

# What's So Special About Christianity and The Catholic Church?

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Before endeavoring to ask why the Catholic Church stands out as extraordinary with respect to other world religions (section II), we must first answer the question of why Christianity is likewise extraordinary among nonchristian religions (section I).

## I

### What's So Special About Christianity?

In brief, there are two major reasons why Christianity may be viewed as unique and extraordinary:

1. The scientifically validatable evidence for Jesus' life, miracles, words, passion, death, resurrection, and gift of the Spirit manifest in historiographical corroboration<sup>1</sup>. Contemporary miracles validated by medical/scientific criteria,<sup>2</sup> the Scientific investigation of the Shroud of Turin,<sup>3</sup> and significant evidence of the continued power of the Holy Spirit (hundreds of thousands of cases).<sup>4</sup>
2. The primacy and centrality of love defined through the beatitudes, illustrated through the parables, proven on the cross.

With Respect to the second point, many world religions attribute some form of love to a god or a "higher power," but Christianity is unique in its definition of love and in the unconditional love it attributes to God. The following briefly illustrates this most remarkable development in world history through the teaching and example of Jesus.

According to Friedrich Heiler, all major world religions believe that the supreme transcendent power is both good and loving.<sup>5</sup> This general belief is interpreted quite differently in each of the major religions. Some subordinate love to justice and the moral law, some hold that the Deity's love is oriented towards a group rather than towards individuals, and some define love in a very restricted way.

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<sup>1</sup> See [www.crediblecatholic.com](https://www.crediblecatholic.com/pdf/7E-P4/7E-BB3.pdf#P1V3), Big Book, Vol III <https://www.crediblecatholic.com/pdf/7E-P4/7E-BB3.pdf#P1V3>

<sup>2</sup> Ibid <https://www.crediblecatholic.com/pdf/7E-P4/7E-BB3.pdf#P1V3>

<sup>3</sup> Ibid <https://www.crediblecatholic.com/pdf/7E-P4/7E-BB3.pdf#P1V3>

<sup>4</sup> Ibid <https://www.crediblecatholic.com/pdf/7E-P4/7E-BB3.pdf#P1V3>

<sup>5</sup> Heiler, Friedrich. 1959. "The History of Religions as a Preparation for the Cooperation of Religions." In *The History of Religions*. Ed. by Mircea Eliade and J. Kitagawa. (Chicago, IL: Chicago University Press).

Jesus' teaching on the love of God is quite distinct. First, He proclaims the *unconditional* love of God, and places it at the center of his teaching, making all other teachings and doctrines subordinate to it. He also defines love in a special way which requires Christians to find a distinct word to describe it (*agapē*). In these two respects, Jesus appears to be quite distinctive in the history of religions. Jesus proclaims the unconditional love of God through several distinct teachings. First, He teaches His disciples to address God as *He* does – as “*Abba*” which means “affectionate, understanding, trustworthy father” with connotations of childlike delight – e.g., “daddy”.<sup>6</sup> Secondly, He identifies God the Father with the father in the Prodigal Son Parable – who is unconditionally forgiving, compassionate, and humble (see below section I.B). Thirdly, He says that the whole law and prophets are summed up in the commandments to love God and neighbor. Inasmuch as *Torah* (the Jewish law) reflects the heart of God, love must be the essence of God's heart.<sup>7</sup>

Jesus places this radical doctrine of love (his definition of love and his proclamation of God's unconditional love) at the very center of His teaching – making all other teachings subordinate to it. The combined effect of these proclamations is a distinctive recasting of love into the primary end or goal of every individual – and even of history and culture.

## I.A. Jesus' Unique Definition of Love

With respect to Jesus' definition of love, Jesus is primarily concerned with the *interior heart* of love. This is most manifest in the Beatitudes (interior attitudes of love) which are placed at the *beginning* of Matthew's Sermon on the Mount (showing the priority of the interior disposition of the heart -- in care and compassion). Jesus gives several examples in His parables and actions to illustrate this love. The most notable Parable, the Good Samaritan, portrays a foreigner whose *heart* is moved with *care* and *compassion* toward a Jewish man (an enemy of the Samaritans) who has been beaten severely by robbers (Lk 10:25-37). The most notable action in Jesus' life is His love for sinners<sup>8</sup> and His self-sacrificial death on the cross.<sup>9</sup>

Jesus then shows how these interior attitudes should manifest themselves in exterior actions – love of enemies, prayer for those who hate us, turning the other cheek, forgiving one another seventy times seven times (an innumerable number of times), having mercy on the marginalized, ignored, and displaced, loving sinners and even criminals – which He declares is imitating God's love in its perfection (see Mt 5:43-45 and Lk 6:35-36). The combination of these teachings in a single doctrine of love is distinctive in the history of religions.

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<sup>6</sup> Joachim Jeremias 1971. *New Testament Theology*. Vol.1. (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons). P 65

<sup>7</sup> Ibid

<sup>8</sup> Ibid <https://www.crediblecatholic.com/pdf/M4/BB4.pdf#P1V4C2> Ch IV

<sup>9</sup> Ibid <https://www.crediblecatholic.com/pdf/M4/BB4.pdf#P1V4C2> Ch V

## I.B The Unconditional Love of God—The Prodigal Son

A majority of scholars acknowledge that Jesus' most profound revelation of his father is found in the Parable of the Prodigal Son, where the father in that parable represents God the father. By retelling this parable as a first-century Jewish onlooker might have heard it, we can begin to understand who God really is in his heart of unconditional love not only for the righteous but even for the most egregious of sinners.

When you read the retelling of this Parable below can you apply it in some ways to yourself? Can you begin to see how much God really loves you—even when you have sinned? Can you see what a simple act of repentance can do for your relationship with God—especially through the sacrament of reconciliation? Let's move to the parable itself.

Three preliminary considerations should be made before retelling the parable as a first-century Jewish audience would have understood it. First, Jesus intends that the father in the story be a revelation of the heart of God His Father. The parable would be more aptly named, The Parable of the *Father* of the Prodigal Son. Secondly, notice that the younger son has committed just about every sin imaginable according to the mindset of Second Temple Judaism (the religious context in which Jesus was living), and so he has absolutely no basis or merit for asking the father to receive him back into the household – even as one of the servants. Thirdly, the older son in this story represents the Pharisees and those who are trying to remain righteous according to their understanding of the Jewish law, and so we can see that Jesus has not abandoned them, but he desires to give them everything he has – so long as they come back into the house. Now we may retell the story as Jesus' audience would have understood it.

A father had two sons, the youngest of whom asked for his share of the inheritance. This would have been viewed as an insult to the father which would have shamed both father and family, because the son is asking not only for the right of possession, but the right of disposal of the property which legally does not occur until the death of the father<sup>10</sup>. Nevertheless, the father hears the son's request and acquiesces to it. He divides his property and lets his son go. Remember the father in the story is Jesus' revelation of God the Father.

The son chooses to go to a foreign land – probably a Gentile land, indicated by his living on a Gentile farm with pigs. Whether he started there or simply ended there is of little consequence. His actions indicate a disregard for (if not a rejection of) his election as a Jew and his people, and a further shaming of the family from which he came.

The son then adds further insult to injury by spending his father's hard-earned fortune on dissolute living (violations of *Torah*) in the gentile land. This shows the son's callous disregard for (if not rejection of) God's law, God's revelation, and perhaps God Himself. Furthermore, he manifests his callous

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<sup>10</sup> See Joachim Jeremias 1972, *The Parables of Jesus* (London: SCM Press Ltd) p. 128-29.

disregard for his people, the law, and God before the entire Gentile community – bringing shame upon them all.

Just when it seems that the son could not possibly sin any more egregiously, the foreign land finds itself in a famine. The son has little money left, and is constrained to live with the pigs, which were considered to be highly unclean animals. The son incurs defilement not only from working with the pigs but actually living with them! He even longs to eat the food of the pigs which would defile him both inside and outside. This reveals the son's wretched spiritual state, which would have engendered disgust on the part of most members of Jesus' First Century Jewish audience.

The son experiences a "quasi-change" of heart, not so much because of what he's done to his family, country, people, election, law, religion, and God, but because of the harshness of his condition ("How many of my father's servants have more than enough to eat..."). He decides to take advantage of what he perceives to be his father's merciful nature by proffering an agreement to accept demotion from son to servant (even though it was the father's right to reject and even disown him altogether). The son then makes his way back home.

The father (who is the God-*Abba* figure in Jesus' Parable) sees him coming while he is still on his way (possibly indicating that the father had been looking for him) and is so completely overjoyed that he runs out to meet him (despite the fact that the son has so deeply injured and shamed both him and his family). When he meets his son, he throws his arms around him and kisses him. The kiss is not only an act of affection, but also a sign of forgiveness.<sup>11</sup> The son's list of insults, injuries, and sins is incapable of turning the father's heart away from him. The father is almost compelled to show unrestrained affection toward him. The son utters his speech of quasi-repentance/quasi-negotiation: "Just treat me like one of your servants...." Instead of rejecting him, lecturing, or negotiating with him, the father tells the servants to get him a robe, which not only takes care of his temporal needs, but is also a mark of high distinction.<sup>12</sup> He then asks that a ring be put on his hand. Jeremias indicates that this ring is very likely a signet ring,<sup>13</sup> having the seal of the family. This would indicate not only belonging to the family, but also the authority of the family (showing the son's restoration to the family in an unqualified way). He then gives him shoes, which again takes care of his obvious temporal need. Beyond this, shoes were viewed as luxuries, signifying the status of a free man who no longer has to go about barefoot like a servant or slave.<sup>14</sup> The father then has the fatted calf prepared (reserved only for very special occasions) and holds a feast. This is a further indication of the son's readmission to the family by being received at the festal family table.<sup>15</sup>

Jesus' audience probably felt conflicted (if not angered) by the father's "ridiculously merciful" treatment of his son, because it ignored (and even undermined) the "proper" strictures of justice. The father's love/mercy seems to disregard the justice of Torah. This does not deter Jesus, because He knows that God the Father treats sinners – even the most egregious sinners –with a heart of unconditional Love.

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<sup>11</sup> Ibid p. 130.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

Jesus continues the story by turning His attention to the older son who reflects a figure of righteousness (like the Pharisees) according to the old covenant. He has stayed loyal to his father, family, election, country, religion, law, and God. Furthermore, he has been an incredibly hard worker and seems to accept patiently the father's frugality toward him ("You did not so much as kill a kid goat for me"). Most of Jesus' Pharisaical audience probably sympathized with this older son's plight when the father demonstrated his extraordinary generosity to his younger son. By all rights, the father should have either rejected or disowned the younger son, and if not that, he certainly should have accepted the younger son's offer to become a servant – but an unqualified re-admittance to the family appeared to be a great injustice to his loyal older son.

The father understands the older son's difficulty with his actions and goes outside to literally "plead" with his son – virtually begging him to come back into the house (an almost unthinkable humiliation for a father at that time). Though the older son expresses great anger and indignation ("You never gave me a kid goat, that I might make merry with my friends. But when this son of yours came, who has devoured your living with harlots, you killed for him the fatted calf!"), the father responds by literally giving him all his property, renouncing his right of ownership by saying, "Everything I have is [now] yours."<sup>16</sup> He then gives him an explanation which did not fall within the mainstream interpretation of the law: mercy must take precedence over justice and love take precedence over the law, for that is the only way that the negativity of sin and evil can be redressed and overcome – "Your brother was lost and is found; he was dead and has come back to life."

This Parable coincides precisely with Jesus' address of God as *Abba* and His declaration of "love as the highest commandment," because the only way in which they can make sense together is through the logic of unconditional love in the heart of an unconditionally loving God.

I recommend that you review this retelling of the Parable before going to the sacrament of reconciliation to experience the Lord's unconditional mercy as Jesus and so many of the saints have described it.<sup>17</sup> If you have appropriated Jesus' revelation of His Father in your heart, then proceed to Section II on Why an All-loving God would Allow Suffering.

## I.C.

### The Golden Rule and Universal Intrinsic Dignity

The vast majority of world religions emphasize the Silver Rule—"do not do unto others what you would not have them do unto you." This is a doctrine of avoiding harm or evil and can be roughly translated as, "do not do a harm to others that you do not want done to you." In modern terms, it may be restated as, "avoid unnecessary harm, but if a harm is unavoidable, minimize it." The Silver Rule is mentioned explicitly in the Old Testament two times (Tobit 4:15; Sirach

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<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

<sup>17</sup> Julian of Norwich (*Revelations of Divine Love*), St. Margaret Mary (initiator of the Sacred Heart devotion), and St. Faustina (initiator of the divine mercy devotion) have declared the unconditional love of the Lord as an integral part of their revelations by Him.

31:15). This is generally termed “ethical minimalism” because it places the emphasis on avoiding harm rather than doing good.

When Jesus removed the “nots” from the Silver Rule, He converted it from ethical minimalism to ethical maximalism. We might rephrase the Golden Rule as follows: “Do the good for others that you would want done to you.” The emphasis is no longer on merely avoiding harm, but also on doing good (beyond the avoidance of harm). Evidently doing the good for others entails avoiding harm, but it also entails much more – namely any good that you would want done to you. There is really no limit to these goods, and so the Golden Rule might be viewed as “open-ended altruism.”

Jesus’ positive ethical maximalism has its origins in His doctrine on love. He asks us to imitate the Father’s love of enemies (Mt. 5:44-48), to forgive everyone from the heart (Mt. 6:12), not to judge others negatively (Mt. 7:1-5), to consider *everyone* our neighbor – worthy of compassionate love (like the Good Samaritan – Luke 10:25-37). When we look at these teachings collectively, we can see Jesus’ underlying viewpoint that love, mercy, and compassion are higher than justice (which is derived from the Silver Rule). Love and mercy (from which the Golden Rule is derived) go beyond justice (the Silver Rule), and encourage a positive, altruistic, and compassionate social order. This emphasis had a profound effect on the development of sociopolitical theory in the West, particularly with respect to the development of universal public healthcare and welfare, universal public education, and on the development of economic rights and social responsibility (see below Section II.A.).

Another distinctive extension of Jesus’ teaching on love is the intrinsic *transcendent* dignity of *every* human being – particularly the lowliest and most challenged. Jesus establishes this principle by identifying every human being with himself – indicating that he is not only present to every human being, but imparts his own divine dignity upon them:

Truly I tell you, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me...Truly I tell you, whatever you did not do for one of the least of these, you did not do for me (Mt. 25:40, 45).

Though there is precedent for the idea of divine dignity in human beings in the Hebrew Scriptures (particularly Genesis 1:27 – “In His image and likeness He created them...”), this is truly an extraordinary teaching, because Jesus elevates Genesis’ teaching on dignity to a *moral and ethical imperative*. Thus, He is not only saying that human beings have a quasi-divine status (created in the image and likeness of God), but also that to mistreat a human being is the same as mistreating Him (the divine Son). As we will be seeing below (Section II.A.), the Catholic Church applied this teaching quite rigorously within its community, and as its influence increased, to the Roman world which had formerly persecuted it. This led ultimately to the banning of the cruelties of the Colosseum and the undermining of slavery in the Roman world as well as the development of justice theory, natural law theory, natural rights theory, and economic rights theory throughout the world.

### I.D.

#### **The Uniqueness of Christian Mysticism**

Jesus’ teaching on love has a remarkable effect on world mysticism. Christianity shares several common features with other religions’ mystical traditions – e.g. the dimensions of mysteriousness, unity with the totality, joy (bliss), and the beauty of the sacred. However, in the Christian mystical tradition, a loving relationship with the unconditionally loving Deity is the overriding feature which gives rise to unity, joy (ecstasy), and beauty (glory). For this reason, Christian mystics associate the experience of God with being perfectly at *home* through an unconditionally loving Divine Being.

Evelyn Underhill wrote extensively about Christian mysticism in the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century. She was familiar with mysticism in non-Christian traditions, but wrote far more extensively on the personal love intrinsic to the Christian mystical tradition. She was not interested in objective approaches to religious experience (such as William James and Rudolf Otto) preferring instead to take a personal psychological approach that incorporated elements of her own religious experience with well-known Christian mystics ranging from Jan Ruysbroeck and Meister Eckhart to St. Augustine, St. Teresa of Avila, and St. John of the Cross. In her classic work *Mysticism: A Study in the Nature and Development of Spiritual Consciousness*, she contrasts the abstract knowledge of God from metaphysicians and theologians with the personal loving connection with God in Christian mysticism:

In mysticism that love of truth which we saw as the beginning of all philosophy leaves the merely intellectual sphere, and takes on the assured aspect of a *personal passion*. Where the philosopher guesses and argues, the mystic lives and looks; and speaks, consequently, the disconcerting language of first-hand experience, not the neat dialectic of the schools. Hence whilst the Absolute of

the metaphysicians remains a diagram —impersonal and unattainable—the Absolute of the mystics is *lovable, attainable, alive*.<sup>18</sup>

This point is brought home through the 16<sup>th</sup> Century Carmelite mystic, St. Teresa of Avila, who links the personal love of the Deity with the ecstasy of mystery:

The *loving exchange* that takes place between the soul and God is so sweet that I beg Him in His goodness to give a taste of this *love* to anyone who thinks I am lying. On the days this lasted I went about as though stupefied. I desired neither to see nor to speak... [I]t seems the Lord carries the soul away and places it in *ecstasy*; thus there is no room for pain or suffering, because *joy* soon enters in.<sup>19</sup>

Saint John of the Cross, another Carmelite mystic and companion of Saint Teresa of Avila, writes that the unconditional Love of God is manifest most profoundly in the infinite One making us like an equal by at once coming to be with us and raising us up to Him. His love is at once affectionate, humble, and gentle:

...[S]ince He is the virtue of supreme *humility*, He *loves you* with supreme humility and esteem and *makes you His equal*, gladly revealing Himself to you in these ways of knowledge, in this His countenance filled with graces, and telling you in this His union, not without great rejoicing: '*I am yours and for you* and *delighted* to be what I am so as to be yours *and give myself to you*.'<sup>20</sup>

The idea of God being supremely humble, supremely gentle and affectionate, and making us His equal (fundamental dispositions arising out of His unconditional love) is distinctive to Christianity, though some religions address these characteristics in God, they are not viewed as the central essence of God or the core of our relationship with Him.

Christian mysticism does not find its culmination away from the world. As Christian mystics move into a deeper relationship with God (including ecstatic union), they do not pull away from the world into a rarified, passive, and exclusive domain. Rather, as Underhill asserts, the Christian mystic is self-creative,<sup>21</sup> and above all a “doer.”<sup>22</sup> The more Christian mystics experience the love and ecstasy of the Divine Lover, the more they are inspired to serve all of God’s beloveds – even to the point of trial, suffering, and death in imitation of Jesus. This is certainly evidenced in the lives of St. Teresa of Avila and St. John of the Cross who reformed the Carmelite Order, and as a result, experienced considerable trial, sacrifice, and suffering. This is also evident in the lives of other mystics, such as Jan Ruysbroeck, who was involved in fighting

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<sup>18</sup> Underhill 2012, p. 16 (italics mine).

<sup>19</sup> Teresa of Avila 1976, p. 194.

<sup>20</sup> John of the Cross 1979, p. 613 (italics mine).

<sup>21</sup> Underhill 2012, p. 21.

<sup>22</sup> Underhill 2012, p. 16.



controversial teachings in Brussels and who later became a Prior of a monastery he founded; and the life of St. Augustine, who in addition to writing an encyclopedia of theological, spiritual, and polemical works, was involved in fighting controversies and served as Bishop of Hippo. The same holds true for St. Francis of Assisi, St. Catherine of Siena, St. Hildegard of Bingen, and St. Ignatius Loyola – to mention just a few. The centrality of contemplation leading to action (instead of to passivity and reclusiveness) appears to be peculiar to Christian mysticism. No doubt other mystical traditions speak of mystics as being active, but not in the same central way as Christianity.

In sum, Jesus brings the revelation of God's love to its ultimate and unconditional fulfillment – by proclaiming the *unconditional* love of God, by defining love as “*agapē*” (compassionate, forgiving, self-sacrificial love of all humankind – friends, and enemies), and intimating the completion of the mystical life through loving action in the world. Most importantly, He demonstrates this love in His own person by giving His life freely and unconditionally in torturous self-sacrifice. His intention is to show us the efficacy and redemption of suffering (which culminates in risen and eternal glory) as well as the fact that He is the Son of His unconditionally loving Father—Emmanuel—“God with us.”

As will be seen below, these distinctive features of Jesus' revelation changed the course of history and culture. Indeed, they transformed the world.

## I.E.

### **A Fundamental Question to Ask Yourself**

If you believe that love is the most important, central, and transformative capacity within human beings and holds the key, not only to the meaning of life, but also to the meaning of our ultimate dignity and eternal destiny; if you believe that Jesus' definition of love in the beatitudes is the key, not only to individual, but collective and cultural healing and perfectibility and, in light of this, if you believe that God (manifest through Jesus) is (or at least could be) unconditional love, then why not assent to the specialness—the extraordinary uniqueness—of Jesus' revelation and its religious expression—Christianity? Indeed, why not assent to the Church He personally instituted—the Catholic Church? Close study of the Catholic Church indicates probatively that Jesus initiated it, and as we shall see below in Section II, the fruits of that Church over the centuries, despite moments of sin and darkness, have transformed the world and billions of human souls toward the unconditional love of Jesus and His Father.

## II

### **What's So Special About The Catholic Church?**

Jesus told His disciples that you will know the genuineness of prophets (or religions) by their fruits (Mt 7:15-20). Anyone investigating the genuineness of the

Catholic Church will want to first examine three areas that will reveal a most remarkable abundance of fruit for individual lives as well as collective world culture:

1. The Catholic Churches' legacy of Charity and Social Teaching.
2. The complementarity of science, reason, and faith.
3. The transformative power of the Holy Eucharist and the Sacrament of Reconciliation.

We will examine each in turn.

This list by no means exhausts the extraordinary fruit of the Catholic Church, but it does give a significant clue to how the Holy Spirit is working through the teaching of Jesus in the Catholic Church and its teaching office. If you find these three fruits of the Catholic Church to be significant indicators of the Spirit of Christ, you may want to investigate the historical and exegetical foundation of Jesus' commission to Peter (Mt 16:16-18) and its unfolding throughout the centuries in *CredibleCatholic.com*, *The Big Book*, Volume 6 (<https://www.crediblecatholic.com/pdf/7E-P5/7E-BB6.pdf#P1V6>).

## **II.A.**

### **The Catholic Churches' Legacy of Charity and Social Teaching**

Though there have been sinners within the leadership of the Catholic Church, starting with Judas Iscariot to this very day, the vast majority (over 95%) have been faithful, hardworking servants of Christ for the love of His people. Though Catholic leaders are not perfect the vast majority strive to imitate the heart of Christ, which is particularly evident in the legacy of charity initiated by the Catholic Church since its inception until this very day.

The Christian church created such large missions to help the needy, cure the sick, and educate all classes of people, it ultimately undermined the barbarity, social stratification, and slavery of Rome.<sup>23</sup> Throughout its history, the Catholic Church has been the largest public educational system, healthcare system, and public welfare system in the world. It remains so today:

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<sup>23</sup> See Helmut Koester 1998 "The Great Appeal: What did Christianity offer its believers that made it worth social estrangement, hostility from neighbors, and possible persecution?" See also Christopher Dawson 1965 "The Formation of Christendom" (New York: Sheed & Ward) pp 111-137

- With respect to public education, the church provides services in 43,800 secondary schools and 95,200 primary schools.<sup>24</sup>
- With respect to healthcare, the Church oversees 26% of all worldwide healthcare facilities and hospitals.<sup>25</sup>
- With respect to public welfare, the Church provides services in 15,722 Homes for the elderly, chronically ill and disabled, 9,552 orphanages, 13,897 Marriage Counseling Centers, 11,758 Nurseries—not including any healthcare facilities.<sup>26</sup>

Inasmuch as these institutions arising out of the teaching of Jesus have literally transformed history and the world, we should seriously consider the truth and efficacy of Jesus' revelation about the unconditional love of God, the definition of love (as highest commandment), and His foundation of the Catholic Church on these principles.

In addition to its huge legacy and institutional framework of public health, education, and social welfare the Catholic Church has provided the most nuanced and comprehensive doctrine of social justice and responsibility in the history of humankind. This legacy of justice, rights, and the common good go back to the time of Jesus who moved the fundamental principle of social ethics from the silver rule to the golden rule and established the intrinsic dignity of every individual human being (see above Section I.C).

The Catholic Church acted on Jesus' moral imperatives with great vigor after His resurrection and gift of the Holy Spirit. The Church immediately started offering health care and social welfare not only to members of its community, but also to all—most especially slaves—who were in need. Even during times of active persecution, the Church attempted to serve those who were in need of resources which could be procured from less dangerous parts of the Empire.

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<sup>24</sup> See "Preparing for the year of creation" in *Vermont Catholic*  
[http://www.onlinedigeditions.com/publication/index.php?i=365491&m=&l=&p=1&pre=&ver=html5#{%22page%22:74,%22issue\\_id%22:365491}](http://www.onlinedigeditions.com/publication/index.php?i=365491&m=&l=&p=1&pre=&ver=html5#{%22page%22:74,%22issue_id%22:365491})

<sup>25</sup> Catholic News Agency 2019 "Catholic hospitals comprise one quarter of world's healthcare, council reports"  
[https://www.catholicnewsagency.com/news/catholic\\_hospitals\\_represent\\_26\\_percent\\_of\\_worlds\\_health\\_facilities\\_reports\\_pontifical\\_council](https://www.catholicnewsagency.com/news/catholic_hospitals_represent_26_percent_of_worlds_health_facilities_reports_pontifical_council)

<sup>26</sup> See Vatican 2018 "Catholic Church Statistics" *Agenzia Fides*  
[http://www.cccb.ca/site/images/stories/pdf/Dossier\\_Statistics\\_2018\\_FIDES\\_ENG.pdf](http://www.cccb.ca/site/images/stories/pdf/Dossier_Statistics_2018_FIDES_ENG.pdf)

Eventually ,the Church began to educate slaves—even those who were working in the Roman beurocracy, and this led to the starting of schools after the cessation of hostilities under Constantine in 313 A.D. As noted above, this led to the establishment of the largest public heath care, social welfare, and educational system in the world until this very day (see above). Jesus’ teaching about love, the Golden Rule, and the intrinsic dignity of all people also effected the development of justice, rights, and political theory throughout the west, and ultimately the entire world. Three aspects of Jesus’ teaching had a profound effect on social-political theory. First *every* human being has a divine-like status in virtue of being created in God’s image and being adopted by Jesus. This lies at the foundation of the doctrine of social equality (particularly for slaves) and the doctrine of universal inalienable natural rights. Secondly, since human beings have this divine-like dignity in virtue of God, they are not given it by any human authority. Thus our dignity is *intrinsic* -- that is it belongs to us in virtue of our creation by God and adoption by Jesus. Thirdly, no human authority (such as a state or court) can remove, negate, or abuse that intrinsic divine-like dignity without having a just cause for doing so (such as self-defense). This doctrine of universal intrinsic transcendent dignity had several major effects: the end of the coliseum’s atrocities, the eventual end of slavery in the Roman world, and the development of the doctrines of universal personhood and inalienable rights. (Explained Below)

Toward the end of the Roman Empire, St. Augustin developed the first comprehensive theory of justice which elevated the principle of justice over the positive law, declaring the principle which stands at the heart of justice theory to this very day: “an unjust law is no law at all.”<sup>27</sup> St. Thomas Aquinas developed the comprehensive theory of natural law which provided the ground for universal personhood and inalienable natural rights.<sup>28</sup> The Dominican Friar, Bartolome de Las Casas, in his defense of the Indians of the New World (enslaved by the Spanish and Portugese) established the principle of personhood for all human beings throughout the world<sup>29</sup>. The Jesuit priest and professor, Francisco Suarez,

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<sup>27</sup> See St. Augustine (*On Free Choice of the Will*, Book 1 Section V). It is now one of the most frequently quoted adages in political theory. See Spitzer 2011 *Ten Universal Principles: A Brief Philosophy of the Life Issues*.

<sup>28</sup> St. Thomas Aquinas *Summa Theologica* I-II, Q94. See also John Finnis 1980 *Natural Law and Natural Rights* (Oxford: Oxford University Press)

<sup>29</sup> Bartolome de las Casa. 1992. *In Defense of the Indians: The defense of the Most Reverend Lord, Don Fray Bartolomé de las Casas, of the Order of Preachers, late Bishop of Chiapa, against the persecutors and slanderers of the peoples of the New World discovered across the seas*. Trans. and Ed. by Stafford Poole (DeKalb: Northern Illinois University Press). pp 37-39

developed the first theory of inalienable natural rights<sup>30</sup> which was recognized as seminal and essential for the philosophy of law and governance by Hugo Grotius<sup>31</sup>, and later taken up by John Locke<sup>32</sup>, Thomas Jefferson<sup>33</sup>, and the United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights<sup>34</sup>.

Beyond this, the Catholic Church developed the most comprehensive doctrine of social-political-economic rights in the history of human kind, called, “The Social Doctrine of the Catholic Church.” In 1891, Pope Leo XIII issued the encyclical letter *Rerum Novarum* to rectify the abuses of the working class created by unjust practices throughout the Industrial Revolution. It endeavored to set out the responsibilities of labor, capital producers, government, and citizens to achieve justice and free market creativity and production. This entailed the condemnation of Marxist socialism as well as unrestrained capitalism while protecting the rights of individuals and private property. It is the founding document of Catholic social teaching (hereafter “CST”).

Since that time every Pope has expanded the body of Catholic social teaching to apply not only to labor and the economy but also to family, political community, international community, war and peace, and the environment. CST is expressed through about thirty encyclical letters and one conciliar document (*Gaudium et Spes*) spanning from Pope Leo XIII’s *Rerum Novarum* to Pope Francis’ *Laudato Si’*. Fortunately, the Pontifical council of Justice and Peace wrote a comprehensive document entitled Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church (hereafter “*Compendium*”) that organizes the content of the above encyclicals according to the six principles and seven major areas of application. It is very well indexed and free online

([www.vatican.va/roman\\_curia/pontifical\\_councils/justpeace/documents/rc\\_pc\\_justpeace\\_doc\\_20060526\\_compendio-dott-soc\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/pontifical_councils/justpeace/documents/rc_pc_justpeace_doc_20060526_compendio-dott-soc_en.html)).

The six major principles of CST are:

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<sup>30</sup> Francisco Suarez 1971. *On the Laws (De Legibus)* (Madrid: Consejo Superior de Investigaciones Cientificas, Instituto Francisco de Vitoria). 1:2.5, 3:2.7.7, 3:22.1.6, 1:9.4.2. See also John Finnis 1980 *Natural Law and Natural Rights* (Oxford: Oxford University Press) p207

<sup>31</sup> See Terrance 2008, *The Development of Ethics*, Vol. II, (Oxford: Oxford University Press) pp 97-98.

<sup>32</sup> John Locke *Second Treatise on Government*, Section 6

<sup>33</sup> *Declaration of Independence*, <https://www.ushistory.org/declaration/document/index.html>

<sup>34</sup> United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights, (<https://www.un.org/en/universal-declaration-human-rights/>)

1. The intrinsic transcendent dignity of every human being
2. The principle of the common good
3. The universal destination of goods
4. The principle of subsidiarity
5. Participation in democracy
6. The principle of solidarity

The seven major areas of the application of these principles are:

1. The family (discussed in Chapter 5 of the *Compendium*)
2. The working environment (discussed in Chapter 6 of the *Compendium*).
3. The economic/business community (discussed in Chapter 7 of the *Compendium*)
4. The political community (discussed in Chapter 8 of the *Compendium*)
5. The international community (discussed in Chapter 9 of the *Compendium*)
6. The environment (discussed in Chapter 10 of the *Compendium*)
7. The pursuit of peace and the situation of war (discussed in Chapter 11 of the *Compendium*)

I have given explanations of the six principles of CST and their application to the seven areas of socio-political-economic environment in MagisCenter.com (<https://magiscenter.com/a-summary-of-catholic-social-teaching/>). It may prove helpful to read this summary before attempting to drill down into the *Compendium* to obtain a context for this remarkably well-articulated social doctrine, providing a road map for social and economic justice, environmental responsibility, international relations, and war and peace. What other church has even come close to articulating such a road map for justice, rights, environment, and international relations?

## **II.B. The Complementarity of Science, Reason, and Faith**

The Catholic Church has been involved in the intersection between faith and reason since its inception, generating encyclopedic volumes on the subject from the early church fathers to St. Augustin and St. Thomas Aquinas to the immense contribution of the scholastic period to the contributions of contemporary philosophers and scientists, such as Fr. George Lemaître (father of the Big Bang Theory), Jacques

Maritain (Thomistic metaphysician and socio-political philosopher, instrumental in the drafting of the U.N. Charter of Human Rights), Fr. John Courtney Murray (Jesuit political philosopher establishing secular norms for Church-State relations and religious liberty), and Fr. Bernard Lonergan (the integration of comprehensive epistemology, science, and metaphysics)—to mention but a few. St. Thomas Aquinas sets out the intellectual dynamic which moved these thinkers throughout church history in his classic work *Summa Contra Gentiles*:

Although the truth of the Christian faith which we have discussed surpasses the capacity of the reason, nevertheless that truth that the human reason is naturally endowed to know cannot be opposed to the truth of the Christian faith. For that with which the human reason is naturally endowed is clearly most true; so much so, that it is impossible for us to think of such truths as false. Nor is it permissible to believe as false that which we hold by faith, since this is confirmed in a way that is so clearly divine.<sup>35</sup>

The natural sciences (and philosophical reflection upon them) have been an integral part of the Catholic intellectual tradition since the time of the Copernican revolution. There were at least 286 priests who were instrumental in the development of most branches of physics, chemistry, biology, and applied mathematics.<sup>36</sup> A few of the most well-known priest scientists are:

- a. Nicholas Copernicus, a Catholic cleric, developed the heliocentric model of the solar system (where the earth and other planets revolved around the sun).
- b. Gregor Mendel, an Augustinian monk and abbot, is acknowledged to be the founder of modern genetics.
- c. Nicolas Steno, a Danish Catholic bishop, is acknowledged to be one of the founders of modern stratigraphy and geology.
- d. Fr. Georges Lemaître, a Belgian, Dioscean priest with a Ph.D in physics is acknowledged to be the founder of contemporary cosmology after discovering the Big Bang Theory in 1927 – a revolutionary, rigorously established comprehensive theory of universal origin.

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<sup>35</sup> Thomas Aquinas. *Summa Contra Gentiles* – Book I. Ch 7, Section 1.

<sup>36</sup> See the list in Wikipedia “List of Catholic Clergy Scientists.”

[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List\\_of\\_Catholic\\_clergy\\_scientists](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_Catholic_clergy_scientists)

The Catholic Church is the only Church to have an academy of sciences with Nobel Prize winners from every area of science. Its lineage goes back to 1601 and is very active today. The Pontifical Academy of Sciences has 46 Nobel Prize Winners as well as about 175 highly esteemed scientists who are elected by their fellow colleagues.<sup>37</sup> In addition to sharing scientific expertise, scientists study the interrelationship between faith, philosophy, and natural science.

The Catholic Church also supports departments of natural science in 1,800 universities. These departments produce outstanding research and publications by esteemed professors in every scientific field. The Church also supports contemporary science departments in over 43,000 Catholic secondary schools. Additionally, the Church supports scientific research institutes (independent of or attached to universities), such as the Pontifical observatories and Jesuit observatories in Rome, Tucson (Arizona), and Santiago (Chile). It also supports some of the largest contemporary and historical scientific libraries. Recently, Dr. Stephen Barr and other colleagues started the Society of Catholic Scientists in the United States and in two years it had 800 members all of whom have Ph.D.'s in all areas of natural science.

Some have contended that the Catholic Church manifested an “antiscientific attitude” during the controversy with Galileo, but the controversy was not about the veracity of scientific method or its seeming heliocentric conclusion. The Jesuits of the Roman College helped Galileo to confirm mathematically his version of the heliocentric theory, and considered him to be an esteemed colleague and friend. The relationship broke down only when Galileo disobeyed the Pope about announcing the heliocentric universe as *fact* (before adequate astronomical observations could be made to confirm the theory through a technique called “stellar parallax”).<sup>38</sup> He exacerbated the strained

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<sup>37</sup> See the list of member and Nobel Prize winner in Wikipedia “Pontifical Academy of Sciences” [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pontifical\\_Academy\\_of\\_Sciences#Nobel\\_Prize-winning\\_members](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pontifical_Academy_of_Sciences#Nobel_Prize-winning_members)

<sup>38</sup> The stellar parallax technique is essential to confirming the earth’s movement around the sun, but astronomical observations of distant stars were not accurate enough to confirm the earth’s movement relative to the sun until over 200 years after Galileo – in 1839 by Friedrich Bessel. The Pope and the Jesuits were justified in asking Galileo not to claim his theory as fact until this critical astronomical observation had been made. Unfortunately, he chose not to do so, and the controversy (and breakdown of a long standing collegial relationship) began. See Wallace 1984 and DeMarco 1986 pp 23-51 and 53-59.



relationship when he implied that the Pope and the Jesuits were “simple minded” because of their reservation.

The Catholic Church has never been “anti-science” throughout the 700 year history of scientific development. Rather it has been creatively instrumental in this scientific development. What other church can come close to this legacy of creativity and harmonization within science, reason, and faith?

## **II.C. The Transformative Power of the Holy Eucharist and the Sacrament of Reconciliation**

We will consider these two uniquely Catholic and powerfully salvific sacraments individually:

1. The Holy Eucharist (Section II.C.1)
2. The Sacrament of Reconciliation (Section II.C.2)

### **II.C.1 The Holy Eucharist**

Current historical exegesis strongly indicates that the Catholic Church has taught and actualized Jesus’ true meaning of the *Holy Eucharist*—that is to make Himself *really present* in the species of bread and wine, which is the most significant spiritual gift provided by any church at any time. This authentic interpretation of Jesus’ intention in the Holy Eucharist – His real presence—is confirmed by current studies of the Jewish prophetic view of the “collapse of time” and Jesus’ equation of unconditional self-sacrifice with unconditional love. This conviction about His real presence in the Eucharist is the universal view of the New Testament writers and the Early Church fathers.<sup>39</sup> We will briefly examine Jesus’ intention in giving us his *real* body and blood at the Last Supper – the real presence of Christ in the Eucharist (Section II.C.1.a) and then summarize the five graces of this important sacrament (Section II.C.1.b).

#### **II.C.1.a The Real Presence of Jesus in the Eucharist**

Let us begin with the meaning of Jesus’ Eucharistic words. The Greek word for “body” is “*sōma*,” which not only refers to his flesh and blood, but also to his whole self—his soul, and even his divine

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<sup>39</sup> For an extended explanation and historical development of the Holy Eucharist, see *The Big Book*, Volume IX (Chapter 1) on Jesus’ intention at the Last Supper, and Chapter 3 on transubstantiation in [www.crediblecatholic.com](http://www.crediblecatholic.com) – click on “The Big Book.”

person.<sup>40</sup> With this understanding of “body,” Jesus’ Eucharistic words mean, “This is my whole self given up for you.” Notice the parallel between Jesus’ Eucharistic words and his definition of love given in the Gospel of John, “greater love has no one than this, that he lay down his life for his friends” (Jn. 15:13). Thus, in the Eucharist, Jesus is not only giving us His whole self (His whole person) He is also giving us His love, indeed, His *unconditional* Love—that is, a love which cannot be exceeded.

This unconditional Love is confirmed by the gift of His blood (which, according to Jewish custom, is separated from the body of the sacrificial offering). When Jesus offered His blood separately from His body, He showed Himself to be an intentional self-sacrifice which He interpreted to be an offering of unconditional Love.

Blood (the substance of life for the Israelites) was the vehicle through which atonement occurred in sin or guilt offerings. Jesus’ reference to His sacrificial blood would almost inevitably be seen as the blood of a sin-offering—with the notable exception that the sin-offering is no longer an animal, but rather, Jesus Himself, the Beloved One of God the Father. Jesus humbled Himself (taking the place of an animal—a sacrificial sin-offering) to take away the sins of the world forever.

Jesus goes beyond this by associating Himself with the Paschal lamb. His use of blood within the context of the Passover supper shows that He also intended to take the place of the Passover lamb. He loved us so much that He desired to become the new Passover sacrifice, replacing an unblemished lamb with His own divine presence.

Recall that the blood of the Passover lamb (put on the doorposts of every Israelite household) was the instrument through which the Israelite people were protected from death (the angel of death passing over those houses) which enabled them to move out of slavery in Egypt to freedom in the Promised Land. When Jesus (the Son of God) took the place of a sacrificial lamb, He transformed a merely earthly freedom from slavery in Egypt into a heavenly freedom from evil and death, leading to eternal life in unconditional love. As such, the Holy Eucharist is the power and love of Jesus to protect us from Satan and usher us into His eternal kingdom.

There is yet a third dimension of Jesus’ use of blood which He explicitly states as “the Blood of the covenant.” A covenant was a solemn promise that bound parties to an unbreakable agreement. When Jesus associates His blood with the covenant, He is *guaranteeing* the covenant with His life (because blood is the substance of life). When He sheds His blood on the cross (the following day), He elevates His guarantee from the status of word-based to action-based, making it an absolute and unbreakable guarantee.

So what is this covenant or contract about? It is a guarantee of His unconditional love (by giving us His whole self), a guarantee of the forgiveness of our sins (by making Himself a sin offering), a guarantee of freedom from darkness, emptiness, and slavery to sin, evil, and Satan (by taking the place of the Pascal lamb), and a guarantee of eternal life (by giving us the blood of the new covenant).

How do we know that Jesus intended to give us His *real* body and blood—His *real* crucified and risen self—rather than a merely symbolic presence in the bread and wine? First there are the obvious implications of John’s Eucharistic discourse (John 6). Consider the following:

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<sup>40</sup> See the credible catholic *Big Book*, Volume IX, Chapter 1.

I am the bread of life. Your fathers ate the manna in the wilderness, and they died. This is the bread which comes down from heaven, that a man may eat of it and not die. I am the living bread which came down from heaven; if any one eats of this bread, he will live forever; **and the bread which I shall give for the life of the world is my flesh**... Truly, truly, I say to you, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of man and drink his blood, you have no life in you; he who eats my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life, and I will raise him up at the last day. For my flesh is food indeed, and my blood is drink indeed. He who eats my flesh and drinks my blood abides in me, and I in him (Jn. 6: 48-51, 53-56).

Note how this passage does not say, “The bread that I shall give for the life of the world is symbolic of my flesh,” but rather, says, “**is my flesh**.” There is not even an implication of symbolism in this passage. How can this Scripture passage reporting the words of Jesus be read in any way other than “the bread is Jesus’ real body and the wine is Jesus’ real blood”?

Secondly, Jesus’ action at the Last Supper is prophetic—that is, it reaches into the future toward its fulfillment—and in accordance with Jesus’ intention, brings the future fulfillment into the present. The First Century Jewish view of time is quite different from our physical view of time. While we rightfully acknowledge that time is physical, objectively determinant, and measurable, we miss another legitimate characteristic of time noticed by Jewish culture—namely, that all time is in God’s mind, and that He can take various dimensions of time and manipulate or collapse them according to His will. This is perfectly possible within current views of time if we acknowledge that all time is manipulable in the mind of God.

First Century Judaism viewed time as sacred, manipulable and collapsible—particularly with respect to prophetic utterances about the future and ritual reenactments of past events.<sup>41</sup> With respect to prophetic utterances, the prophetic word was understood to move into the future, collapsing the time between the prophetic utterance and its future fulfillment. Thus, when Jesus says, “Take and eat, this is my body” (Mt. 26:26), He means the bread *is* really His body *right now* though it is to be given on the cross in the future. He intends through His prophetic word and action to bring His future sacrificed body into the bread He is giving to His disciples in the present. He knows His Father can collapse the time between the bread He is holding in the present and the sacrificed body to be given at Calvary. The same holds true for the blood. When He says, “This is the blood of the covenant,” He intends to collapse the future blood shed on the cross into the cup of wine given to His disciples. In sum, when Jesus uttered His prophetic words at the table, He made present His *real* future body and blood sacrificed in love for humankind on the cross. For Him, the separation of time was transcended and overcome by His and His Father’s divine power—and therefore the reality of His future body sacrificed on the cross was just as real in the present moment as it would be in the future.

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<sup>41</sup> In Spitzer 2016 *God So Loved the World* pp. 124-140, there are several references to historical studies justifying this view of “manipulable and collapsible sacred time” in both Jewish culture and other ancient cultures. For studies concerned with Jewish culture, see Johannes Betz 1968-70 “Eucharist” in *Sacramentum Mundi* ed. by Karl Rahner, Vol. 2 (London: Burns & Oates) pp. 260-261. See also Joachim Jeremias 1966 *The Eucharistic Words of Jesus* (London: SCM Press) pp. 223-24. For an explanation of the ancient Jewish view of the collapse of time in the reenactment of the Passover, see Gerhard von Rad 1965 *Old Testament Theology, Volume II: The Theology of Israel’s Prophetic Traditions* (London: Westminster John Knox Press) pp. 104-108. For studies concerned with “collapsible sacred time” in other ancient cultures, see Mircea Eliade 1987 *The Sacred and the Profane: The Nature of Religion* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich) pp. 40-45. See also Eliade 1971 *The Myth of the Eternal Return: or Cosmos and History* (Princeton: Princeton University Press), the entire volume.

It is important to note here that First Century Judaism did not have a view of a merely symbolic (abstract) prophetic utterance. Beyond the fact that Judaism did not make a strict separation between mind and body, there is no precedent for reducing a prophetic utterance to merely symbolic (non-real) significance. In view of this, we should interpret Jesus' words as He meant them—that the bread was His real crucified body—and that the wine was His real blood poured out for us on the cross.

Jesus did not expect the bread to turn into the appearance of His flesh, or the wine to turn into the appearance of His blood. Though these appearances are very important to our scientific mindset today, they were seen only as incidental by the First Century Jewish mindset which saw the bread as the medium through which the future salvific event is present—really present—irrespective of what it looked like to them. This is why John's Eucharistic discourse can be so explicit—"and the bread which I shall give for the life of the world *is* my flesh..." (Jn 6:51).

If God is beyond all time (and that time exists through the mind of God), then God can do anything He wants – He can bring a future event into the present (as Jesus expects He will do through His prophetic utterance), and He can also bring the reality of a past event into the present – which is what He expects will occur when He commands His disciples to "Do this in remembrance of me."

So what did Jesus mean by His command to the apostles, "Do this in remembrance of me"? In First Century Jewish culture, "remembrance" does not mean "calling to mind"—a merely cognitive recollection. It means a ritualistic re-living of the salvific event which brings the *reality* of God's grace and power into the present in the same way it occurred in the past. First Century Judaism did not make a separation between mind and body (a Greek distinction). Thus a ritualistic re-living was a re-presentation of a *real*—not merely an abstract—event in which God's real saving grace and power are present.<sup>42</sup>

Further, First Century Judaism shared with other contemporary cultures, the view of sacred time in which the re-living or reenactment of a sacred event causes time between the past event and the present to collapse.<sup>43</sup> Thus, the reenactment brings the grace and power of the past event into the present moment. So when Jesus said, "Do this in remembrance of me," He meant that the apostles (and their followers) should engage in a ritual reenactment of His Eucharistic words (which would make His real body and blood—His whole person—really present in the bread and wine). Hence, when a priest reenacts Jesus' words and actions at the Last Supper, the time between the Last Supper and the present reenactment collapses by the mind and power of God. This reenactment makes His *real* body and blood present to every generation until the end of time.

Johannes Betz summarizes the positions of Eliade, Jeremias, and von Rad, as follows:

*Anamnesis* [remembrance] in the biblical sense means not only the subjective representation of something in the consciousness and as an act of the remembering mind. It is also the *objective* [real] effectiveness and presence of one reality in another, especially the effectiveness and presence of the salvific actions of God, in the liturgical worship. Even in the Old Testament, the liturgy is the privileged medium in which the covenant attains *actuality*. The meaning of the logion ["Do this in remembrance of me"]

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<sup>42</sup> See Ibid. Johannes Betz, Gerhard von Rad, Joachim Jeremias, and Mircea Eliade.

<sup>43</sup> See Ibid. Johannes Betz, Gerhard von Rad, Joachim Jeremias, and Mircea Eliade.

may perhaps be paraphrased as follows: “do this (what I have done) in order to bring about my presence, to make really present the salvation wrought in me.”<sup>44</sup>

In sum, the reality of Jesus’ crucified body and blood in the bread and wine is a result of a *double* collapse of time which God effects through prophetic utterance and ritualistic reenactment:

- First collapse of time—Jesus’ prophetic utterance brings His real crucified body and blood (in the future) into the present bread and wine in the ritual during the Passover supper.
- Second collapse of time—the priest collapses the time between the Last Supper (in which Jesus’ body and blood are really present in the bread and wine He offered to His disciples) into the present moment through the consecration at Mass (the ritual reenactment of Jesus’ Eucharistic words).

It may be difficult for us in the present day to conceive of the Eucharistic gift (Jesus’ real body and blood) being made present through a double collapse of time by prophetic utterance and ritual reenactment. However, as noted above, this is perfectly possible and actualizable in the mind of God through which all time must exist.<sup>45</sup> Since Jesus was no doubt aware that time exists through the divine mind, his intention to actualize the double collapse of time in the reliving of his ritual actions and words (at mass) was quite realistic.<sup>46</sup> If Jesus really intended this double collapse of time when he initiated the rite of the Eucharist (at the Last Supper), and his expectation that His Father would actualize this collapse of time was realistic, why wouldn’t we believe in the real presence of Jesus in the Eucharist?

### **II.C.1.b** **The Five Graces of the Eucharist**

What did Jesus intend to be the Grace of the Holy Eucharist—this total gift of Himself? There are five principle graces that redeem, heal, and transform us:

1. Spiritual Peace,
2. Forgiveness/healing,
3. Transformation in His image,
4. Unity within the mystical body, and
5. Everlasting life.

Let us briefly examine each.

*With respect to the first gift*—spiritual peace, the prayers of the Mass petition the Lord to grant us this grace: “Lamb of God you take away the sins of the world, *grant us peace.*” The Gospels also associate Jesus’ gift of himself with his transcendent peace:

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<sup>44</sup> Johannes Betz 1968-70 “Eucharist” in *Sacramentum Mundi*, Vol. 2, p. 260.

<sup>45</sup> For the requirement that time exist through a transcendent mentative state, see Henri Bergson 1991 *Duration in Simultaneity: Bergson and the Einsteinian Universe*, trans. by Leon Jacobson (Clinamen Press Ltd).

See also Robert Spitzer 2010 *New Proofs for the Existence of God* pp. 183-197.

See also Spitzer 2000, “Definitions of Real Time and Ultimate Reality” *Journal of Ultimate Reality and Meaning: Interdisciplinary Studies in the Philosophy of Understanding*, 23:3 (September 2000) pp. 260-276.

<sup>46</sup> See the above citations to Johannes Betz, Joachim Jeremias, Gerhardt von Rad, and Mircea Eliade.

Peace I leave with you; my peace I give you. I do not give it to you as the world gives it. Do not let your hearts be troubled and do not be afraid (Jn. 14:27).

The crucified and risen body and blood of our Lord places us in intimate relationship with Him which, if we allow it, brings an increased trust in the Lord—a capacity to let go of our worries by giving them to Him. This, in turn, enables us to accept the peace given to us by the Holy Spirit even in times of abject fear and deep grief.

*With respect to the second gift*—forgiveness and healing, Jesus taught that His body and blood was for *the forgiveness of sins* (Mt. 26:28). He meant this not only in a general sense – the forgiveness of the sinfulness of people throughout the world for all time – but also in an individual sense – the forgiveness of the recipient of His body and blood. As we saw above, Jesus made Himself a sin offering for all people, and specifically for those who would participate in the reenactment of His Eucharistic meal. Therefore, it seems likely that He intended to bring about reconciliation and healing through the consumption of His body and blood.

The Church continues to proclaim this grace of forgiveness and healing in the liturgy:

- “Lamb of God you take away the sins of the world, have mercy on us.”
- “Look, this is the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world.”
- “Lord I am not worthy that you should enter under my roof, but only say the word and my soul shall be healed.”

How does this square with Paul’s admonition not to receive the Holy Eucharist unworthily (1 Cor. 11:27-29)? The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* teaches that we should not receive communion after we have committed a mortal sin.<sup>47</sup> If we have committed such a sin, we should go to the sacrament of reconciliation before receiving communion. It should be noted that mortal sin requires sufficient reflection and full consent of the will (no impediments to the free use of the will).<sup>48</sup> There are many such impediments which would mitigate culpability, thereby negating the occurrence of a mortal sin endangering our salvation.<sup>49</sup> Impediments may be external (such as being constrained, forced, or threatened to do something against one’s will) or internal (such as strong passions or feelings,<sup>50</sup> strong unconscious motivations, psychological disorders,<sup>51</sup> addictions, deeply engrained habits, and strong situational fear, duress, and depression). Though there are many conditions required for the commission of a mortal sin, we must be aware that we have sufficient freedom to commit one, and if we really do commit such a sin without impediment to the free use of our will, we should refrain from Holy Communion until we have received absolution at the sacrament of reconciliation.

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<sup>47</sup> *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, Section 1385.

<sup>48</sup> See the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* Sections 1857-1861. Of special interest are the impediments to free will listed in 1859-1860.

<sup>49</sup> *Catechism of the Catholic Church* Sections 1859-1860: “Mortal sin requires *full* knowledge and *complete* consent.”

<sup>50</sup> According to the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* 1860, “The promptings of feelings and passions can also diminish the voluntary and free character of the offense, as can external pressures or pathological disorders.”

<sup>51</sup> Psychological disorders may include psychosis, schizophrenia, bipolar disorder, obsessive-compulsive disorder, and long-standing neuroses – among other disorders.

In view of the above, how might we say that the Holy Eucharist forgives our sins? When we receive the Holy Eucharist with sincere contrition, the Lord will forgive and heal sins which are not mortal. This would include not only venial sins, but also actions classified as grave matter, but committed without sufficient knowledge and/or full consent of the will. With respect to the latter, we may be unsure of whether sufficient knowledge and full consent of the will were present, and so it is best to plan on going to confession to obtain absolution and to ask the priest for clarification on this matter.

Saint Ambrose (375 A.D.) in his work on the sacraments emphasizes this grace of forgiveness:

As often as we receive [Holy Communion], we show the Lord's death; if we show his death, we show remission of sins. If, as often as blood is poured forth, it is poured for remission of sins, I ought always to receive it, that my sins may always be forgiven me. I, who am always sinning, ought always to have a remedy.<sup>52</sup>

This theological viewpoint has been reinforced throughout the last 2000 years, and is found today in the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*:

The body of Christ we receive in Holy Communion is 'given up for us', and the blood we drink 'shed for the forgiveness of sins'. For this reason the Eucharist cannot unite us to Christ without at the same time cleansing us from past sins and preserving us from future sins.<sup>53</sup>

Yet the reconciling power of Christ's body and blood is not limited to forgiveness and cleansing of sin. It also heals souls which have been adversely affected by sin. It is as if Christ's healing power (manifest in his extensive ministry of healing) is personally present within us, helping us to overcome the habits and effects of past darkness.

The healing power of the Eucharist has been long attested by those who have benefited from it emotionally, physically, and spiritually.<sup>54</sup> This healing power has truly helped the sick, the depressed, the anxious, those who are recovering from addictions and those who are recovering from spiritual illness – particularly those who have been away from God, Christ, and the Church.<sup>55</sup> You may want to read the many online testimonials to this healing power.<sup>56</sup> The key to healing through the Holy Eucharist is our awareness of the presence and power of the Lord's body and blood accompanied by fervent prayer for healing.

*With respect to the third gift* – transformation in the Lord's heart, Jesus says:

He who eats my flesh and drinks my blood,

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<sup>52</sup> St. Ambrose *On the Mysteries and the Treatise on the Sacraments*, ed. by J.H. Strawley and trans. by T. Thompson, B.D., Chap VI, in Online Library <http://oll.libertyfund.org/titles/ambrose-on-the-mysteries-and-the-treatise-on-the-sacraments>.

<sup>53</sup> CCC #1393.

<sup>54</sup> See for example John Hampsch 1999, *The Healing Power of the Eucharist* (Welland Ontario, CA: Servant Book Publications).

<sup>55</sup> See Ibid.

<sup>56</sup> See for example, the many Eucharistic healings recounted by Jeanne and Ken Harrington 2006 "Healing Through Communion." <http://sidroth.org/articles/healing-through-communion/>

abides in Me and I in him (Jn. 6:56).

The idea of one person living *in* another is the highest possible form of intimacy – far exceeding living *with* another. Jesus intended that we enter into this highest possible intimate relationship with Him by receiving Him in His body and blood -- the Holy Eucharist. If He did not intend this, the expression “living in” would be virtually inexplicable.

Why did Jesus use this expression of highest intimacy? He wanted to signify not only the highest unitive state we could have with another, but also the *transformative effects* that come from this intimate union. For example, when we live with another human being whom we respect, like and love, it is quite typical for them to “rub off on us.” We can’t help it – we assimilate not only their good characteristics, but also some of their personality attributes, their feelings, and even their mindset. If this can occur by merely living *with* another, we can only imagine what could happen when we live *in* another, and another lives *in* us. Perhaps the best way of conveying this is through the mottos of Saint Francis de Sales and Blessed John Henry Newman – “cor ad cor Loquitor” – “heart speaking directly to heart.”

When we receive the Holy Eucharist and call to mind that Jesus has entered into this most intimate relationship with us and in us, His heart will begin to affect – indeed transform -- our hearts. He will not do this in a way that undermines or overpowers our freedom, but in a way that respects our freedom – seizing every opportunity He can to transform our hearts ever so patiently into the unconditionally loving heart He has for us. Sometimes this is so subtle that we barely notice the transition taking place within us.

*With respect to the fourth gift of the Holy Eucharist – unity with the mystical body --* Saint Paul taught that we are all united in the mystical body of Christ:

If one member suffers, all suffer together; if one member is honored,  
all rejoice together. Now you are the body of Christ and  
individually members of it (1 Cor 12:26-27).

Saint Paul is telling us that we share in and derive strength from the grace, love, and joy of the whole communion of saints both past and present – and that we also share in the tribulations of the mystical body on earth. The more we receive the Body of Christ, the more we become unified with Him and every member of the Church and the Communion of Saints. As we receive the Eucharist, we become more tightly bound to the community living in and through Christ. This has a two-fold effect. First, the joy, love, strength, tribulation, and challenge of the Church community affect our minds and hearts – our conscious and subconscious psyche. Secondly, we affect and contribute our gifts and challenges to the same community. It is like living with family members – the more time we spend with them, the more their joys, loves, and concerns and sufferings affect us – and our joys, concerns, and sufferings affect them. We can feel, or perhaps better, sense the liturgical seasons, the sorrow and repentances of Lent, the joy and redemption of Christmas and Easter, and the joyful expectation of Advent. We become more attuned to the ways that the Spirit is working – not just in our lives, but in the lives of members of our local Church, and even in the universal Church. For an example of how Fr. Spitzer experienced this as a young man on Christmas Eve, see the *Credible Catholic Big Book*, Volume 9 (Chapter 1, Section III.C).



*The fifth grace of the Eucharist* – eternal salvation – is the central focus of the Eucharistic discourse in the gospel of John. The repetition of “eternal life” in this discourse shows not only the importance of this grace, but its centrality in John’s Eucharistic theology:

I am the bread of life. Your fathers ate the manna in the wilderness, and they died. This is the bread which comes down from heaven, that a man may eat of it and not die. I am the living bread which came down from heaven; if any one eats of this bread, he will live for ever; and the bread which I shall give for the life of the world is my flesh (Jn. 6: 48-51).

This gospel passage summarizes Jesus’ primary intention at the Last Supper – to secure the eternal salvation of all who receive His body and blood in faith. Jesus’ strategy now becomes clear, the first four gifts of the Holy Eucharist – peace, forgiveness of sins/healing, transformation in his heart, and unity with the Church through His mystical body – all lead to everlasting life and love in Him with His Father. Ultimately, this gift is the reason not only for the Eucharist, but the Mass itself, which has as its center the truth, goodness, beauty, and love of the complete self-sacrifice of Jesus leading us to eternal life. There can be no greater prayer, no greater grace, no greater transformative power, and no greater path to salvation than the faithful reception of the Holy Eucharist, in which we focus intently on the real presence of our Lord and savior, Jesus Christ in His crucified, risen, and mystical body. This is the central act of spiritual conversion within Christianity itself. The denial of the real presence of Jesus in the Eucharist not only undermines His intention for all His followers, but also the most powerful and loving grace available to us for communion with Him and the path to salvation.

In as much as the Catholic Church is the One Church that honors and relives Jesus’ gift of His whole self (Body, Blood, Soul, and Divinity) and this gift of Jesus’ whole self imparts on us the above five graces leading to our eternal salvation with Him (the most important Grace ever given by anyone at any time), why would we ignore it or refuse it unless we were positive that He did not really intend to do this? In light of the above Scripture passages, and the Jewish notion of collapsible time, how could we possibly be sure that He did not intend to give us His real body, blood, soul, and divinity? Do we want to risk the possibility of ignoring or refusing the surest path to our salvation because of an unverifiable doubt? If not, then why *not* believe the obvious interpretation of the scriptural texts and the unanimous interpretation of Catholic Church leaders for two millennia? Why not become a Catholic and receive the most important gift given to anyone at any time—the Gift leading to our salvation?

## **II.C.2**

### **The Sacrament of Reconciliation**

The sacrament of reconciliation bestows a most powerful grace and light, severing our bondage to the evil one, exposing his lies, substantializing our conversion, revealing the light of Christ, galvanizing our continued conversion with graced resolve, and keeping us on the path to salvation. It is one of the most precious gifts given to the apostles and the Church to definitively wipe away our sins and to secure us on the path to salvation and to grant the peace and light of Christ. Why would any Christian want to live without it if he understood the true reality of the cosmic struggle between good and evil in which we are living?

Though the sacrament of reconciliation is frequently minimized and even overlooked in today’s Church culture, its power to catalyze a change of heart, the call of God, and moral conversion make it

essential in a culture steeped in materialism, sensuality, and egoism on the internet, traditional media, the workplace, social settings and associations, and other institutions. In order to understand the significance of this sacrament, we will briefly describe its origin in Jesus and its five key graces.

The sacrament of reconciliation has its origin in the New Testament in which Jesus clearly imparts the power to forgive sins through the Holy Spirit to the apostles after the resurrection:

Jesus said to them again, "Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, even so I send you. "And when he had said this, he breathed on them, and said to them, "Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained (Jn 20: 21-23).

The meaning of this passage is clear – Jesus gave a universal power to forgive and retain sins to His apostles – “If you forgive the sins of *any...*” Though the form under which this power is to be administered is not defined, it is evident that the apostles (and by implication their successors) are to be mediators of the divine power and authority of forgiveness. Since the power to forgive sins belongs to God alone,<sup>57</sup> Jesus gave his apostles the power and charge to be mediators of His own divine power through the Holy Spirit. As such it is a sacramental power of forgiveness and reconciliation administered by the Church since its inception.

There are five key graces of the sacrament which absolve us, heal us, release us from bondage to Satan, and set us and keep us on the path to salvation:

1. *Definitive absolution for mortal and venial sins.* When penitents are sincerely contrite (perfectly or imperfectly) and express firm purpose of amendment, the forgiving and merciful power of Jesus Christ is given definitively to them through the absolving action of the priest. At this juncture, they are no longer held bound by their sins, and can start their spiritual and moral lives anew. Jesus was well aware that without definitive absolution, we can never be sure whether our prayers for forgiveness have been answered. This uncertainty leaves us feeling unforgiven, unreconciled, and unhealed from our past sins, leading to a state of guilt and uncertainty in our relationship with God – a state which keeps us at a distance from Him. As the months and years go by, the distance grows into an ever weakening faith that leads to emptiness, loneliness, and alienation on the most fundamental level. Jesus knew we could not release ourselves from this bondage of guilt, ambivalence, and emptiness, and so He instituted the sacrament of reconciliation where His words and power of absolution could move through his appointed mediators into the hearts and lives of penitents. If you have been away from the sacrament of reconciliation for a while, you will want to avail yourself of its absolving and healing power which will immediately remove the distance between you and God by removing the burden of sin.
2. *Spiritual solidification of a turning point in life.* Countless are the number of people who have lost their way – or are in the process of losing their way from the Church, the moral teaching of Jesus, and a moral life. The Lord tries to call these individuals back to his light and life through feelings of deep spiritual emptiness, alienation, and loneliness, through disturbing dreams, wakeup calls at 3:00 o'clock in the morning that reveal the darkness into which they are moving, and by sending signs of the consequences of the evil they are pursuing through thoughts in the back of the mind, friends and family members, books and

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<sup>57</sup> The power to forgive sins belongs to God alone -- see Psalm 103:2-3, Is. 43:25, and Mk. 2:5-7.

- films, etc. If they act on these “big hints,” they will need a solid grace-filled foundation on which to ground their turning point and change of heart. As many of us who have turned our lives around can attest, the sacrament of reconciliation is indispensable for filling our desire to change with the grace, power, and love of God so that we will no longer be held bound by past failures and enslavement to sin (and sin’s master, the evil one). The grace and power of this important sacrament is like the heavenly angels snatching *Faust* out of the hands of Mephistopheles (the devil in Goethe’s version of the story).<sup>58</sup> The grace of the sacrament of reconciliation gives substance to the act of conversion, removes bondage to the evil one, decreases the influence of the evil one, and gives a renewed sense of light and hope in Christ. Given that many of us will have several “turning point” moments throughout life, this sacrament is essential for bringing the needed substance and reinforcement to our intentions, so that we can be liberated from the bondage and influence of the evil one, and be filled with the light of Christ.
3. *Healing of the damage of sin.* A sinful life can cause considerable damage to one’s emotional, interpersonal, and spiritual life. Sin can cause us to feel hostility toward the truth, healthy loving relationships, religion, the Church, and even Christ himself. We need the grace of Jesus Christ to help us return to the light of truth, love, goodness, and faith, not only to break with our old proclivities but to rekindle the desire for new proclivities in Christ. If you have had the experience of feeling aversion or even hostility towards religion, religious practice, committed relationships, or even Jesus, when previously you felt peace, fulfillment, and care for them, you will want to assess the reason for your change of heart. If those reasons are connected to a rejection of divine moral authority or specific moral standards, then you may have suffered damage to your spiritual wellbeing, making you more subject to the suggestions of the evil spirit over those of the Holy Spirit. If so, then you may need the power and grace of the sacrament of reconciliation to help overcome the spiritual damage, break free from the evil spirit, and be restored to the truth and love of Jesus Christ. The light of Christ in the sacrament of reconciliation is a rebuke to the evil spirit and the darkness invading our souls much like Gandalf’s rebuke of Grima Wormtongue who mesmerized King Théoden into believing his lies and powerlessness to fight off his enemies: “The wise speak only of what they know, Grima son of Galmod. A witless worm have you become. Therefore be silent, and keep your forked tongue behind your teeth.”<sup>59</sup> The power and grace of the sacrament of reconciliation catalyzes the light and love of Christ within our hearts, and if we receive the sacrament several times per year, it continues to help us, building on itself as “grace upon grace” (Jn. 1:16). As healing continues through our efforts and the grace of this sacrament, sanity, truth, love, goodness, and faith in Jesus Christ return and grow stronger.
  4. *Graced resolve for continued conversion.* Many of the benefits of this sacrament occur *after* receiving it. If we continue to bring our firm purpose of amendment to daily prayer after the sacrament, its grace fills our intention with a kind of supernatural strength, facilitating progress in our moral conversion.
  5. *The peace of Christ.* When we recognize the harm our sins have done to others and the spiritual jeopardy to which they have subjected us, we may suffer a deep sense of emptiness, alienation, loneliness, and guilt from which it is difficult to find relief. Most human solutions, such as counseling or conversation with friends, do not seem to get at the heart of this alienation and guilt. Even our best friends cannot take it away. The one truly

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<sup>58</sup> See Johann von Goethe’s *Faust*, Part 2, Act 5.

<sup>59</sup> J.R.R. Tolkien’s *The Two Towers*.

freeing breakthrough moment that transforms deep self-alienation and guilt into supernatural peace is the sacrament of reconciliation. After absolution and the priest's farewell – "Go in peace" – God's peace comes into our souls and does for us what we, our family, and our friends cannot do for ourselves. He lifts us out of our emptiness, alienation, and guilt into *His* sublime light and security. If anyone wants evidence of the power of supernatural grace helping us beyond mere natural and human causation, the grace of this sacrament which is a "peace beyond all understanding" (Phil. 4:7) may well provide it. It is as if the Lord's light and peace breaks through the darkness into which the evil spirit has lured and mired us – yet another instance of Christ's victory over satan manifest in our lives.

As can be seen from the above five graces, the sacrament of reconciliation is one of the very best gifts that God has given to us through the Church he founded on Peter and his successors. It is so powerful in liberating us from the darkness of evil into which we may have become mired, in healing the residual damage from it, and filling us with peace and continuing resolve, that it may well be called, "evil's spell breaker" or "the continued victory of Christ over satan in our lives." Though some may question the need for this sacrament because it can be challenging or they think that a human mediator is unnecessary, they are quite mistaken, for it is one of the very best ways of authentically examining our conscience and bringing the definitive absolving and healing presence of Christ into our lives. If someone offers you a definitive means of unshackling yourself from the evil one, separating yourself from him, and bringing you a peace beyond all understanding for the mere request of authentically acknowledging and being contrite for your sins, wouldn't you accept it? This is precisely why Jesus gave His apostles (and their successors) the power to forgive sins:

Jesus said to them again, "Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, even so I send you. "And when he had said this, he breathed on them, and said to them, "Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained" (Jn 20: 21-23).

## II.D Conclusion

There are many other dimensions of the Catholic Church that are unique and extraordinary beyond the above four—its unity throughout 2,000 years of history (defying every sociological norm<sup>60</sup>), its cohesive universal teaching (embodied by *The Catechism of the Catholic Church*), the Eucharistic Liturgy (that surrounds the celebration of Jesus' Eucharistic gift of Himself with praise, tradition, the Word, teaching, and beauty<sup>61</sup>), the other five sacraments

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<sup>60</sup> Arnold Toynbee, one of the worlds greatest historians of civilization prior to his conversion noted, "The Church in its traditional form thus stands forth armed with the spear of the Mass, the shield of the Hierarchy, and the helmet of the Papacy; and perhaps the subconscious purpose --or the divine intention, if you prefer that language-- of this heavy panoply of institutions in which the Church has clad herself is the very practical one of outlasting the toughest of the secular institutions of this world, including all the civilizations. If we survey all the institutions of which we have knowledge in the present and in the past, I think that the institutions created, or adopted and adapted, by Christianity are the toughest and the most enduring of any that we know and are therefore the most likely to last--and outlast all the rest." Arnold Toynbee 1948 "Christianity and Civilization" in *Civilization on Trial* (Oxford University Press). <http://www.myriobiblos.gr/texts/english/toynbee.html>.

<sup>61</sup> See CredibleCatholic.com, *The Big Book*, Vol 9. <https://www.crediblecatholic.com/pdf/M9/BB9.pdf#P1V9>

(Baptism, Confirmation, Sacrament of the Sick, Matrimony, and Holy Orders<sup>62</sup>), and the most multiformed, deep and comprehensive spiritual tradition of any church anywhere<sup>63</sup>. Precious as all of these other gifts are, we can make a strong, probative case for the unique extraordinary nature of the Catholic Church on which to base our decision to embrace it above any other world religion on the basis of the above four considerations—the Holy Eucharist, the Sacrament of Reconciliation, the remarkable legacy of charity and social teaching, and its unity of faith, reason, and science. In light of the above, why would we not choose to be Catholic?

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<sup>62</sup> See CredibleCatholic.com, *The Big Book*, Vol 10 & 11.

<https://www.crediblecatholic.com/pdf/M10/BB10.pdf#P1V10>

<sup>63</sup> See CredibleCatholic.com, *The Big Book*, Vol 12 <https://www.crediblecatholic.com/pdf/M12/BB12.pdf#P1V12>