Activities

Read Romans 8:14-17 and Galatians 4:4-7. Think of God as the Goal of your life and as the One from whom you come—the Father. Think of Jesus at your side, teaching you to call God "Father," standing with you as you pray—the Son. Think of God within you, inspiring you to lift up your heart to the Father, giving depth and feeling to your prayer—the Holy Spirit.

This prayer of praise to the Trinity is said often by Catholics:

Prayer of Praise

Glory to the Father, and to the Son, and to the Holy Spirit; as it was in the beginning, is now, and will be for ever. Amen.

CHAPTER SIX
Jesus Gives Us Communion With the Saints

Walk into anyone's home and you are likely to find pictures of family members from generations past—grandparents who moved to the area, parents who built the house, relatives who form the family tree. If you inquire, you may be shown mementos like the books they read, the jewelry they wore, keepsakes they treasured, and diaries they kept. We like to recall our past, search for roots, and delve into our background in a quest for information about our ancestors.

We who are Catholic remember those who have gone before us in our Church family. We hope to learn from the saints and so come to a deeper knowledge of ourselves. We look to them for inspiration, courage, and hope.

Remembering and Honoring the Saints (C 957, 1159–62)

Some people criticize Catholics for honoring the saints. But it is biblical to remember and honor them. The eleventh chapter of Hebrews is a "verbal memorial" in honor of the holy men and women of the Old Testament. Hebrews 13:7 advises: "Remember your leaders who spoke the word of God to you. Consider the outcome of their way of life and imitate their faith."

It is also natural to honor great people from the past. In our national capital, the Washington Monument, the Lincoln Memorial, and many other shrines and statues honor government and military leaders. Catholics name churches after saints and erect statues to honor spiritual leaders.

The Communion of Saints (C 946–62)

We do more than remember. We believe in a union, called the communion of saints, which includes all those who are joined to Christ on earth, in heaven, and in purgatory.

We believe that the saints care about us and watch over us, that they pray for us, and that we can pray with them. We base these beliefs on holy Scripture. In the Book of Revelation, the saints in heaven are pictured as offering to God the prayers of God's people: "Each of the elders held a harp and gold bowls filled with incense, which are the prayers of the holy ones" (5:8). 2 Maccabees 15:12-15 reports a vision in which the martyred high priest Onias and the prophet Jeremiah pray for the Jewish nation; this demonstrates the Jewish belief that saints are aware of earthly events and pray for us. Moses and Elijah appear with Jesus at the Transfiguration and talk with him about his coming Passion and death (Luke 9:28-36). Jesus speaks of the "joy in heaven over one sinner who repents" (Luke 15:7). The Letter to the Hebrews compares life to a race we run while the great heroes of the past are in the stands cheering us on. "Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us... persevere in running the race that lies before us" (Hebrews 12:1).

These passages imply interaction between those in heaven and those on earth, and we should be aware of the presence and loving care of the saints. Those who are "in heaven" are close to the knowledge and love of God and, therefore, are more aware of our needs and more devoted to us than they were on earth. We are never alone, for we live "in communion" with the saints.

Praying to the Saints (C 956, 2683–84)

Sometimes Catholics are asked, "Why do you pray to the saints? Why don't you just pray directly to God?" We should first note that "pray" is used in two different ways by Catholics. We "pray" to God as the source of all blessings. We "pray" to the saints in the sense that we ask them to pray with us and for us. This is illustrated in two prayers frequently said by Catholics. In the Lord's Prayer, we ask God to "give us this day our daily bread" and to "forgive us our trespasses." In the Hail Mary, we ask Mary to "pray for us sinners."

Catholics are sometimes criticized for "worshiping" the saints,

especially Mary. We do not worship the saints. *Worship* and *adoration* are terms that refer to the act of acknowledging God as the Supreme Being. We Catholics worship and adore God alone.

But why pray to the saints at all? The answer lies in the importance of prayer with others and for others. Jesus places a special importance in common prayer: "For where two or three are gathered together in my name, there am I in the midst of them" (Matthew 18:20). Since there is a particular value in praying with others, and since the Bible shows that those in heaven pray for us, it certainly makes sense for us to pray *with* the saints.

It also makes sense for us to ask them to pray *for* us. Paul wrote to the Colossians: "Persevere in prayer, being watchful in it with thanksgiving; at the same time, pray for us, too" (4:2-3). Paul prayed directly to God, but he felt it was important to have others intercede for him. If the prayers of those on earth have value, then how much more so the prayers of the saints who stand at the throne of God in heaven!

The prayers of others are needed, not to convince God to bless us but to open us up to the blessings God wants us to receive. Since that is the case, the more intercessors we have on earth and in heaven, the more we can be freed of the hindrances of sin and unbelief which keep us from receiving God's assistance.

We can and should pray directly to God. But our prayers to God take on new life and power when we consciously join them to the prayers of the saints. And each time we pray with the saints, including friends and family members who have died in Christ, we are reminded that we are never alone. Prayer to the saints "keeps us in touch" with them until we join them in heaven.

Canonization of Saints (C 828)

The New Testament addressed Christians on earth as the "saints," but Catholic tradition very quickly began to apply the term to holy individuals who had entered eternal life, especially to those who had been martyred for Christ. Details of their sufferings, last words, and death were recalled. The apostles, martyrs, and holy people were remembered by the Church and invoked in prayer. The tombs of the martyrs were regarded as holy places. When the Church spread throughout the world, groups of believers began to honor their own saints. As stories were told about the great people of the past, legends began to spring up, and it was

not always possible to distinguish fact from fiction in the lives of the saints.

By the tenth century the Church developed a process called "canonization," in which those who had led holy lives were formally named saints. In the sixteenth century a special commission was set up to study the lives of saintly individuals and to make recommendations to the pope about their canonization. More recently there has been much historical research into the lives of the saints, and the Church has limited its formal recognition to saints whose lives could be studied and verified. The Catholic Church has a liturgical "calendar of the saints," honoring those whose lives have a special importance for the whole Church. Many other saints are remembered only in specific localities or by particular groups.

Devotions in Honor of the Saints (C 1173, 1195)

The Catholic Church has a holy day of obligation in honor of "All Saints" on the first of November. This feast acknowledges that there are innumerable human beings who have been saved by the blood of Christ, "a great multitude, which no one could count, from every nation, race, people, and tongue" (Revelation 7:9). We all have our "own saints" before the throne of God.

Masses are celebrated in honor of the saints often on weekdays, and occasionally on Sundays. This practice encourages us to remember their lives and to ask them to pray for us. There are prayers and private devotions honoring various saints, and Catholics are encouraged to pray to the saints in their own words.

It goes without saying that devotion to the saints should help us grow in our commitment to Jesus Christ. The saints direct us to Christ and would not want our enthusiasm for them to distract us from Jesus. Real devotion to the saints sees Christ's face mirrored in his faithful followers and leads us closer to him.

The Saints: Models of Christlike Living (C 1717, 2030, 2156)

When families get together, they often talk about relatives who have gone before them. They remember a grandfather who donated land for a church cemetery and the aunt who worked day and night to support her family during the Depression. Such recollections give us a sense of oneness with the past and encourage

us to persevere in our efforts to lead worthwhile lives. In a similar way our Catholic family remembers our "relatives" in the faith. They form a family tree that is rooted in Jesus Christ. They teach us how to follow Christ in every way of life, and they encourage us to persevere.

Carpenters can look to Saint Joseph to discover that they can be "just" men using hammer and saw. Young people can see in Saint Maria Goretti a model of purity and devotion to Jesus. Mothers can imitate Saint Elizabeth Ann Seton in her dedication to her family. Farmers can learn from Saint Isidore that there is holiness in working the soil, caring for animals, and sharing food with the poor. There are "patron saints" for every vocation and way of life. By studying the lives of the saints, we discover how sanctity may be found in every place and age.

What is just as important, we find that the saints were human beings like us. They had faults and failings, even the greatest of them. When we deny Christ by sin, we can turn to Peter, for he knew what it was like to fail and to receive forgiveness from the Lord. When we fear that we have squandered too many years in petty foolishness, we can ask for the help of Saint Augustine, who prayed, "Too late have I loved Thee, O Beauty ever Ancient, ever New. Too late have I loved Thee." When we sin, or when we succeed, there are saints who walked the path before us and found their way to heaven. They inspire us and lead us on.

The Souls in Purgatory (C 958, 1030–32)

Catholics believe that some people may experience death when they are neither cut off from God by serious sin nor perfectly free from all venial sin. They need further "purification" from sin to achieve the holiness necessary to stand in God's presence where "nothing unclean will enter" (Revelation 21:27). The Catholic Church teaches that such individuals can be helped by the prayers of others. This belief goes back to Old Testament times and finds expression in the New Testament as well.

Some Jewish soldiers fighting in the war for independence under Judas Maccabeus had been slain in battle. They were found to be wearing pagan amulets, a practice forbidden by Jewish law. Their comrades prayed for the dead "that the sinful deed might be fully blotted out." Then Judas "took up a collection among all his soldiers, amounting to two thousand silver drachmas, which he sent

to Jerusalem to provide for an expiatory sacrifice." The Bible comments that this was "holy and pious" and affirms that "he made atonement for the dead that they might be freed from this sin" (2 Maccabees 12:38-46).

The New Testament (2 Timothy 1:18) contains a prayer for one who had died: Paul says of his friend, Onesiphorus: "May the Lord grant him to find mercy from the Lord on that day." As the footnotes in the *New American Bible* point out, Onesiphorus apparently died before this letter was written. His family is mentioned twice (2 Timothy 1:16; 4:19), though it was Onesiphorus himself who was helpful to Paul in prison and rendered much service to the community at Ephesus. Because Paul complains of abandonment by all in Asia during his second imprisonment and trial, the assistance of Onesiphorus seems to have been given to Paul during his first Roman imprisonment (A.D. 61-63).

Inspired by these passages, believers prayed for their beloved dead from New Testament times, as evidenced by inscriptions in the Roman catacombs, early Christian burial places. In the fourth century Saint Monica made this deathbed request of her son, Saint Augustine: "One thing only I ask you, that you remember me at the altar of the Lord wherever you may be."

The practice of praying for the deceased was unchallenged until a controversy over indulgences at the time of Martin Luther. An indulgence is a declaration that certain prayers or actions of Christians have special value because they share in the grace of Christ and in the good works of the saints. The Church applies indulgences to the deceased, following the biblical teaching of Paul that members of Christ's Body can help one another (1 Corinthians 12:12-27) and that the merits of one member can be applied to others (Colossians 1:24). However, indulgences can be misunderstood and abused. Some abuses existed at the time of Luther. In reacting against them, Luther unfortunately went to the extreme of denying the validity of indulgences. He then rejected the practice of praying for the dead altogether. As a result, many Protestant denominations today do not pray for the deceased.

The Catholic Church has continued to pray for the dead, and this prayer has brought consolation and peace to the bereaved. When we stand at the grave of a loved one, we are not helpless onlookers. By God's grace we can reach across space and time to assist the faithful departed by our prayers. We believe that their

prayers can help us as well. Death may cause physical separation, but it cannot destroy the spiritual bonds Christ has forged between us and those who have died in his grace.

Mary: Our Blessed Mother (C 484–511, 721–26, 963–75, 2673–79)

Catholics give special honor to Mary, the Mother of Jesus Christ. She was chosen by God to be the Mother of God's only Son. Without doubt, this was the greatest privilege and the most significant of all human accomplishments, after those of Jesus. The Bible states that "all ages" will call Mary blessed (Luke 1:48) and, in obedience to this passage, generations of Catholics have been proud to call Mary their "Blessed Mother."

Mary has a unique place in Scripture. She is greeted by the angel Gabriel with words that show God's esteem for her: "Hail, favored one! The Lord is with you" (Luke 1:28). She is the faithful "handmaid of the Lord" (Luke 1:38) who assents to God's will. Elizabeth salutes Mary, "Most blessed are you among women" (Luke 1:42). In the Gospel of John, it is Mary who occasions the first miracle worked by Jesus (John 2:1-11), and John's use of the term *woman* in reference to Mary may well be an allusion to the "woman" of Genesis: Mary is the "new Eve" and Mother of all the living. Mary is again addressed as "woman" at the Crucifixion. "When Jesus saw his mother and the disciple there whom he loved, he said to his mother, 'Woman, behold, your son.' Then he said to the disciple, 'Behold, your mother'" (John 19:26-27). The Beloved Disciple may be seen to represent all Christians, and Mary is given to us as our Mother.

The Bible clearly teaches that we are the Body of Christ. Since there is a mystical, but real, identification of Jesus with his followers, the Mother of Jesus is our Mother too. And the very fact that Mary is our Mother should help us realize what Vatican II taught explicitly—that Mary is one of us, a member of the Church, and one of those redeemed by Christ.

The Immaculate Conception (C 490–94)

The Catholic Church believes that Mary was conceived without sin. Many people confuse this doctrine with that of the virginal conception of Christ, but the two are different. The doctrine of the Immaculate Conception teaches that Mary, by God's grace,

was preserved from all stain of original sin and that she herself never sinned. When the doctrine was proclaimed by Pope Pius IX in 1854, he explained that Mary shared in the redemptive act of Christ in that she was saved by the foreseen merits of Christ. The Immaculate Conception is rooted in Scripture passages like Luke 1:28 (Mary is "full of grace"). It was taught through sacred Tradition and believed universally by Catholics before being defined as dogma (official teaching) by the Church.

Mother of God (C 495)

Catholics believe that Mary is truly the Mother of God. This does not mean that Mary was the source of the divine nature of Jesus, but that she was the Mother of his human nature and that there was no time when the human Jesus was not God. The second Person of the Trinity existed from all eternity, but when the "Word became flesh," Jesus was both human and divine from the first moment of his conception. Mary was not the Mother of a human being who was adopted as God's Son. She was Mother of Jesus Christ, both God and human. Therefore, it is proper for us to call Mary the "Mother of God."

Ever-Virgin (C 499–507)

The Bible teaches that Mary was a virgin when she gave birth to Christ. The Catholic Church has always believed that Mary remained a virgin her whole life. Early Christian writers agreed that Jesus had no blood brothers and sisters and that Mary remained a virgin. Saint Jerome (345-420) wrote that "learned men going back to apostolic times" testified to the perpetual virginity of Mary. Early Protestants, like Luther and Calvin, also believed in Mary's perpetual virginity. More recently, however, their belief has been questioned.

The New Testament speaks of "brothers" and "sisters" of Jesus. But it never refers to other children of Mary or Joseph, so it is impossible to prove from the Bible that Jesus actually had blood brothers or sisters. But there are many passages which indicate that he did not. For example, two of those who are called brothers of Jesus, namely James and Joseph (Matthew 13:55), are later identified as sons of a woman other than Mary (Matthew 27:56). If Mary had other children, it is difficult to explain why Jesus, as he hung on the cross, would have given Mary into the care of the Beloved Disciple (John 19:26-27). The word *brothers* is frequently

used in the New Testament for the followers of Jesus. (See, for instance, John 20:17-18; Luke 8:21.) So the New Testament does not provide any real evidence against the Church's belief. And early teachers like Jerome had no reason for stating that Jesus was an only child except that he actually was an only child! The Church has been guided by the same Holy Spirit who inspired the Bible, and the Church teaches that the brothers and sisters of Jesus were actually relatives and followers. The Church believes that Mary remained ever a virgin.

What is the importance of this belief? It points to the uniqueness of Jesus as the only Son of God. Mary and Joseph witnessed the miracle of Jesus' conception and birth. They realized that God had entrusted them with the greatest treasure in the history of the world, God's only Son. They understood that their task in life was to nurture and protect the Savior of the human race. Many years later, Jesus would speak of those who renounced marriage "for the sake of the kingdom of heaven" (Matthew 19:12). It cannot be surprising that Mary and Joseph would have wanted to give up their right to have other children in order to dedicate their lives exclusively to the care of God's Son. Mary's perpetual virginity is, therefore, another witness to the divinity of Jesus Christ.

The Assumption (C 966)

The doctrine of the Assumption is an important aspect of Catholic belief, infallibly taught by the Church. It was defined in 1950 by Pope Pius XII, not on his own initiative but in answer to millions of petitions from all over the world. Like the Immaculate Conception, the Assumption of Mary was accepted by Catholics for centuries before it became dogma. This doctrine proclaims that at the end of Mary's life on earth, Christ gave her victory over death, and her body shared fully in his Resurrection as ours will at the end of time. Because Mary never sinned, she was able to experience complete union with her Son, Jesus. This doctrine is a sign of hope because it points the way to heaven for us, who are, like Mary, members of the Church.

Apparitions of Mary (C 67)

Mary is our Mother, and Catholics have experienced her intercession in many ways. Generations of believers have praised Mary as one who has led them to the grace of God. Many trustworthy

and holy individuals have reported visions of Mary, often accompanied by messages that have been the source of countless blessings. Shrines at the sites of such appearances are visited by millions of people every year, most notably at Our Lady of Guadalupe in Mexico, at Lourdes in France, and at Fatima in Portugal.

The Catholic Church does not require that its members believe in such appearances, but there have been official declarations that some apparitions and the messages associated with them are not contrary to Catholic doctrine and are worthy of belief. We believe on the evidence of Scripture that God sends angels as messengers, and it is reasonable to believe that Jesus can send his Mother as an emissary. Many miracles of healing have occurred at Marian shrines; hundreds of them have been carefully studied by medical bureaus and have been declared to be beyond any medical explanation. The shrine at Lourdes is especially noted for its miracles and the care with which any reported miracles are examined by doctors, non-Catholic as well as Catholic. Anyone who studies these miracles, as they have been described in numerous books and magazine articles, cannot help but be amazed at the evident presence of God's power and grace working through the intercession of Mary.

Jesus said that we can judge a tree by its fruit, and we can see the good fruit of God's blessings flowing from Guadalupe, Lourdes, and Fatima. They are evidence of God's loving care and of Mary's maternal affection for us.

Devotions in Honor of Mary (C 971)

Mary has been honored in great works of architecture like Notre Dame in Paris, in beautiful music like Schubert's "*Ave Maria*," and in priceless masterpieces like the "Pietà." Churches, religious orders, universities, hospitals, streets, and cities have been named for Mary. But the greatest respect the Catholic Church pays to Mary is through the liturgical feasts in her honor.

Mary has a special place at Christmas, the birthday of Jesus. One week later, New Year's Day is celebrated by Catholics as a holy day under the title of Mary, Mother of God. The Solemnity of Mary's Assumption is observed as a holy day on the fifteenth of August, as is the Solemnity of the Immaculate Conception on the eighth of December. Many other liturgical celebrations bring Mary to mind at various times of the year.

There are nonliturgical prayers honoring Mary that are well known to most Catholics. The Hail Mary is one of the first prayers memorized by Catholic children. The first part is taken from the Bible and the second part asks Mary to "pray for us sinners now and at the hour of our death." The rosary recalls the great mysteries of our salvation, and through it Mary brings us closer to her Son. There are hymns, novenas, and litanies to Mary. Many Catholics wear medals, such as the miraculous medal, to honor Mary and to remind themselves of Mary's loving care. In many parishes May is observed as the month of Mary with processions and May crownings. October is set aside as the month of the holy rosary. In these and many other ways, Catholics show their love to Mary and ask her to help us grow closer to her Son, Jesus.

What a Family! (C 960–62)

Why honor the saints? Why pray to the saints? Why pray for the souls in purgatory? Because it's natural to remember our loved ones, to ask friends to pray for us, and to pray for our friends. Because it is a grand thing to belong to a good family, and Christ has called us to belong to the great family of believers, present and past, because all of us—believers on earth, saints in heaven, souls in purgatory—are one in the communion of saints. "So then you are no longer strangers and sojourners, but you are fellow citizens with the holy ones and members of the household of God, built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the capstone" (Ephesians 2:19-20). Indeed, what a family!

And as members of this family we are destined one day to change our dwelling place from earth to heaven. This happens through death and resurrection, as we shall see in the next chapter.

Questions for Discussion or Reflection

In your own words answer the questions, "Why do Catholics pray to the saints? Why don't they pray directly to God?" Do you have a favorite saint? Why does that saint appeal to you?

Activities

At baptism most Catholics are named after a saint. Write a brief description of your patron saint. Try to become more familiar with that

saint's life. If you attend a Catholic Church named after a saint, try to discover why that saint was chosen. Look through a Catholic magazine, such as the *Liguorian*. Search for articles on the lives of saints or for other references to saints.

If you would like to learn more about Mary, the Mother of Jesus, you may want to read *Morning Star... Christ's Mother and Ours*, Liguori Publications (see Bibliography).

A prayer Catholics say often is the Hail Mary:

Hail Mary, full of grace. The Lord is with thee. Blessed art thou among women, and blessed is the fruit of thy womb, Jesus. Holy Mary, Mother of God, pray for us sinners, now and at the hour of our death. Amen.

CHAPTER SEVEN
Jesus Brings Us to Fullness of Life

Sunlight streamed through her window, and Annie wheeled her chair into its warmth. Bright yellow daffodils bouncing in the wind outside made her remember an Easter dream sixty years before. She had only two weeks to wait until the birth of her first child. She was sitting at a window admiring the flowers near her porch steps when she must have fallen asleep. She began to dream, and in her dream she spoke with the child in her womb...

Hello, Johnny. *What? Who are you?* I'm your mother. *Mother? What's a mother?* Johnny, I'm the one, along with your father, who brought you into this world. *Oh? Then where are you? Why can't I see you?* You can't see me because you're living inside me. But soon you'll be born, and then we'll see each other. *Born? What does that mean?* Well, Johnny, you've been growing, and there's not enough room for you there. The life-support system that's keeping you alive won't work much longer. *You mean I'm going to die?* No, you won't die, you'll just begin to live in a new way. *Why should I believe that? I can't see you. Maybe you're not even there. Maybe I'm all alone and just imagining this.* Johnny, you don't think you just came from nothing, do you? Where you're living is real, but the world is much bigger than you think. When you're out here you'll grow tall and strong; you'll run and play; you'll make friends; you'll go hiking in the woods; you'll have a puppy. You'll... *Wait a minute. What are friends? What are woods? What's a puppy?* Friends and woods and puppies are...Johnny, I can't explain them because there's nothing like them where you are. The more I try to explain, the more impossible they'll seem to you. You'll just have to wait and see. *Now I know I'm imagining this. I'm going to die, and I'm afraid.* Johnny, don't be afraid. I

know this sounds hard to believe, and I can't really explain it to you, but it's real. Maybe this will help: do you know what your feet are? *Yes, and I have ten toes too!* That's right, Johnny. But what good are they to you in there? What can you use them for? *Nothing.* Right, Johnny, but you have them because there is an earth here for you to walk and run on. Your feet wouldn't make any sense if there weren't a world out here. Can you believe that? *I'd like to, really I would. But I'm afraid.* I know, and what you're afraid of, your birth, will have to come. There will be some pain and darkness. But then there will be light and life, more life than you can imagine. All I can say is that I've been through what you'll go through, and I'll be waiting here for you with open arms and a big smile. What you think of as death you'll find is really birth!

"That dream seemed so real," Annie thought. Two weeks later her son was born. He had grown into a man she'd always been proud of. He'd soon be coming at Easter to visit her at the nursing home....

Annie. A voice startled her out of her thoughts. An aide perhaps? She turned, but saw no one. Just the crucifix on the wall above her dresser. *Annie.* She heard the voice again, but this time it seemed to come from within. She understood. She closed her eyes and prayed, "Yes, Lord?"

Annie, it's almost time for you to come home. You mean I'm going to die? *No, Annie, you'll soon be born. You'll soon begin to live in a new way.* Lord, I'm afraid. Sometimes I doubt and wonder if you are really there. I wish I could see you face to face. *That's not possible now, Annie, because I'm on the other side of death. But you don't think you came from nowhere, do you?* No, but sometimes heaven seems like a fairy tale. *Well, I can't describe heaven any more than you could explain your world to Johnny before he was born.* I suppose so, Lord, but I'm still afraid. *I know, Annie, but think of your heart. Has it ever really been satisfied? Have you ever been completely happy? No, because your heart is made for God and for eternity. Johnny's feet were made for walking on earth, and your heart was made for heaven.* I'm still afraid, Lord. *Yes, Annie, and what you fear will have to come. There will be some pain and darkness. But then there will be light and life, more life than you can imagine. All I can say is that I've been through what you'll go through, and I'll be waiting here for you with open arms and a big smile. And what you think of as death you'll find is really birth!*

"Amen, Lord," Annie whispered. And she knew that her dream was real.

Death as Birth (C 988–1019)

We who are Catholic believe that death is not just an end but a new beginning. Perhaps the best way to understand this is to compare death with birth. We spent nine months in the womb of our mother. Then we outgrew our environment, and our life-support system could no longer sustain us. We "died" to life in the womb as everything keeping us alive seemed to fall apart. But "death" turned out to be birth, and we found ourselves suddenly in the light, living in a new way we could never have imagined. We found ourselves breathing and eating, using a new life-support system we could not have dreamed of in the womb. We found ourselves in a new world where there were opportunities for growth, knowledge, and love which far surpassed anything in the womb.

Death is really a second birth. Our life-support system, our body, will wear out because of age, illness, or accident. Everything that keeps us alive will seem to fall apart. But death will turn out to be birth once again, as darkness turns into day and we find ourselves suddenly in the Light, fully alive at last, face to face with Jesus Christ, in a new world with opportunities for growth, knowledge, and love which far surpass anything on earth.

How will this happen? We can't say for sure, although people who have had near-death experiences seem to have at least peeked into the doorway of the life to come. They tell of light, of peace, of being in touch with loved ones in ways unimaginable, of knowing they are loved, of being sure that God is, of having what they describe as a "spiritual body."

Paul wrote: "What you sow is not brought to life unless it dies. And what you sow is not the body that is to be but a bare kernel of wheat, perhaps, or of some other kind....So also is the resurrection of the dead. It is sown corruptible; it is raised incorruptible. It is sown dishonorable; it is raised glorious. It is sown weak; it is raised powerful. It is sown a natural body; it is raised a spiritual body" (1 Corinthians 15:36-37,42-44).

Because Christ died and rose, death will be birth. Because Christ rose, Paul assures us, we too shall be "brought to life" (1 Corinthians 15:22). Our resurrection and the eternal life that will follow are essential doctrines of our faith. Trusting in Jesus, we

can even look forward to the moment when we shall be born and say, not just with resignation but with joy and hope: "Father, into your hands I commend my spirit" (Luke 23:46).

The Particular Judgment (C 1020–22)

The Bible tells us that "it is appointed that human beings die once, and after this the judgment" (Hebrews 9:27). At the moment of our death, we will stand in the presence of God, seeing our years on earth as God sees them. We will understand the evil of sin with complete clarity, and we will grasp the full extent of Christ's love for us. If our fundamental direction in life has been toward God and if we have died in God's grace, we will be attracted to God's love in an ecstasy of gratitude and peace. If our fundamental direction has been away from God, so that we have died in unrepented mortal sin, we will be repulsed by the very love which called us into existence. This is the particular judgment: to stand in God's presence as we really are, to be judged by our own conscience, to be judged by the God of holiness and justice and love.

Many people who have been through a near-death experience report that soon after they leave their physical body they see an "instantaneous playback" of the events of their lives. Time seems to be suspended, for even if it takes only a few moments for doctors to revive them, they have enough "time" to review their whole life. Many say that they return to this life with an appreciation of the importance of love and knowledge and with new insight into the value of other things. Whether this experience is the beginning of the particular judgment is uncertain, but it can help us understand how the judgment might take place.

Catholics believe that through the particular judgment we become aware of our eternal destiny. In referring to the world to come, Jesus speaks of those who will enter into "eternal life" and of those who will go off to "eternal punishment" (Matthew 25:46). Catholics call eternal life "heaven" and eternal punishment "hell" and believe that those who are free from sin will enter heaven after judgment, but that those who have rejected God through unrepented mortal sin will enter hell. Individuals who are not guilty of unrepented grave (mortal) sin but come into God's presence with attachments to venial sins will need to be purified before they enter heaven, and their state of purification is called "purgatory." The reality of judgment, heaven, hell, and purgatory is taught as official doctrine by the Catholic Church.

Heaven (C 1023–29)

Heaven is referred to in Old Testament books like Wisdom, which mentions the "innocent souls' reward" (2:22), but not all Jews of Jesus' time believed in life after death. The Pharisees professed belief in eternal life; the Sadducees did not.

Jesus left no doubt about the reality of eternal life: "For this is the will of my Father, that everyone who sees the Son and believes in him may have eternal life" (John 6:40). This was no vague promise of reincarnation. Jesus said to the criminal who was crucified with him, "Today you will be with me in Paradise" (Luke 23:43). Just as the person who dies to life in the womb is the one born into this world, so the person who dies to this life is the one who enters eternal life.

We don't know exactly what heaven will be like. Paul says that he was "caught up into Paradise and heard ineffable things, which no one may utter" (2 Corinthians 12:4). John writes, "Beloved, we are God's children now; what we shall be has not yet been revealed. We do know that when it is revealed, we shall be like him, for we shall see him as he is" (1 John 3:2). As our life on earth surpasses life in the womb, so life in heaven will surpass this life. Certainly all that is good, beautiful, interesting, and exciting in this life will be more so in heaven, and what causes grief will pass away: "Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth....God himself will always be with them [as their God]. He will wipe every tear from their eyes, and there shall be no more death or mourning, wailing or pain, [for] the old order has passed away" (Revelation 21:1-4).

The greatest joy of heaven will be to see God "face to face." "Blessed are the clean of heart," promises Jesus, "for they will see God" (Matthew 5:8). Catholic tradition calls this vision of God the "beatific vision" because of the happiness it will bring us. And what an incredible experience it will be to stand in the presence of our Creator, to realize that what we have been longing for since the first moment of our existence is now ours forever, to feel completely loved and to love without limits. If we visualize great moments of joy in this life—time spent with a best friend, holidays with our family, arriving home after a long absence, pres-

entation of a diploma, a safe landing after a perilous flight, word from the doctor that we are cured—and if we put all these moments together, we can begin to imagine the happiness that will be ours when we arrive at our true home in heaven and stand in the presence of God!

Sometimes heaven is pictured as "up there" in the clouds, with saints and angels floating around strumming on harps. But heaven is the state of being joined to God and those who love God. Heaven is where God is, everywhere. It may be that God has created our vast universe because God wants us to have eternity to enjoy it. We will not be limited by space or time, and what an exciting prospect it is to have forever to explore all of creation in the company of our friends, the saints, and angels, and to visit with these great ones forever!

Purgatory (C 1030–32)

Catholics also believe in a temporary state of purification after death called "purgatory." The Church bases its belief on the biblical teaching of prayer for the dead (2 Maccabees 12:38-46; 2 Timothy 1:18, cited in Chapter Six). If heaven and hell were the only possibilities after death, there would be no reason to pray for the dead. Those in heaven would not need prayers, and those in hell would be beyond the reach of prayer. As a result the Church reasoned to the existence of purgatory, an intermediate state where people can be helped by prayer.

Other Bible passages also point to the existence of purgatory. Jesus says that blasphemy against the Holy Spirit will not be forgiven in this age or in the age to come (Matthew 12:31-32). This implies that the process of forgiveness for some sins continues "in the age to come," in purgatory.

Paul's words in 1 Corinthians 3:13-15 have been interpreted as referring to purgatory: "The work of each will come to light, for the Day will disclose it. It will be revealed with fire, and the fire [itself] will test the quality of each one's work. If the work stands that someone built upon the foundation, that person will receive a wage. But if someone's work is burned up, that one will suffer loss; the person will be saved, but only as through fire." At the very least, Paul's words seem to express a belief on his part that purification from sin is possible even beyond the grave, on the "Day" of judgment.

The Catholic Church teaches that there is a state of purification after death. It does not teach that purgatory is a place in the sense that the Moon is a place. Those who are in purgatory are spirits, and they cannot be "located" as we can when we are in our mortal bodies.

Nor does the Church teach that there is physical fire in purgatory. The symbolism of fire has been used to express the real pain of purgatory, but the fire cannot be physical because those in purgatory do not have material bodies that can be burned. The "fire" of purgatory is the fire of God's love: "For our God is a consuming fire" (Hebrews 12:29). Just as fire burns away impurities when gold is refined, so God's love will "burn away" the imperfections that could keep us from being perfectly open to the presence, love, and joy of God.

Popular explanations of purgatory in the past have sometimes included graphic descriptions of the suffering of the "poor souls." However, those in purgatory are assured of heaven and are even closer to the love of God than we are on earth, and as a result they must experience profound joy. At the same time they have a clear realization of the evil of even the smallest sin, and they suffer the pain of knowing that they are not yet ready to enter the joys of heaven.

An illustration may be useful: Sarah and Jim plan to celebrate their first wedding anniversary. Sarah's anniversary gift to Jim will be to cook his favorite meal. Jim promises to be home from work by six-thirty that evening. Sarah prepares the meal with loving care and decorates the table with flowers, candles, and their best linen. But just as Jim leaves his office building, he is greeted by a high school buddy he hasn't seen in years. They start talking about old times, so excited that neither notices the passing of the hours, until Jim glances at his watch. It's seven-fifteen, and now he remembers Sarah and the dinner. As Jim hurries home, he knows that Sarah will understand; she has always been patient and forgiving. But he feels terrible because he realizes that he has let her down. He wants to tell her he is sorry, even though it will be painful to acknowledge his fault and forgetfulness. Sarah will do nothing to cause Jim's suffering. But there is pain in his standing before Sarah, in apologizing, and in receiving her love and forgiveness. It is a pain Jim wants to experience because he knows it will remove any barriers his thoughtlessness might have placed between them.

Purgatory might be like that. When we die we may find ourselves in a situation similar to Jim's. We will realize that we have been less responsive to God's great love than we should have been. We will want to go through the pain of standing in God's presence, acknowledging our failings, and expressing our sorrow so that all barriers we have placed between God's love and ourselves may be removed. It will be a painful process, but one we will gladly endure.

We do not know who might need purgatory, and since those in purgatory are beyond earth's space and time, it is not possible to know "how long" anyone might be there. We pray for those in purgatory because the Bible teaches that they can be helped by our prayers. We know that God is not limited by time, and God can take our prayers of a lifetime and apply them to the needs of a loved one at death. We may pray, then, as long as we wish for our beloved dead.

In teaching the doctrine of purgatory, the Catholic Church shows that God's mercy extends even beyond death. Some individuals, by reason of their cooperation with God's grace, may be ready for heaven at the moment of death. But many of us may die with some imperfections that will keep us from being "comfortable" in God's presence where "nothing unclean will enter" (Revelation 21:27). Purgatory means hope for us, a way we can walk to enter heaven in the life of the world to come.

Hell (C 1033–37)

Hell is not a pleasant subject, but the New Testament teaches that we can choose to be eternally separated from God, using imagery like fire, wailing, and gnashing of teeth to describe the pain of hell. How literally this imagery is to be taken is uncertain, but it is surely meant to alert us that the suffering of hell will be terrible. Jesus warned us of the chilling words which will be spoken to the condemned: "Depart from me, you accursed, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels. For I was hungry and you gave me no food, I was thirsty and you gave me no drink" (Matthew 25:41-42).

Sometimes people ask, "If God is merciful, how could God condemn someone to hell forever?" The answer is that God simply ratifies the decision of those who have rejected God by mortal sin. It is true to say that God does not create hell. People do, for

hell is essentially the state of separation from God, and people cut themselves off from the love of God when they choose the hatred that is sin. God never forces us, and if we choose to reject God, God will respect our choice.

Imagine this situation: Don and Susan fall in love and are married. Life is full of romance when they are near each other. Don hears music in the sound of Susan's voice. But as a few years go by, the excitement of romance begins to dim for Don. He starts to flirt at the office, and his love for Susan begins to cool. She notices and asks what's wrong, but he evades the question. Susan loves Don as much as ever and would do anything for him, but he continues to pull away. Eventually, he has an affair and reaches a point where he cannot stand to be near Susan. Her beauty now repulses him. The sound of her voice grates on his ears. Even though friends tell him that he is a fool, he leaves Susan for another woman.

Now suppose that the other woman and all else that entertains Don are taken away. He is alone in the universe with Susan. Where would he be? In hell, of course. The very person who once brought him such joy and ecstasy now brings him disgust and pain. And why? Not because Susan wants this, for she still loves him, but because he has made decisions that turn her love into something that repulses his whole being.

Hell may be something like that. God loves us, and when we accept and return God's love, we find happiness and joy. But if we turn to evil, God's presence and love seem unreal, even disgusting. As long as we are on this earth and have "playthings" to distract us, we can at least have "fun," if not happiness. When we die, however, and all our toys are taken way, we stand empty-handed before God. But God and God's love are now repugnant to us because of the decisions we have made. The universe is full of God's presence, and the only way we can escape is to fall headlong into the hell of our own selfishness and find company with all those who have made the same awful choice. And why? Not because God wants this, for God still loves us. But because we have made decisions that turn God's love into something that repulses our whole being.

Hell is a dreadful fate. It is eternal misery. And the worst part of hell is that for all eternity the damned will know that the one thing which could bring them happiness, God's love, is what they have set themselves against forever.

The Second Coming of Christ and the General Judgment (C 668–82, 1038–65)

We who are Catholic believe in life after death and in judgment. Christ will come to us when we die. We will see him face to face and be judged at that moment. But the full meaning of our lives will not be complete until the world ends. For example, we may bring someone into the Church; that person, in turn, may help others, resulting in much good down through the ages. An evil life, on the other hand, can have repercussions that last through many centuries. So, at the end of time, Jesus will bring human history to a close in a final judgment, which will not change the results of the particular judgment, but will bring the consequences of our deeds to light.

The Bible and the Church have given such names to the end of the world as the End Time, Parousia, General Judgment, Last Judgment, Day of the Lord, and Second Coming of Christ. In describing these events, the Bible speaks vividly of angels, trumpets, fire, falling stars, and people being caught up in the air (Matthew 24:29-31; 25:31- 46, Mark 13:24-27, 1 Thessalonians 4:16-17; Revelation 20:11-15). These terms are poetic and apocalyptic, and should not be taken as literal descriptions of how the world will end.

In the past few centuries many fanciful theories about the "rapture" and the "thousand-year reign" have been concocted. The "rapture" (taken from 1 Thessalonians 4:16-17) actually refers to the same events as the Second Coming of Christ and the General Judgment. The "thousand-year reign" (taken from Revelation 20:4) simply represents the time between Christ's Resurrection and the end of the world.

The Church has not made a dogmatic statement on the exact meaning of passages describing the end of the world and the final judgment. Science tells us that in time our sun will expand into a "red giant" and consume the planets before it dies out. But scientists are unsure about the ultimate fate of the universe as a whole. We simply do not know how the world will end. We leave this in God's hands and trust that God, with divine wisdom and power, will transform the universe into a "new heaven and a new earth."

Nor does the Church define exactly what is meant by the expression that Jesus will gather his elect at the end of time (Matthew 24:31). Artists paint pictures of bodies rising from graves in response to angelic trumpets, but the resurrection of the body on the last day does not mean the reassembly of the atoms which formed our mortal body on this earth. The essential meaning of the resurrection of the body may be that our risen bodies will have a new relationship to the universe, once time on earth is through. Even now, all things on earth are moving toward their completion. After the last day, when time has ended and all human beings have entered eternity, God's masterpiece will be seen in all its glory, and the elect will be active participants in it.

The Bible teaches that the end of the world will be preceded by signs such as the gospel being preached to all nations (Matthew 24:14) and the conversion of the Jews (Romans 11:25-32). Other signs spoken of in Mark 13, Matthew 24, Luke 21, and elsewhere include wars, confusion, suffering, wickedness, and the rise of an antichrist. These signs are general, and there is little official Catholic teaching about how to understand them because the Church wants us to focus on the main truth that this world is passing away.

Jesus said that even he (as a human being) did not know the day or hour when the world would end (Mark 13:32). In spite of this, various groups down through the centuries have tried to predict the time of the end of the world. They've all, obviously, been wrong!

So we should avoid useless speculation and worry about the end of the world. The world ends for each one of us when we die. What is important is that we always be prepared to meet Jesus. Trusting in God's love and in the salvation won for us by Christ, we even dare to pray with the early believers: *"Marana tha!"* "Come, Lord Jesus!"

Questions for Discussion or Reflection

Have you ever thought of death as birth? as an exciting possibility? What are some great moments of earthly joy that foreshadow the beatific vision? Name some things you want to experience in heaven? What will purgatory be like? Could God do away with hell and still leave us free?

Activities

Picture yourself as Annie (as in the story opening this chapter) and talk with Jesus about death. Imagine yourself trying to explain this life to an unborn child and reflect on the difficulties you would encounter in doing so.

CHAPTER EIGHT
Christ in His Sacraments—Baptism and Confirmation

Human life is enriched by celebration and ritual. Balloons and flowers send congratulations at the birth of a child and mark the addition of a new member to the family. Initiation ceremonies commit individuals to particular organizations. Meals give strength and bring families and friends together. Words of forgiveness and a handshake or a hug melt the coldness of a quarrel with the warmth of reconciliation. Ceremony and music and dancing tell the world that a man and woman have joined in marriage. Those who lead—teachers or police or government officials—are commissioned for their tasks. Funny cards and visits encourage a friend in the hospital, and floral wreaths or words of sympathy comfort bereaved family members at the loss of a loved one.

Jesus Christ was no stranger to celebration and ritual. Angels sang at his birth, and he was circumcised according to Jewish law. At the age when Jewish boys become bar mitzvah (a son of the law), he went to the Jerusalem Temple with Mary and Joseph. Jesus shared meals with friends, forgave sinners with words of comfort and peace, changed water into wine to keep the party going at the wedding feast of Cana, commissioned his apostles to teach all nations, healed the sick, and wept at the grave of his friend Lazarus.

The first Christians saw Jesus' presence in all that celebrates the goodness of human life. They knew that Christ had come to sanctify everything we do, that he had entered life as sunlight enters crystal, filling it with light and beauty.

The Sacraments (C 1076–158, 1187–1209)

How did Christ enter the lives of his followers? The apostles believed that it was through signs of celebration and ritual given them by the Lord. On the first Pentecost, Peter told the crowds, "Repent and be baptized" (Acts 2:38). A few years later, Paul reminded the Corinthians that they proclaimed Christ's death and shared his body and blood by doing what Jesus did at the Last Supper (1 Corinthians 11:23-27). Christ gave new life through the sign of baptism; he was present through the sign of the Eucharist.

At first there was no organized theology of such signs, but one was gradually developed under the guidance of the Holy Spirit. By the thirteenth century the Church recognized seven signs, or sacraments, that had been given us by Christ. The Council of Trent declared as dogma that these are baptism, confirmation, Eucharist, penance, matrimony, holy orders, and anointing of the sick.

These sacraments are "meetings with Christ," where he does today what he did in Palestine two thousand years ago. He gives eternal life through baptism as he offered it to his contemporaries (John 17:2). He pours out the Holy Spirit in confirmation to commit and consecrate us to the Church as he sent the Spirit upon the apostles (Acts 2). He gives us himself in the Eucharist as he gave the apostles his body and blood at the Last Supper (Matthew 26:26-28). He forgives us through penance as he forgave the sinful woman who wept at his feet (Luke 7:36-50). Through matrimony he brings God's grace to husband and wife as he did at the wedding feast of Cana (John 2:1-11). He sends others to teach, lead, and sanctify in holy orders as he sent the apostles (Matthew 28:18-20). Through anointing, he heals as he cured the sick who came to him, or he leads the dying to eternal life as he promised heaven to the thief on the cross (Mark 1:32-34; Luke 23:43).

A sacrament may be defined as a sign from Christ by which he comes to us and gives us his life and love. The sign may be clearly expressed in the Bible, like the water of baptism and the bread and wine of the Eucharist. Or it may be the result of the Church's experience and reflection, such as the exchange of vows in matrimony. Each sacrament includes the use of Scripture. In every sacrament Christ acts through the signs and speaks through Scripture.

Because Christ is truly present through the sacraments, they can always have an effect in our lives. However, we must approach the sacraments with faith and devotion. We need the eyes of faith to look beyond the signs to the reality they contain, and devoted hearts to focus on Christ's presence. Like the two disciples on the way to Emmaus who recognized the risen Jesus as he broke bread with them and opened the Scriptures to them (Luke 24:13-35), we must recognize in the sacraments the risen Jesus giving us new life.

The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* divides the sacraments into three groups: the sacraments of initiation—baptism, confirmation, and Eucharist; the sacraments of healing—penance and anointing of the sick; the sacraments at the service of communion and the mission of the faithful—holy orders and matrimony. We will study them in the order followed in these divisions.

Baptism—the First Sacrament (C 1210–12)

"It was like a miracle," parents often say of the birth of their child. "God seemed to be there in the hospital room with us!" There are few events more moving than the birth of a child. As the parents hold new life in their arms, they may be filled with faith in God, with hope for their child, and with love for each other as their eyes fill with tears of joy and awe.

But birth can also make us realize how fragile life is and how quickly it passes. Grandparents whisper to new parents, "It seems only yesterday that we were holding you." Life goes swiftly by, and faith can be lost, hopes dashed, and love weakened. If only there were a birth that did not have to end in death! If only we could be "reborn" to a life where faith, hope, and love could not be destroyed!

Jesus came to give us such a birth. By God's grace any human being can be reborn to a new life that will never end. That birth is baptism, the sacrament which unites us to the life of Christ himself and opens for us the pathway to the other sacraments and to eternal life.

The Origins of Baptism (C 1213–28)

The first mention of baptism in the New Testament is made in reference to John the Baptizer, who invited people to be "baptized" in the Jordan River as a sign of repentance (Matthew 3:1-17).

John's baptism symbolized a desire to be freed of sin and to live more worthily. Jesus was baptized by John, not because he needed to repent but because he wanted to show his oneness with humanity.

John's baptism was not the baptism given by Jesus. John said he was baptizing with water for repentance, but Jesus would baptize with the Holy Spirit (Matthew 3:11). The baptism of Jesus is not merely a symbol of repentance but a powerful action of Jesus that brings God's life to us. As Jesus explained, "No one can enter the kingdom of God without being born of water and Spirit. What is born of flesh is flesh and what is born of spirit is spirit" (John 3:5-6).

After his Resurrection, Jesus told the apostles to "make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the holy Spirit" (Matthew 28:19). So Peter told his hearers on the first Pentecost, "Repent and be baptized, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins; and you will receive the gift of the holy Spirit....Those who accepted his message were baptized" (Acts 2:38, 41).

The Effects of Baptism (C 1262–84)

What does baptism do for us? First, it brings *forgiveness of sins*. Paul wrote: "We were indeed buried with him [Christ] through baptism into death..." (Romans 6:4). This means that we have died to the old life of sin: baptism brings "death" to sin. In traditional Catholic theology, this includes deliverance from original sin (see page 20) and from any personal sins one has committed.

Second, baptism brings us *new life* as God's children. Paul noted that we have been buried with Christ "so that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might live in newness of life" (Romans 6:4; 8:17). This is the *life of Christ*, traditionally called "sanctifying grace." It is God's love, which gives our actions a special worth in God's sight and offers a pledge of eternal life. Sanctifying grace opens us up to God's assistance, traditionally called "actual grace," helping us to overcome temptation and to imitate Christ in thought, word, and action. We might compare sanctifying grace to the love parents have for their children: a love that is literally life-giving. We can compare actual graces to the many things parents do for their children: acts of protecting, nourishing, teaching, forgiving, and guiding that help children grow and mature.

Third, baptism gives us *union with God*. God wants to be close to us, and joins us to the love of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit through baptism. Scripture refers to this in many ways. A Christian is a "temple of God" in whom "the Spirit of God dwells" (1 Corinthians 3:16). Jesus promised to send the Holy Spirit to be with us always (John 14:15) and promised also, "Whoever loves me will keep my word, and my Father will love him, and we will come to him and make our dwelling with him" (John 14:23). The Church teaches that in baptism we are given the virtues of faith, hope, and love, by which our union with God is nourished and strengthened.

Fourth, baptism confers *membership in the Church*, the Body of Christ. Paul wrote: "For in one Spirit we were all baptized into one body" (1 Corinthians 12:13). That "one body" is the Body of Christ on earth, the Church.

And so there is a life which does not have to end in death. There is "rebirth" to a life where faith, hope, and love cannot be destroyed, because they are given to us by God.

Baptism and the Church (C 1229–45, 1256)

In New Testament times people who heard the Good News of Christ were baptized soon after professing faith in Jesus (see Acts 2; 8; 10; 16). But when persecutions started, the Church began to require a period of instruction lasting one or more years. The weeks before Easter were a special time of preparation and prayer, leading up to the Easter Vigil celebration when new converts were baptized, confirmed with the Holy Spirit, and given the Eucharist.

At first, baptism was conferred by immersing the candidate. Paul implies this when he says that we are buried with Christ in baptism and rise to new life. In time baptism was also administered by the pouring of water over a candidate's head, perhaps because immersion proved to be inconvenient in colder climates.

Preparation for baptism was shortened when mass conversions began and entire tribes were received into the Church with their leaders. As Christianity spread, the practice of infant baptism became common. It may be that children had been baptized even in New Testament times because families were baptized together, and this presumably included children (Acts 10; 11:14-15; 16:15,33). Baptism of infants would not have seemed strange to

Jewish Christians, for Jews practiced circumcision of boys eight days old (Luke 2:21). After infant baptism became the norm, adults who wished to join the Church were usually instructed by a priest and baptized privately.

In the Catholic Church today, a person baptizes by immersion or by pouring water over the head of the candidate while saying, "I baptize you in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit." A bishop, priest, or deacon is the usual minister of Baptism. In case of necessity anyone can baptize by intending to do what the Church does and by pouring water over the individual's head while saying the proper words.

The water and prayer are the signs essential for a valid baptism, but in the full ceremony of baptism other signs are used. Blessed oil and chrism (oil mixed with balsam) signify the comfort and strength given by the Holy Spirit. A baptismal candle is a reminder that Christ is the light of the world (John 8:12). A white baptismal garment recalls Paul's words: "For all of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ" (Galatians 3:27). Sponsors represent the Christian community and help welcome the candidate into the Church.

Infant Baptism Today (C 1250–55, 1261)

Infant baptism has a long tradition in the Catholic Church going back to its antecedents in Judaism and at least hinted at in the New Testament. It is based on our belief that Christ wants to "take into his arms" the little children of today, just as he embraced the children of his time (Mark 10:13-16; see also Acts 2:38-39). It also shows that we don't have to do anything to earn God's love, which is freely bestowed even upon infants who are cherished by God simply because they are God's children.

However, parents who have their children baptized should have a serious intention of bringing the children up in the faith. In the baptism ceremony Catholic parents make solemn promises to do just that. Parents should pray for and with their children, be the first teachers of the faith to their children by word and example, and lead them to the other sacraments of the Church. If parents have their children baptized and then do not raise them as Catholics, they are denying the children the very life begun by baptism. This is like giving a child physical life and then denying that child food, clothing, and shelter. Parents who do follow baptism with prayer, instruction, and good example give their children the assurance that they are loved and cared for by Jesus.

Some Catholics have been taught that unbaptized infants go to "limbo," a place of eternal natural happiness, without the intimate closeness to God enjoyed by those in heaven. Limbo as the abode of unbaptized infants, however, is not Catholic doctrine. It is a theological opinion not commonly accepted today. The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* notes that the burial Mass for unbaptized infants entrusts them to God's care. It states that God's great mercy and Jesus' tenderness toward children allow us to hope that there is a way of salvation for children who have died without baptism (C 1261). We may trust that Jesus who said, "It is not the will of your heavenly Father that one of these little ones be lost" (Matthew 18:14), welcomes each "little one" with the same warm embrace he gave the children of his time.

Adult Baptism Today (C 1232-33, 1246–49, 1312)

The Second Vatican Council recommended that the Church renew its way of receiving adult candidates. A revised rite called the Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults (RCIA) was approved by Pope Paul VI in 1972 and has become the norm for the Church. The RCIA stresses formation in doctrine, liturgy, Church life, and service and involves the larger Church community in welcoming, instructing, helping, and praying for the candidates.

The RCIA has four stages. The first is the *Period of Inquiry* or *Pre-catechumenate*, which may last from several weeks to many months. During this stage candidates are invited to ask questions about the Church, share their own faith stories, and decide whether or not they wish to continue. Those who do continue celebrate the Rite of Becoming a Catechumen and enter the second stage, the *Catechumenate*. This is a more intense period of instruction and introduction to liturgy, faith-life, and service. The Rite of Election, which usually takes place on the First Sunday of Lent, marks the transition between the Catechumenate and the third stage, *Enlightenment and Purification*. This stage covers the season of Lent and includes special liturgical ceremonies at the Lenten Masses, as well as more intense preparation through prayer and study. It climaxes at the Easter Vigil with the sacraments of Initiation—baptism, confirmation, and the holy Eucharist. The final stage of the RCIA is the *Post-baptismal Catechesis (Mystagogia)*. This

stage, lasting from Easter to Pentecost, focuses on the mysteries ("mystagogia") of Christ's death and resurrection and helps the newly baptized to develop a deeper understanding of their faith. They now share fully in the Eucharist and are asked to live the gospel in their daily lives and to perform works of service for others.

The RCIA is the process by which nonbaptized candidates are received into the Catholic Church. Baptized members of other Christian denominations who wish to join the Catholic Church are not baptized again, but are received into the Church through penance, profession of faith, confirmation, and the holy Eucharist. The stages of the RCIA may be adapted to meet their needs.

The RCIA can also serve as a focus for ongoing conversion for all members of the Catholic Church. As Catholics see new candidates learning doctrine, they are encouraged to study their faith. As they participate in the liturgical ceremonies welcoming new members, they can renew their own commitment to Christ. As they see the newly baptized begin ministries of service, they are encouraged to serve more generously. And those who act as sponsors, teachers, and "prayer-partners" for the candidates have abundant opportunities for personal growth.

Baptism and Salvation (C 976–80)

Catholics believe that baptism frees us from sin, unites us to the saving power of Christ's death and resurrection, incorporates us into the Church, and sets us on the path to salvation. Obviously, this is all God's gift and cannot be earned, but baptism is a gift that invites a response. It is birth to a new life of following Jesus. It is not yet salvation fully completed in heaven.

There are some who believe that an individual is saved once and for all by being baptized or by "accepting Jesus as Lord." Such people may ask others, "Have you been saved?" The question assumes "once-saved-always-saved," which is not biblical. Paul urged the Philippians (people who had already been baptized): "Work out your salvation with fear and trembling" (2:12). Paul also wrote, "How much more then, since we are now justified by his blood, will we be saved through him from the wrath" (Romans 5:9).

We might compare salvation to traveling by ship through the waters of this life to the safe haven of eternity. The ship has been built. Christ has done everything necessary by his life, death, and

resurrection to bring us to heaven. In this sense salvation has been accomplished (John 3:16). But we must book passage on the ship and be an active part of the crew. We must "work out" our salvation. Jesus warned: "Not everyone who says to me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only the one who does the will of my Father in heaven" (Matthew 7:21). James asks: "What good is it...if someone says he has faith but does not have works? Can that faith save him?" (2:14; see Matthew 25; 1 Corinthians 15:58; 2 Corinthians 3:18). The Bible shows that it is possible to "jump ship" and choose the wrong destination (1 Corinthians 9:27; 1 Timothy 4:1; 6:10; 6:20-21; 2 Timothy 2:11-13; Hebrews 4:1-11; 6:4-12; 2 Peter 2:20-22).

But we trust that Jesus will see us to our final goal: "I continue my pursuit toward the goal, the prize of God's upward calling, in Christ Jesus" (Philippians 3:14). We trust that Christ, to whom we are united by baptism, will give us salvation and that we will continue to accept it until we arrive in heaven.

Salvation of the Unbaptized (C 1257–60)

Is baptism necessary for salvation? Jesus said, "No one can enter the kingdom of God without being born of water and Spirit" (John 3:5). Some Christians think this passage means that anyone not actually baptized in water is condemned to hell. But Catholics believe that John 3:5 must be interpreted in the light of Jesus' words at his Ascension: "Whoever believes and is baptized will be saved; whoever does not believe will be condemned" (Mark 16:16). This passage implies that the condemned are those who hear the gospel and refuse to accept it. So the Catholic Church teaches that those who learn of Christ's gospel and culpably reject it are rejecting eternal life. But there are many who are unbaptized through no fault of their own, and the Church believes that they can be saved.

This understanding came very early because some catechumens were martyred before they could be baptized. The Church maintains that those who shed their blood for Christ are joined to him by "baptism of blood." Others desire baptism but die before they can receive it; these people have an explicit "baptism of desire." Still others sincerely try to do what is right but have no opportunity to learn about Christ. These are said to have an implicit "baptism of desire," and the Church teaches that they, too, can be saved.

This teaching has a basis in Scripture. The parable of the Last Judgment in Matthew 25 implies that some will be saved because they ministered to Christ in the poor and hungry, even though they were unaware of his presence. It is also common sense: we do not expect people to follow rules they could not have known. Similarly, God would not expect people to obey the command to be baptized if they had no opportunity to learn about it. People who love and do what is right can be saved. They may not know Christ by name, but they know God, who is love: "Everyone who loves is begotten by God and knows God" (1 John 4:7).

The Sacrament of Confirmation (C 1285–1321)

In New Testament times the sending of the Holy Spirit was usually associated with baptism. Peter told his hearers at Pentecost, "Repent and be baptized...and you will receive the gift of the holy Spirit" (Acts 2:38). But there are some instances in the New Testament of a special "sending" of the Holy Spirit after baptism. Chapter 8 of Acts of the Apostles tells how the people of Samaria were evangelized and baptized by Philip. When the news reached Jerusalem, the apostles "sent them Peter and John, who went down and prayed for them, that they might receive the holy Spirit, for it had not yet fallen upon any of them; they had only been baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus. Then they laid hands on them and they received the holy Spirit" (8:14-17; see Acts 19). Such passages provided a basis for the celebration of confirmation, a sacramental bestowal of the Holy Spirit apart from baptism, and once infant baptism became common, confirmation began to be celebrated later in life in the Western Church.

At whatever age confirmation is celebrated, it always brings a deepening of baptismal grace. It strengthens our relationship to God the Father as adopted children, draws us nearer to Jesus, and increases the gifts of the Holy Spirit within us. Confirmation intensifies our bond with the Church to help us spread and defend the faith.

The bishop is the ordinary minister of confirmation. Administration of this sacrament by the bishop, a successor of the apostles, emphasizes the fact that the confirmand is being joined more closely to the universal Church. It accentuates the apostolic origin of the Church and its task of giving witness to Christ. However, adults who are baptized or become Catholic through profession of faith are confirmed by the priest who receives them into the Church. Here the priest acts as a representative of the bishop.

The sign used for the bestowal of the Holy Spirit in confirmation is the laying on of hands (Acts 8:14-17) and anointing with sacred chrism. (The use of oil goes back to the anointing of priests, prophets, and kings in the Old Testament.) As the minister anoints the confirmand, he says, "(Name), be sealed with the Gift of the Holy Spirit." The term *sealed* indicates the Church's belief that confirmation bestows a character, a permanent change, as does baptism, so that these sacraments are not repeated. Each candidate has a sponsor who should help by prayer, example, and support. The candidate may choose a "confirmation name" taken from a favorite saint, who is both model and heavenly intercessor.

Pentecost and the Gifts and Fruits of the Holy Spirit (C 1302–05)

At Pentecost the Holy Spirit came upon the apostles in power, symbolized by fire and a mighty wind (Acts 2), offering friendship and grace to the apostles, allowing them to accomplish what they could not on their own. Confirmation is our Pentecost, when the Spirit offers us grace and friendship.

The effects of the Spirit's grace in our lives have traditionally been expressed as the *gifts* of the Holy Spirit. These are wisdom, understanding, counsel, fortitude, knowledge, piety, and fear of the Lord (Isaiah 11:2; C 1831). The results of the Holy Spirit's friendship are called the *fruits* of the Holy Spirit. They are charity, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, generosity, gentleness, faithfulness, modesty, self-control, and chastity (Galatians 5:22-23; C 1832). These are qualities that can help us lead happy, loving, worthwhile lives, and confirmation makes them available to us. We are no longer alone when we try to be kind, for example; Jesus models kindness for us, and the Spirit helps us to imitate Jesus. What we could not achieve by our own efforts, we can achieve with God's help as kindness becomes a "fruit" of our relationship with the Holy Spirit.

Confirmation and Friendship With God (C 1303)

Good friends are a source of happiness. Jesus tells us that we can be friends with God (John 15:15). Father, Son, and Spirit love us personally (John 17:23) and want us to be filled with divine life

and love. Confirmation is a sacrament that should "confirm" our friendship with God. And while the ceremony of confirmation may take a short time, it can and should have lasting effects.

Two friends might take a vacation together. It may last only a week, but it can strengthen friendship for a lifetime. Confirmation is something like that. It is an event that can deepen our friendship with God and change our whole life for the better. But just as the results of a vacation might depend on how well the friends keep in touch afterward, so the results of confirmation will depend largely on how well we keep in touch with God.

Friends can write, call on the phone, or visit. God won't send us a letter through the postal service, but God has written the Bible for us. God won't call on the phone, but will communicate with us anytime in prayer. God won't ring our doorbell, but will visit with us anytime. Bible, prayer, worship: these are crucial to a life of friendship and intimacy with God. Confirmation offers us God's friendship now and forever!

Confirmation and Service (C 737–41, 1285)

The coming of the Holy Spirit upon the apostles moved them to do Christ's work. Pentecost got the gospel out from behind locked doors and into the world. Confirmation should help us continue the work of Christ and minister to others. The Holy Spirit offers us gifts like healing and leadership (1 Corinthians 12) for this very reason and helps us understand what we *can* and *should* do.

"Charity begins at home." We begin with our families and acquaintances. When we see someone lonely, hurt, or misunderstood; hungry for food or friendship; imprisoned by fear, worry, or heartache; needing a loving touch or kind word; our response should be what Christ would do if he were in our place.

Next, our parish. We should be a loving community of people who care for one another. Christ asks us to be kind to parishioners by friendliness in the parking lot, words of congratulation after a baptism, presence at a funeral. Most parishes offer many opportunities for service, such as committee work, liturgy, and social-concern organizations.

Then, our world. The Catholic Church provides disaster relief and aid to the needy everywhere in the world. Our gifts to special collections, joined to the gifts of millions of others, can save lives

and ease suffering. The Catholic Church joins with other churches to defend the most helpless of human beings, the unborn, and other groups deprived of justice. It is not possible to be actively involved in all social causes, but we can choose at least one organization where we can make a difference through participation, prayer, and monetary gifts.

At home, in our parish, in our world, "if we live in the Spirit, let us also follow the Spirit" (Galatians 5:25).

Signs of the Spirit's Presence (C 455, 683, 733–36)

An interesting religious phenomenon of the past one hundred years has been the charismatic movement. Reaching many denominations, including the Catholic Church, this movement emphasizes the importance of the Holy Spirit, of the Bible, and of group prayer. It holds that the presence of the Holy Spirit is manifested through gifts like healing, prophecy, and speaking in tongues. These gifts might become evident through the laying on of hands and the "baptism of the Holy Spirit."

Paul's Letters to the Corinthians show that the Church at Corinth was actively charismatic. But other churches founded by Paul were not as charismatic as that of Corinth, and even there not all spoke in tongues (1 Corinthians 12–14). There is room in the Church for a great variety of gifts and ways of worship.

Still, a Catholic might hear about dramatic manifestations of the Holy Spirit and wonder, "Have I received the Holy Spirit?" In 1 Corinthians 12:3 Paul states, "No one can say, 'Jesus is Lord,' except by the holy Spirit." In 1 Corinthians 12:31 to 13:13 he describes love as the greatest gift of the Spirit. Therefore, if we can say with faith that Jesus is Lord, and if we truly love others, we have received the Holy Spirit. Yet we should strive for other spiritual gifts and always try to be more open to the Holy Spirit.

The Sign of the Cross (C 699, 1235, 2157)

Catholics have the beautiful custom of making the Sign of the Cross with holy water. Blessed water touched to our forehead, heart, and shoulders in the sign of a cross recalls our baptism and the fact that Christ died on the cross to give us new life. The words, "In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit," profess our faith in the Trinity, who unite themselves to us in baptism and confirmation.

The Sign of the Cross should call to mind the great gifts and responsibilities bestowed by these sacraments: "So then you are no longer strangers and sojourners, but you are fellow citizens with the holy ones and members of the household of God, built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the capstone. Through him the whole structure is held together and grows into a temple sacred in the Lord; in him you also are being built together into a dwelling place of God in the Spirit" (Ephesians 2:19-22).

Sacraments and Sacramentals (C 1667–1679)

The Sign of the Cross and holy water are examples of what Catholics call "sacramentals." Sacramentals are sacred signs which resemble the seven sacraments, but are not instituted by Christ and do not convey Christ's grace as the sacraments do. Instead, they are instituted by the Church and symbolize spiritual effects which come about primarily through the prayer of the Church. They open us to God's grace if we use them with faith, just as prayer can open our hearts to God. Sacramentals dispose us to receive the grace of the sacraments and sanctify various occasions in human life.

Most sacramentals are related to the sacraments in some way. Holy water, for example, is blessed water that recalls our baptism. All sacramentals remind us of the goodness of the things God has created. Important sacramentals are prayers of blessing, blessed ashes, bells, candles, crosses, crucifixes, statues, sacred images, medals, oils, palms, and rosaries.

Questions for Discussion or Reflection

What are the happiest memories you have of family rituals? What religious rituals and ceremonies have meant the most to you? Have baptism and confirmation made a difference in your life?

Activities

Place yourself in God's presence and think of your baptism, picturing Jesus as the one baptizing you. Feel the water on your forehead as a sign from Christ that he is filling you with his life. See yourself as the dwelling place of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Ask the Holy Spirit to make you more aware of these realities. Think about the fruits of the Holy Spirit listed in this chapter. Which of these qualities do you need most?

Pick out one, think of how Jesus had that quality, and ask the Holy Spirit to help you be more like Jesus.

For a more complete understanding of sacraments and sacramental signs, read *The Privilege of Being Catholic*, Liguori Publications (see Bibliography).

Try to "make a habit" of making the Sign of the Cross devoutly and frequently. You may make it with or without holy water by signing yourself on the forehead, heart, left shoulder and right shoulder as you say, "In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen."