

INTRODUCTION

Forehead, chest, left-shoulder, right-shoulder. Most of us learn the Sign of the Cross at an early age. It is routine, and it is everywhere. Professional baseball players cross themselves before stepping up to the plate; heads of state perform the ritual at official gatherings. For many, the sign has become so common it is mundane. Thus, I would like to ask the question: What does the sign actually mean?

“Father (forehead), Son (chest), and Holy Spirit (left shoulder – right shoulder).” If you’ve spent time around the Catholic Church, you’ve heard these words time and again. The Sign of the Cross expresses the most central doctrine of our faith: the Trinity. There is only one God, but within the one God, there are three Persons: the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. The Trinity is enormously important — but just like the Sign of the Cross, we rarely take time to think about it. It seems to have little relevance to our actual lives, and while we might know it’s true in our heads, we have not adequately allowed the doctrine to enter our hearts.

In this way, Christian doctrines can easily become religious trivia, disconnected from our actual experience of the faith. We treat them like abstract facts, kind of like $H_2O = \text{water}$, or that triangles have three angles, or that George Washington was the first president of the United States. Trivia is nice, but it doesn’t make much difference in our lives.

Should the Trinity be trivia? Should the Sign of the Cross be an extra? Of course not. Church teaching should not be trivia. It should make a difference. In fact, Church teaching should affect everything. Theologian Frank Sheed says:

The test of anyone's mind is what is in his mental landscape. And it is not enough that we should see the same things as other people plus the things the Church teaches. Even the things that we and they both see will not look the same or be the same; because what the Church teaches affects even the things already in the landscape, the things of ordinary experience. It is like a physical landscape at sunrise: it is not that you see the same things that you saw before and now find yourself seeing the sun as well. You see everything sun-bathed. Similarly, it is not a case of seeing the same universe as other people and then seeing God over and above. For God is at the center of everything whatsoever. If we would see the Universe aright, we must see it God-bathed.¹

The faith is like the sun: When there is no sun, there is only darkness. People stumble in the dark, but when the sun shines, people walk freely, and the whole world makes sense. The sun destroys physical darkness, and faith destroys spiritual darkness. Just like a person walking at night struggles to find the road, so too does a faithless man struggle to find meaning in his life. The sun reveals the beauty of the universe; the faith reveals the fullness of life!

So the faith can help us understand the world, but the reverse is also true: The world can help us to understand the faith! You see, God knew that He might seem distant, so He made Himself present in concrete and tangible things. These things are called sacraments. The Eucharist is a sacrament because in the Mass God becomes present to us under the appearance of bread and wine. Here, God shows us just how much He wants to be in relationship with us. He wants to come close to us so desperately that He is willing to become our food. God makes Himself concrete and personal under the appearance of

¹ Sheed, F. J. (Francis Joseph). *Theology and sanity* San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1993. 3.

Introduction

bread and wine. In this way, God uses the things of the world to make sense of the faith. So the bridge goes both ways: Faith helps us make sense of the world, and the world helps us make sense of the faith.

Marriage is a sacrament. Why is marriage a sacrament? Because sexuality, marriage and the family, perhaps more than any other worldly thing, teach us about God's love. Marriage teaches us about God in the same way that biology teaches us about the physical universe. In this way, marriage is a theology. And the language of marriage is the language of the body. God made the body in a specific way to communicate His love.

Think about it like this: Let's say that man's search for God is like trying to understand a difficult academic subject, such as astronomy or biology. What would an astronomer do without a telescope? And what would a biologist do without a microscope? Stars are difficult to see with the naked eye, and cells are too small to even notice. The sacraments are like telescopes and microscopes. They make sense of the world beyond and the world within. God gave them to us so that we might see Him more clearly. And just like the facts about a star — its color, shape and composition — become clear with a telescope, so too the facts about God become concrete in sexuality, marriage and the family.

That's what this study is all about. Beginning in 1979, Pope St. John Paul II gave a series of talks which are now popularly referred to as the *Theology of the Body*. At the heart of John Paul II's message is the belief that the human person reveals the nature of God's love in his or her body, and this happens most especially in the spousal communion between man and woman (TOB 9:3). Human people, human relationships and human bodies are, in a certain sense, like sacraments: They show us the face of God. They are a theology. The

Theology of the Body can therefore change the way we think about everything, matters as big as God's love or as seemingly insignificant as the Sign of the Cross.

Before we begin our Bible study, I would like to make a note on how John Paul II began his teaching. John Paul II gave the *Theology of the Body* in the wake of the sexual revolution, a time of great controversy and heated arguments. But rather than argue, John Paul II began his teaching with a sense of wonder and awe at the gift of the body and sexuality. This is a theme of John Paul II's teaching style. A month before becoming pope, he said, "We must wonder! We must create a climate of wonder! This task is closest to the family...Wonder is needed so that beauty might enter into human life, society and the nation. We need to marvel at everything that is found in man." (Fr. Karol Wojtyła, Sept 1978) John Paul knew that, to understand the Church's teachings on sex, we can't begin with arguments; we need to begin with wonder.

John Paul II was not the only one who refused to begin with arguments. Jesus did the same thing. In Matthew's Gospel, the Pharisees questioned Jesus, saying, "Can we divorce our wives? After all, Moses allowed divorce, so why not us?" Jesus responded, "Because of the hardness of your hearts Moses allowed you to divorce your wives, *but from the beginning it was not so*" (Mt 19:8). Jesus did not accept the question at the level that the Pharisees gave it to Him. Instead, He forced them to go deeper. And John Paul II challenges us to do the same. It's easy to get caught up in questions like "How far can I go?" "Why can't I do this?" or "Why does the Church teach that?" These questions are good questions, but we'll never know the answer to them unless we're willing to ask deeper questions: "What is the meaning of the body?" and "What is the meaning of sexuality?"

Introduction

This study is about the deep questions. So for now, I challenge you to put all the controversial topics to the side. We will return to them later. At present, I challenge you to go deeper and allow yourself to wonder.