

# *Liturgy*





# What is Liturgy?

There's hardly any better place to start to reflect on liturgy than with a statement of what liturgy is. Put simply but accurately, liturgy is: -

- people
- praying
- the prayer of the Church, i.e. its official, prescribed prayer
- and therefore the Church at prayer

In four reflections on liturgy over the four issues of the publication during the coming year I will 'unpack' and develop those four components. (I am somewhat indebted to writings of Fr Eugene Walsh for some inspiration). My thoughts apply to all forms of Catholic liturgy, but especially to its chief expression, the celebration of the seven sacraments.

## *Liturgy is an assembly of praying people*

A praying assembly is a participating one. However, the participation which is required is more than a matter of externals, going through the motions of a ritual. It is more than getting people interested, occupying their time and keeping them busy. It is more than speaking, singing, standing, sitting and kneeling. While participation does involve external activities and mental stimulation, this is all subordinate to the basic attitude and aim which is communication with God (i.e. prayer).

It follows that interest in liturgy is interest in improving the praying of the liturgy – my own praying and that of others. For 'good' liturgy is not 'putting on a good show' but people praying together and praying well. Conversely, poor liturgy is people praying poorly. The standard for all that is said, sung, or done, must be this: 'What help does it offer this group of people to pray this community prayer?' And so whether one is proclaiming a reading, playing a guitar, showing people to a seat, leading the singing, choosing an acclamation, taking part in a liturgy committee meeting, or decorating a church building for Christmas, there is ultimately one aim for all liturgical activities, viz., to help the gathered people to pray as sincerely and as fully as they can. This cannot be stated strongly enough.

The Church is never more truly itself than when the People of God actually assemble for the celebration of the sacraments and especially the celebration of the Eucharist. For both prayer-leader and people this is a time of great opportunity and potential. For many an individual it is a time of hope – a hope that maybe

this time my presence there will be a truly religious experience, that I will actually tap into the presence of God and feel something of his love for me and for the people around me; a hope that I will get a boost from this celebration, a bit more faith, courage and love to face the coming week.

The persistence of this hope is all the more remarkable, because too often the hopes and needs of people are not met in liturgical celebrations. How often do they not emerge from Sunday Eucharist etc. feeling let-down, bored, disappointed and discouraged? For some the quality of celebration is so terrible that they simply cannot take it any longer. They drop out. Others persevere out of a sense of obligation or guilt, but they continue to be bored and to be deprived of the nourishment they crave from word and sacrament, so as to renew their commitment to follow Christ as his disciples.

The quality of worship will be good only if those planning and preparing liturgy never forget that all their efforts have a single aim – to create for everyone there, the possibility of an experience of God, the opportunity to 'taste and see that the Lord is good'.

For this task of helping the average person at liturgy to experience God, the means are available. It's a matter of identifying them and knowing how to put them together.

In the first place, there is the attractiveness of the God we celebrate. He is the God of Jesus, the God he made known, the God of love. He loves you, he loves me, he loves everybody without exception and without reservation. He is only a God of love. He is not an avenging God, not a hating God, not a snooping God, not a book-keeping God. His nature and activity are to love. He seeks to get into our lives, to help us to know him and love him. So in every effort to communicate with people through liturgy, we must start with the recognition that the God we celebrate is a God of total and unconditional love for all people.

In the second place, on the side of people, there is their longing, consciously or unconsciously, to get in touch with God, and with whatever gives meaning to their lives. The search for meaning is a universal quest, and the cry 'What is my life all about?' is a universal one. Sometimes at least it touches the God-question: 'Is God for real? Does God really care? Can I get in touch with God? Can God and does God want to get in touch with me? Is Jesus for real and how can he come into my life?'



# Liturgy is work, God's Work and Ours

by Father Brian Gleeson

In March, dear readers, I wrote that liturgy is people praying together the prayer of the Church, i.e. its official prescribed prayer. As such, it is something we do. But even more it is something which God does.

What God does in liturgy continues what God has already done all through history. This is his work of saving (i.e. transforming) human beings. It reached its climax in the living, dying and rising of Jesus. 'God so loved the world,' says St John in a famous passage, 'that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life' (3:16).

When God the Father raised Jesus from the dead, he let loose among us the power that animated Jesus from the cradle to the grave. This is the power of the Spirit of God, the Holy Spirit! The power that transformed his relationships! The power that led him to keep on loving God and God's people! The power that enabled him to go about doing good, helping and healing (see Acts 10:38)! The power that brought understanding and compassion, kindness and comfort to others, in their struggles and their pain! The power that forgave their sins, relieved their guilt, offered them a brand new start and the joy of his on-going friendship, presence and support! It's this very same Spirit of God that our Saviour keeps giving us and especially when we pray together at liturgy. It is his Spirit that continues to refresh, renew and transform our lives. Slowly but surely we become more and more like Jesus. And so scholars and others often refer to liturgy as an encounter with Christ in the fullness of his redeeming activity. He simply does not and will not leave us as we are.



To speak this way is to speak of liturgy as gift, as grace. But what God is doing in liturgy is only side of the picture. There is also our part, our work. What we do is to respond to the presence and action of God, who keeps working within us and among us through Jesus Christ our Saviour and through his Spirit. This is true of the whole of liturgy and of each form it takes, whether it be praise, thanksgiving, sorrow, petition, lament, self-offering, etc. Liturgy, then, in the words of Mary Schaefer, 'is the shape of God's grace in the form of the assembly's believing response.' To speak this way is to speak of liturgy as response.

Liturgy as both gift and response takes shape as a dialogue, a conversation with God. On the one hand, it is a proclamation and celebration of God's love. On the other hand it is our response to God's loving self-giving to us, our response of faith, trust and love. In responding to God's loving self-giving in liturgy, we share in all the benefits that our Saviour has brought human beings in his living, dying and rising. In a nutshell, we enter into union with God and one another. To speak this way is to speak of the ultimate purpose of

all liturgy – the glorification of God and the sanctification and transformation of human beings.

It may be seen, then, that the pattern of liturgy corresponds to the life, prayer and work of our Saviour: – To the Father, through the Son and in the power of the Holy Spirit! In the conclusion of our every Eucharistic Prayer we explicitly acknowledge that as the pattern of our lives, work and prayer as well: 'Through him, with him, in him, in the unity of the Holy Spirit, all glory and honour is yours, Almighty Father, for ever and ever. AMEN.'



## Liturgy is Sharing Who we Are and What we Believe

by Father Brian Gleeson

In March, dear readers, I wrote that liturgy is people praying together the prayer of the Church, i.e. its official prescribed prayer. In June I wrote that liturgy is work – God’s work of reaching out to us in love and our loving response to God of faith, hope and love. I write this month on our shared relationship with one another at liturgy, what is sometimes called its horizontal and community dimensions.

Liturgy is a celebration of a community, by a community and for a community. At liturgy we belong to one another and we belong together. We come together as people in relationship. We gather as members of one community, the community of the followers of Jesus in this place, the community of faith, hope and love. We gather therefore as people who love and care for one another. ‘We come as your people, we come as your own, united with each other, love finds a home’, says a popular hymn today by David Haas.

Unlike a crowd of disconnected individuals waiting together to catch a train, or a crowd in a cinema watching the same movie, or passengers on an aeroplane sharing the same food with strangers, the Christian people at liturgy have much in common. They have all been created by the same God. They have all been redeemed by the same Christ. They have all been joined to the same Christ at baptism. They have all been made members (limbs and cells) of the same body of Christ. They are all brothers and sisters ‘in Christ’. They all share the same Spirit of Christ.

So when they come together for the shared prayer that liturgy is, they give expression to all they have in common as the community of Christ. He remains their Lord and Leader and the Principal Celebrant of their every liturgy. So much so, that even before they go together to the Table of the Lord to receive Christ in Holy Communion, they are already a ‘holy communion’ of shared fellowship in Christ. Paul the Apostle has spelled out some implications of their wonderful shared dignity: ‘So then, the eye cannot say to the hand, “I don’t need you!” Nor can the head say to the feet, “Well, I don’t need you!”’ (1 Corinthians

12:21); ‘If one part of the body suffers, all the other parts suffer with it; if one part is praised, all the other parts share its happiness’ (1 Corinthians 12:26).

On the other hand, the Christian community at liturgy remains a human community with all our human faults, sins and weaknesses. So our liturgies will never be perfect. As companions on the same journey to God, we’re all in the work of the shared prayer of liturgy together. But even as we give praise, thanks and glory to God and even as we put ourselves at the service of God and one another

at our shared prayer, our limitations and our brokenness as human beings will also come through the ways we do things and the ways we are. This need not make our efforts a disaster. On the contrary! Reality and charity call us to understand and accept one another’s weaknesses, failures and inadequacies, to respect the ways in which we are different from one another and to carry one another’s burdens. None of us has got it all together. None of us has got all it takes. The strengths of one compensate for the weaknesses of another.

Every time we come to Holy Communion, the minister of communion reminds us of our solidarity and togetherness in the one body of Christ. Holding the consecrated bread before the eyes of each communicant, the minister says ‘The body of Christ’. Each of us answers ‘Amen’. In answering ‘Amen’, each of us is not just affirming the real

presence of Christ in the form of bread. Each of us is also saying, ‘Yes, I am the body of Christ’ and even better, ‘Yes, we are the body of Christ’. To take the broader view is to find ourselves in the company of St Paul and St Augustine. St Paul said: ‘All of you are Christ’s body and each one is a part of it’ (1 Corinthians 12:27). St Augustine said: ‘If you then are the body of Christ and his members, it is your sacrament that reposes on the altar of the Lord. It is your sacrament that you receive. You answer “Amen” to what you yourself are ... Be, then, a member of the body of Christ to verify your “Amen”’. (Sermon 272).

That cannot happen if we keep isolating ourselves from others at liturgy by scattering all over the church building!





## Jesus Christ Today In Church,

### Mission And Sacraments

*The Church means 'we' and 'us',  
not 'they' and 'them'*

- In ancient Greece the word church in Greek (ekklesia) meant an assembly of male citizens who were entitled to vote.
- In the Greek version of the Old Testament the word was borrowed for the assembly of the People of God, an assembly of men, women and children that took place in the Sinai desert. God, out of love, chose the people of Israel for the mission of making him known to the nations and entered into a loving bond, a covenant of friendship with them. On their part they were to show their love for God and be an inspiration to the nations round about, by faithfully keeping God's commandments.
- In the New Testament, the Greek word for church (ekklesia) refers to a group of Christians in a particular place and especially when they get together to pray. It also comes to mean, as the church gets bigger, groups of Christians in particular regions. Eventually, the word church comes to mean also the world-wide body of Christians.
- The English word for church also means 'belonging to the Lord' (from the Greek kyriakon). Belonging to the Catholic Church is not simply a matter of being with people we know or with people who think and act like us, our kind of people. The church means much more than our own parish, which is only part of the picture. There is also the Church of Lismore and its bishop. There is the Church of Australia as a whole. And there is the world-wide Catholic Church. One definition of the church as a whole is that it is a union or communion of local churches, presided over by the Church of Rome, which is itself a local church. This makes the Universal Church a community of communities and a communion of communions.



Years ago, the great and influential Dominican scholar, Yves Congar, wrote a book he called *The Church that I Love*. In that book he voiced his concerns, concerns that came to be addressed by the Second Vatican Council (1962-1965). If I were to ask you to write down your three biggest current concerns about the church that you love, I wonder what you would write. Please let me share with you three of my major concerns about the church at the present time: -

1. We need a universal outlook. We need to think big. Civil society has gone global and so has the church. We must stretch our minds and hearts to be concerned about the people of the church in other parishes, in the diocese as a whole, in other parts of Australia and all over the world. The idea of the 'global village' applies also to the church. We must understand too that the idea of church includes Christians in other denominations, such as our brothers and sisters in the Anglican and Uniting Churches. They belong to us and we belong to them in the Christian Church as a whole.
2. We are all called to follow Jesus Christ and live his teachings

and so become good and holy people. There's not one standard for priests and religious and another for lay people. Clergy and religious don't have any monopoly on holiness, or any exclusive access to the means for becoming holy. All of us too have our weaknesses and all of us are sharing in the struggle to become better people. All of us also need the same grace of God to turn away from sin and selfishness and to turn to God for goodness and integrity in the ways we live.

3. We need to become a more just church and a more healing one. To be a more just church we must keep asking ourselves: 'How are we treating the poor and powerless people in our society?' How do we regard them and how do we act towards them? What e.g. is our attitude and behaviour towards aborigines, refugees and asylum seekers? To be a more healing church, we must start by admitting that all around us there are just too many hurting people. Things have happened that have shattered their peace and broken their spirits. The broken ones include some who have been hurt even by ministers of the church, including priests and religious. Those who are hurting, then, for whatever reason, need people like us to reach out to them, dry their tears, bandage their wounds, bring them back home and give them hope. Jesus, our Good Shepherd, loves them in their brokenness and so must we.

*Let me ask you now: 'Do you still need the church? Why? Why not?' I ask myself that same question and this is my answer: -*

The church is so closely connected to Jesus Christ in so many ways and especially as his body on earth, that it might make more sense to ask ourselves: 'Do you still need Jesus Christ?' The first Christians certainly did. For the Samaritan woman at the well, he was a fountain of cleansing and refreshing water, for the man born blind he was the light in the darkness, for hungry believers in the desert place, he was the bread of life, for Lazarus who died, he was the resurrection and the life. For all of his first disciples, in fact, he was the water and bread, the light and life, the truth, beauty, freedom and forgiveness, the peace and joy, the wholeness and integrity, the life and love with God, that all human beings long for in the depths of their hearts and souls. They experienced Christ giving them as everlasting gifts. It was in and through the church that the first Christians came to know and value Jesus Christ as their way to God. It is in and through the church that every generation of Christians since has found their way to God. To put it simply: It is in and through the church that we come to know Jesus Christ. It is in and through Jesus Christ that we come to know God, the God of our salvation, the God who is Father, Son and Holy Spirit.<sup>1</sup>

So even if particular experiences of churchmen and churchwomen occasionally incline us to the thought that we can't go on living in the church just as it is, surely deep down we know in our heart of hearts that we simply cannot live without it. We know that for us who believe, in the best sense of the famous phrase, 'outside the church there is no salvation'.

In the next issue, I will focus on the question: 'What is the church and what is it for?' This will be to ask about the nature of the church and its purpose (its mission) in the world.

*(Endnotes) 1 Cf. William Henn, Church: The People of God (London & New York: Burns & Oates, 2004), 17f.*



## *'I have no hands but yours': Jesus Christ alive and active today in His Church*

One short sentence in Vatican Two's charter on liturgy is a real gem. It says: '... Christ is always present in his Church, especially in liturgical celebrations' (Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy, 7). This rich truth leads me to say something relevant now about what the Church is (its nature) and what it is for (its mission).

The Church is nothing less than the body of Jesus in the world today. When Jesus died and rose from the dead, he disappeared. He can no longer communicate with us as he did in his days on earth. We can no longer see him, hear him, or touch him. To communicate with us now he has taken on us Christians as his body. In words attributed to St Teresa of Avila, 'Christ has no body now on earth but yours.' We are now his body, his face, his hands, his feet, his heart and his voice to others. A true story illustrates this well:

Towards the end of World War II, a squad of American soldiers came into a little town which had been bitterly fought over. In the village square they found a statue of Christ lying battered and broken. Some Catholic men of the group put it together as best they could and set it back on the pedestal. But they could not find the hands. Finally, one of them made a crudely lettered sign: 'I have no hands but yours.'

The soul of the Body of Christ, the Church, is the Holy Spirit. The Church is the temple of the Holy Spirit, who dwells in the community of Christians. The very same Spirit of God who enlivened Jesus Christ and empowered him to go about doing good and healing and helping all kinds of needy and troubled people has been given to us. Being together in the same Body of Christ and belonging to the same Body of Christ, we are concerned for one another, we suffer and we rejoice together. 'If one part of the body suffers,' says St Paul, 'all the other parts suffer with it; if one part is praised, all the other parts share its happiness' (1 Cor 12:26).

As his body now on earth, you and I are therefore his extension and presence to our world. We are, in fact, all of the following:

- The community of the followers of Jesus
- The community of believers
- The community of faith, hope and love
- The People of God, a pilgrim people on a shared journey to God
- The sacrament of Christ in the world

Both together and individually we are a sign and instrument, a sign and source of the presence of Jesus Christ and of the love of Jesus Christ for all human beings.

- A sign and instrument for the coming of the kingdom or reign of God

The kingdom of God is not so much an area of land, a physical space or territory, but a situation – God ruling and reigning over people, ruling and reigning as their King and Lord in power, might and mercy. In the Preface for the Feast of Christ the King, the kingdom is described as 'a kingdom of truth and life, a kingdom of holiness and grace, a kingdom of justice, love and peace.' Irish theologian, Diarmuid O'Murchu, calls it 'a new world order, marked by right relationships of justice, love and peace.'



The idea of the kingdom of God resonates with our longings for a better world, God's kind of world, an inclusive world where people are equal, an inclusive world where people experience justice and fairness, forgiveness and reconciliation, care and compassion, kindness and gentleness, acceptance, joy and peace.

- The community of salvation (spiritual well-being)

'Because of our sins,' St Paul reminds us, 'Jesus was handed over to die and he was raised to life to put us right with God' (Romans 4:25). But our salvation is a work in progress. We have been saved in principle, we are in the process of being saved and we trust that our loving God will keep reaching out to us and transforming us and will finally take us to himself for ever.

This is to say that our being saved is mainly God's work. There is a wrong attitude around about this. It says: 'My salvation depends on ME. "I am the master of my fate; I am the captain of my soul." I am the one who has to work hard and try and try again to be faithful. Then one day I will get MY reward. I hope you get your reward too, but that's your problem not mine.' Such thinking is influenced by our culture which highlights the individual. Our culture admires self-made success people, real people like Kerry Packer and Rupert Murdoch and fantasy figures like the Lone Ranger and Rambo. Our culture also sneers at some it calls 'losers' and 'wannabes'. Coming first, becoming the Australian Idol and getting the gold medal or the gold logie, all emphasize personal achievement, even if it means stepping on the faces of others as we climb the ladder to the top.

But in our relationship with God, this is not the way it works. **WE ARE NOT SAVED AS ISOLATED INDIVIDUALS.** The Second Vatican Council said something wonderful about this: 'God has . . . willed to make women and men holy and to save them, not as individuals without any bond between them, but rather to make them into a people who might acknowledge him and serve him in holiness' (The Church, 9). So we go to God together, or we don't go at all.

I suggest, then, that the essence of life is not individual success, in which some are seen as achievers and others are losers. No, the essence of life is being a loving community, sharing relationships and living life together. It is through the inspiration and support we get from other people and through the inspiration and support we give to other people, that little by little God saves us from our incompleteness, our selfishness and from our ugly, nasty, unkind, cruel and unloving ways. So Barbara Streisand is surely right when she sings: 'People who need people are the luckiest people in the world.'

That's enough for now about who we are, what we are and what we are on about as the Church of Jesus Christ in our world today. But this is all too important to leave it at that. So in the next issue, dear Readers, let me develop a little further what I have said so far about our shared identity and our shared mission.



## *'Christ is always present in his Church, especially in liturgical celebrations'*

There's so much richness in the above statement of Vatican II, dear Readers, that I'm inviting you to keep on reflecting with me on some of its rich implications for our shared life, mission and prayer as the community of Jesus (the Church) in the world today: -

As baptised believers, you and I have been sent into the world by Jesus our Leader to be signs, instruments and servants of the kingdom of God. He says to us what he said to his first followers: 'As the Father has sent me, so I send you' (Jn 20:21). What does it mean to enter the kingdom of God? What does it mean to be citizens of God's kingdom? What does it mean to work for the coming of the kingdom of God?

*To enter and live in God's kingdom is to recognise that God is king of our lives, to walk in the footsteps of Jesus and to live his teachings*

To enter and live in God's kingdom is to recognise that God is king of our lives, to walk in the footsteps of Jesus and to live his teachings – especially that God is Father and Mother to all, that we are to love both God and neighbour, that we are to forgive without limits and that we are to show a practical loving concern for poor people, outsiders and outcasts. Whether we enter the kingdom or not, Jesus insists, depends upon our response to our neighbour (including our enemy) in need. Not everyone who says 'Lord, Lord' (Mt 7:21) belongs. It is those who feed the hungry, clothe the naked, welcome the stranger and comfort the sick, who inherit the kingdom (Mt 25:31- 46). It is they who bring God's loving and liberating presence to others.

The mission of the Church on earth is exactly the same as that of Jesus. His mission on earth was not only to set the human heart free from sin, as central as that might be, but also to deliver men and women from disease and oppression and everything that hinders their full development as human beings, who have been created by God and destined by God for everlasting life. Just as Jesus has been called 'the man for others', 'the person for others', so the Church may be called 'the community for others'. It is not itself the kingdom, but a seed, a budding forth, a sign, instrument and servant of the kingdom.

The kingdom is broader than the Church and includes men and women who are outside the Church. Working for the kingdom means working with others, both inside and outside the Church. Whenever and wherever people love one another, forgive one another, carry one another's burdens, work for justice and peace, the kingdom of God is happening.

The Church's role is not to dominate the world, but to be its loving servant in all the ways in which Jesus loved, served, helped and healed.

He himself was the Good Samaritan to the lost, wounded and broken. We, the Church, must also be that Good Samaritan, working as instruments of God to remove injustice, discrimination, poverty and disease from human society.



The Church has always been concerned for human betterment. In ancient Rome the Church protested against gladiator fights and other forms of killing for sport. In the Middle Ages, prophets in the Church spoke in defence of the peasants against the tyranny of the nobles. Monasteries were the first hotels for weary pilgrims. The Church has always cared for widows and orphans. It has fought against slavery, against the dehumanization of factory workers and against the exploitation of migrants. In the 1960's Christians



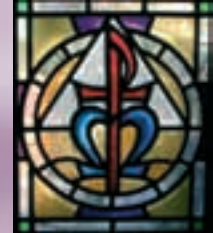
marched for civil rights for black people in America. Today they march for the right to life in its many forms as well as for many other social causes, including a 'fair go' for refugees and asylum seekers in Australia and for a fair and guaranteed minimum wage as well as humane conditions for workers. Today churches are providing homes for the homeless, hospitals, hospices, refuges, soup kitchens, schools, literacy programmes, day-care centres, friendship and support groups, home visits, food parcels and clothing, etc.

Since Vatican II there has been nothing less than an explosion of lay ministries and activities of every kind – to sick, disabled and dying people; to bereaved families; to dysfunctional families; to youth; to migrants and refugees; to battered wives and to other people in need of counselling, therapy and protection. Lay persons function as teachers, principals, parish councillors, catechists, readers, ministers of communion, musicians and singers, prayer leaders, artists and architects. There are nurses, doctors and pastoral workers, who view their services as Christian ministries. Some lay persons are campus ministers, social workers, prison visitors, day care workers and foster parents. Some contribute their love and skills in the rehabilitation of alcoholics and drug addicts. Some work in marriage tribunals and in marriage counselling, some as canon lawyers, givers of retreats and spiritual directors and still others in the areas of social justice, ecumenical dialogue and co-operation. In some places lay people have become, almost equivalently, the pastors of parishes.

One of the most warmly received teachings of Vatican II is that salvation is not only concerned with the saving of souls but with the *One of the most warmly received teachings of Vatican II is that salvation is not only concerned with the saving of souls but with the saving of the whole human person, body and soul.*

saving of the whole human person, body and soul. 'The glory of God,' says St Irenaeus, 'is the human person fully alive.' A growing concern in the Church is for saving the whole of God's work of creation. This has given rise to a movement known as 'ecospirituality', which is passionate about the environment and ecological issues like the dire threat of global warming to the well-being and even the survival of the human race.

When I feel discouraged and disheartened about my own faults and defects and those of my church community, I think of the great and good things that are happening for the coming of the reign of God, such as those I've just been sharing with you. Thinking such positive thoughts make me feel better about life and the Church. What about you?



## The continuing presence and activity of Jesus Christ in liturgical celebration

In a previous issue, dear Readers, I emphasised the presence and activity of Jesus Christ whenever and wherever the Church acts as a servant community. It's time now to start to consider yet another principal manifestation of Jesus in the Church today. This is his presence in liturgy and more specifically in the seven ritual sacraments of our Catholic Church. 'Christ is always present in his Church, especially in liturgical celebrations,' Vatican II has stressed in its Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy n.7. It goes on to specify his presence:

He is present in the sacrifice of the Mass both in the person of his minister... and most of all in the eucharistic species. By his power he is present in the sacraments so that when anybody baptises it is really Christ himself who baptises. He is present in his word since it is he himself who speaks when the holy scriptures are read in church. Lastly, he is present when the church prays and sings, for he has promised "where two or three are gathered together in my name there am I in the midst of them" (Mt 18:20).

It is in the liturgy especially that we experience or ought to experience our unity, togetherness and fellowship with God and one another in the Church. In the liturgy, the Church's public worship, we continue to encounter Christ as our Redeemer and to receive the gifts of the Holy Spirit. It is in the liturgy that we are empowered to surrender ourselves and our lives to God. It is in the liturgy too that we are manifested and seen as the Church, the community of his disciples on earth.

### *The origin and meaning of the sacraments in Jesus*

The sacraments, as we have them, find their origin and meaning in the life and work, the person and values of Jesus Christ. They tell his story. Every sacrament tells us something significant about him. So much so, that even though the sacraments of confirmation, reconciliation, anointing of the sick, holy orders and marriage, are not specifically mentioned in the gospels, when they do emerge in history they reflect aspects of his life and the values he held and lived. Thus baptism reflects his call to conversion and discipleship; confirmation his reliance on the Holy Spirit; reconciliation his stress on God's forgiveness; anointing of the sick his healing of people; holy orders his commissioning of disciples to serve God and God's people; and marriage his call for unity and love among his followers. This is something that his followers have understood and appreciated from the beginning, that their rituals are 'from the Lord' (1 Cor 11:23).

### *The presence of Jesus in the sacraments*

The body of Jesus, as the means of immediate communication with him, has now vanished from sight. In his resurrection he has disappeared from earthly eyes. The message to the women at his empty tomb is as true as ever: 'But [the young man] said to them, 'Do not be alarmed; you are looking for Jesus of Nazareth, who was crucified. He has been raised; he is not here' (Mk 16:6). And yet he is still with us!

So how can people today make contact with Jesus in his present mode of bodily existence? They can do so only if in some real form he makes himself present and tangible to them. This he does in a striking way in the sacraments of his Church. Pope St Leo the Great, in a single

sentence, has expressed the matter particularly well: 'What was visible in Christ has now passed over into the sacraments of the Church.' In the sacraments of his faith community, he communicates himself and his saving love and he uses earthly realities such as people, words, actions, water, oil, bread and wine, to do so.

### *Presence and absence*

The powerful presence of the Risen Christ in sacramental celebration, however, does not remove the simultaneous fact of his absence. Even as he is revealed, he is also concealed. He is not yet fully experienced. Those who take this fact seriously will not seek an unrealistic religious 'high' every time they celebrate a sacrament. They will view sacramental celebrations, then, as shadows of the final welcome that awaits them in the arms of God. They will view the Eucharist, in particular, as only a foretaste of the joyful satisfaction that will be experienced fully only at the heavenly banquet. They will approach the emotion-laden celebrations of marriage and ordination with the perspective of the daily grind that living those vocations will sometimes entail.

In every sacrament, nevertheless, the Risen Lord is both present and active. He is the visible, tangible and saving presence of God to those who have gathered to celebrate that sacrament. In every sacrament too he brings a message and a remedy from God for human need. He delivers them in a human way in and through the persons taking part in the celebration.

### *His action in each of the seven sacraments*

Thus it is the living, loving, powerful Christ (acting in and through the Holy Spirit);

Who welcomes new members into his community at baptism;

Who leads baptised persons in the sacrament of confirmation to publicly acknowledge, celebrate and revel in their baptismal gift of the indwelling Spirit;

Who stands in the midst of his brothers and sisters at the Eucharist, leads them in thanksgiving and praise and feeds them with himself in his body and blood;

Who restores the alienated and the broken to community life in the sacrament of reconciliation;

Who heals and comforts the sick in the sacrament of anointing of the sick;

Who calls and empowers leaders for loving and dedicated service to the People of God in the sacrament of holy orders; and

Who calls a man and woman in the sacrament of marriage to be living signs to each other and to their children of his own creative, sustaining and healing love.

### *The difference his presence and action make*

To speak this way about the seven ritual sacraments of the Church implies that Jesus Christ empowers and strengthens those taking part in their celebration, to become Christ-like persons themselves. He changes them into people who embody and make real his living and loving presence to other human beings. The impact of the sacraments, celebrated with faith, is to transform them into persons of love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control, i.e. persons who live the fruits of the Spirit (Galatians 5:22). The impact of their celebration is to widen their horizons, enliven and energise them. It is to humanise them, in the full sense of that word, so that they in turn will be men and women who live for others. So the sacraments are meant to transform the lives of those who participate in them. They should not leave us as we are. They are meant to make a difference. But their celebration always requires our full, conscious, active and prayerful participation. Especially by our constant attention to the presence and action of Jesus Christ himself throughout their celebration, from start to finish and beyond!







## Gentle Readers!

*The Editor has graciously extended his invitation to me to keep writing for 'Catholic Life.' This year I intend to focus on grace and the sacraments. A classic definition of a 'sacrament' is that it is 'an outward sign, instituted by Jesus Christ, to give grace.' But what on earth is 'grace'?*

Let's start with some faulty, misleading, or incomplete ideas about it. In the minds of some Christians the idea of 'grace' conjures up a range of images. Grace is thought of as the 'whitening' of a soul. Some even think of it as like a milk carton which can be a quarter full, a third full, or full to the brim. In this somewhat crude imagery grace is thought of as a quantity. Or else grace is regarded as a kind of heavenly bank account, or as a sort of spiritual superannuation. Still others think of grace in almost biological terms when they refer to it as an infusion or injection of the life of God. Other images liken grace to an electric current or to petrol in a tank.

What is faulty or misleading or incomplete about all these images is that grace is thought of as a thing, a product or an object added on to persons and from outside themselves. **GRACE, IN FACT, IS NOT SOMETHING, BUT SOMEONE.** It is an interpersonal relationship of love, a relationship of love freely initiated by God. Like the ebb and flow of the ocean, God's love flows to us and draws us back to God. Grace is God (and more specifically God the Holy Spirit) graciously turning his face to us and, in the process, changing us. Grace is God being present to us and our being present to God. Grace is God staying with us so that we might live and move and walk with him. Grace is God reaching out to us and saying, 'Let's be friends'. Grace is God calling on us to dedicate ourselves to him. Grace is God drawing us to love him with all our mind, heart, soul and strength. Grace is God drawing us to our fellow human beings and loving them with the heart of God. It is God speaking to us in the depths of our conscience (i.e. our consciousness of right and wrong) and urging us to know and do what God wants. (Rejecting God's gift of friendship is called 'sin').

What has just been said about grace is supported and illustrated in page after page of the Bible. Here are four particularly



'telling' references to **THE GRACE**, i.e. **THE GRACIOUSNESS OF GOD**, two from the Old Testament and two from the New!

*Exodus 33: 19:*

'And [the Lord] said, 'I will make all my goodness pass before you and will proclaim before you the name, "The Lord"; and I will be gracious to whom I will be gracious and will show mercy on whom I show mercy.'

*Ezekiel 36:26-27*

'A new heart I will give you and a new spirit I will put within you; and I will remove from your body the heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh. I will put my spirit within you and make you follow my statutes and be careful to observe my ordinances.'

*Ephesians 1:5*

'He destined us for adoption as his children through Jesus Christ, according to the good pleasure of his will, to the praise of his glorious grace that he freely bestowed on us in the Beloved.'

*Romans 5:5*

'... God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us.'

In those samples, God's Word illustrates a central theme of the Bible and of liturgy too – God is at work in history as Liberator.

God sets people free FROM oppression, slavery, hunger, poverty, sickness, despair, ignorance, fear and selfishness. On the other hand, God makes people free FOR love, service, generosity, communion (i.e. union with; sharing) and community. The samples therefore suggest that the grace which divinises people through the gift of the presence to them of the Holy Spirit, also humanises them, making them more like Jesus, whom the Father sent as the Liberator of the poor and the broken.

**IN A NUTSHELL**, grace is the interpersonal relationship between God and us, a relationship initiated by God and maintained by God, but a relationship which requires our cooperation. More simply, it can be said that **GRACE IS GOD'S LOVE** (i.e. the Holy Spirit of God) **PRESENT AND AT WORK IN OUR LIVES.**

God loves us not because of any goodness or merit on our part, but because that's the way God is. In his first letter John says simply but deeply, 'God is love' (4:8). God's nature is to love. God's life is to love, to pour himself out in graciousness, affection, goodness and kindness.

Like all genuine love, God's love is active and dynamic. It reaches out to people, touches them and changes them. It empowers them to become what God wants them to be, which may also be what they want to be. The effects of the loving activity of our loving God in our lives has been called by St Paul 'the fruit of the Spirit' (Gal 5:22). He specifies the effects of grace as 'love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control' (Gal 5:22). In a word, the poured-out goodness of God makes us good, humanises us and even in a real if limited sense, divinises us.

The impact of God's love on our persons and our lives is, on our part, an ever purer and more generous love for God. We must make a choice. Either we surrender to God as the source and goal of our existence, or else we refuse to be loving people and remain wrapped up in ourselves – selfish, self-centred and self-indulgent. Not living for God and others but living by the motto 'It's all about me'!

Liturgy in general and sacraments in particular, are best understood as God's loving self-giving on the one hand and on the other, as our faith-response. So the sacraments of the Church are all about the workings of grace, as we shall see this year. So they should never leave us just as we are now.



# What is a Sacrament?

## Sacraments Of Everyday Life

### Dear Readers!

With this issue of 'Catholic Life' we start delving into the experience, history and meaning of the seven sacraments of our Catholic Church. But before exploring them in any detail it will be necessary and worthwhile to give some attention to what I call 'the sacraments of everyday life'. They are sometimes also known as 'the God-moments' of life.

To speak this way is to have a broad understanding of what a sacrament is. It's to speak of what St Augustine called 'sacred signs', i.e. signs of something or someone sacred. It's about what Joseph Martos calls 'doors to the sacred'. It's about what John Shea calls 'paths to Mystery', i.e. to God the Mystery. In a nutshell, it's about symbols for us of the presence of God. Ultimately it's even about 'seeing God in all things', as St Ignatius Loyola put it.

For anything or anyone to communicate a sense of God to us, however, we must be able to 'see more', to 'feel about', to reflect, to contemplate and to wonder. Like the poet William Blake exclaiming with enthusiasm on the impact made on him by the sight of a tiger in the wild:

*Tiger! Tiger! burning bright  
in the forests of the night,  
What immortal hand or eye  
could frame thy fearful symmetry!*

Or like Jesus, when e.g. he speaks to his disciples of 'shining in people's sight' like 'a city built on a hill-top' and 'a lamp on a lamp-stand' (Mt 5:14-15); about the sound tree producing good fruit and the rotten tree bad (Mt 7:17); and about the sower who went out to sow (Mt 3:3-9)!

Let me illustrate what I mean about 'God-moments' by presenting one particularly God-charged area of everyday human experience. This what the writer Gregory Baum in his book *Man Becoming: God in Secular Experience* has labelled 'dialogue and communion'. He is talking about conversations, on the one hand and about sharing and caring love, on the other. He makes the point that in these two everyday ways God is present to human beings everywhere in a redeeming and transforming way.

In Baum's thinking, people mature through contact with other human beings.



Of particular importance in the maturing process of learning to move away from self-centredness and to reach out towards others, is the phenomenon of dialogue, i.e. genuine conversations we have with others. In the sharing which takes place, we listen and we respond. By means of the insights we share, we are assisted to grow and develop as responsible persons.

Again and again, if we are to make progress and change our ways of living, it may be necessary to hear things from our partners in dialogue which are challenging, things which are perhaps even quite painful, but which turn out, at least in the long run, to set us free to become better people. In fact, through the course of a whole life, many challenges and many changes may be called for.

There is another dimension to all this. In the words of others, even unintended remarks and chance conversations, God's word may be addressed to us, God's word of saving truth.

As I have said, the word of God as it comes to us from others in conversation can be painful. We need strength to reply to the call (coming from God indirectly) that is addressed to us by others. To be addressed by others (and God) creates fears. Can we, e.g., take the risk of

listening to them? Isn't there some danger that if we listen to others our self-esteem may go down? Isn't there some danger that if we listen to the revealing word from another person, we will end up being psychologically dependent, even under that person's spell?

Faced with such threatening risks, it takes much courage to engage in the kind of conversations which will challenge us to become more mature and more responsible. We find the courage to face the truth only if the other addresses us sensitively, i.e. with respect, with care and with love. Love is the only way which works. Were we to be brutally confronted with what may be in us, e.g. our superficiality, anger, resentment, or self-rejection, we might crumble to pieces. But the gift of the accepting and encouraging love of the significant other creates in us the strength we need - to listen, to attain self-knowledge and to accept ourselves with our weaknesses, our strengths and our possibilities. The gift of the other's love and care, the human communion, creates freedom - freedom to become a better person, freedom to open up and share with others the love and care which has been given to us.

Faced with the risks involved, the freedom to take those risks and let ourselves enter into a life-giving dialogue and communion with another, is experienced as both a power and a gift. So the experience can take us beyond them as God's instruments to God's very self. We may discover God as the ultimate source of that understanding and support which another human being has communicated to us.

An implication of this experience of meaningful human dialogue and communion by which we grow as persons, is that God is present as the deeper dimension of that dialogue and communion. God is present as the Word of God and as the Spirit of God. Conversation, along with sharing and caring love, are therefore sacraments (i.e. signs and instruments) of the presence and activity of God - of the Word of God and of the Spirit of God. This is so true that we can truly speak of certain people who have been significant supports and sustainers in our lives as literally 'Godsends'. A second more general implication of this particular illustration of 'God moments' is that human friendship is a particularly powerful and beautiful sacrament of the presence of God in everyday life.



# What is a Sacrament?

## Sacraments of The Church

### Dear Readers!

In the June issue of 'Catholic Life' I stressed that there are two kinds of sacraments. One type is the sacraments of everyday life and experience. They are the 'God-moments' of life, of which there are hundreds, even thousands. The challenge is how to 'see God in all things' (St Ignatius Loyola). In this issue I introduce the other kind of sacraments which are also signs and instruments of God. They are so special that they are in a class of their own. We know them as Baptism; Confirmation; Reconciliation; Eucharist; Anointing of the Sick; Holy Orders; and Marriage. They make the Church happen and they keep it going.

The Catholic Church is, in a striking way, a sacramental community. It celebrates the presence of Jesus Christ in its midst through sacred rituals. At first, each of its rituals had only its own name to describe it, e.g. 'baptism' and 'the Lord's Supper' (the Eucharist). The general name 'sacrament' had not yet been invented to apply to them all. This is because concepts, names and doctrines take time to develop. Christians were celebrating sacraments and living their meaning long before they came to see that the concept 'sacrament' applied to them all. They were also celebrating sacraments long before they realized that every sacrament has this in common with every other sacrament, that it is an outward action with an inner meaning. It is, in fact, what St Augustine (+430) came to call 'a visible sign of invisible grace'. The practice, then, came before the theory.

The Hebrew Scriptures often referred to God as wind, fire, breath or rock, because they communicated a sense of God to the people of Israel. They met God in the desert, on mountain tops and in gentle breezes. Although they did not call them 'sacraments', they also had their formal sacred signs, i.e. their official outward signs of God's presence: – e.g.

blessings; laying on of hands; the use of oil, bread, wine, water, washings, kisses and greetings; ritual meals; sacrificial offerings; confession of sins; baptism; and anointing of the sick.

Their chief sacred sign was history, in which they recognised the presence and activity of their God. They encountered the God who saved them in both events and their remembering those events in their sacred rituals and especially in the Passover. Their second most important



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sacred sign was their Scriptures, as record of the revelation of their God. To read God's Word, hear it and ponder it, was to come into contact with the most important events of their past as a people and with the God who spoke to them and met them in those events.

There is no convincing evidence that Jesus of Nazareth left his companions and fellow-workers a clear and complete set of sacramental rituals. He neither invented totally new signs of the presence and power of God, nor passed them on in blueprint form. In particular instances he gave a new meaning to Jewish rituals already in use, e.g. to baptism and to a meal with bread and wine. More generally, on the other hand, the sacraments, as we have them, find their origin and meaning in his

life and work and in his person and values. In short, they tell his story. They tell us especially that Jesus Christ himself is a sacrament, the number one sign and source of God, the one great sacrament through whom all other sacraments make sense.

We find the meaning of each of the sacraments in his life. So much so, that even though the sacraments of Confirmation, Reconciliation, Anointing of the Sick, Holy Orders and Marriage are not mentioned explicitly in the gospels, when they do emerge in history they reflect aspects of his life and the values he held and lived. They reflect e.g. his reliance on the Holy Spirit; his call to conversion; his gift of God's forgiveness; his healing of people; his commissioning of disciples to serve God and God's people and his call for unity and love among his followers. In that real sense Jesus instituted all the sacraments.

From the New Testament we learn that the ritual practices known to the first Christians were baptism, laying on of hands, the Lord's Supper (later named the Eucharist), prophecy (speaking in God's name about what God requires) and speaking in tongues (unknown languages). They understood and appreciated that the rituals they were celebrating were 'from the Lord' (1 Corinthians 11:23) and that Jesus was powerfully present to them from the start to the finish of their celebrations. Through their sharing of his supper especially, which they did in memory of him and his saving work, they experienced a oneness with Christ their Lord and a oneness with their fellow-disciples in the one Body of Christ.

Those early experiences so long ago of Jesus in the sacraments, is ours today twenty centuries later. When we keep telling his story in our sacramental rituals we continue to meet him. Our ongoing encounter with him keeps us going as Christians, gives us new meaning and purpose and fills us with fresh hope for our lives. Thank God, then, for our rich and beautiful seven sacraments and for all the difference they make to us!



## Sacraments of Initiation: An Introduction

Dear Readers,

The first three Catholic sacraments are Baptism, Confirmation and Eucharist. They are known today as the 'Sacraments of Initiation'.

Every form of initiation has to do with joining a group and being absorbed or bonded into a group. Those being initiated gradually learn and make their own the stories, beliefs, values, rituals and traditions of the group. Bit by bit they take on a new identity and develop a sense of belonging. The group itself expects adoption of its way of life as a basic standard of membership and rejects membership in name only.

For Christians and non-Christians alike, life is a journey, a journey that has a beginning, middle and end. Christians make their journey in company with Jesus Christ, who shows them the way forward and who encourages and supports them along the road that leads finally to God in heaven. The encouragement and support that they receive from him takes many different forms. His living presence comes to them especially in and through the Church, which is the body of Christ on earth, the community of the disciples of Jesus, the community of faith, hope and love.

Christian initiation may be described as a combination of teaching, rituals and experiences, by which a person, led by God's grace and guided by the Christian community, turns away from sin and becomes a follower of Jesus Christ within the Christian community. The process, which takes time, effort and struggle, reaches a climax in the celebration of Baptism, Confirmation and Eucharist. Through this process one becomes a Christian person, a new creation in Christ, with a new relationship, a new bonding, to both Jesus Christ and his community, the Church.

The rituals of Christian initiation, in both word and action, tell the sacred and true story of Jesus Christ and his followers. But they tell it not as something over and done with but as still happening in the here and now. Those taking part not only remember the person and story of Jesus. They also meet him in the rituals of celebration. He is, in fact, the invisible but main celebrant of every sacrament.

From the cradle to the grave the sacraments of Christian initiation punctuate the journey of faith. While Baptism and Confirmation are never repeated, their effects continue. They require on-going commitment to what they

mean. The Eucharist, the third sacrament of Christian initiation, however, is one that requires our participation over and over again. More than any other ritual, it is food and drink for the journey of life. It sustains us as Christians. It keeps us bonded to and close to the person of Jesus Christ and to all others who belong to him, our fellow-Christians.

So the life-long journey of Christian initiation is a process of coming to a deeper, firmer and more committed faith. In fact, when a church community gradually admits new members into full membership, its agenda is their conversion. Its goal is their following of Christ. It all happens or is meant to happen by continually taking part in the life of the Church. So the Church is the community



context in which it all happens or is meant to happen.

It may be seen that the initiation of Christians is concerned with a process of progressive development and a climax or high point. The climax of the process is the celebration of the sacraments of Baptism, Confirmation and First Holy Communion. For adults and children who are joining the Church in one go, those three sacraments belong together and are normally celebrated together in one liturgy (service), usually at Easter.

Belonging to the Catholic Christian community involves being baptised, being confirmed and receiving Holy Communion. It also involves internal experiences, faith experiences that go with those external rituals. Such faith experiences amount to a process of conversion of life. But conversion does not happen in a vacuum. It happens as a response

to the telling of the good news, the good news of Jesus Christ. In our quest to become his disciples he is our source of motivation and power. His call on us to change and become better people is wrapped up and implied in every one of those three sacraments of initiation.

Conversion, then, is about change and transformation. It involves coming to one's senses. It is about turning from something to something else, a turning away from how one lives now to a new, different and better way of living. It is becoming an authentic person. It is realizing our potential.

Christian conversion is that way of life into which each Christian is plunged in the waters of baptism. It is a life-long process. It entails gradually taking on the mind and heart of Christ – seeing others as he sees them and committing ourselves to living his values and his teachings. Christian conversion is shown in a gradual change in one's relationships – to Jesus Christ personally, to the church community as the group and gathering of the followers of Jesus, to human society as a whole, to fellow human beings and to ourselves. This change of relationships stems from being joined to the person of Christ who lives in his Church and who is embodied in his Church.

Conversion and discipleship are social and not just individual and personal. Too much talk of conversion is narrowed to a private, born-again, Jesus-and-me experience, which is blind to the social evils that afflict people and blind to one's responsibilities towards others. To turn to Jesus Christ as a disciple is to adopt his kind of life-style and his kind of values, the values of the kingdom, which he proclaimed as poverty of spirit (i.e. detachment from possessions), overflowing mercy, thirst for justice and peace-making. To be his disciple is to get beyond church housekeeping and work with others for a better world, God's kind of world (i.e. the kingdom of God). This is quite the opposite of 'comfortable Christianity'. Genuine Christian conversion then, in partnership with Christ, must confront, heal and liberate our society as well as ourselves from so many 'demons' that oppose the coming of the reign of God.

In summary, Christian initiation is a journey within the Church and world of today. It is a journey of repentance and conversion, a journey of faith and a journey of life as companions of Jesus. Baptism, Confirmation and Eucharist combine to put us on the road with him and keep us walking with him along the road.



## An Easter Reflection...

*Easter glory fills the sky! Alleluia!  
Christ now lives, no more to die! Alleluia!  
Darkness has been put to flight, Alleluia!  
By the living Lord of light! Alleluia!*

*James Quinn SJ*

Good Friday will see us remembering and celebrating the sufferings and death of Jesus our Saviour. We will recall how the life of the most marvellous person the world has ever known was violently extinguished on a cross.

And we will ask ourselves over and over again: Why was this good man, this innocent man, put to death? Why was this person with so much humanity and compassion, so much honesty and integrity, so much warmth and generosity, so much love and affection for people, tortured, humiliated and finally crucified?

The motives which led his enemies to both persecute and murder him are those which have always influenced human beings to hurt and harm one another. They are arrogance and pride, power-seeking and ambition, envy and jealousy, anger and fear, callousness and cruelty, hatred and revenge.

*Good Friday will remind us once again of the dark side of human nature and its associated evils – poverty, ignorance, crime, malnutrition, hunger and disease!*

Fortunately, however, this is not the whole truth. In fact, it is far from it. For if we experience the ugly face of evil we also experience the beauty of an immense amount of good. The crops keep producing food for our tables. The burning summer heat gives way to the cooling autumn breezes. Most diseases are now curable. Tyrants like Saddam Hussein are sometimes overthrown. Social reforms, such as pensions for the needy, are here to stay. Conflicts sometimes end in reconciliation. Sometimes shaky marriages get patched up. Love survives misunderstandings, thoughtlessness and indifference. Wars come to an end. Enemies become friends.

*We forgive others and are forgiven. In a word, there is goodness everywhere, more goodness than evil, in fact, an abundance of goodness.*

Clearly the influence of the Risen Christ, which is to say the light of Easter, keeps shining upon us!



*Yet there can be no doubt that one mighty struggle goes on between good and evil. It goes on in the physical cosmos, in human societies and within our own personalities.*

Evil even seems stronger than good, but it has not yet triumphed. Good is remarkably resilient. Though it often seems to be in danger of being crushed, it manages to survive and even to win many victories. The words of Mahatma Gandhi, the father of Indian independence, are just so true: "When I despair I remember that all through history the way of truth and love has always won. There have been tyrants and murderers and for a time they can seem invincible, but in the end they always fall."

The words of our Easter Vigil Liturgy express the same truth in an equally appealing way: "The power of this holy [Easter] night dispels all evil, washes guilt away, restores lost innocence, brings mourners joy. It casts out hatred, brings us peace and humbles earthly pride." In short, our celebration of Easter reminds us that evil will not have the final say either in us or in our world.

*Jesus was buried at sunset, to all appearances a victim and a failure. But the sun came up on him alive and powerful, victorious and influential.*

It will be the same for us who celebrate Easter, by striving as much as we can, to repudiate, renounce and reject everything in our lives which is evil and striving as hard as we can, to re-commit ourselves to following the person of Jesus, his teachings and his values.

So, as we renew our baptismal promises at Mass this Easter, may we remember that we are intending as far as we can with the help of God's "amazing grace", to reject evil and sin in every shape and form and that to the best of our ability we are promising to follow Jesus in a life of goodness and love – one shaped by his own powerful example and presence!