

*The Knights of Columbus presents
The Luke E. Hart Series
Basic Elements of the Catholic Faith*

INTRODUCTION TO CATHOLIC LITURGY

PART TWO • SECTION ONE OF
CATHOLIC CHRISTIANITY

*What does a Catholic believe?
How does a Catholic worship?
How does a Catholic live?*

Based on the
Catechism of the Catholic Church

by
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This booklet is one of a series of 30 that offer a colloquial expression of major elements of the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*. Pope John Paul II, under whose authority the *Catechism* was first released in 1992, urged such versions so that each people and each culture can appropriate its content as its own.

The booklets are not a substitute for the *Catechism*, but are offered only to make its contents more accessible. The series is at times poetic, colloquial, playful, and imaginative; at all times it strives to be faithful to the Faith.

The Catholic Information Service recommends reading at least one Hart series booklet each month to gain a deeper, more mature understanding of the Faith. You can find the complete listing of the booklets in the Hart series on the order form in the back of this booklet.

SECTION 1:

INTRODUCTION TO

CATHOLIC LITURGY

1. *Liturgy is not “soft”*

We need to begin with a very general point about the whole subject of liturgy, because this will make a difference to all the specific points about liturgy, as the color of a light makes a difference to everything it shines on.

To many people, “liturgy” sounds like something “soft,” something vaguely sweet and sleepy. Liturgical terms like “Paschal mystery” and “sacramental signs” sound somehow remote and removed from real life, like a fairy tale. Many dislike the subject of liturgy because it feels “soft” compared to creeds and commandments, the other two parts of the Catholic faith. Others get exactly the same feeling of “softness,” but *like* it. They think it is more “creative,” and like to “celebrate community,” i.e. themselves. They dislike “hard” creeds and commandments, but like “soft” liturgy.

Both are wrong. The liturgy is not a “soft” thing, like a human experience or feeling; it is “hard,” it is objectively real. It

is not a humanly invented work of art, either ancient or modern; it is neither a delicate, ornate, out-of-date antique nor a practical, up-to-date piece of contemporary “relevance.”

For it is not some *thing* at all but *someone*: Jesus Christ, who becomes really present and active in the liturgy. “It is this mystery of Christ that the Church proclaims and celebrates in her liturgy...” (CCC 1068).*

Furthermore, this person is not dead but alive. He is not just the object of our thoughts and symbols; he actually *does things to us* in his sacraments. (That’s why he instituted them!) And the thing he does is, in one word, salvation. “[T]he Church celebrates in the liturgy above all the Paschal mystery [Christ’s death and resurrection] by which Christ accomplished the work of our salvation” (CCC 1067).

However, these past events are not *repeated*, as if they were incomplete when first done in history. Christ said on the Cross, “It is finished!” (John 19:30). “The Paschal mystery of Christ is celebrated, not repeated. It is the celebrations that are repeated” (CCC 1104).

Finally, “Christian liturgy not only recalls the events that saved us but actualizes them, makes them present” (CCC 1104). Christ is not merely *remembered*, like a dead man who *was*, but he is *encountered* as he really *is*, “alive and kicking” like a stallion.

“It is always shocking to meet life where we thought we were alone... when the [fishing] line pulls at your hand, when something breathes beside you in the darkness... ‘Look out!’ we cry, ‘it’s alive!’ There comes a moment when the children who have been playing at burglars hush suddenly: was that a real footstep in the hall? There comes a moment when people who

*CCC= *Catechism of the Catholic Church*

have been dabbling in religion ('man's search for God'!) suddenly draw back. Supposing we really found Him? We never meant it to come to that! Worse still, supposing He had found us?" (C. S. Lewis, *Miracles*).

2. *Liturgy as God's work*

The word "liturgy" means "work" or public service. The essence of the liturgy is the actual work or deed done by God's grace in Christ, not the humanly invented ceremonies that carry it. It is not merely something we do, but something God does.

And what God does is redeem us, save us from sin and make us holy. "Liturgy" is not the ceremonies, liturgy is the work done by them.

"[I]t is in the liturgy, especially in the divine sacrifice of the Eucharist, that 'the work of our redemption is accomplished'..."⁴ (CCC 1068).

It is "*accomplished*" – it is really done, not just symbolized. A sacrament *actually effects what it signifies* (see Part II, Section 2). "Through the liturgy Christ, our redeemer and high priest, continues the work of our redemption..." (CCC 1069). In all the sacraments Christ is really present and acting on our souls, saving and sanctifying them through the material signs. In fact, all three Persons of the Trinity are present: the Father becomes "God-with-us" ("Emmanuel") in his Son, and the Son becomes present to us in the Holy Spirit.

In addition to being a work of God, liturgy is also a work of man – not an *addition* to God's work, but a *participation* in God's work. "The word 'liturgy' originally meant 'a public work'.... In Christian tradition it means the participation of the People of God in 'the work of God.'"⁵ (CCC 1069). Through the liturgy

God gives us the dignity of sharing in his own work, *opus Dei*, which is the work of our redemption.

It is a work of God and man together because it is a work of the Church, which is the Body of Christ, who is God and man together. Christ, the Church's Head, is no more remote from his Body than your head is remote from your body. The Church has not been beheaded!

“In it [the liturgy] full public worship is performed by the Mystical Body of Jesus Christ, that is, by the Head and his members. From this it follows that every liturgical celebration, because it is an action of Christ the priest and of his Body which is the Church, is a sacred action surpassing all others. No other action of the Church can equal its efficacy...”⁸ (CCC 1070).

3. The diverse and changing character of liturgy

Liturgy has more diversity and change than creed or code because it is a joint work of God and man, not just a work of God. It is less “unilateral” than creeds and codes, for the creeds summarize the truth that comes from God, not from man, and the commandments summarize the moral demands that come from God, not from man.

But though the forms of the liturgy are diverse and changeable, its substance is not; it is as hard and resistant and sharp as the Cross.

When people think of Catholic liturgy, some think of Gothic cathedrals, with dark, mysterious interiors, bright stained glass, incense, and solemn organ music. Others think of monastic simplicity and inwardness. Others think of folksy enthusiasm and guitar music. Still others think of feeling bored and sleepy. But all these things are accidental, like clothing. Liturgy is not essentially a matter of aesthetic beauty or of psychological

feelings. It is essentially the work of our salvation, accomplished by God in Christ, applied to our lives through the Church's sacramental rites.

“The mystery celebrated in the liturgy is one, but the forms of its celebration are diverse” (CCC 1200). For “[t]he mystery of Christ is so unfathomably rich that it cannot be exhausted by its expression in any single liturgical tradition...”⁶⁶ (CCC 1201)

The fundamental rule for all things in the Church can be summarized in this famous threefold formula from Saint Augustine: “In essentials, unity; in non-essentials, diversity; in all things, charity.” This applies especially to liturgy.

- 1) “In essentials, unity.” “In the liturgy... there is an *immutable* part, a part that is divinely instituted and of which the Church is the guardian, and parts that *can be changed*, which the Church has the power and on occasion also the duty to adapt to the cultures of recently evangelized peoples”⁷³ (CCC 1205). The changes in adaptation are for the sake of better propagating the unchanging essence of the liturgy, not for the sake of change itself.
- 2) “In non-essentials, diversity.” The Catholic Church has many different rites, for “catholic” means “universal,” and “universal” means “many in one,” or “one in many.” “The Church is catholic, capable of integrating into her unity, while purifying them, all the authentic riches of cultures ”⁶⁸ (CCC 1202). “The celebration of the liturgy, therefore, should correspond to the genius and culture of the different peoples.”⁷⁰ In order that the mystery of Christ be ‘made known to all the nations . . .’,⁷¹ it must be proclaimed, celebrated, and lived in all cultures in

such a way that they themselves are not abolished by it, but redeemed and fulfilled”⁷² (CCC 1204).

“The liturgical traditions or rites presently in use in the Church are the Latin (principally the Roman rite, but also the rites of certain local churches, such as the Ambrosian rite, or those of certain religious orders) and the Byzantine, Alexandrian or Coptic, Syriac, Armenian, Maronite, and Chaldean rites.... ‘... Holy Mother Church holds all lawfully recognized rites to be of equal right and dignity, and ... wishes to preserve them in the future and to foster them in every way’”⁶⁹ (CCC 1203).

- 3) “In all things, charity.” “Liturgical diversity can be a source of enrichment, but it can also provoke tensions, mutual misunderstandings, and even schisms. In this matter it is clear that diversity must not damage unity. It must express only fidelity to the common faith.... Cultural adaptation also requires a conversion of heart and even, where necessary, a breaking with ancestral customs incompatible with the Catholic faith”⁷⁴ (CCC 1206) – e.g. suttee in India, or voodoo in Haiti.

4. *The liturgy in history*

Where did the liturgy come from?

“The Church was made manifest to the world on the day of Pentecost by the outpouring of the Holy Spirit.¹ The gift of the Spirit ushers in a new era... the age of the Church, during which Christ...communicates his work of salvation through the liturgy of the Church, ‘until he comes’² [at the end of time]” (CCC 1076).

Like Scripture, liturgy is essentially historical. It is an event, not just an idea. Christ’s Incarnation, death, and Resurrection “is a real event that occurred in our history, but it is unique: all other

historical events happen once, and then they pass away, swallowed up in the past.... Christ, by contrast, cannot remain in the past because... all that Christ is – all that he did and suffered for all men – participates in the divine eternity, and so transcends all times while being made present in them all. The event of the Cross and Resurrection *abides...*” (CCC 1085).

What does it mean that Christ is “present” in the liturgy? Three things, at least: he is really “present” as opposed to *absent*; he is also “present” as opposed to *past*; finally, he is offering himself as a “present” or *gift* of grace.

The sacraments are historical events, like Christ. They *happen*. They are the extension of the “good *news*,” the Gospel facts and events, made present here and now. “...Christ now acts through the sacraments he instituted to communicate his grace.... By the action of Christ and the power of the Holy Spirit they make present efficaciously the grace that they signify” (CCC 1084). “By his power he is present in the sacraments so that when anybody baptizes, it is really Christ himself who baptizes” (CCC 1088).

5. *The relationship between the liturgies of the Old and New Covenants*

“In the sacramental economy [order] the Holy Spirit fulfills what was prefigured in the *Old Covenant*. Since Christ’s Church was ‘prepared in marvelous fashion in the history of the people of Israel and in the Old Covenant,’¹⁴ the Church’s liturgy has retained certain elements of the worship of the Old Covenant as integral and irreplaceable, adopting them as her own: notably, reading the Old Testament; praying the Psalms; above all, recalling the saving events and significant realities which have found their fulfillment in the mystery of Christ (promise and covenant, Exodus and Passover, kingdom and temple, exile and return)” (CCC 1093).

“This catechesis [the harmony of the two Testaments] unveils what lay hidden under the letter of the Old Testament: the mystery of Christ” (CCC 1094). Old and New Covenants complement each other, interpret each other, and explain each other.

On the one hand, the Jewish Exodus and Passover, temple and law, illumine and deepen our understanding and appreciation of Christ. Christians should become familiar with the Old Testament and with Jewish law and liturgy for this reason. “A better knowledge of the Jewish people’s faith and religious life as professed and lived even now can help our better understanding of certain aspects of Christian liturgy.... In its characteristic structure the Liturgy of the Word originated in Jewish prayer.... [O]ur most venerable prayers, including the Lord’s Prayer, have parallels in Jewish prayer.... The relationship between Jewish liturgy and Christian liturgy, but also their differences in content, are particularly evident in the great feasts of the liturgical year, such as Passover. Christians and Jews both celebrate the Passover. For Jews, it is the Passover of history...; for Christians, it is... fulfilled in the death and resurrection of Christ...” (CCC 1096).

On the other hand, the deepest significance of these elements in the Old Covenant can be understood only in light of Christ, whom they point to. “Thus the flood and Noah’s ark prefigured salvation by Baptism,¹⁷ ...and manna in the desert prefigured the Eucharist, ‘the true bread from heaven’”¹⁸ (John 6:32; 1 Corinthians 10:1-6; CCC 1094).

Saint Thomas Aquinas explains the principle behind this symbolism:

“It is befitting Holy Writ [Scripture] to put forward divine and spiritual truths by means of comparisons with material things. For God provides for everything according to the capacity

of its nature. Now it is natural to man to attain to spiritual truths through sensible objects, because all our knowledge originates from sense. Hence in Holy Writ spiritual truths are fittingly taught under the likeness of material things” (*Summa Theologiae*, I, 1, 9).

“The author of Holy Writ is God, in whose power it is to signify his meaning not by words only [as man also can do] but also by things themselves. [That is to say that the historical events and things pointed to by the words of Scripture are often providentially arranged by God to point to, or symbolize, other things.] So, whereas in every other science, *things* are signified by [human] *words*, in this [Scripture]... the things signified by the words have themselves also a signification. Thus that first significance, whereby words signify things, belongs to the first sense, the historical or literal. That signification whereby the things signified by words have themselves also a signification is called the spiritual sense, which is based on the literal and presupposes it. Now this spiritual sense has a threefold division. For [1] as the Apostle says [Hebrews 10:1], the Old Law is a figure [symbol] of the New Law, and... [2] the New Law itself is a figure of future glory. And [3] in the New Law, whatever our Head has done is a type [model] of what we ought to do” (*Summa Theologiae* I, 1, 10).

6. *The Holy Spirit in the liturgy*

“You ask how the bread becomes the Body of Christ, and the wine... the Blood of Christ. I shall tell you: the Holy Spirit comes upon them and accomplishes what surpasses every word and thought.... Let it be enough for you to understand that it is by the Holy Spirit, just as it was of the Holy Virgin and by the

Holy Spirit that the Lord...took flesh”²⁴ (Saint John Damascene; CCC 1106).

It is the power of the same Spirit that changed chaos to cosmos at creation (Genesis 1:2), changed water to wine at the wedding feast at Cana (John 2:1-11), changed bread and wine to Christ’s flesh and blood in the Eucharist (Luke 22:14-20), and will change our flesh and blood to immortal “spiritual bodies” in the resurrection (1 Corinthians 15:35-58).

“In every liturgical action the Holy Spirit is sent in order to bring us into communion with Christ and so to form his Body” (CCC 1108).

“The mission of the Holy Spirit in the liturgy of the Church is to prepare the assembly to encounter Christ; to recall and manifest Christ to the faith of the assembly; to make the saving work of Christ present and active by his transforming power; and to make the gift of communion bear fruit in the Church” (CCC 1112).

The Spirit completes the liturgy as he completes and perfects the Trinitarian ‘economy [plan] of salvation.’ The Spirit reveals Christ, and Christ reveals the Father. The Father sends the Son, and the Son together with the Father sends the Spirit. “In the liturgy of the Church, God the Father is blessed and adored as the source of all the blessings of creation and salvation with which he has blessed us in his Son, in order to give us the Spirit...” (CCC 1110).

7. *Who celebrates the liturgy?*

Scripture’s answer to this question, as summarized in the *Catechism*, will probably surprise you.

“The Book of Revelation of Saint John, read in the Church’s liturgy, first reveals to us,

[1] “A throne stood in heaven, with one seated on the throne’: ‘the Lord God’ [Revelation 4:2, 8].

[2] “It then shows the Lamb, ‘standing as though it had been slain’: Christ crucified and risen, the one high priest.... [Revelation 5:6]

[3] “Finally it presents ‘the river of the water of life... flowing from the throne of God and of the Lamb,’ one of the most beautiful symbols of the Holy Spirit”³ (Revelation 22:1; CCC 1137).

So the One adored in the Heavenly liturgy is the Trinity. Now who are the adorers?

“These are the ones who take part in the service of the praise of God:...

- 1) “the heavenly powers [angels],
- 2) “all creation (the four living beings),
- 3) “the servants of the Old and New Covenants, the twenty-four elders [the twelve tribes of Israel plus the twelve apostles],
- 4) “the new People of God (the one hundred and forty-four thousand) [a symbolic number for totality: 12x12x1000],
- 5) “especially the martyrs ‘slain for the Word of God,’
- 6) “and the all-holy Mother of God (the Woman) [clothed with the sun],...
- 7) “and finally, ‘a great multitude which no one could number, from every nation, from all tribes, and peoples and tongues” (Revelation 4-5; 7:1-8; 14:1; 6:9-11; 12:1; 21:9, 12; CCC 1138).

The liturgy is far greater than the universe! In the liturgy all creation adores God, fulfilling the Psalmist’s last and highest

aspiration: “Let everything that breathes praise the Lord” (Ps 150). And “[i]t is in this eternal liturgy that the Spirit and the Church enable us to participate...” (CCC 1139) – not only after death in heaven but right now on earth, tomorrow morning, or “...whenever we celebrate the mystery of salvation in the sacraments” (CCC 1139).

The liturgy is not in the world, the world is in the liturgy. The Heavenly liturgy surrounds the world, and the earthly liturgy participates in the Heavenly, since the Church Militant (the Church on earth) and the Church Triumphant (the Church in heaven) is one Church. During the liturgy “we are surrounded by a great cloud of witnesses” (Hebrews 12:1), like athletes surrounded by cheering fans at a stadium.

8. *The roles of clergy and laity in the liturgy*

It is not the clergy alone who celebrate the liturgy, but the whole Church. If the Church on earth and the Church in Heaven make up one Church, certainly the clergy and the laity of the Church on earth make up one Church, not two. “It is the whole *community*, the Body of Christ united with its Head [Christ], that celebrates. ‘Liturgical services are not private functions, but are celebrations of the [whole] Church ...’”⁷ (CCC 1140).

“...But they touch individual members of the Church in different ways, depending on their orders, their role in the liturgical services, and their actual participation in them”⁷ (CCC 1140). For the Church is an organism, not just an organization; and in an organism each individual organ is unique yet also one with each other organ and with the whole body (see 1 Corinthians 12). Two pennies in a pile are neither unique nor organically united with each other; a lung and a kidney in a body are both. And the Church is a *body*.

“Mother Church earnestly desires that all the faithful should be led to that full, conscious, and active participation in liturgical celebrations which is demanded by the very nature of the liturgy...”¹¹ (CCC 1141). “In liturgical celebrations each person, minister or layman, who has an office to perform should carry out *all* and *only* those parts which pertain to his office by the nature of the rite and the norms of the liturgy”¹⁵ (CCC 1144). The worshippers at the liturgy are like the cast of a play or the instruments in a symphony: each part is necessary, and each functions for the whole. We do not go to Church as we go to a restaurant, to get individual meals, but as we go to fight in an army or to play on a football team: to perform a great work in common.

In this common task there is order and leadership. “All the members [of the Body] do not have the same function” (Romans 12:4). “The ordained minister [bishop, priest or deacon] is, as it were, an ‘icon’ of Christ the priest” (CCC 1142). And therefore the function of the clergy is to serve the laity, as Christ did (see John 13:3-17). “The ordained ministry or *ministerial* priesthood is at the service of the baptismal priesthood”³⁸ (CCC 1120) – that is, the priesthood of all baptized believers (see Part II, Section 7).

The ordained priesthood is essential, for “[t]he ordained priesthood guarantees that it really is Christ who acts in the sacraments...” (CCC 1120). Without priests, we would have only a human religious “club” instead of a divine agent of salvation. Priests are our link, not only to the right faith, but to the right Savior, to the historical Jesus. “The saving mission entrusted by the Father to his incarnate Son [a mission that includes the sacramental liturgy; indeed, that culminates in the sacramental liturgy] was committed to the apostles and through them to their successors [the bishops they ordained, and the bishops those bishops ordained, right down to our present bishops]: they

receive the Spirit of Jesus to act in his name and in his person”³⁹ (cf. John 20:21-23; Luke 24:47; Matthew 28:18-20; CCC 1120). When Father Flanagan says “This is My Body,” that is Jesus Christ who speaks, not Father Flanagan. It is not Father Flanagan’s body that saves us!

The “apostolic succession” of bishops and sacramentally ordained priests bonds us to Christ. “The ordained minister is the sacramental bond that ties the liturgical action to what the apostles said and did and, through them, to the words and actions of Christ, the source and foundation of the sacraments” (CCC 1120).

9. The sources of sacred symbols

Man is a symbol-maker. “In human life, signs and symbols occupy an important place. As a being at once body and spirit, man expresses and perceives spiritual realities through physical signs and symbols. As a social being man needs signs and symbols to communicate with others, through language, gestures, and actions. The same holds true for his relationship with God” (CCC 1146).

“A sacramental celebration is woven from signs and symbols” (CCC 1145) from three main sources: nature, society, and history.

Nature as a source of symbols. “God speaks to man through the visible creation. The material cosmos is so presented to man’s intelligence that he can read there traces of its Creator (cf. Wisdom 13:1; Romans 1:19 f; Acts 14:17).¹⁶ Light and darkness, wind and fire, water and earth, the tree and its fruit speak of God and symbolize both his greatness and his nearness” (CCC 1147). “Inasmuch as they are creatures [of God], these perceptible realities can become means of expressing the action of God...” (CCC 1148). “The great religions of mankind witness, often

impressively, to this cosmic and symbolic meaning...” (CCC 1149). Symbolism is the natural language of all religions, for invisible realities must be signified through visible signs.

Society as a source of symbols. “The same is true of signs and symbols taken from the social life of man: washing and anointing, breaking bread and sharing the cup can express the sanctifying presence of God...” (CCC 1148).

Jewish history as a source of symbols. “The Chosen People received from God distinctive signs and symbols that marked its liturgical life.... Among these liturgical signs from the Old Covenant are circumcision, anointing and consecration of kings and priests, laying on of hands, sacrifices, and above all the Passover. The Church sees in these signs a prefiguring of the sacraments of the New Covenant” (CCC 1150).

The Church’s use of these three sources of symbols. “The liturgy of the Church presupposes, integrates and sanctifies elements from creation and human culture, conferring on them the dignity of signs of grace, of the new creation in Jesus Christ” (CCC 1149). As an instance of the principle that “grace redeems and perfects nature” – that is, the Creator’s supernatural actions use and perfect his creatures rather than setting them aside – “[t]he sacraments of the Church do not abolish but purify and integrate all the richness of the signs and symbols of the cosmos and of social life. Further, they fulfill the types and figures of the Old Covenant, signify and make actively present the salvation wrought by Christ, and prefigure and anticipate the glory of heaven” (CCC 1152). (These last three are the three symbolic meanings of events in Scripture according to Saint Thomas Aquinas, indicated earlier in paragraph 5).

10. *Four kinds of symbols in the liturgy: actions, words, images, and music*

Actions. “A sacramental celebration is a meeting of God’s children with their Father... this meeting takes the form of a dialogue, through actions and words... the symbolic actions are already a language...” (CCC 1153). Actions are a kind of word too; they point to something beyond themselves, they “speak” something. And often “actions speak louder than words.”

Words. “The *liturgy of the Word* is an integral part of sacramental celebrations... [Not only the Word itself but also] the signs which accompany the Word of God should be emphasized: the book of the Word (a lectionary or a book of the Gospels), its veneration (procession, incense, candles), the place of its proclamation (lectern or ambo), its audible and intelligible reading, the minister’s homily which extends its proclamation, and the responses of the assembly (acclamations, meditation psalms, litanies, and profession of faith)” (CCC 1154).

Images. “The sacred image, the liturgical icon, principally represents Christ” (CCC 1159). “All the signs in the liturgical celebration are related to *Christ*... [S]acred images of the holy Mother of God and of the saints as well... signify Christ, who is glorified in them. They make manifest the ‘cloud of witnesses’²⁹ ...transfigured ‘into his likeness...’³⁰ (CCC 1161).

An image “cannot represent the invisible and incomprehensible God, but the incarnation of the Son of God has ushered in a new ‘economy’ of images: ‘Previously God, who has neither a body nor a face, absolutely could not be represented by an image. [That is why Muslims, who worship the true God but deny his incarnation, forbid all images.] But now that he has made himself visible in the flesh and has lived with men, I can make an image of what I have seen of God... and contemplate the

glory of the Lord, his face unveiled”²⁷ (Saint John Damascene; CCC 1159).

Music. “The musical tradition of the universal Church is a treasure of inestimable value, greater even than that of any other art... .”²⁰ (CCC 1156). “He who sings prays twice,” says Saint Augustine.

Angels sing. As our lives are surrounded by their guardianship, so is our liturgical music surrounded by theirs. It is part of their music, part of the song of the Church Triumphant in Heaven.

“Song and music fulfill their function as signs in a manner all the more significant when they are ‘more closely connected ... with the liturgical action,’²² according to three principal criteria: beauty expressive of prayer, the unanimous participation of the assembly ... and the solemn character of the celebration” (CCC 1157) – “solemn” because the point and purpose of the liturgy is holy: the glory of God and the sanctification of man caught up into that glory.

Here is how that glory is described by the writer of the Epistle to the Hebrews, as he is contrasting the Old Covenant with the New. Keep in mind, in reading this stirring passage, that what is being described is not life after death, not Heaven, but what Catholics do every Sunday in Church.

“For you have not come to what may be touched, a blazing fire, and darkness, and gloom, and a tempest, and the sound of a trumpet, and a voice whose words made the hearers entreat that no further messages be spoken to them.... Indeed, so terrifying was the sight that Moses said, ‘I tremble with fear.’ But you have come to Mount Zion and to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, and to innumerable angels in festal gathering, and to the assembly of the first-born who are enrolled

in Heaven, and to a judge who is God of all, and to the spirits of just men made perfect, and to Jesus, the mediator of a new covenant, and to the sprinkled blood that speaks more graciously than the blood of Abel. See that you do not refuse him who is speaking. For if they did not escape when they refused him who warned them on earth, much less shall we escape if we reject him who warns from heaven. His voice then shook the earth; but now he has promised, ‘Yet once more I will shake not only the earth but also the heavens.’ This phrase, ‘yet once more,’ indicates the removal of what is shaken, as of what has been made, in order that what cannot be shaken may remain. Therefore let us be grateful for receiving a kingdom that cannot be shaken, and thus let us offer God acceptable worship, with reverence and awe; for our God is a consuming fire” (Hebrews 12:18-29).

The “kingdom that cannot be shaken” is the same thing as the “acceptable worship.” At its center is something that looks like a little round piece of bread. It is Jesus Christ.

11. Liturgical cycles and sacred times

Liturgy has its own times. In fact, it transforms the meaning of time. Judged by secular time standards, it “wastes” time. But this “waste” of time (and energy and even money) is the most important and joyful thing man can do in his lifetime on earth. If people had not understood that, cathedrals would never have been built.

Liturgy not only transcends secular time, but it also transforms the times of our earthly lives. Liturgy sanctifies all times by its special sacred times.

“From the time of the Mosaic Law, the People of God have observed fixed feasts...” (CCC 1164) in yearly, weekly, and daily

cycles. For human life naturally moves in cycles, like the seasons; in waves, like the sea.

The center of the yearly liturgical cycle is Easter. “Beginning with the Easter Triduum [the sacred three days from the evening of Holy Thursday, through Good Friday, up to Easter Sunday] as its source of light, the new age of the Resurrection fills the whole liturgical year...” (CCC 1168). “*Easter* is not simply one feast among others, but the ‘Feast of feasts,’ the ‘Solemnity of solemnities,’ just as the Eucharist is the ‘Sacrament of sacraments’ (the Great Sacrament)” (CCC 1169). The weekly cycle’s center and source of movement is the same event, Christ’s Resurrection, celebrated each Sunday. “Once each week, on the day which she has called the Lord’s Day, she keeps the memory of the Lord’s resurrection” (CCC 1163). “When we ponder, O Christ, the marvels accomplished on this day, the Sunday of your holy resurrection, we say: ‘Blessed is Sunday, for in it began creation...the world’s salvation...’”⁴¹ (CCC 1167).

The daily cycle is observed by “...the ‘Liturgy of the Hours,’ [also called] the ‘divine office,’⁴⁶ ...‘so devised that the whole course of the day and night is made holy by the praise of God’”⁴⁷ (CCC 1174). It consists of five holy times of prayer. All clergy and some members of religious institutes are obliged to pray it every day. Recent Popes have called our era “the age of the laity,” and “[t]he laity, too, are encouraged to recite the divine office, either with the priests, or among themselves, or even individually”⁵¹ (CCC 1175). The Divine Office includes prayers, Psalms, and Scripture readings. It unites Scripture and prayer, and trains us in *lectio divina*, “divine reading,” one of the best methods of Christian prayer, “where the word of God is so read and meditated that it becomes prayer...” (CCC 1177).

12. *Sacred places*

Liturgy sanctifies all places by its sacred places, as it sanctifies all times by its sacred times.

“The worship ‘in spirit and in truth’⁵³ (John 4:24) of the New Covenant is not tied exclusively to any one place. The whole earth is sacred and entrusted to the children of men” (CCC 1179), and all men are sacred and entrusted to God: “*we* are the temple of the living God” (2 Corinthians 6:16).

This does not exclude setting apart sacred physical places, however. Without them, we forget the sacredness of all places, all creation, and all men. Thus the need for church buildings. “A church [building is]... ‘a house of prayer in which the Eucharist is celebrated and reserved, where the faithful assemble, and where is worshipped the presence of the Son of God our Savior... – this house ought to be in good taste and a worthy place for prayer and sacred ceremonial.’⁵⁷ ...[This house of God] should show Christ...” (CCC 1181). That is the fundamental criterion for Christian liturgical art and architecture. It is natural that Catholic churches are more ornate and magnificent than Protestant churches. A Protestant church building exists primarily for man to pray and worship in, but a Catholic church exists primarily to house the celebration of the Eucharist and its adoration.

13. *Visible elements in the church*

“The altar of the New Covenant is the Lord’s Cross (cf. Hebrews 13:10),⁵⁹ from which the sacraments of the Paschal mystery flow” (CCC 1182). That is why there is a crucifix above it. The crucifix *symbolizes* the Cross, but the altar *is* the Cross, for Christ becomes really present on it. “On the altar, which is the center of the church, the sacrifice of the Cross is made present

under sacramental signs. The altar is also the table of the Lord [the “Last Supper”], to which the People of God are invited”⁶⁰ (CCC 1182).

“The *tabernacle* is to be situated ‘in churches in a most worthy place with the greatest honor.’⁶¹ [The tabernacle is the beautiful golden box at the center of the altar which contains the consecrated bread of the Eucharist.] The dignity, placing, and security of the Eucharistic tabernacle should foster adoration before the Lord really present in the Blessed Sacrament of the altar”⁶² (CCC 1183).

“The *chair* of the bishop (*cathedra*) or that of the priest ‘should express his office of presiding over the assembly and of directing prayer’”⁶³ (CCC 1184).

“The *lectern (ambo)*: ‘The dignity of the Word of God requires the church to have a suitable place for announcing his message so that the attention of the people may be easily directed to that place during the liturgy of the Word’”⁶⁴ (CCC 1184).

“The gathering of the People of God begins with Baptism; a church must have a place for the celebration of *Baptism* (baptistry) and for fostering remembrance of the baptismal promises (holy water font)” (CCC 1185).

“The renewal of the baptismal life requires *penance*. A church, then, ...requires an appropriate place to receive penitents” (CCC 1185).

“A church must also be a space that invites us to... recollection and silent prayer...” (CCC 1185).

“Finally, the church has an eschatological significance [“eschatology” refers to the Last Things]. To enter into the house of God, we must cross a *threshold*, which symbolizes passing from the world wounded by sin to the world of the new Life to which

all men are called. The visible church is a symbol of the Father's house toward which the People of God are journeying and where the Father 'will wipe every tear from their eyes'⁶⁵ (Revelation 21:4). Also for this reason, the Church is the house of *all* God's children, open and welcoming" (CCC 1186). The Church's Gospel is free: "Let him who is thirsty come; let him who desires take the water of life without price" (Revelation 22:17).

14. Liturgy and spirituality

Liturgy has no "practical" purpose. Its purpose is simply to adore God and to elevate man into the life of God. Its active "work" is to *receive* the words of God and the grace of God. Its words come from the silence in which it hears and echoes God's Word.

Liturgy trains us to hear the voice of God, by creating in us the interior silence in which that voice can be heard in the soul. For God's voice is not loud and obvious, but more like a subtle whisper – as Elijah discovered long ago:

And a great and strong wind rent the mountains and broke in pieces the rocks...but the Lord was not in the wind, and after the wind an earthquake, but the Lord was not in the earthquake, and after the earthquake a fire, but the Lord was not in the fire; and after the fire a still, small voice. And when Elijah heard it, he wrapped his face in his mantle (1 Kings 19:11-13).

The point of the words and music of the liturgy is to create the silence in which we hear God, to protect and surround the silence as a frame surrounds a picture. Liturgy helps us develop the art of listening throughout our lives. For we can hear God (and the deepest hearts of our fellowmen too) only in the spaces

between the louder passions, in subtle and shy whispers. For love is both subtle and shy, and God is love.

The criterion for good liturgy is, then: does it create silence – the silence of joy-full love, worship-full wonder, and awe-full adoration?

This is one reason our ancestors' faith was often stronger than ours. Their souls were ravished to Heaven by the music of Bach and Mozart and Palestrina and Handel in churches whose "sermons in stones" spoke of the bright color and passion and joy of the saints, for they were built by saints, out of the pennies and sweat and blood of poor and oppressed but proud and grateful immigrants who would die for their faith. Who would die for (or live for) a faith whose heartbeat was echoed in the erotic pulses of secular music played to embarrassedly mumbling congregations in ugly, utilitarian buildings and by chatty "presiders" who sound like DJs?

It is said that Luther won the heart of Germany by his hymns more than by his theology. We cannot give our whole selves to a faith, even when our minds find it true and our consciences find it good, if our hearts find it ugly, shallow, and joyless. We cannot wholeheartedly embrace a faith without beauty, any more than a faith without goodness or truth.

For the beauty of the liturgy is not an extra "decoration," but an index of the truth and the goodness of the Catholic Faith. Thus, a shallow and ugly liturgy is almost always an indication of doctrinal shallowness and moral laxity as well. For liturgy is not something added on to doctrine and morality, creed and code, from without; it is that very creed and code, faith and works, truth and goodness, made visible.

The *Catechism* begins its section on the liturgy with this indispensable and essential vision of all three dimensions of the

Catholic faith as one and the same mystery: “It is this mystery of Christ that the Church celebrates and proclaims in her liturgy...” (CCC 1068). The three are one at their center because Christ is that center. The Christ who said, “I am the truth,” the Christ who is the final revelation of the God whose very essence is love and goodness, is also the Christ who “became flesh and dwelt among us, full of grace and truth, and we have beheld his glory” (John 1:14).

Notes from the Catechism in Order of Their Appearance in Quotations
Used in this Section

- ⁴ SC 2.
⁵ Cf. *Jn* 17:4.
⁸ SC 7 § 2-3.
⁶⁶ Cf. Paul VI, *EN* 63-64.
⁷³ John Paul II, *Vicesimus quintus annus*, 16; cf. SC 21.
⁶⁸ Cf. *LG* 23; *UR* 4.
⁷⁰ Cf. *SC* 37-40.
⁷¹ *Rom* 16:26.
⁷² Cf. *CT* 53.
⁶⁹ *SC* 4.
⁷⁴ John Paul II, *Vicesimus quintus annus*, 16.
¹ Cf. *SC* 6; *LG* 2.
² *1 Cor* 11:26.
¹⁴ *LG* 2.
¹⁷ Cf. *1 Pt* 3:21.
¹⁸ *Jn* 6:32; cf. *1 Cor* 10:1-6.
²⁴ St. John Damascene, *De fide orth.* 4, 13; PG 94, 1145A.
³ *Rv* 22:1; cf. 21:6; *Jn* 4:10-14.
⁷ *SC* 26.
¹¹ *SC* 14; cf. *1 Pt* 2:9; 2:4-5.
¹⁵ *SC* 28.
³⁸ Cf. *LG* 10 § 2.
³⁹ Cf. *Jn* 20:21-23; *Lk* 24:47; *Mt* 28:18-20.

- ¹⁶ Cf. *Wis* 13:1; *Rom* 1:19 f.; *Acts* 14:17.
²⁹ *Heb* 12:1.
³⁰ Cf. *Rom* 8:29; *1 Jn* 3:2.
²⁷ St. John Damascene, *De imag.* 1, 16: PG 96:1245-48.
²⁰ SC 112.
²² SC 112 § 3.
⁴¹ Fanqîth, *The Syriac Office of Antioch*, vol. VI, first part of Summer, 193 B.
⁴⁶ Cf. SC, ch. IV, 83-101.
⁴⁷ SC 84; *1 Thes* 5:17; *Eph* 6:18.
⁵¹ SC 100; cf. 86; 96; 98; *PO* 5.
⁵³ *Jn* 4:24.
⁵⁷ *PO* 5; cf. SC 122-127.
⁵⁹ Cf. *Heb* 13:10.
⁶⁰ Cf. GIRM 259.
⁶¹ Paul VI, *Mysterium Fidei*: AAS (1965) 771.
⁶² Cf. SC 128.
⁶³ GIRM 271.
⁶⁴ GIRM 272.
⁶⁵ *Rv* 21:4.

