

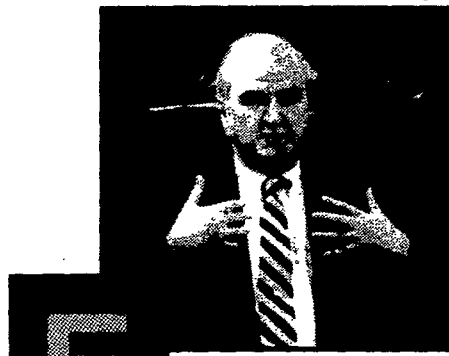
Catholicism is a sacramental faith

By Father Richard P. McBrien
Syndicated columnist

What is distinctively Catholic about Catholicism? What sets the Catholic tradition apart from others?

There is no single, universally agreed-upon answer to such questions, but we can at least eliminate the following answers, which are inadequate, superficial or even frivolous:

- Catholics regard the pope as the earthly head of the church, and believe him to be infallible when solemnly defining a matter of faith or morals.
 - Catholics have strong devotion to the Blessed Virgin Mary. Orthodox Christians, many Anglicans and some Protestants also do, but Catholics are, well, more emphatic about it.
 - Catholics don't allow women to become priests.
 - Catholics don't allow their priests to marry — unless they belong to one of the Eastern-rite Catholic churches or are former Episcopalians who left their church in protest against the ordination of women.
 - Catholics don't allow girls to serve at the altar, at least not officially.
 - Catholics are not supposed to practice birth control.
 - Catholics confess their sins to a priest — some Catholics do anyway.
 - Catholics didn't use to eat meat on Friday, but now they do.
- If none of these answers get to the heart of the matter, what are we left with? How about Catholicism's com-



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mitment to "sacramentality?"

Some friendly readers may nod approvingly, but they might be hard pressed to explain what the principle means. Many older Catholics will assume (correctly) that sacramentality has something to do with the catechism definition of a sacrament: an outward sign, instituted by Christ, to give grace.

Sacraments are material, visible signs that point to — and bear within themselves — the spiritual and invisible reality of grace (namely, the presence of God).

So Catholicism is distinguished by the fact that it has seven sacraments?

Not quite. The principle of sacramentality is more comprehensive than

that. Beyond the seven sacraments, the principle of sacramentality also touches the whole created order, Jesus Christ, the church, the saints, and all other human beings.

Central to Catholic faith is the conviction that all of reality is sacred. First, because it comes from God's creative hand. Secondly, because it is sustained by God's loving and providential presence. Thirdly, because it is instrumental in fulfilling God's earthly purposes. And, fourthly, because it is destined to perfection in God's reign at the end of history.

But beyond all these important reasons, the whole created order is sacred because it is sacramental. It is the visible sign of God's invisible reality.

When St. Ignatius Loyola, founder of the Society of Jesus, urged his company of Jesuits to "see God in all things," he was simply voicing a distinctively Catholic sacramental vision.

And when Pope Paul VI declared at the Second Vatican Council that the church is a "reality imbued with the hidden presence of God," he was applying the principle of sacramentality to the Body of Christ.

And when the council pointed to the saints as "images of Christ" through whom the presence and face of God are "vividly" manifested to us, the council was appealing to this same sacramental principle.

Indeed, there is no limit to the principle's application. The whole of creation is a "theater of divine glory" —

the sun and the moon and the stars and all living creatures, as St. Francis of Assisi reminded us.

Jesus, however, is the great sacrament, the standard and measure for all others. It is in and through him that God's presence and face most "vividly" have been shown to us. The church, in turn, is the sacrament of Christ, and the seven sacraments, in their turn, are church sacraments.

According to the Catholic vision of reality, we live in a kind of sacramental chain of being. The invisible, spiritual God encounters us — and we encounter God — through the visible and the material. And Christ is the linchpin of that chain.

Because the whole of created reality is a sign and instrument of God's presence and redemptive activity, Catholics believe that all of God's creation is to be affirmed, cherished, and celebrated — especially the human.

Thus, when a person reaches out to another in love, God is present in the relationship because "God is love" (1 John 4:8). And when new life springs from that loving relationship, God's creative activity is carried forward.

That is why, for Catholicism, marriage is the sacrament *par excellence* of God's creative love for us.

There are no long faces where there is a truly sacramental faith. Which is not to say that there aren't any long-faced Catholics. But they're the types who probably would have selected their answers from the first list.

Classic movies can reveal life's truths

By Gregory F. Augustine Pierce
Syndicated columnist

"I've just had an apostrophe," said Smee.

"I think you mean an epiphany," corrected Captain Hook.

One of the many wonderful things about having children is that you get to watch some of the truly great movies over and over and over again.

Thanks to the modern miracle of the videocassette recorder, modern treasures such as *Beauty and the Beast*, *Fern Gully*, and *Aladdin*, as well as classics such as *Pinnocchio*, *Mary Poppins* and *It's a Wonderful Life*, can be studied in-depth by any parent seeking to grasp life's truly important truths.

One of my favorites arrived under the Christmas tree, and I have already managed to memorize long sections of dialogue from director Steven Spielberg's *Hook*.

Hook's major theme is epiphany, which *The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language* defines as



FAITH AND WORK

"a spiritual event in which the essence of a given object of manifestation appears to the subject, as in a sudden flash of recognition."

Thus, the feast of the Epiphany celebrates not Jesus' birth but the revelation of his reign to the world.

Hook is filled with epiphanies. Captain Hook and his first mate, Smee, both experience one. The Lost Boys do when they finally recognize the middle-aged Peter Banning as the grown-up Pan. Peter's children have another when they see that their father is the real Peter Pan of their bedtime stories.

And Peter himself, who as a high-powered, corporate-raiding lawyer had become something of a "pirate" himself, discovers the one happy thought that will allow him to fly once again: "I know why I grew up. I wanted to be a father," he tells Tinkerbell. "I'm a daddy!" he shouts.


I, too, had an epiphany while watching this movie. It was an epiphany about the work involved with being a parent. In order to save his children from the evil Captain Hook, Peter Banning must first get back in touch with his own "inner-child." The movie has a wonderful scene in which Peter and the Lost Boys are sitting at a long banquet table and all the boys are pretending

to eat a great feast. The adult Peter, of course, can see no food or drink.

"Play with us, Peter," the boys plead. Peter finally allows his imagination to soar, finally "sees" the magnificent imaginary meal, and proceeds to initiate a very messy imaginary food fight. Having recaptured his childhood innocence, Peter can "fly and fight and crow" once again.

Delighted with this rediscovery of himself, Peter forgets for a while that he is now an adult. "Why are you in Never Land?" Tinkerbell asks him. "That's easy," Peter replies, "To always be a little boy and have fun." But Peter eventually remembers his duty to protect his children. "Go save them, Peter," Tinkerbell calls as he flies off to battle the nefarious Captain Hook.

For me, the epiphany of *Hook* was the realization that in order to be a great parent, I must be — at the same time and equally importantly — both a carefree child and a responsible adult.



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