

SACRAMENTAL THEOLOGY

Intro 2

"For as often as you eat this bread and drink this cup, you proclaim the death of the Lord until he comes." St. Augustine, the famous theologian and Church Father, was walking along the seashore trying to figure out the mystery of the Blessed Trinity. "How could there be one God and yet three distinct persons?" he was said to ponder.

Augustine was so engrossed in meditation and thought that he nearly trampled a little boy who was sitting near the shore in the wet sand, pouring a pail of water into a hole he had dug into the sand. Augustine stopped to chat with the boy. "What are you doing?" he asked. "I'm going to empty the ocean into this hole," the boy replied. Augustine laughed. "You'll never get the whole ocean into that little hole!" he said. The little boy stood up and looked directly at Augustine. "And you, sir," he said, "will never put the whole mystery of the Trinity into your little mind." Then the boy disappeared.

God and his plan for our lives are much too awesome to fit into human-size brains, but God does not want us to remain in ignorance of him or his plan for our salvation. Our own desire for God - and the accompanying mystery of God's plan for our salvation - is written in our hearts. God has created us with faculties capable of coming to a knowledge and existence of him. But in order for us to enter into real intimacy with God, he must reveal himself to us and give us the grace to be able to welcome and understand that revelation in faith.

God's revelation to mankind has been established in several stages. The works of God in the Old Testament set the stage for Christ who completed the work of salvation and gave perfect glory to God. Jesus accomplished this work principally through his passion, death, resurrection from the dead, and his ascension into heaven. These events of our salvation are known as the Paschal mystery. The Paschal mystery has two key aspects, as the Catechism of the Catholic Church teaches:

- First, by his death, Christ liberates us from sin
- Second, by his Resurrection, Christ opens for us the way to a new life. This new life is justification {hat reinstates in us God's grace. It is the source of our own future resurrection (654).

Our new life is here now. At Pentecost, a new era of God's revelation has begun—the age of the Church. In this age, Christ now lives and acts in and with the Church. In the sacramental liturgy, the Church proclaims and celebrates the Paschal mystery through which the Lord saves us.

Liturgy, itself, is a word that traditionally meant "public work" or "people's work." Today, it refers to the people's participation through prayer and worship in "the work of God." The entire liturgical life of the Church revolves around the Eucharistic sacrifice and the other sacraments.

What Are Sacraments: You may have received the sacraments of initiation and the sacrament of Penance or Reconciliation. But how much of your understanding of the sacraments is relegated to only the immediate preparation you received as a young child?

What are the sacraments? The Catechism of the Catholic Church offers a definition that will serve us as we work through an exposition of each of the individual sacraments. The sacraments are:

- "powers that come forth" from the Body of Christ, which is ever-living and life-giving;
- actions of the Holy Spirit at work in his Body, the Church;
- "the masterworks of God" in the new and everlasting covenant.

The seven sacraments are all instituted by Jesus Christ. The mysteries of Christ's life are the foundation for what he would later dispense in the sacraments, through the ministers of the Church. What was visible in the life of Christ on earth has now passed on through the Holy Spirit to his Church.

The sacraments make visible the mystery of God's love for us. It is easy to see how Jesus did that. Jesus is God-made-flesh. The Incarnation is the primary sacrament of our salvation. The Father has spoken his Word in the visible form of Jesus.

The Church, too, is a sacrament because it continues Jesus' work of salvation. Jesus acts through the sacraments in what is called the "sacramental economy," the sharing of the fruits of Christ's Paschal mystery in the celebration of the sacraments. This, too, is how you participate in the sacramental life. You have a sacramental vocation to be an authentic sign of God's love. The Church's faith precedes and nourishes your faith. Through the grace of the sacraments you are called by the Lord to witness to him and to live his message, and to live a grace-filled life that attracts others to the gospel. As Catholics, this is our call until the Lord comes again.