

We Are the Body of Christ, Part II: We Are Catholic

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Last Sunday I began a preaching series called “*We are the Body of Christ.*” I said that, as members of the body of Christ, we are one family. I want explore our family’s heritage. What’s the DNA of this family like? What’s our history? I

Years ago, when I was in seminary in Auckland in New Zealand, there was a church I liked to attend called Saint Paul’s, Symonds Street. It was a beautiful, elegant stone building in the inner city.. Although it represented a very different tradition from the one I’d grown up in, I found myself drawn to that place like nothing you can imagine. I was brought up in an evangelical church, while St. Paul’s was very “high church.” They celebrated the Sunday Mass with incense, with acolytes swarming everywhere and more candles than I had ever seen before!

The preaching was biblically based, and I found that the combination of liturgy and ceremonial, with the preaching of the word, was incredibly powerful. What I encountered at St. Paul’s was a sense that I’d never had as strongly before of the awesomeness of God, the holiness of God, the transcendence of God. It was such an amazing experience to feel the power of that presence that I went back there whenever the seminary allowed us to visit churches.

I’d usually try to get there early, just to sit in the atmosphere of that place. On one of those occasions, a Wednesday night in Lent, I could smell the incense that had been used at a service earlier that day and still lingered in the air like a fragrance. But it wasn’t just the incense: there was this incredible sense of the power of God’s presence.

This post-modern generation is hungry for that kind of experience. Many think, that what churches like St. Paul’s offer through liturgy and symbolism and ceremonial is passé. Yet people are hungry for that today. Beth Maynard, an Episcopal priest, wrote, in *Episcopal Life: A survey of gen-xers from 41 denominations reported that 88% wish their church would recover depth and substance in worship. And 89% said that their deepest desire was to have a genuine encounter with God.*

Post-moderns want to see, smell, touch, and taste God, not just hear about religion. So often in the

church, we only offer *rational* ways of knowing God. We tend to talk all the time, and explain everything. We try to unravel the mysteries of God so that people can catch a *Reader’s Digest* concept of Him. Beth Maynard is testifying to our hunger for something much, much deeper than that.

The 1970s was the decade of the Jesus movement. It was a world-wide phenomenon, and it impacted New Zealand. Many young people, former hippies and others, came to know the Lord Jesus. Although I was already a Christian, I became involved in that exciting move of God. Many of these young people made their way to an Assemblies of God church in the city where my family and I were living.

You would see them on Sunday mornings, hands raised and having a wonderful time enjoying the freedom of a Pentecostal service.

But they went somewhere else as well. Doves of them made their way to *The Community of the Sacred Name*, an Anglican religious order, where forty nuns lived a fairly secluded life. They ordered their lives around a rhythm of silence, liturgy, and service. They called Eucharist “the mass,” burned incense by the ton, and said the Daily Offices seven times a day. These “Jesus freaks” couldn’t get enough of that place. Why? Because there’s something about symbols, there’s something about mystery, there’s something about transcendence, there’s something about depth that we’re hungry for. If we don’t get it at church we’ll look for it somewhere else, because it reflects a deep need in our lives.

What I’m describing to you this morning is part of our family heritage in the Christian church. We call it the catholic stream. I’m not talking about *Roman Catholic*. I’m talking about catholic in a broader way than that.

I John 1, chapter 5, verses 7-8, it says this: *There are three that testify: the Spirit, the water and the blood, and the three are in agreement.* The Spirit represents the Pentecostal stream—we will come to that in a few weeks’ time. The water represents the Word stream—the evangelical—because it’s the word that washes us. Jesus says: *You’ve already been made clean by means of the word that I’ve spoken to you.* But the

blood, the third testimony to God, is represented in sacrament, liturgy and Eucharist. That's what I'm talking about today.

I want to give you what I consider to be three unique testimonies about God that this catholic stream provides for us.

The first testimony about God that the catholic stream offers is this—and we've touched on it already: **God is transcendent.**

That means that he is wholly other. He lives in the realm above the earth that we call heaven. He is the highly exalted One. He is a God who, though we can understand and know him in some measure, is also the God who is *sovereign*. As the Bible says in Psalm 115, "*He does whatever pleases him.*" He is a God who is transcendent.

The Bible says about Moses that "*the Lord would speak to Moses face-to-face, as a man speaks with his friend.*" That speaks of another aspect of God: **immanence**. Immanence is a theological word which means: *the Lord who is amongst us, who is one of us, who shares life with us*. But transcendence speaks of the other testimony of God: that God is highly exalted. Isaiah chapter 6, "*In the year that King Uzziah died, I saw the Lord seated on a throne, high and exalted.*" This man, who was already a prophet, saw the Lord. Let me warn you: when you begin to touch God's transcendence, it is not comfortable. Although Isaiah was already in full-time ministry as a prophet, his response to encountering God's transcendence was: "*Woe to me, I'm a man of unclean lips.*" Transcendence reveals the holiness of God. And in the light of that revelation, we see ourselves as we really are.

That's probably why we spend so much time in busyness: we're terrified that if we touch the transcendent God, something might happen that we not only can't control, but may not like very much. Isaiah was struck with a piercing sense of his sinfulness, and his need for cleansing.

If the only way we know God is that He is immanent, we may become a little familiar with him, and that may make us spiritually proud. But you don't mess with a transcendent God. You bow before him, you do reverence before him, you repent, you pray, you do whatever you have to do—because you are in the presence of a pure love that is wholly other.

Jesus said to his disciples: *I don't call you servants any more, I call you friends*. That's immanence. One of the men whom Jesus called his friend was the apostle John. John had laid his head on the breast of Jesus at the Last Supper; yet he had also glimpsed his transcendence on the mount of Transfiguration. But years later, when he was a prisoner on the island of Patmos, John writes that he was in the Spirit and saw Jesus—no longer as just a friend, but as the blazing sun of glory. In the face of that transcendence, and the awesomeness of that revelation, he describes how he fell down as though dead.

That's the catholic testimony to God. He's not manageable and easily accommodated by neat packages of belief and doctrine. You can't put him into a little intellectual box, and figure out who He is by your reason. There's certainly a place for trying to understand him! But transcendence exposes us to something that we can't comprehend. We just bow in reverence and awe.

Transcendence defines how we in our Anglican tradition understand Communion. We regard the bread and the wine as conveying the *objective* presence of Jesus. He's not there simply by our subjective faith—as though he's only here if I *believe* he's here, and he's not if I don't. He's here whether we want him to be here or not, whether we're ready for him or not. Our faith simply enables us to *recognize and receive* him. Because he's transcendent, he doesn't need our bidding to come.

In our tradition, we get out of our seats and come forward to receive Communion. The God who is immanent comes to us; but *we go, we journey* to the transcendent God. We leave our seats, we come forward, and we stretch out our trembling hands to receive the one who is amongst us, the one who is here, the God who is transcendent. When we receive the bread and the wine, we receive the one who is immanent, the Word made flesh—but not before we've recognized his transcendence.

Consequently, we treat the Lord and the sacrament with reverence. It's not just any meal. It's not just a bread and wine party. This is a place where the living God stands amongst us, and comes to feed us. And so we treat him with reverence, and we reverence the sacrament. It's not a chatty time. It's not just a social time. This is an awesome time where we discern his presence, and also the presence of His body represented in the people around us.

Here's the second witness of the catholic stream.
God has established divine order.

You may recall the story that's told in Luke, chapter seven, of the Roman centurion whose little boy was desperately sick. He goes to Jesus and says, *Will you come to my house?* As Jesus is on his way, the man has second thoughts about the awesomeness of the one whom he's asked to come to his house. He says, *"Don't come to my house, you don't need to do that but just say the word—that's all you need to do—just speak the word and my boy will be healed. I know that because, like you, I am a man under authority. I have men under me, and I say to this one go and he does it, and to that one, do this and he does it, because they're under authority. I'm under Caesar's authority, they're under mine, and that's how it works. And Jesus, I sense that you're not just a loose cannon, you're not just an itinerant minister who goes around doing some very exciting, powerful things. I sense in your ministry that you always defer to your Father. You talk a lot about your Father. You're under authority as I am, so you don't need to do any more than I need to. I just speak the word and something happens. Speak the word Jesus, and my son will be healed."*

Divine authority, divine order: that's what God has established. Jesus submitted to that. The Bible says that, although he was equal to the Father, he didn't think to snatch at equality with God, the equality that was rightfully his. Jesus said, in his own words: *"I and the Father are one."* And yet he also said, *"The Father is greater than I."* Is that inconsistent? Are these contradictory words? Not at all.

I and the Father are one, he was saying, but I honor him so much that I won't do anything unless he tells me to do it, I won't speak anything unless he tells me to speak it. I see what the Father's doing and only then will I do anything. These words I speak are not mine; they are the words of the Father who sent me. Jesus understood divine order. He wasn't a loose cannon, an itinerant doing his independent thing, gathering a following. He understood and was in submission to divine order.

God has created an ordered universe. We recognize that in its mathematical precision. God has created everything to function within its right order. The Bible says that this order applies to all of life, including marriage. Paul writes, in Ephesians 5, that the husband is to the wife what Jesus is to the church.

This is how the church should function as well. In I Corinthians, chapter 10, Paul says that *"God is the head of Christ. And Christ is the head of the church."* God is not interested in chaos, but in order. How does order work in the church? In our Anglican tradition, we understand that divine authority was transmitted from Jesus to the apostles. Paul and the other apostles would lay hands on people and set them aside as elders in the early church. It was a transmission of divine order.

In our tradition, that divine order is transmitted through bishops. They are consecrated in apostolic succession. No bishop can be consecrated by just one other bishop. There have to be at least three who lay hands on anyone who's going to be made a bishop. Our church can trace that succession all the way back to the apostles. Why is that important? Because of divine order. It may seem like some silly historical thing that we perpetuate, or even a prideful thing. It in fact neither. We do it because we are so clear about divine order. If we get the order wrong, then other things are going to go wrong as well.

The bishop ordains priests. So the authority of the priest comes from the Father through Christ, through the bishop, to the priest. I'm here as your rector, but our bishop is also the spiritual authority over this congregation. I do not bear this leadership, and my authority, on my own, and I'm accountable to him. That's how it works. And, as clergy are over congregations, so there is a submission within the congregation and to those in leadership. In the catholic tradition, the divine order has got nothing to do with the worthiness of the people who bear office. My worthiness does not affect whether or not Jesus will show up at the Eucharist, thank God. Otherwise, it would be very uncertain as to whether it would "work" very often. Fortunately, the catholic tradition testifies that it is the divine order that matters. We'll talk in coming weeks about how those people should behave and conduct themselves. But the catholic stream says: "Let's get the order first, and then we'll talk about those who occupy those positions of trust."

That's a very difficult thing to understand. In Numbers, chapter 11, Moses appointed the seventy elders. He had given them delegated spiritual authority. The Spirit that was on him was now on the seventy elders. So Moses is in proper divine order, and he has now enabled the people of God to come into their ministries. In Numbers, chapter 16, a group of the elders comes up to him, and they

challenge him: *"You've gone too far, Moses and Aaron. The whole community is holy, every one of them. And the Lord is with them. Why then do you sit yourselves above the Lord's assembly?"*

They rightly understood that God had given them an anointing for leadership. What they did *not* understand was divine order. They thought that their anointing for ministry created an egalitarian community, where there was no order any more. Moses said, *"No that's wrong."* If you read the story, God had to deal severely with that situation. So God has established divine order. That's another testimony of the catholic stream.

Here's the last one. **God looks for fruit** in our lives. There's a wonderful story told by my predecessor, Renny Scott, about a young couple who were in the church at the time. She was Baptist, and he was Roman Catholic. He had Jesuit priests in his family. He was a well credentialed Roman Catholic. She was an equally credentialed Southern Baptist girl. When they fell in love, they tried to figure out how to make this relationship work, particularly with respect to their faith, because neither of them was fully persuaded that the other was actually Christian.

She was longing to hear him say: Jesus is Lord and Savior of my life. I've repented of my sins, and I've accepted him by faith. She never heard him say it. Coming from her evangelical tradition, which I'll talk about next Sunday, she understood what Paul describes in Romans, chapter ten: *"If you confess with your lips that Jesus is Lord, and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved."* It's as simple as that. She understood that, to be in Christ, you had to make that confession with your lips and have the right faith in your heart. When he didn't seem to be making the right confession, she wondered if the faith was really in his heart. She took him off to crusades and rallies, and was hoping that he would finally get it. When he didn't seem to, it put her in a crisis. But he was in crisis as well, because he wanted to show her the way the Christian faith worked out in his tradition. He took her to a place where there was a Roman Catholic convent, where the nuns were doing works of mercy in the community and pouring themselves out for the poor. She looked at that, was somewhat impressed, but complained, *"I don't hear them talking about Jesus."*

Both of those traditions are part of our family heritage. Evangelicals can get stuck on the confession, and often stop short of works. The

catholic stream can get stuck on the fruit of works, and stop short of the confession! The Bible does not prefer either. *"Faith without works, " James proclaims, "is dead."* You can't choose.

We could illustrate this in a number of ways. Think of Jesus, for example, who looked one day at his disciples said, *"Many will come to me on that day and say Lord, Lord, we prophesied in your name, we cast out demons in your name. We did all these great things in your name."* In other words, they talked the talk. They did the confession thing pretty well; yet he will say, *"I don't know you."* Oops.

"O Lord," we ask, *"you mean the confession isn't enough?"* *"No,"* he replies, *"it it's not enough."* He went on to say, *"it is by their fruit that you shall know them."* That's the catholic witness: fruit. *"Inasmuch as you did it unto one of the least of these my brothers, you did it to me."* That's the catholic as well.

Here's something I'd like you to try and understand. If we don't begin with transcendence, which is the highest place, we won't end up knowing how to minister to the poor, which is the lowest place. Believe it or not, those two things are inextricably joined together. It's hard to see that, but that's how it works, because those who see the transcendent God of glory are able to see that glory in the poorest of the poor. That's why Mother Theresa was able to say, and often would say, *"I see Jesus in the people on the streets of Calcutta."* I see Jesus. That's a typically catholic witness. You won't often hear Protestants using that kind of language. That part of our DNA, that's a key part of how reality works.

Let me tell you why transcendence is linked to service and to fruit. If you talk to Evangelicals, you will find that they have—and we all do, whatever our background—certain preferences in their understanding of what we might call the main *salvation points* of Christ's redeeming work. The first of these is *incarnation*—the Word made flesh. The second one is *redemption*—he died for our sins on the cross. The third is the *resurrection*. The fourth is *Pentecost*. And the fifth one is the *second coming*. Evangelicals make redemption the starting point, because that was the discovery of the Reformation: *"I've discovered Jesus by grace through faith. Praise God, that's my testimony."*

If incarnation is not my starting point, I will find I am most comfortable around others who are redeemed. Anything that's not redeemed, according

to my understanding, makes me nervous and uncertain. I'm not very comfortable, you see, because these unredeemed people may contaminate me. So I need to hear your testimony, to be quite sure that you've been redeemed. We can be like that Southern Baptist girl, who wanted to hear her boyfriend's testimony before she could really be sure that he was truly redeemed.

The catholic stream flows directly from transcendence to incarnation. The Eternal One, the Transcendent Word, became flesh. "*God loved the world so much that he gave his only son.*" If incarnation is our starting point, then we will want to take the transcendent power and glory into the world that he loves, and the catholic stream gives us the theological framework to do it. The world we enter doesn't need to be redeemed before we enter it, because it wasn't when He came either.

Theology is vital in showing us how to live our lives. It helps us know who Jesus is, how to relate to him, how to make the right choices, how to serve him by bearing the fruit of good works.

We are the body of Christ, and we're catholic. We understand that God is not just immanent, but he's also transcendent; not a God of chaos and undifferentiated activity, but a God of order. And we understand that God is not just looking for a profession of faith in the Lord Jesus, but is wanting it to bear the fruit of good works. That's who we are, church.