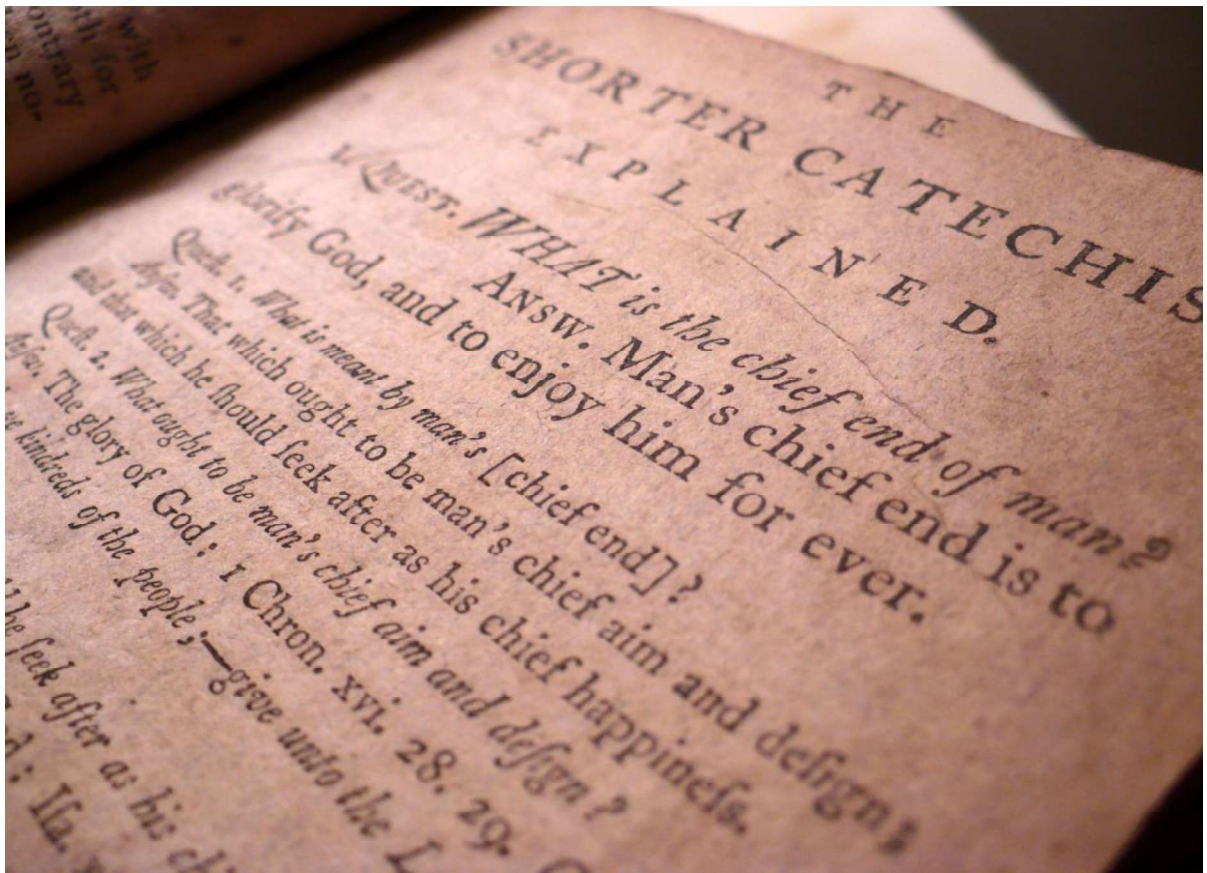


# Basic Catholic Doctrine

Edward L. Shirley, SFO



## Contents

BASIC CATHOLIC DOCTRINE: .....	3
INTRODUCTION .....	3
Elements of Formation: .....	3
SCRIPTURE: THE WORD OF GOD IN HUMAN WORDS .....	4
TRINITY AND CHRISTOLOGY .....	8
THE CHURCH.....	11
LITURGY AND SACRAMENTS .....	14
MARY .....	16
CANON LAW .....	21
CONCLUSION .....	23

### About our Author

Edward L. Shirley is a professor of religious studies at St. Edward's University, where he has taught for 24 years. He has also taught part time at a number of institutions, both in Texas and nationally. He has a doctorate in theology from Fordham University, and specializes in Trinity, Christology, Mariology and Interreligious Dialogue. He possesses the theological *mandatum* from the Diocese of Austin. He has given classes and presentations for numerous dioceses, parishes and Church-affiliated groups across the country.

He has received numerous St. Edward's awards for his teaching, including the 2008-2009 University-wide Teaching Excellence Award.

He is a member of the American Academy of Religion, the Catholic Theological Society of America, and is the past secretary for the Society for Buddhist Christian Studies. He has given a number of presentations at professional conferences, and has published on a variety of subjects, many of them in Secular Franciscan publications.

Ed began meditating when he was a sophomore in college, and has studied and practiced meditation from a variety of Traditions, including Hindu, Buddhist and Sufi. He has been formally initiated into two Hindu forms of meditation, as well as the Sufi Order International. Periodically, he teaches a course at St. Edward's called "Exploring Inner Space."

He has been a professed member of the Secular Franciscan Order since 1980, and as such has served in formation for local, regional and national fraternities. He is currently the chair of the Ecumenical/Interfaith Committee for the Secular Franciscan Order in the U.S. He is married, and has one grown son.

**BASIC CATHOLIC DOCTRINE:**  
**“Study to show yourself approved.” (2 Timothy 2:15)**

## **INTRODUCTION**

Elements of Formation: *A Reflection on the Formation Process*,<sup>1</sup> the “official guide” for Franciscan formation, directs that candidates must be formed on three “levels”: human, Christian and Franciscan. We have to understand both what this does and does not mean. This does not mean that one must be a perfect human before one can become a Christian, and then get that down pat before one enters the Franciscan formation process. Indeed, it is closer to the truth to say that being Franciscan is our way of striving for Christian perfection,<sup>2</sup> and that being Christian is a way of striving toward human wholeness.<sup>3</sup> This process does not end, we believe, until death, when one is fully formed into the likeness of Christ, the “complete human.”

On the other hand, *Elements* wants us to realize that there is a certain “bare minimum” of human and Christian formation that must be present before one can truly enter into the process of becoming Franciscan. We all know (and have probably witnessed) cases of psychologically immature people who are drawn to our fraternities, not because they truly understand the Franciscan path, but because they are “joiners” who look for fulfillment and acceptance in groups: if it weren’t the Franciscans, it would be the charismatic renewal, or the Legion of Mary, or even a local book club. Similarly, we also know people who come to our fraternities horribly unprepared in basic Christian teaching. I am not talking about people who are struggling with their faith (if we aren’t struggling, wrestling with the angel, as it were, we’re probably not “doing it right.”) I am talking about people who come in looking for the last refuge of a Catholicism of the past, or the people who see Francis as the rugged individualist,

---

<sup>1</sup> *Elements of Formation: A Reflection on the Formation Process*, 1995. Lindsborg, KS: Barbo-Carlson Enterprises, Inc., 2005.

<sup>2</sup> “Be perfect as your heavenly Father is perfect.” (Matthew 5: 48) The sense of this passage is probably closer to “be *made* perfect...” In other words, this is a process, not an end product.

<sup>3</sup> “The glory of God is Man [the human person] fully alive.” St. Irenaeus, *Against Heresies*, IV, 20:7.

rejecting all structure and merrily tiptoeing through the tulips. As with most things, the truth often lies between these two extremes.

This is why our formation process is so important: while we should not demand wholeness from our candidates (or we should all resign right now), we must insist on a certain level of human and Christian maturity. One cannot be a healthy Secular Franciscan and hold a childish (not the same as “child-like”) idea of Catholic teachings. And given that being Franciscan is a way of moving toward Christian and human wholeness, it is going to fall to us, the professed, to make certain that we, ourselves, understand the basics of Catholic teaching, and this is going to be especially important for those of us who serve as “Formators” in our fraternities. Our international directives have indicated six basic areas in which Secular Franciscans must be somewhat theologically conversant: Scripture, Trinity and Christology, Ecclesiology (the Church), Liturgy and Sacraments, Mariology and Canon Law.

#### **SCRIPTURE: THE WORD OF GOD IN HUMAN WORDS<sup>4</sup>**

“Ignorance of Scripture is ignorance of Christ.” St. Jerome makes this bold claim in his commentary on the book of the prophet Isaiah. When we read the writings of Francis, we see how steeped he was in Sacred Scripture: it is often impossible to tell where Francis’ words leave off and the Scriptural words begin. He not only knew the Scriptures intellectually, he was immersed in them. Let us hope that the days of Catholics believing they should not read the Bible are long past us (this never was the teaching of the Church, of course; Pope Pius XII even went so far as to offer an indulgence for reading Scripture. Unfortunately, many Catholics, in their religious formation, were told, explicitly or implicitly, that they should use the Bible only to hold family documents.)

---

<sup>4</sup> “For the words of God, expressed in human language, have been made like human discourse, just as the word of the eternal Father, when He took to Himself the flesh of human weakness, was in every way made like men.” Documents of Vatican II: *Dei Verbum*, III, 13.

But *how* do Catholics read the Bible? Like the Ethiopian eunuch in the Book of Acts, we might find ourselves wondering “How can I understand these words unless someone explains them to me?” (Acts 8: 30-31) Catholics are neither secular humanists nor Biblical fundamentalists: Catholics do not believe that the Bible is simply a human record of the thoughts of ancient peoples: they believe the Scripture *are* this, but so much more. At the same time, Catholics do not take the Scriptures literally: *Dei Verbum* acknowledges that to truly discern what God may have been saying in the Scriptures, one must know something of the literary form of the passage as well as the historical context.

This is what is meant by “Scriptural methodology”: to understand any passage, one must understand what type of literature one is reading (e.g., many parts, including the entire Book of Psalms, are songs, poetry, and not to be taken simply at face value). Psalm 91, for example, says that God hides us under his pinions, and under his wings we will find refuge. However, this is not trying to tell us what God is physically like, but it shows us that God’s actions toward us are those of a loving parent, concerned for our safety and well-being. Nor are any of the books “pure history,” as we tend to think of history today: nothing in the Bible is simply “this happened, and then that happened.” These are the reflections of ancient Jews or Christians on their experience of God in their history (it is doubtful that the Egyptians, for example, saw the Exodus event in the same light as the Hebrews.) Thus, we must understand also the historical context of a passage. For example, if one understands what is happening when the Gospel of John was being written, it would be difficult to come away thinking that “according to the Gospel,” Jews as a whole were an evil, conniving people: Jews have suffered much in Christian history because of this misreading.

Perhaps the best place to begin in studying the Bible is its actual physical structure: all Christian Bibles are divided into two primary sections: the Old Testament and the New Testament. This may seem very elemental, but I am continually surprised at Catholics who believe that the Old Testament was written “to teach Catholics” something or the other. The Old Testament is the collection of writings from the Jewish

people before the birth of Christ. It would be incorrect to say, though, that “Jews believe only the Old Testament.” For Jews, this *is* the Bible, period. Christians have adopted these Jewish writings as their own, and as such, it makes up about 2/3 of the Christian Bible.

One of the first things people discover is there is a slight difference between the “Protestant” and “Catholic” Old Testaments. “Catholics have ‘extra’ books.” Or, from a Catholic perspective, “Protestants have ‘fewer’ books.” Interestingly, the Eastern Orthodox (depending on the type of Orthodox) have a couple more books than the Catholic Old Testament. The why of all of this is rather complex, and probably does not need to occupy too much of our time, nor should one make a triumphalistic mountain of this relatively insignificant molehill of a difference. However, it might be helpful for our candidates to realize that this difference is because Jews who lived outside of Palestine, in the ancient Greek world, translated the Scriptures from Hebrew to Greek, and eventually added some more writings. Even at the time of Jesus, these “two lists” existed. Because early Christians mostly spoke Greek, they gravitated toward the Greek translation. Protestants tend to use the Hebrew list, primarily because Martin Luther was trying to get back to the original texts.

The Old Testament consists of subdivisions, or collections of books. The first five books are called the Pentateuch (from the Greek word for “five”) or the Torah (from Hebrew), the Law. These are followed by the Historical Books (stories about the formation and eventual fall of the Kingdom), the Wisdom Literature, and finally the Prophets. The latter, it should be noted, were people who were chosen by God to be God’s “spokespeople” (pro-fessing, speaking for), and not primarily as tellers of the future.

The New Testament consists of 27 books, accepted by all Christians. These consist of the Four Gospels, the Book of Acts, the Epistles (letters) and the Book of Revelation (a very confusing book that was written primarily to give hope to early Christians who were being persecuted, sometimes even to death [“In the end, Jesus

wins, so don't give up."] It is important to remember that the Catholic Church does not view this book as a blueprint for the end of the world.) For Catholics, while all Scripture is divinely inspired, the New Testament has preeminence over the Old, and the four Gospels have preeminence above the rest: this is why we stand when the Gospel is read publicly.

The Catholic Church does not believe that the Bible is meant to teach "pure history," or to predict the future. Nor does it contain "secret messages," and certainly, it is not a science textbook. To maintain any of these is to believe contrary to the teachings of the Church. The truths in Scripture are revealed for one purpose alone: "for the sake of salvation."<sup>5</sup>

That being said, the Sacred Scriptures should not be read *solely* as a text to be studied. It should be that, of course, but it should be read with an even deeper significance: the Bible *is* the Word of God in human words. Christ, being *the* Word (John 1: 1-18), is Really Present in Scripture, in a similar fashion to the way he is Really Present in the Eucharist. This is why, after public readings in the Eucharistic Liturgy, we boldly proclaim, "The Word of the Lord." And the Bible is not simply for public proclamation: Catholics in general, and Secular Franciscans in particular, are to form themselves through a *prayerful* reading of the Scriptures. It is thus that we learn to go "from gospel to life, and from life to gospel."<sup>6</sup> Here, of course, "gospel" refers not simply to the "four Gospels," but to the entire "Good News" of Jesus, to which all of the Scriptures testify.

One way of entering into prayer reflection on Scripture is the process of *Lectio Divina*, "Sacred Reading." This method will be discussed more fully elsewhere, but for now, it will suffice to say that this process involves four components: reading, reflecting, responding and resting in God. Ancient and Medieval Christian writers compared this to a cow chewing its cud: we bite off the Scriptures (read), chew them (reflect, or

---

<sup>5</sup> *Dei Verbum*, III, 11.

<sup>6</sup> *Rule of the Secular Franciscan Order*, Chapter II, section 4.

meditate), “regurgitate” them (respond to God in prayer), and repeat the process until, like the grass for a cow, the passage becomes part of who we are, and we are transformed. The interesting thing about *Lectio Divina* is that the goal was not to read as much Scripture as possible, but to let the little bit we read sink into us until we absorb it. Like Francis, the words of Scripture should become second nature to us, so that it is impossible to tell where our words leave off and Scripture begins. The goal is not to “understand doctrine,” but to hear what God is saying here and now: the next time you read the same passage, it may say something different to you.

## **TRINITY AND CHRISTOLOGY: THE TWO PILLARS OF CATHOLIC DOCTRINE**

It is safe to say that the doctrine of the Trinity, easily the central dogma of Catholic faith, is misunderstood and underappreciated today. German theologian Karl Rahner remarked that if the Church were to change its mind about the Trinity today, most works on Christian spirituality would not have to be changed at all. Not so Franciscan spirituality! Francis was through-and-through a Trinitarian. Francis, of course, was not an academic theologian, but if the Trinity only matters to theologians in universities, it has nothing to do with our lives as Catholics. There is a reason why so many of the encyclicals of Pope John Paul II began with a reflection on the Trinity: it is the basis of every other doctrine.

Unfortunately, when Trinity Sunday comes along, many priests seem to shy away from any real exploration of the doctrine’s relevance in the lives of the people. Often dismissed as “Well, it’s a mystery,” the topic turns sometimes to “love” (which could be a very Trinitarian homily) or, even worse, parish finances.

Again, it is probably good to begin with what the Trinity is *not*: it is not a Divine Committee. The Father, Son and Holy Spirit are not three guys (or even worse, two guys and a bird) sitting around in heaven, plotting the Creation and salvation of the world. That would be tritheism, belief in three gods, and that is contrary to the Catholic faith. Nor is the Trinity merely one God “wearing different hats”: when he creates, we



call him “Father;” when he stops by for a brief visit in ancient Israel, we call him “Son;” and when he lives in our hearts, we call him “Holy Spirit.” That’s an ancient heresy, also. The doctrine of the Trinity is that there is only One God who is, at the same time, what we mean when we say “Father, Son and Spirit.”

So, what does that mean? Well, it all started with the ancient Church continuing to ask itself the question Jesus posed to his apostles: “Who do you say I am?” This begins as a Christological issue: who, exactly, is this Jesus? Is he a human being who brings the Word of God to us, like the prophets of old? Is he “God disguised as a human,” like the ancient Greek gods who would pop down occasionally? No, the Church said: he is absolutely God, as much as the Father, but he is also absolutely human: “like us in all ways but sin.” (Hebrews 4:15) As the Church continued to reflect on this question, one-by-one, the answers that were considered inadequate were left by the wayside, until, at the Council of Chalcedon, in 451, the Church declared that Jesus was the complete union of a full human nature and a full divine nature: he was as human as we, and as divine as the Father. Traditionally, this is known as the “hypostatic union,” the union of two natures in one Person. Why was this important to them? Because for the ancient Fathers, salvation was much more than just “paying for sins.” For them, salvation was the union of God and humanity; therefore the Savior must himself be that union.

If Christ is as fully divine as the Father, what does that mean? As noted before, it does not mean two (or three) gods: that is a violation of monotheism. Nor does it mean Christ was the Father in human form: that, too, is a heresy. The doctrine of the Trinity can be summarized in two words: *dynamic* and *interrelated*. The doctrine of the Trinity says that the Father is ultimately beyond all expression, the Infinite Mystery, which is, ironically, the Source of everything that exists. That Infinite Silence *expressed himself* in and through the Word, which is the expression of the Inexpressible, even to the extent that the Word *is* that same divine nature. St. Augustine theologized that the Holy Spirit is the relationship, the flow of love, from Father to Son, and from Son to Father: thus, there is both distinction (the Father is not the Son or Spirit) and unity (there is only one

divinity). Their relationship is so intertwined and so complete that they “mutually indwell” (exist within) each other: “e.g. inside” the Father are the Son and Spirit; “inside” the Son are the Father and Spirit; and so forth. The Gospel of John expresses this poetically in John 1:18: “No one has ever seen God, except the Son, who is ‘at the Father’s bosom.’” Remember that word: “bosom.” The Trinity, put succinctly, means that Christians see God as a “community” of dynamic interrelations.

Not every Catholic theology viewed the Trinity in the same way. St. Thomas Aquinas laid the foundation for Dominican theology. St. Bonaventure, however, set the tone for Franciscan Trinitarian understanding: every created thing, from the tiniest particle to the Universe as a whole, is stamped with the “likeness” of the Trinity. Every creature is somehow part of the dynamism of the Trinity (as Bonaventure reminds us, everything comes forth from the Word) and is interrelated to every other created thing.

The Word, which is the Expression of the Inexpressible, became flesh and dwelt among us. This is the Incarnation. Again, Franciscans have had a special way of looking at the Incarnation. Ever since Duns Scotus, Franciscans have maintained that even had there never been any sin, the Incarnation would have taken place because it was God’s first intention to become one with his creation. In fact, humans are created “in anticipation” of the Incarnation: while some theologies struggled with how to “fit” the Word into human nature, like trying to put a foot into a glove, Franciscans saw human nature as created *so that* the Incarnation could take place (the analogy would be that shoes are made for the purpose of housing feet, so you don’t have to fit two incompatible things together).

So, for Franciscans, creation itself shares in both the Trinitarian relationships and the union of God and the world: this is why St. Francis can look at creation around him and see Brother Sun, Sister Moon and Mother Earth.

## THE CHURCH: THE CONTINUING BODY OF CHRIST

As I said before, the doctrines of the Trinity and Incarnation are the two pillars of the Catholic faith. Indeed, perhaps a better analogy is that they are the interwoven strands of doctrinal DNA: they are found in every piece of Catholic doctrine, in every authentic expression of Catholic spirituality. This is not to say that every doctrine uses the word “Trinity” or “Incarnation.” However, as noted before, one cannot understand the writings of Pope John Paul II without understanding something of his take on the Trinity and Incarnation. Family as interrelated? Dignity of the human person? It’s there. Beyond the writings of this particular Holy Father, one must say that this basic DNA informs every other doctrine. One of the first places to look for this dynamic interrelatedness is Catholic ecclesiology, the theology of the Church.

By “Church,” of course, we mean the community, what has been called, in the spirit of the Second Vatican Council, “the pilgrim people of God.” St. Paul speaks of the Church as the Body of Christ, with each member, each organ, being absolutely essential to the whole. Like a human body where everything is so interrelated (ah, remember that term?) that what happens to one part affect the whole, so when one member suffers, the entire body suffers, and when one member is built up, the entire body is built up. (1 Corinthians 12: 26)

What is the basis of this unity of the Church? The presence of the Spirit, which makes the Church the continuing Incarnation, the Body of Christ. Remember I said to remember the word “bosom”? There is one other place in the Gospel of John where the word “bosom” is used: at the Last Supper, the beloved disciple has his head on Jesus’ bosom. (John 13: 23) The “beloved disciple,” the disciple Jesus loved, in the Gospel of John, represents all disciples: which disciple does Jesus not love? This is the Evangelist’s way of saying that the *same* relationship Jesus shares with the Father is shared between Jesus and his disciples. That is you and I, and in light of the developed doctrines of the Trinity and Incarnation, means that you and I are “part of” the Trinity, and therefore, “expressions of the Inexpressible” in human nature: we are “mini-Christ,” “Christians.”

This identification of the Church, and therefore its members, with Christ is found in Acts 9: 4 (“Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?”), and is grounded in our baptism (Romans 6: 3-5). We are quite literally “christened”—Christ-ened. This identification with Christ is nurtured in many ways, mostly notably through our celebration of the Eucharist: when preparing wine for the Consecration, the priest says a prayer: “Through the mingling of this water and wine, may we come to share in the divinity of him who humbled himself to share in our humanity.” St. Irenaeus said, in the second century, “...our Lord Jesus Christ, who did,...become what we are, that he might bring us to be even what He is Himself,”<sup>7</sup> and St. Athanasius said, in the fourth century, “He was made man so we might be made God.”<sup>8</sup> Through our baptism and the Eucharist, we are divinized (the Eastern Church calls this *theosis*, divinization), we “become God by participation.” St. Augustine would say, as he gave out the Eucharist, “Receive what you are, and become what you receive.”

Because of this ecclesiology—understanding of the Church—as continuing the Incarnational ministry of Jesus, this dynamic and interpenetrating relationship is extended throughout history and even into Eternity: this is the Catholic notion of the Communion of Saints. Those who have gone before us and those who will come after us are *at this very moment* inextricably intertwined with us: our relationship with God is always in relationship with them, and conversely. In terms of the “structure” of the Body, we need only remember St. Paul’s teaching that each part plays an essential role. It is true that there are clergy: bishops, priests and deacons. It is true that there are consecrated religious and secular. It is also true that the major population in the Church is non-religious, non-ordained: the laity. The Secular Franciscan Order plays an important—even essential—role in the fullness of the Body. Our present membership, and our membership throughout history, includes clergy: secular bishops, priests and deacons. However, it is also obvious that the majority of our membership, like that of the Church as a whole, is the laity, and not ordained. That being said, we should never

---

<sup>7</sup> Irenaeus, *Against Heresies*, Book 5, preface.

<sup>8</sup> Athanasius, *On the Incarnation of the Word*, 54: 3.

think of laity in negative terms: “not ordained.” The laity is the foundation of the Church, “the people” (ultimately from Greek, *laos*, people). Understood in this way, one could even maintain that *everyone* is among the laity, with some being ordained.

Root words aside, we must understand that “lay” does not mean “less.” We are only now beginning to formulate a theology of the laity that does not simply see lay people as providing a population to the Church, out of whom are drawn clergy, who, after all, do the *real* work of the Church. *Lumen Gentium* devotes nine sections to the role of the laity (30-38) and four sections to the universal call to holiness, much of it speaking of the laity (39-42). (Note: in comparison, the section on Religious is 5 sections long, from 43-47.)

In addition to *Lumen Gentium*, there is also the decree on the apostolate of the laity, *Apostolicam Actuositatem*. Lay people are called to be *active* participants in the mission of the Church. The laity, it says, “share[s] in the priestly, prophetic and royal office of Christ.”<sup>9</sup> In fact, the document goes so far as to say “the member who fails to make his proper contribution to the development of the Church must be said to be useful neither to the Church nor to himself.”<sup>10</sup> Never again would it be possible to say that the role of the laity to “pray, pay and obey.”

Having said that about the essential role of the laity, we must remember that our Order also includes secular (diocesan) clergy. Saying that, we have to remember that “secularity” is in itself an officially recognized form of spirituality in the Church. Unfortunately, again, we have traditionally seen “secular” as something negative, in the sense of “not in a religious order.” Even worse, we have used the word “secular” to mean something in opposition to the Divine Will. However, from a Catholic point of view, and especially from a Franciscan view, there is no *secula* (literally, “age,” created time) that exists apart from the space-time world that God has created. The secular is not in opposition to the sacred, it is the embodiment of the sacred. This is the basis of

---

<sup>9</sup> *Apostolicam Actuositatem*, I, 2

<sup>10</sup> *ibid.*

the Catholic sacramental understanding: water, oil, bread, and wine can be vehicles for the experience of God. Indeed, beads, relics, icons, you name it: if it is part of creation, it is a vehicle for experiencing God. We as Franciscans should know that better than anyone. We might phrase the issue this way: just how far do we take this participation in the Incarnation thing? For Catholics in general, and for Franciscans in particular, our answer must always be, “all the way”: the Incarnation in Jesus is the “boundary” toward which we and all of creation are moving. (1 Corinthians 15: 28)

If we are only beginning to truly appreciate the essential role of the laity in the Church, we have only taken halting baby steps toward full appreciation of the secular vocation.

## **LITURGY AND SACRAMENTS: TRANSFORMING ACTIONS OF THE CHURCH**

Just as our understanding of the Church is grounded in our understanding of the Trinity and Incarnation, so, too, our understanding of liturgy and sacraments are grounded in our understanding of the Church. Though we don’t want to draw too sharp of a separation between personal and public prayer (after all, we must make the liturgy “our prayer,” and no one truly prays without connection to the whole Body), the liturgy (from the root “public work,” or “work of the people”) is the public/official communal prayer of the Church. The liturgy includes the Liturgy of the Hours as well as the various sacramental liturgies, especially the Eucharistic Liturgy (the “Mass”). Ideally, liturgy should be celebrated communally, as the name denotes. However, because of the reality of the situation of the Church today, where very few parishes offer any liturgical celebration apart from celebrating the Eucharist,<sup>11</sup> the “Prayer of Christians,” (as the American title for the Liturgy of the Hours is called), is hardly celebrated by the Body worshipping together. However, even when we pray the Liturgy of the Hours by ourselves, we are consciously participating in the official prayer of the Body. Indeed,

---

<sup>11</sup> Even the Sacrament of Reconciliation is rarely celebrated liturgically, except perhaps in Lent or on youth retreats. Otherwise, we tend to line up like we did 50 years ago (though the lines aren’t quite as long), go into the dark boxes, and recite our list.

since in the Church, Christ himself prays to the Father, we are mystically identifying with Christ as we offer a “continual sacrifice of praise.”

Let's think about the structure of the liturgy for just one moment: the Liturgical Year begins with the First Sunday of Advent, Christian New Year, as it were. For one “moon” (four weeks), we celebrate the anticipation of the world, waiting for deliverance. When the light is at its weakest, we celebrate the birth of the Light, not only in Bethlehem, but also at the end of the world, and in each of our lives during our periods of darkness. “The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light.” (Isaiah 9:2) At the end of Christmas season, we celebrate the manifestation of Christ to the world (Epiphany and the Baptism of Jesus), after which, we enter into a period called “Ordinary Time,” where we commemorate the life of the Christ whose birth we just celebrated. Then we enter into Lent, a time of “spring cleaning” for the spirit, preparing for the Triduum: the death, burial and Resurrection of Jesus: the Paschal Mystery. Just as nature is moving into spring, with things presumed dead coming back to life, we celebrate the Resurrection of Christ, and in so celebrating, our own Resurrection as well. Fifty days later, we have Pentecost, and the descent of the Holy Spirit, the “birth of the Church.” Then we enter into a very long period, again called “Ordinary Time,” though this time, it is the life of the Church as we carry out Jesus’ ministry in the world. Toward the end of Ordinary Time, we start getting readings about the end of the world and the Second Coming of Christ, crowned, as it were, by the Feast of Christ the King. The next Sunday: We arrive again at the First Sunday of Advent, and begin looking forward to the coming of Christ. The cycle repeats to constantly keep us in tune with the events of Jesus life and encourages us, year by year, to enter more fully into the Mystery unfolding before us.

In the Liturgical Year, we join together our commemoration of the life and significance of Christ (coming, birth, life, death, life in the Church) with the natural flow of the seasons: winter and death, spring and new life, summer as the time for the Church, and autumn, the time for the harvest. This works quite well for us in North

America. South of the equator, well, that's another story (aren't you glad you aren't the ones in Rome who have to think about these things?)

But the Liturgy of the Hours utilizes more than the natural cycle of the year; it reflects the times of the day: dawn, Morning Prayer, with the sense of Resurrection, New Creation ("the dawn from on high shall break upon us..." [Luke 1: 78]); mid-day as the time for work; evening as thanksgiving, winding down, reversing the natural cycle, as the outside becomes dark and the inside light ("he has cast down the mighty from their thrones, and has lifted up the lowly..." [Luke 1: 52]); night as death ("Now Lord, you dismiss your servant..." [Luke 2: 29]). Morning comes: Resurrection! Who better than Franciscans to recognize the symbolic connection between the Prayer of the Church and the natural cycle?

Among the various forms of liturgical prayer, the celebration of the Sacraments stands out. I like to compare the Sacraments to the love between a husband and wife (OK, I stole this from St. Paul. Can't go wrong with good material.) There are times when the couple says to each other, "I love you." There are special celebrations where they go to dinner or a movie: birthdays, Valentine's Day, their anniversary. And then there are those special moments when they join together physically, and "the two become one." This is how I like to think of the Sacraments: every act of God is an act of love for us, but the Sacraments are the "special moments" when the Church truly acts out who it is: the continuation of the Incarnational love of God in Jesus. Baptism brings us into the Community; the Eucharist nourishes us and transforms us just as certainly as the Bread and Wine are transformed. Marriage mirrors the relationship of Christ with his Church; the three expressions Holy Orders embody and symbolize the ministry of the entire Body; Reconciliation acknowledges that our failings have left both us and the Body (People of God, Church) just a little weaker. Reconciliation aids us in coming to terms with our own shortfalls and restores inner peace to the individual and harmony (relationship) with our Loving God and with each other.

## **MARY: MODEL AND MOTHER OF THE CHURCH**



When the bishops of the Second Vatican Council were debating where to place the schema on Mary, there was some disagreement. Some felt that whatever the Council said of her should be placed within the context of the teaching on Christ. Indeed, every, and I mean every, thing ever said of Mary that was authentically Catholic was a statement about Christ: if she is the “Mother of God,” this is a way we have of saying, “This little baby, born of Mary, is truly God. If she is “Queen of Heaven,” this is because she shares, to a preeminent degree, in the royal prophetic priesthood of Jesus.

On the other hand, there were bishops who felt that the Council needed to re-emphasize Mary’s role and place in the Church: she was, after all, a member of the early Christian community (Acts 1: 14). In the end, the schema on Mary was placed within *Lumen Gentium*: the sections on Mary come at the end of the document. Echoing the teaching of St. Ambrose in his exposition of the Gospel of Luke, the document called Mary a “type,” or model, of the Church.<sup>12</sup> Mary is the living symbol of the Church because the Church itself is virgin and mother. This echoes the words of St. Francis in his “Praises of the Blessed Virgin Mary,” “Hail Lady, Holy Queen, Holy Mary Mother of God who art the Virgin made Church.”

Veneration of Mary is rooted in the Catholic understanding of the Communion of Saints, that is, the Church as extended throughout time and Eternity. Everyone who is sanctified by the Holy Spirit is a saint. We use the term in a special way referring to those who have completed their journeys, and in a very particular way when referring to those who have been recognized by the Church for being exemplars of the Christian life: the canonized saints. We believe that those in union with God in Eternity are still connected to those of us still in space and time, and that their prayers, like the prayers of fellow Christians here on earth, help us on our journey. Among this Communion, this “cloud of witnesses” (Hebrews 12:1), Mary is held up as the preeminent member.

Christians have for centuries honored the Blessed Mother in many ways and forms. In the early Church, the focus was on the motherhood of Mary, both of Christ

---

<sup>12</sup> *Lumen Gentium VIII, III, 63.*

and Christians. In the Middle Ages, influenced by the feudalism of the period, Mary was pictured as the Queen of Heaven, ruling alongside her Son, the King. She was, if you will, the Queen Mother. Using the imagery of romance literature, Christians saw themselves as knights bearing the favors of the Queen, through whom they could have influence with the King himself.

There was nothing wrong with this imagery in itself. However, sometimes Christians developed an exaggerated, and even misdirected, love for Mary, almost placing her as an equal with Jesus. Jesus, pictured as a strict judge, was often feared. However, Mary, gentle Mary, could get you on Jesus' good side. This, of course, did not do Jesus justice: he who came because of God's love of the world (John 3:16) is always on our side: he is not one we have to "convince" to be merciful.

In order to understand the actual teachings of the Church about Mary, we have to understand the difference between devotional and doctrinal language. When I say to my wife, "You are the only woman in the world," this is not a literal statement of "fact." She is obviously not the only woman in the world. However, I am not trying to be literal: I am expressing love for her. This is the language of devotion.

There is absolutely nothing wrong with devotional love of Mary: asked one time how much one should love Mary, German theologian Karl Rahner responded one could love her as much as possible, as long as one loves Jesus more. We come to her as "poor banished children of Eve," asking her to turn "her eyes of mercy toward us." We call her "our life, our sweetness and our hope." All of this is the language of love, and it is perfectly OK, as long as we recognize that it *is* the language of love. It is when we confuse this language with doctrinal language, when we think that those who do not use the same words are somehow lacking in faith and love that problems can arise.<sup>13</sup>

---

<sup>13</sup> I remember a priest saying he had read something that claimed that Mary "had a singing voice more beautiful than all the angels combined." He said simply, "We have absolutely no idea what Mary sounded like when she sang. This is one of those exaggerated statements that confuse people about the teachings of the Church, and leads to misunderstandings about our belief about Mary, both among Catholics and non-Catholics.

Devotion is good, but we must not stop there: good devotion is based on good doctrine: we can call Mary our life, our sweetness and our hope precisely because of the unique role that the Church recognizes that she played, and continues to play, in the plan of salvation.<sup>14</sup> When we examine everything the Church has said about Mary, we can sum it all up in two words: model and mother, and to understand those words, we must turn to the source of our Christian understanding, the Bible.

There are relatively few passages about Mary in the New Testament; it is obvious that the focus is on Jesus. In fact, in the Gospel of Mark, neither Mary nor the rest of Jesus' biological family come off very well. It is really from Matthew, Luke and John, all written later than Mark, that we find the basis for Catholic understanding of Mary. There is so much material in these Gospels that we cannot go into here. However, if you want to read more about it, take a look at *Mary in the New Testament*, edited by John Reumann.<sup>15</sup> For our purposes, we can look at the genealogy of Jesus in Matthew, the Infancy narratives in Luke, and the Wedding at Cana and Crucifixion in John.

Matthew names only five women in the genealogy of Jesus: four from the Old Testament, and Mary. The four from the Old Testament are all involved in potentially scandalous situations: sleeping with one's father-in-law, a non-Jewish harlot, a Moabite woman and an adulteress. Yet in each of these cases, God's will is worked. What is more, three of the four were women of strong faith. When Mary is mentioned as the mother of Jesus, Matthew is making a point, beyond the statement of her virginity.

We meet Mary in the Gospel of Luke at the Annunciation, where an angel announces to her the birth of Jesus, who will inherit the throne "of his father, David," and who will be the Son of the Most High. This is one of the earliest Christian creeds, and when Mary gives her *fiat*, she is accepting the "pre-Jesus Good News." Mary is the proto-Christian, whose example we must follow. Later, in the Visitation, Mary becomes

---

<sup>14</sup> This is similar to saying that our love of St. Whomever is fine, as long as it is grounded in the Catholic understanding of the Communion of Saints, and that we do not see St. Whomever as somehow an autonomous figure.

<sup>15</sup> *Mary in the New Testament*, Raymond E. Brown, John Reumann (editor), *et al*, Paulist Press, 1978.

prophet and announces that the child to be born will bring about a revolutionary change where God “has cast the mighty from their thrones, and has lifted up the lowly.” She has spoken the Christian message of justice (a fine example for the Franciscan JPIC work).

In John, Mary is the one who urges Jesus to help the married couple who have run out of wine. Jesus calls her “woman,” a term that has confused both Protestants and Catholics for centuries. However, a careful study will reveal that this sign is performed “on the seventh day,” when Jesus begins the work of the New Creation. Just as the woman at the First Creation was mother of the living, so, too, the woman of the New Creation is mother, directing us to “do what he says.” Mary then disappears from the text, only to reappear at the foot of the Cross, where Jesus once again calls her “woman,” giving her to the “beloved disciple” (i.e., all disciples) as mother. This is why the Fathers of the Church called Mary the New Eve, corresponding to Jesus as the New Adam.

There are only two dogmas (official teachings that must be accepted) about Mary, *per se*, in Catholic teachings: the Immaculate Conception and the Assumption.<sup>16</sup> Even in these dogmas, what the Church has said of Mary says something about our own relationships with Jesus: just as Mary was free from Sin at her conception (which is why she can give a complete yes to God’s invitation), so, we also shall become free from Sin, and be able to give a complete yes to God’s invitation. In the Assumption, her whole self is taken into union with Christ: she does not just “float off” in disembodied form. Likewise, we, too, shall be saved as whole persons, not just “part of us.” This is the meaning of the Resurrection: the whole person is united to Christ and transformed. Mary is the vanguard: what she is, we shall become.

Nothing is required of us as Franciscans that is not required of Catholics in general: to hold certain teachings about Mary, to imitate her as our model, and to love

---

<sup>16</sup> Some hold that the Council of Ephesus called her Mother of God, which it did. However, this was not so much a statement about *her* as it was about the Son she bore: he is, indeed, God in the flesh.

her as our mother. We are not a Marian order, as say the Carmelites, and most especially, we are not a devotional society like the Legion of Mary. We do not, as a fraternity, “consecrate ourselves” to Mary in the style of Louis de Montfort. There is nothing wrong with these expressions of faith and devotion, but we are a unique and fully autonomous *order*, and our charism is not Marian, it is Franciscan, and as such our call is to live the Gospel of Jesus in the footsteps of St. Francis. Our guiding documents (General Constitutions) make it clear that profession into the Secular Franciscan Order excludes membership in other Third Orders.

At the same time, Francis placed Mary as the Protectress of the Franciscan family: she holds a special place in our hearts and lives. There are some very authentic and specifically Franciscan ways of expressing this relationship. One option for our daily Office, for example, is the Little Office of the Virgin Mary, in its contemporary form, patterned after the Liturgy of the Hours. We have the Franciscan Crown Rosary, the “seven joys of Mary.” So, while it would be inappropriate to make the Crown our normative prayer at fraternity meetings, at certain times of the year, particularly May or October, this may be a wonderful form of communal prayer. And in all of this, like the Franciscan life in general, we must always remember that we are people of our own time, and that we cannot and should not slavishly try to imitate Medieval spirituality.

## **CANON LAW**

It is said, regarding civil law, that a lawyer who defends himself in court has a fool for a client. Something similar could probably be said for those who try to interpret Canon Law without proper training. I once teased a friar I know, who was the Juridical Vicar of our diocese, saying, “Why should someone have to study Canon Law? After all, it’s all written down in a book; anyone can read it.” He laughed and said, “Ah, yes, there is what the text says and what it means.” It is important for us to remember that Canon Law serves the Church, and not the other way around. It is equally important to remember that Canon Law should reflect good theology, but does not define what good theology is.

While most of us don't have to be concerned with Canon Law, it might be good to have a basic understanding of what Canon Law is and isn't. First of all, it is not "universal law" in the Church. What we think of as "Canon Law" is really the internal governing norms of the Latin Rite of the Catholic Church. Eastern Catholic Churches have their own codes of Canon Law. While there were normative rules and procedures throughout Church history, Latin Rite Canon Law was not actually codified until 1917, under the directive of Popes Pius X and Benedict XV. This was revised in the Latin Rite after Vatican II, and promulgated by Pope John Paul II in 1983. Canon Law of the Eastern Rites was promulgated by the pope in 1990. While there are canon lawyers throughout the world, and while individual bishops can interpret Canon Law, the final arbiter of Canon Law is the pope.<sup>17</sup>

It is also important for those of us in the U.S. that Canon Law is not based on the same theory of law as our law. U.S. law (except for Louisiana) is based on English Common Law, where we like to have everything spelled out. Decisions are made based not only on the written statutes themselves, but on precedents set in previous cases. One example of this type of law might be traffic laws: the speed limit says 45 mph, and, by golly, you don't go over 45 mph, no matter what. Roman law, on which Canon Law is based, relies on very general statutes and is interpreted in particular contexts. Speed limit, for example, might be seen as the ideal, not the absolute, and if circumstances are such that you need to speed, this may be permissible. Our view of the law tends to be: if it were permissible, the law would say so. Roman law, on the other hand, tends to be: if it is not expressly forbidden, it is allowed.

All of that being said, one should remember that Canon Law is rather dry. I was asked to look up what Canon Law said about Eucharistic Adoration. In fact, it said very little, and absolutely nothing about devotion to the Blessed Sacrament. Rather, there

---

<sup>17</sup> I once had a graduate student question whether something Pope John Paul II did was in violation of Canon Law. I pointed out to him that the pope has authority over Canon Law, and suggested that if he wanted to write to the pope to point out the Holy Father's mistake, he was free to do so. I don't think he took me up on that.

were regulations about when it was and wasn't allowed, who should have a key to the tabernacle, and what types of chapels could have Adoration: nothing particularly helpful for what the inquirer was looking for. If it isn't theology, it most certainly isn't devotional!

Canon Law tends to affect the Secular Franciscan Order only in terms of what it says of secular institutes (though we are a full Order in the Church, we don't fall in the legal category of "religious," and so we're lumped in with other secular institutes that are not themselves orders.) As Pope John Paul II acknowledged, we are "one and unique." We don't quite fit into the "normal" categories found in Canon Law. There are only a handful of statutes that affect us as an order. However, it could be helpful for at least some SFOs to have a general understanding of what is said about us, particularly our standing as an autonomous "subject of rights and duties" in the Church: though we are united with the various orders of friars and Third Order Regular priests, brothers and sisters, we are in no way "under their authority," nor are we adjuncts of "real" Franciscans. We *are* real Franciscans. There have been problems in some fraternities where a friar treats the SFO like his personal work force, even controlling finances, or where Seculars turn "to father" to get his "final word" on practically everything. This is contrary to our place within the Franciscan family, and contrary to the norms of Church law. To claim any less is a violation of our mission to and for the Church.

## CONCLUSION

This chapter is not intended to be an "everything you wanted to know about" chapter. Many of these topics will be taken up in more detail, particularly from a Franciscan standpoint, later. The purpose of this chapter is to help orient us toward what it means to have a mature, contemporary and authentic understanding of basic Catholic belief. We, as an Order, must be willing to form ourselves to be mature Christians, and we must, in turn, help our candidates to a mature understanding of their

faith. If this is not done, we will have professed Franciscans who are Franciscan in name only, like an institutionally-recognized icing on a half-baked cake. This move toward wholeness is, as St. Bonaventure entitles his work, the journey into God, the infinite journey into the Infinite God. It is a never-ending journey, but one which must be walked. As St. Francis so famously noted, “Let us begin, for up to now, we have done nothing.”