

The Catholic Perspective

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Chapter 1: Escape from subjectivity

What is distinctive about the Catholic mind, that Catholics believe things that no one else believes? Identifying specific differences is not hard; what is tricky is figuring out which one is the ultimate cause of all the others. For example, many would say that the authority of the Pope is what makes Catholicism unique, and hence we are called “Papists”. However, the papacy is for Catholics a conclusion rather than an axiom. We accept it because we see the modern hierarchical Church as the historically legitimate development of the Apostolic Church. But looking at the same historical and scriptural data, Protestants and Orthodox see corruption rather than development. What underlying difference causes us to read the data so differently? Again, one could cite specific dogmas that are distinctive to the Catholic faith: the assumption of Mary, Purgatory, the *filioque*, the immorality of contraception, etc. But why do Catholics believe these things when others don’t?

What do you say Catholics have too much of?

On what authority are the above dogmas based? Depending on the issue and who one asks, one will get an appeal to *Tradition*, to reason (or, in the Catholic-speak I prefer, *tonatural theology and natural law*), or to ecclesial *authority*. And indeed, Catholics are noted for their distinctive attachment to all three of these, as we are often accused of corrupting religion with our blind adherence to the past, our unscriptural rationalism, and our unfettered authoritarianism. This is a rather odd thing in itself, don’t you think? I mean that the Church should go (or at least be seen as going) so over the top on all three things. For, on most people’s understandings, these three things are entirely independent. We would thus expect them to contradict each other at times. Tradition is understood as uncritical acceptance of inherited practices, justifiable if at all only on prudential grounds (“established practices must have some adaptive value...”, etc). Not being able to make any sense of classical metaphysics, “reason” to the modern ear means scientism and utilitarianism, while the picture of authoritarianism is just lawlessness at the top. Putting these things together should make an incoherent muddle, but actually the Catholic worldview is strikingly coherent and interconnected. In fact, the Catholic understandings of tradition, natural law, and authority are very different from the non-Catholic ones. These three things are seen more as different manifestations of a deeper underlying principle than as autonomous and antagonistic principles. The success of Catholicism in creating a coherent worldview should be taken as a sign that our understanding of these principles is the better one.

The Church also goes overboard in other areas, according to her critics: she is excessively *ritualistic*, *hierarchical*, and *dogmatic*, they say. Once again, the intriguing thing is that these are seemingly independent ingroup-identifiers. Why

should a single organization feel the need to over-emphasize all three? If correct belief is the important thing, why bother so much over rituals and obedience, and vice versa. (Catholics, of course, will see in this criticism a case of the perverse “if distinct, then opposed” modern mentality.)

What do you say Catholics have too little of?

To avoid the impression that Catholicism is just religion to excess, imagine asking the Church’s critics what Catholics have too *little* of. In the first place, they will say *freedom*. In their different ways, liberals, Jews, Protestants, and Orthodox will all say that Catholics’ relationship with God is over-regulated, that stifling and unnecessary uniformity is being imposed from the top. But why are such constraints not only unnecessary but bad? Here we come to the crux of the matter. The intuition is that such formalities are ill-fitted to genuine spiritual life, and everybody agrees that Catholics are not particularly “spiritual”. Pretty much every opponent of the Church defines itself in some way or another as the more spiritual alternative to Catholicism. Let’s accept that and try to make sense of it: on the “religious” versus “spiritual” divide, Catholicism is most people’s idea of the high religion/low spirituality extreme, while they all compete to fill the other extreme.

What the heck does this really mean, though? When some New Age hippie claims that he’s “spiritual but not religious”, what is he getting at? (I won’t ask what he literally means by it, since conceptual clarity is not to be expected from that sort of person.) Obviously “spiritual” is being opposed to dogma, to ritual, and in fact to anything public and non-subjective. The ideal of spirituality is unmediated communion of the private soul with ultimate reality. Now, doctrines, ritual, ecclesial membership, and authority are intrinsically public. Even to express religious beliefs in language is to give them a sort of public existence, an existence outside of one’s mind. In the “religious” vs. “spiritual” dichotomy, the public world is seen as less spiritually significant than the private world, and indeed often as a totally meaningless interplay of material and biological forces. Public acts are “formalities”, empty of meaning but for the contingent spiritual acts that sometimes accompany them. From the “spiritual” perspective, authentic religion is a matter solely of feelings and authentic morality is a matter solely of intentions. Consider a man who feels guilty after having committed a wicked act; seeking to purify himself from moral defilement, he dumps water on his head. A silly superstition to think this would do any good, right? After all, what God really wants is perfect contrition, and this is an entirely spiritual—i.e. private, mental, and unscripted—act. Such is the spiritualist’s case. Of course, Protestants and Orthodox are in many ways closer to Catholics than they are to “spiritual but not religious” hippies, but they also in their own ways accuse Catholicism of slighting the subjective sphere, of being the overly-objective (ritualistic or rationalist) variant of Christianity.

Against spirituality

Given that one can have spiritual Christianity, why would anyone choose carnal, superstitious Christianity? Let me for a moment speak for myself. When I probe into my psyche, what I find is not Descartes' repository of clear meanings, but a house of mirrors and fog. My own true feelings and intentions are never clear to me, and my capacity for rationalization is boundless. I doubt that I have it in myself to be perfectly contrite; nor could I ever know if I had succeeded. My motives are always mixed and unworthy, and my intuitions are too unreliable to base something as important as a relationship with God. Although I'm as much driven to find meaning and authenticity as the next man (at least I think I am—not that I really know or care), for me this drive takes the form of a quest to get out of my own head.

Public meanings

The public world, on the other hand, is suffused with the Logos, filled with intelligibility, meaning, and purpose that human minds find rather than invent. We confront this extra-mental intelligibility in the objectivity and beauty of mathematics, in the precision and simplicity of the laws of nature, in the intrinsic teleology of living organisms, in our apprehension of the beauty of the natural world. The human world, too, is imbued with an order we find rather than create, despite the fact that we are its subject. The basic goods of human nature are not a matter of choice, and they color bare biological facts like sex, kinship, and death with unchosen meaning. We may rebel against those meanings (as our age has chosen to do), but we don't have the option of starting from a blank slate where our acts have *only* whatever meanings we give them. Even our imaginations seem to participate in universal forms unchosen by us, as seen in the recurring archetypes and symbols that inform the worlds' mythologies. At the level of human aggregates, too, we see neither chaos, a mere mechanical balance of strife, nor consciously engineered structure; rather we see emergent order in the form of communal identities, authority recognized as legitimate, and the inherited traditions of peoples. Such things do, of course, emerge from a history of human acts, but they are, and must be, bigger than any particular conscious choices of individuals or even communities themselves (which, after all, are constituted by these things).

The above examples of "public meanings" may seem very different. Some may be surprised that I count mythic symbolism as an aspect of objective reality, or that I say that nations cannot be engineered into being when we Americans are proud of our "Founding Fathers" for supposedly doing just that. However, all these things are bigger than the individual human mind in a way that pure human artifacts are not. For a speech, a short story, or a corporate logo, we can ask what the author was thinking when he made it and what he meant to convey by it. For things discovered rather than purely invented, or for emergent rather than consciously engineered order, we cannot even in principle hope to thus get to the bottom of the thing and find a human idea or perspective. This makes public meanings not less intelligible than private meanings, but more. Our minds can

absorb their truths partially, but because there is a lack of fit between the truth grasped and the mind grasping, our contemplations are never exhausted, never “hit bottom”. This same “lack of fit” provides an opening for us to transcend the limits of human rationality. Ironically, the very unintelligibility of matter—its *ambiguity*—in making things less than spiritual, at the same time makes it possible for material beings to be vehicles of the more than (humanly) spiritual. God Himself is the author of public meanings. The order of the cosmos speaks to us, and yet it is no creaturely intelligence speaking, but God speaking in the truths of His creation. And when we participate in objectively meaningful acts, God Himself speaks through us.

Catholic authenticity

My deepest sense is that real meanings are not what is inside my head, but what is outside of it. The task is to appropriate these objective meanings, to allow them to inform the soul. On its own, my soul is just a chaotic jumble of desires; its purpose is to receive order from outside rather than impose it. A true, good, and authentic response to the order of the world would be complete receptivity, a response to things as they really are and not as my internal jumble of desires and fantasies color them. Thus, when I want to really make contrition to my Creator, I am not left to my own internal devices. I can appropriate the symbols of the public world and speak with a depth of meaning beyond my native power. The superstitious man in my example above had the right idea. He knew that, in his wretchedness, no attempt to make things right by his own spiritual purity will suffice. To ascend to God, he must in a sense lay aside his very self, approach God’s throne as an archetype rather than an individual, and speak only with the pure words that God Himself gives him. Water is a universal symbol of formlessness, purification, and rebirth. This symbol is not our creation, but His, and in His words He places great power.

I am a Roman Catholic, and dumping water on people’s heads is one of the most important things my Church does.

I don’t expect you to be convinced yet; this is only part 1 after all. However, you can already begin to see the advantages of carnal, superstitious religion (of which, remember, Catholicism is *the* exemplar). It promises escape from the prison of subjectivity. It promises to reconcile reason, natural, tradition, and authority, so that the compatibility of these indispensable guides becomes clear. Most importantly from a Christian point of view, it allows a natural appreciation of the central facts of salvation history, for although many Christian sects boast of their spiritualism, spiritualism itself is problematic for the Christian story. If the private soul is everything, how could we justly be condemned by Adam and justified by Christ, justified what’s more by a *physical*—not merely spiritual—sacrificial event? It is to this question that I will turn next.

Chapter 2: The sign of the cross

The key to understanding Catholicism is our attitude toward symbols. In naturally symbolic acts like sexual intercourse or animal sacrifice we find the meaning to be partly embedded in the nature of the act itself and independent of the performers' intentions. The signification achieved is *suprational* in that the performer needn't be able to articulate fully the meaning of his act; nor need such a full articulation even be possible. The performer need only affix his assent to the given meaning of the act; he is able to "say" more than he can think. The signification of a natural symbol is also *suprapersonal* in that it is part of the public world rather than of the performer's intentions, in some cases making it possible for others to affix their assent as well. Even conventional symbols display this suprapersonal nature, e.g. so that a company saluting a flag is a single act of the company itself, whereas the interior patriotic feelings of each soldier are necessarily individual and incommunicable. Thus, participation in these symbols allows a soul to transcend itself in a twofold way: beyond its nature as a limited intellect and beyond its person as a single individual.

The central dogmatic claim

Catholicism also contains in its essence a central dogmatic claim: that Jesus Christ, fully God and fully Man, has, by his sacrificial death and resurrection two millennia ago, freed mankind from slavery to sin and opened the possibility of communion with God as His children.

Now, I don't expect this dogma to sound attractive or plausible or even sane on a first examination. Accepting it too easily means you probably haven't understood it. You'll need to have a good grasp of the key words "God", "sacrifice", "sin", and "children". Perhaps you don't feel particularly in thrall to "sin", or you don't see why God has to be such a vindictive jerk about such things, or you don't see how what happened to another person two thousand years ago could affect your spiritual state regardless. If you are a fellow Christian of the Protestant persuasion, on the other hand, you will accept the above "core Catholic dogma" as your own, but you may understand it differently, and it is possible that we can learn from each other.

Man's alienation from God

To understand Christianity, one must first understand the problem it is meant to solve: alienation from God, not being His children apart from Christ's atoning sacrifice. This alienation is conceived as both *moral* and *ontological*. The moral part is what was most often emphasized by the Latin Fathers: we are alienated from God by our sins. This is a matter of great misunderstanding between Catholics and modernists. The latter often express consternation over "Catholic guilt" while being convinced that they themselves are already basically good people, or good enough anyway. The question, though, is "good enough for what?" If one just means "good enough not to be a nuisance to the social order" then probably many people clear this low bar. However, here we're talking about communion with God, so "good enough" must mean "pure and fit to stand in the

presence of the All-Holy". Many socially unimportant vices in my soul—the vanity, selfishness, and vengefulness restrained to petty infractions merely by social pressure and lack of opportunity— positively contradict an all-Holy presence. We often hear that God is merciful, but this cannot mean that God chooses to ignore the offense of our sins, that is, that His mercy is a mere deficiency of justice. To ignore sin would do the sinner no good, at least as far as communion with God is concerned. The impurity must be removed, the debt paid, and the sinner redeemed. This is God's mercy.

Even apart from the moral faults of mankind, an ontological chasm separates us from God. Naturally speaking, we cannot be God's children—even by adoption—because we are limited intellects and He is unqualified Being, subsistent Truth and Goodness, and necessarily incomprehensible to us. God cannot induct us into the distinctive goods of His own Nature, as a father by definition does with his children. At best, we might be His beloved pets. Our intellects are made for objects in the world, but God is not an object in the world (i.e. an instance of some limiting nature), making it impossible for us to genuinely conceive and relate to Him.

Sacrifice

The religious response is to offer God a sacrifice, in which payment is offered in reparation for sins. As blood is (symbolically) the principle of life, the shedding of blood is a fit recognition that it is the sinner's very life that is owed and vicariously offered. Meanwhile, in being consecrated to God, the blood of the victim acquires sacramental power, and through the existence of a sacred space (the temple and victim), God condescends to be treated as a part of the world, a resident of a particular place with whom transactions can be made. This arrangement, instituted by the Lord Himself in the Torah, does not involve any anthropomorphizing error about God, because the offering proceeds by way of public, suprarational signification (the symbolism of blood as life—cf. Lev. 17:11). Its participants never need imagine that they have any kind of adequate conceptual understanding of what the offering accomplishes or to Whom it is offered.

Many objections have been raised to sacrificial religion. Most recently, Rene Girard has tried to reduce the whole thing to a matter of mob pathology, an accusation the Catholic mind naturally rejects. More serious is the old Anselmian claim that no homage to God by mere men can atone for sins, because we owe all that to Him anyway. What's more, even if we say that the sacrifices of men succeed in bringing God down to our level (allowing us to treat Him as a being in the world), they certainly don't bring us up to His level.

Or do they? Worship may be a meritorious act, but it would seem to be a distinctly un-Godlike one. After all, assuming monotheism, who would there be for God Himself to worship? The whole experience must be alien to Him. However, in Christian orthodoxy, God is a Trinity of persons, each one eternally engaged in perfect adoration of the other two. Indeed, all of the virtues

of religion—piety, gratitude, obedience—are present in exemplary form in God the Son, Who enjoys a genuinely filial relationship with God the Father. Sacrifice in the sense of self-offering to God thus belongs to God's own inner nature, as does the communion Christianity claims He offers us.

We can now see how the sacrifice of Jesus is uniquely fitted to reconciling God and man. As the physical, suprapersonal act of a man, Christ is able to offer Himself, not just as an individual, but as Man, for all mankind. A symbolic event in the public, human world, it is a thing suited for the appropriation of other men, in a way that the eternal filial devotion of the Son for the Father, absent the Incarnation, is not. Given Christ's humanity and divinity, though, a participation in His divine sonship is possible. As a suprarational act, Jesus' self-offering is, while a genuinely human act, not limited in its significatory power by human concepts. It's meaning can reach so far—indeed, given Who He is, it *must* reach so far—as to include the Son's self-offering to the Father, the act that constitutes the Son's very identity. A divine “word”—one identical to the Logos Himself—has been put in the human world for our appropriation.

Note that the meaning of Christ's sacrifice is contained in the physical act itself, in His physical murder. Christ's perfect interior obedience to the Father and love for us are in themselves insufficient, because without the public action (His physical execution), Christ's interior obedience would be incommunicable, would be His alone rather than all humanity's. Of course, Christ's private moral goodness in allowing Himself to be tortured to death for our sakes is still very important! Given His omnipotence, our Atonement could not have happened without His assent. Also, to be a valid sacrifice, Christ must affix His subjective assent to the act. (Compare: consent of both partners is needed to validly consummate a marriage, but the bride and groom just thinking consensual loving thoughts about each other is itself insufficient to consummate a marriage. What is needed is the symbolic physical act of intercourse to whose meaning the participants affix their assent.) No doubt, two millennia of Christian devotion were not wrong to draw inspiration and devotion from the memory of our Savior's love and fortitude unto death. However, we must avoid the temptation to over-spiritualize His work, lest we make the Incarnation seem pointless! The crucifixion did not happen just to teach us a lesson or to give us an example or for Jesus to win merit by His private virtue.

Given this unashamedly carnal focus, it is natural that images of Christ's execution play so large a role in Catholic worship and devotion. Walk into a Catholic Church, and you will be confronted by crucifixes and stations of the cross. We place crucifixes on rosaries, necklaces, and holy cards. At the start and end of each prayer, we sign ourselves by the instrument of His murder. In the Blessed Sacrament, we claim to make His sacrifice our own.

Chapter 3: The sacramental life

How to earn salvation? You can't. The idea of a just God rewarding or punishing each soul according to its individual merits is something one must *overcome* in order to understand any of the branches of Christianity. How can it be that the righteousness of Jesus Christ and His own relationship to God the Father are transmitted to other human beings? Catholics approach these questions with our distinctive attitude toward symbols and the public world; our answer comes from our distinctive doctrines on faith and the Church, grace and the sacraments. Christ's sacrifice, as we have argued, was a public symbolic act, meaning it is the sort of act that can be appropriated by other people via public symbolic signification. This was discussed at some length in part II, but recall the key power of symbols to unite the actions of multiple people into a single meaningful act. Christ's sacrifice doesn't inspire us to offer distinct, lesser sacrifices of our own. Through the sacraments, we participate in His own sacrifice, a sacrifice that itself contains in symbol His whole identity as the Son of the Father. We thus inject ourselves into the life of the Trinity, or, to put it more traditionally, the Trinity becomes present in our souls through grace.

From this understanding, the Catholic doctrines of the Eucharist follow. The Protestants call it a "symbol", and we agree—it is a symbol that God makes true. It is a sacrifice, the very same sacrifice of Calvary sacramentally recalled for our appropriation. Through this symbolic appropriation, the Blessed Sacrament is also a source of grace, the constitutive act of the Church, an establishment of communion with God and all His children in heaven and on Earth.

As with all symbolic signification, both a subjective (private) element and an objective (public) element are necessarily involved. In the objective realm are the sacramental signs that, by their objective symbolic meanings, incorporate us into Christ's death and resurrection. To claim possession of these meanings requires the subjective element—the soul's interior "Amen" of faith.

Symbolism: the objective element of the sacraments

The meaning of the sacraments, that which is "spoken through" them, is given entirely by the acts themselves (which includes words spoken) read through the normative context of salvation history. Thus, to understand what the Eucharist or Holy Orders means, one notes the words spoken and actions performed and asks "What meaning does this suggest, given the story of God's covenant with Israel and revelation through Jesus?" One does not ask what the participants of the sacrament are thinking; nor does one worry about their personal character. The potency of the sacrament likewise comes from God alone, Who acting through the symbol makes it to be a true statement. Hence the Catholic doctrine that the sacraments operate *ex opere operato*.

The suprapersonal nature of the sacraments allows a soul to "claim" Jesus' words to His Father. All those claiming Christ in this way thus make, not many

statements to the Father, but a single one (appropriated many times). They speak with a single voice, that of Christ Himself, and so constitute a corporate person. This is the Church, called “the mystical body of Christ”. Catholics believe that grace not only unites our souls with God, but also with each other. Grace may “flow” from God to one person through another. This sense of a supernatural connection between those in a state of grace, living or dead, is what inspires those distinctively Catholic practices of offering prayers for the souls in Purgatory and praying for the intercession of the saints.

Faith: the subjective element of the sacraments

Of course, salvation is through faith, a Biblical truth affirmed by both Protestants and Catholics. Faith opens the soul to grace. Its act of trust is an interior, private reality; each person must make his own act of trust. However, the revelation we are to accept is a public thing. I am saved not by accepting my private faith—some set of propositions on religious subjects, understood as I understand them—but by accepting the faith of the Church. To accept the faith of the Church does not mean that one has looked at an exhaustive list of Catholic doctrines and decided that one agrees with every one of them. Of course, knowingly dissenting from a Catholic doctrine does disqualify one from holding the Church’s faith, but to have gone through an exhaustive list is neither required nor possible. This is because the faith of the Church really refers to the meaning of her sacramental worship—that which the Mass and the sacraments objectively “say”. *Lex orandi, lex credendi*. Because these are suprarational, their doctrinal content is inexhaustible. It makes perfect sense even for a well-educated Catholic to say that he knows little about his own faith. And yet he does believe it, even the part he doesn’t know. Such is the nature of trust that one doesn’t require a full understanding of what one is believing to really believe it. Faith is the interior “Amen” to the meaning of the sacraments, the conviction of the participant to mean what his acts objectively mean and to believe what they objectively proclaim, even though he grasps their meaning only imperfectly.

Faith is, thus, an open-ended commitment; no one really knows all of what he’s “signed up for” at his baptism. For Catholics, this does relate to the authority of the Church, the competence of her teaching office to reliably draw out the doctrines implied by her inherited worship. However, Protestantism’s acceptance of the Bible’s authority gives it a public character as well. The Protestant accepts the Bible’s authority without imagining that he has completely plumbed its depths. Like the Catholic, he may end up surprised by some of the things he’s committed to believing. Even for “faith alone” Protestants, Christianity always ends up being an adventure of getting outside one’s own head. And that’s a good thing.

Chapter 4: Vows

A sacred vow gives form to a life.

Man loves his freedom but finds no happiness in it. As a miser hordes his gold, so the freedom-lover hordes his options. Both make the same mistake. Just as the only joy in money is in spending it, the only joy in freedom is in casting it away in the act of commitment. This indeed is the ultimate self-mastery, to hold one's entire life in hand and, in one moment's vow, to offer it whole to God. The Church offers man the life-disciplines of marriage, holy orders, or the religious life. In embracing one, he imposes on his life a unity and definiteness, an overarching project to be completed, a narrative to be lived. His life becomes an intelligible thing, now that each episode can be related to the primary plot line. To make one's life something definite certainly restricts one's future freedom, and some find this frightening. It is also true that to see one's life as a single, definite thing is also to see it as a finite thing; in every ordination or wedding is an intimation of mortality, and many I suspect find this frightening as well. But what is the alternative? An uncommitted life, a formless life, the meaningless expanse of years. Such is the life fashioned by modern man's miserly freedom-hoarding, the clinging to escape clauses that vitiate even those commitments he does (sort of) make. Stuck in indeterminacy, he loses the vow's moment of existential mastery and the subsequent comforts of a meaningful connection to his past and future.

Marriage and ordination are gifts that enlarge the soul.

Marriage and ordination are great blessings, but it would be wrong to think that, just because the free vow lies at their heart, they are blessings we bestow upon ourselves by sheer force of will. A mere private act of will, such as a decision by a man to be faithful to a particular woman, could never order an entire life like a marriage vow can, because one moment's decision can be overturned by any future moment's regret. Why should his will then have authority over his will now? Even to promise himself to the woman is not enough, because she would then be the holder of the promise and could at any moment release him. In marriage, through its power of sacramental signification, God lends the couple His own voice, empowering them to make a sacred vow with a moral force beyond their or anyone else's reach. There is a promise, but God Himself is its holder. It is an act of freedom, yes, but a supernatural freedom bestowed by our Father in Heaven.

What's more, if vocation were a mere act of will, its content could be nothing more than what was consciously willed; whatever was in one's head at that moment becomes the guiding light to one's life. If that were the case, then the Church's enemies would be right to see this as a diminishment of a man. The vow would constrict his spirit, never allowing him to grow beyond the vision of that moment when he calcified his soul. In fact, the three particular Christian vocations, although chosen by us, are not made by us. Each is a great suprapersonal mystery, something larger than the soul that chooses it,

something into which one grows. To choose one of these paths is to expand one's soul, opening previously inaccessible spiritual vistas, not to contract it.

Marriage and the wisdom of recklessness

Marriage is the most lowly vocation, but it is nevertheless more beautiful than anything in the profane world. In this station the family, one's role as mother or father, is the main organizing principle of one's life. Reduced to its essence, the marriage contract is a public agreement a particular man shall be recognized as father to a particular woman's offspring, with all the duties to each other that this implies. Contrary to what is often said today, the love of the spouses is not the contract's defining feature. Marriage is, however, the natural fulfillment of romantic love. The Church didn't invent the idea that a man and woman should promise each other exclusivity and permanence—lovers have always promised each other that; love carries with it the impulse to make such vows. The Church is unique only in allowing these vows to mean precisely what they say.

Would any lover be content to make the marriage vows to his beloved while replacing the promise "till death" with "unless I become unhappy"? Surely not. True love scorns such timidity. Even heretics and heathen, who admit divorce in principle, would think it base not to at least pretend to marry in the Catholic way. They call the Catholic way cruel, because it traps spouses in "unhappy" and "failed" marriages. But the vow's "cruelty"—the depth of self-sacrifice it may potentially demand—is inseparable from its grandeur. Moderns are never trapped in unhappy marriages at the cost that to be married now just means to be accidentally not yet divorced. Like soldiers, married Catholics know that their honor is tied to the magnitude of sacrifice they may have to make. Who would be so reckless as to take such a vow? Anyone who has been in love. For all its sentimentality, the world does not respect romantic love nearly as much as the Church does. Modernity indulges lovers, but it doesn't respect them. It treats them like drunks whose car keys need to be taken away. Yes, lovers feel compelled to promise each other undying love, but this is a sort of madness, and it would be cruel to hold them to it after they've sobered up. The Catholic Church, on the other hand, sees love—and *especially* the urge to make of one's life a gift to another in contempt for one's future freedom or ease—as a special lucidity of mind, and she grants to lovers her supernatural binding power. What modernity calls wisdom, the prioritizing of personal happiness over marital duty as if life were long and eternity short, is where we see a clouding and enfeeblement of the mind.

Career as modernity's replacement for marriage

It is sad to think of a person looking back on a life of hopping from spouse to spouse and family to family. (Like Saint Paul, I suspect that even widowers would be happier not remarrying, although there is no sin in them doing so.) What would such a life be about? Where would be the unity to it? The modern world, which celebrates divorce, does have an answer to this, though more often implied than stated. For the modern man, career is supposed to be the focus of one's life. Career is the ultimate substantive good in the world's

dominant ideologies of liberalism, capitalism, and feminism. Career is what liberalism means by freedom and what feminism means by self-actualization. Looking back on his life, modern man on his deathbed can recollect how well he climbed up the corporate ladder. *That* is what his life was about. *That* is the freedom that the destruction of Catholic patriarchy delivers.

The priesthood is not a job.

Vocations to the priesthood and religious life are similar in spirit to marriage, but more elevated in that God is more directly the object of self-offering. Much of the world's confusion about the Catholic priesthood stems from failing to realize that the priesthood is a vocation, not a job (or—Heaven forbid!—a career). Thus, we hear many asinine remarks about how women or married temporary functionaries could perform the same functions as an ordained man. This is false (no one but an ordained man can consecrate the Eucharist, the main duty of a priest), and the reason is that a man's priestly role has to be his core self-identity. Suppose one were to say that a revolving sequence of babysitters could take care of a child just as well as his mother could. Of course, the babysitters could do many of the same things as the mother, but the depth of meaning would be lost, because when a mother cares for her child, these acts are the very heart of her life. Priesthood is spiritual fatherhood; we even call our priests "father". What wife and children are to a married man, his parishioners are to a priest.

(This understanding, while somewhat safeguarded by the discipline of celibacy, which deprives the priest of any competing "private life", has been gravely obscured in recent times by the horrible policy of rotating priests from parish to parish every six years or so. Evidently, the bishops have begun thinking of their priests as mere employees, who needn't develop a personal patriarchal relationship with their parish, and the laity have just taking this attitude to its logical conclusion of wanting married/women/pervert priests who can "do the job just as well".)

When, endowed by God with a special sacramental character, the priest stands on the altar and speaks Christ's own words in His place, we see the heart of his life. The perfection of the Eucharistic sacrifice demands that the identity of priest and victim be maintained. The priest must sacramentally identify as Jesus Christ. This must be the core of his life and his identity, with his own personality displaced to the periphery.

Religious life: a deliberate scandal to the worldly

Then there is the religious life, which scandalizes modern men most of all. Marriage they understand as emotional fulfillment, and a priest they imagine to be a funny kind of therapist, but what could be the point of monks and nuns? Some indeed perform secularly useful charitable work, but we should be clear that the purpose of most religious orders is not to staff schools, hospitals, and soup kitchens. It would be closer to the truth to say that their purpose is to

give the sort of scandal they give, to present the sort of life that can't be understood, or even (like marriage and the priesthood) misunderstood by worldly minds. The religious stand out as a sign that temporal usefulness is not the ultimate measure of value, that what we call "the real world" is a small and transient thing in the light of eternity. Appreciate why the Church thinks it good that some should devote their lives to prayer, and one can then understand why she thinks it good that others should marry or be priests.

Chapter 5: Moral rules

Five hundred years ago, when somebody said that Catholic beliefs don't make sense, he was probably talking about something like Transubstantiation; today, when somebody says that, he's almost certainly talking about sex. While moral rules are not the focal point of Catholicism, they are closely connected to it. However, to one who holds the Catholic perspective as I have described it—an alertness to the symbolic depth of the public world—the Church's rules on sex, killing, usury, submission to authority, and the like are no scandal to the intellect. They are rather such natural conclusions that the Church's commitment to them is evidence for her reliability.

Morality cannot be reduced to intentions and consequences

Why though do modern men think the Church's prohibitions on contraception, remarriage, usury, etc. don't make sense? It is because they can only conceive of three reasons an act could be wrong: a malicious motive, bad consequences for other peoples' happiness, or an invasion of other peoples' legitimate spheres of personal autonomy (i.e. violating their "rights"). Now, many things Catholicism calls sins are bad for these reasons, but not all. Consider masturbation or assisting someone else's suicide. Why does the Church forbid these things? Did it just never occur to us that masturbation doesn't hurt anybody, that the motive—carnal pleasure—is the same motive I have when I put honey in my tea? Has nobody pointed out to us that to help a man kill himself relieves pain and enhances his control over his life?

No, trust me, we're familiar with the arguments from these sorts of observations, and we've rejected them. They all hinge on a false premise, seldom even stated and always sloppily taken to be coterminous with reason itself. I mean the assumption that the meaning of an act (and, hence, its moral status) can only depend on the intention of the actor and the consequences for other people. Following this assumption, one can say that any act is licit if the actor intends no harm and no one is inconvenienced. However, Catholicism rejects this reduction of morality. I belabor the point because one cannot understand Catholic morality at all without realizing this, and very many people don't. For Catholics, meaning also comes from the embedded symbolism in the material and social world. An act can thus have a meaning independent of its effects on others or its author's intention, and so it can be sinful on account of this meaning.

Man the symbol-bearer; inviolability of human life

This is the true dignity of man—his symbolic potency, the fact that, unlike a puddle of water or a mouse, he can perform acts of the greatest meaning; he can perform true worship or true sacrilege. Our recognition of this dignity differs fundamentally from the Kantian respect for persons based on their status as subjects. Intellect and will are certainly a crucial part of humanity's capacity for meaningful action, but they are not the whole of it. The human body itself participates in this symbolic "charge", as does the community of humans. After all, we participate in God's sovereignty through government, in His act of creation through coitus, and in His great sacrifice through digestion. The whole organism is the bearer of this awesome significance, not just the mind which is a part but most certainly not the owner of the whole.

Thus, the respect due to human persons is not just a respect for their wills, which may be malformed or nonexistent in certain cases. The Catholic prohibition against murder is in many ways stricter than what modern man finds reasonable. It protects all human organisms—the preconscious fetus, the mentally disabled, and the unconscious, every bit as much as those alert enough to object to their own murder. It prohibits suicide and mercy killing because our lives are not our own, and we may not dispose of them at will. Man, in his symbolic potency, is a temple of God, and to destroy him is itself an act of terrible symbolic meaning.

Sexual purity

Similarly, Catholic sexual ethics bases itself on the recognition that sex is a natural symbol with an objective meaning. It is a sort of natural analog to a sacrament given by God to the family to signify and effect the union of two lives in the creation of a third. Sex is not a blank page on which we may write any meaning or lack thereof we like. Its procreative end and its reference to the total commitment of marriage are already given; these have, as it were, arrived on the scene before us and already made their claims. Our only options are to respect the act's given meaning or to reject it, to vandalize it by reducing it to our own ends. When properly used, sex has the power as a supra-rational signifier to draw the soul out of itself and beyond its native powers. God gives the husband and wife one of His own "words" for their use, so that by affixing their assent to the conjugal act's given meaning, they are able to "speak" through their bodies with a depth and finality beyond the power of spoken words. To reject the act's meaning through fornication, adultery, or contraception, to reduce God's donated word to raw material for one's gratification, is not just a failure to take advantage of something beautiful God offers; it is gravely sinful rebellion.

Social justice

As a final scandal to the modern mind, the Church proposes these truths not only to the individual in his private conscience, but to the community as well. She rejects liberalism not only on the level of substantive morality but also on the formal level of liberalism's commitment to private autonomy via public

neutrality. Not only is public neutrality on matters of goodness and justice impossible anyway, so that liberals end up using the state and media to promote licentiousness and careerism; neutrality is undesirable, because it deprives men of one of the greatest goods: membership in communities of shared moral vision. In fact, following Cicero and Augustine, one might well question whether a real community can be said to exist at all without being built around a moral consensus. Here is the source of Catholicism's infamous hostility to democracy and capitalism. Not that elections and markets are bad things per se, but they should not be allowed to control a society's ethos, because their fundamental principle is choice rather than love or duty.

Justice, then, is social as well as individual, in that societies as well as private citizens must render to good and evil their due. The first command of social justice is that the community must recognize God's corporate sovereignty over it. Next, a properly formed moral consensus must be embodied in the community's laws and customs. Sometimes a certain form of wickedness cannot be forcibly suppressed, but it should never be officially approved or culturally celebrated. Thus, for instance, a healthy moral consensus can rightly defend itself by banning pornography and homosexual propaganda. At the very least, it must insist on not ceding control of the public realm—what is taught in schools, what is affirmed by statesmen, what may be said in public without scandal—to such vile influences. Lastly, because elections and markets have in themselves no explicit orientation to the Good, the community must impose such an orientation on them from outside. The form that such regulation takes might vary widely, but it must allow citizens to experience their community as a moral enterprise rather than a libertarian jungle of mutual exploitation and predation against the weak.

Chapter 6: Last things

Being towards judgement

We have seen that the mind is less the ultimate bestower of meaning than the ultimate locus of ambiguity. Everyone is a mix of good and evil; even my good deeds are vitiated by resentment or expectation of reward. My very freedom traps me in ambiguity by making it impossible for me to make an irrevocable choice for obedience to God. To the extent that I control myself enough to choose good today, to that same extent it will be in my power to repudiate good tomorrow.

Once again, the rescue must be to appropriate meaning from without. God it was Who, through the sacrament of marriage, allowed my life to have an overall plot. God it will be Who will give my life an overall resolution. At the end of life, or so Catholics believe, each soul will be judged, and at that moment that life's definitive truth—as a story of transformation in Christ or rebellion to the end—will be established. Death and judgement are the inescapable horizon, marking, as death does for atheists, each life as finite, contingent, and individual. Each of us

must suffer his own death and have rendered his own personal judgment. However, we are assured that Jesus has gone before us and by his great sacrifice offered salvation to all.

This is not to say that all will ultimately be saved. For most of the Church's history, the assumption has been that the judgment of most is one of damnation. The Catholic attitude thus tends to be different from the Protestant "assurance of salvation". A Catholic, knowing his own inner indeterminacy and freedom to reject God, expects no such assurance. After all, even if I am in a state of grace now, what's to stop me from choosing mortal sin tomorrow? I can be sure of God's continued assistance, but not that I won't thwart it. True, from God's atemporal perspective, each man is either predestined or reprobate. However, this is not a perspective we can share until death. Human life is, by its nature, the realm of time, uncertainty ("fear and trembling"), and freedom.

The ascent of Mount Purgatory

Yet life's resolution is more than an external judgment. Jesus Christ said that even the least in the Kingdom of Heaven is greater than John the Baptist (Matt. 11:11). To really vanquish sin and erase its hold, the soul must be internally purged and cleansed; the seed of charity in it must permeate and reorder the whole. The saints and martyrs show us what souls ordered by charity can do. Many willingly endured ostracism, poverty, torture, mutilation, and death out of loyalty to God. Reading their stories, I wonder whether I too would have chosen to endure such things if put in their situations. It would be nice to think so, but I don't sense any great reserves of courage in me. I can hope (and am commanded to pray) that God will deliver me while on Earth from intolerable temptations. However, I cannot hope (and nor should I really want to) that this will mean getting into heaven "on the cheap" with my weak character and petty sinfulness intact. Only souls that would endure unimaginable tortures rather than turn away from God are capable of beatitude. And yet we know that such virtue does not come cheaply.

Dante presents a gripping image of Purgatory as a vast mountain whose ascent represents the rectification of the soul, culminating in the recovery of original innocence. The souls in Purgatory undergo penances as extreme as the punishments in hell, but with the crucial difference that they are undertaken willingly and in a spirit of hope. In Dante's telling, the souls of the Church Suffering display an almost superhuman single-mindedness toward their penances; so perhaps shall it someday be with us. Today I know myself to be very weak, barely on God's side at all. How many eons in Purgatory might it take to forge in me the soul of a saint? Yet every Catholic knows that God has the power to make a saint out of anyone, and that He will settle for nothing less.