

Because we need clear, unequivocal signs that cause what they signify.

The waters of Baptism, the oil of Confirmation, the bread of the Eucharist have the power to save, a power given to them by Christ himself and a power not given to nature in general or even to those same created things apart from the action of the Church. Salvation is sacramental (CCC 1076), this point subtly but beautifully stressed in the Gospel of John as we read of the blood and water flowing from the Savior's wounded side (Jn 20:34). The Church reminds us on the Solemnity of the Sacred Heart that this was "the fountain of sacramental life in the Church" (Preface), symbolizing the gifts of Baptism and Eucharist.

To have a valid celebration of a sacrament, one must have: a validly ordained minister who intends to do what the Church intends, a believer, and the correct matter and form of the rite (CCC 1128). These prerequisites are not designed to make difficult a sacramental encounter but rather to ensure its occurrence. The Church is the custodian of the sacraments, (CCC 1118), just as she is the custodian of the Scriptures. She guards them carefully for the sake of her members, so that access to Christ will be possible in every age and at every moment.

### **Word and Sacrament Complement Each Other**

Catholics have traditionally had a very highly developed sacramental sense, while Protestants have tended to stress the importance of the Bible. These emphases are not antagonistic to each other or mutually exclusive. In fact, they are complementary. From historical documents, we know that Luther defined the Church as that place where the Word of God is preached and the sacraments duly administered. We also know that for all its emphasis on the sacraments, the Council of Trent likewise called for a renewal of

Catholic preaching. Vatican II, without apology, asserted that Catholics have always revered the Sacred Scriptures as they have the Lord's Body (CCC 103). Just as the Word became flesh in the Incarnation, so too a celebration of God's Word necessarily leads us to its "enfleshment" in a sacramental rite (CCC 1153-55).

Other Christians are beginning to accept this sacramentality of ours as the uniquely Catholic contribution to the ecumenical movement. There is cause for rejoicing here because the sacraments can now be a source of unity rather than division.

The sacraments are signs of the inbreaking of God's kingdom (cf. CCC 1107). Eastern Christian theology has always regarded the liturgy as an experience of heaven on earth; Vatican II referred to it as "a foretaste of the heavenly liturgy". The sacraments are the helps offered to God's people as they make their journey home to the Father, as individuals and as a community.

The sacramental encounters with Christ now point toward that eternal encounter in which there will be no need of sacraments because God will be "all in all" (Col 3:11). Until that day, though, we celebrate the sacraments, thanking God for those rites that proclaim so clearly, so dramatically, and so beautifully that our God is involved and that he cares.

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# **The Sacraments**

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## ***Jesus Christ Is the First and Greatest Sacrament***

"God looked at everything he had made, and he found it very good" (Gen 1:31; CCC 339). This realization provides the basis for the Church's insistence on a sacramental view of life.

From her earliest beginnings, and at fairly regular intervals since, the Church has had to do battle against those who despise the material universe or those who wish to reduce the Church's mission to the level of the verbal or spiritual. Catholicism, however, true to its Jewish roots, looks upon man as a unified whole, in whom the material and the spiritual are so ordered that the individual is led to God (CCC 362-68).

The author of Psalm 19 knew this well in singing: "The heavens declare the glory of God, and the firmament proclaims his handiwork." Creation, then, is a sign of divine love and providence, something to be appreciated and used (Gen 1:24).

Throughout history, in every culture and religious experience, we find man making symbols and ritualizing the crucial aspects of his life (CCC 1146). It is in this sense that one can say that liturgy is natural to man. Since Christianity is an incarnational religion, it takes the multidimensional person seriously and thus offers a sacramental system whereby the physical leads the believer to know in the deepest sense, the One who is spiritual (CCC 1076).

For the Christian, Jesus is the first and greatest sacrament (CCC 774) or sign man has ever received. He is the definitive sign of God's love for us and his last Word (Heb 1:1; CCC 65). In Christ are united both Word and Sacrament, and it is thus that the Church accepts this

paradigm for her own life. The Church herself is a sacrament of God's nearness to men and of his desire to save them (CCC 774-76). The sacramentality of the Church, rediscovered at Vatican II and proclaimed in *Lumen gentium*, provides the necessary linkage for the Church's seven sacraments: Jesus served as a Sign of the father; the Church is to be a sacrament of Christ in the world today; the seven sacraments give concrete expression to the Church's continuation of Christ's saving work among men (CCC 1099).

When we seek a definition of a sacrament, no better definition can be found than the one we learned in the Baltimore Catechism that "a sacrament is an outward sign, instituted by Christ to give grace" (CCC 1084, 1127, 1131).

This paragraph does need analysis, however.

When we speak of a sacrament as "an outward sign", we refer to the sensate nature of the human person, already described and alluded to in the opening lines of 1 John. In the natural order, certain phenomena carry automatic messages, though sometimes ambivalent messages. Rain can be welcome or unwelcome, depending on whether we are in the midst of a drought or a flood. A fire can signify warmth or destruction. In the supernatural order water, bread, wine, or oil always carries a clear and consistent message of salvation.

### **A Sign and a Symbol of a Deeper Reality**

These signs, taken from the realm of human experience, transcend themselves when introduced into the Church's sacramental system (CCC 1145-55). Like the union of the human and divine natures in Christ, nature and "supernature" combine to produce a sign and a symbol of a deeper reality. Trained in the school of the Church and seen with the eyes of faith, the sons and daughters of the Church are able to go beyond the ordinary in human experience to gain glimpse of the divine.

An intelligent and truly Catholic understanding of the sacraments as "instituted by Christ" needs to avoid two extremes.

The first is a rather naïve and biblically indefensible position that holds that our Lord during his earthly life established each of the seven sacraments with their precise matter and form.

The second is a rationalistic approach that proposes that the Church's sacramental system is a mere ecclesiastical invention only remotely connected to the will of the Church's Founder. A nuanced appreciation of the sacraments requires the realization that Christ the Lord established his Church, gave his life for her, and willed that the life-giving benefits of his passion, death, and resurrection be extended to all people of all time (CCC 1114-16).

Jesus wishes to touch our lives at all the critical points in concrete sacramental ways—just as he did during his earthly ministry. The Church, faithful to the Lord's commands, continues her saving work through the sacramental signs (CCC 774). These rites have been adapted over the centuries, so that their salvific message may be better comprehended by the peoples of varying cultures and times. This kind of development steers the middle course between the two extremes, accounting for legitimate variations and yet opting for a sense of tradition that is faithful to the will of Christ (CCC 1204-9).

### **The Sacraments "Give Grace"**

But what is grace? In the past, many thought of grace as a quantifiable object, so that one spoke of gaining "more grace". Without stooping to caricature, it would not be unfair to say that some Catholics have regarded the Church and the sacraments as some kind of spiritual "filling station". A far better view of grace is one that sees it as a relationship between the individual believer and Christ (CCC 2003). Thus, an increase in grace means a growth in one's relationship with the Lord. This type of explanation of sacramental life, interestingly enough, finds a very sympathetic

hearing among many evangelical Protestants, who are so intent on the personal dimension of Christian life and faith.

How is grace obtained? Through a process of divine-human encounter and divine-human cooperation (CCC 2002). An analogy with the Incarnation might be helpful. When God sought a home among the human family, he approached the Blessed Virgin (the encounter) with his plan. As Mother Teresa says, she "gave God permission" (cooperation).

Catholic theology has always explained the operation of grace in the sacraments in exactly the same way. In every sacramental encounter, God takes the initiative by making the offer of grace (*ex opere operato*; cf. CCC 1128); the believer accepts the offer and opens himself up to the intervention of the divine (*ex opere operantis*). To hold both aspects in a healthy tension is necessary to avoid both a "magical" view of sacraments and one that places the human response above the divine call.

### **The Focus of Our Attention in the Sacraments**

Vatican II's *Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy* emphasized a point frequently neglected or forgotten in regard to the celebration of the sacraments, namely, that it is Christ who is active in the administration and reception of each sacrament.

Each sacrament is an action of Christ and an extension of his Paschal Mystery offered to the believer in the here and now. It is not the priest, not the individual, and not even the Church that is the focus of our attention, but Jesus himself. Priest, individual, and Church draw their meaning from Christ and are instruments and/or beneficiaries of his redemptive sacrifice—an important reminder in this day of personality cults (CCC 127-28).

If all reality is sacramental, as I have suggested, then why bother with the sacraments?