. It is like a scene in a stage play. But this is not the focus of Catholic worship, or the celebration and use of the Sacraments.

To find the depth of the meaning of the sacraments, we must first see them from God’s side. We must recognize that he is the one who acts.

“[As] God speaks, indeed, it is only to act, just as His act has meaning, is alone capable, finally of making us know Him as He wishes to be known by us.”

(Fr. Louis Bouyer, Introduction to Spirituality, p106)

In a sense, we will have a proper understanding of the Sacramental Life and of the Holy Scriptures when we see them as intimately bound together, like the cords that are used to form a rope. They are the action of God toward his creation. In each of the sacraments this action has as its object and purpose, first the making known of the God who is present among us and second the making known of the Passion and Death of Jesus.

This is effective, not merely a passing presentation of a thematic, morality play. Change takes place in our life and even in our very being.

For just as from the heavens the rain and snow come down and do not return there till they have watered the earth, making it fertile and fruitful, giving seed to him who sows and bread to him who eats, so shall my word be that goes forth from my mouth; it shall not return to me void, but shall do my will, achieving the end for which I sent it.

(Isaiah 55:10-11)

It is the Death and Resurrection of Jesus that is at the heart of the Church’s proclamation. Here we find our hope and our fulfillment. In each of the sacraments that Death is proclaimed, and with every proclamation of the Word, it is either clearly visible or standing there in its shadows. It is here that God acts, through Word and Sacrament to save us by his love.