

# Episode 154 The Sacraments of the Catholic Church with Father Mario Arroyo

## **Mario Arroyo**

Hello, I'm Father Mario Arroyo. I am the senior pastor at St. Cyril of Alexandria Catholic Church in Houston Texas.

## **David Capes**

Father Mario Arroyo, good to see you today. Welcome to The Stone Chapel Podcast.

## **Mario Arroyo**

It's a pleasure to be here with you.

## **David Capes**

Well, we spend a lot of time together on the radio, as we do with Rabbi Stuart Federow, Rabbit Stew, as we call him. And we have a lot of fun and hopefully good conversations going on. [The show is called "A Show of Faith" on AM 1070 The Answer in Houston]. But today we're going to talk about the sacraments of the Catholic Church, because a lot of people listening to this podcast, may not have heard that term, or they're not familiar with it. And because they're Protestants, maybe they need a little bit of an orientation. Let's begin by saying who you are. Who is Father Mario Arroyo?

## **Mario Arroyo**

Well, I am a Catholic priest of the Archdiocese of Galveston, Houston. I have been ordained a priest for 46 years. I am originally from Havana, Cuba. I came here when I was 10 years old. And I always had been a Catholic but had an intense conversion when I was 21 years old. And I came to the realization that there's really nothing greater than hanging on to God for dear life. I've always been Catholic. I am convinced of the Catholic tradition. And so, I chose to enter the seminary because I wanted to spend the rest of my life proclaiming the one thing that stood when the rest of my life fell apart. And that was Jesus and His resurrection, and His salvation. I've been doing that, as I said, for 46 years.

## **David Capes**

You grew up in Denver, Colorado, after immigrating from Havana, and you came to Houston to go to seminary?

## **Mario Arroyo**

Yes. But actually, my vocation story is a bit turbulent. I was recovering from some stupid things that I did when I was in my late teens and early 20s, including mild drugs. And I went into a kind of nervous breakdown, though I was never hospitalized or anything. But it was just a total eruption inside as to who got my attention. Where am I going? What's life all about?

**David Capes**

This was while you lived in Denver?

**Mario Arroyo**

This is while I lived in Denver. And at that moment, I started remembering that there was a God who loved me and a God who saved. And I started literally, internally screaming, help me! It's interesting, because you can always imagine this theologically, or cognitively. But when you start existentially screaming, saying to God, help me, all of a sudden you understand the whole concept of salvation. And that's very different than the cognitive understanding of the Christian faith. It becomes alive and ever since then I just don't know how to live without clinging to God, the God of Jesus and His resurrection.

**David Capes**

That's a great story. And thanks for being with us today to share a little bit of it. Now, today, we're going to focus our attention on the sacraments of the Catholic Church. Growing up Baptist, we had two, baptism and the Lord's Supper. But we didn't use the term "sacrament." We used the term "ordinance." And I think that's true of some other Protestants as well. But in the Catholic Church, there are seven sacraments. Let's talk about the whole idea of what are the sacraments. Let's begin with that.

**Mario Arroyo**

A sacrament is an encounter with the presence of God, the Real Presence of God. So, for example, the primordial sacrament for us is the Eucharist. In the Catholic tradition, we understand that the Eucharist is a person. I always let people know that because Catholics often say, I'm going to Mass. And I wish we wouldn't do it that way. Because I think more accurately, we should say I am about to go to meet the Lord.

I am going to enter into common-union with God, with Jesus. Communion. Common-union. I always like to expand that word. Because you know, everybody gets a little careless in their theology. And people will say, did you go to Communion? But you don't go to Communion. You go into common-union. When you hear common-union, all of a sudden, it has a little bit of a different understanding. You're going into common-union with our Lord. It is the Real Presence of the Lord, in the Eucharist. Eucharist just means thanksgiving. But the real presence of Jesus is there. And so, we're focused on when Jesus said unless you eat my body and drink my blood, you have no life in you.

And even when people started to leave him, because he was saying something that sounded crazy. He didn't say, wait, wait, wait, you misunderstood me. He doubled down on it. Even to the point of saying to His disciples, are you going to also leave? So, there was no sense of walking it back. It's the common-union. We believe that we receive the body, blood, soul and divinity, the whole of Jesus, existentially in the reception of common-union or the Eucharist.

**David Capes**

Is there an expectation that it is a transformative moment in life? Because some people can go to mass or go to communion and say I did that, but it doesn't faze them. That's a problem that we all have in all traditions.

**Mario Arroyo**

It's a matter of how you receive Communion. There's no electric experience that happens to you. It's an issue of faith. When you go to common-union, when you receive the Eucharist, it's quite deep, if you understand what you're doing. But there are people who just receive it. Just nonchalantly, and you can tell. It bothers me whenever I'm distributing the Lord's body that there are people who do it superficially.

**David Capes**

Yes, I think we can all just go through the motions whatever the tradition is. The other sacrament we share is the one of baptism. Let's talk about that.

**Mario Arroyo**

Yes, baptism. For us, it's an interesting distinction that I think is correct. And you can disabuse me if I'm wrong! But in many Protestant traditions, baptism is your commitment to God. And so therefore, you can renew that baptism as many times as you wish. But for us, in the Catholic tradition, the sacraments are never initiated by us. The sacrament is God's initiation into dialogue with you. And so, when you are baptized in the Catholic Church, it is God saying to you through water, you are my son, you are my daughter. That is unrepeatable.

**David Capes**

Because you don't have multiple times into the baptistry.

**Mario Arroyo**

We are forbidden from doing that, because once God has chosen you, we do not believe he has to re-choose you. In a lot of Protestant theology, it's us choosing God and renewing that commitment is baptism. In Catholic theology, it is God choosing you. I say to parents, you can baptize a baby, because you as a parent, chose your son or daughter before they could choose you. And they grew up in that choice that you made. And discovered that you were mom and dad as they grew up. And so, we understand that God can choose you as his son or daughter prior to you becoming conscious and being able to choose him back. It is God's initiation. It's always God's initiation.

For example, in the Catholic tradition, the Catholic priest does the sacraments, in what is called *in Persona Christi*, in the person of Christ. There was a priest who had been baptizing people. And he would say, we baptize you in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Well, all of his baptisms were deemed invalid. And the reason why they were deemed invalid is because when you say "we" you are presuming the church. The church is doing it. But it is not the church. When the priest says, I baptize you in the name of the Father, Son and the Holy Spirit, that is not the priest. That / is the person of Christ speaking through the priest. So, when I celebrate the Eucharist, and I say, this is my body, it is not my body. It is the body of Christ.

**David Capes**

So, you're speaking in the person of Christ.

**Mario Arroyo**

Yes, in the person of Christ. And when I do the Sacrament of Reconciliation, which is normally called confession, it's the same. I say, I absolve you from all of your sins. Well people don't need my absolution; they don't need my forgiveness. They didn't do anything to me. When I absolve you, it is in the person of Christ absolving them. And I tell people, you're not listening to me. You're listening to the person of Christ, using me as his voice. And the reason he does that is so you don't freak out.

Can you imagine every time you said to Jesus, I'm sorry, Jesus would say, "okay" sounding like thunder, or something like that!

**David Capes**

So, the I absolve you, is really Christ absolved you?

**Mario Arroyo**

Christ absolved you. It's in the person of Christ, and every sacrament is like that.

**David Capes**

And you call that the sacrament of reconciliation? Is that something that only adults do? Or can children do that?

**Mario Arroyo**

We normally introduced children to it at the age of reason. In the Catholic tradition, the Age of Reason is seven years old. And we introduce kids to their first confession at seven years old. And that's always very enjoyable. It's my most enjoyable one. Little kids will come to their first confession, and they will confess adultery. And when you ask them what it is, they say disrespecting an adult. They don't understand the term. It's always funny when that happens.

**David Capes**

So that's three of the sacraments. We've talked about baptism, we've talked about communion, or the Eucharist, but also reconciliation. What's the fourth sacrament though these aren't necessarily in order.

**Mario Arroyo**

The order would be baptism, confirmation and Eucharist. Those are called the Sacraments of Initiation.

**David Capes**

Okay, so let's go back to confirmation then.

**Mario Arroyo**

Confirmation is actually based on the scriptural moment in which Paul goes to a group of people who have been baptized but have not yet received the Holy Spirit. And they lay hands upon them and anoint them. And that is the reception of the Holy Spirit. And confirmation is done to separate sacraments. When an adult is being received into the church, baptism, confirmation and Eucharist are always done at the same time. For children we do the baptism, and then we do first Eucharist at around seven and around 14 or 15, we do confirmation.

**David Capes**

And why at that particular age? Is it deemed that they are making the decision themselves or confirming the decision?

**Mario Arroyo**

It's a time when we feel that they are most ready to receive the fullness of the Holy Spirit given at that moment. So, we want them to be mostly understanding of what they are receiving. In baptism, God chooses them before they even know it. But in confirmation, we want them to be able to understand what they are receiving. They're not making a commitment; they are not making confirmation to God. It's God making firm and fulfilling His fullness of the gift of the Holy Spirit.

**David Capes**

So, it goes back to the idea of God as the initiator of the sacraments.

**Mario Arroyo**

That is correct. And then you have the other sacraments, which is the Anointing of the Sick. And the Anointing of the Sick is based in the letter of James, where it says, if anyone is sick among you, let them call for the elders of the church and anoint them (James 5:16). And the anointing would save the sick person. And if they have committed any sins, their sins are forgiven. And the Catholic tradition bases the sacrament of the anointing on that passage. It used to be called the sacrament of extreme unction.

**David Capes**

That's how I learned it years ago. So that's usually last rites?

**Mario Arroyo**

Well in the Catholic Church, there is no such thing as last rights. Christian communities down through the ages began to say, well, when should you get anointed? And they said, it has to be a serious illness. It's not allergies! you don't get anointed for allergies. So, they said it's got to be an extreme illness. That's where we got extreme unction. And people were always afraid when the priests would come because people would wait until they were dying. And so, the priests showing up, must mean I'm dying. So, it's before a surgery, or if you're dealing with a significant illness. And it has the power of helping you through the illness with God's grace and also the forgiveness of all sins.

And of course, then there's Holy orders. I always like to say, take away the adjective and you're left with orders. In other words, you will become a disciple. You promise obedience to the bishop. And you are under his orders to do ministry and we go where we are told to go by our bishops.

**David Capes**

Okay, so that's what the priests does. So not everybody goes through holy orders.

**Mario Arroyo**

No, just the priests, deacons, and Bishops.

**David Capes**

And what about women who are going into a convent?

**Mario Arroyo**

They make vows. That's not sacraments. There's a category in the Catholic tradition called Sacramentals. And Sacramentals are holy actions. The thing about sacrament is that a sacrament effects what it signifies. For example, if I give you the Eucharist, you have received the Lord, whether you know it or not. It is not dependent on you recognizing it. It may have no effect on you, but you have received the Lord. If I give you the forgiveness of sins in reconciliation, you have been forgiven, if you have the right intention. But if you say, I'm not intending to do anything differently. I'm intending to go right back and do it again. Then even though the reconciliation was given to you. You did not accept it in a way that it would make any significant change in you.

And then the last sacrament to discuss is the sacrament of marriage. The Sacrament of Marriage comes from the tradition of husbands love your wives as Christ loves the church. And the love between the couple is a signifier of this love that is given by Christ to the church. That's the only sacrament that I do not do. I preside at that sacrament. But the couple gives the sacrament to each other.

**David Capes**

I see. So, they are priest-like at that moment.

**Mario Arroyo**

Yes. All I'm doing there is being the church's official witness.

**David Capes**

You're signing the paperwork.

**Mario Arroyo**

That's right. The sacrament is given by the husband to the wife and the wife to the husband.

**David Capes**

It's reciprocal. Of course, not everyone gets married but for those who do in the Catholic Church, you go through the sacrament. Are there particular words that accompany this that must be said?

**Mario Arroyo**

Yes, it's specific. You can't go ahead and make your own vows unless you have different specific points that are made. The typical vows is, I take you to be my husband/wife. I promise to be true to you in good times, and in bad, in sickness and in health. I will love you and honor you all the days of my life.

**David Capes**

And you've presided over a number of those weddings, I would imagine over many, weddings. Well, this is a fascinating look at the sacraments in the Catholic Church. And I'm hopeful that there are some Protestants out there that will say, let me think about that more deeply. There are interesting ideas there.

**Mario Arroyo**

It's an interesting thing, because what's happened is that in the tradition of *sola scriptura*, in the Protestant tradition, the only command that is given by Jesus as a command is go and baptize and do this in memory of me. And so, in the tradition of the church, we understand that the Holy Spirit was given to the apostles. And they were given authority to develop the theology, the understanding of Christianity. For example, when Paul meets with the rest of the apostles in the Council of Jerusalem, they make a decision as to whether a person needs to be a Jew before they can be a Christian. And that is nowhere to be found in Jesus's words. And so it was understood by them that they had the authority to make those kinds of decisions.

**David Capes**

And that's because they had the spirit of Jesus with them.

**Mario Arroyo**

That's right. It's what's called the power of the keys. And the power of the keys is when Jesus says to Peter, and upon this rock, I will build my church and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it. I give you the keys to the kingdom of heaven. Whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven. Whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven. The Catholic interpretation is that the church has the authority within the bounds of the gospel, to make decisions about Christian life.

**David Capes**

The ordering of the Christian life. This is very fascinating stuff. Father Mario Arroyo, thanks for being with us today on The Stone Chapel Podcast.

**Mario Arroyo**

It is an honor to be with you now and every Sunday.

**Here is a nugget of wisdom from Father Mario Arroyo**

The nugget of wisdom that I would like to share with you today is my favorite definition of an ideology or a heresy. It works either way. It was, if I have it right attributed to T.S. Eliot. Heresy or ideology: "a partial insight whose seductive simplicity is altogether more plausible than the whole truth."