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Sacraments

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Lord.

In addition, Father Pacwa noted, the sacraments offer Catholics the opportunity to transform their own human experiences into a deeper Christian spirituality, a point made in section 1210 of *The Catechism of the Catholic Church*:

"The seven sacraments touch all the stages and all the important moments of Christian life: they give birth and increase, healing and mission to the Christian's life of faith. There is thus a certain resemblance between the stages of natural life and the stages of the spiritual life."

Part of that resemblance is rooted in the fact that in each sacrament, Catholics are called to die to themselves so that they may be reborn in Christ, Father Pacwa explained. Indeed, the Second Vatican Council's "Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy" buttressed the priest's point:

"(T)he liturgy of the sacraments ... sanctifies almost every event of (the faithful's) lives with the divine grace which flows from the paschal mystery of the Passion, Death and Resurrection of Christ."

For example, the sacrament of baptism is the first moment in which a Christian — either by himself or through his godparents — renounces a self-centered will in favor of a God-centered will, paralleling Christ's decision to go to the cross in obedience to his Father's will, Father Pacwa noted.

"If the death of Christ on the cross is the means of salvation, if this is how God reconciles the world to himself by sending his only son to die for our sins, then we have to get in on that and baptism is the way for this," Father Pacwa said, adding, "(I)t means our old self, the self of concupiscence and disorder, the self of the flesh, has to die so that Christ can have a new self rise within us, so that he can have a new people."

"Baptism is a call to heroism," he continued. "If we have died with Christ, we will also be able to live with him."

Part of living with Christ is dying to the world's call for people to pamper themselves and seek pleasure at the expense of others, Father Pacwa noted. This process is amplified at confirmation, which prepares Catholics to bring to their baptismal call a more adult level of commitment to self-renunciation, he noted. He added that confirmation is rooted in Christ's passion because it was at the Last Supper that Jesus made the following promise recorded in the 14th chapter

of St. John's Gospel:

"The Advocate, the Holy Spirit that the Father will send in my name — he will teach you everything and remind you of all that I told you."

That promise was fulfilled at Pentecost, Father Pacwa stressed, when the Holy Spirit came to the Apostles and gave them the strength to do

their work in proclaiming the Gospel. Catholics experience a similar "Pentecost" through confirmation, he noted.

"Confirmation strengthens us for our Christian mission," he said. "Every single one of us is called to be an apostle."

This point is made as well in the 1990 book *We Believe ... A Survey of the Catholic Faith* by Father Oscar Lukefahr, of the Congregation of the Mission.

"Pentecost got the gospel out from behind locked doors and into the world," he wrote. "Confirmation should help us continue the work of Christ and minister to others."

Two sacraments the church offers specifically highlight Christ's call to each of us to find our life's vocation, Father Pacwa noted: holy orders and matrimony. He added that self-sacrifice is inherent in both sacraments.

In holy orders, men participate in the priesthood Christ earned for his church by accepting the cross, Father Pacwa explained. He pointed to the fact that in the Old Testament, the priests performed sacrifices to God on behalf of the people, just as the church believes Christ sacrificed his own life to God's will to save humanity. He added that religious orders calling men to priesthood with advertisements that emphasize "self-fulfillment" are missing the whole point of the ordained life.

"It's going to be a life of dying to oneself," he stressed of accepting ordination.

Matrimony, in a like manner, calls men and women to subordinate themselves to one another so that out of their mutual self-sacrifice a mutual love can rise, Father Pacwa commented. He added that St. Paul's call for a husband to be the head of his wife has been misunderstood



to mean the husband should dominate his wife. On the contrary, St. Paul likened the husband's headship to Christ's headship of the church, which is one of service, not domination.

"Husbands are to be enthroned in their families not on an easy chair, but on the cross," Father Pacwa stated.

Like baptism and confirmation, holy orders and matrimony, the sacrament of penance finds its antecedent in Jesus' own actions throughout his passion, Father Pacwa said. One of Christ's last acts before he died on the cross was assuring one of the thieves crucified with him that he would be with Christ in heaven. Unlike the other thief who mocked Christ, the "good thief" acknowledged that he had sinned and could only plead for mercy, not demand it.

"That's a major conversion, to stop saying, 'It happened to me,' and to start saying, 'I did it,'" Father Pacwa said. "Taking that kind of responsibility like the good thief is essential for conversion."

Additionally, Christ forgave his crucifiers because they did not know what they were doing, Father Pacwa said, and Catholics can find comfort in the confessional realizing that Christ had compassion even for those who killed him.

"Our ignorance becomes a source of our salvation," the priest commented, adding that Christ's examples enable us to forgive others for whatever they have done to us.

Father Lukefahr, in *We Believe*, wrote that meditating on Christ's acts of forgiveness on the cross opens new possibilities of imagining God as a being who understands why humans fall into sin and how hard it is to climb out of it.

"(The thief) looked into God's eyes and saw sympathy and understanding," he wrote.

Just as the sacrament of reconciliation calls Catholics to die to the self that won't admit its sin, penance also rolls away the rock of shame that covers the tomb of our guilt, Father Pacwa noted. Absolution equals resurrection, he continued, using the example of a thief whose confession he once heard.

Father Pacwa called the man the thief

had robbed and explained that the thief wanted to make restitution, but feared meeting his victim face-to-face. The victim was so impressed by the thief's repentance that he told Father Pacwa to give half the stolen money back to him and half to charity. The priest subsequently donated the money to an orphanage.

"You see how the joy of one man's reconciliation brought joy to his victim and to some orphans," Father Pacwa said.

Healing that takes place through confession parallels the hope for healing the church offers through its anointing of the sick, Father Pacwa noted. Like the other sacraments, it is rooted in Christ's death and resurrection because its purpose parallels one of Christ's purposes in undergoing his passion, Father Pacwa explained — that of healing humanity's afflictions.

The church highlights the connection between Christ's passion and his healing on Good Friday when the church reads the 53rd chapter of Isaiah at its service, commonly understood by Christians as prophetic of Christ's own role as the "Suffering Servant."

"Yet it was our infirmities that he bore, our sufferings that he endured. ... Upon him was the chastisement that makes us whole, by his stripes we were healed," Isaiah reads.

The catechism also notes how anointing the sick echoes Christ's passion.

"On the cross Christ took upon himself the whole weight of evil and took away 'the sin of the world,' of which illness is only a consequence," section 1505 reads.

The catechism adds that after Christ rose from the dead, he renewed his Apostles' call to heal the sick, a call recorded in the 16th chapter of St. Mark's Gospel: "In my name ... they will lay their hands on the sick, and they will recover."

The ultimate sign of Christ's healing, of course, is found in the sacrament of the Eucharist, Father Pacwa explained, for the Eucharist is a living symbol of how Jesus' body was broken and then resurrected.

To undergird his point, Father Pacwa noted that at the Last Supper, when Jesus broke the bread, he said, "This is my body," and then, in a separate gesture, took the wine and said, "This is my blood."

"He did not say 'This is my body and blood,'" Father Pacwa said, adding that Christ's act signified how his blood would be poured out in his death.

"The root of his Eucharist is going to be his death on the cross," Father Pacwa continued.

The Eucharist is particularly meaningful because the bread and wine used by Christ and the church symbolize both the labor and love that went into making these gifts, and the sufferings and sorrows of each person's life, Father Pacwa observed. In this sense, Christ and the church both offer up their whole lives as gifts to God to be used for the salvation of the world, he noted.

When priests take a fragment of the consecrated bread and put it into the chalice of consecrated wine, hold it up and say, "This is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world," they echo how Christ's willingness to sacrifice himself led to his own resurrection, Father Pacwa said.

"When we receive the Eucharist, we also receive hope that Christ will bring about a resurrection through our suffering," he said.

EDITORS' NOTE: This article was based on cassette recordings of Father Pacwa's speeches provided courtesy of the Irenaeus Center at St. Thomas the Apostle Parish. To learn more about the center's ongoing adult education programs, call 716/342-4670, or 342-1901.

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