

Unconverted Catholics and the Sacraments

By Ralph Martin

In recent years the leadership of the Catholic Church has become increasingly realistic about the condition of the Church. At the heart of this realism is a growing acknowledgment that large numbers of Catholics are, quite simply, unconverted. In his final speech as president to the National Conference of Catholic Bishops at the end of 1977, Archbishop Joseph Bernardin clearly expressed this:

“Realistically, we cannot envisage a successful effort to evangelize others on a large scale—for example, the 80 million unchurched in the United States—when so many Catholics themselves have yet to experience conversion.”

Pope Paul VI squarely addressed the situation in his document, “On Evangelization in the Modern World”: “Today there is a very large number of baptized people who, for the most part, have not formally renounced their baptism, but who are entirely indifferent to it and not living in accordance with it.”

The Holy Spirit has led the Catholic Church to focus its attention on evangelism, but we are discovering that the Church is remarkably unprepared to evangelize as a body. We are seeing clearly that vast numbers of Catholics are themselves unconverted, not living a life under the lordship of Jesus, led by the Spirit, loving the brethren, participating in mission.

SACRAMENTAL ABUSES

This has implications not just for evangelism but for many aspects of church life. I would like to consider here the implications of the actual condition of the Catholic people for the way the sacraments are normally administered today. The problem facing us is that the sacraments are not supposed to be administered to unconverted people. The sacraments are supposed to equip or sustain people who want to live or are already living as committed Christians. I would like to look specifically at the sacraments of Christian initiation—baptism, confirmation, and the Eucharist—although there are currently difficulties in the administration of all the sacraments.

Baptism

Let us consider first the baptism of adults. It is clear that before being baptized, adult candidates should be converted to the Lord, to living the Christian life, and to Christian morality, and they should be formed in Christian attitudes.

The few adults who are seeking baptism today in the Catholic Church are frequently not led to a point of conversion before being baptized. Many Christians from other denominations are becoming Catholics to resolve a mixed marriage. Often they are unconverted members of their previous churches—and their instructions in the particulars of the Catholic faith do nothing to lead them to a conversion experience. They often are not led to a personal relationship with the Lord, a life of prayer, life in the Holy Spirit, love of the brethren, and Christian service. Jesus may not be any more the center of their life after they become a Catholic than before. “Instructions” and the use of appropriate liturgical rites in the various stages of the adult catechumenate don’t necessarily produce converts.

With the baptism of infants, which is the predominant way the Catholic Church is maintaining itself today, we have an even more difficult situation. The Catholic Church has rightly defended the validity of infant baptism, citing its ancient and continuous practice and enunciating its theological justification. It has pointed out that infant baptism depends, for its ultimate effectiveness, on the baptized infant’s being raised in an environment in which the infant can become a mature, committed Christian.

The effective catechumenate required in conjunction with infant baptism, then, is provided *after* the sacrament is administered, as the child grows up in a family environment and parish environment that function as a training ground of Christian life and faith. According to the sacramental theology of the Catholic Church, infant baptism is supposed to be administered in the context of a community of faith that will provide what is needed for the seed of divine life planted in baptism to grow.

Today, while the theoretical justifications for infant baptism remain valid, the conditions for its effective administration are realized less and less. The existence of a “very large number of baptized people who ... are entirely indifferent to [their baptism] and living in accordance with it” could have been predicted from the weaknesses in the circumstances in which the sacrament is being administered.

Today, many of the babies being baptized in the Catholic Church will not grow up in an environment of active faith and example in their families, or their parishes, with which they will probably have only marginal, insignificant contact. Even 20 years ago there was something of a Christian environment and an “informal catechumenate” in many Catholic homes, particularly in ethnic Catholic neighborhoods and Catholic countries, but today that is less and less the case.

The days when Western secular society was grounded in Christian principles are largely over, and the Catholic people who once had a supporting culture are rapidly being secularized by a powerful modern pagan culture. Religious instruction by itself is hardly ever effective in producing conversion, but six million American Catholic youth are not even receiving religious instruction. Those that are, even in Catholic schools, are usually much more influenced in life-style, values, and decisions by the world (television, movies, books, universities, and so on) than by the Church or even by their families.

Is it not an abuse of the sacrament to baptize an infant when there may be little or no vital Christian commitment and life on the part of the parents, and little or no actual Christian community taking responsibility for the child being raised a Christian? Does a three-week course of preparation for parents and godparents really provide a means to conversion and to the construction of an ongoing Christian life for the raising of the child?

Confirmation

By the time children reach the age for confirmation, many of them have not been raised in a Christian environment and have not grown up in the faith. They may be able to answer certain questions about the meaning of the sacrament, but many are unprepared to make a conscious decision to affirm their baptism, and do not make such an affirmation. Confirmation, like baptism, is frequently administered today almost in a vacuum, without the supporting context of a community of faith.

As Maria Von Trapp put it several years ago: “in Austria, and it isn’t very different in America, confirmation is a new wristwatch, a trip to the amusement park, and somewhere sandwiched in the middle, church—‘but it won’t take too long.’ It’s memorizing seven gifts, twelve fruits, fuss about a sponsor and a name, and trying to remember why the bishop is going to tap your cheek, and wondering what it’s going to feel like. It’s hardly ever a personally desired and experienced commitment to Jesus and release of the Spirit.”

In talking with bishops on several continents about the widespread phenomenon of young people drifting away from the Church shortly after confirmation, I have frequently encountered this attitude: “If we don’t get them confirmed before they get out of elementary school they won’t have the sacrament, because we’ll never see them again after that.”

Confirmation as it is commonly practiced today does not in fact complete a child’s initiation into Christ, his Spirit, and the body of Christ, but rather it begins his initiation into the secular world. In many countries jokes are made that confirmation is now the sacrament of leaving the Church.

The desire to have children baptized and confirmed stems from a desire to assure their salvation, their being with Christ. Unfortunately, when the sacraments are not preceded or followed by effective evangelism, catechesis, and life in a vital Christian environment, their continued administration becomes problematic.

Shortly after Vatican Council II there was a wide-spread concern on the part of the pope and the bishops that abuses in the administration of the sacraments, particularly the Eucharist, be stopped. Often the focus of this concern was that rubrics and liturgical formulas be properly followed, certainly a justifiable concern.

But have we so focused on the correct form of the sacraments that we have not noticed their widespread lack of effective power? Have we so focused on liturgical correctness and “well done” liturgies that we have failed to notice that the necessary context for the celebration of the sacraments—a vital Christian community—scarcely exists? To put the question another way, does the ordinary pastoral approach to the sacraments in the Church today constitute a massive abuse of the meaning and purpose of the sacraments?

The Eucharist

Catholic theology and doctrinal pronouncements on the sacredness and centrality of the Eucharist are clear and consistent. The Eucharist is the sacrament of unity, and in the questions raised by the ecumenical movement this dimension has been further clarified. The official teaching of the Catholic Church is that the Eucharist cannot be shared with Christians of other traditions, since it is a sign of unity

of faith and doctrine, of unity with the bishops and the pope, and of the unity of the faithful with one another and Christ.

But while we have been defending the Catholic view of the Eucharist, have we overlooked the actual condition of Catholics at the Eucharist? If the Eucharist is so sacred, and it is, is it right for unconverted Catholics to take part in it? Is it right for Catholics who no longer believe the central Christian doctrines, who no longer follow the teaching or authority of the bishops and pope, to partake of the Eucharist? Is it right for Catholics who are not reconciled with their fellow Catholics in the same Eucharistic assembly to partake of the Eucharist? Is it right for rich Catholics in the same parish as poor Catholics to say, "God bless you," and send the poor away hungry and naked, and partake of the Eucharist? Is it right for the pastors and shepherds of the flock to celebrate the Eucharist under such conditions? Does it not make a mockery of the sacrament of unity? Does not such a lax approach to the Eucharist bear with it the consequences of serious spiritual weakness in the Church (1 Cor. 11:27-30)?

We experience enough of that weakness to sense that some changes must be made in how the sacraments are approached in the Church today. The lack of solid and widespread Christian commitment in the Church, the presence of so many unconverted Catholics, indicates something seriously wrong with how the sacraments of Christian initiation are being administered.

BLOCKS TO SEEING

Such an assessment of the state of the Catholic people and the state of sacramental practice in the Church may be difficult to receive. There are many deeply entrenched attitudes and unconscious fears to be overcome. In the remainder of this article I would like to mention some impediments to seeing clearly and acting effectively in this area.

Caught in the Middle

By and large, the present generation of Church leaders is caught in the middle. Trained to tend a pastoral system based on an assumption of a strong foundation of faith among the Catholic people, they find themselves in situations where that foundation may no longer exist or is quickly vanishing. Simply tending the flock will no longer work. Trained to administer the sacraments as the main focus of their ministry, they face a situation requiring a more fundamental ministry, that of basic evangelization and conversion, of rebuilding the very foundations of faith among the Catholic people. Learning a new approach to ministry, establishing the context for the proper celebration of the sacraments—namely, a converted people—is a difficult task.

The purpose of pointing this out is not to blame current Church leaders for difficulties besetting the administration of the sacraments. Indeed the difficulties flow out of long-range social, intellectual, demographic, and technological changes, the effects of which are difficult to perceive and analyze accurately in the short run. Only now are the consequences of some of these changes for the life of the Church starting to become clear. These changes have happened over many years, even generations. The point is not to fix blame but rather to see the situation clearly and to recognize the need to do something about it.

High on Theory, Low on Practice

It has become common in recent years for renewal in the Church to consist of developing the right documents, statements, papers, and reports. If an area has been treated in a theoretical way, we seem to suppose, then, somehow or other it will come to life among the people. That has not been the case. As Archbishop Bernardin pointed out in his talk, referred to previously:

"Many excellent things have been said about evangelization...yet, much of what has occurred to date seems largely notional: it concerns the theory of evangelization; it remains to be translated into action. Furthermore, much of it seems confined to official church circles: it involves a relatively small number of people speaking to one another."

The number of people who are effectively evangelizing in the Church and building Christian communities is relatively small. The Church as a whole needs to draw more heavily on the impressive amount of practical pastoral wisdom that is being accumulated in successful renewal movements such as the Cursillo, the Focolare, and the charismatic renewal.

What Are We Aiming At?

When talking about Christian renewal or facing questions concerning the sacraments, people frequently say: "But the Catholic Church is a church of sinners, it's open to all people, it's pluralistic, it embraces and includes all." I think a misunderstanding of the meaning of the universality of the Church is a significant factor blocking a more realistic pastoral and theological approach to the sacraments. A sentimental approach to the sacraments that does not want "to make people feel bad" by "depriving" them of the sacraments betrays a fundamental misunderstanding of the sacraments' purpose. They are encounters with the living God. They are to be approached with the response and commitment that does justice to the great and holy gift that God gives in the sacraments, his own self.

Bishop Juan Hervas, one of the founders of the Cursillo, put his finger on this problem when he talked about the pervasive tendency in the Catholic Church in its ordinary pastoral practice towards a "minimalist corruption of the gospel." By this he meant the tendency in the Church to ask less from the people than the gospel asks, and to offer less to the people than the gospel offers.

Often the pastoral approach of the Catholic Church has tended to promote and preserve a lukewarm Christianity. The Lord's attitude toward such a tendency is clearly expressed in Revelation: "And to the angel of the church in Laodicea write: 'The words of the Amen, the faithful and true witness, the beginning of God's creation. I know your works: you are neither cold nor hot. Would that you were cold or hot! So, because you are lukewarm, and neither cold nor hot, I will spew you out of my mouth'" (Rev. 3:14-16, RSV).

Where Are We Going?

The Church is in the midst of a massive change in social, political, economic, and cultural conditions. It is groping toward a new understanding of its situation and seeking a new, adequate pastoral strategy. Evangelism is a key to a whole pastoral strategy adequate for our time. It will be years before the new strategy will be clear in the Church at large, but already many are moving toward it. How to begin? I think the words that Archbishop Bernardin addressed to his fellow bishops can apply in some measure to us all.

"Finally, if we bishops are to be effective evangelizers and catechists, it is essential that in our own lives we give witness to our beliefs and values—our personal acceptance of Jesus Christ as Lord and redeemer. And this must be a visible and perceptible witness, capable of inspiring others to the point at which, responding to God's abundant grace, they too will make a similar commitment."

"I am convinced that personal witness of a faith-filled and prayerful life is the real key to solving our alleged 'credibility' problem—not more or fewer statements, more or fewer programs, more or fewer structures, and all the rest. These things are important and desirable...but they will accomplish little that is deep and lasting in the absence of direct, personal witness by each of us to Jesus and his message...on fire with zeal to proclaim Jesus Christ and His good news..."

"In this process we must be willing to accept risks as did the Lord Himself. For instance, the risk of taking new steps for which there is no guaranteed success. The risk of looking foolish when our initiatives, even before they are taken, are misunderstood or rejected. The risk of being called *unpastoral* and *insensitive* when we insist that to accept Christ's teaching in its fullness and integrity involves freely assuming burdens which, humanly speaking, are not easy to bear at any time and perhaps especially difficult at a time when there are many inducements and rewards for doing otherwise."

Originally published in *New Covenant* June 1979, pages 20-23