

LESSON FIVE



Marked with the Sign of Salvation

You have covered a basic catechesis, you are attending weekly mass, you have read through a brief history of the Catholic Church, you have explored more deeply the moral teachings of that same Church, and those of you who are already baptized have gone to confession. You are moving more and more towards your goal, and (hopefully) we are nearly finished this part of your journey of your entering more deeply into the Catholic Communion.

When our Lord was baptized, the Spirit was said to have descended upon him as if a dove, and those around him reported hearing a voice from heaven declaring him the Son of God. When we are baptized and confirmed we are

given a share in this same Spirit, and we too are able to be called more and more sons or daughters of God the Father. Some of you may be seeking to be baptized. Some of you may already be baptized, but you may be seeking confirmation. Either way you are seeking one or two of the sacraments of Christian Initiation that really initiate us into the Spiritual Life.

Both the sacraments of baptism and confirmation mark us with a sign of faith (called a sphragis), that while invisible to us physically; it marks us forever before the Lord spiritually. This invisible spiritual mark is sometimes linked (in the mind of the Church) to the visible tattoos Roman Soldiers used to get identifying them as belonging to certain legions. Like an early version of the dog tag, this mark on the body of the soldier was not likely to get lost on the battlefield, but it also reminded the soldiers of their own oaths to serve and to be obedient. The sphragis also meant that the soldier could not really hide his identity (even from himself), as it constantly reminded him in whose service he was in. Not infrequently the scriptures and the saints of the Church remind us that the Spiritual Life is like a battle, and that we who are baptized and confirmed are a part drawn into a battle that requires discipline and practice. We cannot be good Christian soldiers without discipline, and whenever we cease to practice our faith, and we ignore our call and our duty, we will more imperiled and less likely to survive that battle.

Both the sacraments of Baptism and Confirmation mark us with an indelible sign, impossible to remove (though invisible to the eye), and both of these sacraments tie us into the life of the Spirit, and as such we know we belong to Christ, and we can call his heavenly Father our Father too. These sacraments also bring a deeper source of grace in the Spiritual Life. Still, the Spiritual Life of the Church (properly lived) is a life of growing in virtue and growing more and more deeply connected to the Lord through our prayer. The Spiritual Life is not just something we just once and we're done. The Spiritual Life is something we commit ourselves to for the rest of the life. It is a life of prayer. And so we need to consider our prayer life, and how that is unfolding. It is important for us to be able to reflect on our Spirituality. Are we really praying? Are we really growing in the Spiritual Life? Let us then think about our prayer, and work to grow better at prayer.

The Spiritual Life

The Spiritual Life in the Catholic Church is essentially a three fold reality, like three columns of Prayer, Fasting and Alms Giving.

Alms Giving is very important in the Spiritual life, if only because virtually the only time that our Lord talked about heaven and hell he placed it in the context of those who have shown charity to the poor and outcaste. For the Catholic these works of charity are a crucial form of the Spiritual Life, and the world knows us by our generosity towards the poor. Still we can include in this spending time and showing love to others not merely in financial ways, but also by visiting the sick or the prisoner. A good Catholic is a committed Catholic, and we urge everyone to get involved in some form of charity by either volunteering or contributions or both. There are many ways to help in the average Catholic parish, but everyone should know about the good work that the Saint Vincent de Paul Society does with the poor. Still, it may also mean helping with unwed mothers or comforting the dying. These works of charity are critical for a well-lived Spiritual life.

Fasting is another of the three columns of the Spiritual life, and we may personally elect to fast on certain days, or we may collectively fast as a people on certain days of the year. Still there are degrees of fasting (if you will) or it may include the practice of just mean skipping a meal from time to time, or eating less on certain days. Fasting developed as a way of disciplining the body *and* the spirit, and it was particularly helpful whenever the Church was under persecution, for it helped us prepare for the probability of imprisonment and torture, and it helped us to be in solidarity with those who were suffering persecution for our faith. It made us stronger to endure the test which we might have had to have undergone. Fasting is a Biblical practice, and it is also done in imitation of our Lord, who fasted for forty days. Similar to fasting is abstinence, when we might (for example) abstain from red meat on Fridays to mark the day of the week when our Lord died. Fasting is not something that we take too far, nor should we seek to endanger our health by fasting, but it remains a part of the Catholic Spiritual Life.

Prayer is the third important part of the Spiritual Life. Growing in the prayer life is a life long commitment, but one of the great sources of aid in all of this is

the saints, many of whom have written many great works on the importance of prayer. Prayer is essentially walking daily with the Lord, conscious of his goodness, and constantly praising him for his providence.

There is no one single spirituality of the Church. Some Catholics will have a prayer corner in their room or home. Others will come to the church daily to make a holy hour. Some use scripture and some pray the rosary and some do both and some do neither. Prayer is important, and yet there are things that pass for spirituality these days which are not really Catholic at all, but are more new age. Having guidance is important. There are countless resources one might consider here. There are way too many options to list them all, but I will present these for your consideration.

- INTRODUCTION TO THE DEVOUT LIFE by Saint Francis De Sales is a classic masterpiece and spiritual guide for anyone seeking to live a truly Christian life. You can order these in most book stores for less than \$10.
- IMITATION OF CHRIST by Thomas a Kempis was written five centuries ago by a humble monk, but the timeless message of faith remains a great spiritual classic for man. You can order these at most book stores for less than \$10

Though these may not be the favorites for every Catholic, they are classic texts, and they can give you a taste of the *Catholic* spiritual life.

A Christian Witness

You will need to choose a Christian witness to sponsor you as a Catholic for either baptism or confirmation. This person needs to be a practicing Catholic who regularly attends Sunday mass, and who can get a letter from his or her parish indicating that they are suitable candidates to be a godparent or sponsor. This person will also need to be able to be here whenever you are baptized or confirmed, and so you'll need to begin to work with Father on a good date for this that is suitable.

Homework Follows

- Explore more deeply the Spiritual Life of Catholics, and continue to pray
- Choose a person to be your godparent or sponsor at your baptism or confirmation, and to act as a witness for you
- Begin to talk with Father on the date and time for your baptism and/or confirmation.
- If you have not already, you should begin to memorize the Creed used in the Mass as you prepare for your full reception into the Catholic Church. You could also review the words of the Gloria if you need to.
- Fill out the following questionnaire, and send it to the priest or catechist.

Seventh Questionnaire

Please answer the following questions, and return this information to us.

1. Have you chosen a Catholic sponsor to be witness at your baptism and/or confirmation?
2. If yes, what is that person's name?
3. Their phone number:
4. Is this person a practicing Catholic in good standing?
5. Please ask your Christian sponsor to procure a letter from the parish where they worship indicating they are a Catholic in good standing, and have that letter sent to our parish (to the attention of the priest or catechist).
6. Have you chatted with the priest regarding the date and time for your baptism or confirmation, and if so, what is that date?
7. Do you have any questions?
8. May we presume that you are still regularly attending weekly Sunday Mass at the parish?
9. Have you had anytime to think about or do some research into the spiritual life? Did you purchase any books on the subject, and have you had time to read anything? If so, what are your impressions?
10. How is your discernment going? Are you still interested in becoming Catholic?
11. Are you ready to learn more about this faith you seek to embrace?