

GOD'S CONTINUED PRESENCE: *The Sacramental Economy*

(Catechism of the Catholic Church 1076-1209)

Introduction

This section marks the opening of a new stage in the R.C.I.A. programme. The last four sessions have dealt with the Church under the broad question: "What is it?" Thus, we looked at the foundation of the Church (*The Birth of the Church*), the make-up of the Church (*The Church: the People of God*), the authority of the Church (*Peter and the Church*), and Mary who is an image of the Church (*Mary, Mother of the Church*). All these sessions have concentrated on the nature of the Church. What is it that we have joined / are thinking of becoming members of? How does this community understand their belief that they are the 'Body of Christ'? This leads us into the next section of the programme. Having looked at what the Church *is*, now we will look at what the Church *does*.

The focus of this section is, without question, Jesus Christ. Whatever the Church does is done in him. This is most obvious in the Church's solemn liturgies: the sacraments. This section concentrates on the practical implications of what we have become (or will become) in entering the Church. We will see that the Church is not simply a club of like-minded people: she has an essential mission to fulfil, and every member of the Church is called to participate in it. We will see that this mission is so vast that the members of the Church take their part in the mission in a thousand different ways, each of which is critical. We will see that the Church is not like a regiment of soldiers in which all receive identical training, and any one soldier could carry out whatever job was necessary. Each member of the Church is not only unique but also has a unique place in the plan of God's salvation - before it became a buzz-word in education or industry, the Church was preaching '*differentiation*'. In the Church, Christ calls and forms individuals to carry out specific tasks which are all ordered to the greater end of the mission of the Church: the members of the Church are not interchangeable and so it is only when they work in harmony, with each one dedicating himself / herself without reservation to their share in Christ's mission which they have been given, that the Church fully expresses and carries out the commission she has received from her founder.

This session is really intended to address the question "*How does God reveal himself through the ages - and especially today?*" We will see that the idea behind God's action from the very beginning was what we call *sacraments*: they are not magical,

nor are they always effective in making us holy, because that depends on our free co-operation. BUT, because they are actions of God, they are always truly offered.

A. GOD'S PRESENCE IN ISRAEL: from all the people to some individuals

1. Before the Fall: Adam

Before the first sin, the Sacred Scriptures are very clear about the relationship man enjoyed with God. Adam, who represents all peoples who lived before the Fall, is presented as enjoying an extraordinary relationship with God. God is immediately present to him, speaks directly to him and treats him with great dignity and even deference. He makes man in his own image (*Gen. 1:25-26*) - with a unique configuration to God, through which "*he alone is able to share, by knowledge and love, in God's own life*" (C.C.C. 356). He entrusts the whole of creation to man (*Gen. 1:28-29*), he asks man to name the animals and birds he has created (*Gen. 2:19*), He wished man's happiness beyond that of the rest of creation and so was eager to provide company for him which would bring deeper fulfilment to both man and his "*helpmate*" than either could achieve alone (*Gen. 2:18-24*).

It is fruitless to get embroiled in a debate about the historical accuracy or detailed reliability of these stories: the issue is not "did the creation happen exactly like this?" or "did God really make woman after man, or get man to name the animals, or walk beside him in the garden?" The issue is: what do these stories, which may or may not be historically literal, tell us about the relationship which existed between man and God before man lost it through sin. The Sacred Scriptures stress that man lived in the presence of God, and that God granted him privileges beyond those of all creation. The summary would be: God was ***immediately present*** to every living human being - God was bound to man, and man to God in love.

- "*The first man was not only created good, but was also established in friendship with his Creator, and in harmony with himself and with the creation around him.*" (C.C.C. 374).
- "*The Church, interpreting the symbolism of biblical language in an authentic way, in the light of the New Testament and Tradition, teaches that our first parents, Adam & Eve, were constituted in an original 'state of holiness & justice'. This grace of original holiness was 'to share in ... divine life.'*" (C.C.C. 375).

The phrase "***immediately present***" has a specific meaning that will become important later. It stresses the depth of harmony between creator and created in the beginning. The phrase that describes the creation of mankind in Genesis 1 (in the "image and likeness" of God) means in the context of a family relationship: it is almost a biblical idiom, which sadly we no longer understand. It is used in the Scriptures to refer to a man who fathers a child. A sculptor or artist can fashion materials into a copy of himself and if he is really good into a fairly exact reproduction of his features - but this is not to have a son or daughter. The artist has copied his appearance but has not

communicated his life to the statue or picture. But in contrast, the father may produce a child who looks nothing like the father who produced him - but unlike the statue, he is truly made in the image of his father, because he carries his father's life and has received from him his human nature. When God creates man in His own image, the Scriptures are telling us that God fathers the human race. In some way, we relate to God in the unique relationship of love, which only the children of their own parents are privileged to enjoy. If you think I may be inventing this, look up how Genesis describes the birth to Adam and Eve of their third son, Seth (after the murder of Abel by Cain): the writer deliberately uses the same idiom to describe Adam fathering his son as used when God creates Adam and Eve:

- *"When God created man, he made him in the likeness of God ... When Adam had lived 130 years, he became the father of a son in his own likeness, after his image, and named him Seth." (Gen. 5:1,3)*

The phrase *"immediately present"* is used to describe the intimacy of the father/son relationship, which Genesis teaches we existed in with God at the beginning. A father is fully and immediately present to his family: he lives with them in the same house, he is constantly concerned for them, he loves them with a fierce and almost jealous care - they are too precious to him to risk losing to someone else. He is present to them - but without the need for a go-between, a runner, messenger or intermediary. They are present to him - not just physically but also emotionally and willingly: they want to be with him and accept him. There is nothing in their attitude towards him (or him towards them) that introduces any distance between them. Their relationship is fully *"immediate."*

The fall from Eden changes that: man does not want God's immediate presence. He makes this clear by the choice of his actions. When he is expelled from Eden (Gen. 3:23), don't think that man was reluctant to go: the force of the passage was that by his actions, he wanted to go. In effect, the expulsion from Eden was not a punishment for the sin but simply the effect of the sin: man was rejecting the full, immediate, intimate proximity of his Father - so the good Father does not force his son to stay. By expelling Adam, God was doing no more than carrying out the demand his son had made. You see, the parable of the prodigal son was drawn from God's experience, not just a made-up story. As in the parable, the good Father does not restrain his son by force but allows him to leave if it is his will. From this moment, human history has changed: man has rejected the *"immediate presence"* of the Father. From now on, the Father communicates with his prodigal family through intermediaries - *"mediated presence"*.

2. God's presence until the birth of Christ - imperfect intermediaries

Throughout the history of Israel, God continuously made himself present to his people in a variety of mediated ways. He was always truly present, but no longer immediately, as a father is with his children (because they have run away). Now, the Father reveals himself through the medium of people or things.

One of the consequences of sin was that mankind was less aware of God's presence in his creation, and even less aware of their own distance from him through the

sinfulness of their actions. It is as though sin dulls the senses to God's unrelenting faithfulness to us. Throughout this part of Israel's history, God continually demonstrates his presence, and invites his people to return to him. He is no longer so immediately present to all people - not by his own choice but because of the blindness of his people through their sin. The majority of the people are no longer open to his presence, and God's reveals himself directly to a small number of chosen individuals - *"It was rare for God to speak in those days; visions were uncommon."* (1 Sam. 3:1). What a change from the closeness of God and Adam, in Genesis.

Nevertheless, God never abandons his plan of restoring his people to their former dignity. In the words of the fourth Eucharistic Prayer:

- *"Even when (man) disobeyed you, and lost your friendship you did not abandon him to the power of death, but helped all men to seek and to find you. Again and again, you offered a covenant to man, and, through the prophets, taught him to hope for salvation."*

God now uses specific individuals and even objects (like the burning bush, or the stone tablets of the commandments) to demonstrate to his people that though invisible, he is always present to his people. Thus, God calls the prophets to represent him to Israel and to speak his messages to them. They are to represent him, to speak whatever he commands them and through their own presence among the people of the Covenant to demonstrate that God is still with his people. Thus God calls Isaiah:

- *"I heard the voice of the Lord saying: "Whom shall I send? Who will be our messenger?" I answered "Here I am, send me." He said, "Go, and say to the people..." (Isaiah 6:8-9).*

The same is asked of Jeremiah:

- *"The word of the Lord was addressed to me, saying, "I have appointed you as prophet to the nations." I said, "Ah, Lord; Look, I do not know how to speak: I am a child". But God replied, "Do not say, "I am a child". Go now to those to whom I send you & say whatever I command you." Then God put out his hand & touched my mouth & said to me: "There! I am putting my words into your mouth." (Jer. 1:5-7,9).*

In the prophets, God overcomes the distance between Israel and himself by temporarily using one of their number as a mouthpiece. Instead of inanimate objects such as the burning bush, the pillar of fire and cloud, the tablets of the Commandments, God occasionally chooses a medium which is made in his own image (a son) who is, because of this family relationship, a better and fuller intermediary between the Father and his shattered family. (Notice how in the parable of the servants in the vineyard, when the servants whom the master sends are ignored or killed, the master decides to send a member of his family, because they are more likely to listen to one of the master's relatives - because he represents the master's authority better, being his son). Thus, God sends the prophets - sons of his - to represent him to the prodigal sons of Israel. The prophets often begin their oracles with the words *"The word of the Lord was addressed to me as follows"* or *"It is the Lord who speaks."* In other words, God demonstrates his presence among the people

of Israel by speaking through one of them. In addition, he makes that presence effective in the people of Israel by using the prophet to call the people to repentance.

There are too many examples in Sacred Scripture to list them here, but we should be aware that they are more numerous than simply the well-known prophets like Isaiah or Amos. They include Moses (see Exodus) Miriam (sister of Aaron - also in Exodus), Esther & Judith (each with their own O.T. book), David etc.

These intermediaries were better and fuller representatives of the Father than inanimate objects because they were made in the Father's image: they reflected God's nature in their very being (as all human beings do) so they made more complete intermediaries than the mere objects. They could show by their own actions the will and heart of the Father (see especially Ezekiel, who often used symbolic actions as well as words to communicate the will of God to the people).

BUT, these intermediaries were imperfect: even the greatest prophets were sinful and weak men. They failed, as would any human being, to express fully the nature of the Father's relationship of love with us. For this, the Father would need to send an intermediary who was so fully united with him that there was no division between them whatsoever: so that whatever the intermediary said, did or communicated would not simply be the relaying of a message from the Father but an actual expression of the Father (as a shadow is the expression of the object which casts it). This would be a wholly new method of being present to his people: God would be so close to the intermediary that the intermediary would be inseparable from the Father. This would still be "*mediated presence*" but it would also be "*immediate presence*" because the Father would be seen through the messenger. We call it "*mediated immediacy*" - there is a go-between who unites two estranged parties (God and man): usually a go-between does just that (he runs between the two who are not actually present to each other). BUT, here, the go-between is so closely united with the God-party that when he comes to the man-party, the God-party is actually there, present in him. Does that make sense?

B. JESUS CHRIST: God's fullest presence among men

- "*He is the image of the invisible God ... for in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell.*" (Col. 1:15,19)

God has never demonstrated his presence among men more fully than in the person of Jesus Christ. With *Adam*, God walked with man: he was close to every human being. In the *prophets*, God dwelt within those he chose, giving them a share of his Holy Spirit: but they were only temporarily used by God, and they represent only a fraction of the number of God's people. In *Christ*, however, God does not just show he is present by inspiring a human being - he becomes present in an unprecedented way, taking residence within human nature and actually becoming man. Never before had God and man been so united. Jesus Christ, the God-man, represents a break-through: Christ takes mediation to a new level. The prophets were human beings who were used by God. Christ is more.

1. *Christ represents the Father*, in a similar way in which the prophets represent God. Christ's appearance among us demonstrates that God is not at enmity

with his creation, but desires its reconciliation with him. In addition, Christ teaches us how to return to the Father by giving us instruction in how to live. The parables, the Sermon on the Mount, the discourses to the disciples etc. all show us how God asks us to live.

2. But Christ is not just a *sign* of reconciliation. Unlike the prophets, who are representatives but no more than representatives, Christ does more than just speak on behalf of the Father. In St. John's Gospel, the radical unity between the Father and the Son reaches such a depth that Christ no longer speaks simply as the Father's messenger (as the prophets do): Christ is so united to the Father that wherever Christ is, there the Father is too. The Father is so immediately present in his Son whom we could see, that he is actually present through the Son. Is this just a play on words? The Gospels do not think so, nor did Christ: "*Philip said, 'Lord, let us see the Father & then we shall be satisfied.'*" "*Have I been with you all this time, Philip', said Jesus to him '& you still do not know me? **To have seen me is to have seen the Father**, so how can you say, 'Let us see the Father'? Do you not believe that I am in the Father & the Father is in me? The words that I say to you I do not speak as from myself: **it is the Father, living in me, who is doing this work.** You must believe me when I say that I am in the Father & the Father is in me.*" (Jn. 14:9-11). Through the visible, physical Son, the invisible Father is **visibly approachable**. It is analogous to saying that through grasping the hand of your friend, you are holding HIM. Technically, you are only holding his hand. He, himself, is not capable of being 'held' because you cannot 'hold' a character or personality. But, through a physical body, we have access to the invisible but deeply real person who exists under it. In the same way, through the visible Christ, we have immediate access to the invisible person of the Father. Christ and the Father are as closely united as is a hand to the person to whom it belongs. Whoever grasps the hand is in direct contact with the person beneath - in similar fashion, whoever approaches the visible Christ is immediately in relationship with the Father who is present through the visible body of his Son. SO, the Father is immediately present, through the mediation of Christ: now does the phrase "*mediated immediacy*" mean anything?!

Perhaps this sounds complicated, but actually it is a daily experience and we are used to dealing with it all the time in our own lives - we just don't often try to describe it. After all, we never say, "*My hand* switched the light on"!! We say, "*I* switched the light on." My hand is certainly not me - it is a part of me, but it's not identical with myself (otherwise, if my hand was amputated, I would lose my identity and become someone else!). In fact, what we say about Christ and the Father is not unusual - it's the essence of what we call a **sacrament**. A sacrament is the visible, human, physical means through which we receive the wholeness of the invisible, supernatural God. It doesn't solely and simply represent something (in the way that an actor stands in for the character he is playing) - it also actually makes that thing present and confers it. You could say my visible body makes the invisible character and nature of me both visible and accessible.

This is what the Incarnation achieves: the invisible God, who has always been present to his creation & who has always loved it despite its sin, is NOW made both **visible** and **visibly active**. Christ's visible incarnation does not just tell us that God does love

us & want our return to him - it actually makes that love *visibly* active in the world, and it brings about our reconciliation with the Father:

- *"He came to his own domain & his people did not accept him. But to all who did accept him, he gave power to become children of God, to all who believe in the name of him who was born not out of human stock or urge of the flesh or will of man but of God himself" (Jn. 1:11-13)*
- *"God loved the world so much that he gave his only Son so that everyone who believes in him may not be lost but may have eternal life. For God sent his Son into the world not to condemn the world, but so that through him the world might be saved." (Jn. 3:16-17)*

It's not enough for us to know *that* God loves us: we need to experience the rejuvenating effect of that love in the sterile depths of our souls. In the parable of the Prodigal Son, the prodigal was described by his father as 'dead, now come back to life' - the 'dead' son has to be changed radically for him to return to his father. For this reason, Christ does not just *tell* us that God loves us: Christ is that love of God operative on a visible level in our world - he brings spiritual life to the prodigal sons who are in the spiritual death of their own choosing:

- *"In this the love of God was made manifest among us, that God sent his only Son into the world, so that we might have life through him." (1 Jn. 4:9).*

In the same way, Christ does not just *tell* us that God wishes to restore communion between himself and us: through him that communion is both signified to us and made possible for us:

- *"The Word became flesh to make us 'partakers of the divine nature'; 'For this is why the Word became man, & the Son of God became the Son of man: so that man, by entering into communion with the Word & thus receiving divine sonship might become a son of God.'" (C.C.C. 460)*

This is the classical language of a **SACRAMENT**: Jesus Christ is the fullness of the Father's revealing of himself. Look at Christ and you see the Father, as well as Christ, because the two are so inseparably one. *"To have seen me is to have seen the Father" (Jn. 14:9). "For in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell" (Col. 1:19).* Christ is the person through whom the Father comes to his children. Christ is not just the *sign* that the Father is close - Christ is also the *means* or the *way* that the Father comes close. Christ is a sign, but also an effective sign - he achieves what he is representing (i.e., unity with the Father). SO we talk of Jesus Christ as being the true sacrament of the Father: receive Christ fully and whole (not just as your personal Lord and saviour but into your body, soul and humanity) and you receive the *whole Godhead - FATHER, SON AND HOLY SPIRIT.*

C. GOD'S PRESENCE SINCE THE ASCENSION OF CHRIST

Nothing could improve on the closeness of the union achieved between God and man in the Incarnation. There is no deeper unity that could be achieved between Creator & created than that the former should choose to take on the nature of the latter simply through love. That is fine as far as it goes - but how far *does* it go? Christ is united with the Father: but what about you & me? If Christ makes the invisible Father visibly present so that we can join ourselves to him, then we still have a problem. Christ is no longer visible to us: how do we, physical people, unite ourselves to this making-visible of the invisible God when this making-visible is himself invisible!! Christ is the sacrament of the Father - receive him and we receive the Father. But how can we be joined visibly to Christ when he is no longer visible? How can I ever know that I have received the benefits of Christ when I can no longer see him?

A sacrament has to be visible to be useful - what we need from Christ is a *visible* means through which he can be present and immediate to us: then we can join ourselves to that - & therefore to him – and therefore to the Father (of whom he is the visible making-present). Somewhere there must be a sacrament - a tangible sign which represents the presence of Christ in the world, through which Christ will always be accessible, operative and powerful, and which *he* promised he would use (rather than just something we invent).

There *IS* such a sacrament, and there has been, throughout the millennia, ever since the life of Christ. He established it in the course of his own lifetime & he told us that through this sign he would not simply be represented in symbolic form but actually be at work. **THAT SACRAMENT IS THE CHURCH.**

In the body of the faithful, the Church, Christ continues to be present in the world in a visible form. As men and women are drawn into unity with the Church, they are answering Christ's call from within the Church to be united with him (& therefore with the Father). How do I know that I am united with Christ? Because I am united with the body of people who are fully united with Christ (*C.C.C. 787-791*). How do I know that they are fully united with Christ? Because Christ tells us that they are. He repeatedly stressed that he was present through the presence of his disciples. Wherever they went, he was there. Whoever joined his disciples were being joined onto him ("*I am the vine, you are the branches*" *Jn. 14*). When he sent out the disciples to preach in his name, he said:

- "*Anyone who listens to you listens to me; anyone who rejects you rejects me, and those who reject me reject the one who sent me.*" (*Lk. 10:16*)

In prayer to the Father, just before the crucifixion, Christ prays that the unprecedented unity between the Father and himself may be reflected in the unity between himself and his followers, so that just as the Father is present and completely accessible through the Son, so too the Son may be present as immediately and as accessibly present through his Body, the Church:

- "*As you sent me into the world, I have sent them into the world ... May they all be one. Father, may they be one in us, as you are in me and I am in you ... I*

have given them the glory you gave to me, that they may be one as we are one. With me in them & you in me, may they be so completely one that the world will realise that it was you who sent me & that I have loved them as much as you loved me." (Jn. 17:18,21-23).

Once his prayer is heard, Christ confirms this extraordinary unity between the Apostles and himself - guaranteeing to exercise his divine powers of reconciliation through them:

- *"As the Father sent me, so I am sending you ... Receive the Holy Spirit. For those whose sins you forgive, they are forgiven; for those whose sins you retain, they are retained." (Jn. 20:21-23)*

Finally, just before the Ascension, Christ ratifies this intimate identity between the Church and himself so that his presence is guaranteed in a visible way wherever the Church is present:

- *"And know that I am with you always; yes, even to the end of time." (Mt. 28:20)*

Furthermore, this identity between Christ & the Church was clearly a central doctrine of the earliest Church: in the Acts of the Apostles, the conversion of St. Paul is achieved when Christ confronts Saul with the revelation of his identity. In persecuting the Church, Saul persecutes the one of whom the Church is a sacrament:

- *"Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?" "Who are you, Lord?" he asked, and the voice answered, "I am Jesus, and you are persecuting me." (Acts 9:4-5).*

Because Christ has chosen to be identified totally with his followers, whatever we do to the least of our brothers, we do to him (*Mt. 25:40*), and, equally, whatever the Church does to us in his name, Christ himself does. In other words, in our attempts to live a Christ-like life, it is the power of Christ that makes that possible, and it is Christ we are making visibly present in the world and proclaiming. The Church is truly his Body - the visible manifestation of Christ in the world. In other words, if Christ is the sacrament of the Father, then **the Church is the sacrament of Christ**. Through Christ, we can approach and touch the Father because to see Christ IS to see the Father (we have Christ's word on this). But equally, we have Christ's teaching that to enter his Church, to believe in him and in his teaching from within his Body, the Church, is to be so fully in communion with him that we are actually receiving him. Hence in the sacrament of the Mass, the Body of Christ, the Church, receives the Body of Christ under the appearance of bread and wine. Enter the Church and you will be in contact fully with the Son of God: you will receive him at the most profound level of faith - if you wish to.

In summary:

God has always been really present in the world he created. First, with Adam, beside his creation. Then, after the Fall, through the mediation of a few chosen men and women. Finally, in Christ – the total self-revelation of God in human nature. Now,

God is still visibly present through the sacrament of Christ - his mystical Body, the Church. He is present no longer beside his creatures but through the indwelling of the Holy Spirit. God makes himself visibly present to his creation by taking up residence within them; not just in the chosen few as with the prophets, but by pouring himself on all those who come to him through Christ by entering the Church. This doctrine of the Church as the sacrament of Christ is most beautifully expressed in the Document of the Second Vatican Council on the nature of the Church - *Lumen Gentium*.

The last problem remains: if the Church is the sacrament of Christ, how do I visibly join myself to the Church, the sacrament of the sacrament of the Father. The Church has always answered - through immersion into the seven liturgical sacraments of the Church. Through them we are united to the Body of Christ (the Church) & therefore to Christ, & therefore to the Father.

Now read the next section where we will look at exactly this.