

GOD IS THE SOURCE OF ALL LIFE

BACKGROUND READING



God is the Creator of all things, both visible and invisible, which He created out of nothing. This doctrine of creation reveals important truths about the nature of God, creation, and human beings. God reveals these truths that we cannot see through the things we can see – material creation – using signs and symbols. First among these is the Church, the visible sign of God’s communion with humanity. Jesus established His Church to make known the Kingdom of God on Earth and to gather all people to Him so that we might know God’s love and be saved from sin and death.

Creator of All Things Visible and Invisible

The book of Genesis opens with some of the most famous words in the Bible, “In the beginning, when God created the heavens and the earth...” The sacred author goes on to describe a formless and shapeless darkness covering an abyss, surrounded by primordial waters over which a mighty wind swept. And then God spoke: “Let there be light,” and there was.

All of this poetic language explains what was present in the beginning – or, more precisely, before the beginning. Christians have long used the phrase “out of nothing,” or *ex nihilo* in Latin, to describe this scene – what and how God created. God did not use any preexisting material to create the universe. The formlessness and shapelessness express the nothingness that was before the beginning, and the darkness and the abyss express the emptiness of the nothingness.

The wind that swept over the water in the sacred author’s portrait of creation is recognized as the Spirit of God hovering over the nothingness. God made all things, the material and the spiritual, out of nothing, with only the power of His voice. Given this doctrine, we can understand the sacred author as saying that in the beginning, when God created all that is, visible and invisible, there was nothing but God Himself, who spoke creation into existence. All of creation, therefore, owes its existence to God.

We learn from the doctrine of creation that God is all powerful and all knowing, for nothing exists that did not come from Him. We learn that nature is real and not a mirage

because it came from a Creator, that nature is fundamentally good, and that God reveals Himself to us through His creation. We learn that humanity has been given dominion over God's creation, that we have a fundamental dignity as human beings made in God's image and likeness, and that our purpose is to honor and glorify God in this life through the things He has made.

God Reveals Himself through His Creation

The invisible God communicates Himself to us through His visible creation. For example, we know love, an invisible reality, through physical signs and symbols – a hug, a gift, or spoken words.

Human beings are both body and soul, visible and invisible, material and spiritual. Out of love for us, the invisible, spiritual God became visible. Taking on human flesh, God became man in the Person of Jesus Christ, who was like us in all things but sin. We call this fundamental teaching of our Faith the Incarnation. Jesus Christ is God's love fully revealed.

Jesus communicates the Father's love for us in visible, physical ways, going so far as

to give Himself completely to us, Body and Blood, Soul and Divinity, in the Eucharist, so that we might become one Body in Him. He gave His life and died on the Cross to save us from sin.

The Church: A Visible Sign of the Invisible Kingdom of God

Jesus established His Church here on Earth to continue His mission of the salvation of all souls. The Church is a visible sign of the invisible Kingdom of God, inaugurated by Christ during His earthly life.

The Church uses visible signs and symbols to make known the invisible truths of our salvation. These visible signs of God's love communicate His very life to us. We call this free and undeserved gift of God's life *grace*. Grace is necessary for us to persevere on the path of holiness, to avoid sin, and ultimately to attain Heaven. In His divine wisdom, Jesus gave us the seven Sacraments as visible, material means of receiving the invisible grace of God.

How beautiful it is that God's grand design for His creation and for our salvation is made known to us still through the work of Christ's Church!

LESSON 2

WHAT IS A SACRAMENT?

BACKGROUND READING



It is human nature to mark the movements of life with signs and traditions. God uses signs and traditions to make Himself known to us. Throughout human history, God has revealed Himself and made His love known to us using signs taken from creation and human culture. Jesus instituted seven very special signs, or Sacraments, not only to symbolize God's grace but *actually to confer it on us*.

The seven Sacraments are different from every other sign in the world because they bring about what they signify. For example, smoke is a sign of fire, but it does not cause fire. Baptism is a sign of rebirth, and it actually causes that rebirth. Confession is a sign of God's healing mercy, and it actually brings about that healing.

Signs and Symbols

Human beings have always used signs and symbols to communicate, to mark important moments in life, and to better understand invisible truths. God knows this is how we work. He created us, after all, and therefore, He made us this way. God, from the very beginning, has made Himself known to us through signs and symbols that communicate His very nature and life. Although God is

invisible to the eye, and transcends, or is beyond, His creation, He is present and near to us. We can recognize Him in His creation. Specifically, He gives us grace through physical signs and symbols. Grace is the free and undeserved gift of God's life in us. We must receive the grace of God in faith and use it to serve and glorify Him.

Salvation History

Throughout salvation history, God has made Himself known in specific ways, to prepare us, His people, for the gift of salvation. Salvation history is the story of God's saving actions in human history. God entered into a series of covenants with man by which He gradually and in stages, in words and deeds, revealed more of Himself and drew us deeper into relationship with Him. Each new covenant contained a sign, taken from human experience, to represent the depth of God's love present at the heart of each covenant. Marriage between a man and woman, the rainbow, circumcision, the Law, and the Temple all took on greater meaning in their communication of God's love and mercy.

Finally, at the appointed time, God Himself entered into human history by sending His

only, beloved Son, the Second Person of the Blessed Trinity, to become human, like us in all things but sin. Jesus fully revealed the Father and communicated His grace to us in and through His life and teaching. He performed miracles as signs of God's love and mercy and to announce the coming of the Kingdom of God. And then He poured out His love for us by sacrificing Himself on the Cross, paying the debt of sin that we could not. By His Cross and Resurrection we are freed from sin and made holy. Our salvation has been won!

The Seven Sacraments

In this age of the Church, which Jesus Himself founded during His earthly life to carry on His mission of salvation of all souls, we continue in the tradition of our spiritual ancestors by recognizing certain signs and symbols as having the power to communicate God's love to us. The Seven Sacraments of the Church – Baptism, Confirmation, Holy Eucharist, Penance and Reconciliation, Anointing of the Sick, Holy Orders, and Holy Matrimony – all instituted by Christ, are efficacious signs of God's grace. This means that each Sacrament not only is a visible representation of God's love and life, but also effects, or causes, God's grace to be present. The Sacraments, in fact, are the primary

means for us to receive grace, particularly by frequent reception of the Eucharist.

As advanced as we might be in our modern world, little has changed in respect to basic human experiences. We all are born to a mother and father. We all experience love and joy, sadness and fear. We all make mistakes and lose our way sometimes. We all experience sickness and suffering. Our lives are remarkably similar to those who lived thousands of years ago. And like our predecessors, we too mark the important moments of our lives with signs, symbols, rituals, and traditions. This is how we work. This is how God made us.

Jesus Christ instituted each Sacrament. He entrusted them to the Church to administer them to His people throughout the ages. God's grace is necessary for us to grow in holiness and get to Heaven. We cannot do either of those things by ourselves. Therefore, it is necessary for us to receive the Sacraments in order to receive God's grace.

Just as the blood of the Paschal Lamb on the doorposts of the Israelites in Egypt was a sign of life, the Sacraments are signs of God's life in us that fill us with His life and make us holy. The Sacraments fulfill God's actions in the Old Covenant, make present our salvation won by Christ on the Cross, and fill us with hope for eternal life with God in Heaven.