

By Anna-Nicole Kyritsis

One year at a Lenten youth retreat, three teenagers attended a session entitled, “Living a Sacramental Life.” The facilitator’s goal was to reveal that our Lord instructs us to live the Sacraments, rather than simply to partake of them. He illustrated his point through several scriptural references, both from the Old Testament and the New Testament, that revealed God’s instructions for living. Although many listened to his words during the workshop, few responded or questioned the facilitator’s ideas. However, these three young adults became baffled by one of the speaker’s examples, a quote taken from Malachi. “He will sit as a refiner and purifier of silver” (Malachi 3:3). Although they could not comprehend how that particular scripture related to God’s instructions to live the sacramental life, upon departing the retreat, the three decided to research further and discovered how this example correlated to the lesson.

During the next week one of the trio made an appointment to visit and watch a silversmith at work. She watched him heat a piece of silver by holding it over the fire. During this process he explained to her that the silver needs to be placed in the center of the fire, where the flames are the hottest in order to burn away all of the metal’s impurities. Furthermore, he showed her that he had to keep his eyes on the piece of silver the entire time it was immersed in the fire, so as to prevent it from spoiling. For, if the silver remains in the flames for too long, then it will be destroyed. The young lady was intrigued as to how the silversmith timed the heating process. “How do you know when the silver is fully refined?” Smiling at her, he responded, “Oh, that’s simple. The silver is refined and purified when I see my image in it.”

Our young people need to know that every person is created in the image and likeness of God. They need to be taught by example that just as the silversmith reveals that the silver must be cleansed of its impurities so that he may see in it his image, so must we be cleansed of our impurities in order to mirror the likeness of Christ. Although our sins are forgiven through repentance and the sacraments of Confession and Communion, we still have the capacity to sin again. Jesus Christ designed a way of life for His disciples to follow in order to live a life created in His likeness. Within this plan, Christ instituted a series of visible sacraments to promote the communion of one’s life with His. The Holy Sacraments are a means that allow us to repent, to be forgiven, to receive both physical and spiritual healing and strengthening, and to be saved. We all know this, right? Think again. Sacramental living is more than being baptized and putting on Christ as a child. It requires more commitment than receiving Holy Communion on Sunday. It demands more than confessing one’s sins once a year. It entails living every moment in the footsteps of Christ so that we may be prepared to receive His glorious Kingdom.

Living the sacramental life entails living a life that is blessed with God’s grace, and hence should be a daily routine. It is something we should plea for by the moment, not by the day of the week or the religious holiday of the year. Yet, many of the children and us understand sacramental living to begin and end with the Holy Sacraments. Therefore, we need to teach our youth through a different means. We need to explain to them that living is a continual process. Each breath that we take enables us to enjoy another moment of the life that God gave to each of us. Within every moment that we live, we should walk in the footsteps of Christ. The Holy Sacraments aid us in this process by making God real to us through the five senses. However, because they are not always available to us at every moment of the day, we need to do more.

So how should we live a sacramental life? Simple. We should invite Christ into our life. One should make Him the center of one's daily routine. Christ teaches that through prayer we may receive help and understanding of His will for us. He shows us upon His death that, above all else, we should love and forgive our enemies as well as our neighbors. He beseeches us to deny ourselves and follow Him. Within each of these practices lay deeds and actions that will bring us closer to living a sacramental life.

Inviting Christ in our lives through prayer and the study of Scripture enables us to truly "put on Christ." The Sacraments...provide the foundation for one to live a Christ-centered life. However, building upon that foundation is necessary to maintain the purity and innocence that is received through these sacraments. The reading and study of scripture enables us to discover how Christ expects us to live in this world. The Holy Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments provide us with instructions and solutions to common-day struggles. Christ is the ultimate teacher. In the Garden of Gethsemane, He taught His apostles and disciples about prayer through His own example. In Matthew 26:36-56, Christ reveals and models that above all we must pray for the Lord's will to be done, as well as for the strength to understand His will, accept it, and follow it. St. John the Apostle also recorded that Christ instructs us how to pray. Here Christ is shown modeling the importance of praying for one's self, as well as for fellow Christians, for the Church, and for all (John 17:1-26). Christ teaches us that by participating in daily and consistent prayer with the Lord, one may live in communion with Him, and hence be open to receive the gift of His grace, which is by definition the sacramental life.

Furthermore, Christ, the teacher, shows that loving and praying for one's enemies as well as for his neighbors is also a necessary part of living the sacramental life. The ultimate example of Christ's sacrifice does not lay in His crucifixion alone, but in those words He uttered while hanging upon the Cross. "Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they do" (Luke 23:34). Even in death He is consumed with teaching us to follow His example by forgiving and loving those who have wronged us. Indeed, the Sacrament of Confession makes this teaching real to us and encourages us to follow this commandment. However, our actions speak louder than words, and we must remember to follow His example even outside of confession. Furthermore, the Sacrament of Holy Baptism also makes Christ real to us by calling us to deny ourselves, take up our cross, and follow him, (ref. Matthew 16:24). Near the end of the baptismal service, the newly illumined child is adorned with a cross as a symbol of the sacrifice Christ bore for us. However, the cross should stand as a daily reminder to each of us that we are living for Him, not ourselves, and that we should invite Christ to dwell within us so that we may truly deny our own desires and follow His Will. Through these earthly sacrifices, we begin to live the sacramental life.

However, we must not only teach ourselves to live a sacramental life, but show our children how to live in His likeness, as well. Every educator knows that the strongest teaching tool is modeling. Children imitate what is said and done by their mentors. An Orthodox priest once said it best with his advice, "Do not worry that they (the children) will not listen to what you say; worry that they will be watching what you do." Therefore, it is so important for the youth to be surrounded by individuals who model Orthodox values and morals. Moreover, the youth should receive reinforcement of this desired behavior from their peers and those close to them

in age with whom they identify. [Catechists] should lead lives that exemplify Orthodox values and morals. Many people seem to forget that our youth have the uncanny ability to perceive whether or not a person is being genuine. Therefore, it is so important for staff to “practice what they preach.”

Additionally, [we should] provide the ability to explore sacramental living through...studies of the saints. The lives of the saints exemplify sacramental living, and show us how one can accomplish God’s calling to live in Christ’s image. When educating our youth, secular schools teach their students to research, read, and study historical figures’ contributions to society. If we go to such lengths to educate our youth about the lives of ancient Greek philosophers, Napoleon, Hitler, and Martin Luther King Jr., should we not go to the same lengths to educate our youth about the historical figures of [the faith], further providing them with examples of how to live in Christ’s image? Indeed, many of the saints only differed from us in that they chose to follow Christ, learned from His living examples, and modeled to others the importance of and ability to lead Christian lives. They further set examples for us on how to follow Christ’s calling to deny himself and take up his cross. Truly, Christ implores us to experience those same teachings by providing us with the Gospels and books of the New Testament. All we have to do is follow Him as did the disciples, and educate our youth by actions as well as words, that living the sacramental life entails learning about Christ...and walking in His footsteps.

Just as the silversmith immersed the piece of silver in the fire to cleanse it from its impurities, so must we immerse ourselves and our youth in Christ to purify our souls. Yet, the full immersion does not end with the participation in the Holy Sacraments, but requires us to study Christ’s living example and the lives of the saints, to read and study the Holy Bible, to engage in a consistent prayer life, to live according to Christ’s teachings, commandments, and God’s will, and to witness to others, primarily the youth through our own living examples. For Christ, too, desires to see His image in us, which necessitates that we lead sacramental lives. However, living such lives requires us to go beyond the set Sacraments so that we may receive God’s grace. Therefore, we must commit to making Him real within ourselves on a daily basis, and pray that our living examples will in turn teach our youth about Christ’s call to live the sacramental life.

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