

Homily for January 3, 2017

Blessed John Henry Newman, the 19th century Catholic theologian, who converted from Anglicanism to Catholicism when he was in his 40s liked to speak of the sacramental principle. Stated simply it says:

There is a visible church with sacraments and rites that are the instruments of an invisible world.

In its basic form, the sacramental principle “states that created things are good and are signs of God’s presence and grace.” God became man in Jesus, and the Incarnation changed everything. That’s why the seven sacraments make sense. They are reasonable. They ring true with creation itself.

The Baltimore Catechism’s definition of sacrament is: “A sacrament is an outward sign instituted by Christ to give grace.” The basic assumption here is that creation itself is good. It was created that way by God. And God uses creation to communicate with us.

This week we are reading from First John and from the Gospel of John. Sacramentality is infused throughout this Gospel and Epistle. Two of the most famous verses in John’s Gospel celebrate the sacramental principle.

“The Word was made flesh and dwelt amongst us”

“God so loved the world that he sent his son into the world”.

“Matter really matters to God” this is why sacramental theology is central to how Catholics live their lives.

The Sacraments matter because they keep before us the goal of our lives.

The sacraments matter because they provide the way to reach the goal.

The Goal:

In our first reading St. John affirms that the one who is currently veiled from our site, Jesus Christ, will one day be made visible to us. One day, by and through the grace of God we will see Jesus and upon seeing him we will be like him. This is what is called the beatific vision. This is life’s goal. To one day see Jesus face to face.

In our Gospel St. John the Baptist famously states: “Behold, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!”

Here is the sacramental principle at play. When do we hear these words? At every Mass, before we receive Jesus, the priest repeats the words of John the Baptist: “Behold the Lamb. Behold him who takes away the sins of the world. Blessed are those who are called to the supper of the Lamb.”

Today we see Jesus veiled in the sacramental species of bread and wine. One day we will see him face to face. When this happens, St. John says we “will be like him for we will see him as he is”.

So every time we behold the Lamb of God we reaffirm our ultimate goal. To participate in the beatific vision. To see Jesus as he is.

The Way:

With this goal in mind we are also thankful to know the way to reach this destination. It is the way of holiness. St. John makes it clear to us that because of the hope of the beatific vision, we can know that in the present we are God's children. Such an understanding of who we are and who we are becoming in Christ inspires us to grow in holiness. John puts it this way:

And every one who thus hopes in him purifies himself as he is pure.

He then goes on to develop what he means by this in his precise moral language:

4 Every one who commits sin is guilty of lawlessness; sin is lawlessness. 5 You know that he appeared to take away sins, and in him there is no sin. 6 Any one who abides in him does not sin; anyone who sins has not seen him, nor has he known him.

What John is getting at here is the following. For the person who does not know Jesus there is a propensity to live a life where mortal sin dominates their thoughts and actions. There is no conviction of the lawless nature of sin and therefore no desire to grow in holiness. This person has no concept of the sacramental principle, something John observes when he says: "The reason why the world does not know us is that it did not know him."

Not so for the follower of Jesus Christ. This person takes to heart the day by day need to die to sin and so purify themselves just as Jesus is pure.

It is here that the sacramental principle comes into play. Through our participation in the sacramental life of Church especially the Eucharist, Confession, Marriage and Priesthood we abide in Jesus.

The Eucharist allows us to abide in Jesus by receiving Jesus.

Confession allows us abide in Jesus by actively desiring to put to death mortal and venial sin.

Marriage allows us to abide in Jesus by learning the way of agape love that wills the beloved's good.

Priesthood allows us to abide in Jesus through the charism of ordination, where the priest is here in the person of Jesus.

The sacraments of initiation, Baptism and Confirmation are the means by which we become members of Christ and are then baptised in the Holy Spirit so we can be empowered to lives of purity.

As we begin 2017 let's be thankful for the sacramental principle that affirms our goal, to see Jesus, and the way to that goal, a life of growing purity.