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EDITORIAL
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DEAR READERS,

Thomas Tallis’ *The Lamentations of Jeremiah* is a stunning piece of music, rendering artistically the first two mournful verses of this liturgical poem. The closing line of the polyphonic piece cries out, *Ierusalem, convertere ad Dominum Deum tuum* (Jerusalem, return to the Lord your God). The music incarnates the desire of the poet that Jerusalem ceases sinning and turns toward God, discovering again the beauty of keeping the covenant. As such, Tallis’ piece is especially apt for the season of Lent, when the Christian embodies this return through the renewed practice of loving God and neighbor.
Tallis’ *Lamentations* serves as the musical keystone of the summer edition of *Church Life*, focusing on “rites of return.” Essential to the new evangelization is the invitation to return to the fullness of ecclesial life. And this return is performed anew each day in the liturgical and sacramental rites of the Church.

- The praying of the Divine Office each morning by a monastic community invites the whole Church, whether attending the Office or not, to return to her vocation of divine praise.

- A couple, absent from the Church for years, approaches the minister seeking baptism for their newborn child, expressing a desire for salvation.

- Lapsed Catholics return during the transitional rites of baptism and funerals, while those well-practiced in the Christian life renew their commitment to a life conformed to the Paschal Mystery of Christ.

- The parish’s Sunday Eucharist invites each member of the body of Christ to remember once again his or her deepest identity as made in the image and likeness of God, a creature whose calling is self-giving love unto the end.

All liturgical prayer, the whole sacramental life, is an invitation to return to the Lord, our God.

Thus, as the Church explores what constitutes the new evangelization relative to her liturgical rites, the theme of “return” is a pivotal one. Too often, the issue of “return” focuses solely upon inviting those Catholics back to the parish, who have been away for some time, for whatever reason. Such an approach, while a necessary part of evangelization, is partial at best. If a Catholic returns only to discover a parish so smug, so sure of its holiness, a parish that believes it has arrived at the summit of Christian perfection, then the newly returned Catholic will depart as quickly as he or she came back.
Instead, pivotal to the new evangelization will be awakening each Catholic's understanding of how every liturgical rite, every act of Christian worship, is a “rite of return”. In his *Spirit of the Liturgy*, Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger writes regarding the return or *reditus* of Christian worship:

The exitus, or rather God’s free act of creation, is indeed ordered toward the reditus, but that does not now mean the rescinding of created being…The creature, existing in its own right, comes home to itself, and this act is an answer in freedom to God’s love. It accepts creation from God as his offer of love, and thus ensues a dialogue of love, that wholly new kind of unity that love alone can create. The being of the other is not absorbed or abolished, but rather, in giving itself, it becomes fully itself…This reditus is a ‘return’, but it does not abolish creation; rather, it bestows its full and final perfection (32-33).

As fallen creatures, we have ceased to accept the world as gift. In worship, we return a word of amorous dialogue to the God whose speech is love itself. And “returning” this word of love, we become our truest selves. The process of redemption is learning to speak true words of love in worship. Ratzinger writes:

If ‘sacrifice’ in its essence is simply returning to love and therefore divinization, worship now has a new aspect: the healing of wounded freedom, atonement, purification, deliverance from estrangement. The essence of worship, of sacrifice—the process of assimilation, of growth in love, and thus the way into freedom—remains unchanged. But now it assumes the aspect of healing, the loving transformation of broken freedom, of painful expiation (33).

No Christian, until he or she enjoys God in eternal life, has fully returned to authentic creaturehood. We are pilgrims on the way toward the fullness of love and participating in the Church’s worship is our slow return to the authentic life of freedom made possible by divine love. *Our hearts are restless until they rest in Thee* (Augustine, *Confessions* 1.1).

Only when this broader sense of “returning to the Lord” is inculcated in the worship of the parish will we become effective agents of evangelization. Our liturgical prayer will not simply be entertaining but a genuine expression of our desire for union with God. And our whole identity will become a form of humble hospitality, whereby we welcome the recently returned, not out of obligation but out of the depths of Christian charity, a continuation of the worshipful dialogue taken up in the Church’s rites. We are happy to welcome back those long absent, not simply to increase our numbers, but because in their presence the body of Christ is built up and the world transformed. The newly returned are fellow saints in the making.

The rest of this edition of *Church Life* explores such rites of return both catechetically and liturgically. Bishop Christopher Coyne, apostolic administrator of the Archdiocese of Indianapolis, describes how liturgical prayer is the pivotal moment of evangelization, inviting participants to enter into relationship with Jesus Christ. Through liturgical rites, enacted as the Church prescribe and with attention to the rites' intrinsic beauty, each parish learns that which cannot simply be taught: Jesus Christ is Lord.

Josh and Stacey Noem turn our attention toward the art of marriage preparation, as one such moment of liturgical return. In discussing their own approach to marriage preparation, the Noems outline a persuasive, beautiful invitation to the reality that the sacrament
of marriage signifies: a form of self-sacrificial love that is a participation in the Pasch of Christ. The engaged couple, because of Josh and Stacey’s spiritual pedagogy, begins to discover a theological way of perceiving their married lives together. Preparation for the sacrament can foster a whole sacramental way of life, one attractive to those preparing for marriage, no matter their initial commitment to faith.

Deacon David Lopez offers a theology for diaconal formation based in conversion of life. The deacon does not simply assist at Mass or in the visitation of the sick. Rather, he becomes a sign of that conversion toward self-giving love, which the whole Body of Christ is to live. When deacons begin to live kenotically, opening themselves more fully to giving themselves unto death, they become an efficacious sign of Christ himself at work in the parish. Thus, the deacon is both a sign of conversion, at the same time that he is ordained for a lifetime of ever more humble service.

Katie Ball-Boruff and Kristen Hempstead McGann describe the way that Catechesis of the Good Shepherd invites young children and parents alike into a full participation in the sacramental life of the Church. As Ball-Boruff and McGann argue, Catechesis of the Good Shepherd, because of its attention to liturgical wonder and the particularity of the Christian narrative, may serve as a balm against the debilitating effects of Moralistic Therapeutic Deism in American parish life. As children are awakened to the grandeur of being in relationship with the Good Shepherd, the whole parish will learn to perceive anew the gift of the Christian life, ceasing to reduce the Christian narrative to morals alone.

Leonard DeLorenzo, who wrote in our last edition on film, contributes this time on the power of the sacrament of Penance for adolescents. DeLorenzo, director of Notre Dame Vision, positions Penance as a rite of return whereby the adolescent comes to know, perhaps in the first time in his or her life, the freedom offered by a God who loves unto the end, who yearns that we return to give ourselves to God. For adolescents (and for all Christians), the sacrament of Penance is a re-composition of one’s narrative, not as estranged but as beloved of God.

John Cavadini treats the role of the preacher as theologian, using Augustine’s *Enarrationes in Psalmos*, as the basis for his argument. Given as the 2007 Martens Lecture for the M.Div. program at Notre Dame, Cavadini builds the case for the pivotal nature of preaching in the proclamation of the Scriptures. Preaching is a form of exegesis in which the love and mercy of God continues to take flesh in the poverty of human words, transforming the Church in the process. Preaching is a sacramental invitation for the Church to return toward the radical love of Christ.

So then, join us in reconsidering what constitutes a “rite of return.” Such moments are not isolated to those returning to Mass after years away, but to each Christian who wakes up in the morning, again learning to offer a sacrifice of praise for the life of the world. When the Church acknowledges the pilgrimage she has embarked on, then she will be able to welcome fellow sojourners along the way.
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In the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* paragraphs 1077 to 1112 are a beautiful treatment of how the Father, the Son, and the Spirit are all at work in the Church’s liturgy, each in a different but profoundly related way. The section is divided into smaller parts which treat in turn the roles of each member of the Trinity, beginning with the Father. In the previous article I commented on those parts that concerned the Father. In this present column I would like to treat the paragraphs titled “Christ’s Work in the Liturgy,” paragraphs 1084 to 1090.

Titles and subtitles are effectively used throughout the *Catechism*. They help the reader to see the structure and logic of the exposure. The subtitles of this section on Christ’s role in the liturgy have subtly employed a useful technique of putting three periods either before or after the four subtitles, indicating that the four sections can form one sentence. So, “Christ glorified…” is the first section, while the second section is titled “…from the time of the Church of the Apostles…” Then, “… is present in the earthly liturgy…” And finally, “…which participates
in the liturgy of heaven.” Seven dense paragraphs can thus all be summarized with one sentence: Christ glorified, from the time of the Church of the Apostles, is present in the earthly liturgy, which participates in the liturgy of heaven. Let us see how the Catechism exposes all that is contained in this loaded sentence.

It is good to recall that we are in a part of a larger section titled “The Liturgy— Work of the Holy Trinity.” Even as the exposition naturally treats Father, Son, and Spirit in that traditional order, it regularly links one member of the Trinity to the others. This is done effectively in the first subsection titled “Christ glorified…” The very first statement includes mention of all three persons of the Trinity in a dynamic relationship to each other, acting for the sake of the Church. The emphasis falls on Christ, the focus of this section. It says, “‘Seated at the right hand of the Father’ and pouring out the Holy Spirit on his Body which is the Church, Christ now acts through the sacraments he instituted to communicate his grace.” [emphasis mine] (§1084) So, Christ is the principle one who acts in the liturgy, but he does this from the “place” of his glorification, expressed here in the biblical phrase, “seated at the right hand of the Father.” From there he pours out the Holy Spirit on the Church. Ascension and Pentecost stand behind this formulation, an idea previously established in §1076 and upon which I commented in my first article in these pages. In the Ascension, Christ is taken from our sight but only to act in a new and deeper way through the Holy Spirit in the liturgy.

There follows a definition of sacraments, which older Catholics will recognize as a slight expansion on a traditionally pithy and efficient way of saying what sacraments are. “The sacraments are perceptible signs (words and actions) accessible to our human nature. By the action of Christ and the power of the Holy Spirit they make present efficaciously the grace that they signify.” (§ 1084) The older and simpler definition that I remember from my youth was “Sacraments are outward signs instituted by Christ to give grace.” The slightly longer definition of the Catechism adds several dimensions to this essential core. It specifies “words and actions” as what the signs are formed of. This rightly draws our attention to both as requiring our understanding. It further emphasizes that these signs are fitted to the perception of our human nature—a useful reminder; for after all, it is God who is acting and it is good to take note that he acts in a manner suited to us and our way of understanding. Another addition to the older simpler core is mention of the Holy Spirit along with Christ. This addendum allows for a fuller Trinitarian understanding of sacraments and will be developed in the next major section on the Holy Spirit and the liturgy.

I remember that I was in high school religion class when I first learned the word “efficacious” in connection with how the signs of the sacraments work. I thought it wonderful that there could be such a precise and loaded word for saying what kind of signs we encounter in the sacraments. I was happy to find again that word used by the Catechism at this point. For after all, in this human world of our words and actions, it is entirely possible that signs could flop, that they could fail to express an intended meaning. This failure does not happen with the words and actions of the sacraments. Christ is acting in them, and the power of the Holy Spirit is present; and for this reason they unfaillingly deliver what they signify. Hence, the Catechism’s claim: “…they make present efficaciously the grace that they signify.”
The next paragraph, §1085, says precisely what that grace is. This paragraph is one of the densest and most beautifully formulated paragraphs of the entire Catechism. It is packed with theology, and, once understood in its fullness, it serves as a very useful formulation of what this section sets out to teach; namely, “Christ’s Work in the Liturgy.” Picking up on the words “make present” and “signify” from the definition of sacraments just given, this paragraph begins with a short sentence that says it all, even if it will need to be unfolded in what follows: “In the liturgy of the Church, it is principally his own Paschal mystery that Christ signifies and makes present.” So, the Paschal mystery is the basic content. The words and actions of the liturgy deliver that—or better said, the action of Christ and the power of the Holy Spirit deliver that.

Then the phrase “Paschal mystery” is developed. Even without the Catechism it is, of course, known that this phrase basically refers to the death and resurrection of Jesus; but several things are quite useful in the way the Catechism sets forth this teaching. It first notes that Jesus pointed to this climax of his mission throughout his earthly life both by his teaching and his actions. But the passage then comes quickly to the center and does so by using an expression of Jesus that we know from John’s Gospel, even if that origin is not explicitly noted here. In John’s Gospel Jesus spoke of his approaching death and resurrection as being “his hour.” At the turning point of the whole gospel we read, “Before the feast of the Passover, Jesus knew that his hour
had come to pass from this world to the Father.” (John 13: 1) Relying on this and other uses of the term from John’s Gospel, the Catechism says, “When his Hour comes, he lives out the unique event of history which does not pass away: Jesus dies, is buried, rises from the dead, and is seated at the right hand of the Father ‘once for all.’” All this is the Paschal mystery, and it is this that Christ signifies and makes present by the words and actions of the liturgy. He can make present what happened in the past precisely because it is “his Hour,” which the Catechism strikingly notes “does not pass away.” It explains how this could be. Precisely because it is “his Hour,” it is unique in its relationship to time. “His Paschal mystery is a real event that occurred in our history, but it is unique(320,455),(989,815): all other historical events happen once, and then they pass away, swallowed up in the past.”

That the Paschal mystery is a real event that occurred in history is a crucial point. Jesus really was crucified at one particular time and in one particular place. Indeed, in this way the Son of God shows that he really did become incarnate and enter into history, so deeply in solidarity with our condition that he enters the ultimate limits that death imposes on our particular time and place. Then from one particular place and time Jesus rises and is filled with divine glory. Resurrection bursts the bonds of time and place. “The Paschal mystery of Christ, by contrast, cannot remain only in the past, because by his death he destroyed death, and all that Christ is—all that he did and suffered for all men—participates in the divine eternity, and so transcends all times while being made present in them all.”

This is beautifully put: “transcends all times while being made present in them all.” To destroy death means, among other things, that the bonds of a particular time and place are burst open. Time and space themselves are burst open, and the risen and glorified Christ is present in them all. In the liturgy Christ signifies this (precisely this!) and makes it present. The paragraph ends with what is nothing less than a joyful announcement: “The event of the Cross and Resurrection abides and draws everything toward life.”

Clearly, this is a powerful formulation and teaching of “Christ’s Work in the Liturgy.” This is the first of four points developed around this theme, and it is the foundation of the others. The subsequent paragraphs in fact are for the most part simply citations from Vatican II’s programmatic document on the liturgy, Sacrosanctum Concilium. This too is a common feature of the Catechism’s style of teaching. It cites the documents of many councils but especially those of Vatican II. As such, it can be considered a kind of hermeneutic of the Council and indeed part of the task of its ongoing application. It is probably the case that, apart from theological experts, not many people actually sit down anymore and read Sacrosanctum Concilium straight through. But throughout the Catechism we encounter this document and other major documents cited again and again.

In this article I have chosen to concentrate my attention on the several paragraphs of the Catechism that are newly formulated. These paragraphs form a new context for the conciliar citations, which in many other places have been usefully commented upon. The Catechism uses these citations to unfold the single sentence that I said at the beginning could summarize this whole section: Christ glorified, from the time of the Church of the Apostles, is present in the earthly liturgy, which participates in the liturgy of heaven. I have tried to show how enormous is the beginning of this sentence: “Christ glorified…”

†
LIFE IN CHRIST
BY DEACON JAMES KEATING

CHASTITY
THE GIFT GOD DESIRES TO GIVE
The dramatic quote below is found within a *Catechism* section realistically entitled, “The Battle for Purity”:

“I thought that continence arose from one’s own powers, which I did not recognize in myself. I was foolish enough not to know . . . that no one can be continent unless you grant it. For you would surely have granted it if my inner groaning had reached your ears and I with firm faith had cast my cares on you (CCC §2520).”

St. Augustine, Conf. 6, 11, 20: PL 32, 729-730.

The person who struggles with purity of thought and desire is called to turn not to his or her own “powers” for a remedy but to the One who can grant continence as a gift. Technically Catholics do not simply want to be continent; they want to be chaste. To be continent is to exercise restraint, but to be chaste is to *live in freedom* from unruly erotic desire. To live in such freedom is the result of a painful process of renouncing certain immoral choices and affirming one’s vulnerability to grace. In moving toward a chaste heart one has to *choose* behavior faithful to justice, temperance and modesty. To be unchaste is an *injustice* to one’s present or future spouse. Lust is *intemperate* in that it focuses solely upon the self,
and lust is *immodest* because one chooses to expose the self rather than behold the beauty of the beloved. To live a chaste life from birth to wedding day and beyond signals to one’s spouse his or her singular importance, “I was faithful to you even before I knew you.” This value of fidelity, symbolized by virginity and then chastity, is one of the more beautiful aspects of the Catholic teaching on marriage. It captures how God loves us too; faithfully with a pure heart, having our welfare as His singular desire. Augustine came to embrace the truth that chastity flows into the heart as a gift from God. Chastity, as gift, is a further indication of God’s providential love.

Catechetically, we tend to be a bit tentative in urging people to ask God for the gift of chastity knowing that many *people like the sin of lust* and loathe to be reminded of how it can destroy their communion with the Trinity. Further, we ourselves may struggle with lust and hence feel the weight of guilt holding us back from a passionate defense of the virtue of chastity. Moreover, to go where Augustine went, *into intimacy with God,* might make us hesitate to use his approach to chastity formation. Perhaps only a few of us who teach the faith dwell at the level of “inner groaning.” Finally, Augustine beckons us to *surrender to God,* to cast all our cares upon Him. Surrender is very difficult for we who live in an age of anxious self-maintenance. It is hard for us to trust in the providence of others, let alone God, who appears to dwell far from us.

In this anxious age of self-maintenance we will ‘try’ to be chaste but we will fail, not because we are not good enough or strong enough but because it is simply not possible. As Matthew Levering once wrote, “since the Fall of Mankind all communion is now accomplished only through sacrifice.” Is surrendering to the grace of God and receiving the gift of chastity a sacrifice? Yes, for we love sexual sins more than most others, except perhaps for gluttony. From both these sins we derive immediate artificial consolation (consolation that does not begin from or end in deeper communion with the Divine). In the world of artificial consolation our pain is assuaged fast. Such a world plays upon our need to get “a hit” and then move on to the “next thing.” Fast food, fast pornography, fast relationships are all attractive because they move us to the “next thing”, the next “hit.”

These goods, food and sex, can both be perverted. The perversion is simple; goods meant to bring life, communion with others and legitimate pleasure are turned to serve only the purposes of the self. This “turning” is easy because of our weakened human state and once appropriated in perverted ways sex and food possess us, leaving us neither satisfied nor fulfilled but only isolated, alone, bored.

Instead Augustine asks us to enter the “groaning”; to suffer the passing of our perverted pleasure for the coming of communion with God. This passage is painful and we hate it because we know it is the way of truth and the way, ultimately, of divinely established serenity. We hate the way of “groaning” because it means the purification of desire and the end of artificial consolation. And so we resist groaning after God because we can feel these “consolations” slipping away and for what? “Do I want God as my love, I reach out to Him but He doesn’t satisfy like “a hit”. I *wait* for the Lord. But I **cannot** wait for the Lord!! We want, in other words, our Eros to never to be taken up into agape (Benedict XVI, *Deus Caritas Est,* §§5-6). We want to keep my artificial consistlations for the same reason an immature man wrestles away from spousal love in favor of “keeping his options open.”

And so the one who wants to be chaste must suffer its coming all the way through the “groaning” and
into surrender. In such groaning and surrender prayer is hard but there is fruit if the aching lust is placed in the cross of Christ. In this kind of prayer one’s resolve is tested like a deck hand weathering a storm. If one is able to cling to the promises of Christ the lust will pass and such prayerful intimacy, over time, will fashion a new heart. The fashioning of a new heart can be too much to bear as memory takes one back to the artificial consolations which are always calling or as Augustine noted, “They tugged at my fleshly garments and softly whispered: “Are you going to part with us? And from that moment will we never be with you anymore? … [T]hey were not openly showing themselves and opposing me face to face; but muttering, as it were, behind my back; and furtively plucking at me as I was leaving, trying to make me look back at them… for unruly habit kept saying to me, “Do you think you can live without them?” (Confessions 8.11)

If one allows Christ to live His mysteries over again in the heart then indeed one can “live without” lust. But such a living will be more gift than accomplished task, more what we suffer than what we choose through the evidence of clear logic, and more the result of “casting cares” to Christ then continuing to live the lie of self-maintenance. Indeed, it is a battle for purity until we surrender and let the Lord fight our battle (Ex. 14:14).
The British theologian Nicholas Lash, commenting on the Emmaus encounter described in Luke 24, observed that the church was first described in an act of hospitality. The travelers who met the unknown person on the road to Emmaus recognized who he was in the breaking of the bread and recalled how their hearts burned as he had first opened up to them the meaning of the scriptures. At the end of the story they go and tell the others what they have experienced.

The Emmaus account, one of the most profound in all of the Gospels, is redolent of the liturgical life of the nascent church—touched by a moment of evangelization, and suffused with the glow of the Risen Christ. In one sense it is a climax moment of one of the most important themes in Luke’s gospel: that of hospitality. However profound that passage is, its fullest meaning only becomes deepened when one reads it against the background of the frequent descriptions found in Luke as he depicts Jesus in that most intimate of hospitable occasions, the sharing of a meal. Such descriptions are found in Luke 5, 7, 11, 14, 15, 16, 19, 22, and 24 almost, as it were, serving as set pieces for the narrative as a whole.
Anonymous, The Christ Child as Good Shepherd, 1600-1650
The Gospel of Luke is punctuated with settings at which our Lord is at table. Sometimes he eats at the home of a Pharisee while other occasions find him at table with sinners. We who are unacquainted with the strict laws of Jewish ritual purity especially at meals may not see the full power of a dinner scene in Luke 19 with a publican like Zacchaeus; nor the oddness of dining at the home of a Pharisee when a woman, a sinner nonetheless, arrives to anoint the feet of Jesus. The critics of Jesus can think of little else to vilify him beyond saying that he eats with sinners and tax collectors. The social shift between eating with sinners and with Pharisees has profound implications perhaps no more largely noted than in the story told by Jesus about the Rich Man and Lazarus. Lazarus, sitting in the detritus of the rich man’s gate surrounded by dogs (an unclean animal) ends up in the bosom of Abraham while the rich ends up in eternal torment. At least one part of the rich man’s sin is his total neglect of the poor man who sits at his gate. Of course, the Eucharistic sharing at the Last Supper, where Jesus shares his own body and blood, is the supreme act of hospitality with one member of the company, Judas, denying himself the sharing of the table.

It has been observed more than once that the Eucharist was the one place in the Roman Empire where there was equality at table with slaves, free persons and aristocrats sharing in one meal. From its beginnings, Christian missionaries preached to “all nations”, inviting each person to be regenerated in water and to join in the fellowship of the Eucharistic table. On the distaff side, the most extreme punishment the church could inflict on a person was to deny that person a place at the table as a punishment for public sin—that is what excommunication means—to separate one from union with those who share the Eucharist. That punishment explains why there is an historical link between penance and Eucharist.

Today there is much talk about the new evangelization. In the western world in particular, it is hard to preach the gospel effectively both because there are so many competing voices in our public, largely electronic, media. And, further, there are so many competing voices that tug us away from some of the gospel demands. There is a further problem, too little emphasized in the cascade of literature coming from the Church about this new evangelization, and that problem can be put in the form of a simple but fundamental question: is the church a hospitable community?

Do we a priori reluctantly invite some people to come to the table? Have we thought pastorally about the issue of the divorced and remarried? Have we accommodated ourselves to the culturally diverse who come to our country (half of all Catholics will speak Spanish as a first language by the year 2040)? Have we found a way to reach the young who think the church is only about “thou must” and “thou shall not”? Have we reflected upon the people who have been hurt by the members of the church in one way or another? In other words, if someone is tempted to accept the invitation to “return home” to the church, will they find a hospitable community awaiting them?

I am not a pastoral theologian nor do I pretend to be. Nonetheless, one thing strikes me as critical as we follow up on the new evangelization. Before we attempt to make a coherent plan to evangelize others, we need to first be converted (individually and communally), asking ourselves a very simple question: are we genuinely a hospitable community after the manner of Jesus, who ate with sinners and righteous alike thus giving us the first example?
Hospitality is a very old problem in the church. We should remember one particular issue of hospitality that the primitive church faced. Can one eat food that is not kosher in the Christian community? Do Gentile converts have to be circumcised? Had Paul not won that argument, humanly speaking, Christianity would have ended up as a small Jewish sectarian movement. In that sense, Saint Paul gave us the first example of the new evangelization.

Every age faces its own test of accommodation and ours is no different. As the new evangelization begins to gain some traction, we must ask ourselves again whether or not we are ready to welcome strangers, sinners and righteous alike, to the table. The hospitable welcome we need to offer today might take a clue from another act of welcoming found in Luke, the parable of the Prodigal Son (15:11-32). Let persons turn away from the “far country” of alienation, indifference, or sin and find a community that recognizes their return with joy. The new evangelization should be quick to forgive and prompt to welcome. Coming home is a form of conversion and the converted one should find a paternal embrace on that occasion.
To improve Catholic homilies

Part II: Less Moralism, More Gospel
In the spring edition of *Church Life*, I addressed one problem with Catholic homilies: the tendency to focus on too many points, rather than a single teaching or idea woven throughout the homily. The second common problem with bad Catholic homilies is this: far too many preachers neglect the Christian Gospel, true evangelization, and instead merely peddle sentimental moralism. Too often Catholic homilies are bad because they do not **always** work from and toward the amazingly Great News of the Christian Gospel.

The center and key of all reality is that **God the Father has primordially loved every human being from all eternity and is at work reconciling each of us and our entire sinful world to himself in Jesus Christ by the power of the Holy Spirit.** Now that is great news! And that Gospel message is the **only and totally sufficient** basis, orientation, and motivation from which all of Christian faith and life must be believed and lived. There is no other foundation, no other reason, no other energy than this good news for anything that happens with and in us. Every good idea we believe, every good work we do, every good attempt to grow and live better lives for ourselves and others must be rooted in and energized by that Gospel message. Otherwise, our preaching is just a lot of human-centered good intentions, with which the world is already saturated. Even worse, moralism can easily slide into mechanisms of institutional social control. That is not Christianity.

Unfortunately, it must be said, far too many Catholic homilies consist of merely touting various moralistic admonishments and encouragements. Some such homilies fail even to be discernibly Christian—many could very well be offered at the Rotary Club or Unitarian Universalist Association.

Be a good person. Care for others. Try to forgive. Love God better. Care about social justice. *Et cetera.* All of these messages are obviously good, but they **must** be animated, motivated, and directed by the reality of the Gospel.
Homilies that peddle moralistic admonishments and encouragements are at bottom, no matter how nice sounding, massive failures to speak the truth; to reorient listeners to the one and only important reality named above. The authentic Christian Gospel is the heart of what the Church has to say, the only starting point and ultimately the sum of what she is about. For Catholic homilies to say anything else while neglecting the Gospel is a massive failure.

This truth has been said many times, but it bears repeating: people are not well motivated by feelings of guilt or sentimentality. Such inducement of guilt or sentimentality does not get anyone very far (nor are they the way of the true God). Life is difficult and change is hard. So, homilies need to cut out the inducement of guilty feelings and sentimentality designed to prod people to “try a little harder.” So, what then remains? What has the power to motivate real human change, but is also distinctively Christian? Unconditional, faithful, genuine love. And what is this love’s only source? Nothing else but God the eternal Father, through Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit, at work to reconcile the world to himself. This Christological and Trinitarian approach must be the starting line, the touchstone, the launch pad of every single Catholic homily delivered.

Of course the Gospel is inherently embedded in Church liturgies, in the Christian calendar, and much else besides. Even so, God’s primal love and salvation for humans are so easy to forget that the liturgical words and practices readily become rote. We humans easily focus, not on the Church’s truly Great News, but instead on our own problems, interests, and efforts. This self-oriented idolatry is an ever-present temptation, keeping us away from living in the freedom and love in Christ.

But the ever-evangelizing Christian Gospel—not our little “doings” and “tryings”—is ultimately what reality is about. Therefore, every Catholic homily must recurrently, continually, and unfailingly draw the attention of its hearers back to the central fact of all reality—God’s eternal love for and reconciliation of humanity in Jesus Christ—as the basis for everything else that is said and done.

Let’s say it another way: Humans never could or should live good and right lives in order that God might love and save them; that is pure anti-gospel moralism. No, God has already absolutely loved and saved humans in Jesus Christ, period. That’s the good news. And in light of that unalterable fact, we humans are now free to live good and right lives in communion with God and each other, which leads to human flourishing. That is the evangelization that everyone needs to hear again and again.

Ultimately, the problem with Gospel-empty homilies is that they unintentionally make Jesus Christ and the Church expendable. Everyone needs Christ and the Church for the Gospel and Eucharist. But nobody must have Christ and the Church for sentimental moralism. That can be found anywhere. Homilies without the Gospel thus advance the unintended but real effect of communicating that the Church is superfluous, just another chattering voice in the cacophony of cultural noise.

Homilies play a limited but important role in the Mass; they are not everything. Homilies are, however, valuable opportunities to reflect on the meaning and implications of the Scriptures. But any reading from the Scriptures can itself be meaningless to listeners, if not positively misleading, when it does not work to direct them—like the pointing finger of John the Baptist—to the life-giving person of Jesus Christ. Whatever else
of value that gets said in any homily must always be oriented and informed by proclaiming and unpacking the implications of Jesus Christ, the Great News.

So, those who prepare and deliver Catholic homilies must consciously work to make every single one explicitly Christocentric and thus Trinitarian. First and foremost, homilies must not be about what their listeners must do, but rather about what God the Trinity has done for them. Only then will our own actions make any sense. No homily should ever be delivered that does not explicitly reference and motivate its central point by proclaiming the Christian Gospel. Every homily must in one way or another re-declare and work within the truth of the particularly Christian, re-evangelizing, fantastically Good News. When the Gospel gets preached in this way, people will want to come and hear it, and it just might change their lives.
LITURGICAL EVANGELIZATION

BY BISHOP CHRISTOPHER COYNE
“The liturgy, like the feast, exists not to educate but to seduce people into participating in common activity of the highest order, where one is freed to learn things which cannot be taught.”
Aidan Kavanagh
The death of a friend or a loved one is a moment of crisis in anyone’s life. It throws us out of our normal patterns of existence. We find ourselves confronted with moments of intense activity and moments of bleak emptiness. We relate to those we know, even intimately, and they to us differently: what should we say to each other, how do we act, is it “okay” to talk about the deceased, what can I do, what should I do?

Ritual, both social and religious, has in the past given a framework by which this personal and familial chaos can be addressed. Neighbors would come to the house offering simple words of condolence and substantial acts of consolation: food, baby-sitting, housekeeping, whatever was necessary. People fell into the “doing” of things. They were not there as grief counselors or spiritual directors. They simply were there. Yet, they also brought the most important gift to the grieving: personal presence. They sat with the bereaved. They knew the simple but expected phrases: “I’m so sorry. You have my prayers. Just let me know what I can do.” Some might complain that these were nothing more than empty, rote phrases, devoid of meaning, but they would be wrong. They were ritual phrases that everyone knew and understood and expected as the giver and the receiver of these words. They allowed for structure and clear communication in the midst of a chaotic moment of life.

The same was true for the religious rituals centered around the funeral rites. Within the Jewish community, after the burial rites were carried out, the family would normally sit in “Shiva” for three or seven days. During this period, friends and family paid a Shiva call to those who were sitting Shiva, normally bringing food rather than flowers since those who were mourning were not to be concerned with such mundane things.

Within the Christian context, the three-fold pattern of wake, the service or Mass, and burial offered another familiar framework. In times past, we all knew the drill.” Friends, family, neighbors, colleagues, all would come to the wake. Flowers would be sent; notes or Mass cards would be placed on a table and answered later; and again, the formal words of consolation would be spoken by all. This same pattern of ritual played out within the Mass/service and the burial rite. The religious and social rituals allowed us to deal with the grim reality of death, to speak when it was difficult, and to act within a pattern of behavior that was understood by
all. These simple expected words and actions of the rites bore deeper complex meanings: we are here with you, we understand, we all see ourselves in you, and, in the case of religious rituals, they professed belief in God, belief in heavenly communion, and belief in eternity.

This ritual familiarity has been the case in the past but it is not quite the case now, especially when one is talking about the civic and social rituals surrounding death. Part of this is that structures of family and community out of which these rites happened organically in the past are no longer automatically there. Families are smaller and more fragmented by distance and time. Neighborhoods are more closed and insular and the numbers are just not there anymore within our parishes and religious communities. In many instances, the ritual model has been replaced with the therapeutic model and we can no longer assume that people “know the drill.”
The reason for this is not the point of this article. I simply raise this as a given to underline the impact it has on the practice and understanding of the funeral rites of the Church. We cannot assume that the people present at the Church’s rites are either believers or knowledgeable participants in the rites. Yet, religious ritual, done consistently and well, according to the intention and directives of the Church offers a framework in which grief can be expressed, hope can be nourished, and the deeper longings of the human person can be articulated in faith even when one is only barely able to either understand or participate. But what is even more important is that religious ritual can, at the same time, call people to faith.

Many who work in service to the Church’s Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults (RCIA) will tell you that oftentimes those who come to the rites discerning entrance into the Catholic Church have had a profoundly moving experience of the mystery of the Church within a funeral. The deceased may have been a family member, a friend, or maybe they were attending the funeral to support someone they knew who had lost a loved one, but somewhere within the ritual of the funeral rites, they sensed something intensely disturbing, in the good sense of the word, such as to disturb one’s slumber.

My point here is this: the Church’s liturgy, by its very nature is an evangelical act, meaning it is a proclamation of the Word who became flesh, who desires an encounter with us that sparks a relationship grounded in his Body through Word and Sacrament. Even more so, if Christ is truly present in the Word proclaimed and in the Sacrament celebrated, those present at the liturgical celebration, no matter how nascent or lukewarm their faith may be, who are seeking something true and deep in their lives, will hear the call of Jesus Christ to come to Him even if they are not sure what they may be experiencing.

Notice something important here. It is that word “relationship.” Jesus Christ calls each if us to Himself. He calls us to a relationship with Him that invites us to come to know Him, to love Him, and to serve Him. This call is manifested clearly in the Church’s announcement of the good news of salvation and this announcement, as the Church teaches, reaches its heights in its liturgy celebrated by Christ the Head and we the Body. This call of Christ to a deeper relationship with Him is made to all who are present within the liturgical assembly.

But allow me to state the obvious: there is often a disconnect between what is supposed to be happening in the liturgy and what actually occurs. Christ’s call is often met with what seems to be “deaf ears.” While the full reasons for this are unique to each individual, it seems to me that there are two basic end points at which the connection between the human person as participant and the liturgy as an evangelical act can break down. The first is when the person who is participating is not able to connect to the deeper meanings and reality of the liturgy because their own life is so far away from the meanings and realities present. So, for example, if one’s life is disordered by selfishness and sin, it is very difficult to see and accept the call to conversion into the person of Christ present in the Church’s liturgy. Or if one is intellectually hostile to the possibility of a Divine Being or a revealed religion, one cannot see the liturgy as anything more than a bunch of superstitious nonsense. The disconnect is from the side of the person and no celebration of the liturgy no matter how well done is going to matter in their lives.
The second end point occurs when the celebration of the liturgy is done so poorly and with so little care that even the most saintly of believers would find it difficult to experience any encounter with the transcendent. If the liturgy is going to be evangelical, meaning by its very celebration a proclamation of the “good news”, intended to call those with no faith to faith and those with faith to deeper faith, then we have to pay attention to all of the details of its celebration. This means the liturgy has to be celebrated with dignity, grace, and care according to how the Church desires it to be celebrated. Done without explanation. Done in a church that is clean, well-lit, and comfortable. Done with clean and beautiful vessels, vestments, and books. Done so as you can hear what is being said, with preaching that speaks to the words of Scripture and the rite itself, preaching that speaks to the life of the Christian and preaching that is good news. Done by clergy and people who look like they really believe and really care.

In all of this, the foundational starting point is to let the Rite be the Rite. In other words, allow the Church’s liturgy to do what it does by paying attention and tending to the details. There is no need to “reinvent” the Liturgy. Just do it well. Read the rituals. Know the options that are already available within the rite for its celebration. The Church’s Liturgy works if one just gives it a chance. But when we treat it shabbily or carelessly, it can’t.

This also means trusting the rite. Too often what we find happening in ritual celebrations such as funerals and weddings and baptisms are efforts to make the rite “relevant” or therapeutic rather than allowing the rite done well to take the person where it will as the Church intends. Just as the cultural frameworks of ritual already exist for dealing with something like a death in a family, so too the ritual framework exists in the same way. We just need to rediscover both.

I try to remind myself each time I celebrate the Church’s liturgy to “get out of the way of the Church’s worship,” to be a bridge that serves to connect the people of God with the person of God the Father, God the Son, God the Holy Spirit. If, as one truly believes, the Triune God is present in Word and Sacrament and in the Body of Christ gathered in faith, then one needs to get out of the way and allow the rite to do what it does. In that place in which holy things are being done by holy people, there are many present who may not believe or whose faith may be weak or who are just seekers of truth. The Church’s liturgy speaks to them, as it does to all, proclaiming the evangelical message of the good news that Jesus Christ is Lord if we only take care to allow it do so.
EVANGELIZING WITH A BEAUTIFUL, PERSUASIVE INVITATION

BY JOSH AND STACEY NOEM
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The most common question we receive when people learn that we have been doing marriage preparation for 14 years is: “Have you ever recommended that a couple not get married?” Admittedly, it would be an extreme move to suggest that a couple might want to reconsider their decision to bind themselves together for life. For us to make that suggestion would necessitate a commensurately extreme situation.

Have we ever recommended a couple not get married? The short answer is, “almost.”
Several years ago while sitting with a couple during a marriage preparation session, it came to light that one of them consistently used marijuana.

It was not news to the bride-to-be, nor did it seem like a taboo subject when brought up in our presence. Our strategy in the moment was not to pass judgment on the situation ourselves, but to help the couple talk through the issue so that they could align their views and be of one mind.

The user was not abashed, ashamed or private about his drug use. He said that he used marijuana recreationally, as a way to blow off steam. He said lots of people drink beer to relax, and he was just using a different means to the same end. He said that he could quit whenever he wanted to, but that he had not yet found a compelling reason to stop using. He was committed to not progressing to harder drugs.

His partner was not self-conscious in the conversation, and was not surprised by what he said. However, she did seem to experience his drug use as a source of tension in the relationship and it appeared as though she had not yet asserted those feelings. We created space for her to articulate her feelings clearly. When he was high, she said, he was not himself, and she didn't like being around him. She did not want to use drugs herself, and so she felt left out of that part of their life together.

After opening up the conversation with them as much as possible, making sure they both had room to listen to their beloved’s concerns and be heard by them, they were at a standoff. Each of them had their say, but there was no clear way forward. For us to demand a resolution would have rung false—they needed to find a way through this for themselves.

What should a minister do in that situation? We opted to step out of the way and make room for the Holy Spirit. We strongly suggested they make time and space to intentionally work through the issue. We gave them some communication tools on how to sort out their feelings and reflect deeply as individuals and then come back as a couple to discuss it candidly.

Sadly, we did not leave this meeting optimistic. Typically, during our debriefing following a marriage preparation meeting, we find that our conversation is uplifting, a fun exchange appreciating what makes them “tick.” We recognized the magnitude of the situation before us and realized that, especially given her feelings, if he did not come to a decision to stop using, this marriage likely could not work. If they remained divided on this issue, especially after fully hearing each other out, resentment would build on both ends, which is the seed of a failed marriage.

Further, in our role with them, the responsibility rested squarely on us to let them know what was at stake. So we decided that at our next meeting, if he was firm in his conviction to keep using, we needed to lay out the consequences they would likely face as a couple.

In the intervening weeks, we prayed for the couple and prepared ourselves for the conversation that potentially needed to happen. The next time they sat on our couch, we made a brief bit of small talk and then asked, “So how did your conversation go?”

She responded, “Great! He’s given it up.” Both of our heads pivoted as though watching a tennis match to look at him. He nodded profusely and said, “I figured she is much more important than using that stuff.”
We managed to cover our astonishment fairly well in the moment and did some good ministerial affirmation of their choices. But internally, we were a bit awed. We had witnessed a moment of grace active in the lives of these two people. In a seemingly insurmountable situation, the Holy Spirit had found a way through for this couple. It was unexpected and seemingly unlikely. And we were in a privileged position to witness it.

Preparing couples for marriage is privileged work. We have the opportunity to speak with men and women at a pivotal point in their formation for vocation. Often, ministers refer to marriages and baptisms as “moments of return,” touchstone moments when those who may not be fully practicing their faith return to the Church for the landmark events of life. The question is if that return will be a short visit, lasting only as long as the six months leading up to their wedding date, or if it will be a deeper encounter in which they recognize that our faith can speak to the deepest longing in their lives.

We as ministers must offer these couples an invitation that is both beautiful and persuasive.

How couples come…

The couples coming to us for marriage preparation fall into three general categories of faith practice: about 25% are committed to their faith. These are the couples where one or both of them may have been heavily involved in retreats, small faith groups, liturgy or the like in college. If they have been out of school for a while, they have become involved in their parish and are likely leading some kind of ministry there. These couples come to us excited and eager to engage the marriage preparation process and whatever it may hold.

The middle set of couples comprises about 50% of the couples we see. Generally they might be termed “definitively faithful,” meaning both of them are committed to having some faith in their lives. How they engage their faith could vary broadly—as could their denominational background, if any—but usually includes regular attendance at church. These couples come to us with curiosity about what the process may hold and a general apprehension toward the possibility of questions regarding sex.

The final set of couples we see makes up the remaining 25%. One or both of them may not appear to have any discernable personal faith life. They often prompt the question, “Why do you want a Catholic wedding?” When they come, one of the partners might seem a bit defensive and wary of the process. Sometimes these couples are the most exciting to work with and often they exhibit the greatest movement from one meeting to the next.

Regardless of the nuances in their faith background and practice, though, the preponderance of couples come sharing a significant amount in common. Namely, in the midst of their busy lives they have all added an extensive “to-do” list of wedding planning logistics.
A Beautiful, Persuasive Invitation…

What does it mean to offer a beautiful, persuasive invitation to couples such as these?

For an invitation to be beautiful, it must be life-giving. The first thing to account for is context. When couples enter an office for a marriage preparation meeting, it has to be a space that is different from every other “wedding planning” meeting. Couples meet with photographers, caterers, cake designers, dress makers, videographers, musicians, tuxedo renters, building managers, gift registry clerks, and wedding coordinators. All of these meetings take on a very specific transactional tone. The minister must differentiate a marriage preparation meeting from the myriad of other logistical meetings a couple has to engage in order to plan the wedding day.

The marriage preparation meeting should be a space where there is plenty of time. No one can feel rushed or the weight of an agenda to get through. We make a practice of assuring couples of this soon after they arrive and their relief is palpable, if not conscious. Often they involuntarily exhale. We observe their shoulders and overall posture relax. There is a peacefulness to our gathering, our sitting and sharing. This is a space for real dialogue with substance that touches on the depths of their personalities and relationship. We want to begin a conversation that will endure well beyond our time together. The marriage preparation meeting is not a space where a sequence of decisions needs to be made in a limited amount of time. As ministers, we have no more important place to be than right here in this moment and we invite them into that same disposition.

Marriage preparation programs can take on any number of incarnations from one day “Pre-Cana” experiences to weekend-long Engaged Encounter retreats, from individual meetings with a host couple to group Evenings for the Engaged. We know that the quality of any given approach varies broadly from one program to the next. Our experience tells us that the greater the individual attention a couple receives the greater their sense of connectedness to the Church.

The reason for this has to do with relationship. Those preparing for marriage are invited as a couple, together as a unit, into personal relationship with the Body of Christ. Regardless of their faith background, be they Catholic, Christian or other people of good will, we have an opportunity as a Church to put our best selves forward. That hospitality is easier to extend by giving a couple our full personal attention in a comfortable, private space, than it is when speaking from a podium to 10 or 20 couples sitting at tables in a church hall.

For an invitation to be persuasive, it needs to carry the weight of witness value. We cannot speak with integrity into the lives of couples something that is foreign to us. To ask a couple to share their reality and then to name the grace that we see in that reality, we must have already seen, experienced and named grace in our own relationships. To be compelling, we must know, love and serve God in and through our relationships in order to call others to the beauty of making God known, loved and served in theirs. Priests or single lay ministers are not at a disadvantage here because they, too, can have insight into marriage dynamics if they attend to integrity and candor in their own personal relationships.

We must also be mindful of our tone. If we have experienced the grace we are naming for those we serve, we need to communicate the fullness of that experience: the life, peace and joy present therein. We need to avoid any tone that sounds as though
we are evaluating or judging a couple. We have an extraordinarily compelling message, but if those we serve cannot hear it, it does not matter. We have all been in a classroom, a lecture or a meeting where a speaker is absolutely convicted about what they are saying but communicates it in a heavy manner, devoid of life. The weight of their tone suppresses the beauty and persuasion inherent in their message. Essentially, they are allowing themselves to get in the way of the Spirit. All that their interlocutors hear is the person in front of them speaking, not the Spirit speaking a word of life *through* that person.

For our message to be hearable we have to communicate it with the fullness of joy and life that it carries. This is not to suggest that individual ministers act outside of their natural dispositions in favor of appearing artificially happy. To the contrary, we must act and speak with integrity. That is equally true if our personalities are naturally introverted and sober, or if we are more extroverted and exuberant. Regardless of our individual personality types, if we are speaking a word of grace that has given us life, we must allow that word to be spoken in the fullness of life. Couples can tell the difference.

In order to offer an invitation that is both beautiful and persuasive, our framework is no different from that of Christ himself: personal relationship. This invitation is perfectly depicted in the Emmaus story. Joining the traveling disciples on their journey, Jesus listened to them, and discovered what was going on in their lives in order to share it with them. Jesus then interpreted the content of their experience in light of sacred text, and the exchange led them to a personal encounter with Christ in the breaking of the bread. There are three key actions here: listening, breaking open sacred text, and encountering Christ.

Our framework when we sit down with a couple looks similar. We listen to the content of their lives, we break open the sacred text of their relationship through the use of an inventory, and we point them to an encounter with Christ through their marriage by exploring sacramental theology.
We Listen...

Most often our time with a couple takes place over the course of three to five meetings. We avoid arbitrarily scheduling a fixed number of meetings in order to leave room for the unique incarnation that is each couple’s relationship to unfold.

The content of our meetings is determined by the couple’s response to a relationship inventory. The inventory is a series of questions that a couple answers in multiple-choice format to report on the state of their relationship and how much they have discussed and agree on major themes such as finances, parenting, extended families, roles and household duties, communication styles, etc. There are several types of inventory—we use the version supplied by FOCCUS, Inc., which shapes questions and chooses themes based on research on marriages.

The inventory is not a test—there is no evaluation attached to their responses. A couple who agrees on less than half of the inventory simply needs more assistance in initiating those conversations. A couple who agrees on the majority of the inventory has more experience with discussing these in-depth themes, but can always benefit from refining their approach.

All of these factors and more determine the number of meetings we use to work through the inventory responses in which they are not in agreement. The couple’s communication dynamic may be quick and concise or it may be more deliberative and gradual. The couple may be highly extroverted and talk a great deal or they may be more introverted and reserved in their comments. Whatever and however they are, we make a space where they are invited and welcome to be fully themselves.

Our initial meeting with a couple is all about establishing relationship and process. We try to be as welcoming as possible and set them at ease (this often involves the offer of hot beverages and small talk). We frame their expectations by sharing briefly about how the process will unfold. We offer some printed resources, introduce ourselves and say a word about confidentiality. All of this takes no more than five minutes. Then it is their turn—we invite them to share their experience with us by talking about the love, joy, and grace that is active in their lives through their relationship.

To encourage a couple to dive in to sharing about themselves on a fairly personal level we ask questions that capitalize on story-telling: How did you first meet? Do you remember initial impressions of your beloved? What was your first “date” like? How did you get engaged? How did your families react to the news? It is usually easy for a couple to share the story of their relationship—everyone has a narrative of how things went.

Our questioning serves multiple purposes at the same time. In addition to getting them used to personal sharing, it helps for them to hear their own voices in the space before we get into anything too intimate. The narrative style of communication assists us in learning and retaining details about them. Finally, in listening to their story, we discover how this couple works together and what values figure prominently in their experience. We also can usually get a feel for the “personality” of the couple—how they use humor, how deeply reflective they are about their experience and how they express and receive affection. Just as on the road to Emmaus, when we listen to a couple open up about their experience, we discover what makes their hearts burn.
We Break Open Sacred Texts…

Couples coming for Catholic marriage preparation, no matter what their faith background or practice, are not blank slates. They have already met grace in their lives. Additionally, they are adults making an adult commitment. They are agents in their own salvation. It behooves us to treat them as such lest they feel like children coming to a religious education class.

The sacred text we seek to break open with them is the text of their lives. Whether they have the eyes to see and the words to name the grace that is present varies broadly from couple to couple and individual to individual. We rely on the stories they have shared and the inventory they have completed to shape the content of our shared “exegesis.”

Here we transition to a more explicitly ministerial role. Up until this moment we have not done, said, or nor invited reflection in our meetings that differs significantly from what might take place with a secular counselor. In some ways that is appropriate. As Edward Schillebeeckx once said of preaching: “Speak the name of God neither too soon, nor too late.”

Just like Jesus on the road to Emmaus, in order to communicate God’s presence in human activity, we need to know our couple’s story, being especially attentive to the way they tell it. Then, as we begin working through the product of their inventory, we can begin to acknowledge and name the grace present and active in their lives. We do not hold up an overtly religious theme to conform their experience to it. Rather we invite them to dig more deeply into their experience and see for themselves if they recognize Christ active within it.

At this stage of the process, that may look like a conversation about struggling with communication, reconciling disparate hobbies or deciding how to deal with challenging family members. As we unfold their experience, hearing how they broke through their struggle, we listen for specific movements. Generally, we find one person dying to self for the good of the couple, which resulted in new life in their relationship. This is Christ present. We may or may not choose to name it so explicitly at this point. It all depends on the couple.

The process reaches a culmination when we connect their experience to sacramental theology. Just as the disciples at Emmaus knew Jesus in the breaking of the bread, we seek to invite couples to a personal Encounter with Christ through contemplating and appropriating the Sacrament of their Marriage.

We point them to an encounter with Christ…

To impart sacramental theology to a young couple with a thousand tasks on their wedding planning “to-do” list is not an easy charge. We have been tempted to give it up altogether, and rest in the knowledge that we have simply tried to offer a fully human preparation: we gave them the best communication tools and we talked through the topics that usually cause the most trouble in marriages.

On the other hand, like any minister, we have also made the mistake of revealing the divine dimensions of marriage in theological terms that are too distant from a couple’s experience for them to choose to reach for it, let alone grasp it and own it for themselves.

In the one case, we err by omitting an invitation to the fullness of beauty in marriage; in the other we offer nothing the couple finds personally persuasive.
It is a balance to strike an incarnational course that is at the same time fully human and fully divine. We find this balance most beautifully struck in the wedding liturgy itself.

Beginning with a question about who celebrates the sacrament of marriage, we walk couples through the “real life” implications of the shape of the ritual (lex orandi lex credendi). We explain that the celebrants of this sacrament are the couple themselves. The priest or deacon is there to stand as a representative of the Church community to witness the vows that the couple professes. Marriage is a profoundly public act—no couple gets married alone. Even if the only other person present is a priest, someone is there to witness the vows.

Further, the relationship between the wedding couple and the congregation is mutual. The congregation offers the couple support, a good example, and the confidence that they are not alone on this adventure. The couple offers the congregation a tangible reminder of the profound commitment of marriage. They are the very definition of sacrament: a visible sign of an invisible reality. Seeing a couple set out on a journey through life together reminds anyone witnessing their vows that this commitment takes courage and hope, and that it is joyful. Witnessing courage and hope embodied in joy rekindles those virtues in the congregation.

This position differs widely from the whole paradigm of wedding planning in our culture today. The multi-billion dollar wedding industry is predicated on the notion that one’s wedding should be an intensely personal experience, the fulfillment of one’s lifelong romantic hopes and dreams. We try to remind couples that this moment is just as much about the community they are gathering together as it is about them. And thank God for that. They are going to need the love, support and example of those gathered around them in the years and decades to come. Depending on the theological acumen of the couple, we might go so far as to suggest that the cosmic reality of liturgy implies that the “community gathered around them” transcends time and space to include all holy men and women, and that they could rely on their love, support, and example as well.

Additionally, there is a deeper significance to the fact that it is the couple themselves who serve as the ministers of the sacrament of marriage. Not only do they minister the sacrament of marriage to one another on the wedding day, but they also minister the sacrament of marriage to one another on the day after the wedding. And the day after that. And every day of their lives.

In fact, every action and every behavior of their married life together will now reflect the reality that they are bound to another person. When they take out the trash, they are ministering the sacrament of marriage to their spouse. When the husband avoids cooking onions for his pregnant wife with her weak stomach, he is ministering the sacrament of marriage to her. When the wife parses the week’s medications into daily segments for her aged husband, she is ministering the sacrament of marriage to him.
From the moment they exchange vows, every action of their lives, public or private, takes on a different meaning. They will henceforth eat, sleep, drive a car, talk with friends, exercise, work, pray, raise children, brush their teeth, buy cereal, plan a household budget, play, grieve, buy a house, sell a house, laugh and cry as someone profoundly connected to another person. Exploring that lived connection with a couple is precisely where ministers can incarnationally evangelize because it is within that connection that the couple experiences Christ in one another. It is within that connection that the couple becomes Christ for one another.

Any fool can tell that marriage is about love. Marriage preparation is an opportunity to precisely define that love. If the couple identifies themselves as Christian, then their standard of love is the example of Jesus.

Christ’s life, ministry, teaching, suffering, death and resurrection all flowed from the deepest reality of love: self-gift. Christ’s life, death and resurrection proclaim once and for all, for everyone, that dying to self for others—self-giving love—leads to new and abundant life.

Self-sacrifice always leads to new and abundant life. We have found this proclamation to be the deepest pattern alive in our marriage. In minute ways, when we die to ourselves by cleaning the toilet, getting up with sick children, or folding laundry with love we minister the sacrament of marriage to one another. It is a small action of self-giving love for the good of another, and it leads to new life. Single lay ministers and priests also experience this self-giving love as the deepest pattern in their own lives, and can speak about this reality from relationships in which others have a claim on them.

At times, the new life that follows dying to self is as simple as a grateful comment that feels good. In our experience, more significant actions of self-gift lead to deeper experiences of new life peacefully expressed with a sigh and a smile, jokingly expressed with a self-deprecating jibe, or passionately expressed physically.

We saw this in the couple described in the introduction, when we were able to learn a bit more about the conversation in which they worked through his drug use. Self-delusional or not, he held his drug use close to his heart. When confronted with how this behavior separated him from his fiancée, he made the decision to give that up. We talked about how that gesture was an example of dying to self—being willing to sacrifice a part of himself for the good of another out of self-giving love.

And then we proclaimed the resurrection. We talked with his fiancée about what that decision meant for her. She described her gratitude and how much more comfortable she felt around him because he is not high for part of the day. She felt like they shared much more of a life together.

This new status was clearly evident in the couple’s body language. They did not seem depressed at the earlier meeting, but now they seemed distinctly light-hearted and playful. They were marked by joy.

This is new life; this is the resurrection; this is the paschal mystery alive in the experience of marriage. It is this pattern of dying to self in love for another, and the promise of new and abundant life, that sets the foundation for the sacrament of marriage. Indeed, it is the foundation of all the sacraments and of Christian life as a whole.
Invitation to community and communion…

Connecting couples to this kind of theological language is important not because it conforms them to orthodoxy. Most couples are not concerned about “church talk” and easily bore if we impose it upon them without any context that relates to their lives.

Describing their experience in ways that introduce them to theological language is important because this is the language of our tradition. Often, this language seems old and dusty, but ministers preparing couples for marriage have an opportunity to reveal the living reality behind this language by using it to describe experiences of grace in which they experience new life in their own relationship.

Introducing them to theological language also offers them a key to liturgy, transforming it from something seemingly boring and obligatory to an essential source of deep spiritual nourishment.

The Eucharist, for example, is brimming with this language of self-sacrificial love and new and abundant life—both in word and gesture. In the Eucharist, Jesus offers himself to us. Receiving the body and blood of Jesus, fully human and fully divine, transforms us because it conforms us to this act of love. We participate in God’s love in the Eucharist, and become Christ-like.

Shaped by the Eucharist, our participation in God’s love is then extended to daily life when we act like Christ. The wife who, with love, gets up early to walk the dog and let her husband sleep late loves with Eucharistic love. The husband who, with love, packs a lunch for his wife before she leaves for work extends the reality of Christ’s love in the Eucharist to their weekday. Further, receiving these acts of love is also Eucharistic. The Eucharist invites us to receive Christ and to become Christ. The husband who recognizes the sacrifice of his wife in walking the dog receives Christ and is encouraged to become more like Christ in his love for his wife.

Marriage preparation that connects to the Eucharist gives couples a source of nourishment for a life’s journey. Contextualizing self-giving love within the Eucharist also further identifies the couple with the body of Christ in the world. Couples who unlock the spirituality of recognizing their lives in the words and gestures of the Mass realize that they are not alone, that they are part of a great tradition of self-giving lovers who find life in Christ.
Concluding thoughts…

Marriage is only one touchstone moment in a person’s life. The birth of a child, loss of a parent, or loved one are others. These moments constitute a distinctive opportunity for us as Church to put our best selves forward. These are opportunities for evangelization. Many Catholics struggle with what it means to be called to evangelization, fearing perhaps that it asks us to be street preachers or include “God talk” in every conversation. The reality is that we are constantly evangelizing with our witness in the world. The way we speak and act, no matter the topic or context, testifies to our most deeply held values and beliefs. We could stand to be more intentional about what we are communicating with our witness in the world just as we could be more intentional with what we communicate to those returning to the Church.

To evangelize couples presenting themselves for marriage with beauty and persuasion, we must proclaim the resurrection, the promise of new life. We might choose to offer some examples from our own relationships. But the best proclamations of the resurrection are those that we can uncover within the couple’s own experience. It is simply a matter of putting theological language to their experiences of love. Ministers who do this for themselves gain the capacity to invite others to witness ancient truths alive in their experience and to deepen those sources of meaning. Living with hope and joy of the resurrection is a beautiful and persuasive example of the gospel incarnate.
Vittore Carpaccio,
St. Stephen Preaching,
c. 1520
When, in the year 258, Pope St. Sixtus II was arrested and taken to his place of martyrdom, St. Lawrence is said to have followed him, weeping, “Father, where are you going without your deacon?” (“Hymn in honor of the Passion of the Blessed Martyr Lawrence,” vs. 21-28). The pope assured him that they would not be separated, since he too would die a martyr’s death, which happened only three days later.

St. Lawrence’s concern not to be separated from his bishop, even to the point of martyrdom, was no affectation. Four of Rome’s seven deacons died as martyrs together with Pope Sixtus, and two more later that same day. Many of Rome’s priests were also martyred on that and the following days. St. Lawrence would certainly not have wanted to remain separated from Pope Sixtus or from his brother deacons and priests (see, David Lopez, *Separatist Christianity: Spirit and Matter in the Early Church Fathers*, 85-88). Being united with them in the ministry of following Christ in life, he accepted, and even desired, the same unity in following Christ with them in martyrdom.
Today, the clergy may not expect their ministerial unity to lead to literal martyrdom. But the same ideal of unity in following Christ still binds priests anddeacons to their bishop, and bishops to each other in their apostolic college under the leadership of the pope (Lumen Gentium §3). Even during the formation ofdeacons and priests (that is, before the actual grace of Holy Orders), the grace of Jesus Christ and thevitality of the Holy Spirit, which flow through theministry of the bishop, work to prepare these men forsuch a ministry.

The Church’s care for her children is expressed in the offering of the Word and sacraments, in love and solidarity, in prayer and in the solicitude of the various ministries. However, in this care, which is, so to speak, visible, the care of the Holy Spirit is made present. In fact ‘the social structure of the Church serves the Spirit of Christ who vivifies it, in the building up of the body,’ both in its universality and in the singularity of its members. In the Church’s care for her children, the first figure, therefore, is the Spirit of Christ.... In the formation of permanent deacons, the first sign and instrument of the Spirit of Christ is the proper Bishop... (Basic Norms for the Formation of Permanent Deacons §§18-19).

Just as the bishop is the “visible principle and foundation of unity in his own particular Church,” (Pastoris Gregis §55) so also is he the “sign and instrument” of the unifying Spirit of Christ for the formation of clergy.

But within this unity, is it possible to say that deacons, as a particular order in the Church, have a particular character for their ministry? They are ordained to serve (specifically in proclaiming the Gospel and in “pointing to” Christ), and their ministry of proclaiming and pointing must be one of firm ecclesial communion (Basic Norms §9). As the homily for the ordination of the Deacon states in the Roman Pontifical:

Consecrated by the laying on of hands that comes down to us from the Apostles and bound more closely to the service of the altar, they will perform works of charity in the name of the Bishop or the pastor. With the help of God, they will go about all these duties in such a way that you will recognize them as disciples of him who came not to be served, but to serve (§199).

The deacon’s ministry participates in—comes from, and supports, and leads back to—the apostolic ministry of the bishop.

This participation allows a deacon’s service to lead people into the apostolic communion, both by “the service of the altar” and by “perform[ing] works of charity.” But communion never happens without interior transformation. Thus, the deacon’s proclaiming and pointing, in communion with his bishop, and through him with Christ, must also be properly understood as a call to conversion. This invitation was precisely the object of St. Lawrence’s desire for unity in martyrdom with Pope Sixtus:

“Let Rome behold the lands discrete / made one in Christ’s redeeming grace; / Let Romulus embrace the faith, / and even Numa now believe.” (“Hymn in Honor of the Passion of the Blessed Martyr Lawrence”, vs. 441-44).

But the entire apostolic ministry embraces such a call to conversion. Does a deacon call others to conversion and communion in a manner different than (while still participating in) the sacerdotal call to Eucharistic communion? Is a deacon’s witness, even to the point of death, characteristic of his diaconal identity?
Pope St. Leo the Great taught that it was. In a homily on St. Lawrence’s martyrdom, he preached that St. Lawrence’s example, both as a martyr and especially as a deacon, reveal something characteristic of how a deacon serves and calls to conversion:

The baffled plunderer, therefore, frets, and, blazing out into hatred of a religion, which had put riches to such a use, determines to pillage a still greater treasure by carrying off that sacred deposit, wherewith he was enriched, as he could find no solid hoard of money in his possession. He orders Lawrence to renounce Christ, and prepares to ply the deacon’s stout courage with frightful tortures…. You gain nothing, you prevail nothing, O savage cruelty. His mortal frame is released from your devices, and, when Lawrence departs to heaven, you are vanquished. The flame of Christ’s love could not be overcome by your flames, and the fire which burnt outside was less keen than that which blazed within…. By his prayer and intercession we trust at all times to be assisted; that, because all, as the Apostle says, ‘who wish to live holy in Christ, suffer persecution’ (2 Tim 3:12), we may be strengthened with the spirit of love, and be fortified to overcome all temptations by the perseverance of steadfast faith (s. 85, http://www.newadvent.org/fathers/360385.htm).

In his perseverance as a martyr, St. Lawrence shares, with all martyrs, in Christ’s victory over death. By imitating him and persevering in whatever challenges our faith, we too can share in the same victory.

More precisely as a deacon, St. Lawrence “baffles” the Roman officials. They demand money, the material treasures of the Church, which St. Lawrence administers. Instead, he gives them spiritual treasure, the poor whom he serves. They demand his observance of traditional Roman religion, and apply judicial torture to intimidate him and others into compliance. Instead, he proclaims by his actions the reality of Christ’s transforming love, which shows that paganism lacks true charity. They are baffled not just because he thwarts their demands, but also because he challenges their most deeply held conceptions of the way things are. Willingly dying as a deacon in communion with his bishop, he invites them to their own conversion. As Tertullian noted, “The blood of martyrs is the seed of the Church” (Apologeticum, 50). And even though we are not told that these persecutors accept this invitation, St. Lawrence has still shaken their pagan convictions and challenged the casual brutality of the Roman order.

Like St. Lawrence, deacons proclaim the Gospel’s call to conversion as much by their actions as by their words. Within the Church, those in need of conversion will have the most contact with a deacon in a liturgical or catechetical role. The call to a deeper conversion may be received in these contexts as part of the continual process of living the faith more and more fully. But in the world, those in need of conversion (or “reversion”) likely have the most contact with a deacon in a ministerial role – offering charity in a nursing home, soup kitchen, prison, or the like. The call to conversion in this sense can be more challenging, more “baffling,” because it defies, even contradicts, worldly norms and expectations. In both contexts, any recognizable inconsistency between a deacon’s words and his actions will undercut the message preached. Therefore the authenticity of a deacon’s “ministry of service” is crucial to the hearing of Christ’s voice. “This is at the very heart of the diaconate to which you have been called: to be a servant of the mysteries of Christ and, at one and the same time, to be servant of your brothers and sisters” (John Paul II, “Address to
Deacons of the United States,” Detroit, 19 September 1987; see also, Basic Norms §§9, 11).

In my personal experience as a deacon, prison ministry has best exemplified this dynamic. I recall, for example, one particular person, much battered by life and baffled by the world’s callousness. After several months of weekly catechetical preaching, he summoned the courage to ask me, “Why should I go to Confession?” It had been decades since his last encounter with that particular form of Christ’s grace. As I spoke with him, I could see the depth of his spiritual need, the palpable hunger not only to hear but to receive what only Christ can give. When next I saw him, he had been to Confession, and was a thoroughly changed man. His need and hunger had been fulfilled, and he was profoundly at peace, in ways I had never seen in him before. It was not only the catechesis offered, but also the faithful weekly presence of one of Christ’s ministers, which unlocked for him the desire for Christ’s mercy.

How should deacons cultivate this inviting authenticity? The most developed magisterial description of such a diaconal character is from the 1998 document, Basic Norms for the Formation of Permanent Deacons, issued from the Congregation for Education. This document offers that deacons must become “icons of Christ the Servant:”

The spirituality of service is a spirituality of the whole Church, insofar as the whole Church, in the same way as Mary, is the “handmaiden of the Lord” (Lk 1:28), at the service of the salvation of the world. And so that the whole Church may better live out this spirituality of service, the Lord gives her a living and personal sign of his being as servant. In a specific way, this is the spirituality of the deacon. In fact, with sacred ordination, he is constituted a living icon of Christ the servant within the Church (§11).

Christ’s “living and personal sign” to the Church of “his being as servant” evokes not merely specific Gospel moments of Christ serving, but more profoundly His entire life and mission, from Annunciation to Pentecost. This is the sense in which it is celebrated in the ancient hymn of Philippians 2: “Though He was in the form of God, Jesus did not deem equality with God something to be grasped at, but emptied himself ….” Over and over, Christ “emptied Himself,” bending down to assume our human nature, to bear the Cross, to die and enter hell. This unswerving attitude of divine “condescension” is the essence of His “being as servant.” A deacon’s authentic witness to Christ’s salvation requires a similar total gift of self.

Jesus washing the disciples’ feet at the Last Supper (Jn 13:2-17) is perhaps the Gospel passages most commonly associated with the deacon’s self-emptying “ministry of service” (see Deacon William Ditewig, 101 Questions and Answers on Deacons, Q. 85). As the National Directory for the Formation, Ministry, and Life of Permanent Deacons in the United States states:

The apostles’ decision to appoint ministers to attend to the needs of the Greek-speaking widows of the early Church at Jerusalem has long been interpreted as a normative step in the evolution of ministry. It is seen as a practical response to Jesus’ command during the Last Supper of mutual service among his followers. In washing his disciples’ feet, Jesus as head and shepherd of the community modeled the service he desired to be a hallmark of their faithfulness (§38).
This association of the deacon’s “ministry of service” with this particular ministerial moment has the advantage of being a concise icon of Christ the Servant, to whom the deacon is sacramentally conformed. It also seems to encapsulate rather neatly the distinction between the sacerdotal service of Christ the High Priest in the Crucifixion and Resurrection, and the diaconal service of Christ the Servant. In both these senses, one must agree that deacons should look to this passage to learn something of the Christ-like humility and gratitude which are essential to their ecclesial ministry.

However, the more profound senses of this association of deacon’s ministry with Jesus’s footwashing are not supported by the *lex orandi*. In the Mass of the Lord’s Supper on Holy Thursday, it is rather the bishop – either in person in his own cathedral, or in his co-worker, the priest, in parish churches—who washes the feet of the *viri selecti*. The deacon, if he is present, does not wash but merely assists the bishop or priest, by holding bowls and pitchers, and by handing towels, and so forth. Therefore the footwashing is not a mandate specifically for deacons, but has a more general meaning.

The more traditional association of the footwashing is with the people’s “ministry of service” – that is, the common or baptismal priesthood. St. John Chrysostom, for example, preached that the faithful should imitate Christ’s forbearance of Judas’s betrayal, and give good deeds, especially the good of prayer, in return for evil:

> These things are written that we bear not malice towards those who injure us; but rebuke them and weep for them; for the fit subjects of weeping are not they who suffer, but they who do the wrong. The grasping man, the false accuser, and whoso works any other evil thing, do themselves the greatest injury, and us the greatest good, if we do not avenge ourselves.…. Do you see how we are the greatest gainers from the insolence of others? Nothing so delights God, as the not returning evil for evil? But what say I? Not returning evil for evil? Surely we are enjoined to return the opposite, benefits, prayers. Wherefore Christ also repaid him who was about to betray Him with everything opposite. He washed his feet, convicted him secretly, rebuked him sparingly, tended him, allowed him to share His table and His kiss, and not even by these was he made better; nevertheless (Christ) continued doing His own part (*Homily 71 on the Gospel of John*, [http://www.newadvent.org/fathers/240171.htm](http://www.newadvent.org/fathers/240171.htm)).

In the same sense, St. Augustine preached that this passage shows Christ’s humility, and thus teaches the virtue of humility to all the faithful, “We have learned, brethren, humility from the Highest; let us, as humble, do to one another what He, the Highest, did in His humility. Great is the commendation we have here of humility: and brethren do this to one another in turn, even in the visible act itself, when they treat one another with hospitality… (*Tractates on the Gospel of John* 58.4, [http://www.newadvent.org/fathers/1701058.htm](http://www.newadvent.org/fathers/1701058.htm)).
Moreover, this humility has a higher spiritual corollary, in intercessory prayer:

But apart from this moral understanding of the passage, we remember that the way in which we commended to your attention the grandeur of this act of the Lord’s, was that, in washing the feet of disciples who were already washed and clean, the Lord instituted a sign, to the end that, on account of the human feelings that occupy us on earth, however far we may have advanced in our apprehension of righteousness, we might know that we are not exempt from sin; which He thereafter washes away by interceding for us, when we pray the Father, who is in heaven, to forgive us our debts, as we also forgive our debtors…. Can we say that even a brother may cleanse a brother from the contracted stain of wrongdoing? Yea, verily, we know that of this also we were admonished in the profound significance of this work of the Lord’s, that we should confess our faults one to another, and pray for one another, even as Christ also makes intercession for us (Ibid., 58.5).

Certainly, deacons too ought to be such imitators of Christ in forbearance, humility, and intercessory prayer. If they do not, their ministry will suffer. But, this Christ-likeness is characteristic of mature faith, and is therefore the foundation (both in the deacon and in those being served) for the diaconal call to conversion, not, strictly speaking, the call itself.

Deacons, in their ministry of proclaiming the Gospel and pointing to the fullness of Christ’s presence in the Eucharist, should look to additional passages of the Gospel for how, more specifically as deacons and icons of Christ, they “baffle” worldly expectations and call the faithful to a deeper conversion. For example, in each of the synoptic Gospels, Jesus explicitly contrasts the arrogance of worldly leaders with the humility He expects in His own followers:

When the ten heard about this, they were indignant with the two brothers. Jesus called them together and said, “You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their high officials exercise authority over them. Not so with you. Instead, whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wants to be first must be your slave – just as the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.” (Mt 20:24-8).

This commandment of apostolic humility applies especially profoundly to bishops:

As those who lead others to perfection, bishops should be diligent in fostering holiness among their clerics, religious, and laity according to the special vocation of each. They should also be mindful of their obligation to give an example of holiness in charity, humility, and simplicity of life….In exercising their office of father and pastor, bishops should stand in the midst of their people as those who serve (Lk 22:26-7). Let them be good shepherds who know their sheep and whose sheep know them (Christus Dominus §§15-16).
Inasmuch as priests share in the apostolic ministry of their bishop, the same Christ-like pattern pertains also to them:

Priests, therefore, must take the lead in seeking the things of Jesus Christ, not the things that are their own. They must work together with the lay faithful, and conduct themselves in their midst after the example of their Master, who among men “came not to be ministered unto, but to minister, and to give his life as redemption for many” (Mt 20:28) (Presbyterorum Ordinis §9).
As we have already noted, deacons likewise share in the apostolic ministry of their bishop, and hence, likewise ought to imitate the same Christ-like pattern of humility. “The primary and most fundamental relationship [of the deacon] must be with Christ, who assumed the condition of a slave for love of the Father and mankind” (Directory for the Ministry and Life of Permanent Deacons §47). Moreover, deacons learn that pattern from the example of the bishop and priests with whom they serve (Ibid., §48).

In St. Matthew’s Gospel, Jesus contrasts this authentic witness to the hypocrisy of the Pharisees. “The teachers of the law and the Pharisees sit in Moses’s seat. So you must obey them, and do everything they tell you. But do not do what they do, for they do not practice what they preach” (Mt 23:2-4). Such hypocrisy fundamentally opposes the effectiveness of apostolic ministry. Particularly for deacons, who are commanded in the ordination rite to “believe what you read [in the Gospels], preach what you believe, practice what you preach,” it is a substantial contradiction. Not only does it fail to baffle the worldly, it scandalizes the faithful. “Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You travel over land and sea to win a single convert, and when he becomes one, you make him twice as much a son of hell as you are” (Mt 23:15). Failure of consistency and authenticity in the apostolic ministry is not service, but a disservice.

But consistent and committed practice of humility in the apostolic ministry opens the divine gifts of ordination. The Apostles demonstrated this inviting sincerity at Pentecost, when they submitted to the impetus of the Holy Spirit and preached in tongues. Such an example did baffle many, who preferred to think the Apostles drunk than inspired (Acts 2:13). But the example and great profession by St. Peter on this occasion (Acts 2:14-36) won many converts for Christ. “When the people heard this, they were cut to the heart, and said to Peter and the other apostles, ‘Brothers, what shall we do?’ Peter replied, ‘Repent and be baptized.’ Those who accepted his message were baptized, and about three thousand were added to their number that day.” (Acts 2:37-8, 41).

The same pattern is shown by St. Stephen before the Sanhedrin. Inspired with divine power in the same way (Acts 6:8), St. Stephen was proclaiming the Gospel as a deacon in Jerusalem. “Opposition arose, however, from the members of the Synagogue of the Freedmen… These men began to argue with Stephen, but they could not stand up to his wisdom or the Spirit by whom he spoke. Then they secretly persuaded some men to say, ‘We have heard Stephen speak words of blasphemy against Moses and against God.’” (Acts 6:9-11). Stephen’s preaching and example baffled these men, just as Peter’s had before.

Taken before the Jewish court, the Sanhedrin, St. Stephen likewise gave a great profession of faith (Acts 7:2-53). At its conclusion, he condemned hypocrisy in very much the same terms Christ had already used. Like the Roman persecutors of St. Lawrence, the Sanhedrin responded to the witness of Stephen with violence, and he was taken away and stoned to death. His “profession of blood” later opened the door to the conversion of St. Paul (Acts 7:58).

While having the same fundamental meaning as the footwashing, these two passages are far more specific, even definitive, for the manner of following Christ’s demanding example of humility within the apostolic ministry in general (St. Peter’s profession), and for the diaconal participation in the apostolic ministry (St. Stephen’s profession and martyrdom). Both examples are explicitly imitations of Christ pouring Himself out for others (see Phil. 2:6-11). Both demonstrate the fundamental place in the ministry of proclaiming
the Gospel, in both words and deeds. Both baffle or challenge the hearers’ false convictions about God and about reality. Both lead to conversion for others, even though not all the hearers accept the Gospel.

Pope Benedict, in the recent, post-synodal exhortation on the Word of God, *Verbum Domini*, strongly emphasized the same connection between authentic witness and fulfilling the latent hunger for what Christ alone offers:

What the Church proclaims to the world is the *Logos of Hope* (cf. 1 Pet 3:15); in order to be able to live fully each moment, men and women need “the great hope” which is “the God who possesses a human face and who ‘has loved us to the end’ (Jn 13:1).” This is why the Church is missionary by her very nature. We cannot keep to ourselves the words of eternal life given to us in our encounter with Jesus Christ: they are meant for everyone, for every man and woman. Everyone today, whether he or she knows it or not, needs this message (*Verbum Domini* §91).

In the restored diaconal ministry, what is most needed is just this proclaiming of the “Logos of Hope.” Like St. Lawrence and St. Stephen, deacons must be willing to “empty themselves” in communion with the apostolic ministry of their bishop, willing to preach an authentic witness to hope by their ordinary daily actions, willing thus to imitate deeply the example of Christ’s own humble obedience. The authenticity of such deacons calls loudly to conversion, just as it always has:

The *Didascalia Apostolorum* recommends to the deacons of the first century: “As our Savior and Master said in the Gospel, ‘let he who wishes to be great among you, make himself your servant, in the same way as the Son of Man came not to be served, but to serve and give his life as a ransom for many,’ you deacons must do the same, even if that means giving your life for your brothers and sisters, because of the service which you are bound to fulfill.” This invitation is most appropriate also for those who are called today to the diaconate, and urges them to prepare themselves with great dedication for their future ministry (*Basic Norms* §89; citing *Didascalia Apostolorum* 3.3).

Commenting on this same quotation, Monsignor Buelt has written, “[T]he church’s service to the poor is the sign of the credibility of the Gospel she proclaims…. By feeding the poor with the Word of God and the Bread of Life, as well as with the bread of their physical sustenance, the deacon bears witness that Christ himself is serving the least of his brothers and sisters” (Edward Buelt, *A New Friendship: The Spirituality and Ministry of the Deacon*, 177).

The deacon’s conformity to Christ the Servant is conformity to His “learning obedience through what He suffered” (Heb 5:8). Deacons may cultivate this conformity, not merely through the humility of the footwashing, but more specifically through participating in the apostolic paradigm of life-giving service, and the complete avoidance of hypocrisy, its antithesis. Deacons should also consciously imitate such examples as St. Stephen and St. Lawrence, whose apostolic unity and zeal gave them great power in professing the faith in word and deed. In this characteristic way, the deacon’s sincere, authentic, self-emptying witness invites a deeper reception of Christ’s love, mercy, and hope.
The space is dark. The single flame of the Paschal Candle is the only light. The light passes from person to person as each receives the light of Christ. “Thanks be to God,” they reply.
“They” are anywhere from three to six years old, and they gather in a room specifically prepared as their prayer space, the atrium. Contrary to what many might expect of this age group, they are still and quiet throughout the ritual. They are careful with the candles, having practiced using delicate objects for many months. Eventually they sing, “Alleluia,” a word they put away many weeks ago. Their joy at the return of this special word is clear.

These children are learning the ways of the Church through the Catechesis of the Good Shepherd. They are exploring the connection between Scripture and liturgy. They are learning the ways God has acted in history. They are becoming part of the sheepfold, so that there may someday be one fold and one shepherd.

Catechesis of the Good Shepherd: History and Philosophy

The Catechesis of the Good Shepherd began in Rome sixty years ago with two women: Sofia Cavalletti and Gianna Gobbi. The two women differed in background. Cavalletti was a Biblical scholar, while Gobbi was an educator who studied under Maria Montessori. But each brought the gift of her previous experiences to the work of “listening to God with children.” Cavalletti’s contribution included the in depth knowledge of that which is essential in Christian faith, while Gobbi brought the insights of Maria Montessori’s educational philosophy and the tools through which she catechized the children in her care. In particular, the women incorporated two Montessori insights that cannot be separated from their pedagogical strategy. Montessori argued that the child “has its own difficult task to perform, that of producing a man” (Maria Montessori, *The Secret of Childhood*, 193). Everything the child does is directed toward this goal. The goal of catechesis—the cultivation of real faith for the present and the future—is best achieved when faith formation is incorporated into the natural process of growth and transformation that occurs in the life of the child. This strategy of “the whole message for the whole child” (Patricia Coulter, “Introduction”, *The Good Shepherd and the Child: A Joyful Journey*, 3) prevents a fragmentation of faith from the other aspects of one’s life and includes taking advantage of what Montessori called “sensitive periods,” times during which a child is developmentally primed for the acquisition of particular skills or knowledge.
Cavalletti and Gobbi also incorporated Montessori’s insight about the differing models of effort for adults and children. Adults operate, Montessori argued, on a principle of minimum effort. Children show no concern for the amount of effort expended, seeking mastery instead. A conflict then occurs. The adult seeks to substitute his or her efficient actions for the slower paced, complex action of the child, but in so doing deprives the child of the joy of mastering a skill by him or herself. Consider, for example, the preschooler putting on his or her shoes. The child is content to take the time needed to perform the action correctly. It is the adult who seeks to swoop in and put the shoes on for the child in the name of efficiency or punctuality. On the one hand, this is logical. Events begin at particular times, it is rude to keep someone waiting, and the child clearly has not yet mastered the skill. It does not appear harmful to step in. Montessori argues, however, that the act of substituting the efficient action for the awkward one deprives the child of justly earned confidence in the mastery of a skill and joy in the process of discovery.

This joy is, we would argue, essential in the religious education of children. Without it, the Christian message, which we rightly call the Good News, is reduced to a dry, wonderless understanding of Christianity. The focus of the Catechesis of the Good Shepherd is “the whole message for the whole child.” This means that all the different aspects of the child must be addressed in a catechetical setting in order to facilitate the child’s journey with God. This journey must not be only an intellectual one. In an atrium, there are no magazine collages, word searches, or quizzes. Instead, carefully prepared and tested materials are presented to the children; the children then use the materials in order to reflect on the teachings presented. Very few and specific words are chosen as part of the presentation to leave the bulk of the mystery for the child’s own discovery. When reading from Scripture, care is taken not to deviate from the text unless it will enhance, rather than obscure, the child’s understanding. The catechist is to use “many ‘question marks’” and “few periods” so as to “invite the participation and response of the children” (Sofía Cavaletti and Patricia Coulter, “Presenting the Good Shepherd to Children”, The Good Shepherd and the Child, 47). This pedagogical style enables the catechist to present difficult concepts without the dangers of oversimplifying the mystery or overwhelming the child. In addition, it follows in the footsteps of Christ the Teacher who didn’t say, “I am the Good Shepherd; here’s what that means,” or, “The Kingdom of God is like a mustard seed, and now let me elaborate on that a little bit.” Jesus resisted simple explanations of complex realities. He left room for meditation upon mysteries. He realized that God is so wholly Other that we, who are not both human and divine, can only know God through analogy. He used rich imagery to reveal what is concealed.
Catechesis of the Good Shepherd as Medicine for Moralistic Therapeutic Deism

The Catechesis of the Good Shepherd also resists the reduction of religion to morality. This resistance is particularly important in light of the challenge posed to the contemporary Church by Moralistic Therapeutic Deism. Moralistic Therapeutic Deism reduces Christianity to an enterprise that helps one to do the right thing, get through difficult times, and be a good person. It acknowledges the existence of God, but does not perceive this fact as being terribly important.

By the term “Moralistic Therapeutic Deism,” we are drawing on the work of Christian Smith and his collaborators on the National Study on Youth and Religion. Smith asserts that although most of the people he has interviewed through this longitudinal study would identify themselves as members of various diverse religious traditions, in fact the majority of them ascribe to a few common beliefs:

- God created the world and watches over us;
- God wants us to be good, nice and fair;
- The goal of life is to be happy;
- God’s presence in one’s life is mostly for emergencies;
- Good people go to heaven when they die (Christian Smith with Melissa Lundquist Denton, Soul Searching, 162-63).
While some elements of this belief system resemble some tenets of the Christian faith, they are not sufficient in themselves. Furthermore, some elements, for example, that the goal of life is to be happy, are actually contrary. This belief system lacks any kind of personal and intimate relationship with God and any sense that God has a specific, individual plan for one’s life in the context of the community.

Interestingly, Cavaletti was aware of this challenge to authentic Christian faith long before Moralistic Therapeutic Deism became a buzz phrase. One reason that she focused so extensively on the spirituality of young children, despite her background as a Biblical scholar, was that she recognized the danger that religion would become nothing more than morality. Because children develop their moral sense during the period from age six to nine (Cavalletti would call this the sensitive period for moral development) she worried that failure to begin a child’s religious education before that time would result in reducing faith to morality. Indeed, her fears align with the image of the Church that popular American culture seems to have embraced: a purely human institution obsessed with regulating to the minutest detail the behavior of its members. Of course it is essential to instruct our young people in the ethical implications of Christian faith. But this cannot be the starting point of our reflection, lest religion become about us rather than about God. As an alternative, Cavaletti constructed a strategy of religious formation that begins with love. The intimate relationship that is cultivated between God and the child is just the opposite of Moralistic Therapeutic Deism. Moral behavior then naturally unfolds from this relationship. The Catechesis of the Good Shepherd explicitly emphasizes the affective element in Christian faith and consciously prepares the child for full and active participation in the life of the Church.

The presentation of the Parable of the Good Shepherd, from whence the Catechesis takes its name, illustrates these points. In this presentation, the catechist begins by proclaiming the passage from John 10 in which Jesus offers the image of the Good Shepherd. A material is then introduced to aid the child in meditation on this text. The catechist invites the child to ponder the meaning of these words through carefully chosen questions and especially to consider “who are these sheep?” whom the Shepherd calls by name. The child easily appreciates that the Shepherd loves the sheep deeply, but only over time does the child discover that the sheep are people, and ultimately that one of them is “me.” When the child comes to the realization that the Good Shepherd calls her or his own name, it is an appropriation of a personal relationship in which God is intimately present for the child.

After the text is presented in the words of the Scriptures and a material is introduced to aid in the child’s reflection, carefully phrased questions are asked of the children. “Do you think that Jesus was talking about real sheep?” The catechist serves as a guide through the questions. Maria Montessori instructed her teachers to “follow the child,” but a common mantra of Montessorians, often attributed to Maria herself is that “it does the child no favors to follow him off of a cliff.” Therefore, if the children believe that Jesus was talking about real sheep, which they sometimes do, the catechist says, “I am not so sure.” He or she does not strip the child of the joy of discovering the true identity of the sheep by saying, “No, you’re wrong. We are the sheep.” Instead the catechist waits, acting as a matchmaker between God and the child. Eventually the realization comes that the one who is loved so tenderly by the Shepherd is the child herself. Often the catechist can see on a child’s face when he or she reaches that conclusion, but sometimes it is not clear until someone—
sometimes in a whisper—articulates their discovery. The children’s joy is apparent. If they have an art response, which they commonly do, it is common for a child to respond to the parable using the color yellow. In children’s artwork, yellow often represents joy. Joy is a frequent response to what occurs in the atrium. Joy is the proper response to the lived experience of God’s love. Without joy, one comes dangerously close to Moralistic Therapeutic Deism even while asserting one’s faith in the God of Jesus Christ.

Cavaletti engages in a kind of enculturation, tailoring the message to the developmental needs of her audience. She therefore omits certain elements of the text, but only very few. She believes “two images at the same time would be overwhelming for children” (Cavaletti and Coulter, 46) and therefore leaves out the image of the gate. Similarly, she omits the verses that refer to the hired hand and the wolf when speaking to young children believing them to be developmentally inappropriate to children ages three to six.

When meditating on the image of the found sheep, an adult readily identifies a moral message relating to sin and conversion. Such a message is not developmentally appropriate for the child between ages three and six, however, since the period during which they are sensitive to moral development does not occur until the child is slightly older, between the age of six and nine. Instead of a moral message, the relationship between the Shepherd and the sheep is the perspective from which Cavaletti frames the telling of the parable in this first level of CGS. One might be tempted to see this as eliminating a key theme from the teaching of Jesus, but that is simply not the case. Because the parable is told to the child in its entirety, the child is receiving the whole message. The difference is the emphasis, which is placed on that which is most likely to resonate with the child, not unlike what occurs in a well-written homily.

When the child does reach what the Church has historically named the “age of reason,” a new passage of Scripture begins to resonate for the child: the True Vine. In John 15, the word “remain” occurs eleven times in the first ten verses. This frequency does not escape the notice of the child. What does it mean to “bear fruit,” to be “pruned,” to “remain”? Remaining within the vine makes real and specific claims on life and behavior. In the context of Catechesis of the Good Shepherd, necessary moral choices are not a product of blind obedience to rules, but rather flow out of the relationship between Christ, the True Vine, and the child, the branch.

In reducing moral behavior to being good, fair and nice, without much further explication, Moralistic Therapeutic Deism values a kind of benign unobtrusiveness. As long as I don’t offend anyone else, I have done my moral duty. The radical obedience of Christ that led him to death on the cross is hardly benign unobtrusiveness, and yet it brought about life that is stronger than death.

In order to make moral choices, the child must be able to appreciate both the motivations and the consequences of her actions. Sofia Cavaletti observed that there is a link between historical consciousness (living in time: past, present and future) and responsibility for moral choices. Anyone who has driven on a car trip with a four year old knows that this child exists primarily in the present and is not comforted by the fact that “we’ll be there in five minutes.” Later on that child develops the ability to appreciate five minutes in relationship to other lengths of time. Around the age of six, the Catechesis of the Good Shepherd begins to attend to this historical consciousness in an intentional and specific way.
The foundational presentation in this regard is entitled “The Unity and Vastness of the Kingdom of God.” It is also affectionately called “The Fettuccia,” the Italian word for “ribbon.” This presentation begins with the words “Since the beginning of time, a plan has existed in the mind of God…” A ribbon fifty meters long is unrolled as the gifts of creation are recalled: the universe, the sun and its planets, water and land, vegetation, animals and the gift of one another and the gift of the person of Jesus Christ. The length of the ribbon is proportional to the time that evolutionary scientists propose is the length of time since the Big Bang. Children have the opportunity to ponder the sheer quantity of time, how recently Christ has come, as compared to the rest of history and to ask the question “Who has prepared all of this for us?”

By presenting history as a single ribbon, the Catechesis of the Good Shepherd embraces what St. Augustine called “the golden thread” of history (Augustine, *De catechizandis rudibus* 6.6; also, Cavaletti, *Religious Potential of the Child: Six to Twelve Years Old*, 45; *History’s Golden Thread*, 15). God has a single plan that has unfolded over time even in the midst of sin and suffering. Children naturally begin to consider how they fit into this plan of God. The Catechesis of the Good Shepherd offers the image of a blank page of history, yet to be written and invites the child to consider what she will write on that page. The child has the opportunity to cooperate with and be a part of this one plan of God. This is education to vocation in the fullest sense. Moralistic Therapeutic Deism lacks an awareness of God’s real, specific and personal plan for each person; this attentiveness to history deepens and shapes the child’s appreciation of how the Shepherd calls her by name to follow Him in real, specific and personal ways.

This reality has roots in the experiences of the youngest children. In the atrium, the children are told, everything we do is a prayer. We pray when we work with a material, when we trace words from the Scripture, when we arrange flowers, when we sit quietly by the model of the altar. This prepares children to see their whole lives as prayer. As catechists, we want to make it possible for others to become ever more aware of the presence and action of God in their lives. To see even mundane actions as carrying within them the germ of a deeper relationship with God provides an opportunity for this to occur, for faith to become a lens (or even the lens) through which the child sees the world. It becomes possible for the child to see his or her whole life as a gift from God that is then offered to God: the universal call to holiness.
The “Fettuccia” does not end with the present. It includes a portion of white ribbon that serves as the end of the one ribbon, but it is not yet connected. This white portion represents the Parousia, the time yet to come when God will be “all in all” (1 Cor. 15:28). This history, this one plan of God is always moving forward to what Cavaletti calls “Cosmic Communion,” (Religious Potential of the Child, 43; also, Sofia Cavaletti, Living Liturgy, 18) when God will bring his people and all creation into God’s full presence. Moralistic Therapeutic Deism lacks a sense of hope: although heaven is a given for those who are good people, it does not speak of what that heaven will be like, whether anyone would want to be there and what that means for the present. Catechesis of the Good Shepherd aids the child in recognizing salvation history as a history that has a conclusion, something worthy of hope and something united with our individual personal histories.

We have seen, therefore, that the Catechesis of the Good Shepherd can be a powerful agent for bringing the Good News to children in a developmentally appropriate way. It can also be a means to evangelize the whole family. The work of the child and the insights the child has through his work provide an avenue for the child to evangelize the parent. This is especially the case in the atrium of the youngest children because Catechesis of the Good Shepherd is so specifically targeted to their developmental needs. By focusing on the relationship of the sheep and Shepherd during a period when the children are particularly sensitive to relationship, the personal dimension of the Christian message is spread. In
emphasizing that the child is called by name, the child learns that the Good News is the Good News for me. The natural response is to share what has been received. That we are first loved by God and that we are only able to love in response would not be developmentally appropriate if presented to children in that way, but in using the very words of the Scriptures the truth becomes apparent, even to the very young child: he calls us by name! We know his voice! We would not follow a stranger! The catechist has given language to a lived reality. The child has received the Good News and is able to hand on what he or she has received.

Catechesis of the Good Shepherd and the Evangelization of Parish Life

In fact, curiosity about what is learned in the atrium can spur one to become more interested in the life of the Church even when one is from another Christian tradition. A friend raised in a mainline Protestant church witnessed the life of the atrium through her children, who were being raised Catholic, and eventually decided to assist her children’s catechist in the atrium. As a result of what she witnessed there, she developed a much more positive view of the Church and later became an inquirer in RCIA. Where previously she had seen the Church as rigid and wonder-less, she came to find it full of joy. And she came to have an answer for her oldest child, who had asked her, “Why do I need to learn all of this if you don’t believe that it’s true?”

There are many aspects of Catechesis of the Good Shepherd that are capable of enriching parish life and making it a place of wonder, but none is more pressing than the way in which this pedagogy makes what happens during the liturgy relevant to those who are participating. The Catechesis of the Good Shepherd gives the child what is real, vital, and essential. It brings together Scripture and liturgy. It articulates the meaning of liturgical gestures. It offers a new lens through which to see the symbols of our tradition, a lens that holds the potential for revitalization.

It takes just a few seconds for the priest to lower his outstretched hands over the gifts, but when a child sees this gesture, he is filled with wonder. The real Holy Spirit is coming on the gifts and making them holy! Karl Rahner might be right about adults, that functionally the doctrine of the Trinity makes very little difference to any of us (Karl Rahner, *The Trinity,*)
But not when it comes to children catechized in the atrium. It’s true that they sometimes mix up the persons of the Trinity and sometimes lack vocabulary to describe what they are experiencing, but when they see the priest lower his hands over the gifts, they know that the Holy Spirit is making those gifts holy by its very presence. How humbling, that something that means so little to so many can be such a source of wonder for the child. The child learns that the appropriate response is to offer the gifts back to God in thanks for what we have received. The child will later learn that this is true in life as in liturgy, and it will enable a deeper sense of vocation. As the child shares the gifts he or she has received, the entire community of believers will be enriched.

Another way in which the life of the atrium can transform the life of the parish is through its explication of the symbols of baptism. When baptisms occur during Mass, some adults might be resentful that their “obligation” will take that much longer to fulfill, but the child catechized in the atrium has learned that baptism is an abundance of gifts. The child watches for the water, the light, the oil, and the white garment, eager to see the newly baptized person receive these gifts in much the same way that children crowd around at a birthday party. At St. Joseph parish in South Bend, IN, the community sings, “Blessed be God,” after each of the gifts is received. The children join in the singing, knowing in a special way that this is the most appropriate response to a God who heaps gift after gift after gift upon us out of pure love. We respond by rejoicing.

In the atrium, radical hospitality is exercised. The adult prepares the space and the time in such a way that it is inviting and accessible to the child. Furniture is child-sized; artwork is hung at the eye-level of the child. Words are chosen according to developmental appropriateness. Ultimately, the child decides how to use her or his time (within a clear set of parameters). This approach respects the child as subject and as fully a person before God and others. Conversely, Todd Whitmore has observed that in the market-shaped world, a child is a commodity, a consumer or a burden (Todd David Whitmore with Tobias Winright, “Children: An Undeveloped Theme in Catholic Teaching”, The Challenge of Global Stewardship: Roman Catholic Responses, 161-85). Catechesis of the Good Shepherd serves as a corrective to this deficient anthropology. Respecting the personhood of the child does not always come easily, but the Gospel compels us to do so.

When a parish is open to the influence of Catechesis of the Good Shepherd, the radical hospitality that is practiced can transform the larger community. At St. Teresa of Avila in Chicago, Catechesis of the Good Shepherd became known as a community that welcomed all children including those for whom a traditional schooling model catechesis didn’t seem to work. When a family whose son had Down’s Syndrome became a part of that community, this led the parish to look to ways to be more open and inclusive to all people with developmental disabilities. A Special Religious Development (SPRED) Center was established and annual masses with specific adaptations for people with developmental disabilities were implemented. The practice of the Catechesis of the Good Shepherd led this community to look at who was missing from the community and to ask the question “how must we welcome the Other?”
The prevalence of Moralistic Therapeutic Deism poses particular challenges to the cultivation of authentic Christian faith. Catechesis of the Good Shepherd is a means to inspire authentic faith in the child and has the potential to inspire a growing faith in the adults who care for that child and the community that receives that child. By attending to the particular developmental needs of the child, the Catechesis of the Good Shepherd supports the child as child. It invites the child to see her life as vocation in the context of the plan of God for all creation. It enables the child to make real and concrete moral choices as a means to embody that vocation. It roots these realities in the real and intimate relationship between the child and the Shepherd who calls her by name.
THE FLOW OF GRACE

BY LEONARD DELORENZO

Sacred Heart Statue and Basilica of the Sacred Heart at Night
As a single ring goes out from the bell tower into a warm, fading summer night, a young man—no older than 16—shifts ever so slightly in his seat. Outside, the palette of simmering pastels swirl sleepily in the western sky, as the daylight of this Tuesday in mid-July recedes over the horizon to draw strength for another day. Inside, this young man looks up from the middle of the fourth-to-last pew in Notre Dame’s Basilica of the Sacred Heart to see the people to his left rising. Hesitantly, he rises, too, and steps somewhat clumsily over the lowered kneelers toward the outer aisle of the nave. At the end of the pew, a college student—perhaps four years his elder—briefly and gingerly places her hand on the young man’s shoulder while he turns right to face the sanctuary. He is surrounded in front and behind by other young people his age, all of whom seem to move with an air of uncertainty not unlike his own. To his left are the many-colored stained glass images of saints who walked this way in days past, the speckles of daylight’s vestiges now dancing in their figures. Up above, layers of angels, stretched out as shapely instruments of praise, seem to float amidst the deep, celestial blue of a ceiling purposefully punctuated with a crisp array of stars. This young man is enveloped in an atmosphere that beckons him forward, as if onto a path prepared just for him. And though the stream of motion seems to go the way he begins to walk, his steps are his own.

Where is he going?
Where has he been?
Where he has been

Some months earlier, he received an invitation—likely from his parish priest, or youth minister, or campus minister, or even from a friend—to travel to the University of Notre Dame for a weeklong summer conference. He was told that Notre Dame Vision was “sort of like a retreat program, where college students help you grow in your faith and discover your gifts.” Not entirely sure how he felt about all that, he did know that several of his buddies were going and he liked Notre Dame football well enough, so he agreed to make the trip from Des Moines to South Bend the week after the Fourth of July.

When he arrived on campus 30 hours ago, he met his small group, which consisted of seven other high school students in his grade from all over the country: Spokane, Washington; Queens, New York; Brownsville, Texas; Santa Ana, California; Fairfield, Connecticut; Toledo, Ohio; and Biloxi, Mississippi. There were also two Notre Dame students who would be the group’s “Mentors-in-Faith” for the week. The patron saints of his group were Catherine of Siena and Juan Diego, whose images were on his and his group members’ nametags, as well as on three-foot poster boards his Mentors held in their hands.

After dinner and some icebreakers, he found himself in an auditorium with more than 360 high school students and 70 college Mentors. Together, they heard about “God’s Call for Us” and were invited to enter into this week—and their whole lives even—by bringing everything together, all parts of themselves, and asking Christ to be present in the midst of what might seem like a storm: the storm of a reintegrating life. He went to bed with the names from the Litany of Saints still echoing in his ears, the last words spoken on a long day of travel and orientation.

When he awoke this morning, he rejoined the group for morning prayer. In the first session of the day, he heard that every saint reveals how a specific, ordinary life can become holy because Jesus himself drew near and walked with them (Luke 24:15). Each saint is a witness to the truth that this particular life and that particular life were acceptable to God, whom the saints themselves accepted as their own portion (Psalm 119:57). With his group members, he shared what was going on in his life, listened to what was going on in theirs, and prayed—perhaps only half-heartedly—that the Lord Jesus would “draw near to us, now and always.” He learned that this is the basis of the “Call to Discipleship.”

Just a few hours before finding himself in the Basilica, he and the other 360 teenagers entered into an exploration of the “Call to Conversion.” The first image presented in this session was of an adoring father who cranes his neck towards the horizon in search of his wayward son, and who, when catching sight of his son while he was still a long way off… was filled with compassion, so he ran to his son, embraced him and kissed him (Luke 15:20).

Next he listened to three of the college Mentors share their personal stories of “Grace, Sin, and Conversion,” witnessing to how they, like the saints before them, were struggling to accept the love of God but who all, through no merit of their own, were unmistakably touched at some point by the grace of forgiveness and healing that exceeds their imaginations. These are some of the very same Mentors who guffawed and galloped around the quad during icebreakers the day before, who listened attentively to him and the other high school students in small groups throughout the day, and who intentionally spread themselves out among the hundreds of teenagers similarly clad in summer attire. From them he heard how it is grace, not sin, which reveals who we really are. He heard
one of the Mentors, near the end of her story, declare, “I have cheated, but I am not a cheater.” Another Mentor talked about his liberation from the shame of a pattern of sinfulness that had once disordered his life on a daily basis, while the third narrated her conversion “from dissatisfaction to gratitude.”

With these faith-filled reflections fresh in mind, the young man retreated with the rest of his small group to perform his own examination of conscience. His Mentors shared a prepared guide with him, from which he was prompted to call upon the God who searches me and knows me; who knows my resting and my rising; who discerns my purpose from afar; who created my inmost being; who knit me together in my mother’s womb; who can see if there is any evil way in me and who will lead me along the path to eternal life (Psalm 139). In the quiet of his mind and heart, in the recesses of his soul and through the probing of his yearning spirit, he looked honestly upon himself. He began to claim his own past and personal history.

In the light of a flickering faith, he began to see all that he has been but should not have been, and all that he should have been but was not. He even glimpsed something of who he hopes to be, though he could not quite see how to become that person. He collected these thoughts, wrote them down, and carried them with him as he walked silently over to the Basilica of the Sacred Heart, where he would take his seat in the middle of the fourth-to-last pew in the nave.

Where he is going

Neither the people in front of or behind him can see it, but there is a weight he carries as he steps up the side aisle towards the sanctuary—the weight of falsehood. He carries the stories he told himself about himself that restrict who he is to single regrettable events, to feelings of unworthiness, to seemingly unbreakable habits. Slanted stories that others have told him about himself weigh heavy upon his heart: stories about how he is not good enough, smart enough, talented enough. He remembers himself according to his achievements and his failures, as if who he is were about what he could or could not do—as if he were of the species human doing rather than human being. At one time or another, he has taken these stories as true, though deep down he knew them to be false. He has given himself over to these stories and thus limited the radical profundity of who he most basically is.

The perpetual acceptance of these untrue stories is how Dante described the misery of the Inferno. The breaking out from this centripetal pull into the new life of an undetermined future is how Søren Kierkegaard imagined forgiveness in Works of Love and what Desmond Tutu testified to in No Future Without Forgiveness. Opening up to the grace that moves us out of our delimiting self-defining narratives is how C.S. Lewis separates the pitiable Napoleon Bonaparte from the purgative pilgrim in The Great Divorce, as well as Uncle Andrew from Digory and Polly in The Magician’s Nephew. The choice to believe in a love that is greater than all our attempts to resist it is what permeates the moment in which this young man now abides. It is a moment touching radical freedom.
The steps he is taking are steps out of those suffocating pseudo-narratives. Tonight is not about sin; it is about freedom. This Reconciliation Service is not so much about the past as it is about the future—or, more precisely, it is about claiming a past and allowing it to be opened up into an unlimited future. After all, what is a state of unforgiven sin but a kind of death, a paralysis, a locked cell from which there is no outward movement. To remain in unforgiveness is to be one who only has a past, a past which is interpreted by something else, by someone else, by some narrative about who you are that reduces you to something you have done, some way you have been, some trespass you have committed. To be in need of forgiveness but not to receive it—or, more likely, not to accept it—is to be closed to “what-may-be” because of “what-has-been.” The steps this young man takes now are the steps of one who truly, albeit imperfectly, seeks to reclaim his past as his own and gain a future that is open to new interpretation by passing through the portal of healing, redeeming love.

As he passes the altar and ascends the steps to the apse, the choir in the loft above concludes Bernadette Farrell’s Restless is the Heart and a pregnant silence starts its descent from above. The echoes of the song’s last line are now settling upon the floor:

...all the earth shall remember and return to our God.

Another college Mentor directs the young man forward to the first side chapel, in which he can already see the bronze statue of the Return of the Prodigal Son, who has collapsed into the arms of a father that gazes adoringly upon his long lost love. In the space of these final protracted steps, a new song emerges from a soprano’s voice—a cappella—providing the last words he will hear before settling into the quiet of the confessional:

You are all I am not,
You are all that I am.
Break down these walls,
Take all my brokenness,
Rebuild me to shelter your name...
Moving Toward the Cross,
Notre Dame Vision Rite of Penance

Hope to Bring

The journey from the pew in the back of the Basilica; the journey of the last two days; the journey begun some months ago; the journey of his life to this point: all these journeys converge upon this place. It is quiet. Waiting for him is a man he does not know, wearing a white alb and draped with a purple stole. This is one of the score of Holy Cross priests who have been hearing the confessions of young men and women like this one for nearly two hours tonight. This priest is part of the congregation called to be “men with hope to bring” (The Constitutions of the Congregation of the Holy Cross 8.118). Is he ever more a hope-bearer than right now? Sitting before this young man who has traveled far, this Holy Cross priest embodies the trust of God and His Church to bring the hope of the Gospel even here, where the light of truth illumines the shadowy recesses of the human heart.

For most of his life, this young man’s religious imagination formed around the image of a distant “God,” a figment whom Christian Smith once described as a “Divine Butler” or “Cosmic Therapist” (Soul Searching, 165). This “God” was neither interested, nor invested, nor accessible. He was somewhere out there, out of sight and, for the most part, out of mind. As Simone Weil rightly admitted, “The infinity of space and time separates us from God. How are we to seek for him? How are we to go toward him? … We are incapable of progressing vertically. We cannot take a step towards heaven (“The Love of God and Affliction” in Waiting for God, 79).” This “God” is out there. There was no way for this young man to get to Him.

But in this moment, there emerges the possibility of something different. What if there is a deeper, even more unlikely truth? Perhaps, God is right here. Perhaps this is the occasion for a long-desired heart-to-heart. Perhaps the actuality of this moment—a human encounter: gestures, words, communication—really is the visible sign of an invisible reality. Maybe He is not a distant God after all. Maybe “God crosses the universe and comes to us… [and] over the infinity of space and time, the infinitely more infinite love of God comes to possess us” (Weil 79).

What if God really is the One whose transcendent Love was emptied into our humanity; who accepted all that we are and redeemed us for all we were not; who suffered, died, and was buried; who even descended into hell, which imprisons all those who are locked in false stories, self-deceptions, and prideful rebellions? If this Love entered even into hell, then even in our waywardness—in the extremity of our corruption and self-alienation—we are outflanked, as it were, by the Love of God. We are never outside of His reach to restore [us] to health and heal [our] wounds (Jeremiah 30:17). And no matter how lost or unsure or unworthy he may think himself to be, this young man, too, is firmly within the wings of God’s embrace (Psalm 91:4).
The young man’s presence here makes manifest his choice to risk believing in a Love that is greater than all his attempts to resist it. It is a moment touching radical freedom. As he begins to speak, his freedom becomes real.

What the young man says and how he says it—these things are not known. The weight of sin, the tinges of regret, and the sharpness of shame were all welcome to enter with him here, but they are not bidden passage to leave.

- This confessional is a tomb, where sins are laid to rest and the soul of this burdened one is quickened to new life in Christ.

- This is where contrition—even if imperfect—is at least the seed of a willingness to pierce through the enclosing stories he has told himself about himself, stories based in sins, fears, and falsehoods.

- This is where confession is the beginning of a new story, where history truly does become prelude and the pages of future chapters await verses written in creativity and freedom.

- This is where absolution seals the tomb upon sin, where the God who exceeds his imagination will swallow up death for all time (Isaiah 25:8).

- This, at last, is the place from which penance will begin as the first fledgling steps of that new life, a life lived in response to He who sweetly commands him to rise and do not be afraid (Matthew 17:8), who says that I delight in you (Isaiah 62:4) and who Himself confesses that you are precious in My eyes and glorious, and I love you (Isaiah 43:4).

The tomb is closed and will soon be empty.
What does God do with those sins, the ones left behind in the tomb of this confessional? The marks of the sins remain and are transformed, but the sinning itself, where does it go? Maybe it is like the darkness of a cloistered room that is suddenly illumined when the curtains are swiftly drawn. It would not be enough, though, to imagine the curtains being removed—the roof itself would be raised, the walls whisked away, and the room made completely naked to the resplendent rays of light. What did the light do with the darkness? It seems a silly question when put like that. Where, O death, is your sting (1 Corinthians 15:55)?

For this young man, the light now dawns upon the dark places. And hope is rekindled. And a future is born.

Flow of Grace

He rises now for the second time this night. He looks up to see the path he traveled; he begins his journey back. Slowly, pensively he makes his steps towards the stairs, passing by the Mentor who was the last person he saw before the mysterious silence, and then turns left towards the center aisle. These steps are not of one who trudges but of one who is beginning to stride, for he has the hope (Constitution 8.122).

While he walks up the center aisle, the few remaining young people who had been sitting behind him are now themselves walking down the outer aisle—two stages of the journey home. Those angels drifting in the stars above see this young man moving within the flow of grace, though they know all too well that this dance requires his willful steps.

As he nears the last pews in the nave, three rings go out from the bell tower high above. In the span of two rings, how far has he traveled to meet the God that crossed infinity for him? Across measureless space, he walked back into the deepest, truest story about himself, the story into which he was once plunged and from which he was never really separated: he is Christ’s, the beloved of God. This is the glorious weight he carries now as he turns that last corner into the fourth-to-last pew and begins to slide across the polished wood.

Tomorrow he will join again with these hundreds of high school students and 70 college Mentors to explore his free response to this most basic story about himself. But right now, sitting in the middle of this pew, he rests. He is home.
Augustine’s Homiletic Meteorology

By John C. Cavadini

Editor’s note: All citations from Augustine’s Expositions of the Psalms are from Maria Boulding’s New City Press translation.

Augustine was a fantastic preacher. How do we know that? We get a glimpse of his popularity as a preacher from some of the asides that he addresses to his congregation. At the end of his “exposition” or sermon on Psalm 38, which runs twenty-five pages in English translation and would probably have taken about an hour to preach, Augustine tells his congregation, somewhat bluntly, “Well, brothers and sisters, if I have burdened and wearied you, put up with it, for this sermon has been hard work for me too.” Then he adds, “But in fact you have only yourselves to blame if you feel overworked, because if I felt you were getting bored with what was being said, I would stop immediately” (38.23, III/16, 193). We know that Augustine’s church often rocked with applause and cheers, and sometimes tears. Augustine’s hearers looked forward eagerly to his preaching. At the beginning of a twenty-seven page sermon, he remarks, “Indeed, I see that you are all agog, eager to understand the mysteries of this prophecy. Anything I might say to focus your attention would be superfluous, since the Spirit of God has done that already” (Psalm 103(3).1, III/19, 139; see also 103 (2).1 where he acknowledges that the “violent demands” of the people “drag” the forthcoming homily from him, III/19, 130). There is even some evidence that Augustine’s homilies had an interactive dimension (see the stylized question and answer that appears in some sermons, as I point out in “Simplifying Augustine” in Educating People of Faith: Exploring the History of Jewish and Christian Communities, 63–84). Clearly, Augustine’s homilies were regarded as entertainment.
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But if part of the reason that Augustine was such a well-received preacher is his superb mastery of the art of speaking, providing one of the most popular entertainments in Antiquity, it is not the only reason he succeeded. People enjoyed his preaching because they also felt that they learned something. They learned, for example, about the “mysteries of prophecy” as he put it in the passage above; that is, about the meaning of the Scriptures, all of which could be viewed as prophetic in some way. Augustine often remarks that he expects many of his listeners will already know some of what he has to say, because, as he puts it, they come so regularly to the “school for Scripture,” to church. People like his preaching because, listening to it, they were formed in a method of inquiry which took faith in God’s Word as the starting point and sought an understanding of what had been received in faith. Augustine taught his congregation that faith is itself an opening and an orientation to understanding. As such, faith is never transcended or left behind by understanding, but is rather the name of the orientation that begets understanding and is its sine qua non. Augustine himself was aware of his own position as a seeker, and he often styled himself in his sermons as one seeking understanding together with those to whom he was preaching. In the face of God’s Word, we are all students, and none of us “magister,” even if some of us are farther along in the ongoing quest.

But if preaching can itself be part of the ongoing quest for understanding, a moment in “seeking” and not just the delivery of “understanding” to others who are the seekers, then preaching is not in this understanding simply an art adjacent to or derivative from theology but properly speaking a moment in theology itself. There is no such thing as the relation between “theology” and “preaching,” because preaching is a moment in theology itself.

Augustine did not use the word “theology,” but used different expressions; for example, “doctrina Christiana,” meaning the act of teaching the Word of God, of “treating” or “investigating” the meaning of God’s Word, of “explaining” the Scriptures. Augustine’s work De doctrina Christiana, whose title is almost untranslatable, envisions the process of interpreting and explaining Scripture as having two phases, or “modes,” the first one a “research mode” of “discovering what is to be understood” (modus inveniendi), and the second a “mode of speaking forth that which has been understood” (modus proferendi). “What has been understood” does not exist as a “doctrina,” as teaching, apart from its being “spoken forth,” or proclaimed. It is that which is proclaimed that is “understood.” It is in this sense that Augustine will sometimes say that he learns by writing or by speaking. In any event, even that which is proclaimed is only provisionally understood, open to discussion and critique, so that the preacher does not ever depart from the ranks of the seekers, as already mentioned. I think we could fairly say that for Augustine, the Word of God is not fully interpreted or “treated” until it is proclaimed. (That is why Augustine’s sermons are sometimes called “Tractates” [meaning, “handlings” or “treatments”] or “Expositions” [enarrationes] of Scripture.

To understand more fully why this is true, we have to move into the world of imagery, which, one could say, is the basic medium in which the Fathers thought. They exegeted images even before concepts, and used different instances of the same image in Scripture to develop their arguments. In this case we must move into the realm of meteorology. Consider this interpretation of Psalm 76.20 (III/18, 87) Your thunder echoes as though in a wheel: “Whatever does this mean? How are we to understand it? May God help us!,” Augustine begins. Note that the homily is rhetorically
styled as an inquiry on which everyone, preacher and people, are engaged. He continues:

When we were children and we heard a roll of thunder in the sky, we imagined that a cart was being driven out of a shed, for thunder causes vibrations similar to that made by vehicles. Are we to revert to that childish fancy when we read, \textit{your thunder echoes as though in a wheel}, and understand it to mean that God keeps wagons up there in the clouds, and the clatter we hear is the noise their wheels make? Of course not; that would be puerile, silly and absurd…

…. Even though that could well be what half the congregation is thinking. Augustine continues the inquiry. This is rhetorical styling in a way, because he has an answer, but it’s not “merely rhetorical,” as we might say today, failing to understand the power of rhetoric. The rhetorical styling turns Augustine into an inquirer along with his hearers; he may be the leader of the inquiry, but he is just as much a student in the school of the Word as are his hearers, and the search is undertaken together. The position of the “seeker” is privileged.

What does it mean then, \textit{your thunder echoes as though in a wheel}? That your voice rolls along? But I don’t understand that either. What are we to do? Let us question Idithun himself; perhaps he will explain what he meant by it. I do not understand, Idithun, so I will listen to what you have to say.

Idithun is the “leaper,” the dedicatee of the Psalm. Augustine is suggesting that they read on farther to see if it clarifies the meaning:

\begin{quote}
Your lightening flashed all round the world. Go on: I still do not understand. The world is like a wheel because it lies all round us, so we rightly call it orbicular…or ring-shaped. \textit{So your thunder echoes as though in a wheel, and your lightning flashes all round the world.} Those clouds we heard about rolled around the whole round world; they circled it, thundering and flashing their lightning, and caused turbulence in the deep. They thundered their teaching and coruscated with miracles, for their sound went forth throughout the world, their words to the ends of the earth.
\end{quote}

Earlier, the Psalm had said, \textit{Mighty was the waters’ roar; the clouds sent forth their voice}. The thunder is the voice of these clouds, an image from Is. 5.6, where God says he will instruct the clouds not to rain on his vineyard. Since in Isaiah the vineyard is a figure for the people of Israel, the clouds must be figurative also, and must represent preachers of the Word of God. The thunder and lightening is the mighty preaching of these clouds unto the ends of the earth.

As unlikely as this may at first seem, this is Augustine’s primary and consistent image for the preacher, a cloud. Psalm 88.7 asks, \textit{Who among the clouds shall be reckoned equal to the Lord?} And Augustine comments:

\begin{quote}
Preachers can ask that question in all confidence, because no one among the clouds will be found the Lord’s equal. … \[W\]e understand these clouds to represent the preachers of the truth, brothers and sisters, just as the \textit{heavens} do; they symbolize the prophets and apostles and all who proclaim the word of God” (88[1].7, III/18, 278).
\end{quote}
Again, commenting on Ps. 96, verses 4-5, *His lightening flashed around the earth*, Augustine comments, “How did it flash? In such a way that the world might at last believe. Where does lightning come from? From clouds. But what are God’s clouds? The preachers of the truth” (III/18, 445). He goes on to explain:

When you see a cloud it looks like an obscure, dark shape in the sky, but something is hiding within it. If lightning strikes from the cloud there is a gleam of brightness; from something you despised has leapt something that terrifies you. Our Lord Jesus Christ sent his apostles, his preachers, like clouds. They seemed like ordinary men and they were despised, just as clouds are despised until something that amazes you leaps out from them. The apostles were initially seen as weak people, encumbered with flesh, then as ignorant, uneducated and common; but they bore within them something that could strike like lightning and glow fiercely. Peter stepped forward, a fisherman. He prayed, and a dead person sat up (Acts 9.40). Peter’s human shape was a cloud; the glory of his miracle was a flash of lightening (III/18, 445-46).
If, as a preacher, you don’t quite feel up to raising the dead, Augustine hastens to add, “The same is true of both their words and deeds,” and Augustine goes on to remind his hearers that in fact “The whole Church preaches Christ. *The heavens proclaim his justice* (v. 6)” because all the faithful who try to win for God those who have not yet believed, and who do this out of love, are heavens. All Christians participate in some way in the apostolic vocation of proclaiming the Word, even if that is by enlightening deed and not by words. You may not seem like much to yourself, after all, you are not the Apostle Peter—Augustine is saying, but, like him, you are a cloud; don’t be fooled by the outward appearance, as a believer, you have within you an unsuspected depth of power to enlighten those around you and to make the *mountains*, that is the arrogant and prideful, melt away like wax.

What is that power? It is the power of truth, as Augustine has already pointed out; preachers proclaim the truth. But to put it that way is potentially to miss the power of what Augustine is saying. What is the truth? The truth of God’s greatness, certainly, who has arranged the literal heavens, the literal mountains and clouds which the Psalms never tire of narrating unto the praise of the Creator. Augustine does not deny the literal sense of the texts or the greatness of the Creator that they are meant to hymn. But what does that greatness mean to me? To us? It can seem distant, abstract, as mysterious and terrifying as a clap of thunder. What access do we have to God’s greatness, so that we can receive its true dimensions and respond in praise? We can look at Augustine’s homiletic meteorology a little more closely to find out.

Commenting on Psalm 35:6, *Your mercy is in heaven, O Lord, and your truth reaches even to the clouds,* Augustine says:

This means that the mercy you lavish on your holy ones is a heavenly, not an earthly, mercy; it is eternal, not bounded by time. But how did you proclaim it to the human race? By causing your truth to reach *even to the clouds*. Who could have had any idea of the heavenly mercy of God, unless God had announced it to human beings? How did he announce it? By sending his truth to the clouds. And what are these clouds? The preachers of God’s word (35.8, III/16, 78).

It is God who is speaking through his preachers, and they are like the clouds, pouring down rain upon the earth, in the comparison, pouring down God’s mercy, proclaiming the mercy of God, which is heavenly and eternal and infinite, upon the earth, upon anyone thirsting for it (which is everyone) (III/16, 77-78; note at *Expositions of the Psalms* 62.3, III/17, 236, preachers are those [clouds] filled with the water of the Holy Spirit in order to rain upon those who, in following the Way which is Christ, have come upon a desert). The power of the preacher is to proclaim the greatness of God according to God’s word, which is essentially a record of God’s mercy. One can hear the *Confessions* in the background here. In the prologue, Augustine first asks God a metaphysical rhetorical question, “What are you?” meant to indicate God’s unique greatness; but he quickly turns to another question, as you will recall, namely, “What are you to me?” and it is only by answering that question that God’s greatness can be properly realized. Only by confessing God’s compassion and mercy can one recognize for oneself the greatness of God. Only by proclaiming God’s mercy will preachers be able to communicate a sense of the true greatness of God and engender the praise of God in their listeners (and not, Augustine warns time and again praise of oneself, as though it were one’s own mercy one was “raining”).
The image of the preacher as a cloud “raining” God’s mercy, thundering God’s threats (which, paradoxically, are also a function of God’s mercy) and lightening with astonishing deeds of God’s powerful love – this image corresponds to Augustine’s characteristic image for Scripture itself, namely, the sky. This image is familiar to any reader of the Confessions who has persisted to Book 13 (13.15.16). But the image comes from Psalm 103.2, which says, *He stretched out the sky like a skin (or tent, or parchment, that is, anything made from skin)*. In his first sermon on Psalm 103, Augustine comments that literally this is written to indicate the greatness of God: “You have looked at this vast construction [the sky],” he tells his hearers:

and you reflect on how hard it is for a human being to put up even a small vault or arch [except at Notre Dame], how much effort and trouble he hast to put in, and how long the job takes. The limitations of our minds might therefore have suggested to us that similar strenuous labor was entailed in the works of God; and to rule out such a misunderstanding the psalmist used a symbol of effortless operation which you can grasp (103[1].7, III/19, 114).

But figuratively, since “skin” represents mortality (since the animal whose skin is “stretched out” into a tent or parchment is necessarily dead, and also from the “tunics of skin” with which God clothed Adam and Eve after they sinned, often interpreted symbolically as mortality), the sky is the fabric of preaching which, after the death of the mortal preachers, was preserved as Scripture, stretched out over us as an authority. As Augustine notes, drawing upon 1 Cor. 1.21,

Those who believed were to be saved through the foolishness preaching of, and so God chose mortal creatures, human beings subject to death and destined to die. He employed a mortal tongue and uttered mortal sounds, he employed the ministry of mortal men and made use of mortal instruments, and by this means a sky was made for you, so that in this mortal artifact you might come to know the immortal Word, and by participating in this Word you too might become immortal (103[1].8, III/19, 115).

Behind the sky in Antiquity was believed to be a vast storehouse of water, the “deep,” and in Augustine’s Scriptural meteorology, the waters above Scripture are the heights and depths of God’s love:

The commandment of charity is higher than the skies and higher than all books, for the books are subordinate to it and the tongues of all the saints fight in its service, as does every movement, spiritual or physical, on the part of God’s stewards. Charity is the supereminent way, and we can rightly say that God covers the higher regions of the sky with waters because you will find nothing loftier than charity in the sacred books. (103[1].9, III/19, 118)

Also, the Spirit is imaged as living waters in Jn. 7, and it is the Holy Spirit who pours out the charity of God into our hearts (Rom. 5.5). The waters of God’s love, the Holy Spirit, are what are “above” the sky of Scripture. The next verse of the Psalm, *be makes the clouds his chariot*, indicates that preachers, who send down onto the people the rain of God’s love, make it possible for them to ride up or ascend to an understanding of the Scriptures. And we know from the De doctrina that Scripture teaches nothing but charity or love. The preachers enable the vineyard of the Lord, the church, to bear the fruits of charity by engendering in them an understanding of the Scriptures, which teach only charity, that is, love of God and neighbor.
By this time the astute listener will have noticed that it isn’t only the “clouds” in the “sky,” that represent preaching, but the “sky” itself. This whole celestial arrangement is an apparatus of preaching. God’s revelation is mediated through human preachers, whose deaths “stretch out” like a skin their preaching over all the earth. The reason that the Word of Scripture is not fully interpreted until it is proclaimed is that it is itself preaching. It is essentially proclamation, and the whole delivery system, if it can be put that way, is as organic an arrangement as the rain that comes down from the clouds in the sky. The inspiration of Scripture is God’s inspiration of the apostolic preaching (see 103[1].8, III/19, 116), the proclamation of the love of God, and Scripture is not fully interpreted until that proclamation intent is realized. One could say that Scripture “intends” or is intended to be preached, and it is only in preaching that its meaning is fully revealed.

Nowadays we tend to regard preaching as something almost adventitious to exegesis. Preachers can use the results of the academic exegetes, who seem to have pride of place when it comes to “really” understanding the Scriptures, with all the prestige that goes with it. Preachers must feel lucky to receive not rain but the dribblings from the enterprise of exegesis. If they are clouds, they are the ones who obscure the true, unbiased understanding of the text. Nothing could be more foreign to Augustine’s understanding of the relation between preaching and exegesis.

However, it is also important to note that we latter day clouds do not fulfill the task of interpreting Scripture properly without appropriate study and research. Even if we have been concentrating on the “modus proferendi,” we can’t leave behind the “modus inveniendi.” Augustine spends the prologue of the De doctrina telling us what he thinks of people who imagine they can preach without study, who imagine that they can understand Scripture through the direct inspiration of the Holy Spirit, without bothering with an education. He comments, in his special Augustinian brand of sarcasm:

For those who rejoice in having received a divine gift, and are proud of understanding and commenting on the holy books without the aid of such rules [for interpretation] as I have undertaken to pass on here, and who therefore reckon that what I have wished to write is quite superfluous [always a bad idea when dealing with Augustine]; this is how their objection is to be met: they should recollect that, though they are quite right to rejoice in a splendid gift from God, it was still from human beings that they learned, at the very least, how to read and write (De doctrina, Preface 3).

True, the monk Anthony did not know how to read and write, but even he had to learn Scripture from hearing it read. And even Anthony had to learn language just like everyone else does. Scripture is a “skin,” it is inspired but it is a kind of mortal remains, an artifact as culturally bound as any human artifact is, even if it does contain all the waters of God’s truth. It is a mark of pride, Augustine says, not to want to learn from other people, that is, those who have mastered the liberal arts that enable them to understand things like linguistic convention, the kind of thing that hyssop is, and the kind of thing the literal sky is, and who have been able to press these skills into service in the understanding of Scripture. Scripture itself is part of an economy of revelation mediated through human beings. Augustine drily remarks that Moses actually did speak to God “face to face,” but he still accepted advice from his father-in-law on how to govern such a great people, and his father-in-law was even a foreigner. And the apostle Philip did not send the eunuch in Acts 8 to an angel.
Gian Lorenzo Bernini,
Detail of Saint Augustine,
St. Peter's Throne,
St. Peter's Basilica, 1657-66
for an explanation of the book of Isaiah, but helped him himself. Paul was struck down by a divine voice from heaven, but the voice did not explain the Christian faith to him directly (as it could have) but sent him to a human being to receive the sacraments from him and to join the Church. And the centurion Cornelius, though an angel told him his prayers had been heard, was nevertheless sent to Peter for instruction and baptism.

How, after all,” Augustine asks, “could the saying be true, *For the temple of God, which is what you are, is holy* (1 Cor. 3.17), if God never gave any answers from his human temple, but only thundered out his revelation from the [literal] sky and by means of angels? Then again, charity itself, which binds people together with the knowledge of unity, would have no scope for pouring minds and hearts in together, as it were, and blending them with one another, if human beings were never to learn anything from each other.

Those preachers who claim to understand Scripture by direct inspiration of God, with no help from other human beings, misunderstand the character of revelation. They regard the mediation of human agency and will as accidental, though the incoherence of their position is demonstrated when Augustine wonders rhetorically why they bother to preach at all, instead of simply referring their would-be hearers to the direct inspiration of God. But the mediated character of revelation is not optional; it is part of God’s intention. We get a hint here as to why, namely, that teaching and learning the things of God from each other builds up the community of charity or love, for in such a situation we owe not only God, but each other, a debt of gratitude for the reception of, and the passing on of, the most beautiful things there are in life, namely, faith, hope and love.

But in order to discover more fully why God has willed that revelation be mediated through human agency, we have to go back to the weather station and examine the clouds one more time. Or rather, one very special cloud. In his first exposition of Psalm 88, at verse 7, *Who among the clouds shall be reckoned equal to the Lord?* Augustine explains that the Son of God, Jesus Christ, is a cloud unique among the clouds. He remarks:

> We are called clouds on account of our flesh, and because as clouds we shower down rain we are known as preachers of the truth; but our flesh and his flesh arise differently. We are called children of God, but he is Son of God in a different sense. The cloud of his flesh came from a virgin, and he is Son from eternity, equal to the Father (88[1].7, III/18, 279).

Citing Matthew 16.13-16, Augustine poses and elaborates Jesus’s question rhetorically for his listeners:

> *Who do people say that I am, I, the Son of Man?* Tell me. I am seen, I am closely observed, I walk about among you, and perhaps I am deemed unimportant because you are so used to me. Tell me, then, *Who do people say that I am, I, the Son of Man?* They see a son of man, and therefore they see a cloud. Let them tell me, or rather, you tell me, *who people say I am* (Ibid).
Though as God the Word, he stretches mightily from
end to end and touches everything by his purity and
wisdom (103[1].8, III/19, 115), “he came in flesh to
a world from which he had never been absent in his
divinity,” because the world in its “wisdom” had not
been able to recognize him. The ultimate referent of
the symbol “cloud,” in other words, is the foolishness
of God in the Incarnation. The Incarnate Word
is the Word in a “cloud” of flesh, fully hidden in
that cloud, and yet fully revealed by it. How hidden
was he as a cloud? Augustine points out in another
homily that he was himself the source of Light, the
Sun, and yet he had hidden the light within him so
thoroughly, that is, he had thrown in his lot with
ours so completely, that he needed a lamp to point
him out. John the Baptist saying, Behold, the Lamb of
God Who takes away the sins of the world,
is like an oil
lamp illuminating the Sun (Tractate 2 on the Gospel
of John). The one who is the source of truth was
dependent, in other words, on human testimony
to reveal who he was. The vulnerability of the
Word made flesh could not be put more poignantly,
because we all know, in the end, how reliable human
testimony can be. It can just as easily betray you as
proclaim you, even more easily betray.

But for Augustine it is in the “foolishness” of that
cloud that all the wisdom of God is contained and
revealed. It is precisely in his hiddenness, in his
willingness to become fully what we are and live
under the conditions of fallen life as we do (though
without sin), that all of the Love and Mercy of God is
revealed. In his lifetime, the Lord preached through
the “cloud of his flesh” (28.3, III/15, 294), and this
does not mean simply what he said in words, but
by his whole person, by the whole economy of the
Incarnation. The Word made flesh is the supreme
instance of preaching, and it is because God is hidden
in the cloud of flesh that the preaching is effective, or
better, that there is any revelation at all. God could
have thundered directly from the literal clouds. We
might have been terrified and acquired some notion
of God’s greatness that way, but we would never
suspect the essence or the truth of God’s greatness,
that God is Love. It is the kenosis, the self-emptying,
of the Incarnation that reveals God’s true greatness.
The subsequent economy of preaching is only a
continuation of the original Incarnational economy.
It is itself an embodiment of God’s mercy and love.
That the proclamation of the love of God in Christ is
entrusted to human beings is simply a continuation
of the love and mercy revealed in the Incarnation, a
continuation of the kenosis of the Incarnation. That
Scripture exists as an authentic product of regular old
fallen human culture but is nevertheless just as much
a living Word as it is an artifact of the mortal past, is
itself an indication of the extent and beauty of God’s
mercy and love. It is as high as the sky, and dwarfs
any conception of mercy and love we might dream
up on our own. And it is as seemingly unreachable
as the sky. And yet no, God has put the Scripture and its
interpretation into the hands of other human beings,
the preachers who like clouds rain down from the
sky of God’s love a rain of his mercy. Sometimes this
mercy is received as a call to repentance, and then
it is like thunder. Sometimes this mercy is received
as mighty deeds of love, raising the dead either
physically or spiritually. But it is always received
as rain in the desert, as mercy where there had
seemed none, as love where there had seemed only
a wasteland of petty interests and the ceaseless quest
for prestige (see Conf: 1).
But the fact that this is true is itself the work of God’s mercy. The fact that the preacher is a “cloud” means that the preacher’s human being is a locus of God’s self-emptying, a continuation of the Incarnation in the members of a Body of which Christ is the Head. The reason that preaching is a moment in the exegesis of Scripture, rather than an add-on or an afterthought, is that it carries forward the economy of the self-emptying of the Word, which gives rise to Scripture in the first place. And so preaching continues the embodiment of the Word. That the Word of God is not thundered to us from the literal sky, but mediated to us through the spiritual, zealous, and loving words of the preacher, is itself a continuation of the economy of God’s love; building up the Church in unity, building up the Body, the whole Christ, as members of so glorious a Head. For Augustine, a true interpretation of Scripture is effected not in the first place by disinterested readers of the text, but by preachers who proclaim the love and mercy of God that Scripture itself proclaims, and who, in so doing, thereby build up not themselves, but the Church.
Pastoral ministers, carrying out the work of the new evangelization often speak in generalities about what constitutes a “secular society”. If ministers are to engage in the new evangelization, responding to secularizing trends in ecclesial life, they will need to move toward a more exact diagnosis of what constitutes secularity. Reading Brad S. Gregory’s *The Unintended Reformation* will assist such ministers in this work.

Gregory, an associate professor of early modern European history at the University of Notre Dame, situates the secularization of society (both European and American) within the context of the religious revolution of the Reformation. He begins each chapter with some feature of modern life, then “offers a genealogical explanation of its historical formation with particular attention given to the Reformation era’s transformative and unintended influence” (22). Thus, one comes to see that secularization is a complex process involving our understanding of God’s relationship to the world; the grounding of truth claims in both Scripture and reason alone (and the
subsequent failure of this project); the use of political power relative to religion; the complexities of moral discourse in an era without universal truth claims; the rise of capitalism and its subsequent effect upon human desire; and, the secularization of knowledge in higher education. And through the genealogical approach, the reader begins to perceive how present realities are shaped by and informed by assumptions, practices, and institutions developed in the distant past. To treat the root causes of secularity will thus require attention to the complex intellectual, social, political, and thus religious history that led to the “modern age.”

What makes Gregory’s work so important to pastoral ministers is how he invites readers into the drama of history itself. Historical study shapes our understanding of the present reality, making us capable of responding in a strategic way to the problems that we face. And history is not an inevitable series of events, but the work of strategic actors, many of whom (though well-intentioned) unleashed specific ideas and practices that have been detrimental to the “development” of Western society as whole. Let me cite an example from the text itself, Gregory’s treatment of “consumer culture.” Historically, in cultures influenced by Christianity, avarice was viewed as a sin, not as the basis of economic growth. For the most part, this remained true among Protestants at the time of the Reformation. But, as Gregory notes, the structures of capitalism were forged in the conflict between Catholics, magisterial, and radical Protestants, in conjunction with the rise of the “secular” nation-state. He writes:

Discord about the Bible subverted biblical teachings about human desires and material things. Antagonisms between Christian moral communities liberated market practices from traditional Christian morality and produced a market society. Competing confessional

empires prompted countervailing nationalist assimilations of providence that viewed wealth, power, and prosperity as signs of God’s favor, thus recasting mercantile avarice as politically and religiously sanctioned duty. Doctrinal impassses led to the demographically widespread, cross-confessional acceptance by Christians of practices and values that had been antithetical to Christian teaching since Jesus and Paul. Disruptions born of doctrinal disagreements among Christians launched the legitimation of acquisitiveness and the strange—although now all but naturalized—Western notion that a “standard of living” refers neither to a normative human model nor even to ethical precepts, but to the quantity and quality of one’s material possessions and the wealth that accompanies them. And disagreements about the substantive Christian good unintentionally hastened an acceptance of the goods life as the good life within the formal ethics of rights characteristic of hegemonic, Western states (272-73).

Thus, when the preacher, the catechist, or the liturgist encounters the effects of consumerism in American parishes, it is not enough simply to condemn such practices. They are deeply rooted in the structures, the culture, and the institutions of American life. Even a parish’s explanation of stewardship as sharing the extraordinary gifts that one has received, for example, is consonant with assumptions that led to the development of what Gregory calls the goods life. To abide in a truly Christian understanding of gift, of salvation, of stewardship would necessitate a reformation of human desire through the particularities of Christian doctrine and practice. One cannot go back to a time before capitalism began to shape human desire; but, it is possible to challenge the very assumptions of a society grown forgetful of another way of living.
Gregory’s tome is generative of an array of such insights for the pastoral minister, whether one is examining the history of science and religion, the relationship between the polis and faith, or the contemporary university. As such, *The Unintended Reformation* is a rare work that promotes a learned analysis of culture and of society that might enable a more intelligent and strategic approach to evangelization in parishes and schools alike. It does not dismiss nor perform an ideological polemic against the Reformation, instead holding up a mirror to our assumptions regarding the world. I wholeheartedly commend it to pastors, catechists, directors of evangelization, and those interested in responding to the decline of the religious imagination in the twenty-first century.

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**Baptismal Imagery in Early Christianity: Ritual, Visual, and Theological Dimensions**
Robin M. Jensen

Grand Rapids
Baker Academic, 2012
$24.99

Preachers and catechists frequently seek orienting resources to assist in the subtle art of mystagogical formation. In Robin Jensen’s *Baptismal Imagery in Early Christianity*, one discovers such a source.

Indeed, relative to liturgical studies, there is no shortage of volumes dedicated to baptism in early Christianity. What sets Jensen’s work apart is the delicate interweaving of early Christian art, analysis of ancient ritual...
practice, and mystagogical texts next to one another. The book itself consists of five chapters, each of which treat various theologies of baptism, including baptism as cleansing from sin and sickness (chapter 1); incorporation into a community (chapter 2); the sanctifying and illuminating function of baptism (chapter 3); baptism as dying and rising (chapter 4); and baptism as the new creation (chapter 5).

Jensens’ volume is especially strong when treating the role of specific biblical motifs in Christian art, as related to early Christian rituals of baptism. Biblical typology was undoubtedly influenced, not simply by the example of preachers, but the art that adorned the walls of Christian basilicas and catacombs. Readers of these ancient sermons will benefit from the artistic and ritual context, which may be ignored by those trained in textual analysis alone. Noah’s frequent appearance in early Christian art in the ark, along with the dove, shows the richness of the baptismal imagination among post-apostolic Christians (18-20). Likewise, the dove itself, shown often with a faint blue liquid emerging from its mouth, testifies perhaps to interpretations of baptism as enlightenment by the Holy Spirit (120). There are dozens of such examples throughout Jensens’ text, ones that would serve as seeds for preachers, catechists, and liturgical artists alike.

Further, the rich theological interpretations of baptism might serve as a cultivation of a richer baptismal imagination among all Christians. In the post-conciliar era, among Catholics in particular, the tendency is to treat baptism as primarily a sacrament of dying and rising to new life. Hence, the inclination to design baptismal fonts, shaped either as a womb or tomb. But, this obsession with a Roman theology ignores, for example, the understanding of initiation as a re-entry into paradise. Quoting Jensen, “Thus, spaces for baptism were filled with images that reinforced the symbolism of paradise, perhaps in order to become an actual, physical re-creation of that past and future home. The water of the font becomes the sacred river that flows back to Eden, against the current of the other four rivers, which brings thirst-quenching water…out to the world” (188). Such images for baptism are particularly fecund for developing a robust sense of evangelization. The Christian abides now in the context of a sacramental paradise, oriented toward a redeemed world that is coming into existence. The catechist or preacher invites the newly baptized, and those interested in incorporation into the community, to perceive all life as “…beginning, with a breath of God sweeping over water and the creation of a new morning” (213). Baptism, and the entire Christian life, can become eschatologically oriented. Human life, through baptism, is re-creation.

The preacher and catechist, who works his or her way through Jensen’s text will discover a rich resource for performing a post-baptismal mystagogy in both a parish and university context. The work would also serve as a very fine introduction to early Christian baptism for pastoral ministers. And lastly, all those charged with church architecture, particularly baptisteries or fonts in parishes would benefit from a careful reading of Jensens’ baptismal typologies.
Courses in systematic theology at seminaries and schools of theology and ministry are often tempted to fall into the forgetfulness of foundations. In such classes, undue attention is paid to specialized arguments in the field of systematic theology before students have learned the basics. Further, such courses tend to pass over theologians born before the twentieth century. In what has become known as “postmodernity,” systematic professors are also reticent

to present a comprehensive understanding of Christian faith (a metanarrative), focusing more on a contextual theology that places emphasis upon the “experiential background” of the student above that of the Scriptures and the Tradition. For these students, once they find themselves in their ministerial setting, they leave behind their study of systematics, since it has little to do with their day-to-day work. Or worse, they inflict such arguments upon those seeking an introduction to the beauty of the thought and practice of Christian faith.

Fr. Aidan Nichols’ *Chalice of God: A Systematic Theology in Outline* might serve as an antidote to this approach for teaching systematic theology to pastoral ministers. In the introduction to the work, Fr. Nichols writes, “The objective has been to show how divine revelation emerges in human experience and thought as *coherently epiphanic* in character; that is, as manifesting a superabundant fullness of truth, beauty, and goodness, which exceeds those available by other routes” (xvii). That is, systematic theology is an exploration of revelation, God’s action revealed in time and space, as coherently beautiful. Strictly speaking, Fr. Nichols’ text is not a complete work in systematic theology. Instead, it is an outline of an approach to systematic theology, which takes seriously the intelligibility of revelation. As such, the six chapters of the work are composed of theses that each build upon one another. The reader is thus invited into the very process of thought, of seeking, even of prayer that produced the work. Theology becomes a doxological and sacral meditation, whereby reason is transformed through thoughtful contemplation. The aesthetic, prayerful quality to what is ultimately a sophisticated work is amplified by the Byzantine and Russian iconography that is placed at the beginning of each chapter.

The foundational metaphor of Fr. Nichols’ exercise in systematic theology is also the title of the book, “the chalice of God.” Fr. Nichols employs this metaphor in a two-fold manner. The first is related to the use of philosophy in systematics. According to Fr. Nichols, all systematics must come to terms with philosophy, since systematic theology pertains

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**Chalice of God: A Systematic Theology in Outline**

Aidan Nichols

Collegeville

Liturgical Press, 2012

$18.95
to reason. But, the philosophical approach should be chosen based upon the contours of revelation itself. Fr. Nichols focuses upon a “philosophical principal of order that will exhibit the world as a beautiful receptacle for the gift to creatures of the divine life” (6). The philosophical foundation is not unimportant. For at the heart of the universe is a gift, a reception. Human beings receive a world; they are bestowed a history, an identity, their very personhood. This ontology (study of existence) of gift is taken from Fr. Nichols’ own incorporation of Aquinas. Yet, he also employs a phenomenological approach, “the disciplined attempt to describe and analyse [sic] the immediate data of awareness as they are given to consciousness” (19). Human beings experience the world as cosmos, as history, as form, and as personhood—all aspects of being human, which reveal the gift character of the world. From Fr. Nichols, one is reminded that theology needs philosophy, precisely because philosophical method enables human beings to think intelligently about the world and about human existence.

This ontology assists the theologian in understanding the second and primary use of Fr. Nichols’ metaphor, the chalice of God as an apt description of Christian revelation. For, as Fr. Nichols notes, “the heart of Christian revelation [is]…the outpouring of plenitude on the world (cf. 2.4.3), through the self-emptying of the Holy Trinity in Jesus Christ whereby a reconciling and deifying share in divine life is accorded us” (8). Here, philosophical ontology is taken up and thus fully manifested through the revelation of God. Human beings come to see the giftedness of existence in its truest light through Christian revelation. The remainder of the text pursues this insight through a Christological reading of the Scriptures (chapter three); a treatment of the traditioning of revelation through the Church and her liturgy (chapter four); the mystery of Christ as revealed in the sacraments, the saints, and grace in the moral life (chapter five); and lastly, the Trinitarian context of eschatology (chapter six). Throughout, Fr. Nichols masterfully employs the insights of the ressourcement movement, engaging in a systematic work that thinks with the theological masters of the Church. Ancient and modern sources are used side-by-side, modeling a form of systematic theology that thinks with the whole history of the Church. The purpose of systematic theology is not the advancement of theological research for its own sake. Instead, systematic theology is doxological in structure. Human thought about God is transformed through an intelligent encounter with the theological tradition.

In particular, I would recommend this text to deacon formation programs, students in introduction to systematic theology for pastoral ministers, and all those seeking a thoughtful and spiritually rich approach to the theological analysis of Christian faith. The work, since it is in outline form, might even serve as a rich resource for developing a syllabus for systematic theology courses in seminaries and schools of theology and ministry. Students will come away, not simply with an introduction to themes in systematic theology, but a philosophical foundation often lacking in approaches to systematics today.
One of my favorite aspects of parish ministry has to be the journey that the RCIA brings each year. Maybe this is the case because contrary to what we normally encounter in our society the RCIA presents a unique opportunity to talk to people that are genuinely interested in the Catholic Faith. It is a journey of discovery and communion. Discovery because it gives us an opportunity to share our faith and life journey with one another, and communion because through this process we become a community of people traveling together on the same lifelong road of faith formation.

However, as anyone familiar with this process can tell you, every journey is different. For me one moment particularly stands out among many beautiful ‘RCIA moments’. I was serving at a Catholic Church in Eagle, Colorado (St. Mary’s) as the director of religious education (DRE), and one of my responsibilities was to coordinate the RCIA process. That particular year we had an exceptional group of adults, but there was also one little girl named Maud. Maud was a very sweet girl and it was during her preparation for her first communion that we discovered she had never been baptized. So she became part of our Rite of Christian Initiation for Children (RCIC) process for the year. Now this was a small parish, so she ended up being the only child at our Easter Vigil Celebration. I had talked to her family about the length of the celebration to prepare them for the
'liturgical marathon’, and they were confident that Maud would do very well. She did, and her baptism is one of the most memorable and beautiful ones I have seen. She knelt in the baptismal font, arms stretched out into the air; her head was slightly bowed as she welcomed joyfully the water that Fr. Bob Kinkel poured on her. We really wanted to make a ‘splash’ that year, so by the end of her Baptism she was literally soaked from head to toe, and despite being very wet and probably cold, the only thing on Maud’s face was a big and radiant smile.

But what was truly remarkable happened the following morning when I saw that same beautiful smile at one of our Easter Sunday Masses. I saw Maud and her family during Communion and after Mass I went up to them to say ‘hello’. Knowing how late our Easter Vigil Mass had ended the night before I asked what had compelled them to wake up early for Mass since last night’s celebration had ‘counted’. Maud told me she couldn’t wait to come back, that she loved the Mass and she wanted to come back to receive the Eucharist. The excitement that I saw on her face is normally what I would associate with Christmas morning, and her beautiful faith-filled witness is why this particular moment stands out.

The New Evangelization compels us to renew our sense of witnessing to God our Father, to our relationship with Jesus Christ his Son, and to the presence of the Holy Spirit. Maud’s witness reminded me of what Jesus told his disciples concerning children “it is to such as these that the kingdom of heaven belongs. Truly I tell you, whoever does not receive the kingdom of God as a little child will never enter it” (Mark 10:14-15). At times it seems like this part of the Gospel serves simply as a reminder that we need to be nice to children or Jesus will reprimand us the way he reprimanded his disciples. But there is clearly much more that Jesus is saying to his followers in this ‘catechetical moment’. He is calling his closest friends to receive the kingdom of heaven as little children, with the same joy, wonder, and faith that Maud displayed in her baptism.

It is no secret that children have an incredible capacity to believe what they cannot see. In a way that makes them more capable of seeing what is truly real. In his writing, C.S. Lewis refers to our present world as a ‘shadowland’ a preparation for the reality that will be present in heaven. Through our faith in God, we experience glimpses of the Kingdom here on Earth, but that sense of complete belief and certainty in its true existence is perhaps best seen among children and saints. So Jesus wants us to believe in Him the way they do, to trust in God’s love and protection the way a child has complete faith in her parents. And to allow the Holy Spirit to fill us with grace to carry out the mission entrusted to us. To evangelize we need to believe like children do. Their natural trust in the miraculous is an essential element we need for our mission. Without it, we lose the beauty and attractiveness of our faith, the sense of wonder and awe that is so needed in a world that is increasingly becoming more materialistic and self-centered. That way we can joyfully be true witnesses to what Pope Paul VI compels us: “it is important to proclaim the gospel through wordless witness so as to stir up irresistible questions to those who see how Christians live” (Evangelii Nuntiandi §21). God’s beauty is truly irresistible.