

## Navigation Point: SACRAMENTS - 1

God calls us to reflect perfectly the image of Christ. From all eternity, he chose us in Christ to be his adopted children. He commands us to love as Christ loves, to be perfect as our Father in heaven is perfect. The Christian way of life as described in the New Testament is impossible to human nature, especially considering the “baggage” we all carry.

God empowers us to live his very own life. He gives us the power to overcome our weaknesses and sins, and to rise above our mere human nature. How is this done? First of all, he gives us the gift of faith. Faith is a spiritual power by which we believe all that God tells us about himself. With this gift of faith comes the power to hope that God will be faithful to his promises, and that he will be merciful. When we are aware of the mercy of God and his promises, we desire to respond to his great love of us. He empowers us by the spiritual power of his love so that we, sharing his life and made his adopted children, can turn from our selfishness and live as he wants us to live.

These gifts are spiritual. They can't be seen or felt. We human beings are not merely spiritual beings. We have bodies. We have a physical nature. We are part of this visible, tangible universe. Because of our bodily human nature, the Lord adapts himself to us. He did this first by becoming one of us, truly human although he is still truly divine. He became like us in all things but sin. While on earth, he looked like any other human being. As far as we know, he manifested his divine glory only once during his earthly life. This was in the Transfiguration when “his face shone like the sun, and his clothes became dazzling white.” He was engulfed in the cloud of God's glory. On that occasion he was seen by only three of the apostles.

Jesus adapts himself to our human nature when he visibly leaves this world. He gives us a visible community through which he communicates his truth and his love. And in that community, he gives us visible signs of his grace. We call those signs of grace *sacraments*. Catholics believe that these “signs” are truly effective. This means that when the particular “sign” is authentically given, then the power of God's grace and life is infallibly there. Let us hasten to say that this is not “magic.” Magic is an illusion; sacraments are a reality. Magic “works” automatically; sacraments are means by which God's grace is given. We can resist that grace. We can inhibit the presence of the Lord. We must be disposed by faith, hope, and love, in order that God's sacraments have an effect in us.

We say that sacraments are *signs*. A sign is something I can sense, and it gives me a message. Our lives are filled with signs. Some of these are “natural” signs; others are “artificial” signs. For example, if I go to the corner and see an octagonal piece of metal on a post, I stop. It is artificial, but everyone agrees that an octagon will mean “stop.” The same is true of “red” and “green” lights on a post. Stop or go. Other signs are “natural.” There seems to be some intrinsic connection between the message of the sign and our sensing of it. For example, the sense of taste usually indicates whether food is good or bad. Food itself may be a sign, a sign of life and growth. Water is a “natural” sign: Water is the basis of life. All things need water to live. Our first step in appreciating the sacraments is to realize that they are *signs*. And they are signs which Christ chose in order to be the means of his grace.

## Navigation Point: SIGNS

In our first reflection on the sacraments, we said that they were “signs.” Remember that a *sign* is something perceived by one of our senses, and which gives us a message. There are natural signs and artificial ones. A stop sign is an artificial sign, but when we *see* it, we stop. A handshake may be partly artificial and partly natural. A touch or embrace or clasp of another seems to be a natural sign. We *feel* the touch, and we get the message of friendship. When we *hear* a siren, we get the message that there is an emergency vehicle. When our food *tastes* good, usually it is all right to eat; it is not spoiled. There are even *signs* through our sense of smell: Natural gas has no odor; but at the pumping station and odor is put into the gas. If we did not have that odor, we could easily be asphyxiated if there were a gas leak. When we have a leak in our gas system, we say, “We have a gas leak.” What we really smell is the odor to give us the message that odorless gas is leaking.

Jesus used many signs. What we call his “miracles,” are usually called “signs” in the gospels. We believe that Jesus chose certain signs which would always give the message of his grace in his Church. Through these signs, he would impart his grace. If we know the message of the sign, we know what Jesus wants to do for our spiritual life. These signs are water, laying on of hands, anointing with oil, bread and wine, and words to specify the signs.

Often at baptisms, the priest asks a small child to explain the theology of baptism. There is a stunned look of bashfulness and perhaps embarrassment. The child is asked what water is used for. The first answer is usually “to drink.” Attention is then drawn to the fact that everything that is alive needs water; water is the basis of life. If a person never has water to drink, she would become dehydrated and die. So, then, water is a sign of *life*. That’s the reason Jesus chose this sign of water: to give us God’s life for the first time. Through the waters of baptism we begin to live -- We are, if you will, “born again” or “born to eternal life.” Through this water, we begin to live as children of God.

Then the priest might ask what else we use water for. We use water to wash with. We wash ourselves; we wash our clothes; we use water in nearly every one of our cleansing chores. So water is a sign of *cleansing*. Through the water of baptism, we are cleansed of all sin. An infant, of course, has no personal sin. But if a person is baptized as an adult, he is washed clean of all personal sin. Every person has been marked with original sin: which is a state, not an act. Original sin is something negative: we are born without the grace that God wants us to have. Our first parents let their trust in their Creator die and abused their freedom, disobeying God’s command. The Catechism tells us that “all subsequent sin would be disobedience toward God and *lack of trust* in his goodness.” (CCC397) When we say that, through baptism, the Lord washes away original sin, we are really saying that he does something positive. To wash away sin is to fill us with God’s life, his grace and the ability to trust him.

The final “sign” of water is not quite so obvious. In the ancient Church, baptism was usually ministered by immersion. When he went down into the waters, it looked like (“sign”) a *burial*. When he arose from the waters, it looked like a coming forth, a *resurrection*, from the grave. Now read Colossians 2:12. Through baptism, we are dead to sin and alive to God in Christ Jesus.

*Compass Check: What are some of the “signs” of Christ’s presence in your life?*

## Navigation Point: THEOLOGIES OF BAPTISM

We have seen that sacraments are signs by which the Lord does what the sign shows. In the New Testament, there are at least three “theologies” of baptism. Each of these comes from reflection on the meaning of water and on the manner in which we are baptized. John 3:5 tells us that we must be “born again of water and the spirit.” (Water and the spirit is figure of speech -- it really means “spirit-giving water” or “water of the spirit.” They are not two separate baptisms, but one baptism which confers the Lord’s life or Spirit.) So the first “theology” of baptism is that it is our birth as children of God; water is a sign of life, and through this water, the Lord gives us his *life*.

The second “theology” of baptism is forgiveness. We find this “theology” in several places, but chiefly in Acts of Apostles where we are told to “be baptized for the forgiveness of sins.” (Acts 2:38). This follows from the sign of water as cleansing: Our sins are washed away. The third “theology” of baptism, as we mentioned, follows from the manner in which baptism was ministered in early times, i.e. by immersion.

When a person was lowered into the water, it was a sign of burial. When he was raised from the water, it was a sign of resurrection, of coming forth from the grave. For this reason, St. Paul constantly reminds us that we are buried with Christ in baptism and we arise with him in newness of life. And so, we must consider ourselves as dead to sin but alive to God in Christ Jesus. As we said, through the sign of the sacraments, the Lord does what the sign signifies. So our sins are truly buried; and we arise in new life -- the life which is a foretaste of the resurrection from the dead. It is the life of grace.

“Theology” is an attempt to give an explanation to what is truly a mystery. Thus the three “theologies” of baptism are not exclusive of each other. So in baptism, we begin to share the risen life of Christ, we are cleansed of sin, we become adopted children of God, heirs of heaven, temples of the Holy Spirit. We can only be baptized once, just as we can only be born once. But we never lose the dignity of our baptism. Even if we should sin grievously, we are still God’s beloved children; we are still members of Christ’s living body, the Church.

Baptism is the first sacrament; we can share the other sacraments only if we are baptized. Because of disputes in the course of history, we need to answer a couple of questions. First of all, the manner of baptism. Immersion was the usual method of baptism in the early Church. But it was not the only method. The best proof of this is from the oldest non-New Testament Christian writing. The work is called the *Didache*. It was written around 100A.D. -- perhaps even before some of the books of the New Testament were written. In the *Didache* 7:14 there is a description of baptism. After saying that the one to be baptized and the baptizer should fast, and after describing the manner of immersion, the *Didache* says that if we do not have a quantity of water, then we pour water on the head while using the words “I baptize you in the name.....” Therefore those Christian groups which maintain that you are only baptized if you are immersed are mistaken. Pouring was used in the primitive, New Testament Church.

*Compass Check: How are you a different person because of baptism?*

## Navigation Point: INFANT BAPTISM

Some of our fellow Christians say that infants should not be baptized. They practice baptism only when a person has reached the use of reason and determines that he/she wants to take Jesus as a personal Savior. They maintain that an infant is incapable of making an act of faith, and that faith is necessary for baptism.

The New Testament says nothing explicit in favor of infant baptism; by the same token it does not give a prohibition against infant baptism. We must determine the legitimacy of the practice from the customs of the primitive Church. The first Christians were adults. When the apostles went forth to preach, adults responded and were baptized. Children are never mentioned as being baptized, except perhaps in one instance.

Acts 16 describes the miraculous deliverance of Paul and Silas from prison. The jailer is about to commit suicide, thinking that the prisoners have escaped. Paul tells him that they are all there. The jailer took Paul and Silas to his home and bathed their wounds. Paul preached the Good News to his household. And Acts 16:33 says that the jailer “and his entire family” were baptized. We might presume that there were children in the family; there usually were. (Further, homes of people of modest means did not have large pools. If they were baptized in the home, it could scarcely have been done by immersion.)

There is one setting in the gospels which, according to the Protestant theologian Oscar Cullmann, indicates infant baptism. It does so even though baptism is not really mentioned. The story is that of the little children coming to Jesus. The disciples try to keep them away. But Jesus says, “Let the little children come to me and do not hinder them. For of such is the kingdom of heaven.” The word “hinder” in the original Greek is “koluein”. In the New Testament, this verb is used almost exclusively in a baptismal context. For example, Acts 8:36: The story is of the eunuch of Queen Candace, riding in his chariot and reading Isaiah. Philip comes along and explains the passage to him. They come to an oasis, and the eunuch says, “Here is water, what *hinders* (koluein) (koh-LOO-ayn) my being baptized?” Acts 10:47 uses the same verb. Cornelius and his household have heard the Good News from Peter. They receive the Spirit. Peter says, “What *hinders* (koluein) that these be baptized, since they have received the Spirit just as we did?” (Our English translations may use a different expression, but it is the same verb in the original Greek.)

Oscar Cullmann, from these passages and others constructs a primitive Christian baptismal ritual in which the last question asked before baptism was “What *hinders* (koluein) that this one be baptized?” In the context of the little children, Jesus is apparently teaching infant baptism through the use of this verb. Elsewhere, Jesus says that unless a person receives the kingdom as a child, he will not enter it. The way to receive the kingdom of God is through baptism. Putting it all together, we have a solid exegetical argument in favor of infant baptism. While it is true that the early Church usually baptized adults, and then only after a lengthy catechumenate, it is equally true that the Church did not want any child to die without baptism. Our present practice is to baptize infants as soon as possible after birth. Although they cannot have conscious faith, they are capable of receiving the grace of God and a share in the life of grace. They are capable of becoming children of God.

*Compass Check: Explain why you would or would not choose to have a child baptized.*

## **Navigation Point: YOUR DIGNITY**

As a Christian, you are called to reflect perfectly the person of Jesus Christ. From all eternity, God chose you in him, to be his adopted son or daughter. Reflect on Colossians 1:15-20 and on Ephesians 1:3-14. Because of our common “baggage” (heredity, environment, effects of original sin, culture, etc.) we may feel incapable of living up to the call to reflect Christ. We might be content with mere “natural” goodness. We might think that the Christian life (with the commands to love as Christ loves and to be perfect as our heavenly Father is perfect) is impossible for us.

That would be true if it were not for the power of God’s grace. And God’s power comes to us for the first time in baptism. We are washed clean. We are adopted as God’s children. We are born into the family of God, the Church. We are made temples of the Spirit of God. We are enabled to live as Christ wants us to live.

In short, the effects of original sin are no excuse for mediocrity. Christ Jesus himself assures us that we can live this Christian life. It remains for us to dedicate ourselves to this purpose. Because of our baptism, all “accidental” differences between human beings disappears. There is no slave nor free, no male nor female, no Black nor white nor any other color. All differences in culture and education, ethnic and racial origin, and any other difference, disappear. All are made one in Christ. Because of this, we must have a universal vision. We must seek to share each others’ burden as well as joys. When one member of Christ suffers anything, all other members should be concerned.

Our common baptism is the basis of family and fellowship. It is the root of real peace. If all the baptized would remember their dignity as children of God, then there could scarcely be dissension or rancor. If we truly strived to live according to the Good News of Jesus, how different our lives would be, and how different would be the history of the world.

The Holy Spirit radically changes our souls through baptism. As we have said, baptism cannot be repeated. It forever marks us as a member of Christ, a child of God. Theologians customarily describe this permanence of the sacrament as an “indelible mark” or “seal” on the soul. Make a resolution to remember your baptism and the effects of baptism each day, and resolve that, because of your adoption as a child of God, you will make use of the power of the Spirit and live Christ’s life.

Several aspects of baptism should be noted. The usual minister of baptism is a priest who is one’s pastor. Deacons can also baptize with the full ceremonies of the Church. In case of necessity, anyone can baptize. For usual baptism, godparents or sponsors are required. These are not merely functionaries. They have obligations to provide good example and to assist in the spiritual formation of their godchild. A person may have only one male and one female godparent. In these ecumenical days, a good and practicing Christian who is not a Catholic may be a “Christian witness” at the baptism. By submitting their child for baptism, parents promise that they will rear the child as a good Catholic. If the lives of parents do not reflect this firm resolve, the pastor may delay the baptism until they show some evidence of wanting to lead Christian lives themselves.

*Compass Check: Why is it important for parents to understand their faith and agree to foster the Faith in their child?*

## **Navigation Point: RITE FOR CHRISTIAN INITIATION OF ADULTS**

From about the third to the seventh centuries, there was a very determined procedure for becoming a Catholic. (We should always remember that being “Catholic” was synonymous with being “Christian” for about the first thousand years of Christianity.) Usually adults only were baptized. In case of necessity, such as danger of death, infants were baptized, but the usual procedure was adults. Each person who thought he or she would become Catholic entered the “catechumenate.” The catechumenate was not merely book learning or a set of instructions on beliefs and morals. It was a complete formation period. The catechumens or learners went to school each day. When they came to Church on Sundays and holy days, they were permitted to stay only for the Liturgy of the Word. After the homily, they were dismissed; they were not permitted to be present for the Liturgy of the Eucharist.

The final preparation before baptism was the Lenten season. In fact, this was the origin of Lent: the preparation for baptism. Baptism was ministered only on Holy Saturday (the night before Easter Sunday), in the Cathedral. “Cathedral” means “chair.” The Cathedral was the Church where the bishop had his chair, the place from which he presided over the spiritual life of Catholics in his diocese. At Rome, the Cathedral is called “St. John Lateran,” but that is a misnomer. Its real name is “Archbasilica of the Most Holy Savior.” It is fitting that the main Church in Christendom be dedicated to Christ himself. The Lateran basilica property was given to Pope Sylvester by the Emperor Constantine around 314 A.D. (Constantine had confiscated the property from the Laterani family.) For a thousand years, the popes lived on this property. The baptistry of the Lateran basilica is a large octagonal shaped building adjacent to the basilica. On Holy Saturday night, in the Easter Vigil, the catechumens, their sponsors, the pope and clergy, would go in procession from the Church to the baptistry where baptisms were ministered. The baptistry building was dedicated to John the Baptist. Thus the misnomer came into being: The Lateran Basilica, being the baptismal Church for all in Rome came to be called St. John, thus “St. John Lateran!”

After the Second Vatican Council (1962-1965), the Church restored the catechumenate and established the procedure leading to baptism: The Rite for Christian Initiation of Adults. It is a process which takes some months. First there is the time of inquiry during which people learn about Church teaching and try to discern whether they want to be Catholics. There is the period of enlightenment during which they grow in appreciation of their faith. The third stage is during Lent; the catechumens are designated as “the Elect.” During Lent they make their final preparations by prayer and penance which leads to their baptism in the Easter Vigil. After Easter, there is the time of “mystagogy.” This is a deepening awareness of the meaning of the sacraments and Mass. Incidentally, there are writings from ancient times, sermons which were given during Easter time to the “neophytes” or newly baptized. Perhaps the most famous of these is the ‘Mystagogical Catechesis” which were given by St. Cyril of Jerusalem in the year 350 A.D.

The RCIA is not the only way of becoming a Catholic. It is not for those who were baptized in another Christian group and who wish to come to full Communion with the Catholic Church. Some may find it impossible to attend the RCIA sessions each week for several months. Some may know everything there is to know about the Catholic faith, and really don’t need a lot of instructions, but the RCIA is the usual manner by which adults become Catholics.

*Compass Check: Why is a time of preparation important before “joining the Church”?*

## Navigation Point: CONFIRMATION

The “proof text” for the Sacrament of Confirmation is found in Acts 8:14-17. The passage describes the conversion of the Samaritans. They had been baptized. But from Jerusalem, the apostles sent Peter and John to them. These “laid hands on them and they received the Holy Spirit.” The “laying on of hands” is found frequently in the Bible. In the Hebrew Scriptures (Old Testament), Moses laid hands on Joshua (Deuteronomy 34:9) who thereby became the leader of the Israelites. In the New Testament, laying on of hands may be used to cure a person (Acts 28:8). It is also used to confer a special ministry or priesthood (Acts 13:3, II Timothy 1:6 and I Timothy 4:14). And it is used several places for the conferring of the Holy Spirit (Acts 8:14-17 and Acts 19:6 among them.)

From earliest times, the Church has seen a “sign” separate from baptism to confer the Holy Spirit in a special way. The laying on of hands (or imposition of hands) is, as a matter of fact, used in each of the sacraments of the Church. It is a special sign to complete baptism and to confer the Holy Spirit. From very early times, the anointing with Chrism was part of the “sign” of the sacrament. Tertullian (Tuhr-TULL-ee-uhn) (around 200 A.D.) speaks of the anointing of those who come forth from the baptismal font. From earliest times, also, this oil was consecrated by a bishop; the sacrament itself was ministered by a bishop or by a priest using the oil consecrated by a bishop. Thus the “sign” of this sacrament is the laying on of hands of the bishop (or delegated priest) together with the anointing with Chrism and the words to designate the conferral of the Holy Spirit. In the Eastern Church, Confirmation is conferred by the priest immediately after baptism. In the Western Church, Confirmation is usually ministered to children who have reached the use of reason. In many places Confirmation is conferred in the teenage years after a lengthy process of preparation.

Through this sacrament, the Lord completes our baptism by a special conferral of the Holy Spirit. What does this mean? We actually receive the Spirit in every sacrament. But this sacrament is pointed toward maturity in Christ. Through this sacrament, the Lord designates us as his active witnesses, called to profess our faith boldly and to share our faith with others. Confirmation denotes strength. Through this sacrament, we receive the strength to stand for what is right and true.

For those who come to the faith later in life, Confirmation is ministered by the priest who receives them into the Church. Ordinarily, this would be in the Easter Vigil.

In the New Testament, the Holy Spirit usually denotes an active and intense Spirit. The Spirit is not simply the bearer of the gifts of wisdom, understanding, counsel, knowledge, fear of the Lord, fortitude. He is the active Spirit, prompting us to be aware always of the presence of God, of our goal in life, and of standing firm for the faith.

The oil used in Confirmation is called Chrism. It is olive oil mixed with a perfume scent (balsam or balm) and consecrated by the Bishop during Holy Week. The Chrism is then sent to every parish and institution in the diocese.

At the time of Confirmation, few people need to stand boldly for the faith. Confirmation is a lasting sacrament. When we need the power to profess the faith boldly, the gift of the Spirit is there to strengthen us.

*Compass Check: The Sacrament of Confirmation gives us strength for daily life. What are some daily challenges to your faith? How do you respond to these challenges?*

## Navigation Point: CONFESSION -- I

“I go directly to God for forgiveness of my sins; I don’t need any priest go-between.” “Only God can forgive sins; no human can do it.” So go the statements of many of our friends of other Christian denominations. Catholics, however, believe that God wants us to approach a human priest for the forgiveness of our serious sins committed after baptism. The human priest is the instrument of God’s forgiveness.

Jesus gave the power to forgive sins to his apostles. In John 20:22-23, we read, “He breathed on them and said, “Receive the Holy Spirit. Whose sins you shall forgive, they are forgiven; whose sins you shall retain, they are retained.”” He was speaking only to his apostles, and not to every member of the Church. He clearly gave them a spiritual authority and power. It was a power of judging whether to forgive or not to forgive, and then to extend the forgiveness of God to those who were sorry for sin. It was not merely a power of declaring that sins were already forgiven. Some of our friends who are so strong on the Bible squirm mightily when they read this passage in John. They go to great lengths to get around the obvious meaning of the passage. They will say, as the Jews said to Jesus, “Who can forgive sins but God alone?” Jesus forgave sins, but he was truly God become man. In the passage where he forgives a paralyzed man (much to the scandal of the Jews), Matthew 9:8 adds, “They glorified God who had given such power to men.” Note it is “men” not “man.” Thus the power of Jesus to forgive sins was not only given to the apostles; they used it—men had the power to forgive sins in God’s name.

If we have only a “me and God” religion, it is easy to deceive ourselves. We can rationalize a hurtful conscience; we can claim that something is not a sin; we can excuse ourselves and imagine that therefore God excuses us. A priest, acting in the name of Jesus, can call us to look objectively at our sins; he can challenge us not to rationalize; he can urge us to the true repentance which is necessary for the forgiveness of any sin. This may be embarrassing. But it is also very consoling: when the priest forgives us in the name of Jesus Christ, we are assured that our sins are forgiven. There is no doubt. We are released from our shackles. No one enjoys going to Confession. Like broccoli, you might not like it, but it is good for you! Frequent Confession is one of the most important ways of growing in our spiritual life. And remember, the priest is there to help you, not to keep you away from God. His lips are absolutely sealed. Even if it were to mean his life, the priest cannot reveal anything that takes place in the Confessional. Catholics need to defend this great sacrament of God’s mercy; so learn the Scripture passages. But even more than defend, we need to use this sacrament! Get to Confession every month, at least, and if you have serious sins, get to Confession immediately.

*Compass Check: Name a time when you were given a second chance. Think of an occasion when you had a change of heart and were able to look at a person differently?*

## Navigation Point: CONFESSION – II: “I don’t know how.”

Apart from the natural hesitance in confessing one’s sins to a human being, perhaps one reason that many Catholics don’t go to Confession is lack of knowledge. It’s not just a failure to know what to say, i.e. the “rite.” Actually, that part is fairly simple. Although there is a prescribed ritual, if a person doesn’t know it, all he/she needs to do is to tell the priest, “Father, I don’t really know how to go to Confession.” The priest will take it from there.

Before this, the problem is really knowing how to examine our conscience. That means trying to know how we stand before God. Then we need to know what we should confess, and what we don’t need to confess. The Lord wants us to confess all our *mortal* sins which we have committed since our last good Confession. But what’s a *mortal* sin? It is a sin so serious that the all-loving God would permit us to be punished by hell. That’s got to be really big. A *mortal* sin is a sin which destroys the life of grace in us. Confession, then, is like a second baptism: when we confess our mortal sins and are truly sorry for them, they are completely taken away just as if we were baptized again!

How do we know what a *mortal* sin is? Three conditions must be present in order that a sin be *mortal*: It must be a *serious* matter. At the time we do it, we must *know* that it is serious. And we must *fully want* to do it anyhow. So we say “*Serious matter, sufficient reflection, and full consent of the will.*”

*Serious* matters are those things which do serious harm to God, to neighbor, to society, or to self. Obviously, murder would be serious. So also would be serious bodily harm. Serious harm may be by stealing or destruction of property or by refusing to pay our just debts. We can seriously harm our neighbor by destroying his reputation. We can seriously harm ourselves by drunkenness or by getting stoned or by using addictive substances. We seriously harm our relationship with God by refusing to worship him as he desires (i.e. deliberate failure to worship at Sunday Mass). Sexual matters are considered serious. Thus the deliberate seeking of sexual pleasure with another person or by myself is a serious matter. It would be a serious matter to take an oath to tell the truth and then to lie (i.e. perjury).

But some sins are not serious, even though they are evil and should be avoided. Petty gossip is awful, but it is usually venial. Most people don’t realize what they are saying when they use God’s name in vain, so it is not serious, even though it is wrong. To disobey parents can be serious or maybe slight. Quite frequently, what civil law outlaws as felonies would be considered serious matters.

Now, if I have committed *mortal* sins, these alone should be what I confess, for we are required to confess *mortal* sins. And we must try to confess *mortal* sins in their specific kind, their circumstances, and their number to the best of our ability. We also need to remember that it is not enough to *confess* our sins. For God’s forgiveness, we must be *sorry*. That means we hate our mortal sins, we want to repair any damage done by them, and we want never again to commit these sins. It’s not easy to confess that we have mortal sins. Frequent Confession will make it easier; it will also give us God’s grace and help to avoid those sins for the future.

*Compass Check: How would you encourage or help a friend who has not been to Confession years and has the desire but is afraid?*

*Serious sin cuts us off from the life of Christ. Have there been times when you felt cut off from the love of God? How did you handle it? How did you “reconcile”?*

## Navigation Point: VENIAL SINS AND FAULTS

Some of our Protestant friends don't like our distinction into "mortal" and "venial" sins. They say that all sin deserves eternal punishment, and that the real Christian never sins. Mind you, not all say that. Many think that "once saved, always saved." That would be nice if it were true. The Scriptures say that the "just man sins seven times a day." "Just" means "righteous" or "upright." Further, we need to read the First Epistle of John. In I John 5:16-17, he speaks of Christians sinning. He also speaks of "deadly" sins and "non-deadly" sins which is exactly what we mean by mortal and venial.

Back to our discussion of "Confession." If we have *mortal* sins, we must confess these. We need not confess *venial* sins, since these are forgiven by an act of sorrow (contrition) or by any righteous action. If we have no mortal sins and we certainly hope that is true, we should confess one or two of our chief *venial* faults. Very likely we have a lot of faults. If we tried to confess everything, we'd be in the confessional a very long time. We should hone in on one our two faults for several reasons: The forgiveness of sins means conversion of heart. It means that we are not going to commit the sin again. To do that, we need to focus our attention and make practical resolutions about not sinning again. If we simply say that we are not going to sin again in general, we fail in one of the important steps in forgiveness.

Confession is not automatic. We must make practical, concrete, specific resolutions or we shall probably do the same thing over again. Let us say that, among our venial sins, we are gossips or tale-bearers. Make a specific resolution: Who, what, when, where, why. Is there a particular person or group that we gossip about? Are there particular occasions which lead to the gossip? Are there particular times? In addition to making the resolution specific, try to acquire the opposite virtue: Never say anything about a person unless you can say something good. This is perhaps a feeble example, but you get the point.

Since we can't make lots of resolutions and keep them, confess only a few venial faults and make a few, specific, resolutions on how you will change. The saints tell us that if we only overcome one fault a year, we will soon be saints.

One caution in examining our consciences: We live in a world that where Christian ideas of morality have largely eroded. Thus in our sex-crazed society, a person is not considered sinful or immoral but merely "sexually active." The entire Catholic attitude toward sex is rejected by this world. In forming our conscience, we always need to ask ourselves if this is the way of the Lord. "What would Jesus do" is not only a neat slogan, but a good axiom. We really know what Jesus wants by his teaching in his Church. After all, he promised to be with his Church until the end of time so that the Church would always teach his truth. See John 16:12-13.

Frequent Confession is a good means of checking up on ourselves. If we develop a habit of frequent Confession, we'll be surprised at how much progress we make in our relationship with God.

*Compass Check: How does the confession of faults help us live more deeply in the life of Christ? When have you experienced this?*

## Navigation Point: QUALITIES OF SORROW

For the forgiveness of sins, either in the Confessional or outside it, it is necessary that we have *contrition*. We are not forgiven simply because we “tell” our sins. We must have *contrition*.

*Contrition* means sorrow of soul and intention of correcting our lives. Sorrow means that we don’t like what we’ve done, we are going to try to make up for the past, and we are not going to do it in the future.

There are different types of sorrow. Theologians give the qualities of sorrow or contrition which are necessary for the forgiveness of sins. They say it must be *true*, *universal*, *sovereign*, and *supernatural*. *True* means genuine. Some people can weep large crocodile tears and still not be sorry. Priests have the experience of drunks who come and want to go to Confession; they cry over what they have done; but in a state of inebriation, they often have no intention of giving up the bottle. Their sorrow is not true.

*Universal* means that my sorrow must cover all my sins. I can’t be sorry for four out of five and expect to be 80% or 100% forgiven. It is all or nothing. So here is a person who got stoned, who blasphemed the pope, who stole a large amount, and who committed fornication. He is sorry for getting stoned; it won’t happen again. He is sorry for blaspheming. He is sorry for stealing and will make restitution, but he just can’t give up the fornication. He cannot be forgiven. His sorrow is not universal. He can’t be a friend of God in several things and an enemy of God in one.

*Sovereign* means the most. In the old days we used to say that we’d rather die than commit the sin again. That’s pretty extreme. But it expresses what our attitude should be: Our eternal salvation is the most important aspect of our life. The worst calamity of life is to commit serious sin. Therefore we should want to make any sacrifice and endure any difficulty in order to avoid mortal in.

*Supernatural* means that the motive of our sorrow is God. We hate what we have done because it offends the all-good God. We may hate our sin because of God’s just punishments: that is supernatural, although it’s not the highest type of sorrow. We may hate our serious sins because we dread losing heaven. That, too, is supernatural, but still not the highest. What we should strive for is the hatred of sin because we love God and we realize we have offended him. Every person in the penitentiary is sorry for his sins: He is sorry because he got caught. She is sorry because she embarrassed her family. He is sorry because he is sentenced to prison. All those motives of sorrow are *natural*. They are not sufficient for God’s forgiveness. We must have supernatural sorrow in order that the Lord forgive us.

We need to learn more about the wonderful, merciful sacrament of Confession (Reconciliation, Penance.) We also need to know the effects of the sacrament: the forgiveness of all our sins. Not only that, but through this sacrament the Lord strengthens our will. He gives us the grace to avoid the sins we confess. He draws us closer to himself. Frequent Confession is one of the best ways to grow in our knowledge and love of God.

*Compass Check: Do you believe that we really possess an innate desire to please God? How is that manifested in your life?*

*What is the difference between sorrow for sins based upon the **Love of God** vs the **fear of God**? How would you bridge the difference from fear to love?*

## Navigation Point: LIKE BROCCOLI

Most Catholics will vigorously defend the existence of the Sacrament of Confession (Penance, Reconciliation). They will argue from the Bible that the priest has the power to forgive in Christ's name (John 20:22-23). Most Catholics also don't like to go to Confession, and they simply don't go very often. Sad, but true.

Some reasons are pretty obvious: No one likes to tell his sins to another person. We might like to brag about our faults, but we don't want to confess them with humility and sorrow. Maybe Confession is a bit like broccoli: You might not like it, but it's good for you. So eat it. Humility is a virtue. In fact, it's the basis of all virtues, so humble yourself and get to Confession frequently.

Another reason we don't like to go to Confession is that we think we are telling the priest something he hasn't heard before. Wrong! He's probably heard nearly everything many times before. You don't need to go into a big explanation. Just confess briefly and to the point.

Still another reason we don't like to go to Confession is human respect. If we know the priest, we wonder what he will think of us after Confession. Will he act differently toward us? Will he bring up the matter of our Confession? Here we can be very secure: The priest is bound by what is called the "seal of Confession" even if it should cost his life. He may never tell what a person has said after Confession. If he should ever do so, by that very fact he is excommunicated and only the pope can lift that excommunication. So he's not about to reveal your sins.

The seal of Confession is so strict that he can't even discuss what went on in the Confession, even if it doesn't concern sin. He can never make use of any information which comes to him through the Sacrament. Years ago, there was a movie called "I Confess." It was about a murder in a particular parish. The janitor of the parish had done it, but he had worn a young priest's cassock when doing the murder. The blood-stained cassock led to the young priest. But the janitor had gone to Confession to the priest, so the priest could not clear his name. He could not say that another person had done it. He couldn't say anything. Well, he was convicted and sentenced to death. The movie ended tragically as the janitor admitted his guilt but died in the end.

But suppose he hadn't admitted it. The priest simply could not say anything or do anything which would lead to suspicion of others. Maybe the tale is far-fetched, but the point is: The seal of Confession is absolute. You can have confidence in what you tell the priest.

Perhaps another reason a lot of Catholics don't go to Confession is that they really don't have much to say except the same-old-same-old venial faults. If this is the case, we need to make our Confession more specific and make practical resolutions and do everything in our power to try to overcome just one of our faults. Remember what the saints say: If you overcome just one fault a year you'll soon be a saint.

*Compass Check: Why do some Catholics regularly celebrate the Sacrament of Penance and others only once or twice a year? Which part of the Sacrament do you find most difficult? How has the Sacrament helped you to live more faithfully as a Christian?*

## Navigation Point: THE EUCHARIST IN THE BIBLE

Almost all Christian Churches celebrate Communion or the Lord's Supper. Again, most of them rarely have this Communion service. So-called "liturgical Churches" such as the Lutherans and Episcopalians usually have the Eucharist or Communion service every Sunday. Eastern Orthodox Christians, like Catholics, have as their central act of worship the Eucharist (which always means Communion). This service is called the Eucharist or the Mass or, among Eastern Orthodox, the Divine Liturgy.

Catholics and Eastern Orthodox believe that this service is sacrament and sacrifice. As a sacrifice, the Eucharist is a bringing-to-the-present the entire saving life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Under the signs of bread and wine, Jesus Christ is truly present and truly renews his offering of himself to our heavenly Father. Thus our service of worship is more than our mere subjective human efforts at prayer. Our worship is really the worship which Christ offers to the Father in our behalf. Our union with Christ in this worship is by our prayer which is consummated in the sign of Communion, the sacrament by which we receive the true Body and Blood of Christ under appearances of bread and wine.

For fifteen hundred years, no one questioned the reality of Christ's presence at Mass (Divine Liturgy). All Christendom believed that the Lord Jesus Christ became truly present in the Eucharist. The bread became his Body; the wine became his Blood. Lutherans and some Episcopalians and a few others still believe in some form of the "Real Presence," but most believe that the elements of bread and wine are still bread and wine, and that Christ is present in the service only spiritually.

With this brief but somewhat heady explanation, let us look at what the New Testament has to say about what we call the Eucharist. Four places in the New Testament give an account of the "Last Supper" and describe it as a Passover Meal:

*I Corinthians 11:23-27:* "For I received from the Lord what I also handed on to you, that the Lord Jesus, on the night he was handed over, took bread, and after he had given thanks, broke it and said, 'This is my body that is for you. Do this in remembrance of me.' In the same way also the cup, after supper, saying, 'This cup is the new covenant in my blood. Do this, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of me. For as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the death of the Lord until he comes. Therefore whoever eats the bread or drinks the cup of the Lord unworthily will have to answer for the body and blood of the Lord.'"

*Mark 14:22-24:* "While they were eating, he took bread, said the blessing, broke it, and gave it to them and said, 'Take it; this is my body.' Then he took a cup, gave thanks, and gave it to them, and they all drank from it. He said to them, 'This is my blood of the covenant which will be shed for many.'"

*Matthew 26:26-29:* "While they were eating, Jesus took bread, said the blessing, broke it, and giving it to his disciples said, 'Take and eat; this is my body.' Then he took a cup, gave thanks, and gave it to them, saying, 'Drink from it all of you, for this is my blood of the covenant, which will be shed on behalf of many for the forgiveness of sins. I tell you, from now on I shall not drink this fruit of the vine until the day when I drink it with you new in the kingdom of my Father.'"

*Luke 22:14-20*: “When the hour came, he took his place at table with the apostles. He said to them, ‘I have eagerly desired to eat this Passover with you before I suffer, for I tell you, I shall not eat it again until there is fulfillment in the kingdom of God.’ Then he took a cup, gave thanks, and said, ‘Take this and share it among yourselves, for I tell you that from this time on I shall not drink of the fruit of the vine until the kingdom of God comes.’ Then he took the bread, said the blessing, broke it and gave it to them, saying, ‘This is my body which will be given for you; do this in memory of me.’ And likewise the cup, after they had eaten, saying, This cup is the new covenant in my blood which will be shed for you.”

The liturgy of the Church did not come from the New Testament; rather the New Testament came from the liturgy of the Church. Christians had been celebrating the Eucharist for many years before the first account of the Eucharist was written. (I Corinthians ‘c. 58 A.D.’; Mark ‘c. 70 A.D.’) Whether the first Eucharist was a Passover meal or not, this was the interpretation given to it from the days of the primitive Church. John’s gospel describes the Last Supper as occurring *before* the Passover, and does not contain any Institution narrative, (Cf. John 13:1) We can say with certainty that the Eucharist was seen as the Christian Passover from the earliest times.

What does this mean? The Passover was the celebration of the liberation of Jews from slavery in Egypt. The Passover sacrifice-meal protected them from death of the first-born. The blood of the Passover lamb was their salvation. Jesus is seen as our Passover Lamb. Through his blood, we are saved from eternal death and from slavery to sin.

The primitive Church saw in the crucifixion of Jesus the new Passover. By his sacrificial blood we are delivered from slavery to sin and from eternal death. The Eucharist was seen as the renewing of this Passover. It was not merely “play acting,” but reality: Once again, Jesus, the Passover Lamb (who died, rose, and could die no more) became present in order to extend to us his salvation.

We might note the similarities and differences between the accounts of institution above. Luke and I Corinthians use the word *remembrance* which is not found in Matthew and Mark. *Remembrance* (*memory, commemoration, memorial*) translates the Greek word **anamnesis** (an-AM-nee-sis) which in turn translates the Hebrew **ziccaron** (dzee-kay-ROHN). This word is used in the Hebrew Scriptures for a memorial feast or *remembrance sacrifice*. The Passover was such a *remembrance sacrifice* par excellence. The concept is anthropomorphic: The “remembering” is not on our part (at least not primarily) but on God’s part! It is as if God is asleep or otherwise occupied, but when the remembrance sacrifice is offered, he awakes or devotes his attention to the sacrifice, and *he remembers to show his people mercy!* When we celebrate the Eucharist, therefore, God remembers us (in and through his Son) and shows us his mercy and forgiveness. (Cf. Numbers 10:10) In the Passover narrative in Exodus 14, the Passover is described as a perpetual memorial feast. Our Eucharist replaces that memorial with the memorial sacrifice of Jesus Christ.

The words “Do this in remembrance of me” mean that God remembers to show us his love and his mercy in each and every celebration of the Eucharist.

*Compass Check: How is the Eucharist a sacrifice? We believe that the bread and wine are changed into the Body and Blood of the Lord: how would you explain this to a small child? A non-Catholic? A non-Christian?*

## Navigation Point: THE EUCHARIST: OUR SHARE IN THE COVENANT

The word “covenant” is not an everyday word, but it is very common in the language of the bible. The Hebrews borrowed the “covenant” concept from their pagan neighbors, the Hittites. Among the Hittites, a *covenant* was an agreement between two unequal parties, freely entered into, perpetually binding, and sealed in blood. The most primitive form of *covenant* was the cutting of animals in two, laying the halves on the ground, and then both parties to the agreement walking between the halves. This was a sign “If I don’t keep my word, may it be done to me as it has been done to these animals.” (I.e. split in two!) This most primitive form of covenant is found in Genesis 15:5-17. God passes through the halves of the animals in the form of a fireball.

By the time of the Exodus, the blood of the covenant had become sacrificial blood. At Mt. Sinai, God enters into an agreement with his people. God promises to make Israel a “kingdom of priests, a holy nation.” (Exodus 19:6). The terms of the covenant are read to the people; these include the Ten Commandments. When the terms of the agreement have been read, the Hebrews affirm, “All that the Lord has said, we will heed and do.” (Exodus 24:3). Moses then has Levites sacrifice bulls as peace offerings. He splashes half the blood on the altar (representing God walking through:) and half on the people. As he does so, he says, “This is the blood of the covenant which the Lord has made with you in accordance with all these words of his.” This is the ratification of the agreement.

These words of Moses are almost identical with the words of Jesus found in Matthew and Mark, and somewhat differently in Luke and I Corinthians. The intention is obvious, however: The Eucharist is our share in the *covenant* which Jesus makes with the Father. We are called to heed and do all that is the Father’s will. In turn, the Father blesses us as he blessed his Son.

Maybe a subtle distinction should be made here: The covenant is not between ourselves and God. Rather, it is between Jesus and God the Father. Jesus came to do the will of the Father. That is his part of the bargain or agreement. The Father promised that Jesus would be his beloved Son. The ratification of the covenant is in the blood of Jesus, not the blood of goats or heifers. Read Hebrews, chapters 8 and 9 which compare the covenant of Jesus with the old covenant.

We enter into this covenant insofar as we are united with Jesus Christ in the Eucharist. When the priest at Mass says, “This is my Body...This is the covenant in my blood” we should make the intention that we want to enter the covenant by offering our very own body and blood in union with Christ. We want to live now, not we, but as Christ. This means that we want to live as the Lord would have us live. By this attitude and intention, which is sealed in our union with Christ sacramentally in Communion, we enter the mystical covenant which Christ has made with his Father.

As God promised to make Israel of old kingdom of priests and a holy nation, so in this covenant with Christ, he promises to bless us, to forgive us, to empower us to live his life, and to be raised up with Christ on the last day.

*Compass Check: As Christian Catholics, we are “one in the body of Christ”. What does this mean to you?*

## Navigation Point: THE EUCHARIST: OUR IDENTITY WITH CHRIST

When Paul wrote his first letter to the Corinthians, there was a big problem between the Jewish Christians and the Gentile Christians over meat which had been sacrificed to pagan deities. The Jewish Christians were scandalized that Gentile Christians would eat such meat. Gentile Christians argued that pagan gods were no-gods. Therefore meat was meat and it was all right to eat. Jewish Christians thought that if you ate meat which had been sacrificed to a pagan deity, even if the deity did not exist, you were equivalently saying that you wanted to have an *identity with*, a union with, that deity. Paul solves the problem by agreeing with both! He says that it is true that pagan gods are no-gods, but if anything causes scandal for those with delicate consciences, we should forebear. In solving this problem, he brings in the Eucharist. In I Corinthians 10:16-17 and 21, he says: “The cup of blessing that we bless, is it not a participation in the blood of Christ? The bread that we break, is it not a participation in the body of Christ? Because the loaf of bread is one, we, though many, are one body, for we all partake of the one loaf.”

The word translated as “participation” is elsewhere rendered as “communion” or “sharing.” The Greek word is actually **koinonia** (koin-o-NEE-uh) which means “*identity with*.” In other words, we have an *identity with* Christ when we share the Eucharist. We are made one with him. In Paul’s mind, the Eucharist “makes” the Church. “We, though many, are one body...” He, of course, has in mind the actual celebration of the Eucharist: The bread which was consecrated was one loaf, and this one loaf was then broken and distributed to all the faithful. So we all shared in the one loaf which is truly Christ. Therefore we become one with him. And if we are all one with him, then we must be one with each other.

In the Eucharistic Prayer, the Church asks the Father to send the Holy Spirit to change the gifts of bread and wine to become the Body and Blood of Christ. This prayer is called the “epiclesis” which is Greek: to call upon. It is by the indwelling of the Holy Spirit in us that we carry the Lord in our hearts to the world. As the Holy Spirit changes the Gifts to be the Body and Blood of the Lord, so the Spirit changes us and brings us into communion with God and each other.

The life of a Christian takes its meaning from the Eucharist. If we are united with all those who receive of the same Body and Blood of Christ, we must love them as the Lord loves us. We must bear their burdens and carry their sorrows. We must forgive as the Lord forgives us. In other words, we must try to see every person in the image of Jesus Christ.

**Corollary: The Church is the Body of Christ** Paul gets his theology of the Church as the Body of Christ from this reflection on the Eucharist. His description of the institution of the Eucharist (chapter 11) follows this discussion of koinonia in chapter 10. Chapter 12 speaks of the unity of the Church which flows from the Eucharist. I Corinthians 12:12-27 gives the beautiful metaphor of the Church as Christ’s Body. This is a consequence of the sharing in the Eucharist. He will repeat this description of the Church as the Body of Christ in Ephesians 4.

Somehow, when we come to Mass, we need to reflect on the profound meaning of the liturgy. It is our memorial sacrifice. It is our share in Christ’s covenant. It is the means and the motive by which we live as Christ in this world. It is the basis of the unity of the Church. It is our identity with Christ, and through him, with every other person. When we “receive” Holy Communion, we must also “give.” We give ourselves to the Lord.

*Compass Check: How does the Eucharist help you become “eucharist” for others?  
How does the celebration of the Eucharist build up the Church?  
In our sharing in the Eucharist, do we “become what we eat?” How would you explain this?*

## Navigation Point: THE EUCHARIST AS OUR NEW MANNA

The Gospel of John does not depict the Last Supper as a Passover. John does not mention the Eucharist at that supper. His teaching on the Eucharist is found in Chapter 6 of the gospel.

The background is Jewish belief in signs which will be found when the Messiah comes. Rabbis had a whole catalog of signs which they thought would happen when the Messiah came. The first part of John's Gospel is called the "Book of Signs" because John gives seven signs by which Jesus manifests his glory. Among these signs is the multiplication of loaves and fishes. The Pharisaical tradition believed that manna was not only food for the body; it also had a spiritual effect: It enabled the Hebrews in the Exodus to live according to God's covenant. It was what we would call a sacrament. The Pharisees expected that, when the Messiah came, there would be a new miracle of manna which would enable all to keep the Covenant, i.e. the precepts of the Torah. This is the background of John 6. The chapter proceeds in this way:

1. "Sign" of the multiplication of loaves and fishes.
2. Jesus crosses sea, walking on water, preaches in synagogue at Capernaum.
3. Jews come on foot around lake and ask him how he got there.
4. Jesus remarks that they have not sought him because of signs, but because they were fed. He tells them that they should seek the food that will bring eternal life.
5. (*Misunderstanding-clarification 'characteristic of John's gospel.'*) Jews ask what they can do to accomplish the works of God. (Referring to sacramental manna of old, they ask how they can keep Torah.)
6. Jesus tells them to have faith in one sent by God.
7. They ask for "sign" i.e. the sign of manna. Their ancestors had manna which enabled them to keep Torah. That was the real bread.
8. Jesus says manna was *not* the real bread. The Father gives the *real* bread. (Bread 'metaphor for teaching.)
9. They ask for this *real* bread. Jesus says that HE is the real bread (still referring to teaching)
10. When Jesus says he is the bread which came down from heaven, they murmur. Up to this point, "bread" has meant Jesus, the Word or teaching of the Father.
11. Jesus now says that the *real bread* is his flesh for the life of the world.
12. From now on, the discourse is Eucharistic: "Unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you do not have life in you."
13. After the synagogue discourse, many refuse to follow him because of the "flesh-blood" emphasis. Jesus does not retract but says that it is the spirit that gives life, not the flesh B meaning that the mere eating of the flesh and drinking of blood profits nothing: It must be in faith, i.e. the spirit.

*Further remarks:* Very likely, two synagogue discourses have been combined by the author: 6:27-47 and 6:58-58. Aileen Guilding, scripture scholar, has shown that the readings around Passover time were from Genesis 3. Thus the parallel: "You shall not eat of the tree..." "Bread from heaven for you to eat and never die." When Adam wants to take the fruit of the tree of life, he is prevented....But here Jesus invites all to eat and live forever. Genesis 3:24: "He drove man out." Here "Anyone who comes to me, I will never drive out." (Cf Anchor Bible: John, vol. 1, P. 279). Read and reflect on John 6.

*Compass Check: How do you feel when you receive Communion? What effect does the Eucharist have on the rest of your day? Your week?*

## Navigation Point: THE PRIESTHOOD OF JESUS CHRIST

All those who are baptized into Jesus Christ are sharers in his priesthood. The New Testament tells us that we are a “chosen race, a royal priesthood, a people set apart.” (I Peter 2:9) We are called to offer spiritual sacrifices. (I Peter 2:5) Since we are joined to Jesus Christ by baptism and confirmation, we unite ourselves with him in renewing the offering of his Body and Blood in each Mass. Our feeble human worship takes on an infinite dimension when offered through, with, and in Jesus Christ. This sharing in Christ’s priesthood is often called the “priesthood of all believers.”

The priesthood of all believers must be ordered and organized in the ministerial priesthood. Not all believers share in this ministerial priesthood, but only those men who are called by Christ and who receive the sacrament of holy orders. In the New Testament, Jesus entrusted to his apostles the authentic handing down of his truths. He entrusted to them the authority to forgive sins in his name (John 20:22-23) and to celebrate the Memorial Sacrifice which we call “Eucharist.” (See the accounts of the Last Supper where he told his apostles to “do” what he had done.)

If Jesus had returned in glory as the primitive Church expected, there would have been little need to provide for other men to fulfill the function of the apostles, but he did not come. And the missionary work of the Church spread throughout the known world. Others were needed to share in the work of the apostles. So, by another “sign” the apostles “ordained” others to succeed them. We call this “sign” or sacrament “holy orders.” It is ministered by the laying on of the hands of the apostles and words to signify the handing on of the apostolic office. St. Paul describes this in II Timothy 1:6. Throughout the Acts of the Apostles, St. Paul always ordained others who would preside over the Church after he departed from them. See Acts 14:23 and similar passages in Acts.

Two words are used to describe the structure of the primitive Christian community. One is *episkopos* (*eh-PISS-koh-pos*). The other is *presbuteros* (*prehs-BOO-the-ros*). The word *episkopos* literally means “overseer.” The function of the *episkopoi* was to guide and guard the community of faith. In other words, they succeeded the apostles. Our English word *bishop* is etymologically derived from *episkopos*. Remove the initial “e” and the ending “os,” and we are left with *piskop*. In our Indo-European languages, “p” often becomes “b”, and “k” often softens. Thus it becomes *bishop* in English. We also get our word *episcopal* from this word. *Episcopal* means “having to do with a bishop.”

*Presbuteros* literally means “an older man.” or “an elder.” It is clear in the New Testament that this title was also used of younger men, such as Timothy and Titus. A little study will show that *presbuteros* is the New Testament word for priest. As a matter of fact, our English word “priest” is etymologically derived from *presbuteros*. Take off the ending “-eros” and we are left with *presbut*. The “b” drops out and the vowels are changed to give us “priest”. Thus the New Testament Church was founded on the apostles, and their successors were “bishops” and “priests.” By the time of St. Ignatius of Antioch, i.e. around 125 A.D., the structure of the Church was clearly made of one bishop and many priests. (There were also deacons who shared in some of the ministries of the priests.) We’ll continue with this discussion of the organization of the Church in the next installment. Right now, we should realize that our Catholic Church structure: bishops, deacons, and priests is according to the Scriptures.

*Compass Check: What are the differences between the priesthood of all believers and the ministerial priesthood?*

*How do you live out your share of the priesthood rooted in Baptism and Confirmation (the priesthood of all believers)?*

*How do the Orders of Bishop, Priest and Deacon help guide and encourage the priesthood of all believers?*

## Navigation Point: THE BISHOP OF ROME

Jesus established a community of his followers with the leadership going to twelve of his disciples whom he named apostles. Jesus empowered the apostles to proclaim his Good News authentically; through the Holy Spirit they were always to teach his truth. The apostolic mission continued through the ages: After the departure of Judas, the apostles selected another man to take his place. This man, Matthias, received the same authority and spiritual mission as the other apostles.

But one apostle was always special. He was not the greatest intellect. He was not necessarily the most talented. He was chosen by Jesus to be “the Rock.” This is Simon Bar-Jona whom Jesus named “Peter.” In all lists of the apostles in the New Testament, Peter is listed first. Peter preaches the first sermon on Pentecost Sunday. Peter seems to make the important decisions which affect the whole Church. Peter receives the first Gentile into the Church. Even though Peter denied Jesus, nevertheless after Jesus’ resurrection, Peter is given the charge of “feeding the lambs and the sheep” of Christ.

Perhaps the most striking passage which shows the first place of Peter is in Matthew 16:18-23. Jesus and his apostles were in Gentile country. He asked the apostles whom the world thought he was. Various answers were given. Jesus then asked his apostle who they thought he was. Simon Bar-Jona spoke up and said, “You are the Christ (Messiah), the Son of the living God.” Jesus replied, “Blessed are you, Simon, son of John. And I say to you: You are Peter and on this rock I will build my Church and the gates of Hades shall not prevail against it. And I will give to you the keys of the kingdom of heaven. Whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven. Whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven.”

The word *petra* in Greek means “rock.” Jesus names Simon to be the Rock. He then gives him the “keys of the kingdom.” The image is not of the “porter of the pearly gates.” Rather, “kingdom of heaven” means the Church. In the Old Testament “keys” is a symbol of authority. If I have the keys to a place, I have complete authority over who comes and goes. In the Old Testament, the master of the palace had complete authority over the king’s household, next only to the king. He wore a sash over his shoulder from which dangled a key, the symbol of his authority. Read about this in Isaiah 22:21-22. Jesus gives Peter authority over his Church.

He then gives him the power of “binding and loosing.” This is a rabbinical expression for imposing and releasing from legal obligations. Whatever Peter binds will be recognized as bound by heaven. Whatever he looses will be recognized as loosed by heaven.

Toward the end of his life, Peter went to Rome. This is absolutely certain from history and archeology. Peter is buried under the high altar of St. Peter’s basilica in Rome. Throughout the centuries, the successor of Peter has been recognized as the legitimate Bishop of Rome. As such he is heir to the promises made to Peter. The Bishop of Rome, whom we call pope, has the same authority in the Church today as Peter had in apostolic times. The unity of the group or college of apostles is founded on unity with the successor of Peter, the pope.

*Compass Check: Bishops serve as shepherd of God's people. In governing the Church, they are to imitate the care of Jesus for His people. How is the hierarchy valuable for your growth in faith? What sources of spiritual growth do you receive from the Church's structures: parish, diocesan, universal?*

## Navigation Point: THE NEW TESTAMENT CHURCH

Up until the Sixteenth Century, all Christians were united in their belief that the Church was guided by bishops, priests and deacons. All Christians believed that there were seven sacraments. All Christians believed in the Real Presence of Christ in the Eucharist, and that the Eucharist was our Christians sacrifice, our renewal of the suffering, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ for our salvation. All Christians believed in the Communion of Saints and in special honor given to Mary, the Mother of Jesus. All Christians believed that the Church infallibly taught Christ's truth, and that Ecumenical (or General) Councils of the Church were the supreme authority of the Church.

It is true, sad to say, that there was a great division between East and West. Eastern Orthodox Christians and Roman Catholics separated in the Eleventh Century. But still these two great divisions of the Church believe essentially the same doctrines. The greatest problem of their separation is the place of the Bishop of Rome "the pope" in Church authority.

Essentially, for sixteen centuries, if you wanted to be a Christian, you would believe in what we have previously stated. We won't go into a lot of details about the Protestant Reformation which has left us with hundreds of different Christian bodies. We would like to ask: How can someone come along sixteen centuries after Jesus and deny what Christians have always believed and taught? The original justification of separating from the age-old Church argued that the new Christian group was just a purification of the Church. Later on, others claimed that their distinctive Christian group was a "restoration of New Testament Christianity."

What is "New Testament Christianity?" If we look carefully at the New Testament, we shall find the basic beliefs which Catholics and Orthodox have held throughout the centuries. For example: The Real Presence of Jesus in the Eucharist is shown vividly in John 6:53. The power of men to forgive sins in the name of God is found in John 20:22-23. The Sacrament of Anointing of the Sick is found in James 5:14-17. The infallibility of the Church is found in John 14:26. These are but a few examples.

In addition to texts of the New Testament, if we want to find out what the "New Testament Church" believed and taught, we need to examine the writings of those who lived in those times. Persons who wrote in ancient times and who are witnesses of the belief of the Church are called "Fathers of the Church." There are many different collections of the writings of these "Fathers." The most extensive collection was made over a hundred years ago by a Frenchman named Migne. That collection consists of about three hundred volumes, each containing about 2,000 pages! Some of these writings are even older than some of the books of our New Testament! In our discussion on baptism, we alluded to a document called the *Didache* which was probably written before II Peter and before the final edition of the Gospel of John! The study of the various "Fathers" of the Church is called "Patrology."

Our point in dwelling on these sources is to show that "New Testament Christianity" is broader than the New Testament. If we want to know what Christians have always believed, we look at all the sources.

## Navigation Point: MORE ON THE FATHERS

We quoted the *Didache* (7:14) in showing that the New Testament Church practiced baptism by pouring as well as by immersion. We alluded to St. Ignatius of Antioch (c. 110 A.D.) who taught that each Church must be structured around one bishop and his group of priests and deacons. St. Justin the Martyr lived 100 - 165 A.D. He describes the Mass in his time: The same dialog which we use before the Preface-Eucharistic Prayer was used in his time. (“The Lord be with you...Lift up your hearts....Let us give thanks to the Lord our God.”) All of these Fathers speak of their belief of Jesus in the Eucharist. St. Ignatius also refers to the “first place” which the Church at Rome holds, since it is hallowed by the memory of Peter and Paul. Beginning with Justin the Martyr we have a primitive “theology” of the place of Mary in the Church. Justin and others following him see Mary as the counter-type of Eve. As Eve by her disobedience brought death, so Mary by her obedience brought life. St Irenaeus (140 - 202 A.D.) and other Church Fathers continue this parallel and contrast.

Not only writings, but also early inscriptions give us the belief of the New Testament Church. For example, in the catacombs throughout the Roman empire there are countless inscriptions from the Second Century on which express belief in prayer for the dead and the prayer of the saints. An example is found in the Catacomb of St. Sebastian from about 200 A.D. The inscription on a tomb reads: “Peter and Paul, pray for Victor.” This witnesses to the belief that our prayers can benefit the deceased. It also witnesses the belief in calling upon the saints to pray for us. Although we usually associate the catacombs with Rome, they are found throughout the Roman Empire. Similar inscriptions, for example, are found in the excavations of the ancient city of Cologne, Germany.

What we are trying to say is: If you are looking for what the New Testament Church believed, look at the New Testament. And look also at the writings of contemporary Christians. And look at excavations and inscriptions. You will find that the beliefs of early Christians are precisely those which the Catholic Church has always believed and still believes. In other words, the Church didn’t just decide to invent new doctrines; it held and holds to the faith which has been handed down from Christ through his apostles and their successors to the present.

If you are looking for a Church which authentically believes what the primitive Church believed and which is found throughout each period of history, what Church would you find? If you wanted to be a Christian in every period of history, and wanted to have the same faith which Christians had in every era, what would you be? A study of history would show that you would need to be a Catholic.

We rejoice with a certain legitimate pride that the teaching of Christ has been authentically handed down from the time of the apostles. We must, sadly, admit that we have not always lived up to those teachings. There are sad pages of Church history where members of the Church sinned grievously against their faith. We could almost describe our relationship with the Church as a “love-hate” relationship: We love the Church in its teachings and in its inner life. But we also hate the way that some of our members have lived in history. We are embarrassed by such things as the Inquisition, by the Galileo incident, by simony and corrupt living of bishops and popes in the Renaissance. We are saddened by anti-Semitism at certain times in history. We are sorry. But remember not to throw out the baby with the bath water! Instead, resolve to be faithful to Christ.

*Compass Check: How does the Church help you understand the Bible?*

## Navigation Point: WHY GO TO MASS?

Let's put aside some of the usual objections: Mass is boring. The preaching is terrible. The choir always sounds off-key, and anyhow the music is not relevant. I can't hear anything because of the screaming infants and unruly children. The priest just sounds like he's rattling off a lot of words without much meaning. Beside that, I don't get anything out of it. Maybe some of these objections are legitimate. Before we consider any of them, let's think about what Mass really *is* -- whether all the objections above are true or not.

If Mass were just a "service" of bible reading, prayer, and song, with some sort of wafer and wine bit, then I wouldn't go either. If you are so inclined, you can reflect more on the bible at home. You can hear some better music from your CD's. And you might even find a good preacher by surfing the channels, but Mass is more than just a "service." Suppose the priest is a terrible celebrant and a rotten preacher. Suppose that the music is awful. Suppose....suppose... The Mass would still have an intrinsic, infinite, meaning.

The essence of the Mass is the renewal of the Sacrifice of Jesus Christ for our redemption. It is that, even if the "manner" of celebration is awful. The Mass is identical to the Last Supper. The synoptic gospels of Matthew, Mark and Luke, together with Paul's account in I Corinthians 11 tell us that Jesus took bread and wine. He said words equivalent to: "This is my Body....This is my Blood." He said "Do this in remembrance of me."

What did he mean by these words? For fifteen centuries, every Christian believed that he meant what he said: The bread really did become his Body. The wine really did become his Blood. And, since Jesus is risen from the dead to die no more, wherever his Body is, there also is his Blood, soul, and divinity. And wherever his Blood is, there also is his Body, his soul, and his divinity. In other words, the risen Lord Jesus Christ really and truly comes among us in each and every Mass under appearances of bread and wine.

Why? Because he said, "Do this in remembrance of me." "Do this" means "Do what I have done". In other words, he told his apostles, "When you do what I have done, I will change that bread and wine into my Body and Blood. I will be truly present under appearances of bread and wine."

The word "remembrance" (sometimes translated "memory" or "commemoration") in the original Greek is "anamnesis." And this word "anamnesis" translated a Hebrew Old Testament word "ziccaron". The word meant "memorial sacrifice" or "sacrifice of remembrance". The idea is pretty primitive. It meant that whenever the Hebrews offered their particular sacrifices, God would remember to show them mercy! The "remembering," then, is not primarily our subjective remembering of what God has done for us. The "remembering" is primarily on *God's* part: Whenever we "do this" (i.e. celebrate Mass), God remembers that we are his people. He remembers the salvation won by Christ. He remembers to forgive, to reconcile, to bless, and to strengthen us.

So, whether we "feel" like it or not, whenever Mass is celebrated, God looks with love on us. He remembers that we are his people, and he wants to lavish us with his blessings.

*Compass Check: There are many countries and societies where Christian worship and Mass are illegal. These countries have worship “underground” and people will risk their lives to receive Holy Communion. Why?  
And why, in our society, where it is quite easy to attend Mass, do people take it for granted?*

## Navigation Point: WHY GO TO MASS? - II

Remember, the Mass is not just a “service”. It has an intrinsic, transcendent meaning as the renewal of Christ’s sacrificial life, death, resurrection, and ascension. That’s the meaning of the word which we translate “memory”, “remembrance”, “memorial”. (The Greek is “anamnesis”; the Hebrew is “ziccaron”.)

We express this in each and every Mass, immediately after the consecration. The problem is that we do it pretty badly. The English language just doesn’t convey the meaning intended by the Greek, Hebrew, or even Latin, but here’s what we say. In the First Eucharistic Prayer (Roman Canon) it is “Father, we celebrate the memory of Christ your Son. We your people and your ministers recall his Passion, his resurrection from the dead, and his ascension into glory.” “Celebrate the memory” means “celebrate this memorial sacrifice by which you remember us.” It means “bring to the present what you have accomplished in the past through your Son Jesus Christ.” The sentence that follows is pretty bad: “we recall his Passion...” You get the idea that we are subjectively stopping to think about what Jesus did for us in his suffering and death. True. But that’s not the meaning! The meaning is that we are actualizing it in this Eucharist; we are making those saving acts present and effective here! Whenever you hear these words, think: “Right now, the Lord Jesus has come under forms of bread and wine to renew his sacrificial life, death, resurrection, and ascension. He does this because he wants to show his infinite love of me -- and all people in the world.”

In the Second Eucharistic Prayer, the anamnesis is: “In memory of his death and resurrection, we offer you, Father...” Once again, remember that “memory” means the objective memorial sacrifice which Christ brings to the present in this Eucharist. In the Third Eucharistic Prayer, the anamnesis is: “Father, calling to mind the death... his glorious resurrection and ascension...we offer.” Here again, it seems as if we are the ones calling to mind. The “calling to mind” is the actual celebration of the memorial sacrifice of the Eucharist! Finally, the Fourth Eucharistic Prayer has: “Father, we now celebrate this memorial of our redemption.” That is good. It gives the notion of the objective re-presentation of Christ’s sacrifice. But the prayer continues: “We recall Christ’s death, his descent among the dead, his resurrection...” The operative word for “recall” in Latin is “recolimus.” The word can mean “reflect” or “contemplate.” But its root is “colo” which means to worship! “Recolimus” (ray-KOH-ee-mus) would mean “we worship again” or “we renew the worship.”

I don’t really know how one would make a good English translation without using a lot of words. The point is: When you go to Mass, and when the priest proclaims these words after the consecration, think of “anamnesis.” Think that something more is here than your subjective remembering of Jesus. Think that everything that Jesus did for you and for the world is brought together and made present and effective here and now in this Mass.

Why go to Mass? Because God shows his infinite love for you in each Mass. Because in each Mass, the Lord Jesus renews his sacrificial death for your redemption. Because the Father remembers to show you mercy through this memorial sacrifice of the life, death, resurrection and ascension of his Son.

*Compass Check: So why go to Mass? If you have heard or read the previous articles, the answer is simple.*

## Navigation Point: HOLY MATRIMONY

In ancient times, the pagan Greeks thought that all material things “including the human body” were evil. They thought that only the “spirit” was good. Plato used alliteration when he said, “soma sema psyches” “The body is the prison house of the soul.” He thought that the greatest good would be death, when the body decayed but the soul went to the supreme world of forms or ideas to contemplate the good and true. Other pagan religions followed Plato. And unfortunately some Christian sects also followed him: They thought that the body (and therefore all sex) was evil and that only the soul was good. Among “Christian” sects who thought that the body and all material things were somehow evil are the Cathari, the Albigensians, the Manichees, the Puritans, the Gnostics, and in our times similar movements. Perhaps this is what prompted the humorous statement of Hilaire Belloc (hee-LEHR BELL-ock) that “An Englishman is one who thinks he’s being religious, whereas he’s really only being uncomfortable.” For “Englishman” we can substitute any one of the above groups as well as many religious groups today.

The Catholic Church teaches that God made everything good, the material world as well as the spiritual world. The body is good. The drives and appetites of the body are good as long as they are used according to God’s plan. So sex is good. It is not only good, it is sacred and holy. Sex is one of the most important aspects of the Sacrament of Matrimony. God intended that sex should have a two-fold purpose: the procreation of children and the fostering of love between husband and wife. Whenever either purpose is contravened, there is a disorder, a sin.

The Catholic Church holds that all marriages of themselves last until death do they part. Marriage is a union between one man and one woman to share each other’s lives together for life. This union has three basic purposes: the mutual love and help that husband and wife can be to each other, the procreation of children, and the legitimate expression of our sexual nature. To use sex according to God’s purpose is good and noble. To seek sexual pleasure apart from monogamous marriage is a very serious sin. This sin requires forgiveness through the Sacrament of Reconciliation.

In order to enter marriage, man and woman must be of sufficient age that they understand what is meant by this union. Understanding the purposes of marriage, they then freely enter into the union, realizing that it is for life.

In addition to the sacredness of all marriages described above, Catholics believe that the Lord made the marriage between two baptized persons a holy sacrament! Marriage is not only a means of mutual love, it is also a sacrament by which Christ blesses married love and makes it a means of grace and salvation. There is no explicit place in the bible where we can say that Christ made marriage a sacrament. Ephesians 5:32 calls marriage a great “mystery” the Greek word for “sacrament”. Before this verse, Ephesians has compared the union of marriage to the union of Christ and his Church. That mystical union is shown forth in the sacrament of Holy Matrimony.

Perhaps here we might note the objections of many that St. Paul was a misogynist who made women inferior to men. He says “Wives be subject to your husbands”, but right after that he tells husbands to love their wives as Christ loved the Church and gave his life for her. If husbands are willing to sacrifice their lives for their wives, then it should be no problem for a wife to “be subject”.

*Compass Check: Why should faith be an important consideration for a couple considering marriage?*

## Navigation Point: ANOINTING OF THE SICK

Before the Second Vatican Council (1963-1965) this sacrament was called “Extreme Unction” or “Last Anointing” or even the “Last Rites of the Church.” But in the New Testament and in the rite of the sacrament, the healing ministry of the Church is emphasized. James 5:14-15 states: “Are there any sick among you? Let them send for the priests of the Church. Let the priests pray over them and anoint them in the name of the Lord. The prayer of faith will save the sick person, the Lord will raise him up, and if he be in sins, they will be forgiven.”

The “sign” of this sacrament is the anointing of the sick person by a priest with the accompanying prayer. The effects of the sacrament are given: “save, raise up, forgive.” The word “save” can mean “save from illness and suffering.” It can also mean “save for eternal joy in heaven.” It means both! When we are seriously ill, we are filled with fear. We don’t know what is going to happen. Perhaps we have looked over our past lives and found them wanting. We can easily become depressed and discouraged wondering whether our sins are forgiven, whether we shall live or die, and whether God’s judgment on us will be good or bad. The Lord may save us from present illness... not apart from science or medical treatment usually, but with good medicine. He saves us for eternal life by forgiving all our sins and the punishments due to sin. He gives us an increase of hope for this time of crisis.

“Raise up” may refer to “raise up from the bed of sickness.” Or it can mean “raise up in the resurrection, like Christ.” Again, it means both! If it is necessary for our spiritual welfare, through this sacrament the Lord infallibly heals us. Most priests have seen astounding things in administering this sacrament, even the cures of terminal and chronic illnesses. Even if we are not raised up from our sick bed, we are assured that the Lord will raise us up on the last day.

“Forgive.” Through this sacrament, the Lord forgives every sin of our entire life, and he remits all the punishments due to sin. If we should happen to die after receiving this sacrament, we would go straight to heaven, with no intervening period in purgatory.

Any person who is seriously ill should receive this sacrament. “Seriously ill” means that this particular physical condition may possibly end in death. It may also end in life. “Seriously ill” varies with circumstances of age, disease and strength. Influenza is not normally a threat to the life of the young who are otherwise robust and strong. But it may be a possibility of death for an aged person or a weak person. Such should be anointed. It has become customary to anoint people who are going into the hospital for surgery. If an illness is so great that it necessitates a general anesthetic, then it is serious enough for the person to be anointed. Persons with clinical depression or chronic diseases such as high blood pressure and diabetes may also be anointed.

Some old timers put off anointing until they were about to breath their last. The opposite is true: Even if we are feeling fine, nevertheless if there are internal reasons (such as cancer) which may lead to our death, we should be anointed. How often can a person be anointed? As often as there is a serious illness. And even if the illness is chronic and prolonged, a person may be anointed about every month. This is one of those tremendous sacraments which we should use. It goes along with Confession and Holy Communion as a preparation for eternal life. But through it, the Lord also offers us temporal and physical healing.

*Compass Check: What is your favorite “healing story” from the Gospels? What good can come from suffering? How has an illness brought you or someone you know closer to God?*