

**McHENRY COUNTY CATHOLIC PRAYER BREAKFAST**  
**November 12, 2016**  
**Crystal Lake, Illinois**

**Introduction**

I had to prepare my remarks before the momentous results of the recent elections were known. Either way, believers face increasing challenges. Regardless of the result, we knew it would not be easy for us going forward. Yes, we face great challenges as Christians – not just to living our faith unfettered and without harassment, but more so to fulfill the “Great Commission”, i.e, spread the faith.

U.S. was never a “religious state” in the sense that there was an official state religion – AND, throughout history, the Church has always respected the distinction between political/secular rule, and spiritual authority, even when the Pope ruled over vast territories in central Italy (cf. how governance was divided – even to this day: Vatican City State vs. Roman Curia, a Vatican civil tribunal, etc.) Nonetheless, the West – whether in societies where there was an official state religion or not – was always imbued with a Christian ethos. Such is not the case anymore. What is that difference? What has brought us to this point? Lots of explanations – the demise of the moral code, consequent fracturing of families, etc.

In my reflections, I would like to offer some thoughts about this on a more basic level, and then some considerations on how we are to live our lives as Christian in this post-modern world as a result of all this.

**The Sacramental Principle**

Christianity: all defined (i.e., distinguished, set apart from other religions, what is especially unique to it) by the Incarnation, = sacramental principle. Incarnation: the invisible God became visible by taking on human form, a human body, so that in that body he could die for our sins and reconcile us back to him. This = the sacramental principle: the invisible is made visible through the physical: the invisible God takes on a visible form through a physical body. This physical body of Jesus of Nazareth was more than a human body like anyone else’s; it points to a reality beyond itself and make that reality present – God Himself.

This has to do with the power of symbol: a physical object which both points to a reality greater than itself and makes that reality present in the here and now. A traditionally Christian

*Talk to McHenry County Catholic Prayer Breakfast*

culture is imbued with this symbolic, sacramental sensitivity, and it is this sensitivity that has largely been lost in our secular society. A symbol in popular thought is seen as something other than reality (“it’s just not symbol, not the real thing”), rather than that which plunges us into the depths of reality. This goes a long way in explaining why it is becoming increasingly difficult to convey the truths of the Christian faith in a convincing and compelling manner in our contemporary culture.

Yet, the human person has an instinctive need of symbol, and as de-sacramentalized as our society has become, we still have remnants of this sensitivity in the culture. Just look at the debate over flag-burning: people on both sides of that debate know that we are not talking simply about a piece of colorful cloth. No self-respecting American would dream of tearing up a flag and using it to wash his car – that would be supremely disrespectful to all those generations, present and past, who have made such great sacrifices, especially the greatest of sacrifices, to protect our freedom. And this principle manifests itself in other ways, too, in day-to-day life, such as a family heirloom which may have little monetary value but is precious patrimony in terms of the family’s identity and history.

We see a sensitivity to this power of symbol to make present the reality to which it points early on in Scripture. In a number of episodes, the “angel of the Lord” appears to the Lord’s chosen servant, but the angel *is* God Himself. In the famous passage of Moses and the burning bush, the text moves indistinguishably from mention of the angel of the Lord to the Lord or God Himself, and Moses reacts in the typical biblical manner of those who realize that God has appeared to them: deadly fear of looking at God. Listen to these opening verses of the third chapter of the Book of Genesis:

[T]he *angel of the LORD* appeared to [Moses] as fire flaming out of a bush. When he looked, although the bush was on fire, it was not being consumed. So Moses decided, ‘I must turn aside to look at this remarkable sight. Why does the bush not burn up?’ When the *LORD* saw that he had turned aside to look, *God* called out to him from the bush: Moses! Moses! He answered, ‘Here I am.’ *God* said: Do not come near! Remove your sandals from your feet, for the place where you stand is holy ground. *I am the God of your father*, he continued, the God of

Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob. Moses hid his face, for he was afraid to look at God.

This just one of a number of examples in the Old Testament where this happens. God appears under the guise of an angel: the appearance is that of an angel, but it is God. This calls to my mind a commentary I read in a catechetical text many years ago in which the writer refers to the body as a symbol of the person. Very insightful: we know the human person is more than the physical body, yet, we have a great respect for the body, even after death, because the body makes present the greater reality that is the specific human person to whom I am relating. Cf. CDF, recent instruction re. cremation: “By burying the bodies of the faithful, the Church confirms her faith in the resurrection of the body, and intends to show the great dignity of the human body as an integral part of the human person whose body forms part of their identity” (n. 3); therefore, “The Church continues to prefer the practice of burying the bodies of the deceased, because this shows a greater esteem towards the deceased” (n. 4). Ecco intimate connection between the body and the person: an attack on the body is an attack on the person (but not the only way to attack the person [character assassination, identity theft, etc.] – BUT, cf., “I’m not attacking you, I’m attacking your body”), just as an attack on the American flag is, albeit lesser extent, an attack on the United States of America.

### **Marriage as the Key**

System of sacraments in the Church = specific and significant application of this general sacramental principle – significant moments in the public ministry of Christ in which he instituted these signs to be conduits to his grace for us. But, there is one sacrament above all that sums up the whole movement of revelation and salvation as narrated to us in the Bible.

The one sacrament that is the key to understanding all of revelation: marriage.

As we know from the teachings of St. John Paul II, the Bible begins and ends with a marriage: Adam and Eve, and the Wedding Feast of the Lamb. And it is replete with nuptial imagery all throughout. The foundational passage of Scripture is Genesis 1:27, which presents the creation of the man and woman as the culmination of God’s creative activity: “God created

mankind in his image; in the image of God he created them; *male and female* he created them.”  
As Pope Benedict XVI points out about this passage in his first Encyclical, *God is Love*,

... the idea is certainly present [here] that man is somehow incomplete, driven by nature to seek in another the part that can make him whole, the idea that only in communion with the opposite sex can he become ‘complete’. The biblical account thus concludes with a prophecy about Adam: ‘Therefore a man leaves his father and his mother and cleaves to his wife and they become one flesh’ (Gen 2:24).

As alluded to in this observation, this passage of Genesis is critical, because it sets the pattern for the whole rest of Bible, and for all that will later be revealed and, indeed, for all of salvation history.

We can already see this in the next step through the Bible, the prophets. They frequently speak of Israel’s relationship to the Lord as a bride to her bridegroom, so much so that when God’s people violated the Covenant by worshipping the false gods of their pagan neighbors, the prophets excoriated them for being an unfaithful bride. There is also a book of the Old Testament that is nothing but a collection of love poems: the Song of Songs. Why in the world would a collection of love poems be entered into the canon of Scripture? Pope Benedict explains why, also in *God is Love* (n. 10):

... the reception of the Song of Songs in the canon of sacred Scripture was soon explained by the idea that these love songs ultimately describe God’s relation to man and man’s relation to God. Thus the Song of Songs became, both in Christian and Jewish literature, a source of mystical knowledge and experience, an expression of the essence of biblical faith: that man can indeed enter into union with God – his primordial aspiration. But this union is ... a unity in which both God and man remain themselves and yet become fully one. As Saint Paul says: ‘He who is united to the Lord becomes one spirit with him’ (1 Cor 6:17).<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Pope Benedict XVI, Encyclical Letter *Deus Caritas Est*, n. 10.

*Talk to McHenry County Catholic Prayer Breakfast*

Is this nothing other than the nuptial mystery, that is, the two becoming fully one, yet remaining themselves, each retaining their unique individual identity?

In the New Testament, we have various sayings and parables of Jesus alluding to this imagery, such as the parable of the ten virgins (five wise, five foolish) who took lamps with them to *go out and meet the bridegroom* (Mt 25:1-13). It is also significant that Jesus chose the occasion of a marriage feast to perform his first miracle; his response to his mother, “My hour has not yet come”, is a reference to the consummation of God’s marriage to His people that will be accomplished by his death on the cross. And of course, we are all familiar with Ephesians chapter five, which explains that the prophecy from the creation account of Genesis referenced by Pope Benedict, “For this reason a man shall leave [his] father and [his] mother and be joined to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh”, is fulfilled in Christ and the Church.

Cf. Christ on the Cross: We learn from the Fathers of the Church that God’s creation of a bride for His son Adam from Adam’s side as he slept was a foreshadowing of God the Father’s creation of a bride – the Church – for His Only-Begotten Son as he lay in the sleep of death on the Cross. Christ gives the seed of life to his bride, the Church, from the blood and water that flowed from his side on the Cross. The Church, as mother, receives it, generates new life for his Kingdom (the water of baptism) and nourishes that new life through the grace of the sacraments (his blood, the Eucharist) and by teaching the truth received from him. The Church’s insight into this truth can be seen from the ancient Latin translation (Vulgate) of the verse recounting Christ’s last words on the Cross, “it is finished” (Greek): *consummatum est* – literally, “it has been consummated.” The drawing back of the curtain before Communion signifies this entering into nuptial union with Christ.

It’s all the story of a marriage: God’s marriage Covenant with Israel is fulfilled in the blood of Christ on the cross, establishing the new and eternal Covenant between him, the bridegroom, and his bride, the Church. Cf. line I heard from amateur Broadway playwright: when I asked him about the storylines of his plays, he responded, “Oh, the usual thing, you know – boy meets girl, boy loses girl, boys gets girl back.” That the story of the Bible – God and His people, = the human race!

But to return to the Christian understanding of the world, with this sacramental way of seeing all reality: nowhere does it come more into conflict with what we are dealing with today than in the area of marriage. We are all well aware of the secular reasons why it is important to

preserve the meaning and definition of marriage in the law and in society, in that it protects the right of children to be reared by a father and a mother whenever possible, recognizing that principle of complementarity by which father and mother each makes a unique contribution that benefits the child in the child's maturing into adulthood. But the recent change in the definition of marriage in the law of our land presents a challenge at an even deeper level. It is really reflective of a change in the definition of marriage – that, is of the understanding of the meaning of marriage in the popular mentality – that happened a long time ago: not the life-long union of a man and a woman of mutual and exclusive fidelity for the purposes of the procreation and education of offspring and the unity and mutual good of the spouses – that is, a social institution that is child focus, providing for the child the context for growing up and being loved by the child's father and mother – to, rather, an adult-centered institution in which the state gives recognition and benefits. It is this change in the fundamental understanding of marriage that has led to the demise of the understanding of the sexual difference and complementarity of male and female, which in turn corrupts our sensitivity to the sacramental meaning of the universe and of all of life.

This is because God has used marriage as the primary sacred sign of our relationship with Him, for the Incarnation is already, itself, a marriage: God marries His divinity with our humanity in the Second Person of the Most Holy Trinity taking on our human flesh in order to redeem us. Marriage is about the two becoming one: they become one flesh in a comprehensive union of persons, while each retains their own identity. This corresponds to the ancient Church Fathers' teaching on "divinization", and why, for example, St. Basil the Great could say something so bold as, "Through the Spirit we acquire a likeness to God; indeed, we attain what is beyond our most sublime aspirations – we become God."<sup>2</sup>

All of this is indicative of a movement away from paganism toward worship of and allegiance to the one, true God; and, it is a movement that happens by way of marriage. As Pope Benedict XVI explains *God is Love*, there is a connection between monotheism and monogamy evident at the beginning: "Corresponding to the image of a monotheistic God is monogamous marriage. *Marriage based on exclusive and definitive love becomes the icon of the relationship between God and his people and vice versa*" (emphasis added).<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Cited in the Roman Breviary, Office of Readings for Tuesday of the Seventh Week of Easter.

<sup>3</sup> *Deus Caritas Est*, n. 11.

When you consider that the entire Judeo-Christian religious tradition is premised on the concept of sexual difference and complementarity in marriage, then you will understand that, if we lose that concept, nothing of our faith tradition will make any sense in the culture. Precisely because revealed truth is not super-imposed on nature but builds on it – that is, builds upon truths that are accessible to reason alone from the observation of nature (= the principle of the whole sacramental system – cf., e.g., baptism, etc.) – when the culture can no longer apprehend those natural truths, then the very foundation of our teaching evaporates and nothing we have to offer will make sense. The result is a societal reversion to the paganism of old but with a unique post-modern variation on its themes, such as the practice of child sacrifice and the worship of feminine deities.

### **The Letter to Diognetius**

So what are we to do? This is hardly the first time or first place we as Christians have not “fit in.” Quite the contrary: we’ve been here before! Lots of times – cf. the ancient Christian text, the Epistle to Diognetius. It is a rather mysterious document: the author is unknown, the recipient uncertain, the date unclear, the ending missing; it was never quoted by ancient or medieval authors, and it barely avoided being lost forever.

Almost certainly it was written mid-to-late second century. According to one scholar, it offers “a vivid snapshot of an early attempt to rationally present the integrity of Christianity to a society that was both pluralistic and hostile.”<sup>4</sup>

When this work was written Christianity was maligned and persecuted. Persecutions could be more or less overt, but this sect was a handy scapegoat. In the late second century, Tertullian wrote:

They think the Christians the cause of every public disaster, of every affliction with which the people are visited. If the Tiber rises as high as the city walls, if the Nile does not send its waters up over the fields, if the heavens give no rain, if there is an earthquake, if there is famine or pestilence, straightway the cry is, ‘Away with the Christians to the lions!’<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Paul Foster, “Epistle to Diognetius”, *Expository Times* 118 [2007], p. 167.

<sup>5</sup> Apology 40

While the Epistle to Diognetus was aimed at explaining the Christian faith to outsiders, there are two very fascinating chapters about how Christians saw their relationship to the world around them. What comes across is a sense that our ancestors in the faith did not see themselves as straightforwardly counter-cultural: they played an active role in society, but their ultimate loyalties were elsewhere.

### FOUNDATIONAL UNDERSTANDING

The disciples of Jesus are to be in the world but not of the world: this is our fundamental stance, and it is sometimes a very difficult balance to maintain.

Two unacceptable alternatives:

**TO BE IN THE WORLD:** simply bless the status quo. Espouse popular causes and avoid “controversial” issues. Not an option: on the night of his arrest, Jesus told his disciples:

‘If the world hates you, know that it has hated me before it hated you. If you were of the world, the world would love its own; but because you are not of the world, but I chose you out of the world, therefore the world hates you. Remember the word that I said to you, “A servant is not greater than his master.” If they persecuted me, they will persecute you; if they kept my word, they will keep yours also’ [John 15:18-20].

**SHUN THE WORLD:** maintain the purity of our faith by retreating from society around us. This meets the needs of “purists” and is also acceptable to those who advocate “freedom of worship” as opposed to “freedom of religion” (have you heard that one! – there is a big difference between the two!): Catholics can carry out their curious rituals, but should not presume to meddle in society. This is not an option, either. That same night, Jesus prayed: “I have given them your word; and the world has hated them because they are not of the world, even as I am not of the world. I do not pray that you should take them out of the world, but that you should keep them from the evil one” (John 17:14-15).

*Talk to McHenry County Catholic Prayer Breakfast*

And there is a very good reason for this: “For God so loved the world that He gave His only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life. For God sent the Son into the world, not to condemn the world, but that the world might be saved through him” (John 3:16-17).

Elsewhere, Our Lord said: “You are the salt of the earth; but if salt has lost its taste, how shall its saltiness be restored? It is no longer good for anything except to be thrown out and trodden under foot by men”; and, “You are the light of the world. A city set on a hill cannot be hid. Nor do men light a lamp and put it under a bushel, but on a stand, and it gives light to all in the house. Let your light so shine before men, that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in heaven” (Matt 5:13-16).

THE LOGIC OF THE INCARNATION DEMANDS IT: WE MUST BE IN THE WORLD, BUT OFFER SOMETHING GREATER (= the sacramental principle applied to us, as Church, = our corporate identity as the People of God). WE CANNOT HIDE THE LIGHT OF THE GOSPEL AWAY IN OUR OWN PRIVATE WORLD; NOR CAN WE LOSE THE SAVOR OF GOSPEL AND HAVE NO SALT TO DISTINGUISH US FROM OTHERS.

THE EPISTLE TO DIOGNETUS, 5-6

(Office of Readings, Wednesday Fifth Week of Easter)

With this foundation, let us see how our ancestors in the faith described their relationship to the world. The vision our author presents is deeply rooted in the theology of St. Paul. Let us look at the key principles it espouses.

**1. *Believers are found in every culture, and fully participate in the life of their society***

Christians are indistinguishable from other people either by nationality, language or customs. They do not inhabit separate cities of their own, or speak a strange dialect, or follow some outlandish way of life. Their teaching is not based upon reveries inspired by human curiosity. Unlike some other people, they champion no purely human doctrine. With regard to dress, food and manner of life in

general, they follow the customs of whatever city they happen to be living in, whether it is Greek or foreign.

The Catholic Church is truly multi-cultural. We are a world-wide communion, embracing people of all kinds. In many matters we follow the customs of our diverse cultures. Catholics reach across the spectrum in dealing with a wide array of people of different political and religious persuasions.

***2. But we have a higher loyalty, a deeper identity***

And yet there is something extraordinary about their lives. They live in their own countries as though they were only passing through. They play their full role as citizens, but labor under all the disabilities of aliens. Any country can be their homeland, but for them their homeland, wherever it may be, is a foreign country. Like others, they marry and have children, but they do not expose them. They share their meals, but not their wives. They live in the flesh, but they are not governed by the desires of the flesh. They pass their days upon earth, but they are citizens of heaven. Obedient to the laws, they yet live on a level that transcends the law.

AND YET: we have an identity that transcends any particular culture. In one sense, much of the tension among Catholics today revolves around a very basic issue: are we Catholic Americans, or American Catholics? Not a matter of semantics: nouns are more important than adjectives.

Heb 13:14: “For here we have no lasting city, but we seek the city which is to come.”

Christ claims our highest loyalty! In every generation, believers must seek to express the faith in terms of the culture in which they live, but we cannot sacrifice fundamental beliefs regarding faith and morals on the altar of social acceptability.

*Talk to McHenry County Catholic Prayer Breakfast*

Note that already in the second century Christians distinguished themselves from the society around them by their understanding of the sacred bond between husband and wife and the importance of protecting infants:

Rom 8:12-17:

“So then, brethren, we are debtors, not to the flesh, to live according to the flesh — for if you live according to the flesh you will die, but if by the Spirit you put to death the deeds of the body you will live. For all who are led by the Spirit of God are sons of God. For you did not receive the spirit of slavery to fall back into fear, but you have received the spirit of sonship. When we cry, ‘Abba! Father!’ it is the Spirit himself bearing witness with our spirit that we are children of God, and if children, then heirs, heirs of God and fellow heirs with Christ, provided we suffer with him in order that we may also be glorified with him.”

Phil 3:20:

“But our commonwealth is in heaven, and from it we await a Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ, who will change our lowly body to be like his glorious body, by the power which enables him even to subject all things to himself.”

***3. This higher loyalty may bring us into conflict with the world around us***

Christians love all people, but all people persecute them. Condemned because they are not understood, they are put to death, but raised to life again. They live in poverty, but enrich many; they are totally destitute, but possess an abundance of everything. They suffer dishonor, but that is their glory. They are defamed, but vindicated. A blessing is their answer to abuse, deference their response to insult. For the good they do they receive the punishment of malefactors, but even then they rejoice, as though receiving the gift of life. They are attacked by the Jews as aliens, they are persecuted by the Greeks, yet no one can explain the reason for this hatred.

*Talk to McHenry County Catholic Prayer Breakfast*

Our secret is the cross: like our Savior, we must meet opposition with trust in God and forgiveness for those who persecute us. Not easy, especially when we see believers in various parts of the world enduring horrendous persecution.

2 Cor 6:3-10:

“We put no obstacle in any one’s way, so that no fault may be found with our ministry, but as servants of God we commend ourselves in every way: through great endurance, in afflictions, hardships, calamities, beatings, imprisonments, tumults, labors, watching, hunger; by purity, knowledge, forbearance, kindness, the Holy Spirit, genuine love, truthful speech, and the power of God; with the weapons of righteousness for the right hand and for the left; in honor and dishonor, in ill repute and good repute. We are treated as impostors, and yet are true; as unknown, and yet well known; as dying, and behold we live; as punished, and yet not killed; as sorrowful, yet always rejoicing; as poor, yet making many rich; as having nothing, and yet possessing everything.”

1 Cor 4:11-13:

“To this very hour we go hungry and thirsty, we are poorly clad and roughly treated, we wander about homeless and we toil, working with our own hands. When ridiculed, we bless; when persecuted, we endure; when slandered, we respond gently. We have become like the world’s rubbish, the scum of all, to this very moment.”

***4. Our faith, far from being a problem, is in fact the source of spiritual life for the entire world***

To speak in general terms, we may say that the Christian is to the world what the soul is to the body. As the soul is present in every part of the body, while remaining distinct from it, so Christians are found in all the cities of the world, but cannot be identified with the world. As the visible body contains the invisible soul, so Christians are seen living in the world, but their religious life remains unseen. The body hates the soul and wars against it, not because of any injury the

*Talk to McHenry County Catholic Prayer Breakfast*

soul has done it, but because of the restriction the soul places on its pleasures. Similarly, the world hates the Christians, not because they have done it any wrong, but because they are opposed to its enjoyments.

1 Cor 15:53-54:

“For this perishable nature must put on the imperishable, and this mortal nature must put on immortality. When the perishable puts on the imperishable, and the mortal puts on immortality, then shall come to pass the saying that is written:

‘Death is swallowed up in victory.’”

O death, where is thy victory?

O death, where is thy sting?””

Gal 5:16-25:

“But I say, walk by the Spirit, and do not gratify the desires of the flesh. For the desires of the flesh are against the Spirit, and the desires of the Spirit are against the flesh; for these are opposed to each other, to prevent you from doing what you would. But if you are led by the Spirit you are not under the law. Now the works of the flesh are plain: immorality, impurity, licentiousness, idolatry, sorcery, enmity, strife, jealousy, anger, selfishness, dissension, party spirit, envy, drunkenness, carousing, and the like. I warn you, as I warned you before, that those who do such things shall not inherit the kingdom of God. But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control; against such there is no law. And those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires. If we live by the Spirit, let us also walk by the Spirit.”

For so many in our secular society, the horizon is limited to this world: how to get as much as possible out of it. (“The one who dies with the most toys wins.”) We offer eternal life!!

***5. To be in the world but not of the world is in fact our fundamental vocation***

Christians love those who hate them just as the soul loves the body and all its members despite the body's hatred. It is by the soul, enclosed within the body, that the body is held together, and similarly, it is by the Christians, detained in the world as in a prison, that the world is held together. The soul, though immortal, has a mortal dwelling place; and Christians also live for a time amidst perishable things, while awaiting the freedom from change and decay that will be theirs in heaven. As the soul benefits from the deprivation of food and drink, so Christians flourish under persecution. Such is the Christian's lofty and divinely appointed function, from which they are not permitted to excuse themselves.

Gal 6:14:

“But far be it from me to glory except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, by which] the world has been crucified to me, and I to the world.”

**Conclusion**

That is the job (function/vocation) of the Christian, to make this fallen world more like the Kingdom of God, a mirror reflection: that is to say, to make of this entire world of time and space a sacrament of God's eternal and boundless Kingdom – a sign pointing to that Kingdom and making that Kingdom present here and now. We should not shrink back or cower in fear when the challenges are great, for God provides the grace for those who love Him and seek to do His will in all circumstances. But we need to keep our eyes fixed on His Kingdom, a Kingdom which – as we will pray at Mass a week from tomorrow, in the Preface for the Solemnity of Christ the King – “an eternal and universal Kingdom, a Kingdom of truth and life, a Kingdom of holiness and grace, a Kingdom of justice, love and peace.”