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SACRAMENTS: IT ALL STARTS WITH JESUS



The sacraments allow us to become conscious and aware of God's greatest gift: the creative, sustaining, loving presence of God.

by Thomas Richstatter, OFM

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Since the Second Vatican Council, Catholics have experienced some rather dramatic changes in the way we celebrate the sacraments. Think, for example, of the way your parish celebrates Sunday Mass now as compared to when our parents and grandparents did. It is normal that when the way we celebrate the sacraments changes, so does the way we talk about them.

We can better understand the changes in the way sacraments are celebrated when we examine the new outlook on sacrament held by those scholars and bishops who revised our sacramental rites. Grasping this new sacramental theology may make us more comfortable with the changes in the sacramental celebrations.

If there is anything we can say about the sacraments it is this: they start with Jesus.

IT ALL STARTS WITH JESUS

The loving God who made us wants to be present to us. Lovers want to be together. God knows how hard it is for us to love someone we cannot see or touch. And so the invisible God took flesh and came among us and was seen in human likeness. Central to the mystery of Christmas is the realization that God comes to us—and we come to God—in the flesh, through our bodies in the midst of the created world.

The invisible God, whom no eye has seen, was seen in the humanity of Jesus. God, whose wonder and love are beyond our imagination, wished to become visible and close to us. St. Augustine (who died in 430) calls sacraments “visible signs of invisible grace.”

An important step in enriching our understanding of sacrament is to see Jesus himself, in his humanity, as the first and original sacrament. It all starts with Jesus. Jesus himself is our sacrament, our visible sign of the invisible God.

FROM JESUS TO CHURCH

“But we cannot see Jesus. Jesus is no longer among us. ...” It didn’t take Christians long to see how false that objection is! St. Paul was born again in the light of the revelation that Christ is present among us. Paul retells the incident: “I fell to the ground and heard a voice saying to me, ‘Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?’ I replied, ‘Who are you, sir?’ And he said to me, ‘I am Jesus the Nazorean whom you are persecuting’” (Acts 22:7-8).

Paul realized that Christ cannot be separated from his members. The risen Christ is so identified with the Christian that what Paul did to a Christian, Paul did to Christ himself. The Christian is baptized *into Christ* and can say with Paul, “yet I live, no longer I, but Christ lives in me...” (Gal 2:20).

As Jesus is the original sacrament, so we who are baptized into the risen Christ become sacrament. Today it is Christ’s body the Church which is the sacrament, the revelation of the loving plan of God. The Second Vatican Council teaches that Jesus “rising from the dead, sent his life-giving Spirit upon his disciples

and through this Spirit has established his body, the Church, as the universal sacrament of salvation” (*The Dogmatic Constitution on the Church*, 48).

The Church itself is sacrament. Another point in enriching our understanding of sacrament is to think of sacraments not so much as something we *receive* but something that we *are*. We are sacrament, instruments of grace; we are the ordinary way God graces today’s world.

TELLING THE STORY

In this sin-torn world, divided by war and greed, we must continually retell the story of God’s plan for unity and reconciliation. We must keep the dream of God alive. We, the Church, do this first of all in the celebration of the sacraments. The sacraments are the celebration of our Christian story. This is the principal reason why the proclamation of Scripture is an essential part of every sacra-



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mental celebration. Sacraments are worded signs. Scripture is the word, the story which makes the sacramental sign meaningful.

“Sacred Scripture is of the greatest importance in the celebration of the liturgy. For it is from Scripture that the readings are given and explained in the homily and that the psalms are sung; the prayers, collects and liturgical songs are scriptural in their inspiration; it is from the Scriptures that actions and signs derive their meaning. Thus to achieve the reform, progress and adaptation of the liturgy, it is essential to promote that warm and living love for Scripture to which the venerable tradition of both Eastern and Western rites gives testimony” (*Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy*, 24).

Sacraments celebrate the goodness of all creation. Material things are good. Our human bodies, our very flesh and bones are good. God took flesh and dwelt among us, and in this mystery of taking on human flesh proclaimed that the things of this earth are not obstacles to God but are intended to be windows to the divine. The magnificence of creation enables us to see something of the wonder, the multiplicity, the superabundance of God. Catholicism is a sacramental religion; it prays with bathing and eating, singing and embracing. Sacraments celebrate the goodness, the grace-filled essence, of creation: water and fire, oil and salt, ashes and palm branches, bread and wine. Creation draws us into the very life of the Creator.

“Thus, for well-disposed members of the faithful, the effect of the liturgy of the sacraments and sacramentals is that almost every event in their lives is made holy by divine grace that flows from the paschal mystery of Christ’s passion, death and resurrection, the font from which all sacraments and sacramentals draw their power. The liturgy means also that there is hardly any proper use of material things that cannot thus be directed toward human sanctification and the praise of God” (*Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy*, 61).

‘TO GIVE GRACE’

We cannot update our understanding of sacrament without looking at our understanding of grace. Grace has been understood in many different ways in Christian history. Probably most Catholics today think of grace as “a gift of God.”

The greatest gift that God can give us is the gift of God’s very self. Karl Rahner and other theologians speak of grace as “God’s personal self-communication.” Grace is not so much *something* that is given but *someone* who is experienced as present. This is why many theologians today do
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ARE THE SEVEN SACRAMENTS IN THE BIBLE?

We do not find the word *sacrament* in the Bible. *Sacrament* is a Latin word. The origins of our Christian Scriptures, however, are in the Greek language. Hence the word for *sacrament* we find in the Bible is the Greek word *mysterion*, “mystery.”

Today the English word *mystery* is frequently used to mean “something we cannot understand.” The Greek word *mysterion* is usually translated in our English Bibles by the word *plan*. The wonderful, mysterious plan that God had before creation began to take flesh in Jesus and to draw all of creation into unity and a harmony so spectacular and breathtaking that the very idea is too wonderful for us. This plan is something we never fully understand. This is the fundamental meaning of *sacrament* found in the Bible.

When the language of the Church changed from Greek to Latin, the Greek word *mysterion* was sometimes translated by the Latin word *sacramentum*; it is in this word that we find the biblical roots of the word *sacrament*.

For the first 11 centuries of Christian history the word *sacrament* was frequently used in this more general sense, referring to the mysterious plan of God. Little by little specific aspects of this mysterious plan—for example, Eucharist, Baptism, Anointing of the Sick—began to be singled out and called sacraments.

DIG DEEPER

How have the sacraments enriched your faith?

How do the sacraments allow us to experience God’s grace?

In what ways do the sacraments keep God’s hope for humanity alive?

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not speak so much of sacraments “giving grace” as sacramental celebrations “enabling us to experience grace,” to touch Grace itself, to contact the all-pervading presence of the loving God who sustains all created things in existence. The sacraments allow us to become conscious and aware of God’s greatest gift: the creative, sustaining, loving presence of God.

A SACRAMENT IS...

Defining the sacraments is impossible; and even lengthy, detailed descriptions fail. After all the defining and describing are over, we are left with: “Well, you would have to be there!” Sacraments are like that. To understand them fully, you have to be there! One must experience them in person.

Two descriptions which have helped me rethink my idea of sacrament are: “Many Christians tend to view the minister/priest as the actor, God as the prompter, and the congregation as the audience. But actually, the congregation is the actor, the minister/priest merely the prompter, and God the audience” (Soren Kierkegaard). “As long as you notice, and have to count the steps, you are not yet dancing but only learning how to dance. A good shoe is a shoe you don’t notice. Good reading becomes possible when you do not consciously think about eyes, or light, or print or spelling. The perfect liturgy would be one we were almost unaware of; our attention would have been on God” (C. S. Lewis).

Our attention is on God. God’s plan is disclosed. God’s people are renewed. Christ’s presence is celebrated. Salvation is realized. In celebrating the sacraments we, the Church in today’s broken world, keep the dreams of God alive.

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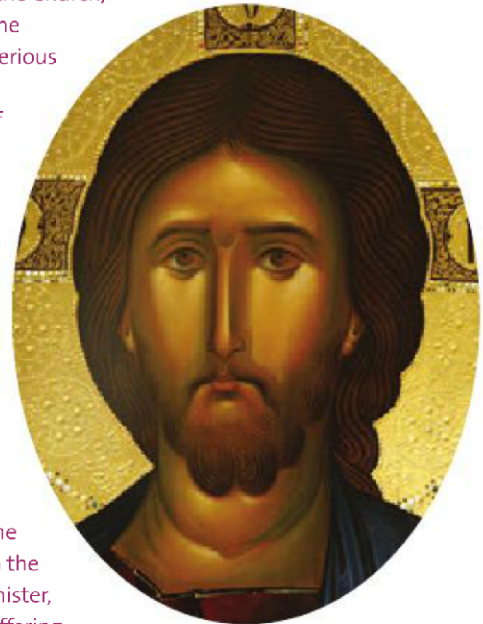
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REAL PRESENCE

Our understanding of sacrament is related to our ideas of grace and presence. Not only the Eucharist, but each of the sacraments is a celebration of God’s real presence. In celebrating the sacraments we, the Church, proclaim anew the marvelous, mysterious plan (*mysterion, sacramentum*) of God to bring all things together in Christ:

“To accomplish so great a work, Christ is always present in his Church, especially in its liturgical celebrations. He is present in the sacrifice of the Mass, not only in the person of his minister, ‘the same now offering, through the ministry of priests, who formerly offered himself on the cross,’ but especially under the eucharistic elements. By his power he is present in the sacraments, so that when a man baptizes it is really Christ himself who baptizes. He is present in his word, since it is he himself who speaks when the holy Scriptures are read in the Church. He is present, lastly, when the Church prays and sings, for he promised: ‘Where two or three are gathered together in my name, there am I in the midst of them’ (Matthew 18:20)” (*Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy, 7*).

Sacraments proclaim the mysterious, hidden plan of God to bring all things together in Christ. Sacraments are the celebration of the presence of Christ in our midst.



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