

SACRAMENTAL THEOLOGY

What are sacraments?

- Tangible signs that combine narrative and ritual action that reveal God to us.

What are our sources of knowledge for sacraments?

- Scripture and Tradition

How do Catholics understand the sacraments?

- As symbols and sources of grace

The Famous Definition of Sacrament

- Threefold: "A sacrament is a visible sign, instituted by Christ, to give grace."
- Visible Sign
- Instituted by Christ
- Gives Grace

Visible Sign

- An action is performed by a minister (usually a priest).
- For example, when a baby is baptized in the church the priest pours water over its head and at the same time says the words "I baptize you in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit."
- That is a visible sign.

Instituted by Christ

- Jesus Christ instructed His church to offer the seven sacraments to His followers.
- For example, His directive to His disciples in Matt 28:19: "Go then, to all peoples everywhere and make them my disciples; baptize them in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit and teach them to obey everything I have commanded you."

Gives Grace

- At the risk of over simplifying something that is very complex, we could describe grace as God's free gift of God's self as the controlling influence in our life and the decisions we make once we have committed ourselves to God in faith.
- The sacraments deal with the holy signs which Christ instituted as the vehicles of His grace.

More on Meaning

- The word "sacrament" can be traced to the Latin "sacrare," meaning "to make sacred."
- The Second Vatican Council in the 1960s stated that the purpose of the sacraments is "to sanctify [people], to build up the body of Christ, and finally, to give worship to God."

Sources of Knowledge of Sacraments

- Scripture
- Tradition

Scripture and Sacraments

- The Bible introduces us to a long tradition of sacramental activity.
- The Hebrew Scriptures do not use any term that we would translate "sacrament," but they describe acts of worship based on symbolism.
- The most important of these is the Passover celebration, but there are many others.
- In the New Testament Jesus built on these existing traditions of worship, as well as on the stories and imagery of the Scriptures in his actions and in his teachings.
- The sacraments we celebrate today are all developed from these actions and teachings of Jesus.

Tradition and Sacraments

- The sacraments are community prayer, reflecting and deepening one's personal relationship with the Lord.
- The Tradition of all believers is carried through the life of the Church and thereby informing and effecting the living and dynamic faith with which we share.

Example: Tradition and the Sacrament of Eucharist

- St. Augustine expresses well the living tradition of the Church when he says: "It is your sacrament that is placed on the table of the Lord; it is your sacrament that you receive....You hear the words, 'the Body of Christ,' and respond 'Amen.' Be then a member of the Body of Christ that your Amen may be true."

The Key Question

- How does the invisible God, who is spirit, become visible and tangible in our world of space and time?
- This is the question that the theology of sacramentality is concerned with.
- This is the question that, once answered, enables Catholics to understand, to some extent, the mystery of the sacraments.

Vatican II's New Emphasis

- Prior to Vatican II, the sacraments were often understood in a mechanistic way that enabled God's grace for the recipient.
- Since V II, the sacraments are understood to manifest the presence of Christ in the human situation in which Christians accept and respond to that process.

The Sacramental Principle

- A profound sense that the invisible divine presence is disclosed through created realities that function as signs of revelation.
- So, these signs are not arbitrary signs that signify a divine reality.
- The sacraments are signs which not only signify sanctification but also effect it.

As Sources of Grace

- St. Thomas Aquinas, who called the sacraments "spiritual medicine," said that we need them to be saved from sin and to remind us not to focus just on material things, but also on the spiritual.
- Sacraments are also the main way we pursue friendship with God.
- Christ instituted the sacraments to give us the grace we need to reach heaven.

Matter and Form of Sacraments

- The matter of the sacraments refers to the sensible reality used to effect grace.
- Sensible reality is the means through which human beings know the world.
- E.g. the water of baptism, the oil of anointing, the bride and groom of marriage
- The form of the sacraments refers to the words of institution, the ritual action, and the right intention which accompany the encounter.
- Both of those things need to be present and followed for the sacrament to have any effect.

Presence of the Holy Spirit

- While there are the seven acknowledged sacraments of the Roman Catholic Church, it is also recognized that a sacrament is received at any time a person is made to know that he/she is in the presence of God or the Holy Spirit.
- The seven sacraments are acknowledged as such because it is believed that at these specific times the Holy Spirit is present during these rites.