

SACRAMENTAL THEOLOGY

In a manner of speaking, sacraments can be called "the complete package." In sports, the phrase "the complete package" refers to a person who can do it all. If he is a basketball player, he can run, shoot from all locations on the floor, score, and rebound.

Sacraments are the complete package spiritually. They do it all for us. They bring us into God's love in Baptism and feed us with the Eucharist. When we soil ourselves with sin, Reconciliation removes the dirt. Confirmation gives us additional strength for life's big battles. In Holy Orders and Matrimony, we are supported by God's grace in our choice of vocation, and at the end of life, the Anointing of the Sick sees us safely home to God's presence. Sacraments really are "the complete package."

The Sacraments: While on earth, Christ instituted the sacraments to enable us to share his divine life and to assist us in reaching our heavenly home. The sacraments are efficacious signs of grace instituted by Christ and entrusted to the Church, by which divine life is dispensed to us. (CCC, 1131)

There are seven sacraments: Baptism, Confirmation, the Eucharist, Reconciliation, the Anointing of the Sick, Holy Orders, and Matrimony. These signs are effective because Christ works through them. We see the visible actions of the minister, but it is Christ who accomplishes the sacramental action. The visible rite of each sacrament makes present the particular graces conferred by the sacrament and accomplishes much through the cooperation of those who receive it with the proper attitude. Each sacrament in its own way enables us to serve God as he intended, while supplying us with grace to help us accomplish his plan for our salvation and the salvation of others. The word sacrament is derived from the Latin word *sacramentum*, the initiation oath of soldiers into the Roman army. Thus, we may say sacraments are our initiation rites into the mysteries of the Church. St. Isadore thought the word meant something hidden or secret. Others believe it was synonymous with the Greek word *mysterion*, meaning mystery. It is used to describe something holy or sacred, which sanctifies man to accomplish a mission.

The purpose of the sacraments is to sanctify men, to build up the body of Christ, and finally, to give worship to God. Because they are signs, they also instruct. They not only presuppose faith, but by words and objects they also nourish, strengthen, and express it. That is why they are called 'sacraments of faith.'" 1 (CCC, 1123)

Jesus' words and actions during his public life were saving, for they anticipated the power of his death and Resurrection on Easter. The Gospels record his institution of the Church and sacraments in his saving acts directed to men. They reveal in a particular way the special relationship between the sacraments and Christ's Incarnation, Passion, and Church. Since the source of our salvation is the Crucifixion, all the effects of the sacraments flow from this act.

Sacraments are "powers that come 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. (CCC, 1116)

When we think of the Church, our first thought is usually of our participation in the sacraments. By the action of Christ, each sacrament gives a particular sacramental grace from the Holy Spirit. These graces enable their recipient to cooperate with the plan of God.

The sacraments are associated with three divine calls:

- A call to personal holiness. Baptism calls each recipient to a life of personal holiness to accomplish a mission known to God, which will be worked out over a lifetime.
- A call to worship. A crucial aspect of this call is to worship God as his Church indicates, in order to acquire the graces necessary to accomplish this call.
- A call to a correct moral attitude. The moral teachings of the Church instruct the baptized about the will of Christ concerning their moral choices.

Guided by the Holy Spirit, the Church recognizes the sacraments as treasures that Christ gave to his Church. They unite us to God, particularly in our union with Jesus through the Eucharist. This is a mystical union of Christ with his Body, the Church, to which we are joined in loving communion through Baptism.

Signs of God's Power: The Church was instituted by Christ to confer the graces he wishes to give us, so it is proper to call the Church a sacrament. The Church is the inheritor and guarantor of our eternal life. The Church is the sacramental key that opens the door to all the other sacraments.

Christ could have chosen to apply the benefits of his life, death, and resurrection in any number of ways. Since he is the God who made us sensible creatures, he chose sensible ways and gave us a visible Church and visible sacraments. Sacramental signs are visible realities that point to what is occurring spiritually through the

sacraments. A sacrament is a sign of a sacred act or thing. That is to say, the sacraments bring about what they signify from the actions of Christ. They are the only signs that cause what they signify; all other signs merely point to something else but do not cause anything. Smoke, for example, is a sign of a fire, but it is not the cause. The signs of the sacraments cause the resulting interior action. The act of circumcision in the Old Law was a sign of the Jewish people's invisible covenant between themselves and God.

The signs of each sacrament indicate the New Covenant between God and man and direct us to the inner reality of the change in our souls through the effective action of Christ. For instance, the water of Baptism removes our sins, both original and actual sin, if present. The exterior sign of water that we see points to the interior cleansing of our souls, which we cannot see.

The ritual use of a certain thing (such as water, bread, and wine) in the liturgical action is the sign, not the thing used in itself. It is Jesus who has both given us the ritual action and designated the particular sign. Every sacramental action of the New Law is composed of sensible actions, objects, and words. The words are called the form of the sacrament and the actions or objects the matter. Together they make up the substance of the sacrament.

Necessity Of The Sacraments: Before Adam sinned, there was no need for the sacraments. After Adam's sin, God determined that sacraments were the best and wisest means for us to attain our salvation. God chose the sacraments because of:

- Man's nature - Divine wisdom gives sensible signs to appeal to the human nature of man.
- Man's sinfulness - They apply a spiritual remedy for sin through sensible signs.
- Man's inclinations - They apply sensible sanctified signs to enable man to avoid superstitious practices.

The action of Christ operates to accomplish what the sacrament signifies independently of the personal holiness of the minister. God's power acts through the agency of man. For us believers, sacraments are a necessary component of our salvation; they indicate that this sacred thing sanctifies man here and now. Sacraments also have social value, for they enable us to live in community with charity toward all while binding every member of the community to one another to the extent that each cooperates with them.

Sacraments also set us aside as worshippers of the true God. They call us to manifest the truth of God's commands by our acceptance and response to his call to be witnesses to others.

God's Grace: Each sacrament confers graces upon us, for the sacramental action confers grace of itself, as long as the recipient places no obstacles in the way. The first grace we receive is sanctifying grace, which is conferred by every sacrament. While God has given us human life through our parents, he also gives us a share in his own divine life through the sacraments. This divine life is so different that St. Paul refers to it as "a new creation."

This sanctifying grace is a supernatural reality, which enables us to share in God's life, to become temples of the Trinity, adopted sons and friends of God, and heirs to heaven, able to perform acts that will merit us eternal life in heaven. It gives us a share in God's own divine life. This is a great mystery, over which we should pray for understanding.

In no sense do we deserve this freely given gift of God. Without his grace, we would live a purely natural level of life, bound to earth with no direct connection to God. When we are baptized, we are connected directly to God. Since his life is above and beyond ours, we say that we share in his supernatural life, a life above and beyond that lived by man in his simply human existence. This share in God's life enables us to accomplish things beyond the capacity of natural human beings. For almost two thousand years, the Church has witnessed to the accomplishments of saints who lived and died for Christ.

The lives of saints are heroic, for they serve Christ by bringing his love and life to every place in the world, regardless of conditions or hardships. When God created Adam and Eve, he made a covenant with them that made them his friends and gave them the power to choose, free of any inclination to sin. Because they chose to disobey him, they lost this friendship and the ability to make choices free from inclination to sin.

From their first disobedience, we have inherited original sin and its consequence, our inclination to actual sin. Few people in this world wish to do evil or to be evil people. All of us often do evil when we wish we wouldn't. We have all shared the experience of St. Paul, who said, "I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I do" (Rom 7:19).

Through the actual graces we receive from Jesus' life, death, and Resurrection, we are enabled to fight the temptation to sin. God has given us both the gift of new life in him and the gift of actual grace to enable us to live this new life. Actual grace is supernatural help from God to do good and avoid evil for the purpose of saving our souls.

Actual grace is given to us every time God wishes us to do a good work or we are tempted to sin. This freely given grace does not force us to choose good over evil; rather, it enables us to see what God wishes us to do, so that we may make the right moral choice. It has been compared to a gentle breeze, which blows away the fog on a dark night to enable a person to see the safe way to go.

When temptations occur, some say, "I don't want to be a goody two-shoes." This attitude denies our serious responsibility to choose between sinning and returning God's freely given love to us through cooperation with his grace. Every temptation presents an opportunity to demonstrate our love for God. We succeed in the service of God only by opening our actions to God's grace.

Sacramental Characters: Three of the sacraments imprint a perpetual character or mark on the soul, which distinguishes the followers of Christ from others. This indelible mark is imprinted on the soul in the sacraments of Baptism, Confirmation, and Holy Orders, which can each be received only once. When we arrive in heaven, we will be able to distinguish those who received these permanent signs from those who did not.

This character or sign:

- Configures us to Christ;
- Distinguishes us perpetually from those who do not have the sign;
- Disposes us to cooperate with grace.

Ministers Of The Sacraments: Christ in his human nature is both the principal minister of God in the institution of the sacraments and the principal minister of the sacraments. He employs secondary, visible ministers in their accomplishment, for he wishes to associate men with the fulfillment of his work. Baptism and Matrimony do not require an ordained man to administer them, but all the other sacraments do. To confer a Christian sacrament, the minister must intend the sacramental result while using the correct form and proper matter.

Since the minister acts in the name of Christ and Christ's Church, he must not be in mortal sin, for he is doing the sacred work of God. But if the minister is in the state of mortal sin the sacrament is not thereby rendered invalid, but illicit for him. Baptism and Reconciliation do not require their recipients to be free from mortal sin, but the other five sacraments do.

New Creatures In Christ: Unfortunately, many people have recourse to the sacraments only when they are culturally expected, such as Baptism for an infant, or absolutely necessary, such as Reconciliation for someone in a state of mortal

sin. To accept this situation is to accept a life lived to the minimum. Sacraments are much more than this.

Sacraments enable us to be Christ to others. Regular reception of the sacraments graces us to become more like Christ in word and action. Often we hear someone say, "I don't like that person's personality." Personality is the word used to describe our social traits, yet our social traits are reflections of the condition of our souls. Regular reception of the sacraments graces us to become more like Christ inwardly. As we become more holy inwardly, there is an outward manifestation of our interior goodness, which affects our personality.

In recent history, Mother Teresa of India is an excellent example of this sacramental personalism. She gave up her life as a teacher to minister to the poorest of the poor. To all outward appearances, nothing distinguished her from any other woman. Yet, she was one of the best-known people in the entire world. People were attracted to her because she had become Christ-like through a life dedicated to living the sacraments and responding to the initiative of grace. Jesus' call to us in the sacraments is a call to become new creations, who reflect the image of Christ in our being.

Practical Exercises

1. A Lutheran friend tells you that in her church they only have three sacraments (Baptism, Eucharist, and Confirmation). Where can you look in the Bible to help show her that Jesus instituted four other Sacraments? You may also want to use other writings from the early Church Fathers (try *The Writings of the Early Fathers* by William Jurgens).
2. You have another friend who attends non-denominational Christian services. He says all he wants is a personal relationship with Jesus. He claims that Jesus is the only Mediator between God and men, and that he doesn't need a priest to be close to Jesus. How can you use the Bible to help your friend see that Jesus intended us to be helped by others, beginning with his apostles? How can you help your friend see that Jesus gave us the gifts of the Sacraments so that we could have a personal relationship with him?
3. Our God never says "Enough!" If we only need God's sanctifying grace to get into heaven, why does he also give us actual grace in the sacraments?