

# The Catholic Language of Mystery—Our “Native Tongue”

*How Catholics rely on sacramentality to transcend words*

BY JOE PAPROCKI

What is your native tongue? If you're Catholic, your true “native tongue” is a language of mystery called sacramentality—a language of signs, symbols, rituals, and gestures given to us by God. Most Catholics know this language of mystery from our celebration of the sacraments, and in particular, the liturgy of the Mass. We genuflect, bow, stand, kneel, sign ourselves with holy water, burn incense, and light candles. We also trace the Sign of the Cross over our forehead, lips, and heart. We strike our breast; we walk in processions.

Throughout Scripture, God communicates to his people using signs: a burning bush, a mighty wind, tongues of fire, a column of smoke, a pillar of fire, a tiny whispering sound, and so on. God's language is not primarily words. Recognizing that this is our “native tongue,” we incorporate the language of mystery into our celebration of the liturgy.

A funny thing happens to us, however, as we move from worship to catechesis: we seem to set aside this language of mystery and turn to total reliance on words, of which we seem to have no shortage. Catechesis is impoverished when it relies totally on the spoken and written word and forgets to incorporate a language

of mystery. I can think of no better way to predispose children for the celebration of the sacraments—especially the Eucharist—than by engaging them in a language of mystery during our catechetical sessions. So, just what are the building blocks of this language of mystery? Let's look at them, along with suggestions for incorporating them into our teaching.

**1. Sign and symbol** Catholic churches are characterized by statues, icons, pictures, stained-glass windows, and other tangible reminders of the intangible and mysterious presence of God. The learning environment for catechesis should reflect this. Children can and should be invited to bring in signs and symbols of their own to add to a prayer space.



*Pope Francis with incense during his papal visit to Florence and Prato on November 10, 2015.*

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**2. Movement and gesture** Many non-Catholics comment about how much we Catholics move around at Mass: We process, stand, sit, kneel, bow, and more. We pray with our whole bodies. If we hope to penetrate the hearts of those we teach, we need to also engage their whole bodies by inviting them to participate in processions in our learning space, bow before the Bible, and use other sacred movements that express reverence.

**3. Ritual** There's a fine line between routine and reverence. Routine is something we do the same way over and over again with little or no thought. Ritual is something we do the same way over and over again with deep and profound thought. Incorporate rituals into your lessons: actions the children will repeat week after week, but with deep thought and reverence.

**4. Silence** We live in a very noisy world that makes it very difficult to hear the subtle voice of God. We do our students a disservice by filling up every second of our sessions with noise and activity. Incorporate periods of silence into your sessions to help young people recognize that, in the presence of mystery, we simply need to stand or sit or kneel in silent awe.

**5. Song** Imagine *The Sound of Music* beginning with Julie Andrews simply reciting the words, "The hills are alive with the sound of music," instead of singing them! When we put words to music and break out into song, we are touching a part of our being that words alone cannot touch. Take advantage of every opportunity to incorporate music and singing into your sessions.

**6. Story** Jesus did not give lectures. He mostly told stories. If we are to teach as

Jesus did, we need to tell the great stories of our faith: stories of the Old Testament, stories of the Gospels, and stories of the saints—as well as stories of our own lives in relation to Jesus Christ.

For the great story of Jesus Christ to penetrate not only the heads, but also the hearts of young people, we need to teach them the language of mystery so they can come to recognize how God reveals his presence to us beyond words.



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