

- One of the great riches that I discovered within the Catholic faith when I converted was the vast number of ancient and beautiful prayers that are part of our liturgical and spiritual heritage as Catholics.
- In my early days as a Catholic a friend of mine gave me a book of Catholic prayers and devotions that is full of such things, and it's a book that I use every single day.
- Those of you who come to daily Mass may see me carrying it around. It's a little blue book with tattered edges that is obviously very well used.
- And I'm sure many of you who are a little older than me still have an old daily Missal somewhere that has a few holy cards tucked within it and that bears the marks of daily use.
- Growing up as a Protestant, we had very few such formal prayers. When we wanted to pray, we usually made up a prayer on the spot, which is beautiful way to express the deepest desires and longings of our heart to our Lord and is certainly a wonderful way to pray.
- But what I like about the ancient and traditional prayers of our Catholic faith is that they, too, express the desires and longings of our heart, while at the same time conveying our theological beliefs as well.
- In fact there's an old expression in the Catholic faith: *lex orandi lex credendi*, which means "the law of prayer is the law of belief." In other words, if you want to know what we believe as Catholics, just read our prayers, because our prayers are expressive of our theology.
- One of my favorite prayers in our Catholic faith is the *Salve Regina*, the "Hail Holy Queen", because it's a beautiful expression of whom we believe Mary to be and the powerful intercessory role she plays in our lives.
- And the last line of the prayer is my favorite: "Pray for us, most Holy Mother of God, that we may be made worthy of the promises of Christ."
- The promises of Christ, of course, are endless joy and peace in Heaven, and in this prayer we are asking Mary to help us reach this most important goal of salvation.
- Now as Catholics we believe that salvation is a free gift from God that Christ procured for us through His suffering, death and resurrection. Salvation is not something we earn by our own merits. Salvation is a gift of grace that we receive, and with which we must cooperate.
- The primary way that we receive our Lord's saving grace is through the seven sacraments of our Church. The 7 sacraments: Baptism, Confirmation, Eucharist, Reconciliation, Anointing of the Sick, Marriage, and Holy Orders, are vehicles of God's saving grace.
- In considering salvation sometimes our Protestant and Evangelical friends are fond of asking us: are you saved? The answer for us Catholics is actually YES! We were saved at our baptism. And we are saved every time worthily receive one of the sacraments!
- The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* teaches us that Christ Himself is at work in the sacraments, and that they do not depend on the holiness of the minister or of the recipient.
- "From the moment that a sacrament is celebrated in accordance with the intention of the Church, the power of Christ and his Spirit acts in and through it, independently of the personal holiness of the minister. Nevertheless, the fruits of the sacraments also depend on the disposition of the one who receives them." (CCC #1128)
- Now that last point is so important! While the sacraments convey grace simply by being performed correctly, if we want to receive the full benefit of grace, we must be properly disposed to receive the sacraments.

- And our readings today give us the key to how we properly dispose ourselves so that the grace of the sacraments will bear fruit in our lives.
- The Gospel today speaks of the authority of Christ. As Jesus speaks in the synagogue in Capernaum, the Jews are astonished at the authority that Christ shows in His teachings, and even the unclean spirit in the possessed man is subject to His authority.
- In the first reading we are told of the importance of listening to the Lord, and the responsorial psalm encourages us not to harden our hearts when we hear the Lord's voice.
- The point that is made in all of these readings is that we must open our hearts to the Lord. In humility we must be willing to submit ourselves to His authority and try to live according to His will. This humble submission to Christ is the key to being properly disposed to Him.
- The responsorial psalm we have today is Psalm 95, which is known as the Invitatory Psalm. In other words it is a psalm by which God invites us. In particular, our Lord is inviting us into a life of grace.
- Catholic clergy and religious are required to pray a collection of psalms and prayers every day known as the Liturgy of the Hours; Psalm 95 is the first psalm that we pray every day.
- Psalm 95 is a simple reminder of Who God Is, what He's done for us, and how we should respond to His generosity. As such, it is a great preparation for the day.
- Psalm 95 tells us to be joyful and grateful before the Lord. It calls us to humbly bow in worship before the Lord, and most importantly it encourages us to listen to Him, to submit ourselves to Him, and to open our hearts before Him.
- Doing these things – following the prescriptions of this psalm – is the very best ways that we can dispose ourselves to receive the grace of the sacraments!
- Specifically, if we want the sacraments to bear fruit in our lives, we must be willing to accept the authority of Christ and His teachings. There is a certain obedience that is required of us.
- Simply put, we cannot expect that the grace of the sacraments will be efficacious in our lives if we choose to live in a way that is contrary to the teachings of Christ as expressed in Sacred Scripture and in the constant teaching tradition of the Church.
- And so if you are living in a way that goes against Church teaching, such as through an illicit relationship, the use of contraception, or even through the failure to forgive someone who has hurt you, as your pastor I beg you to stop because you're missing out on God's grace.
- God desires to save each and every one of us from our sins, but He will never force Himself upon us. And if we obstinately cling to our grave sins, then we cannot cling to our Lord's saving grace that comes to us through the sacraments.
- That being said, obedience alone is not enough to be fully disposed for the grace of the sacraments. As Psalm 95 tells us, we must also be thankful and joyful.
- When we go to receive the sacraments, most especially Holy Communion, we must strive to be recollected and conscientious. We must strive to approach the altar with praise and thanksgiving, with full knowledge that when we receive the Eucharist, we are receiving the gift of salvation: Jesus Christ Himself under the appearance of bread and wine.
- My dear friends, the *Catechism* teaches us that the sacraments are necessary for salvation (cf. #1129). With this in mind let us try to properly dispose ourselves for receiving them through humble obedience and a joyful sense of gratitude.
- And in this process, let us commend ourselves to the prayers of our heavenly mother, Mary: "Pray for us Most Holy Mother of God, that we may be made worthy of the promises of Christ."