

The Baptismal Vocation in the Light of Vocational Discernment of Young People
John C. Cavadini, June 14, 2017

Dear Friends, Reverend Fathers,

I feel very honored, and very humbled, that you asked me to give this talk. Thank-you!

Each mystery of the faith, like a rare gemstone, has many facets from which its beauty radiates out. It is tempting to try to treat them all at once, and yet sometimes it is better to choose one of these facets as a focus, and thereby to better appreciate the beauty of the whole. That is what I have chosen to attempt here with you. With regard to the baptismal vocation, I am sure you will all immediately recall that by Baptism we are given a share in Christ's own vocation, in His priesthood, and in his prophetic and royal mission (see CCC #1268). Baptism is one of the sacraments that we say leaves an indelible "mark" or "character" on the soul. When I was a kid I tried to picture what this mark looked like, but of course it is not a literal mark, but rather an irreversible and permanent claim on one's identity at the deepest level of one's being. The person baptized "belongs no longer to him or herself but to Him who died and rose for us (CCC #1269)." Baptism configures us to the Paschal mystery of Christ's Passion, Death and Resurrection, so that our being has an essential and irreducible reference to that mystery. The Paschal mystery is the work of Christ's self-emptying love, and so to say we are configured to the Paschal mystery by Baptism is to say that we are configured by the sacrament to Christ's self-giving love, by which and in which He is priest, prophet and king. So now "the love of Christ controls us." It is both identity and vocation.

This brings me to the point, or facet of this mystery of baptism, to which I want to call special attention. The baptismal vocation is to share in the sacrificial love of Christ, his priesthood, and thereby to share in the prophetic witness that this love always entails in a world addicted to power, and thus to participate in the sovereignty of that love over all claims to sovereignty, other principalities powers. There-- priest, prophet, king. But even before we say this, we have to remember that Baptism gives us a share in the priesthood of Christ, and thus His prophetic and royal mission, in a certain way: by making us "'living stones' to be 'built into a spiritual house,'" a member of "'a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's own people'" (CCC #1268, 1 Pet. 2.5, 2.9). That is, baptism "incorporates us into the Church," and *thereby, as member of His people*, confers on us a participation in Christ's triple vocation, not as lone rangers, free-lance prophets or *ad hoc* spiritual guides. Baptism, conferred on us as sheer grace with no merit of our own going before it but only sin, initiates us into a new fellowship, a new solidarity, a new communion, in the love of Christ which we could not give ourselves and could never deserve. "From the baptismal fonts is born the one People of God of the New Covenant, which transcends all the natural or human limits of nations, cultures, races and sexes: *For by one Spirit we were all baptized into one body*" (CCC #1267, 1 Cor. 12.13). But, though it is the first, Baptism is only the first, of the sacraments of initiation. It marks our soul with an indelible orientation towards communion in gratitude for the gift of Christ's love, which is to say towards the Eucharist. As the *Catechism* puts it: "In Baptism we have been *called* [my emphasis] to form

but one body. The Eucharist fulfills this call: *The cup of blessing which we bless, is it not a participation in the blood of Christ? The bread which we break, is it not a participation in the body of Christ? Because there is one bread, we who are many are one body, for we all partake of the one bread*" (CCC #1396, citing 1 Cor. 10.16-17). In this sense, the primary vocation of Baptism is to the Eucharist, the sacrament of sacraments, the source and summit of the Christian life, and to the unity of the Church of which the Eucharist is the "efficacious sign and sublime cause" (CCC #1325). The primary vocation of Baptism is to the Eucharistic life and Eucharistic communion, as a member incorporated into Christ and called to the unity of but one Body – and *thus* to participate in Christ's triple vocation of love: priest, prophet and king.

This is important because talk about the Baptismal vocation often seems to come loose from its ecclesial moorings. We can talk about the prophetic role of the baptized, for example, in a way that begins to seem simply functional. Be prophetic! Change the world! Young people do, and should, resonate with this language – everyone should! -- but the danger is that talk of vocational discernment that is too one dimensional renders the Church otiose and makes Baptism seem very much an unnecessary "extra." Anyone, really, can take up prophetic language of a sort, can speak for social justice, can make sacrifices on behalf of a more just world order – and the religious language of vocation just comes to seem as so much mystification that is maybe motivational for some people, but doesn't really bring anything unique to the mix. The Church begins to seem as though all it offers is a series of exclamation points for all good efforts at social change in the world, liberal or conservative. Peter Salovey, President of Yale, told last year's graduating seniors that their job as Yale graduates, their vocation, if you will, is to "repair the world." We hear similar injunctions from Presidents of Catholic universities, and from the pulpit. And really, how can one object?!

But this can actually verge on secularizing the Baptismal vocation, not in the sense that it is a vocation *in* the world, for that is of its essence, but in the sense that it becomes a vocation *of* the world, as merely a variant on a calling which can be fully described in other terms. True, we spread the teachings of Jesus, but these can come to seem like teachings of love and justice that are only accidentally His, but could be fully translated into other terms. And then it is very hard to talk to young people about vocational discernment in any way that truly flows from the sense of a unique baptismal vocation. To understand the baptismal vocation properly, then, one must understand what it is a call towards, and, as I have been saying, that is towards the mystery of the Church. Indeed in my many years of teaching undergraduate theology, I find that apart from the problem of evil (and it is related) perhaps the hardest thing for young people to negotiate, is the Church herself. Why the Church? Why is it worth belonging? What's the point of *that* vocation? Aren't there other ways to become exclamation points for goodness? Can't I just be a good person?

I think this shows that a discussion of vocation, and of the baptismal vocation, is incomplete, misleading and ultimately impossible, the more distant it becomes from a proper sense of the mystery of the Church into which Baptism indelibly fixes us. To be a baptized Christian means to be awesomely aware of this mystery in one's own person and *thus* to find oneself called further. Could it be that some of us adults are at fault? That WE have lost a sense of the

mystery of Church, that we are therefore afraid that the Church comes to the world empty handed except for a pocketful of exclamation points affirming in unnecessarily lavishly mystifying language what is already here?

If you would like an answer, I propose a test. If you are familiar with the CCC's article on the Church, you will know that it cites the *Shepherd of Hermas*. Ready? Here's the test: "The world was made for the sake of the Church," or so the *Shepherd* (2.4.1) tells us.

Perhaps the principal function of this 2nd century Christian claim was to shock 21st century Christian readers of the *Catechism* 1800 years ahead of time. The CCC quotes this text without a trigger warning or other caution, so that the hapless 20th century reader could very well come across it unawares and unprepared (CCC#760), along with other texts from early antiquity with equal potential shock value to the tender ears of contemporary Catholics, myself included. To claim that "the world was created for the sake of the Church" just seems, well, *narrow* to us, more than a tad triumphalist. Of course, if we stopped a minute to think about it, we would realize that "the world was created for the sake of the Church" would mean nothing unless the reverse of the statement were also true, that is, that the Church was created for the sake of the world, or, with an echo of Jn. 3.16, for the *love*, of the world. But the reason the statement is so shocking to many contemporary readers, if they pause over it at all, is that we moderns, and this includes Catholics, tend to hear the word "Church" in a very one dimensional way.

Judging from the way most of my students seem to think, the Church is a kind of club, perhaps invented by Jesus, but otherwise much like any other club. It's an optional association of like-minded people who come together to engage in mutual support, in certain ceremonials used to define the identity of the club. It is fully reducible to the will of its members to associate together. Being baptized just means joining this club. The club has certain core teachings which one may hold, for example, the existence of God or the excellence of Jesus Christ, even if one is not a member of the club. Most of the club's shared beliefs are detachable from any given club structure and as such are portable; they can be taken elsewhere or even entertained one one's own. One could even establish one's own club. In fact, I once told Bishop D'Arcy of beloved memory that I intended to start my own Church. For the record, I learned from this experience that it is not recommended to tell your bishop that you are going to start your own Church. In any event, to hear that such a club is the very reason the world was created, or is the goal of the universe, sounds at best quaint and at worst triumphalist, delusional and destructive.

Let's move on to another passage that might help us recover the meaning of this first one. We read in the CCC the following beautiful passage, which I believe should be nominated for the Academy Award for least appreciated best *Catechism* passages the next time they come around:

The Church was born primarily of Christ's total self-giving for our salvation, anticipated in the institution of the Eucharist and fulfilled on the cross. 'The origin and growth of the Church are symbolized by the blood and water which flowed from the open side of the crucified Jesus' [LG 3; cf. Jn. 19.34]. 'For it was from the side of Christ as he slept the

sleep of death upon the cross that there came forth the “wondrous sacrament of the whole Church” [SC 5]. As Eve was formed from the sleeping Adam’s side, so the Church was born from the pierced heart of Christ hanging dead on the cross [cf. Ambrose, *In Luc* 2. 85-89, but also Augustine, *City of God* 22.17-18, etc.].

This is not a passage about a club. It is a passage about a mystery of love. Meditating on the mystery of the Church is not meditating on a written constitution or club charter, but on the only constitution the Church has: the Wounds of Christ from which His Precious Blood flowed, from which the communion constituting the Church flowed. Meditating on oneself as a baptized member of the Church is meditating on one’s dwelling near, at, and even in, the Wounds of Christ, an intimacy of love that is of such an infinite depth and so unspeakable a closeness that one’s only response is THANK-YOU Lord for this love! (You can see how Baptism orders us towards the Eucharist here, the sacrament of gratitude.)

Funny, but the more this THANK-YOU is said, the more it causes a great depth of gratitude it to well up in one’s heart and this enlarges it, makes it deeper and deeper and roomier and roomier for all the people you know and meet, for all people you do not know, for all people. This THANK-YOU burns away or melts away the hatreds, jealousies, fears, contempt and disgust we have for other people in the Church for suddenly we find ourselves intimately bound to them, as deeply as to ourselves, each one, by a communion in an intimacy we did not deserve, earn, merit or create, one which has nothing to do with whether we like other people or not, and whether they are friends or enemies, whether they are virtuous, exemplary or petty and mean. It is not that we become unconscious of such differences, but instead become aware of a basis for communion that is not a function of these things, as it is in every other human grouping, and therefore a new, real, true possibility for human union dawns on us, possible because actual, one with a future that is limitless even if not actually perfected yet, even if it is “on pilgrimage” as *LG* 7 puts it. A new possibility for universal communion opens up and is actually present.

Through love of this communion, one is not distanced from the rest of the people in the world, but brought closer and to them and to all of their “joys and hopes” and to everything that is human. The one who loves the Church loves the love that had no contempt for anything human, but did not spare Himself. Loving this communion is loving the love of the sinless one who mixed Himself in with sinners at His own Baptism, jumping right in the water with tax collectors and prostitutes as though He were one of them – well – He *was* one of them! He truly joined in! I would have advised Him to get a better career counselor, but He didn’t give it a second thought, and He didn’t back away from that solidarity when the time came to pay the penalty for solidarity with sinners, namely death. Instead of backing away – no harm no foul – pleading His sinlessness, He received the blow, and so transfigured the whole of human solidarity into that Love which did not back away, such that being human no longer meant solidarity in sin but in Him, in the Second Adam, in His self-gift, in His blood, in His love. The Church is the *sacrament of that solidarity in the world* (see *Lumen Gentium* 1), a solidarity which the world cannot give itself, which does not come from the world and yet which paradoxically is *for* the world. In fact the closer you get to the Catholic Church, the closer you

get to the Wounds of Christ, the result of His Baptismal solidarity, and thus the closer you get -- to *everyone*. "In order to guard against the gradual weakening of that sincere love which requires us to see our Savior in the Church and in its members, it is most fitting that we should look to Jesus Himself as a perfect model of love for the Church. And first of all let us imitate the breadth of His love. For the Church, the Bride of Christ, is one; and yet so vast is the love of the divine Spouse that it embraces in His Bride the whole human race without exception" (MC 95-96), a dramatically beautiful passage from Pius XII's *Mistici Corporis*.

Again, going back to our Academy Award winning CCC passage, the Church, born from the pierced side of Christ, is like Eve, taken from the side of the sleeping Adam (see CCC #766). She is indeed the Bride, the Spouse, because she is without remainder defined by His love. The real, visible Church, truly in history, is a mystery but a derivative mystery, a mystery of Christ's love, truly the continuing presence of the self-emptying love that constitutes her. Loving Christ means loving the love that **SO** emptied itself that it mixed in with sinners and took their punishment in order to transfigure their solidarity into Himself. That is what you love when you love the Church, the self-emptying love that did not disdain mixed company.

In fact, if we don't love the Church, we don't love Christ fully. If we don't "see" the Church, we don't fully "see" Christ and we don't fully "see" even ourselves as baptized and called thereby into but one Body, one Flesh. You cannot see the Bridegroom unless you see the Bride. Yes, this thoroughly unprepossessing mixed group of sinners of various levels is the Bride. If we learn to see her with the right vision, with "spousal vision," the loving vision of the Bridegroom, we will also truly see the Bridegroom Himself, and be able to utter more and more a deeper and deeper "Thank-You." This vision of the Church is sacrificial, because it renounces a view of the Church that would see her as merely an "it," an object, a collection of people bound by physical and moral ties, a club, and not by the mystical ties of Christ's love, "We the People" and not "The People of God." Contempt for the Church is always a moment of self-righteousness, for of course we could have done it better, we know how the Church should look, what achievements and traits and attitudes should define this community. But where is our vision correction so we can see this way? "The Eucharist -- [not Baptism] -- makes the Church" (CCC #1396), because the Eucharist is the total self-giving of Christ, His sacrifice, made truly present to form us by the same Church-making Spousal love that poured out of His side with His blood. When we go to Communion, we receive the divine Bridegroom, we are configured to His sacrifice, and we begin to see as He did and as He does. "What have ye that ye have not received?" He asks us. Thank-you, Thank-you, THANK-YOU, we reply! Teaching the meaning of the baptismal vocation, and of the individual vocations which may flow from it, thus means fostering, encouraging, explaining, and speaking affectionately about that communion in which the Baptismal vocation is ultimately fulfilled. It means teaching Love of the Church, and thus the mystery that such love means living life as one continual "Thank-you" that only makes the heart larger and larger and does not rest until, in a way, the Wounds of Christ, the Wounds **Of** Love, are our own, and are equally open to all. THAT seems like something worth buying into. Thank-You