

Topic 20: The Sacraments

The sacraments are efficacious signs of grace. Sanctifying grace is a stable and supernatural disposition that perfects the soul to make it capable of living with God. The seven sacraments correspond to all the stages and important moments of each Christian's life: the sacraments give birth and increase, healing and mission to the Christian's life of faith. They form an ordered whole, in which the Eucharist is at the centre, since it contains the Author of the sacraments.

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“The whole liturgical life of the Church revolves around the Eucharistic sacrifice and the sacraments. There are seven sacraments in the Church: Baptism, Confirmation or Chrismation, Eucharist, Penance, Anointing of the Sick, Holy Orders and Matrimony.”^[1]

1. The Paschal Mystery and the Sacraments

Christ’s resurrection forms a unity with his death on the Cross. Just as through Christ’s passion and death God eliminated sin and reconciled the world to Himself, so through Jesus’ resurrection God inaugurated new life, the life of the world to come, and made it available to all men and women. Through the gift of the Holy Spirit, our Lord enables us

to share in the new life of his resurrection. The paschal mystery is thus a central element of our faith. It is always the first proclamation of every apostle: “Jesus Christ loves you; he gave his life to save you; and now he is living at your side every day to enlighten, strengthen and free you.”^[2] This is the first proclamation, because it is the most important proclamation, the one that needs to be heard again and again in various ways and that must always be proclaimed again in one way or another.

This work of salvation that we proclaim is not relegated to the past, for “when his Hour comes, [Christ] lives out the unique event of history which does not pass away: Jesus dies, is buried, rises from the dead, and is seated at the right hand of the Father ‘once for all.’ His Paschal mystery is a real event that occurred in our history, but it is unique: all other

historical events happen once, and then they pass away, swallowed up in the past. The Paschal mystery of Christ, by contrast, cannot remain only in the past, because by his death he destroyed death, and all that Christ is – all that he did and suffered for all men – participates in the divine eternity, and so transcends all times while being made present in them all. The event of the Cross and Resurrection abides and draws everything toward life.”^[3] —

At the same time, the paschal mystery is so decisive that Jesus returned to the Father “only after he had left us a means of sharing in it as if we had been present there. Each member of the faithful can thus take part in it and inexhaustibly gain its fruits.”^[4] This means is the sacred Liturgy: especially the Eucharistic sacrifice and the sacraments.^[5] —

As the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* reminds us: “Seated at the right hand of the Father and pouring out the Holy Spirit on his Body, which is the Church, Christ now acts through the sacraments he instituted to communicate his grace.”^[6] The sacraments are “powers that comes forth’ from the Body of Christ, which is ever-living and life-giving. They are actions of the Holy Spirit at work in his Body, the Church. They are ‘the masterworks of God’ in the new and everlasting covenant.”^[7]

The Church proclaims and celebrates in her liturgy the Mystery of Christ so that the faithful may live by it and bear witness to it in the world. “From the first community of Jerusalem until the Parousia, it is the same Paschal mystery that the Churches of God, faithful to the apostolic faith, celebrate in every place. The mystery celebrated in the liturgy is one, but

the forms of its celebration are diverse.”^[8]

The Mystery of Christ is so unfathomably rich that it cannot be exhausted by its expression in any single liturgical tradition. The history of the development of these rites witnesses to a remarkable complementarity.^[9] With regard to the celebration of each of the sacraments, we can see how “the Churches of the same geographical and cultural area came to celebrate the Mystery of Christ through particular expressions characterized by the culture.”^[10]

2. Nature of the sacraments

“There are seven sacraments in the Church: Baptism, Confirmation or Chrismation, Eucharist, Penance, Anointing of the Sick, Priestly Ordination and Matrimony.”^[11] “The seven sacraments touch all the stages

and all the important moments of Christian life: they give birth and increase, healing and mission to the Christian's life of faith. There is thus a certain resemblance between the stages of natural life and the stages of the spiritual life.”^[12] They form an ordered whole, with the Eucharist at the centre, since it contains the Author Himself of the sacraments.^[13]

The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* gives a definition of the sacraments: “The sacraments are efficacious signs of grace, instituted by Christ and entrusted to the Church, by which divine life is dispensed to us. The visible rites by which the sacraments are celebrated signify and make present the graces proper to each sacrament.”^[14] Thus “the sacraments are perceptible signs (words and actions) accessible to our human nature.”^[15]

If we ask ourselves what the sacraments are a sign of, we can say that they are a sign of three elements: of the *sanctifying cause*, which is the Death and Resurrection of Christ; of the *sanctifying effect* or grace; and of the *goal* of sanctification, which is eternal glory. “The sacrament is a sign that recalls what happened, that is, the Passion of Christ; it is a sign that demonstrates the effect of Christ’s passion in us, that is, grace; and it is a sign that anticipates, that is, that foretells the glory to come.”^[16]

The sacramental sign, proper to each sacrament, is made up of material elements (water, oil, bread, wine) and human gestures (ablution, anointing, laying on of hands, etc.), which are called the *matter*; and also of words pronounced by the minister of the sacrament, which are the *form*. As the *Catechism* states, “a sacramental celebration is a meeting

of God's children with their Father, in Christ and the Holy Spirit; this meeting takes the form of a dialogue, through actions and words.”^[17]

Moreover, the liturgy of the sacraments contains an unchangeable part (what Christ himself established about the sacramental sign), and parts which the Church can change, for the good of the faithful and the greater veneration of the sacraments, adapting them to circumstances of place and time. It should not be forgotten that “no sacramental rite can be modified or manipulated at the will of the minister or the community. Even the supreme authority in the Church may not change the liturgy arbitrarily, but only in the obedience of faith and with religious respect for the mystery of the liturgy.”^[18]

3. The sacraments and grace

“Our justification comes from the grace of God. Grace is favor, the free and undeserved help that God gives us to respond to his call to become children of God, adoptive sons, partakers of the divine nature and of eternal life. Grace is a participation in the life of God. It introduces us into the intimacy of the Trinitarian life: by Baptism the Christian participates in the grace of Christ, the Head of his Body. As an ‘adopted son’ he can henceforth call God ‘Father,’ in union with the only Son. He receives the life of the Spirit who breathes charity into him and who forms the Church.”^[19] Hence, the baptised “have passed from death to life,” from remoteness from God to the grace of justification, to divine sonship. We are beloved children of God by the power of Christ’s Paschal mystery, of his death and resurrection.

The grace we receive “is the gratuitous gift that God makes to us of his own life, infused by the Holy Spirit into our soul to heal it of sin and to sanctify it. It is the sanctifying or deifying grace received in Baptism.”^[20] As the *Catechism* states, “sanctifying grace is an habitual gift, a stable and supernatural disposition that perfects the soul itself to enable it to live with God, to act by his love.”^[21]

All the sacraments confer sanctifying grace on those who do not hinder it. This grace is “the gift of the Spirit who justifies and sanctifies us.”^[22] In addition, the sacraments confer sacramental grace, which is the grace “proper to each sacrament”:^[23] a specific divine help to achieve the end of that sacrament.

We receive not only sanctifying grace, but the Holy Spirit himself; in fact, “grace is first and foremost the

gift of the Spirit who justifies and sanctifies us.”^[24] Hence we can say that “through the Church's sacraments, Christ communicates his Holy and sanctifying Spirit to the members of his Body.”^[25] Thus the fruit of the sacramental life is that the Holy Spirit deifies the faithful by uniting them vitally to Christ.^[26]

The three sacraments of Baptism, Confirmation and Holy Orders confer, in addition to grace, the so-called sacramental character, which is an indelible spiritual seal impressed on the soul, by which the Christian participates in the priesthood of Christ and forms part of the Church according to different states and functions. The sacramental character remains forever in the soul as a positive disposition to grace, as a pledge and guarantee of divine protection, and as a vocation to divine worship and the service of the Church. Therefore,

these three sacraments cannot be repeated.^[27]

The sacraments that Christ entrusted to his Church are necessary – at least their desire – for salvation, for attaining sanctifying grace. And none of them is superfluous, even if not all are necessary for every person.

4. Effectiveness of the sacraments

The sacraments “are efficacious because in them Christ himself is at work: it is he who baptizes, he who acts in his sacraments in order to communicate the grace that each sacrament signifies.”^[28] The sacraments “efficaciously realise the grace they signify by virtue of the action of Christ and by the power of the Holy Spirit.”^[29]

The sacramental effect is produced *ex opere operato* (by the very fact

that the sacramental sign is realised). That is to say, the sacrament does not act by virtue of the righteousness of the man who gives or receives it, but by the power of God. “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.”^[30]

The person who performs the sacrament places himself at the service of Christ and the Church, and is therefore called the minister of the sacrament; and he cannot be indiscriminately any Christian faithful, but ordinarily needs the special configuration to Christ the Priest which the sacrament of Holy Orders gives.

The effectiveness of the sacraments stems from Christ himself, who acts in them. “Nevertheless, the fruits of

the sacraments also depend on the disposition of the one who receives them.”^[31] The better each one’s dispositions of faith, conversion of heart and adherence to the will of God, the more abundant are the effects of grace that person receives.

“Holy Mother Church has also instituted sacramentals. These are sacred signs by which, imitating the sacraments in some way, effects, especially spiritual ones, obtained through the intercession of the Church, are expressed. By them men are prepared to receive the principal effect of the sacraments and the various circumstances of life are sanctified. They do not confer the grace of the Holy Spirit in the manner of the sacraments, but by the prayer of the Church they prepare to receive it and dispose them to cooperate with it.”^[32] Among the sacramentals, blessings (of persons,

of the table, of objects, of places) are in the first place.

Basic bibliography

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1667-1671.

Saint John Paul II, *Ecclesia de
Eucharistia*, 2-5.

^[1] *Catechism of the Catholic Church*,
1113.

^[2] Pope Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium*,
164.

^[3] *Catechism*, 1085.

^[4] Saint John Paul II, *Ecclesia de Eucharistia*, 11.

^[5] Cf. Second Vatican Council, *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, 6.

^[6] *Catechism*, 1084.

^[7] *Catechism*, 1116.

^[8] *Catechism*, 1200.

^[9] Cf. *Catechism*, 1201.

^[10] *Catechism*, 1202.

^[11] *Catechism*, 1113.

^[12] *Catechism*, 1210.

^[13] Cf. *Catechism*, 1211.

^[14] *Catechism*, 1131.

^[15] *Catechism*, 1084.

^[16] Saint Thomas Aquinas, *S.Th*, III, q. 60, a.3; cf. *Catechism*, 1130.

^[17] *Catechism*, 1153.

^[18] *Catechism*, 1125.

^[19] *Catechism*, 1996-1197.

^[20] *Catechism*, 1999.

^[21] *Catechism*, 2000.

^[22] *Catechism*, 2003.

^[23] *Catechism*, 1129.

^[24] *Catechism*, 2003.

^[25] *Catechism*, 739.

^[26] Cf. *Catechism*, 1129.

^[27] Cf. *Catechism*, 1121.

^[28] *Catechism*, 1127.

^[29] *Catechism*, 1997.

[30] *Catechism*, 1128.

[31] *Idem*.

[32] *Catechism*, 1670.

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