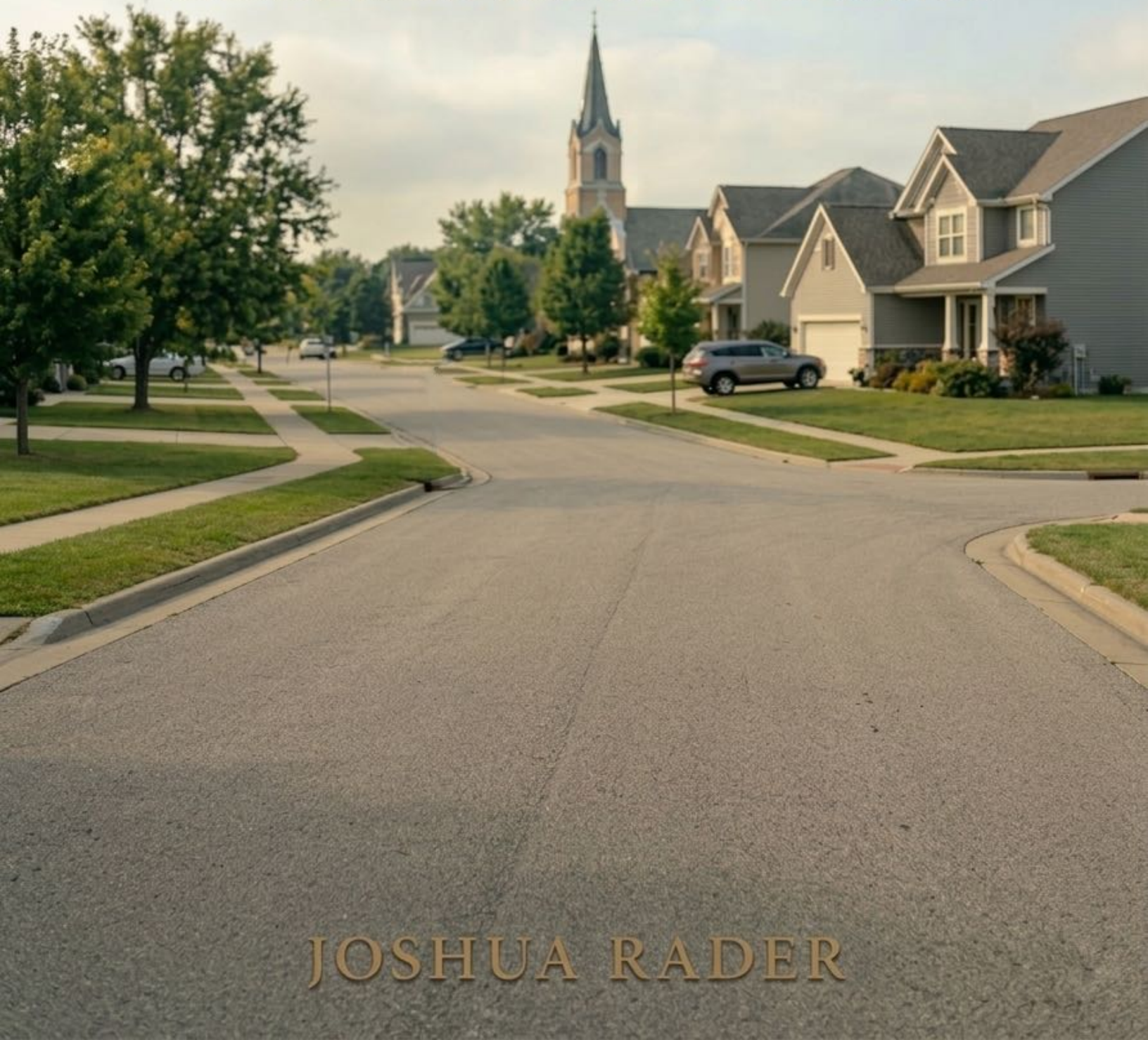


# ACTIVE PARTICIPATION

The Intersection of Contemporary  
Christian Life and Sacred Tradition



JOSHUA RADER

# Table of Contents

[Title Page](#)

[Dedication](#)

[ACTIVE PARTICIPATION](#)

[Foreword](#)

[Introduction](#)

[PART ONE: Article 1](#)

[Article 2: Faith Alone – Why the Will Changes Ever...](#)

[Article 3: Scripture Alone – The Formal Principle ...](#)

[PART TWO: Article 1: Catechesis](#)

[Article 2: The Vine and the Branches](#)

[Article 3: Historical Councils of the Church](#)

[Article 4: Doctrine, Division, and Eucharistic Com...](#)

[Article 5: Apostolic Formation and Succession](#)

[Article 6: The Seven Signs \(Sacraments\) in John's ...](#)

[Article 7: Communion & Catechesis](#)

[Article 8: The Sacraments](#)

[Article 9: Sola Scriptura, Tradition, and the Call...](#)

[Article 10: In Closing](#)

[ABOUT](#)

# ACTIVE PARTICIPATION

*The Intersection of Contemporary Christian Life and Sacred Tradition*

Joshua Rader

**Free Publication**, via <https://joshnader.com>

Early Public Draft: March 2026

I dedicate this book to my wife and children, whose love and support have made it possible for me to write in the spare moment amidst our busy lives.

---

## ACTIVE PARTICIPATION

---

# Foreword

## **Thank You, Reader**

*Active Participation: The Intersection of Contemporary Christian Life and Sacred Tradition* is shared here as an early draft, not a finished book. Its purpose is conversation. I offer these reflections to invite dialogue, critique, and thoughtful engagement about the divisions shaping Christian life in America today.

We live in a time of constant division and conflicting teachings about what Christians ought to believe and how they ought to live. The cultural landscape is always shifting, and that instability contributes to the problem. A Christianity that tries to be everything to everyone often struggles to express clearly what it means to live an active life of faith within the Church and through the Sacraments.

Written from a Catholic perspective, this work reflects on what I see as growing passivity within modern Christianity and a separation from the fullness of Sacred Tradition and the sacramental life that historically formed the Church. Many Christians sincerely believe in Christ but struggle to live their faith in a deep, active way. Certain ideas within modern Christianity, intentionally or not, can distance believers from the richness of the sacramental life. This book reflects on why that may be.

I invite readers to consider whether Christianity is a passive response to God's grace or actively lived through participation in the mysteries handed down through Scripture, Tradition, and the life of the Church. My goal is not to offer solutions but to share thoughts on how we may have arrived at this point and to encourage consideration of more active participation in the life of faith.

For those curious about the Catholic faith, I will also introduce some key beliefs about grace, the human will, and the importance of the Sacraments. This is not a comprehensive work, but an introductory conversation meant to spark questions, reflections, and dialogue.

Because these ideas are still forming, I am releasing them early in hopes of hearing your perspective. My aim is not to argue from a silo but to encourage honest reflection and conversation among Christians of diverse beliefs and practices. I hope this becomes, in some sense, a communal project: part theology, part history, and part personal reflection explored together.

If this book achieves one thing, I hope it demonstrates how deeply the sacramental life matters for living the Christian faith.

This work is not written for profit. Its purpose is dialogue. I welcome thoughtful feedback, questions, and critique as these ideas continue to develop. Readers are invited to continue the conversation through discussions on my website <https://joshdrader.com> where you can send in your insights and your responses that may help shape future drafts.

### **Author's Note on Research and Writing**

Artificial intelligence tools were used for research support, organization, and editing. The ideas, interpretations, and conclusions expressed are my own and rooted in the Catholic faith. This book is not an official publication of the Catholic Church but reflects my personal perspective on Christian unity in a time of division.

## Introduction: The Human Will, Grace and Faith

One of the central questions of this book is how we understand the human will in relation to God's grace. Is the human will passive or active in responding to God's call? I raise this question because it seems that many Christians, at least here in America, live a largely passive faith life, expecting God to do everything. This can be a natural stage in early discipleship. Yet at some point, the Christian life must become more active, calling us to take up our cross and lay down our lives for God.

Part of the reason for this passive posture, I suggest, may be traced to two key principles that emerged during the Reformation: *sola fide* ("faith alone") and *sola scriptura* ("Scripture alone"). My intention is to engage with these ideas primarily through the lens of one of the Reformation's most influential thinkers, Martin Luther, and his understanding of the human will. It is possible that the passivity of the human will in relation to grace partly shaped the development of these principles and, culturally, contributed to a divided and often passive approach to faith.

In his work *The Bondage of the Will*, Luther offers a striking metaphor: "Thus, the human will is placed between the two like a beast of burden. If God rides it, it wills and goes where God wills... If Satan rides it, it wills and goes where Satan wills." It is a powerful image. There is certainly truth in the idea that a person can be influenced either by God or by the devil. Yet something important seems missing: the role of free will and the ability to choose.

Luther assumes that because of original sin, the human person is spiritually bound and incapable of freely choosing God. From a Catholic perspective, this diminishes the freedom God has given to humanity. The Catholic understanding agrees that original sin wounds our relationship with God, yet it does not place the human will in total bondage. Grace is necessary for movement toward God, but the human person must freely respond to that grace. In this sense, the will is not bound but called to active cooperation.

Here we encounter one of the first major points of division among Christians: whether the human will is fundamentally passive or free and

capable of responding to God. I would argue that God desires our freedom, while it is Satan who seeks our bondage. Grace always comes first, yet the human person must willingly respond. The will is wounded but not destroyed; it remains free and capable of cooperating with God.

These issues will be address in the books two parts. Part One explores the human will, *sola fide*, and *sola scriptura*. I examine how Luther's understanding of the will helps illuminate the development of these Reformation principles. Part Two turns to a Catholic perspective, presenting how the will, while dependent on grace, is called to active cooperation with God through the life of the Church and the Sacraments. My hope is that these two parts together will spark reflection and conversation about faith, freedom, and the call to live more deeply in God's grace.

# PART ONE

## The Core Argument

### Article 1: The Will

#### Initial Summary

I suggest that passivity in the Christian life is not always a conscious decision, but often an unbeknownst assumption. Many believers operate with the idea that simply “having faith,” or “faith alone,” is sufficient. This assumption may be connected to how the human will is understood or if faith alone is a derivative of how the will is viewed it may produce the same effect unbeknownst to the believer. In order to explore this idea of the passive human will in relation to God’s grace it will help to look briefly at the man most associated with these concepts: Martin Luther.

Martin Luther was a man with a very strong and active will, always pushing and struggling against both the world around him and his own inner doubts. He experienced deep spiritual struggles, often feeling as though he was under attack from external forces, society, the church, and what he saw as the devil as well as from within himself. From what little I know about him, I would say he wrestled with fear, guilt, and uncertainty. Some have described his personality as rough, boisterous, and confrontational, often engaging in battles both with others and with his own conscience. To me, his will was never passive; it was constantly active, always wrestling with challenges, doubts, and spiritual trials, shaping him into a forceful and determined figure of his time.

It is well known that Luther struggled with anxiety, doubt, and a deep sense of spiritual dread. When he entered the monastery, he was searching for a loving God who could resolve the fear that had haunted him for years. Yet monastic life did not ease this burden. Instead, it often intensified his fears. Luther became trapped in a cycle of confession, scrutinizing every thought, word, and action with great severity. At times he even questioned whether he could truly trust God.

Some theologians describe this kind of spiritual condition as a “malady of the soul,” in which the conscience becomes overly rigid and

sensitive. Alphonsus Liguori describes this state as *scruples* a groundless fear of sin rooted in a disorder of the mind or conscience that perceives fault where none exists. Today this condition is often described as scrupulosity, and it may help explain some of Luther's intense spiritual struggles.

In many ways, Luther felt that he was engaged in a battle for his own soul. It is possible that his understanding of the human will developed partly out of these personal experiences of faith and struggle. If the will is truly in bondage, as Luther argued, then the human person cannot initiate or merit salvation on their own. From this perspective, the only possible path would be *sola fide*, faith alone, with salvation understood as entirely the work of God's grace rather than a cooperative effort.

Within this framework, faith alone must do all the work because the human will cannot cooperate with grace. The will can only be acted upon or "ridden," as Luther described in his metaphor of God or the devil directing the will. A passive view of the will therefore becomes a necessary part of this theological structure. If the will were truly free, then the claim of faith alone would appear incomplete. But if the will is in bondage, then the principle of faith alone follows naturally.

This raises an important question: is the human will truly free, or is it fundamentally bound?

Most Christians would likely agree on at least one point: grace always comes first. We do not initiate salvation; God does. Yet from a Catholic perspective the human will must freely respond to that grace. Grace moves the will, but the will must still cooperate with it. Even accepting God's will is itself a free act of the human person.

Scripture speaks to this freedom in the Letter to the Romans:

"We know that our old self was crucified with him so that the sinful body might be destroyed, and we might no longer be enslaved to sin. For he who has died is freed from sin." (Romans 6:6–7)

The phrase "he who has died" is significant. When a person's old-self dies and the soul is united with Christ, through faith, repentance, baptism, and ongoing conversion, the old life truly passes away. Where death has occurred, mastery ends. The Christian is no longer a slave to sin.

The Christian life, however, is not without struggle. Faith calls believers to persevere through difficulties without falling into despair or self-condemnation. The deeper issue is human sin, not the person themselves.

Sin is not a substance but a privation, a lack of the love that ought to be present. The will belongs to the human person, not to sin. To will the good of the other is to love, and this is a free gift not bound or tied to any obligation.

Because the human will remains free, the person can choose the good. By choosing love, the human will participates in the divine life offered in Christ. Through this freedom the believer begins to share, however imperfectly, in the likeness of Christ as a son or daughter of God.

Seen in this light, the idea that the will is completely bound may risk suggesting that human freedom has been entirely lost. Yet if Christ has truly freed humanity from sin, then the will must retain the capacity to respond to that freedom.

It is important to note that the perspective described here is not meant to represent all Protestant thought. Protestant traditions are diverse, and many Christians would not frame the issue in exactly this way. My point is that, culturally speaking, Reformation principles such as Luther's view of the "passive" human will can implicitly require assumptions similar to *sola fide* and *sola scriptura*. These assumptions may function as a kind of de facto framework that many Christians do not explicitly acknowledge, yet they still shape the way faith is practiced.

### Luther and *The Bondage of the Will*

There is something deeply human and sympathetic about Luther's struggle. Yet there is a distinction between free will and temptation that might be lacking. When the line between self and sin becomes blurred, a person can begin to see themselves as being identified by a particular sin. This is not who we are. We are sons and daughters of God, created in His image and likeness. Temptation and sin do not identify who we are. However, that is what the devil wants to do, condemn, as he is the accuser. God's strategy is love, mercy, and forgiveness. As Scripture reminds us:

"See what love the Father has given us, that we should be called children of God; and so, we are" (1 John 3:1).

Any Christian trapped in a cycle of self-condemnation might wrongly believe they can do no good, or those whose faith is dominated by anxiety and guilt may think it is within them as compared to what is most likely external spiritual oppression. When these things become the focus the

power of God's grace is not always taken in as fully because of what is lacking due to obsessive self-loathing, which I think is what was happening to him.

Luther lived in a world that was so spiritually darkened by plagues, war, famine, and sudden death that everyday life was a constant reminder of humanity's vulnerability. This environment created a sense that life was caught up in forces beyond human control like his analogy of the devil riding humanity without God. The rigid feudal order and unrelenting suffering made the world feel enslaving rather than life-giving. The Church, in its efforts to guide the faithful, often deepened this sense of fear through strict demands, judgment, and appeals to the fear of divine judgment.

In this context, it was understandable that Luther would perceive the world itself as being in bondage, held captive by sin and death. At the same time, he wrestled with a personal fear of damnation, intensified by the Church's own failings: the sale of indulgences, an overemphasis on penance and works. Practices such as simony and the abuse of indulgences compounded the problem, placing human power and profit where trust in God's mercy should have been. Some refer to the medieval period as an "age of anxiety" about salvation, understandably so.

In these circumstances, Luther was right to call for reform. His critique of the Church's abuses reflected a genuine need for renewal, even though the issues emerged from a personal and cultural climate of fear, oppression, and spiritual tension it was a dark time in human history that brought these issues about. Human sin also caused an entire systemic split in Christianity that has yet to cease even to this day. I think it is time all Christians move beyond what has been lingering for five-hundred years and find a way to untangle this divisive mess we find ourselves in.

### The Misconception of Bondage and the Power of Fear

To understand how the will is not in bondage to sin, death, or the devil, it is helpful to begin with the Catholic definition of sin. "Sin is an offense against reason, truth, and right conscience; it is failure in genuine love for God and neighbor caused by a perverse attachment to certain goods" (CCC 1849). Sin can occur when a person knowingly and willingly consents to the failure of doing the good of the other, and that is what sin really is, is a privation, a lack of what should be love. However, if a person is constantly enduring persistent spiritual assault such as it was during the Middle Ages

this does not mean the will is bound or has surrendered to sin. Clear knowledge and intent is required: the person must make a conscious decision of mind to choose evil over the good. For sin to sever one's relationship with God in a serious way, it must also involve grave matter, full awareness, and deliberate consent. Even then, God's mercy is never absent or withdrawn, and this message I think was lost during that era.

This distinction would have been pastorally significant in Luther's day. It reminds believers that God does not aim to condemn those who struggle but to sustain those who resist, repent, and cling often imperfectly to His grace.

### Freedom from Bondage of Sin

Scripture teaches that the bondage of sin is broken through Christ's death and resurrection. Saint Paul writes:

“We know that our former self was crucified with him so that the sinful body might be destroyed, and we might no longer be enslaved to sin” (Romans 6:6–7).

Through baptism, repentance, faith, and ongoing conversion, the old self dies. Where death has occurred, the mastery of sin ends. The human will is no longer enslaved; it is free to choose the good. Yet this freedom is not coerced. God does not force the human soul to desire baptism or salvation and love cannot be compelled. True consent must come freely from the will.

Even a will wounded by original sin, or burdened by past sin, remains free to choose good or evil. This freedom is essential; without it, love would be impossible. In Christ, human freedom is restored. Grace enables the will to act, but the will itself must respond. This is the meaning of true freedom from sin, and not by our merit, but by God's grace.

Baptism fully pours out God's grace, washing away original sin and personal sins. Through this sacrament, a person is reborn in Christ, made a child of God, and the indwelling of the Holy Spirit enters the soul. This sacramental rebirth leaves an indelible mark on the soul, a permanent freedom from bondage to sin. As the Gospel of John states:

“The slave does not remain in the house forever; the son remains forever. So if the Son makes you free, you will be free indeed” (John 8:35–36).

Human beings are never permanently bound by sin. Saint Paul emphasizes this truth in Colossians:

“God made you alive together with him, forgiving us all our trespasses, cancelling the bond which stood against us with its legal demands; this he set aside, nailing it to the cross” (Colossians 2:13–15).

No human effort, no works of the law, could free humanity from this bondage. Only Christ’s life, death, resurrection, and ascension accomplish this. Hebrews reinforces the point:

“Through death he might destroy him who has the power of death, that is, the devil, and deliver all those who through fear of death were subject to lifelong bondage” (Hebrews 2:14–15).

The “lifelong bondage” here is fear itself, which can paralyze the will. A passive approach to faith, whether from misunderstanding or cultural influence, allows fear to dominate, making the will feel powerless. When the will is perceived as incapable, moral slavery and constant anxiety can take hold and the very snare the devil desires of you can take hold.

In this context the human will as inherently captive would be antithetical since true freedom is found in Christ. Grace awakens the will, enabling it to respond, to love, and to participate actively in God’s plan. Without this recognition, faith can become a cycle of fear and guilt rather than a lived relationship with God.

### The Human Will and the Divine Will

To understand how humans can cooperate with God’s will, it is helpful to reflect on the relationship between Christ’s divine and human wills. Just as Christ’s human will was not automatically subservient to His divine will, it freely aligned with it. Otherwise, temptation, suffering, and death would have been unnecessary, and His life would have been predetermined by His divine nature. The Church proclaims Christ without sin precisely because His human will endured real trials and responded freely to His Father. As He prayed in the Garden of Gethsemane:

“Father, if you are willing, remove this chalice from me; nevertheless, not my will, but yours, be done” (Luke 22:42).

Christ’s human will freely cooperated with His divine will. For us, the dynamic is similar: we have freedom to choose, yet we pray, “Lord, let me do your will, not my own.” We must ask for God’s grace, which enables our cooperation with His plan.

## Grace and the Assent of the Will

Catholics believe that humans are created with free will, but grace is always primary. Grace is sent by God independently of any human action, and our response is itself enabled by that grace. Our assent to the Gospel is therefore both free and divinely empowered. No one can turn toward God without Him leading the way, yet God does not coerce our consent.

This interplay between grace and free will allows humans to actively participate in God's work. While we cannot take credit for salvation, Scripture teaches that believers are called to work out their salvation "with fear and trembling" (Philippians 2:12), responding to grace through our choices, actions, and growth in virtue.

## The Seed and the Soil

One analogy for understanding grace and the will is that of a seed and the soil. Scripture tells us:

"The reason the Son of God appeared was to destroy the works of the devil. Anyone born of God does not commit sin; for God's seed abides in him, and he cannot sin because he is born of God. Whoever does not do right is not of God, nor he who does not love his brother" (1 John 3:8–10).

At first glance, this might seem to suggest a human being is either of God or of the devil, with no middle ground. But notice the emphasis: *whoever does not do right*. Here is the work of the will: to choose to do good or not. Even a believer can fall into sin, yet the will itself remains free to repent and return to God.

Grace is like the seed that falls on the soil of the human heart. The seed enables growth, but the soil must be receptive. If the soil is hard, rocky, or choked by thorns, the seed will fail to thrive. The human will is like that soil: it must freely receive grace, nurture it, and cooperate with it. Grace does not override the will but empowers it to act in accordance with God's plan.

God's instruction to Cain illustrates this dynamic:

"If you do well, will you not be accepted? And if you do not do well, sin is lurking at the door; its desire is for you, but you must master it" (Genesis 4:7).

Sin may be present, but the human will has the freedom and responsibility to master it. Through this cooperation with God's grace, the

will grows in virtue, resists temptation, and experiences transformation. Even when God's grace is not immediately perceptible, it is always present, enabling those who are willing to receive it and participate in it.

In short, the human will is real, choice is real, and grace is always operative. True freedom comes when the will freely cooperates with God, allowing transformation, growth, and participation in the divine life.

## Article 2: Faith Alone – Why the Will Changes Everything

I believe *sola fide* (faith alone) rests on the presumption that the human will is not free. If the will is incapable of moving toward God in conjunction with grace, then faith alone seems necessary. But if the will can respond to God's grace and actively participate in faith, then it is not faith alone, but it is faith working alongside the human will. In this sense, the "alone" in *sola fide* becomes an unnecessary condition since to say alone segregates the will from grace, as if to say it is grace all by itself.

When grace enables the will to freely respond, faith and will are inseparable partners in the believer's life. Scripture reinforces this point. Jesus says:

"Everyone then who hears these words of mine and does them will be like a wise man who built his house upon the rock" (Matthew 7:24).

The parable of the hearers and doers shows that it is not enough merely to hear God's Word; one must act on it. Faith without the active response of the will is incomplete.

Grace produces both hearing and doing. Good works, therefore, are not in competition with God's grace, but they are its fruit. The Catholic perspective emphasizes that the human will is not the cause of salvation. Salvation originates entirely in divine grace; the human will cooperates voluntarily, enabled by that grace. The assent of the will is real but non-meritorious, an effect of grace rather than its source. Because this cooperation is voluntary, defining faith as "alone" is insufficient: faith always involves the will acting in response to grace.

### Why Our Participation Matters

How we understand our participation in God's work shapes how we live out our faith. The ancient maxim *lex orandi, lex credendi, lex vivendi* means the way we pray forms what we believe, which in turn shapes how we live and this captures the truth of the matter. How we view our human participation in grace affects our faith as either active or passive.

If Christians believe grace functions primarily as a declaration, as in a strict interpretation of *sola fide*, faith can risk becoming more juridical than transformative. Passivity may follow, with spiritual growth seeming

incidental rather than essential. In modern culture, this tendency is not uncommon: faith may become an idea rather than a lived reality.

Grace restores the will, making it truly free. Yet freedom is not automatic; it requires the will to act. True faith, therefore, is both receptive and active, a partnership with God's grace in which the believer freely participates. Most Christians would agree that faith requires this cooperative action, and I do not think faith alone supports an actively conscious faith life.

## Article 3: Scripture Alone – The Formal Principle of Authority

Scripture is divinely inspired and possesses real, supernatural power. It teaches, transforms, and brings people to Christ. No Christian would deny this. The question is not whether Scripture is authoritative, but whether it functions as the sole authority for Christian belief.

What distinguishes *sola scriptura* from the other solas is that the others address the content of salvation, while *sola scriptura* addresses the source of authority.

- *Sola gratia* asserts that we are saved by grace.
- *Sola fide* asserts that we are saved through faith.
- *Solus Christus* asserts that we are saved in Christ.

These statements concern what saves, and all are compatible with Catholic theology, which also affirms the primacy of grace, faith, and Christ in salvation.

*Sola scriptura*, by contrast, is a claim about how we know what saves. It functions as the formal principle (*norma normans*), the ultimate self-authenticating authority by which all theological claims are judged. While it may recognize tradition, creeds, councils, and church offices, their authority is considered derivative, legitimate only insofar as they conform to Scripture. This raises a critical question: without an authoritative interpretive body, who determines which traditions or interpretations are truly faithful to Scripture?

### The Problem of Private Interpretation

Without a central authority, debates over interpretation inevitably arise. Confessional boundaries, catechisms, and denominational standards create multiple, competing interpretations of the same biblical text. This fragmentation is compounded if one views the human will as passive and faith as “alone,” because Scripture is read primarily through that lens, potentially fostering passivity and doctrinal confusion.

The Catholic faith, by contrast, understands Scripture in relationship with Sacred Tradition and the teaching authority Christ entrusted to the

Apostles. As Saint Paul wrote:

“So then, brothers, stand firm and hold to the traditions that you were taught by us, either by word of mouth or by our letter” (2 Thessalonians 2:15).

The early Church already recognized the need for authoritative teaching. The Council of Jerusalem demonstrates this in action. Church Fathers such as Clement of Rome (c. 96 AD) affirmed adherence to apostolic authority (1 Clement), and Ignatius of Antioch (c. 107 AD) wrote:

“Where the bishop is, there let the people be; as where Jesus Christ is, there is the Catholic Church” (Letter to the Smyrnaeans).

Irenaeus of Lyons (c. 180 AD), in *Against Heresies*, emphasized that authentic Christian doctrine is preserved through Apostolic Succession, not private interpretation. Tertullian (c. 200 AD) similarly argued that rejecting Tradition distorts Scripture by separating it from its authoritative context.

From the beginning, the Church has received both Sacred Scripture and Sacred Tradition, transmitted through the Apostles and their successors. This is known as the deposit of faith and ensures that the truth of the Gospel is preserved. *Sola scriptura*, by principle, rejects the binding authority of Tradition and the teaching office of the Church, and so cannot function coherently within the Catholic understanding of ecclesial authority.

### Another Problem: The Canon of Scripture

The difficulty deepens when one considers the canon of Scripture itself. The books recognized as inspired and infallible were identified, received, and canonized by the Church over the first four centuries of Christianity. The Reformers generally treated this process as carried out by a fallible Church operating under ordinary providence, rather than under divine guidance or infallible authority. This raises a fundamental question: by what authority is the canon known?

If no infallible authority exists outside of Scripture itself, then one cannot appeal to “Scripture” to determine which books are canonical before the canon is established. Without the Church’s discernment, defining the canon becomes arbitrary. Historically, Scripture emerged gradually from a living people, first Israel, then the Church, through a tradition of faithfully handing on God’s inspired Word. Scripture cannot identify itself as Scripture; it is the faithful community that receives, preserves, and transmits God’s Word. This is a core historical and theological problem

with *sola scriptura*: it denies the Church's central role in the recognition and preservation of Scripture.

### Sacred Tradition and the Integrity of the Faith

The Church's teaching office (*Magisterium*) relies on the living witness of the Apostles and the guidance of the Holy Spirit. When individual members falter or go astray, the Church corrects and purifies itself from within, under divine guidance. Its authority is not transient or dependent on cultural trends; it is rooted in the continuity of Sacred Tradition in harmony with Sacred Scripture. The Church does not impose itself over Scripture, but serves it faithfully.

The fundamental error of *sola scriptura* is to deny this continuity, rejecting the very foundation of Christian doctrine. Scripture itself arises from the Church that Christ established. To claim that the Bible can be rightly interpreted apart from the Church is to ignore the means by which it was preserved and recognized as divinely inspired.

*Sola scriptura* does acknowledge the power of Scripture: as God-breathed, it transforms preachers and readers, bringing people to Christ. Yet without the interpretive guidance of the Church, Scripture becomes vulnerable to misinterpretation, division, and doctrinal fragmentation.

### The Consequence for the Sacraments

One unintended effect of *sola scriptura* is that it encourages adherents to reconstruct history in search of a "pure" interpretation, often detaching Scripture from the living Church. This can lead to an endless cycle of division and debate, moving Christians away from the mysteries of the faith, especially the Sacraments. When Scripture is treated as the sole authority, the Church the guardian of sacramental life is marginalized, and the fullness of God's grace given through the Sacraments is at risk of being overlooked.

In short, Scripture alone is insufficient to preserve unity, safeguard truth, or fully convey the richness of the Christian life. The Church, guided by Tradition and the Holy Spirit, ensures that Scripture is interpreted faithfully, preserving both doctrine and sacramental reality.

### A Family Divided

One of the greatest challenges facing the visible Body of Christ today is confusion and division. Many believers earnestly desire a sincere and serious faith, seeking to follow Christ without error. Yet in America, Christianity often presents itself through polarizing, irreconcilable viewpoints. Assumptions, misconceptions, and errors abound and this book does not attempt to catalog them all, only to acknowledge that they are pervasive.

Despite this, there is reason for hope. Not every contradiction in belief or practice is harmful; sometimes apparent conflicts serve to deepen our understanding and prompt a more diligent search for truth. By approaching these differences thoughtfully, Christians can be guided toward a richer, more active engagement with the faith.

## PART TWO

### A Catholic View

#### Article 1: Catechesis

Before proceeding, it is helpful to recall the central argument of Part One: that the principles of *sola fide* (faith alone) and *sola scriptura* (Scripture alone) have profoundly shaped the cultural landscape of Christianity in America, often contributing to fragmentation among believers. Beneath this division lies a deeper question concerning human freedom: what does it truly mean to say “yes” to God?

How we respond to God is not merely an abstract idea but a lived reality. The way we practice the faith matters, and what we believe matters. The divisions that arise from differing answers to this question can separate believers not only from one another but also from the fullness of Christian life.

The reflections that follow aim to illuminate the Catholic understanding of that fullness. My hope is that they will encourage a deeper and more active participation in the life of the Church, fostering both unity among Christians and a richer encounter with the grace of God.

#### What is Catechesis?

As mentioned in the introduction, catechesis is the handing on of the Catholic faith. What has been handed on to us, we, in turn, hand on to others. Today, there seems to be a certain indifference toward the distinction between what some might call “biblical faith” and the Catholic tradition. One factor contributing to this is the modern emphasis on individualism and plurality, whereas Catholicism provides ecclesial authority. This stands in stark contrast to the overwhelming number of Christians who view personal faith as subjective or primarily individualistic.

Scripture cautions us:

"The heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately corrupt; who can understand it?" (Jeremiah 17:9).

This is one reason the Church's order and teaching authority are so important. Those whose minds are darkened because of hardness of heart can lead others astray (cf. Ephesians 4:17–24). Throughout all forms of Christianity, we can see the effects of hardened hearts. Catechesis is the faith handed on and echoed through time, providing a trustworthy and reliable foundation.

The faith that has been handed on throughout the ages has grown in understanding and development. It is a rich heritage, especially when compared to modern, streamlined forms of Christianity that do not offer catechesis in the same depth or structure.

### Priest, Prophet, and King

All disciples are called to participate in the threefold office of Christ, priest, prophet, and king in some capacity. Through this vocation:

- The priestly role allows one to offer spiritual sacrifices.
- The prophetic role enables one to speak truthfully on behalf of God.
- The kingly role is lived by striving for holiness and righteousness.

This is the essence of catechesis: facilitating the transformation of the individual into an active participant in the faith by entering into the mystery of Christ. Jesus rejoices in this process:

“Of those whom you gave me I have lost not one.” (John 18:9–10)

The Church desires to hand on all that she is and all that she believes to be faithfully transmitted throughout the ages (cf. CCC 78). This is why it can be challenging to understand the Church's teachings fully when they are so deep, rich, and complex. The Church is entrusted to protect and hand on the entire deposit of faith, refining and developing its teachings so that all may hear what Christ has done.

As baptized Christians, we are called into communion with the universal Body of believers; the Church. Through His grace, poured out by the Church, humanity finds salvation. St. Paul teaches:

“I betrothed you to Christ to present you as a pure bride to her one husband.”

The Church is the Bride of Christ, meant to be unified and reborn as one body. As living stones, we contribute to the building of the Kingdom of Heaven on earth:

"You also, as living stones, are being built up a spiritual house, a holy priesthood, to offer spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ." (1 Peter 2:5)

Through faith, proper practice, and right sacrifice, the priestly office is renewed in Christ. The prophetic role follows in fidelity to Christ: when right sacrifice is made, one bears witness, for "The testimony of Jesus is the spirit of prophecy" (Revelation 19:10).

This entails going forth to make disciples of all nations and fostering unity. The kingly office is exercised by giving all glory to God without seeking personal exaltation:

"He has made us kings and priests to His God and Father; to Him be glory and dominion forever and ever." (Revelation 1:6)

We stand or fall according to how faithfully we hand on the gifts God has given us and live out His grace.

### The Church as Ekklesia

Christ established an Ekklesia, a Church with a divinely inspired structure and hierarchy. Throughout history, this Church has been led by imperfect human beings whose words and actions have sometimes caused confusion. This is not the fault of Christ, but of human weakness. God, however, uses even these failings to magnify Himself through His Church, particularly in the darkest times.

Scripture reminds us:

"built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Christ Jesus himself being the cornerstone, in whom the whole structure is joined together and grows into a holy temple in the Lord" (Ephesians 2:20–21).

We stand or fall according to how faithfully we hand on the gifts God has given us, striving to live fully in His grace. This is exemplified in the threefold office of priest, prophet, and king, which is restored to us through baptism. What God entrusted to the Apostles, the Church, must be protected and defended, no matter the cost. Every disciple is called to live this life of faith according to the measure of God's calling, participating in the unity of the Church and faithfully handing on what has been entrusted to us throughout the centuries.

## Article 2: The Vine and the Branches

One central aspect of the mystical reality of the Church can be seen in the Olivet Discourse. Here, Jesus speaks of the weeping and gnashing of teeth in connection with the parable of the master who entrusts his servants with the house, “over all his goods” (Matthew 24:47). He warns that to whom much is given, much is required. Those entrusted with leadership, whom Jesus has elected, understand the gravity of their responsibility and the consequences of their actions. They are called to help others enter a covenantal relationship with God through baptism and to guide them along the journey of faith.

Catholics recognize that, as a people, we are not to betray our roots nor reject the branches, even the wild ones. St. Paul teaches:

"And if some of the branches be broken and thou, being a wild olive, art grafted in among them and partakest of the root and fatness of the olive tree, boast not against the branches. But if thou boast, thou bearest not the root: but the root thee." (Romans 11:17–18)

This call to humility in the Church reminds us that in our modern context, we must seek ways to incorporate all Christians into the Body of Christ, not through pride, but through God’s grace in a spirit of unity and humility.

When the Church fails to integrate its people into one Body, it does a disservice to those who, through no fault of their own, are separated from full communion and deprived of the nourishment they need. The Catholic Church is called to help all share in the fullness of Christ’s Sacraments, for the salvation of souls. Since the time of the Reformers, the sacramental priesthood has been rejected by many, and the ecclesial foundation established by Christ, including the Sacraments as the ordinary means of sanctification, has been ridiculed and even mocked. When the Sacraments cease to be constitutive of the Church’s life, the reality of the Church itself is undercut, even though it remains real and life-giving by God’s grace.

The ministerial priesthood, ecclesial hierarchy, and sacramental reality are all mediations of God’s grace, yet Christ remains the sole mediator, extending Himself through His Body, the Church. Through this Body, His graces continue to pour out upon the world. God is not bound by the Sacraments, yet He chooses to work through them in keeping with His promises. The greatest of these promises is His desire for the salvation of all

through His mystical Body on earth. While not all will be saved, those who come to Him, do His will, and belong to Him are truly His.

Without Apostolic Succession, the Eucharist cannot be fully celebrated as the Real Presence in its proper substance. Once the priesthood is removed, the question of whether Christ is “really present” is no longer a matter of an ontological reality, it has already been severed from the Church’s divinely instituted structure. What replaces it is not a single coherent doctrine but a range of substitutes, each dependent on the internal framework of its particular tradition. This is because the divine economy of Church and Sacrament is lost when Apostolic Succession is broken.

In the Church, Scripture reminds us that:

"Faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen." (Hebrews 11:1)

In this context, we can understand that without the priesthood, the Eucharist in its fullness is impossible. In the Catholic faith, our assurance rests in the things hoped for: the communion of believers, hidden under the outward signs of bread and wine. The Body and Blood of Christ are present and efficacious, as they have been from the beginning, starting in the Upper Room. As Scripture records:

“This chalice which is poured out for you is the new covenant in my blood.” (Luke 22:20)

Outside the Catholic Church, what is lacking is the fullness of the faith and the unity of the people of God in Christ, sustained through the sacraments and the ministerial priesthood.

## Article 3: Some Historical Councils of the Church

One of the primary ways the Church teaches authoritatively is through ecumenical councils. There have been twenty-one such councils in the history of the Church, and several stand out for their pivotal role in preserving and clarifying the faith.

Early in the Church, one of the most important was the Council of Nicaea (325). There, the Church affirmed the divinity of Christ, recognizing Him as the fullness of God's revelation. This council responded to the Arian heresy, which claimed that "there was a time when the Son was not," meaning that Jesus was a created being. If Christ were not fully God, worship would become idolatrous, the Incarnation would be merely instrumental rather than salvific, the Eucharist would be reduced to symbolic representation rather than participation, and salvation would be reduced to moral imitation instead of ontological restoration.

To address this, the Council of Nicaea declared that the Son is *homoousios* meaning of the same substance as the Father. This philosophical terminology affirmed that Jesus is truly God, not a lesser or created being. In doing so, the council preserved, defended, and transmitted the faith against doctrinal error.

The Council of Constantinople (381) further clarified Trinitarian doctrine. It reaffirmed Christ's full divinity, as defined at Nicaea, and explicitly articulated the full divinity of the Holy Spirit, correcting several heresies:

- The Arians and Semi-Arians, who denied Christ's full divinity.
- The Apollinarians, who denied that Christ possessed a complete human nature.
- The Pneumatomachians, who accepted the Father and Son as divine but treated the Holy Spirit as a created power.

The council's teaching established clear, authoritative language for understanding the Trinity so that the Church could teach, worship, and confess the faith consistently. Scripture does not explicitly define a formal doctrine of the Trinity, so the Church exercised its authority to clarify and preserve the truth in the face of divergent interpretations.

Later councils continued this work. The Council of Ephesus (431) and the Council of Chalcedon (451) defended the unity of Christ's divine and human natures, ensuring that God was fully revealed in Christ. Ephesus emphasized that Jesus is one person, truly God who acts, suffers, and saves. Chalcedon clarified that this one person exists in two complete natures, divine and human, without confusion or separation. These distinctions are essential: salvation depends on Christ being fully divine (able to save) and fully human (able to heal humanity). Christian worship, prayer, and the sacraments also presuppose a Christ who is genuinely God incarnate, not a divided or diminished figure.

Several heresies emerged around this period to illustrate the importance of these clarifications:

- Nestorianism, rejected after Ephesus, divided Christ into two persons, undermining the truth that God Himself suffered and acted for human salvation.
- Monophysitism, rejected after Chalcedon, taught a "single nature" that compromised Christ's full humanity, endangering the understanding of salvation through His incarnate life.

Both heresies were dangerous because they distorted either Christ's divinity or humanity, undermining the Christian confession that salvation comes through the one incarnate Son who is fully God and fully human. Understanding Christ's two natures is not only important, but essential. Without this, He cannot save us.

### Later Councils and the Development of Doctrine

The Second Council of Nicaea (787) defended the veneration of sacred images and affirmed that divine revelation is transmitted through both Scripture and Tradition. The council taught that images may be venerated (honored) but not adored, since worship belongs to God alone. Because Christ truly became human, He can be visibly depicted, and the honor given to an image passes to the person represented, not to the material object itself.

This defense of images is rooted in Christology: because the Word truly became flesh in the Incarnation, God entered visible, material history. Depicting Christ is therefore not a denial of divine transcendence but an

affirmation of the reality of the Incarnation. In this context, the council also reaffirmed that divine revelation is transmitted through both Sacred Scripture and Sacred Tradition. The legitimacy of icons is grounded not in Scripture alone but in the living tradition of the Church, expressed through liturgy, patristic teaching, and conciliar authority. Nicaea II thus stands as a clear witness to the Catholic understanding that Scripture and Tradition together form a single, coherent deposit of faith.

The Fourth Lateran Council (1215), convened by Pope Innocent III, explicitly reaffirmed and dogmatically defined how God reveals Himself to humanity. Its Profession of Faith taught that God is one essence in three distinct Persons; Father, Son, and Holy Spirit; co-eternal and consubstantial. It also emphasized that God freely reveals Himself through creation, Sacred Scripture, and supremely through the Incarnation of the Son. These definitions safeguarded right belief against heresies that denied foundational Christian truths, such as the unity of the Creator God, the goodness of creation, the Incarnation, and the Trinity.

This council also illustrates the development of doctrine: it formally clarified and articulated long-held Christian beliefs regarding the Eucharist, confession, and Church authority without introducing fundamentally new doctrines.

Over time, the Church clarifies and defines revealed truths in response to historical circumstances that demand greater precision. Without both Sacred Scripture and Sacred Tradition, the Deposit of Faith could become fragmented and vulnerable to distortion by heresy. Without an authoritative interpretive body such as the Magisterium, individuals are left to private judgment or culturally conditioned interpretations, which can lead to doctrinal instability. Together, Scripture, Tradition, and the Church's teaching authority safeguard revealed truth, ensuring that it is faithfully preserved, rightly understood, and consistently proclaimed in every generation.

### More Recent Councils

The Council of Trent (1545–1563) was convened to uphold the Church's teaching authority in response to the Reformation. Seen as part of the Counter-Reformation, Trent definitively taught that divine revelation is transmitted through both Sacred Scripture and Sacred Tradition, which together form one Deposit of Faith. The Church defended the historic

means by which the faith had always been preserved in both written and oral transmission (cf. 2 Thess 2:15). This is what Jesus handed on to the Apostles, and the Church continues to hand on today through Apostolic Succession: the living Tradition of the faith together with Scripture.

The early ecumenical councils, including Nicaea, relied on Tradition to interpret Scripture when defining doctrines like the Trinity. Even the biblical canon itself was discerned, safeguarded, and confirmed by the Church through Tradition and Magisterial authority. When Trent articulated its teachings, it was not introducing new doctrines but reinforcing and clarifying the historic, apostolic means by which the faith has been faithfully preserved.

The First Vatican Council (1869–1870) addressed a modern intellectual crisis. It taught that human reason can know God but is insufficient without divine revelation. In the 18th and 19th centuries, rationalism, materialism, scientism, and liberalism increasingly claimed that reason alone was sufficient and that revelation, miracles, and dogma were unnecessary or irrational. Vatican I clarified that, while reason can indeed demonstrate God's existence, it is limited and wounded by sin, and therefore requires divine revelation to attain saving truth without error.

The council also took place during a time of severe institutional instability: the Papal States were collapsing, nationalism was fragmenting Catholic unity, and the Church's authority was openly challenged politically and theologically. By defining papal primacy and infallibility, Vatican I secured a visible doctrinal center of unity, protecting the Deposit of Faith from divisions arising from human error and cultural pressures.

The Second Vatican Council (1962–1965) sought to renew the Church's understanding of how God speaks to humanity. In *Dei Verbum*, the council emphasized that revelation is God's personal self-communication, not merely a collection of human religious experiences. Jesus Christ is not simply a bearer of divine revelation or one prophet among many; He is the fullness of revelation, the eternal Word made flesh. Revelation is therefore a divine self-gift, both personal and historical, which reaches its definitive and unsurpassable completion in Christ. This understanding challenges any cultural tendency to see the Bible alone as the entirety of divine revelation, reminding the faithful that life in harmony with Scripture includes the fullness of Tradition and ecclesial guidance.

Throughout history, each council has arisen because of the need for an authoritative interpretive teaching body, the Magisterium, to formally declare what the Church believes. This pattern runs from Nicaea to Vatican II. Doctrine itself does not change, but clarity requires precision to prevent the faithful from being misled. The Arians had Scripture. The Nestorians had Scripture. The Pneumatomachians had Scripture. What they lacked was the living Tradition and the teaching authority of the Church that Christ established to safeguard the faith throughout the ages. This demonstrates why the Apostolic model and the Tradition handed on by the Church are so essential.

## Article 4: Doctrine, Division, and Eucharistic Communion

The Church does not reverse, abandon, or contradict doctrine, but develops and clarifies it over time in a hermeneutic of continuity. One must also acknowledge that the divisions arising from the Reformation were precipitated, in part, by genuine moral and disciplinary corruption within the Church. While it is important to recognize this historical reality, there is no reason to reopen old wounds. The Church cannot err in formal doctrinal matters, because to do so would constitute a true contradiction and there is no historical instance in which the Church can be shown to have taught in contradiction to established doctrine. If it seems that way it would have to be addressed by the bishops of the Church who can and do challenge apparent false teachings that might have occurred. Overtime the Church works out these apparent contradictions with clarifications, and this is the normal process of ensuring falsehoods and misconceptions do not enter into the teachings of the Church.

At the same time, Scripture retains its teaching authority and is undeniably supernatural. God can and does work through Scripture to sanctify individuals, raise up holy men and women, and bring about authentic conversion. He works to heal divisions and to make a scattered people whole again. How visible, ecclesial unity might be achieved is difficult to imagine, yet if a sacramental life is desired, there may be ways to cultivate the visible dimension of Christ's mission for His Church. Eucharistic communion among all Christians would be the most profound expression of that unity, but achieving it requires careful engagement with Catholic teaching, particularly regarding the spiritual and practical risks of receiving the Eucharist unworthily.

Christ becomes truly and substantially present in the Eucharist by the power of His words and the action of the Holy Spirit through the priest, regardless of the faith or disbelief of the communicant (John 6:53–56). While unworthy reception can hinder spiritual fruitfulness or even bring judgment (1 Corinthians 11:27–30), it does not negate the reality of Christ's presence. The Eucharist is what it is because of Christ's institution, not because of human assent.

When people are denied access to the Eucharist, they may experience what it means to be without Holy Communion. This lack of communion between Christians is deeply harmful to the Body of Christ. The Church's

refusal to admit non-Catholics to Communion is not a judgment on individual faith or devotion, but reflects the theological reality that Eucharistic communion presupposes full ecclesial communion. For Catholics, *full communion* also requires that a person be in good standing with the Church and in a state of grace.

Some of the Reformers advanced what may be described as a counter-ecclesial theology, presupposing that the ministerial priesthood is unnecessary. Once this premise is accepted, the irreducible claim of the Eucharist, that Christ gives His true Body and Blood through the sacramental ministry of the Church, can no longer be maintained. Consequently, alternative accounts of the Eucharist emerge that depart from Catholic teaching. In His providence, however, God grants the grace of spiritual communion to all who believe. While this participation in Christ is real, it is not the fullness of the Eucharistic gift Christ entrusted to His Church: the actual and substantial reception of His Body and Blood.

To be without the Eucharist is to be outside the Church, lacking full communion. For Catholics, this reality is deeply painful, because the Sacraments are the ordinary means by which Christ's grace is encountered and His presence is made tangible. The absence of this unifying substance reminds us of the profound importance of the Eucharist in sustaining the life and unity of the Church.

## Article 5: Apostolic Formation and Succession

Jesus lived with, taught, and guided His Apostles through a catechetical process of learning through doing by participating in His divine will. They learned not only by instruction, but also by witness, practice, and understanding. This formation occurred gradually, in stages, over time. It was not merely the transfer of information, but the conferral of authority through relationship, formation, and commission. By participating in this process, the Apostles became authentic disciples, formed in the image and likeness of Christ.

During this three-year period, Christ formed His Apostles, preparing them for their mission. He then sent them out with the authority to teach, to heal, and to bind and loose. When Judas fell, his vacancy was filled according to Peter:

“Let another take his office” (Acts 1:20–26), citing Psalm 109:8.

Matthias thus restored the Apostolic seat, fulfilling the role of bishop. Presbyters, or priests, were ordained in every church Paul established (Acts 14:23), and deacons were appointed to support the ministry of the Word (Acts 6:1–6). Paul instructed Titus to “appoint elders in every town” (Titus 1:5) and gave Timothy authority over the Church in Ephesus, including the power to ordain (1 Timothy 5:22) and to guard the deposit of faith (1 Timothy 6:20; 2 Timothy 1:14). These commissions from Christ established the pattern of appointing successors, ensuring that the Church could continue faithfully from one generation to the next.

The Sacred Tradition handed on through Apostolic Succession is clearly evidenced in Scripture. Paul instructs Timothy:

“What you have heard from me in the presence of many witnesses, entrust to faithful men, who will be able to teach others also.” (2 Timothy 2:2)

Early Church Fathers also attest to this succession. Clement of Rome, writing around 96 AD, appeals to Apostolic Succession as the basis of authority in the Church at Corinth (1 Clement 42–44). Ignatius of Antioch, around 110 AD, insists that nothing in the Church should be done apart from the bishop. Irenaeus of Lyons, writing around 180 AD, traces the succession of bishops in Rome back to Peter and Paul as proof that the faith has been faithfully transmitted (Against Heresies III.3.1–3).

Through Scripture and the witness of the Church Fathers, we see that the Church is a visible and identifiable body of believers, living out a sacramental life in continuity with the Apostolic mission. This continuity affirms that the faith has been faithfully preserved, transmitted, and celebrated throughout the ages.

## Article 6: The Seven Signs (Sacraments) in John's Gospel

Within Scripture particularly in John's Gospel there exist signs, patterns, and sacramental correlations through which Christ quietly reveals the seven Sacraments to His Apostles and to the Church. What I am handing on to you was handed on to me from a professor of mine while I was in graduate school, so these are not my own insights, but that which has been revealed to me and I wanted to share them with you. They are correlations in Scripture that reflect the sacramental mysteries themselves.

### The First Divine Sign: The Wedding at Cana and the Covenant of Matrimony

The first divine sign presented in John's Gospel is the Wedding at Cana (John 2:1–12). Christ's transformation of water into wine is not merely a miracle but a sign that discloses a deeper sacramental reality. It is an unmistakable allusion to the sacrament of Matrimony. John deliberately situates this sign within the language of creation: Jesus addresses His mother as "Woman," evoking Genesis and identifying Himself as the new Adam inaugurating a new covenantal order. Marriage, from the beginning, was intended to bear sacramental weight, and Cana reveals its restoration and elevation in Christ. This first sign establishes the pattern by which the Gospel unfolds: visible acts that disclose invisible grace.

### The Second Divine Sign: The Temple, the Priesthood, and the New Dwelling of God

Immediately following Cana, Jesus refers to the temple as "my Father's house" (John 2), this language finds its full articulation in John 14, where He promises to prepare a dwelling place for His disciples. The continuity is deliberate. The physical temple gives way to the true Temple, which is Christ Himself, the dwelling place of God among men.

The Temple imagery in Israel is inseparable from priesthood and sacrifice. Under the Mosaic law, Aaron and his sons were required to wash their hands and feet before entering the sanctuary (Exodus 30:20–21), a ritual act of purification for sacred service. Against this backdrop, the foot-washing in John's Gospel cannot be reduced to a moral lesson in humility. It

is a liturgical act. Christ, the true High Priest, consecrates His Apostles for priestly service within the new covenant.

Here, service and worship converge. In Hebrew, Greek, and Latin alike, the language of service and ministry shares a common root. To serve is to minister; to minister is to participate in liturgical worship. The foot-washing therefore signifies both the moral posture of the Church and her sacramental identity. When Jesus speaks again of His Father's house in John 14, He confirms that the new temple is not stone but communion, and God dwelling with His people through Christ.

### The Third Divine Sign: Healing of the Official's Son and the Anointing of the Sick

The next divine sign occurs when Jesus returns to Cana and heals the son of a royal official (John 4:46–54). Once again John employs the word sign, which I think is a sign that this miracle be read sacramentally. This sign corresponds to the Anointing of the Sick, revealing Christ's authority over illness and death. The healing is not only physical but restorative. This prefigures the Church's ministry of healing that unites suffering to faith and trust in the word of Christ. It is a sacramental reality being unveiled.

### The Fourth Divine Sign: Healing of the Paralytic and the Sacrament of Reconciliation

At the feast of Passover, Jesus heals the paralytic at the Sheep Gate who had been afflicted for thirty-eight years (John 5:1–9). This sign discloses the sacrament of Reconciliation. Paralysis is the proper image of sin: a condition of stagnation and incapacity. Christ's commands the paralytic, "Rise, take up your mat, and walk," this signals the restoration of freedom through forgiveness. John deepens this theme when Christ later proclaims, "I am the light of the world" (John 8:12). Sin darkens the heart and the mind and immobilizes the possibility of absolution, so Christ restores movement and sight. It is the Spirit that Christ gives them with the power to forgive sins and heal a paralyzed soul.

### The Fifth Divine Sign: Feeding of the Five Thousand and the Eucharist

During the feast of Tabernacles, Jesus feeds the five thousand (John 6:1–14). This sign unmistakably points to the Eucharist. John again insists on

the language of the sign. This miracle prefigures the Bread of Life discourse that follows. Christ is the true manna from heaven, sustaining His people not temporarily but unto eternal life. When Jesus later identifies Himself as the Good Shepherd (John 10:11), the connection is sealed: the Shepherd feeds His flock with His own life. You have to read these passages to see what God is revealing.

#### The Sixth Divine Sign: Healing of the Man Born Blind and Baptism

On the Sabbath, Jesus heals a man blind from birth (John 9). This sign corresponds to the sacrament of Baptism. Physical blindness serves as the image of humanity's condition under original sin. The washing restores the sight of the blind and illumines the soul. Sight is not merely restored, but it is given for the first time. When Christ later declares, "I am the resurrection and the life" (John 11:25), John reinforces baptism's paschal character: death to sin and rebirth into divine life. The connections in all of John's Gospel reveals his deep theological understanding of what God was divinely revealing, but it is hidden in the signs.

#### The Seventh Divine Sign: The Raising of Lazarus and Confirmation

At the feast of Dedication, Jesus raises Lazarus from the dead (John 11:38–44). This climactic sign corresponds to the sacrament of Confirmation. Lazarus does not merely return to life; he emerges bound and then is commanded to be loosed. The sign reveals the strengthening and work of the Holy Spirit, who calls believers from death into bold witness. Christ's declaration, "I am the way, the truth, and the life" (John 14:6), situates this sign within the Church's mission: confirmed believers are sent into the world, empowered by the Spirit to bear witness to the Truth. The complex nature of these signs is so deep and profound that many books have been written about them.

If pondered carefully the "Book of Signs" layers a deeper mystery with a correlation to the Sacraments. Scriptures, though divinely inspired, do not interpret themselves, nor did Christ intend for them to function apart from the Church. Part of what has happened for the individual believer is that he or she goes into Scripture with an open heart to discern what is being revealed, but without the Living Tradition in the fullness of the faith this can be difficult to actually participate in. This is why we all need faith

formation and catechesis in order to learn how to participate in these mysteries.

## Article 7: Communion & Catechesis

Communion with the Church is not merely outward participation in rituals; it is participation in the fullness of Christ's grace, truth, and apostolic authority. When a believer is outside of holy communion, the loss extends far beyond missing the Eucharist, it also entails separation from the divinely ordained channels through which Christ dispenses His life to the faithful via the Sacraments. While God can work grace through extraordinary means, the absence of sacramental life leaves the soul in a state of woundedness, for it is the Sacraments that heal, nourish, and restore. Being without full communion is therefore an incomplete form of faith, lacking the life-giving food that Christ provides for healing and thanksgiving.

When Christians unite themselves to the Eucharist, they unite themselves to Christ and to one another as the corporate Body of Christ. In this way, the faith of believers is strengthened, deepened, and unified.

This is where the influence of sola Scriptura becomes most challenging: it separates individuals from the Church and from the richness of faith handed on through Scripture and Tradition. For Catholics, this treasure is meant to be shared courageously and boldly, proclaiming what God has revealed. Yet many hesitate to share this gift, fearing offense or seeking approval. Our faith is meant to be lived passionately, proclaimed clearly, and defended with courage:

“You are the light of the world. A city seated on a mountain cannot be hid.” (Matthew 5:14)

The Church is that city on the mountain, having survived persecutions, heresies, and revolutions by holding fast to the Deposit of Faith, which has developed and matured over time, yet remained faithful through the ages.

The Church is always in a state of reform, and one may even say it is in some measure always in crisis that though this reality is often only understood firsthand. For those open to it, it is worth considering the fullness of divine revelation offered through the Church. God works in mysterious ways, even through the events of the Reformation, much like Joseph tells his brothers:

“You meant evil against me, but God meant it for good.” (Genesis 50:20)

This principle applies to both Catholics and non-Catholic Christians: God works through all circumstances to accomplish His will. As Scripture

reminds us, the Church can be both “dark and beautiful” (Song of Songs 1:5), a reflection of how God acts through our personal, public, professional, and religious lives. God is sovereign over all things, guiding His people and leading those who know Him.

## Article 8: The Sacraments

The word Sacrament comes from the Latin *sacramentum* and in Greek *mysterion* (mystery). There are seven Sacraments (1) Baptism (Matthew 28:19), (2) Eucharist (Luke 22:19–20), (3) Confession (John 20:22–23), (4) Confirmation (Acts 8:14–17), (5) Anointing of the Sick (James 5:14–15), (6) Matrimony (Matthew 19:6; Ephesians 5:31–32), and (7) Holy Orders which can only be conferred by the apostolic practice of ordination. St. Augustine describes the sacramentum as sacred signs that convey grace. The efficacy of the sacraments lies in the fact that they truly convey the graces they signify. Therefore, regardless of a priest's personal holiness, his consecration to the office grants him the power to administer the sacraments.

### Baptism, Confirmation & Eucharist

The Sacraments of Initiation are celebrated a little differently today than they were in the ancient Church, but their meaning and purpose remain the same. For example, the anointing with oil in the chrism of the Sacrament of Confirmation represents the strengthening of the soul in Christ. This anointing echoes the way Christ Himself was anointed and also recalls how kings like David and Solomon were anointed in the Old Testament. In those moments, the anointing signified that God was giving them a special role and strengthening them for their mission within His kingdom. In a similar way, Confirmation strengthens the believer to live out a priestly role within the community of faith.

In the early Church, Baptism, Confirmation, and the Eucharist were not separated as they often are today. Instead, they were administered together as a single act of Christian initiation. This meant that when someone entered the Church, they received all three sacraments at once as part of their full welcome into the life of Christ and the community of believers.

By the 200s AD, we already see descriptions of this practice. After coming up from the baptismal bath, the newly baptized were anointed with blessed oil according to the ancient tradition. This was followed by the laying on of hands and the invocation of the Holy Spirit. The early

Christians understood this as the moment when the grace of Baptism was strengthened and sealed.

As one early Christian description explains, those who were baptized were brought before the leaders of the Church. Through prayer and the imposition of hands, they received the Holy Spirit and were “perfected with the Lord’s seal.” In this way, the three Sacraments of Initiation worked together: Baptism gave new life in Christ, Confirmation strengthened that life through the Holy Spirit, and the Eucharist united the new Christian fully with Christ and His Church.

### The Sacrament of Reconciliation

Sin is not merely an internal struggle or a private failure; it is damage to one’s relationship with God and His Church, requiring a real and visible means of reconciliation. Christ did not leave the forgiveness of sins to subjective feelings or silent prayers alone that He established a sacramental means by which divine authority would be exercised through His Church. In John 20:21–23, He breathed on His Apostles, imparting the Holy Spirit, and explicitly granted them the power to forgive sins or withhold forgiveness. This was not a symbolic act but a real transmission of authority, just as He had given Peter the keys to bind and loose on earth (Matthew 16:19). The early Church understood this commission as a sacred duty entrusted to bishops and priests, as seen in the writings of St. Cyprian, St. Ambrose, and the early penitential practices.

If Christ intended for sins to be forgiven in secret between the sinner and God alone, He would not have made the apostolic ministry an essential part of this process. The *Didache* instructed Christians to confess their sins before receiving the Eucharist, and Tertullian and St. Augustine affirmed the necessity of seeking absolution through the ordained ministers of the Church. Even the structure of the Old Covenant foreshadowed this reality: atonement for sin involved the mediation of a priest offering sacrifice on behalf of the people (Leviticus 5:5–6). Christ, as the eternal High Priest, fulfilled this system by becoming the sacrifice Himself, yet He left His Church as the means through which that forgiveness would be personally applied to each sinner. The priest, acting *in persona Christi*, does not forgive by his own power but as a minister of the one High Priest.

## The Sacrament of Anointing of the Sick

Christ, knowing the depths of human weakness, did not abandon His people in their final struggles but provided a sacramental means of healing and strength. In Mark 6:13, the Apostles "anointed with oil many who were sick and healed them." This practice is explicitly affirmed in James 5:14–15: "Is anyone among you sick? Let him call for the elders of the church, and let them pray over him, anointing him with oil in the name of the Lord." This passage establishes that the anointing with oil, performed by the Church's ordained ministers, conveys both spiritual healing and the forgiveness of sins.

The early Church confirmed this. Origen (c. 250 AD) speaks of the power of sacramental anointing as a divine mystery that strengthens the suffering. St. John Chrysostom (c. 400 AD) affirms that when a priest anoints the sick, it is Christ Himself who acts. By the time of St. Gregory the Great (c. 600 AD), the Church had formalized the understanding that this sacrament was especially necessary for those near death, offering both bodily healing when possible and spiritual strength for the journey into eternal life. This sacrament is not about resignation to death but about spiritual fortification in the face of suffering and mortality.

## The Sacrament of Holy Orders

Christ did not establish His Church as a mere gathering of believers bound by shared ideas; He instituted it as a visible, sacramental reality. From the very beginning, He set apart certain men to act in His name, conferring upon them a unique participation in His priesthood. In John 20:21–23, He gives the Apostles authority to forgive sins. In Matthew 28:19–20, He commands them to baptize and teach. In Luke 22:19, He commands, "Do this in remembrance of me," instituting both the Eucharist and the priesthood in a single act. Hebrews 5:1 affirms: "Every high priest is chosen from among men and appointed to act on behalf of men in relation to God." When Scripture is seen through a faith alone perspective it can be difficult to see the spiritual undercurrent taking place through the Sacraments.

The early Church safeguarded this through apostolic succession. Clement of Rome (c. 96 AD) affirms that the Apostles appointed bishops and presbyters to ensure continuity. Ignatius of Antioch (c. 107 AD) insists on the threefold structure of Holy Orders: bishops, priests, and deacons.

Thus, maintaining that no sacrament or teaching is valid apart from union with the bishop. By Hippolytus of Rome (c. 215 AD), formal ordination rites were in place, including the laying on of hands and a prayer of consecration, mirroring the apostolic practice in Acts 6:6 and 1 Timothy 4:14. Without the priesthood, there is no Eucharist, no forgiveness of sins, no apostolic teaching handed down with authority. The priest is not a mere minister or preacher, but he is configured to Christ, acting *in persona Christi*, especially in the consecration of the Eucharist. Holy Orders is not an administrative function, but a divine vocation, an indelible mark, that is fulfilled through participation in Christ's eternal priesthood. This requires the active will of the person to do the will of God.

### The Sacrament of Matrimony

Of all the Sacraments, Matrimony is the one in which nearly all people on earth participate; the union where man and woman become one flesh. Adam was responsible in the garden as its steward, protector, and priest, entrusted by God to guard and cultivate what was sacred (Genesis 2:15). Yet when the serpent entered and tempted Eve, Adam remained silent, failing in his duty to defend both his wife and the integrity of God's command. This failure was not merely a personal sin as it was a failure of vocation, a distortion of the very essence of marriage as a union ordered toward truth, love, and divine obedience.

Yet even in the face of their failure, God did not abandon them. He set forth a greater plan, one that would restore marriage to its original dignity and not just through human effort, but through Christ, the New Adam, and Mary, the New Eve. Where Adam failed to protect his bride, Christ laid down His life for the Church. Where Eve led Adam to disobedience, Mary's "yes" to God brought salvation into the world. Marriage is not simply a human institution, but a divinely ordained reality, fulfilled in Christ's love for the Church (Ephesians 5:25–32). This is why Christian marriage is sacramental: it does not simply unite man and woman in a lifelong bond but sanctifies, strengthens, and makes them participants in God's own covenantal love.

In Genesis 2:24: "A man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh." Christ reaffirms this when He declares, "What God has joined together, let no man separate" (Matthew 19:6). Unlike other Sacraments, where grace is conferred through a

minister, in marriage the spouses themselves become the ministers, bestowing the sacrament upon each other by their free, total, faithful, and fruitful consent. The early Church understood this. Tertullian (c. 200 AD) describes Christian marriage as "two believers united in one hope, one discipline, one worship." There are three essential goods of marriage: *fides* (fidelity), *proles* (openness to children), and *sacramentum* (indissolubility). The Church has always defended the indissolubility of marriage as divine protection of love, ensuring that it remains a true reflection of Christ's unbreakable commitment to His Bride, the Church. What the world has lost is the sense of the word *Sacrament* and the meaning of Matrimony and all the other Sacraments as sacred. This happens when many of the sacraments are often lost because of the principle of sola-scriptura that they are often times reduced to two, baptism and the Lord's Supper, which is actual the wedding feast of the lamb, the new Passover, the Eucharist. Marriage reflects the Eucharistic reality of a foretaste of heaven.

## Article 9: Sola Scriptura, Tradition, and the Call to Catechesis

The divisions among Christians over issues such as the passive will, justification, and even faith alone are commonplace. Yet nothing is a more potent divider than the principle of sola Scriptura. In my view, the only way forward is for both Catholics and Protestants to affirm without qualification that Sacred Scripture is inspired by God, authoritative for faith and life, and normative for Christian doctrine.

This, however, cannot stand alone. The key question remains: how is Scripture understood and exercised within the life of the Church? This necessarily brings in the context of Tradition, which applies to all Christians, regardless of denomination. The real question is: which Christian community has the authority to teach dogmatically and doctrinally about God's Word? It seems reasonable to suggest that the Church possessing the Magisterium and all seven Sacraments holds that authority. This is the true divide, because sola Scriptura rejects this structure and authority.

Until ecclesial bodies come to terms with the sacred reality of Church Councils and the full history and development of the Catholic Faith, true unity among Christians is extremely difficult to achieve. Lay people, however, can take the initiative to investigate these matters for themselves. Scripture may rightly be called the "norma normans," the norm that norms, but it requires catechesis first: the handing on of what the Church has received and continues to pass on to future generations.

The Bible can be considered the ultimate standard, but only within the context of Sacred Tradition, where the Church is not superior to the Word of God, but its servant. God's Word is not merely His written Word; it includes everything He has handed on to His Church. To deny this is, paradoxically, to deny Scripture itself, which attests repeatedly to the authority of God's covenantal people and their teaching.

When Scripture is treated as a self-regulating, standalone document, doctrinal boundaries inevitably arise, because Scripture alone cannot define everything. Much of the polemical tension in Christian debate dissolves once it is recognized that Christ gave us not only the Bible, but also a Church with a visible identity and structure, prefigured in the Old

Testament and fulfilled in the New. The Church Fathers saw this clearly, and a look at Church history confirms it: all that the Church now teaches was present in shadow and seed, taking centuries to uncover the mysteries of the faith and make them explicit. This is why doctrine exists, to illuminate the path of faith.

I invite you to reflect personally: are you fulfilled in your faith, individually or within your local community? If not, consider exploring the Order of Christian Initiation for Adults (OCIA). The Church offers this for anyone curious about learning more about the Catholic faith. There are also excellent Bible studies and online resources, but ultimately, the best way to begin is simply to attend Mass and pray. You don't need to understand everything at first; just be present and see what speaks to you.

For me, it was the Eucharistic liturgy that drew me in. In the beginning I knew very little, but I knew for certain that Christ was present in the Eucharist, that I was a sinner in need of baptism, and that I wanted to receive Communion and Confirmation. The greatest aspect of my faith is experiencing the sacramental reality of a life of grace, encountering Christ tangibly and personally through the Sacraments.

## Article 10: In Closing

I'm just an average Catholic trying to live an above-average faith life, and I fully understand how long and challenging the road of faith can be. After sixteen years of being Catholic, having been baptized at the Easter Vigil on April 3, 2010, it has now been nearly sixteen years since that day. I realize that in many ways I am still a teenager in my faith, so please bear with me. There is so much to learn, so much to experience, and so much growth ahead that it often feels like the journey has only just begun. I hope this book also grows through your helpful comments and criticisms, and I look forward to hearing your thoughts.

Sometimes I feel like this life is similar to the Hebrew people wandering in the desert. Yet I also think that Christians at this moment in human history may be poised to enter into the Promised Land, and maybe even sooner than we think, that we can be united as one in the hope of the time to come. I want your journey of faith to be like that of Joshua and the priestly class who crossed the Jordan into that promised land, faithfully led by the Ark of the Covenant. That covenant for us is the covenant of Jesus Christ. Together, I believe we can move toward that unity if we address the social and cultural issues that divide us. Although the beginning of this book focuses primarily on opening the conversation about those divisions, the hope we carry is a covenantal reality of faith, that we are called to be one, united in Him.

I believe the only way forward is to let God lead the way, just as Moses parted the sea and set his people free from bondage. We too are called to follow, like the priests carrying the Ark of the Covenant as they stepped into the rushing waters of the Jordan. The river did not stop in advance as it did with Moses, but only after their feet touched the water. Only then did the current begin to recede and eventually part, making a way for the people to cross. Sometimes God waits for His people to take that first step.

I think you are being called to that. No matter what form of Christianity you practice, God is calling you to follow Him. Even if you feel distant from the faith, know that God has a plan for your life. We do not always see it while we are going through it, but in retrospect, when we look back, we can often see how God was working. The key, I think, is learning to be comfortable being uncomfortable walking in the mystery of faith and not

always knowing where He is leading us, but trusting in Him that His will will be done.

This means that you, me, and everyone else must take an active role in that journey. It means listening to Him and doing what He asks. But if you have the slightest doubt or if you are unsure how well you know His voice, or whether you can trust His nudge or inspiration then you must seek faith formation in order to clarify His will for your life. Go to your local parish and ask or ask a friend. One has to have the utmost confidence and conviction that it is truly Him speaking, and not simply the self, the world around you, or worse, the principalities and powers that stand against you. Seek and trust the Kingdom of Heaven above all things. But remember that you must seek, knock, and ask, and the door will be opened to you.

As a member of the Mystical Body of Christ through baptism, you are meant to be a light for others, and I think we do this better when we are united as one. I can only dream of that time, and I hope you do too. When the waters part, a path where none seemed possible will be provided, but unlike the Hebrew people, we do not have to build a memorial when entering the Promised Land together. It is already here in His Body and His Blood, the New Covenant. This is our memorial His sacrifice made present through the Eucharistic liturgy. I hope we all come to recognize this as the way we will finally come together in Christ. How this will happen, I do not know. It will not be by human hands alone, but in God's time and in God's way, and no man can force it. But I do believe we will soon see like what the Hebrews saw when the walls of Jericho came falling down on that great and mighty day of the Lord. One day we too will be united as one marching in the covenant of our Lord, singing the sound of the Gospel, and that will be the miracle that brings the walls down.

We are all called to become a light to the nations. If we can overcome our divisions here, as the faithful in America, by taking an active participation in the faith that God has given us we can be a light set upon a hill for other nations. I don't think there is any other way than to trust Him through His unconditional love to guide us there. I don't think there is any other way to do that than to follow Him, see where He leads us, and to move beyond a passive solitary faith as individuals into a community as one for the sake of our salvation and others.

May God bless you, in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.



## ABOUT

*ACTIVE PARTICIPATION* EXPLORES a question at the heart of many divisions within the Christian world: How does God truly work within the human heart, and how are believers meant to respond? Beneath disagreements about doctrine or practice often lie deeper differences about faith and reason, the human will, and the role of the Church in guiding the Christian life.

Structured in two complementary parts, the book moves from foundation to lived reality. The first examines some of the principles that have shaped Christianity in America, including human freedom, faith alone, and Scripture alone. The second part explores the living Tradition of the Faith safeguarded by the Church's Magisterium. It shows the visible life of the Church itself, encountering the *Ekklesia* as a divinely instituted community where Scripture, the Sacraments, and the Ecumenical Councils preserve the truth of the Gospel and make Christ present to the faithful.

Written as a personal reflection on what often seems to be a passive faith life in America the author encourages a move toward a more active participation. All readers are invited to participate whether searching or devoted, so as to move beyond faith in principle to the fullness of Christian life through the Sacraments. In this way, faith becomes participation in the mysteries, where the Christ of Scripture is encountered in the living life of the Church.

At the heart of his work is a simple conviction: the Catholic faith is true, beautiful, and meant to be lived and experienced.