



Catechetical Series:

What Catholics Believe & Why

THE SACRAMENTAL PRINCIPLE

Behold The Truth

Discovering the What & Why of the Catholic Faith
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The Word Incarnate

“In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. ... And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us” (John 1:1, 14).

Jesus Christ, the Word of God, took on our human nature and dwelt among us. The unseen God, that is, became seeable, hearable, touchable.

Thus Saint Paul calls Christ “the image of the invisible God” (Col. 1:15).



The Sacraments Are Patterned After Christ

Like the Lord, the Sacraments which He gave to His Church are visible signs that convey God's invisible grace to us.

The Sacraments do what they signify. Water, for instance, signifies life and cleanliness. By the power of the Holy Spirit descending upon the baptismal font, the water of Baptism cleanses the soul of original sin and fills it with divine life.



The Sacramental Principle

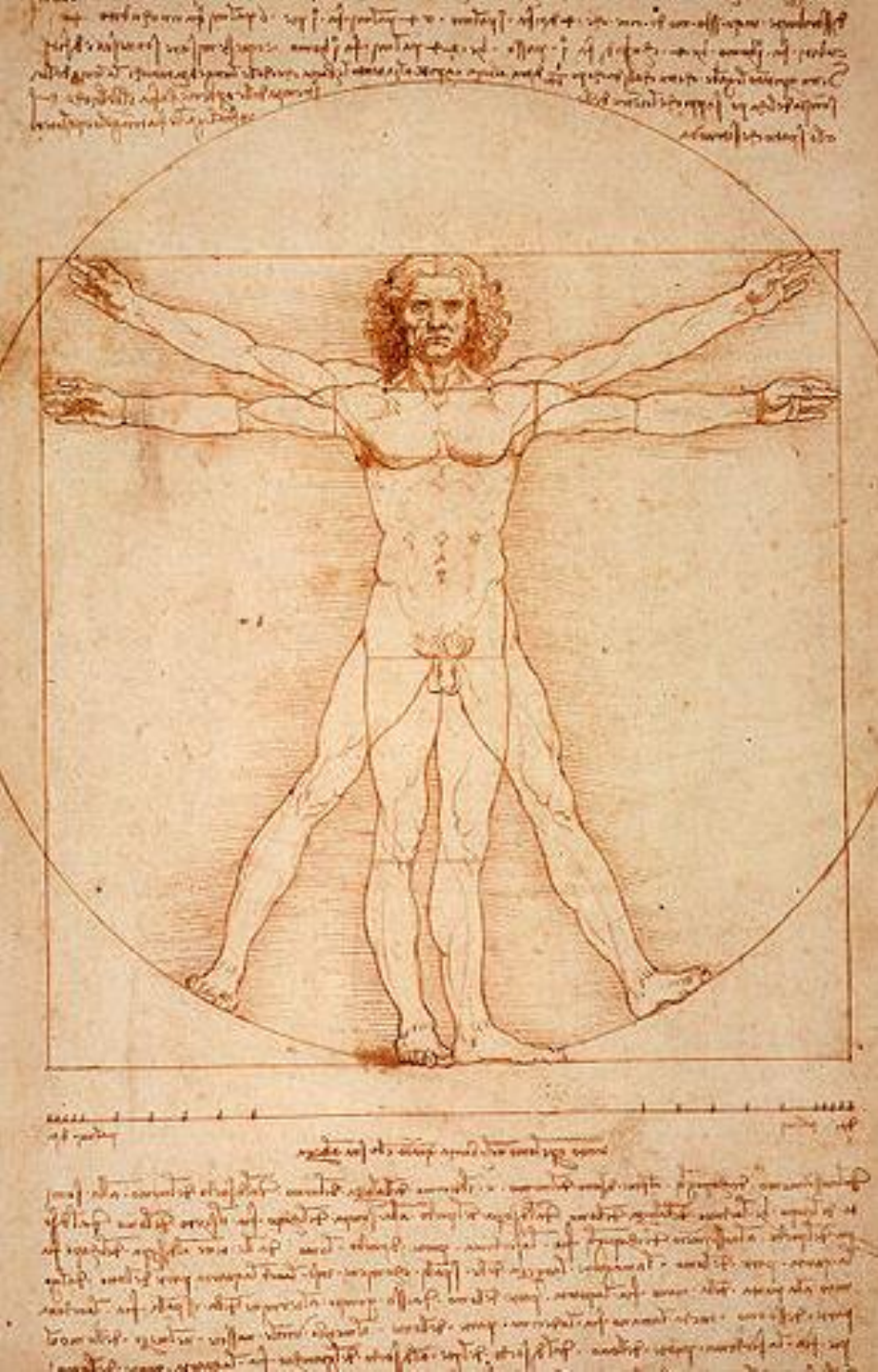
This same sacramental principle of *the invisible made visible* exists by way of analogy in all physical Creation.

Saint Paul, for instance, writes, “For what can be known about God is plain to them, because God has shown it to them. Ever since the creation of the world his invisible nature, namely, his eternal power and deity, has been clearly perceived in the things that have been made” (Rom. 1:19-20).

The Sacramental Principle

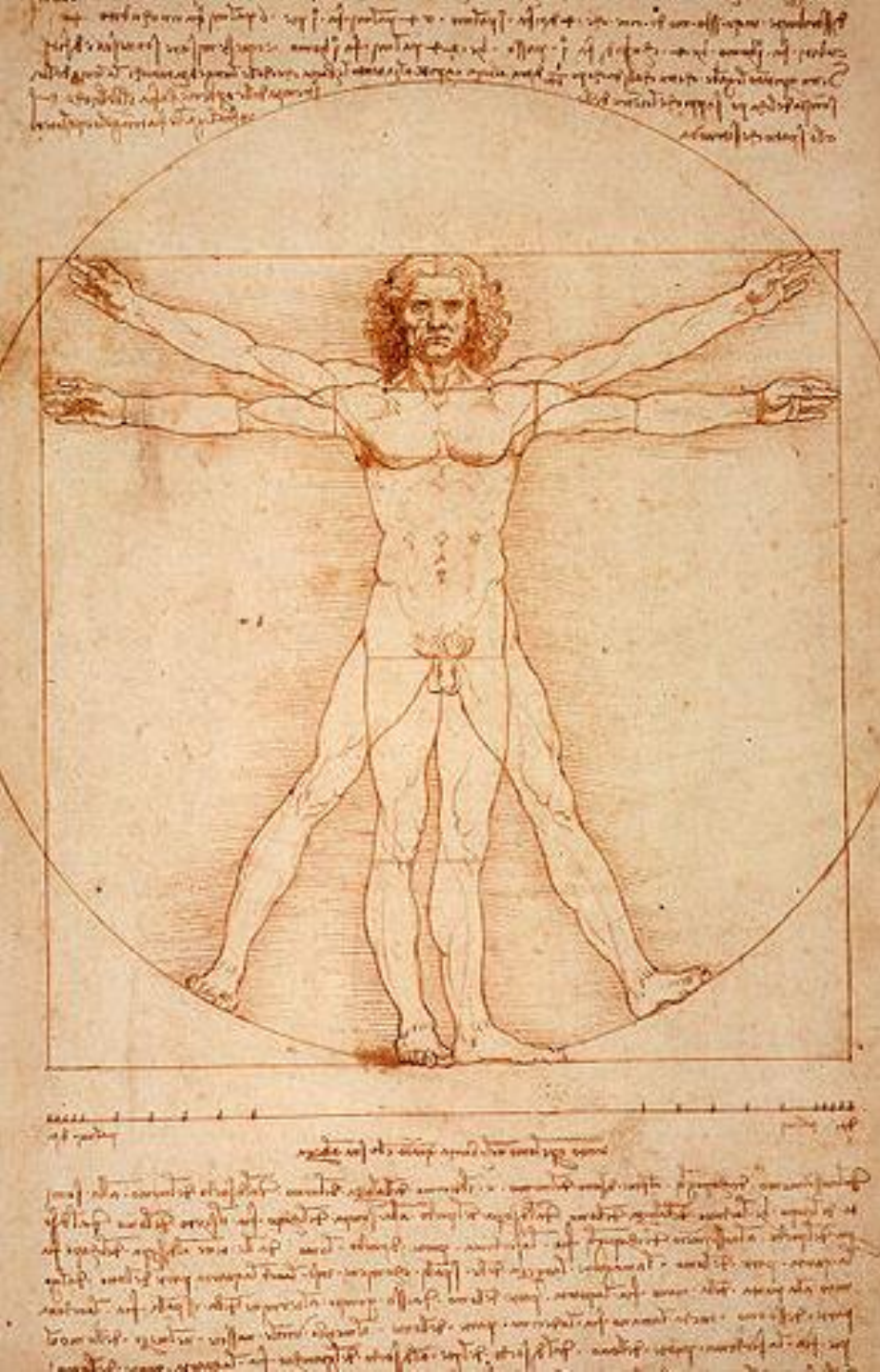
The same is especially true of the human person, who is uniquely made in “the image and likeness of God” (Gen. 1:27).

Defending the faith to the Emperor Antoninus Pius around 150 A.D., Saint Justin the Martyr noted how the form of the Cross is repeated in physical objects and especially in the human figure.



The Sacramental Principle

The Cross, he wrote, “is the greatest symbol of [Christ’s] power and authority, as [can be] shown from things you can see. Reflect on all things in the universe [and consider] whether they could be governed or held together in fellowship without this figure. For the sea cannot be traversed unless the sign of victory, which is called a sail, remain fast in the ship; the land is not plowed without it; similarly diggers and mechanics do not do their work except with tools of this form. The human figure differs from the irrational animals precisely in this, that man stands erect and can stretch out his hands, and has on his face, stretched down from the forehead, what is called the nose, through which goes breath for the living creature—and this exhibits precisely the figure of the cross” (*First Apology* 55).





The Sacramental Principle

Saint Justin asserts the power of the Cross can be “shown from things you can see” and in “all the things of the universe.”

Primarily, he references things made by man—sails, ploughs, and other tools—, and in a special way he mentions the human body itself. From Justin’s point of view, this preeminent sign of Our Incarnate Lord is built into the very fabric, the very stuff of who we are.



The Sacramental Principle

Contemplating the signs of the supernatural found in nature, C.S. Lewis wrote, “[These signs] are focal points at which more reality becomes visible than we ordinarily see at once. I have spoken of how [Christ] made miraculous bread and wine and of how, when the Virgin conceived, He had shown Himself the true Genius whom men had ignorantly worshipped long before. It goes deeper than that. ...



The Sacramental Principle

“Bread and wine were to have an even more sacred significance for Christians These things are no accidents. With Him there are no accidents. When He created the vegetable world He knew already what dreams the annual death and resurrection of the corn would cause to stir in pious Pagan minds. . . .



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“He knew already that He Himself must so die and live again and in what sense, including and far transcending the old religion of the Corn King. He would say ‘This is my Body.’ *Common* bread, miraculous bread, sacramental bread—these three are distinct, but not to be separated”
(*God In the Dock: Essays on Theology and Ethics*).



The Sacramental Principle

The sacramental principle lies at the heart of all visible Creation, so much so that to divorce the material world from it—to view Creation in a non-sacramental way—is nothing less than to remove from life its meaning.

What does it mean to say the sacramental principle lies at the heart of all visible Creation? It means, simply put, there is more to life than what one sees with his eyes—far more (cf. 1 Cor. 2:9; 13:12)!



The Sacramental Principle

The old cliché “stop and smell the roses” is meant to encourage one to break out of the monotony of the everyday long enough to notice what is going on around him, to take the time to enjoy the simple pleasures of life. This wise adage fails, though, if it entices one to only enjoy the things of the world on a sensory level.



The Sacramental Principle

To stop and smell the roses is good as far as it goes. But to relish only the fragrance of the rose without penetrating the deeper truths embodied within it—its signification of romantic love, the echoes of eternity contained in the concentric folds of its petals—is something of a tragedy: the two-dimensionalization of the rose.



The Sacramental Principle

The poet has ever derived inspiration from this enchanting flower. Dante Alighieri used the imagery of the rose in its unfolding glory to describe the assembly of the holy ones in heaven. “In fashion then as of a snow-white rose,” he wrote, “Displayed itself to me the saintly host, / Whom Christ in his own blood had made his bride” (*The Divine Comedy: Paradiso, Canto XXXI*).



The Sacramental Principle

Beyond enjoying the rose with the senses, it is incumbent on a rational creature to ponder how it came to be. If it came to be merely by the accidental forces of nature, without plan or design, then the glory of the rose is ultimately hollow, having no lasting meaning beyond the momentary pleasure it gives.



The Sacramental Principle

And why does it please us to see and smell it? The experience of the rose goes beyond simply satisfying our sensory organs; something intrinsic to it feeds a yearning deep within us: the desire for beauty. How is it that we as human beings possess the capacity to appreciate beauty? Why are we driven to seek it out in the world around us?



The Sacramental Principle

The human heart instinctively seeks God; and whether we are cognizant of it or not, He continually calls out to us, even through the things we see around us in the natural world. This is to be expected since the world is His creation.



The Sacramental Principle

There is a divine truth conveyed unceasingly in nature's ongoing cycle of sprouting, blooming, withering, and budding new life—a truth concerning our own birth, death, and resurrection. Nature, God's creature, daily serves to instill this truth in our hearts and minds.



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