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**CHRISTIAN**

**COMMITMENT**



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THE LITURGY**

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# CHRISTIAN COMMITMENT

“We know that God makes all things work together for the good of those who have been called according to his decree” (Romans 8:28). It is in this confidence that Christians undertake to live in Christ, aware not only that they have been called by the Father of mercy but that their “yes” to that call is inspired by the very Spirit of God, which makes it possible for them to cry out “Abba, Father” and “Jesus is Lord.” From its very inception, the Christian life is a gift, the grace of the Lord’s invitation. Any Christian commitment and any renewal of that commitment must be understood in this light.

A Christian’s faith life commences and continues, not in isolation and separation, but in concert with the life of the whole body of the faithful, diverse in members and ministries, but made one under the headship of Christ. Faith is always a shared experience—first, in that it is initiated by the choice which the Lord himself makes and, second, in that faith comes from hearing the proclamation made by those whom the Lord sends (Romans 10:14-15). Pastors, catechists, and persons responsible for the Christian community’s liturgical life, particularly the members of diocesan and parish liturgy committees, share this mission in a special way. This statement is especially directed to them, so that they may help clarify and foster a true sense of Christian commitment and the liturgical renewal of that commitment among those whom they serve.

## GOD’S CALL THROUGH HISTORY

For the Christian the past is more than the prologue of the present. It is what makes us who we are today, both as individuals and as the

community of God's people. Our history is the history of God working among us. More than a record of humanity's search for meaning or for the Ultimate, our history is the lived experience of God seeking out and summoning his people. The call of Abraham and the patriarchs, the call of Moses and the prophets, the call that Jesus of Nazareth received from his Father, the call of Christians of every age, all have one factor in common: the utterance of God's word. "In the beginning was the Word; the Word was in God's presence, and the Word was God" (John 1:1). This is the word which has given direction and purpose to the cosmos and to us who inhabit the earth. It is through the word that God creates (Genesis 1); through the word he destroys and recreates (Genesis 6:7; 8:15-17); through the word that he forms history and gives it meaning. Christ Jesus is the fulfillment of that word, the one who completes all that the Old Testament said the word will do. He is the full self-revelation of the Father. As the Divine Word, he calls us to experience him (1 John 1:1-3) and so enter into union with him and through him, with his Father.

For both the community and the individual, the experience of the divine call is situated in history, conditioned and colored by specific cultures and circumstances. It is unique in each instance, both by virtue of those who are called, themselves unique, and by virtue of the One who calls, whose love is infinite and who loves each in an individual and special way.

The committed Christian attentively heeds God's call and is thereby able to respond through personal union with Jesus Christ, who is both the word by which God calls and the individual's word of response. This personal union with Jesus has its sacramental beginning in Christian initiation.

## CHRISTIAN INITIATION

The entry of the Christian into the mystery of Christ and his Church is achieved through participation in the paschal mystery of the risen Lord who commanded his disciples: "Go, make

disciples of all nations; baptize them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit" (Matthew 28:19). This initiation of the Christian is a sharing in the event of the Lord's death and resurrection, which happened once and for all, yet constitutes an ongoing process for the Christian who seeks to observe all Christ's commands (Matthew 28:20).

Christian initiation as a ritual event includes the sacraments of baptism, confirmation, and eucharist (*Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults*, nos. 2, 27-36). Through the celebration of these sacraments the initiated ritually participate in the whole process of salvation history. New Christians join the pilgrimage of the entire people of God making their way through history to the fulfillment promised by the Lord Jesus when he returns. As individuals, the new Christians respond to the action of the Holy Spirit in their own lives, pursuing the unique call to follow in the footsteps of the Lord. The new *Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults* clearly sees the actual reception of sacraments of initiation in this context of a continuous, step-by-step movement along the "path of faith and conversion" (*ibid.*, no. 1).

The primary model for Christian initiation is the initiation of adults. Adults are capable of a mature response to the action of grace: "They hear the preaching of the mystery of Christ, the Holy Spirit opens their hearts, and they freely and knowingly seek the living God" (*ibid.*). This model of a mature adult seeking to enter the Christian life also includes the steps of preparation known as the catechumenate, a lengthy period of spiritual growth designed to assist the candidate experiencing conversion and making a commitment to the Gospel and to the community life of the Church. The point is this: The response of the individual to God's call is a dynamic, ongoing process, well symbolized by the image of a journey or pilgrimage. There can be no stopping or turning back. Each step, whether in the life of the sincere inquirer, the catechumen, the newly baptized, or the seasoned member of the Church, requires a continuing *menta-*

*noia* or conversion. Christian life must be a continuing response to the divine initiative by which God seeks to unite himself with a person created in his own image and in doing so to restore the divine image partially defaced and obscured by the human race through sin.

The current practice of the Church encourages the baptism of infants and postpones the reception of the other sacraments of initiation to a later time. This demands that a great deal of attention be given to the ways in which Christians are to renew and, one might say, even fully experience their initial sacramental meeting with the Lord. Therefore, it is essential to underscore those means available to help young Christians grow in awareness of their baptismal gift and of their need to accept and live it in a personal, committed way. Parents, family members, godparents, sponsors of confirmation, and, indeed, the whole local community are critically important in this regard. In different ways, they are responsible for providing the necessary Christian environment and the example of their own fervent Christian witness and their participation in the practical life of the Christian community. The seed of faith must be nurtured and lovingly cared for if it is to reach maturity. In fact, when there is no possibility that a child will enjoy a Christian environment and example, and no reasonable hope that the faith to be shared with a child will survive, baptism should be delayed, until such time as reasonable hope does exist, except in danger of death.

Christians ought not to treat the faith-life imparted in the sacramental event of initiation in the manner of the unenterprising servant who buried the talent his master left with him. Faith should live and grow. Its model is the mustard seed, the leaven in the dough, the fruit-bearing vine. For either it continually grows and is shared or it suffers extinction. The faith-life of the Christian must include a constant response to God's act of faith in the one he calls. Christian initiation, while happening once and for all through the initial participation in the paschal mystery of Jesus, must also be a moment-to-moment



process of saying yes to the Lord at each step in life's pilgrimage.

## WAYS OF RENEWAL

### *Eucharist*

The paschal mystery is the foundation of the Christian life of faith. The Christian community most fully celebrates the paschal mystery in the eucharist. By the Lord's command to make memory of him, the eucharist captures all that he has given in faith to his people; for the eucharist is ultimately the Lord Jesus himself, the whole Body of Christ, Head and members, offered to the Father. Thus, by its very nature each celebration of the eucharist demands a total self-giving on the part of those who worship; eucharist is not only the sacrifice of Christ, but, by that very reality, the sacrifice of the Church made one with the Lord.

The regular celebration of the eucharist with the local church is the principal way in which the Christian consistently renews commitment to the dead and risen Lord. The theme of Christian commitment recurs throughout the Order of the Mass. The penitential rite, the silent and sung responses to the proclamation of the word, the profession of faith, and, most important, the offering and reception of the body and blood of Christ, all express the Christian's renewal of baptismal faith at each eucharist.

In a special way, the *Amen* proclaimed by the faithful at the end of the eucharistic prayer gives voice to a renewed acceptance of the new covenant and is a public profession of submission to its bond of love. Augustine poetically homilizes on this *Amen* in his sermon against the Pelagians: "My brethren, your *Amen* is your signature, it is your consent, it is your commitment" (Migne, PL 39:172). The same can be said of the *Amen* at the reception of communion. At each celebration of the eucharist the Christian is challenged to renew his commitment to the Gospel of Jesus Christ, to membership in his body, the Church, and to the living of the covenanted relationship with the Lord manifested by a life of

service to others. As such, the eucharist is the repeatable sacrament of initiation.

### *Sunday*

Eucharist is the primary liturgical event for the renewal of faith because it makes present and celebrates the paschal mystery. Similarly, the Lord's Day, Sunday is the primary liturgical moment for the celebration of the eucharist. The Church in the *Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy* (no. 106) sees every Sunday as "the original feast day" and "the foundation and kernel of the whole liturgical year" when the faithful are to call "to mind the passion, resurrection, and glory of the Lord Jesus" and give thanks to God who "has begotten them again, unto a living hope" (1 Peter 1:3). Thus the Sunday celebration takes a special place in any renewal of Christian faith, for it occasions a reliving of the paschal mystery.

### *Liturgical Year*

The renewal of faith which Christians make each time they celebrate the eucharist takes on a regular, rhythmed character through weekly association with the Lord's Day; and this is further heightened by the celebration of the seasons and feasts of the liturgical year.

Advent-Christmas is a time of anticipation and hunger for the presence of the Lord in our lives. The Christian is called to prepare not only for the feast of the birth of Christ, but more especially for meeting the Lord in the many ways in which he comes: in word, in sacrament, in people who are called to be temples of his presence, and in the situations which arise in the world. This preparation for the Lord's coming must focus particularly on the meeting with him which occurs in the final human act of death. Then, sealing with a final yes the life he or she has lived, the Christian makes the commitment to the Lord an eternal one. Advent, then, is truly a season of commitment.

The forty days of Lent are the time par excellence for the Christian to renew commitment to the life of faith received in baptism. The rites of preparation for the sacraments of initiation are to

be celebrated at the appropriate times throughout Lent. The Easter Vigil itself is the ordinary time for the actual reception of the sacraments of initiation and for the renewal of baptismal faith (*Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults*, nos. 50-57). High points in the catechumen's journey into the Church are to be anchored in the renewal of baptismal faith made by the rest of the Christian community. The Community in turn is challenged in its own faith renewal by the budding faith of the catechumen. "The initiation of catechumens takes place step-by-step in the midst of the community of the faithful. Together with the catechumens, the faithful reflect upon the value of the paschal mystery, renew their own conversion, and by their example lead the catechumens to obey the Holy Spirit more generously" (*ibid.*, no. 4; see no. 7f).

As the season of *metanoia* and Christian renewal, Lent is the time when every member of the Church is called upon to turn once again to the font of living water and drink deeply of the Spirit of the Lord. This process of renewal is most effectively accomplished when the faithful visibly express their sharing of faith with the newly baptized by participating both in the Easter Vigil and in the ceremonies throughout Lent which lead up to it. So that all the faithful may share as fully as possible in this life-giving act, the Church insists that the whole community renews the vows of baptism during the Masses celebrated on Easter Sunday.

This is more than a pious practice. It is meant to be the climax of the whole lenten season. The acts of prayer, mortification, and charity which have marked the previous forty days are now to bear fruit in a solemn, public reaffirmation of Christian faith. Each year the Christian is called once again to solemnize and give expression to the choice of the Lord as center and master of his or her life and in so doing to reawaken an awareness of the divine presence and of his or her commitment to live as God wills. The community continues to celebrate this awareness and commitment in the fifty days of the Easter Feast crowned by Pentecost.

## *Sacrament of Penance*

In addition to the eucharist and the celebration of the liturgical seasons, the sacrament of penance is an obvious moment for the revitalization of baptismal faith. Each time the Christian turns to the Lord and the Church for this spiritual healing, the strength of the initial moment of grace is renewed and deepened. The rites of reconciliation involve more than the erasing of sin; key moments in the living out of the Christian covenant, they heighten in the penitent that awareness born of the Spirit—to see ourselves as God does.

## *Moments of Personal Decision*

Coupled with and mirroring the various apostolates and works of charity performed by the whole community and by each individual Christian, the liturgical life of the Church forms the main path and substance of the Christian's life. This is especially emphasized by the Fathers of the Second Vatican Council who teach that the liturgy, although it "does not exhaust the entire activity of the Church," is nevertheless "the summit toward which the activity of the Church is directed; at the same time it is the fountain from which all its power flows" (*Constitution on the Liturgy*, nos. 9-10). This normal process in the Church's life is further augmented by key events in the lives of Christians. Such events can be liturgical or private.

Certain radical changes or new orientations in an individual's life naturally find expression in corresponding liturgical moments. This is the case, for example, with the sacraments of orders and marriage, religious profession or public commitment to any vow, and installation or recognition in liturgical or other public ministries of the Church, such as reader, acolyte, cantor, catechist. As special ways of living out the baptismal life of faith, these demand a renewal of faith in view of the new charge given by the community to the individual. These moments of personal dedication demand reflection, prayer, and discernment so that the decisions to be made may be truly responsive to God's call.

The non-liturgical events in the lives of individual Christians which call forth a renewal of baptismal faith are many and varied: graduation from school; the beginning of a new job; a retreat or participation in any one of many renewal experiences (e.g., Search for Christian Maturity, Marriage Encounter, Cursillo, entrance into a charismatic community); serious illness; the death of a loved one, especially a spouse; and the making of any important decision, but especially the choice of vocation or career. All these special moments along the path of life demand decisions rooted in a Christian life of committed faith.

In preparation for and sometimes in conjunction with these liturgical events it is very appropriate to renew formally the promises of baptism, those promises which accompanied our initiation into the mystery of Christ when we first said yes to his call. This can be done during the eucharistic liturgy as on Easter Sunday or in specially prepared service of the word. It is important that the significance of the renewal of the promises be explained and that the entire assembly be asked to pray for those renewing their baptismal commitment.

Several approved liturgical texts are available for use in the renewal of Christian commitment. Whereas the Nicene Creed, common to the Sunday eucharistic liturgy, is the most frequently used, the renewal of baptismal promises included in the Easter Vigil celebration, and the Apostles' Creed may also be considered appropriate for use on a particular occasion.

It is important, however, that this ritual renewal of baptismal promises not happen so frequently as to become routine or detract from the primacy of the Easter renewal undertaken by the whole Church. Also, persons who are to make this public profession of their faith should always prepare seriously for doing so. Special times of retreat or recollection can encourage this necessary preparation and can even appropriately be the specific context for the liturgical renewal of baptismal promises.

The sacramental celebration of Christian initiation or of any liturgical renewal of that initiation must always be "worship in spirit and truth" (John 4:22-24). Arising from interior lives rooted in the Spirit who binds us together in the Body of Christ, such worship must also be truthfully reflected in exterior lives of love and service. The liturgical renewal of Christian commitment must therefore be founded on that living faith which manifests itself in good works. This is to say that worship must authentically mirror and support those acts of charity and mission which identify a Christian. Practical, consistent living-out of the Christian life is the ultimate proof of any liturgical renewal of Christian commitment, the test the Lord himself uses: "I tell you solemnly, insofar as you did this to one of the least of these brothers of mine, you did it to me" (Matthew 25:40).



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