

THE BEST KEPT SECRETS IN CHRISTIANITY

Why Catholicism Does Not Know How to Deal with Secularism

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To all the priests who have given me absolution

On all levels catechesis should take account of this hierarchy of the truths of faith. (Congregation for the Clergy, General Catechetical Directory, 43)

A catechesis that neglects this interrelation and harmony of its content can become entirely useless for achieving its proper end. (ibid., 39)

## Introduction: Unleashing the Power of the Sacraments

This book tries to explain the dispositions Catholics need both to respond fully to sacramental grace in their individual lives and to help the Church accomplish her mission of carrying on Jesus's work of salvation.

During an *Ad Limina* visit with the bishops of New Zealand, Pope John Paul II spoke of the prevailing "effects of unrestrained secularism...This radical split between the Gospel and culture is . . . . a distortion of reason (that) neglects the search for the ultimate goal and meaning of human existence."<sup>1</sup> Is sacramental grace powerful enough to permit the Church to overcome the secular influences of our society? Of course it is. Then why does the first-world Church<sup>2</sup> appear to be so ineffective in countering those influences? Why can the Church not overcome problems like the decline in vocations, poor Mass attendance, Catholics supporting politicians who favor abortion rights, lack of concern for the Church's social doctrine, youth falling away, lifeless liturgies, etc?

Reasoning from cause to effect, or actually from the absence of an effect, namely, the overcoming of secular societal influences, to the absence of a sufficient cause, why should we not suspect that something is lacking in the pastoral formation the Church provides, especially at the local level? When things are chronically awry in the Church's pastoral life, might there not be something awry, at least by way of omission, in the spiritual formation it gives, even if that is not the only source of our problems? The suggestion is not that the formation the Church is giving us is bad. On the contrary, where sound doctrine is taught, Catholic spiritual formation probably consists almost entirely of good things. But are those good things the ones needed to unleash the full power of the sacraments against secular influences?

Responding to sacramental grace is the responsibility of the individual Catholic. But if so, the effectiveness of the sacraments depends the Church teaching us the dispositions needed for cooperating with grace, motivating us to be so disposed and creating environments that support those dispositions. I will present evidence that the Church is not ade-

quately doing these things in the western world, even when sound doctrine is taught. Among other things, the evidence will show that we have seriously misunderstood, pastorally though not necessarily theologically, Vatican II's teachings on the liturgy and the priesthood.

Recall that for centuries frequent reception of the Eucharist was discouraged in the Church. That policy was never officially promulgated by the Vatican, but neither did the Vatican do anything to correct it until relatively recently, even though everyone knew what was going on. Are we now so enlightened that we are not capable of our own pastoral blind spots? Those who discouraged frequent communion had the same Eucharistic doctrines that we have, but they drew a different pastoral conclusion from those doctrines, a different conclusion concerning the spiritual formation Catholics need. Are we now immune from jumping to incorrect pastoral conclusions from theologically correct doctrines? (And if we had criticized on pastoral grounds those who discouraged frequent communion, they probably would have thought we were in error theologically. Are we now above thinking that those who criticize the Church pastorally must be mistaken theologically?)

You might object that the cause of our pastoral problems is not the Church's pastoring but the lack of response of individual Catholics, whether clergy or laity, to sacramental grace. Grace produces effects that are independent of the dispositions of the receiver, but the lived effects of grace, the fruits of grace in the life of the receiver, are dependent on the dispositions of the receiver. If we do not properly respond to grace, it is our fault.

That analysis does not go far enough. The doctrine of the independent (ex opere operato) as opposed to the lived (ex opere operantis) effects of the sacraments is balanced by the doctrine that grace presupposes and perfects nature. We are by nature social beings who achieve the fullness of life, including spiritual life, only by helping and being helped by one another. That is why God put such a rich diversity of ministries in the Church.

His gifts were that some should be apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, some

pastors and teachers, to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ . . . . We are to grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ, from whom the whole body, joined and knit together by every joint with which it is supplied, when each part is working properly, makes bodily growth and upbuilds itself in love (Eph 4:11-16; and see 1 Co 12:28-30. Emphasis here and in other Scripture quotations is, of course, supplied).

Sacramental grace is meant to bear fruit through the members of the Christian community interacting, and especially through the work of pastoral leaders, both ordained and lay; grace is meant to produce its lived effects by providing the power for fruitful pastoral work. Why else was it the purpose of Vatican II to renew the Church pastorally? St. Paul says "Christ did not send me to baptize but to preach the gospel (which I will hereafter translate as 'the Great News')" (I Cor 1:17). That is, Christ did not send him to perform sacramental baptism but to lead Christians to the dispositions necessary for the lived effects of the sacraments.

The effectiveness of the sacraments, therefore, is the individual's responsibility, but not solely the individual's responsibility.

Son of man, I have appointed you a watchman for the house of Israel. When you hear a word from my mouth, you shall warn them for me. If I say to the wicked man, You shall surely die; and you do not warn him or speak out to dissuade him from his wicked conduct so that he may live: that wicked man shall die for his sin, but I will hold you responsible for his death. If, on the other hand, you have warned the wicked man, yet he has not turned away from his evil nor from his wicked conduct, then he shall die for his sin, but you shall save your life.

If a virtuous man turns from virtue and does wrong when I place a stumbling block before him, he shall die. He shall die for his sin, and his virtuous deeds shall not be remembered; but I will hold you responsible for his death if you did not warn him. When, on the other hand, you have warned a virtuous man not to sin, and he



has in fact not sinned, he shall surely live because of the warning, and you shall save your own life" (Ez 3:17-21, NAB; and see 33:1-9).

Deplorably, the Church in western society appears to often have an even worse problem than mere pastoral omissions: the teaching of false or watered down doctrine and sometimes of outright sinful behavior. But I believe that a necessary condition for overcoming doctrinal dissent is for the Church to have a strong spiritual life. The pastoral failings I am talking about are failings in those parts of the Church where sound doctrine is usually preached. Would we have so much theological dissent if in places where sound doctrine is taught the Church was more successful in living up to its doctrine and Catholics were finding their spiritual needs met? Vatican II's advice for overcoming atheism applies equally to heterodoxy:

The remedy which must be applied to atheism, however, is to be sought in a proper presentation of the Church's teaching, as well as in the integral life of the Church and her members. For it is the function of the Church . . . to make God the Father and his incarnate Son present and in a sense visible. This result is achieved chiefly by the witness of a living and mature faith. . . Many martyrs have given luminous witness to this faith and continue to do so. This faith needs to prove its fruitfulness by penetrating the believer's entire life (Pastoral Constitution on The Church in the Modern World, 22).

In my diocese (Boston), the Church was getting weaker as an institution and had less and less influence on the behavior of Catholics long before the sex and cover-up crises were exposed, despite the fact that the preaching I heard was 99% orthodox. Teaching orthodox doctrine is not enough if the Church does not foster the dispositions needed to release the power of the sacraments. The problem is not that the formation the Church is giving us is bad. On the contrary, where orthodox doctrine is taught, spiritual formation probably consists almost entirely of good things. But in effect, even doctrinally sound pastoring has unintentionally kept "secret" truths on which the fruitfulness of the sacraments most depends.

To show this I will present the neglected truths one-by-one and will explain their importance by using the Church's teaching on the "Hierarchy of Christian Truths," some of which are the basis of others and need to be adequately taught before the others can be properly understood. Readers can judge for themselves, in the light of Church teaching, whether the neglected teachings are indeed truths and how important they are for our ability to cooperate with grace. Assuming these truths are as important as I will try to show, readers can also judge whether the pastoral life of the Church has made us sufficiently aware of them. To counter secularism we must do more than merely present them in catechism classes. We must constantly reinforce them by proclaiming them with the prominence they deserve.

Catholics have a sacred re-birth right not only to know crucial the truths they have been missing but also to know why those truths have been neglected. If causal reasoning about our failure to overcome secular influences leads us to suspect that something is missing from our pastoring, it will inevitably lead us to suspect that something is wrong, by way of omission, in the pastoral preparation of priests and deacons. So it will be important for me also to show that the current dilemma is the result of understandable historical and cultural conditions; no one or no group is to blame. The problems in today's pastoring are the fault of neither the Church's leaders, in general, nor of our conscientious seminary officials, in particular.

If you are a priest or deacon, please do not be taken aback by the suggestion that there could have been omissions in your pastoral education. You probably recall your time in the seminary as a wonderful experience. The reason you recall it that way is that it probably was a wonderful experience. But being a great experience can have disadvantages. All education has shortcomings. The more we enjoy the experience our education provides, the more difficulty we will have in seeing its shortcomings. Like any culture, the seminary's culture must include elements that are good and elements that are not good. And as with any culture, some problems with the seminary's culture will be better seen by those not

enculturated with them. A lay person like myself cannot know what goes on in seminary education, but I am only talking about what is not going on in it. Lay people can judge what must be missing from it by observing what is chronically missing from the spiritual formation the Church provides at the local level.

Among doctrinally sound priests and deacons there are many prayerful, dedicated, self-sacrificing men who are doing their best given their education. They are certainly not to blame for our pastoral problems. If I am right about our pastoring, they must be innocent victims of inadequate pastoral preparation. We have the power of the sacraments at our disposal, but our leaders have not been taught what is needed to fully unleash that power, especially the Eucharist's power, and especially in a secular environment. Again, in saying that ordained ministers are innocent victims of inadequate training, I am not putting the blame on seminary teachers and administrators. The historical explanation of how the Church got into this pastoral crisis will show that those in charge of seminary education are themselves innocent victims of the history because of which that training omits what it does.

Specifically, pastoral strategy since the Protestant Reformation has stressed "distinctively Catholic" truths, truths about the apostolic Church, the sacraments, Mary and the saints, purgatory, etc. But truths of those kinds logically and pedagogically depend on truths about God, Jesus and salvation that are prior in the Church's hierarchy of truths. Because Protestantism began by sharing our belief in truths at the top of the hierarchy, most of society continued to support belief in those truths after the Reformation. That allowed post-Reformation pastoral strategy to work to a significant degree, even though it placed an otherwise unbalanced emphasis on truths that are not as crucial for the fruitfulness of the sacraments as those at the top of the hierarchy. As a result, now that secularism has replaced Protestantism as our main opponent, priests and deacons are blamelessly unprepared to release the sacraments' power against it.

I will begin the discussion of dispositions necessary for grace to bear fruit by explain-

ing, in Chapter 1, why St. Paul repeatedly calls on the Corinthians' awareness of "the surpassing grace of God in you" (2 Cor 9:14) to motivate them to Christian behavior. This indicates that one necessary disposition for responding fully to actual grace is an appreciation of what sanctifying grace is, the infinitely glorious life of the Trinity dwelling within us.

Our appreciation of the divine life in us is, of course, as much a gift from God as is sanctifying grace itself; so our disposition for appreciating that life must itself result from our prior cooperation with actual grace. But starting with sanctifying grace will allow me to do several things that are important for discussing the other dispositions. It will allow me to present the Church's teaching on the hierarchy of truths and show how far our usual spiritual formation is from reflecting the importance of that hierarchy. It will also allow me to offer evidence that priests and deacons are not learning how to foster the spiritual dispositions we need for unleashing the power of the sacraments. And it will allow me to explain the historical and cultural reasons why Church leaders and seminary officials are not to blame.

As Chapter 1 deals with our insufficient appreciation of what sanctifying grace is, Chapter 2 deals with our insufficient understanding of how we cooperate with actual grace. Since an appreciation of sanctifying grace itself requires cooperating with actual grace, there must be dispositions for releasing the power of the sacraments that are more fundamental than that appreciation. Chapter 2 explains those dispositions by explaining why Paul could say "Christ did not send me to baptize but to preach the Great News."

Chapter 2 will show that we have failed to learn the positive aspects of evangelical Protestant pastoral methods that, despite whatever defects they also have, make those methods successful in converting Catholics all over the world. We understand the theological ex opere operato, how sacramental grace produces effects independently of us; evangelicals often understand, or at least practice, the pastoral ex opere operantis, how to foster the dispositions needed for the lived effects of grace, better than we do. Also, in our correct theological reaction against the error that we are justified by faith alone, not faith and

works, we have neglected the pastoral significance of Paul's repeated insistence that we are justified by faith as opposed to works. As a result, today's pastoring cannot adequately lead us to achieve the good works, especially in the area of social action, that grace calls us to. (This is not to imply that Protestant pastoring achieves them better. Catholic pastoring, being doctrinally complete and founded on apostolic sacramental powers and governing authority, always has the potential to produce a spirituality that in some instances is more profound than Protestant spirituality. But we clearly are not doing that often enough in the secular west.)

Because our thinking about the issue of faith and works has too often been confined to the theological level, the basic dispositions for cooperating with actual grace at the practical level are not only different from what most Catholics, clergy or lay, would probably say, they are much less complicated (which does not mean they are always easy); in the last analysis only two dispositions are required for that "one thing necessary" (Lk 10:42), living the life of sanctifying grace. If we do not understand the simplicity of the instructions Jesus gave us for taking advantage of what he has done for us, we understand neither those instructions nor what he has done for us. Essential to the Great News is the fact, not only that Jesus did everything we need for us, but that he made it as uncomplicated as possible for us to take advantage of what he did. Chapter 2 is the core of this book.

Chapter 3 will show that Christ explicitly made the Church's being a visible brother/sisterhood the goal at which the work of his pastoral ministers must aim. Since sanctifying grace is the divine family's life within us, it is not just something lived in and by individuals; it is something lived between and among individuals. The Church's life is meant to be a sacramental sign of the Trinity; to accomplish that, the Church must be a loving family in a visible, not just spiritual, sense. Out of fear of discriminating against non-Christians, we have, in effect, suppressed Christ's New Law of mutual love between brother and sister Christians. But Christian brother/sisterhood is supposed to be the environment where grace empowers us to actually practice, not just preach, love of all our neighbors. Usually,

Catholics are a family in a "spiritual," but not visible, sense, and so practice Protestant doctrine, not Catholic, on the kind of unity the Church is supposed to have.

We also need Christian brother/sisterhood as environments supporting our Christian commitment. But the decline of natural community in western society has deprived us of that kind of environment. That is why secularism has not yet weakened the Church in the third world where natural community still exists, though only temporarily. The solution is not in sociological knowledge but in knowing how to foster the foundation of Christian brother/sisterhood: each Christian's personal response to sacramental grace.

Catholics also lack a sufficient awareness that sanctifying grace gives each of us the glorious vocation of bringing divine life to others. Chapter 4 will explain that our pastoring has not balanced the truth that salvation does not require being Christian, only responding to whatever actual grace one receives, with the truth that all grace comes from Christ and so through the prayers, works and sufferings of his body, the Church. As a result, we don't know the most important reasons why we must evangelize: Evangelizing does not just bring divine life to the converted; it ensures that the Church has all the workers God wants for its mission of sharing divine life with everyone, and evangelizing allows the royal priesthood to offer up sufferings borne specifically for witnessing to Christ.

Chapter 1 shows that one necessary disposition for the effectiveness of the sacraments is an appreciation of what sanctifying grace is. Chapter 2 shows that the needed appreciation is itself a gift, and so comes from other subjective dispositions for cooperating with actual grace. Chapter 6 looks at that gift from an objective exegetical and theological point of view corresponding to the pastoral point of view of our subjective dispositions for receiving it. We need to know that the necessary appreciative awareness of the indwelling of the Trinity is promised to every Christian as an essential element in the work of the Paraclete.

Chapters 2 through 5 end with specific practical suggestions by which pastoral leaders, ordained and lay, can implement their ideas.

One of the questions I bring up when discussing sanctifying grace in Chapter 1 is the issue of priestly education. I return to that question in Chapter 6 to reinforce and complete the explanation of why our dedicated priests, including bishops and seminary officials, are not to blame for the doctrinally sound Church's pastoral weakness. We must always be cognizant of a lesson taught by history from the time of the very first Pope (Gal 2: 11-14): Despite the infallibility of our doctrine, culturally contingent perspectives can make us jump to pastoral conclusions that appear to be just as self-evident as they are false. As Chapter 1 will show, pastoral renewal can require us to break out of assumptions so deep that we are hardly aware that they are assumptions, not doctrine.

If my diagnosis of what is missing in the Church's pastoring is incorrect, however, it would not follow that everything is alright with our pastoring. Why the doctrinally orthodox Church's efforts are so ineffective in overcoming secularism, when those efforts are supposed to have the power of the sacraments behind them, is a question that concerns every Catholic. Why do we not see the full power of the sacraments unleashed? We cannot place the blame entirely on the response of individual Catholics until we can exclude the possibility that some of the fault lies in spiritual formation they receive.

#### Notes

<sup>1</sup> Quoted on the web site [Zenit.org](http://Zenit.org) September 13, 2004; reference number ZE04091305.

<sup>2</sup> On the reason our weakness before secularism has been, at least until now, more of a first-world than a third-world phenomenon see Chapter 3, Section 4.