What does Symbolon mean?

In the early Church, Christians described their Creed, their summary statement of faith, as the *symbolon*, the “seal” or “symbol of the faith.”

In the ancient world, the Greek word *symbolon* typically described an object like a piece of parchment, a seal, or a coin that was cut in half and given to two parties. It served as a means of recognition and confirmed a relationship between the two. When the halves of the *symbolon* were reassembled, the owner’s identity was verified and the relationship confirmed.

In like manner, the Creed served as a means of Christian recognition. Someone who confessed the Creed could be identified as a true Christian. Moreover, they were assured that what they professed in the Creed brought them in unity with the faith the Apostles originally proclaimed.

This book is called *Symbolon* because it intends to help bring people deeper into that communion of apostolic faith that has existed for 2,000 years in the Church that Christ founded.
# Contents

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Introduction</th>
<th>7</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Chapter 1 The God Who Is Love</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter 2 The Divine Unveiling</td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter 3 The Great Story</td>
<td>41</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter 4 “Who Do You Say That I Am?”</td>
<td>55</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter 5 The Triumph of the Cross</td>
<td>61</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter 6 “Clothed with Power from On High”: The Holy Spirit and the Life of Grace</td>
<td>79</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter 7 Why Do I Need the Church?</td>
<td>95</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter 8 Mary and the Saints</td>
<td>113</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter 9 The Last Things: What Happens After We Die?</td>
<td>129</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter 10 Encountering Christ Today: The Seven Sacraments</td>
<td>145</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter 11 The Holy Eucharist: God with Us</td>
<td>161</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter 12 A Walk through the Mass</td>
<td>177</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter 13 Confession</td>
<td>187</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter 14 A Catholic Moral Worldview</td>
<td>197</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter 15 Love and Responsibility: Life, Sex, and Care for the Poor</td>
<td>209</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter 16 Prayer: The Encounter of God’s Thirst with Ours</td>
<td>225</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Introduction

Man cannot live without love. . . . His life is senseless if love is not revealed to him, if he does not encounter love, if he does not experience it and make it his own, if he does not participate intimately in it.

—John Paul II, *Redemptor Hominis*

If you were to walk into a coffee shop and randomly ask people, “What does the Catholic Church stand for?” what kind of responses do you think you would receive? Some people might talk about the rituals of the Catholic Faith. Others might mention the pope or the Blessed Virgin Mary. A large number probably would focus on controversial moral issues of our day: “The Catholic Church is against abortion, against contraception, and against gay marriage.”

Few, however, would get to the heart of the gospel and say, “The Catholic Church stands for the God who is madly in love with you, who has a plan for you and wants you to be happy—the God who even sent his Son, Jesus Christ, to die for you, who wants to forgive you and help you in your life,

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and who, most of all, wants an intimate, personal relationship with you so that you can be with him forever in Heaven.”

This, quite frankly, is not the impression the average person out in the world has about the Catholic Faith. And the fact of the matter is many of us who grew up Catholic don’t always see our Faith this way either. We might have heard there were twelve apostles, Ten Commandments, seven sacraments, and three Persons of the Trinity. But many practicing Catholics admit that they have almost zero understanding about how it all fits together and what difference it makes for their lives.

I know that was once the case in my own life.

I grew up Catholic, believed in God, showed up at Mass on Sundays, and in general wanted to be a “good person.” But as I entered my adult years, many other things captured my attention more: striving for success, making money, having friends, having fun. I still went through the motions in my faith, but God was not really the priority in my life.

I also began to have a lot of questions: Is all this Catholic stuff really true? What about the other religions in the world? Does it actually matter whether I’m Catholic? And then there were all those moral issues about life, sex, and
marriage: Shouldn’t each individual be able to make up his own morality? Why can’t we just love people and get along?

Over time, the Faith started to come together for me. Thanks to God’s grace and many good friends, mentors, and books, I began to sense that there was something deeper behind the various doctrines, rituals, and hierarchies of the Church. These guides helped me to appreciate more the truth and beauty of the Catholic Faith and opened up for me many treasures in my faith that I had taken for granted or didn’t even realize were there. Most of all, the Faith began to make more sense to me—not just as a theory, but as a whole way of life.

This Catholic way of life that attracted me—and millions of others throughout the centuries—is ultimately the way of love: a most profound love that the world itself does not offer. But it’s the love for which we are made, a love that corresponds to our hearts’ deepest desires. In fact, all of our authentic forms of love—whether it be love for one’s country, one’s friend, one’s child, or one’s spouse—are meant to be drawn up into this one love that is God himself (see 1 Jn 4:8, 16). And as we will see throughout this book, it’s only in this divine love that we will find our happiness and fullness of life.

**Love Unveiled**

Though not often appreciated in this way, the Catholic Faith actually emphasizes the centrality of love more than any other religion, spirituality, or philosophy in the world. We don’t just believe in a divine power that moves the universe, but in a God who, in his very essence, is love—indeed, a communion of love: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. And even though this God was perfectly happy in himself, he freely chose to bring us into existence so that he could share his love with us.
What is even more remarkable is that this God loves with an intimate, personal love and constantly pursues a relationship with us, even when we have turned away from him in sin. He still hungers for our attention. He thirsts for our love. The Bible describes our God as a good shepherd seeking his lost sheep, a woman searching for her lost coin, a father ardently running out to meet his lost son. As one recent pope said, God is not just Creator and Lord, but also “a lover with all the passion of a true love.”

So intense is God’s love for us that it’s as if he could not bear to remain separated from us. His love drove him to become one of us in Jesus Christ, and it drove him to offer his life for our sins so that we could be one with him again.

On the Cross, Jesus reveals most fully not only the total self-giving love of our God, but also the great love to which we are all called. On the night before he died, in fact, Jesus commanded his disciples, “[L]ove one another as I have loved you” (Jn 15:12; see Jn 13:34). The way he loves—totally, freely, sacrificially, and unconditionally—is now the standard for

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our lives. Indeed, this is how God made us, and we will find our happiness only in living like Christ, in self-giving love.

This, however, is not just some external command imposed on us from the outside, a high ethical bar over which we have to leap in order to please God and get to Heaven. Left to our own powers, we could never love as God has loved us. But Catholic Christianity emphasizes that God actually invites us to participate in his divine love. Here, we come to what is arguably the most astonishing aspect of the Catholic Faith. God doesn’t just pardon us of our sins. He wants to fill us with his life. He wants to transform our hearts. He seeks to heal, perfect, and even elevate our human love, so that it participates in his own perfect, divine love. This is what God has been doing throughout the centuries in the lives of countless ordinary Christians: changing our minds and hearts, so that we can begin to see as he sees, and love as he loves. Through God’s grace—his very divine life in us—we can begin to love in a much more profound way than we ever could on our own, for, as Saint Paul once wrote, “[I]t is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me” (Gal 2:20).3

Encountering Christ: The Head and the Heart

In this book, we will see how everything about the Catholic Faith leads us further on a lifelong journey of growing in the love of God. Through his Spirit dwelling in us, God draws us ever more out of ourselves—out of our fears, our limited perspectives, our selfishness, our pursuits for our own pleasure, comfort, and gain—and toward him and toward our neighbor in love. Through the Church, the communion

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3 As Saint Thérèse of Lisieux once said to God of her fellow religious sisters in the convent, “Never would I be able to love my Sisters as You love them, unless You, O my Jesus, loved them in me” (St. Thérèse of Lisieux, Story of a Soul [Washington: ICS Publications, 1976], 221; emphasis in original).
of saints, and especially through the sacraments, we don’t just receive God’s love; “we enter into the very dynamic of his self-giving.”

4 In this book, we will walk through the “big picture” of the Catholic Faith, from creation, the Cross, and the Church, to the sacraments, Catholic social teaching, and sexual ethics, to Purgatory, the papacy, and prayer. In the process, we will see how all the various aspects of the Faith fit together into the one overarching story of God’s love and our being caught up in that love. And we will use the Catechism of the Catholic Church for our itinerary. The Catechism, the official summary of Catholic teaching for our day, has four main pillars: the Creed, the sacraments, moral life, and prayer. The Creed is the summary of the story of God’s love: his plan of salvation from creation to Christ to the Last Judgment. The sacraments are how God draws us into this story of his love by filling us with his life. The moral life is our response to God’s love in the way we live. And prayer is our response to God’s love in our interior life.

4 Benedict XVI, Deus Caritas Est, no. 13.
Introduction

Our understanding of the Faith and our ability to live it out, however, is not something that is formed in a vacuum. We live in a certain cultural setting that influences our hearts and minds. The increasingly secular, relativistic, and individualistic attitudes around us can affect the way we think about God, life, love, and happiness. So as we walk through core Catholic beliefs, we will address common questions people in our culture have, such as the following:

- Why do I need the Church? Can’t I just be spiritual on my own?
- Isn’t one religion just as good as another?
- How is the death of a man two thousand years ago, in a city far away, relevant for my life today?
- Why does the Church talk about morality so much? Can’t I make up my own morality? And besides, shouldn’t we stop imposing our views on other people?
- Is it really our responsibility to care for the poor? Doesn’t God help those who help themselves?
- Along the way, we’ll also address questions some of our Protestant brothers and sisters have regarding topics such as Mary, the Bible, Confession, the papacy, and the Mass.

But our walk through the Catholic Faith will be much more than an intellectual enterprise. We will learn spiritual lessons from the beauty of the Catholic tradition and the insights of the saints. And we will be encouraged constantly to make application to our daily lives, considering how the various aspects of the Faith invite us to a deeper conversion—to love
God more and entrust more of our lives to him. This book, thus, aims to form not just the head, but also the heart. My hope is that this book not only helps you understand Jesus and his plan of salvation, but inspires you to love him more. For this is what the Faith is all about: “Being Christian is not the result of an ethical choice or a lofty idea, but the encounter with an event, a person, which gives life a new horizon and a decisive direction.”

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5 Ibid., no. 1.
One of the most profound statements ever written about God is found in the biblical text known as the First Letter of John. The statement consists of just three simple words: “God is love” (1 Jn 4:8, 16).

This verse gets to the heart of the distinctively Christian understanding of God. While the vast majority of people in the world believe there is a God, many do not really believe in a personal God—a God who loves us, who reveals himself to us, and who calls us to an intimate relationship with him. Rather, some view God as a vague higher power like “the force” in the movie Star Wars. Others believe in a God, but not one who really interacts in this world and is involved in our daily lives. Some think of God as a harsh judge. Still others make God in their own image, assuming God supports whatever ideas, choices, and lifestyles they may have and never challenges them to change.

But the Bible offers a very different picture of God: “God is love.” And in this opening chapter, we will take a closer look at what this means. We will see that God himself exists as a profound communion of love, a Trinity, and that he created us out of love and invites us into an intimate personal
relationship of love. The God who is love created us out of love, and made us for his love.

The Holy Trinity

When Saint John states, “God is love,” he is not simply describing a quality of God (God is loving) or saying that love is something God possesses (God has a lot of love) or merely affirming that loving is something God does (God loves). Rather, Saint John is underscoring how love is at the very essence of who God is: God is love. And in the words of theologian Bishop Robert Barron, “This means that God must be, in his own life, an interplay of lover (the Father), beloved (the Son) and shared love (the Holy Spirit).”

This sheds light on the Christian doctrine of the Trinity—the belief that there is one God who exists as three divine Persons: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. It is this triune God that Jesus Christ fully revealed some two thousand years ago—a God who, in his very essence, is love.

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As a faithful Jew, Jesus affirmed the traditional Jewish conviction of monotheism, belief in only one God (see Mk 12:29–30). But he also revealed something new about the inner life of the one true God.

First, Jesus gave a deeper understanding of God as Father. Previously, the Jewish people had invoked God as Father in the sense that God was the Creator of the world, the Giver of the law, and the One who guided and protected his people. Jesus, however, revealed God as Father in a totally new way. Long before God created the universe and established his relationship with Israel, the Father existed as a Father in relation to his Son. And what is most remarkable is that Jesus identifies himself as that eternal Son of the Father. He spoke of himself as the beloved Son who was sent by God the Father (see Jn 3:16). At the same time, while he is distinct from the Father, Jesus also spoke and acted as God himself. Indeed, Jesus, who affirmed belief in only one God, saw himself on par with God the Father, so much so that he could say, “I and the Father are one” (Jn 10:30).

Second, at the Last Supper Jesus promised to send another advocate, the Holy Spirit, to be with and in the disciples. He describes the Spirit also as having divine qualities, proceeding from the Father and the Son, guiding the disciples “into all the truth” (Jn 16:13; see Jn 14:17, 26), and taking what the Son possesses and giving it to his disciples (see Jn 16:15). Jesus thus reveals the Spirit as a divine Person along with himself and the Father.

The most famous reference Jesus made to the three Persons of the Trinity came after his Resurrection when he commissioned his apostles to baptize all nations “in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit” (Mt 28:19).

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The early Christians expressed this trinitarian faith in their own worship of God in the ritual of the Sacrament of Baptism, in the statements of faith known as the Creed, and in the eucharistic liturgy, which echoes the praise found at the end of Paul’s letters: “The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ and the love of God and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all” (2 Cor 13:14; cf. 1 Cor 12:4–6; Eph 4:4–6).

**Daring to Approach the Mystery**

But how can this be? How can there be three Persons but only one God? This is a great mystery, indeed the central mystery of the Faith, for it is the mystery of God himself. Our small, finite minds cannot fully grasp the essence of the infinite, all-powerful, all-good, all-loving God. We will spend all eternity contemplating the mystery of the triune God.

Mankind wouldn’t dare to contemplate the hidden life of God unless Jesus himself had revealed it. And although the full mystery is beyond the grasp of our limited human reason, we can know something about God’s inner life and at least begin to appreciate how it makes sense that God exists as Trinity.

All creation bears the mark of the Creator to some degree. Saint Augustine said there are “traces” of the Trinity throughout creation, and various analogies have been used throughout the centuries to express the mystery of the three Persons in one God. Some have used the example of fire, which has flame, heat, and light. Others have turned to the shamrock, the one clover with three leaves. Augustine himself focused on the individual person, the one creature God specifically made in his own “image” and “likeness” (Gen 1:26). In one of his analogies, Augustine noted that

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4 Ibid., book IX, chap. 3ff.
when a person has a proper, healthy love for himself, there are three dynamics at work: the person’s mind must first have a thought, an understanding of himself, and when he is aware of himself, he can love himself. Augustine sees in this personal three-fold dynamic between one’s mind, one’s self-understanding, and one’s love—all within the human being—a reflection of the Trinity. If God loves himself, he must have an understanding of himself. There must be a lover (the Father) and a beloved (the Son). And there must also be the shared love itself (the Holy Spirit) between the lover and beloved. “When Father and Son gaze at each other, they breathe back and forth their mutual love, and this is the *amor sui* [self-love] of God, or the Holy Spirit. Hence we have three dynamisms but not three Gods; we have a lover, a beloved, and a shared love, within the unity of one

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5 We know from our own experience that we can have moments of introspection when we come to a deeper understanding of ourselves—why we do what we do, why we react the way we react, what our hearts’ deeper desires are. This may happen on a business trip, vacation, or retreat, when we’re away from our daily routines and have more time to reflect. Or it may happen in a good conversation about our lives with a close friend, a priest, or a counselor. And with that greater self-understanding often comes a deeper level of love and self-acceptance.
substance, not a one plus one plus one adding up to three, but a one times one times one, equaling one.”

To Know and to Love

Another helpful approach is to consider how man has the ability to know and to love, two powers that reflect God himself, who is all-knowing and all-loving. Let’s take a moment to ponder what God’s being all-knowing and all-loving might tell us about the Trinity.

First, if God is all-knowing, he knows everything perfectly. He knows even himself perfectly. Now think about what that would mean. Right now, you as a person can close your eyes and have a thought of yourself, an image of yourself in your mind. But that idea of yourself remains just that, an idea in your head. You wouldn’t say that the thought you have of yourself is another person.

With God, however, it’s different. If God knows everything perfectly, and he knows even himself perfectly, then his thought of himself has to be a perfect mirror image of himself. All that is in him must be in the idea of himself or he wouldn’t know himself perfectly. As one Catholic writer explained, “The idea that God has of himself cannot be imperfect. Whatever is in the Father must be in his idea of himself, and must be exactly the same as it is in himself. Otherwise God would have an inadequate idea of himself, which would be nonsense.” It is this very living thought of himself, this image of himself, that Christians call God the Son, the second Person of the Trinity.

But what about the third Person of the Trinity? We can proceed by considering how God is also all-loving. The

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6 Barron, Catholicism, 87.
The Father and Son look upon each other with love. There is, thus, an infinite dialogue of love between the divine thinker and the thought, between the Father and Son. Each pours himself totally in love to the other, holding nothing back. And that infinite outpouring of love between the Father and Son is the Holy Spirit, the third Person of the Trinity. The Holy Spirit is the bond of love between the Father and the Son.

So we can see that God in his inner life is not just a Creator, a higher power, a master of the universe. In his very essence, he is a profound communion of love. The twentieth-century Christian writer C.S. Lewis once said the doctrine of the Trinity is the most important difference between Christianity and all other religions: “In Christianity God is not a static thing—not even a person—but a dynamic, pulsating activity, a life, almost a kind of drama. Almost . . . a kind of dance. The union between the Father and Son is such a live concrete thing that this union itself is also a Person.”

The Father loves the Son, and the Son in return loves the Father. Quite fittingly, the very outpouring of love between the Father and Son—the Holy Spirit—has often been called the breath or bond or kiss of love between the Father and Son.

These are just analogies, attempts to shed light on the mystery of the hidden life of God himself, not complete explanations. But the Trinity is not an abstract concept merely for scholars and theologians. We will now see how viewing God not just as “higher power” but as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit makes all the difference in the world for understanding who we are and the fullness of life to which God calls us.

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Image of God

The opening scene of the Bible makes a subtle but very important point about God and our relationship with him.

In the dramatic biblical account of creation, God is described as bringing the universe into being simply by the power of his word. He says, for example, “‘Let there be light’; and there was light” (Gen 1:3). Similar language is consistently repeated when God makes the sun, moon, and stars; the land, sky, and sea; and all the plants and animals that fill the earth. He simply gives his divine fiat: “Let there be . . .”

But at the climax of the creation narrative, when God creates man and woman, he uses a strikingly different expression. God says, “Let us make man in our image, after our likeness” (Gen 1:26).

Notice how the one indivisible God suddenly starts speaking in the first person plural: “Let us . . . in our image . . . our likeness.” God didn’t proceed as he had in his previous acts of creation. He didn’t just command, “Let there be man.” He said, “Let us make man.” Some have seen in this expression an allusion, a hint, to what Saint John Paul II
called the “divine We”—the Trinity. John Paul II says it’s as if God, before creating man and woman, pauses to seek “the pattern and inspiration” for his crowning work of creation. And he doesn’t look outside of himself, out into the newly created universe, for his model. Rather, “the Creator as it were withdraws into himself . . . in the mystery of his Being, which is already here disclosed as the divine ‘We’.”9 And he creates man in the image and likeness of himself.

Living Like the Trinity

Indeed, when we read Genesis 1:26 in light of the whole of Scripture, we can see that we are made in the image and likeness, not just of some impersonal spiritual power or Supreme Being, but of the God who exists as a divine communion of Persons, the Holy Trinity. And that tells us a lot about ourselves. As John Paul II taught, our bearing the image and likeness of God has an important “trinitarian character”: we are made to reflect not just some vague deity we call “God,” but the triune God.

But what does this mean? How are we to image the Trinity in the world? Man does this in a variety of ways, but one thing that stands out is our call to self-giving love. We’ve seen how God’s very inner life is a communion of love—the love of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Being made in the image and likeness of this God tells us that we are made for communion and self-giving. As the Catechism explains, “God is love and in Himself He lives a mystery of personal loving communion. Creating the human race in His own image. . . . God inscribed in the humanity of man and woman the vocation, and thus the capacity and responsibility, of love and communion.”10

10 CCC 2331, quoting John Paul II, Apostolic Exhortation Familiaris Consortio, November 22, 1981, no. 11.
This is a profound law of reality. We are made in the image and likeness of the Trinity. Written into the fabric of our being, therefore, is this law of self-giving. The Creator left his trinitarian fingerprints on us to such a degree that only in self-giving love—only when we live for God and for others—will we find the happiness we were made for. As the Catholic Church has taught, “man . . . cannot fully find himself except through a sincere gift of himself.”11

**Giving or Grasping?**

This stands in stark contrast with what the world says will make us happy. Instead of self-giving, many of us tend to focus on what we can get out of life for ourselves. Instead of making our lives a gift to God and others, we live more for ourselves, filling ourselves up with the honors, pleasures, and things of this world. We pour our lives into our careers, driven to find our fulfillment in success, wealth, important positions, recognition, or applause. We have an urgent need to keep ourselves constantly entertained—living on screens, pursuing frivolous amusements, seeking the pleasures of food, drink, or sex—thinking that if we could just have more of these experiences, our hearts will be satisfied. It’s as if we subconsciously say to ourselves, “If I could just have X—whether it be a certain job, a purchase, a boyfriend, an award—then I would finally be happy.”

One great saint for our modern world is Saint Augustine, an impressive man who passionately pursued all that the world had to offer. Born in A.D. 353, Augustine achieved great success in his career as a teacher and scholar, but that was not enough. He pursued wisdom; earned positions of great honor, including a most noble teaching position in

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the Roman imperial court; and was financially rewarded. But still, he longed for something more. He also had the kind of social life many in the world envied: friends, parties, delicious food and drink, the amusements of the coliseum, and the pleasures of sexual relationships. On the outside, Augustine appeared to have it all. But on the inside, he had an ache in his heart. Something was missing.

Augustine eventually came to see that, while there is nothing wrong with experiencing in moderation and in the proper way the good things of this world—money, success, sex, power—these things cannot fulfill us. God made us with “longings for the infinite,”12 and nothing from this finite world can satisfy us. Only the infinite God can fulfill the deepest desires of our hearts. That’s why Augustine concluded in his famous prayer to God, “You have made us for yourself, and our hearts are restless until they rest in you.”13

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12 CCC 33
13 Augustine, Confessions 1, 1.
What Do You Seek First?

Long before Augustine offered that prayer, he had come to believe in God, but God was not at the center of his life. Other things were more important to him: honor, praise, worldly entertainments, sex. He believed in God, but he sought his happiness in other things and did not follow God’s plan for his life.

When we, like early Augustine, search for our security, fulfillment, and happiness in anything short of God, we, too, will experience anxiety, frustration, and lack of peace. If we don’t put God first—if we make God just one of the many things in our lives—we will never be truly happy. Our hearts will be restless.

The ideas discussed in this chapter—God’s existence as the Trinity and our being made in the “image” of the triune God—challenge us to ask ourselves the following: What is really most important in my life? For whom do I really live? Do I live more for God and others or more for myself? Do I live like the Trinity, a life of self-giving? Or do I live seeking my fulfillment in the things of this world?

In the rest of this book, we will see that the Catholic Faith is a whole way of life. The various aspects of the Faith—Jesus, the Bible, the Church, the saints, the sacraments, morality, and prayer—are not just religious ideas or abstract doctrines. They have everything to do with our day-to-day life. They are all about our encounter with the God who is love. And they help us live more deeply with him at the center of our lives. Think of all the facets of the Catholic Faith as lights guiding us on the path to personal fulfillment, the path that leads us to God—the triune God, in whom alone our hearts find rest.