



WHAT ARE
Sacraments
ALL ABOUT?

JERRY WELTE

This is my body which is given for you.

Do this in remembrance of me.

—Luke 22:19

SACRAMENTS ARE ABOUT SIGNS AND SYMBOLS



They cast out many demons and anointed with oil many who were sick and cured them. —Mark 6:13

Humans need signs in order to love. Love cannot be communicated in pure form, but only through signs and symbols. Thus, spouses exchange rings, send flowers, and give embraces to realize their love. We know that love is dying when the signs and symbols of love cease, a truth expressed in the Neil Diamond song, “You Don’t Bring Me Flowers.” The Catholic Bishops, in a document entitled *The Theology of Celebration*, state it this way: “People in love makes signs of love, not only to express their love, but to deepen it. Love never expressed dies.”

Faith is like love in its need for signs and symbols. The old *Baltimore Catechism* defined a sacrament as “an

outward sign, instituted by Christ, to give grace.” The liturgical document, *Built of Living Stones*, expands on this definition’s recognition of the value of signs: “Gestures, language, and actions are the physical, visible, and public expressions by which human beings understand and manifest their inner life. These human actions as well as physical objects are also the signs by which Christians express and deepen their relationship to God.” For Christians, Jesus is the preeminent sign of God’s love. Through the Incarnation, Christ became Emmanuel, “God with us.” The sacraments continue to realize the presence and action of Christ among us.

Symbols are tangible objects that communicate invisible realities. *Built of Living Stones* affirms this truth: “Just as Christ invited those who heard him to share his personal union with the Father through material signs, so Christ leads the Church through these same signs in the liturgy from the visible to the invisible.” Sacramental theology has sometimes misrepresented the symbolic as the opposite of the real, leading some to presume that symbolic presence is somehow “not real.” The symbolic is not the opposite of the real, however, but rather its essential partner. Without symbols, real presence is impossible for humans. Moreover, Christ’s real presence in the sacraments transcends human physical presence. Teachers know, for example, that students can be physically present in their classrooms, but yet miles away in terms of “real presence.”

SACRAMENTS ARE ABOUT CONTINUING LIFE WITH CHRIST



Remember I am with you always, until the end of the age.

—Matthew 28:20

The sacraments are rooted in the words of Christ in the gospel. Some of these texts are specific directives: “Do this in memory of me” and “If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them.” Others are more indirect: “No one can enter the kingdom of God without being born of water and Spirit.” The words of Jesus authorize the Church to engage in sacramental ministry, but the sacraments are essentially born out of the actions of Christ. They are an ongoing response to the call to continue Christ’s work of gathering (Baptism, Confirmation, Eucharist), healing (Reconciliation, the Anointing of the Sick), and commissioning (Holy Orders, Matrimony).

The post-resurrection community was characterized by a sacramental consciousness that viewed all sacred things as sacraments. After the 9th century, theologians began to draw distinctions between sacraments in a general sense and the seven formal sacraments we have today. In time, holy items such as crucifixes or relics came to be called *sacramentals*, objects that recall Christ to us, but do not enjoy a sacrament's prominence or efficacy. The earliest record of enumerating the current list of seven sacraments is found in the writings of 12th century theologian, Peter Lombard. A solemn identification of these seven sacraments was made in the 16th century by the *Council of Trent*. This official pronouncement was largely in response to growing heresies.

Sacred encounters with Christ must be formalized if they are to be passed on. The process of shaping sacraments aims to be true to the Church's collective memory of Christ, but is also subject to the influence of human interpretation and emphasis. Thus, by the end of the 12th century, the sacrament of the sick became *Extreme Unction*, signaling a shift in focus from healing to last rites for the dying. The Second Vatican Council reformed it into a more inclusive rite called *The Anointing of the Sick*. Similarly, the public and communal nature of reconciliation in the early Church was gradually eclipsed by a private emphasis that culmi-

nated in the confessional box. Vatican II restored the sacrament to an open pastoral encounter with a priest representative of Christ, often in the context of a communal celebration.

As our conception of Christ and the Church's mission developed, and as time or circumstances produced shifting pastoral needs and priorities, our sacramental practice evolved as well. The sacramental ministry of the early Church, for example, was centered on adults. Adult converts were welcomed into the Church with *The Rite of Christian Initiation*, an integrated rite that included immersion in water, anointing in the Spirit, and welcoming to the Lord's Table. As the Church increased its pastoral focus on children, the three sacraments we know as Baptism, Confirmation, and Eucharist emerged with individual identities and functions. Soon, infant baptism became normative in response to—or perhaps in support of—the doctrine of Original sin. Meanwhile, Confirmation was separated both in time and purpose from baptism as it was redefined for adolescents as an “adult” or mature acceptance of one's baptism.



SACRAMENTS ARE ABOUT ACTIONS



*As often as you eat this bread and drink the cup,
you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes.*

—1 Corinthians 11:26

Much of our sacramental vocabulary over the years created the impression that sacraments are things that are given by priests to people. We often say that we intend to “receive communion,” suggesting that the Eucharist is a holy object that is placed in our hands. The sacraments all have physical elements that are essential to their meaning, but a full understanding of each sacrament includes the actions of the celebrating community—the priest, the ministers, and the assembly.

Thus, the full sign of Eucharist is not bread and wine, but God's people eating and drinking bread and wine. We do not receive the Eucharist, then, so much as we partake of the Eucharist.

Ex opere operato is a Latin term that was officially adopted by the *Council of Trent* to teach that sacraments produce grace of their own accord, regardless of the effectiveness of the ministers involved. Without denying the efficacy of Christ's action in each sacrament, subsequent theology gradually adopted a more holistic approach to sacramental grace. The Church has come to embrace the implications of the Incarnation, reminding us that God works through human ministers, not in spite of them. Thus, the grace of the sacrament of Reconciliation is more fruitful if the minister is wise and compassionate in the image of Christ rather than stern or cold. The quality of the human interaction supports and enhances the efficacy of the physical signs.

A narrow focus on sacraments as things tends to divide the celebrating community into givers and receivers. Such a division implies that the assembly's role during sacramental celebrations is largely passive. The *Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy*, developed by the Second Vatican Council, is very clear about the paramount importance of participation: "In the restoration and

promotion of the sacred liturgy, this full and active participation by all the people is the aim to be considered before all else.” The sacraments, then, are given and received by all the faithful as they fulfill their designated roles in each liturgy. The word *liturgy* itself is taken from a Greek word, *leitourgia*, which means “the work of the people.”

The term that we use for action in the context of liturgy is *ritual*. Ritual is stylized action that expresses a spiritual reality that words alone cannot sufficiently capture. Conjugal love is too deep and marvelous a gift to be sealed with words alone, so the bride and groom exchange rings. At an ordination ceremony, the Holy Spirit is conferred with a silent, traditional “laying on of hands.” We go to a funeral at a time when emotion makes words difficult, but the familiar structure of the rite gently moves us through our grief. Ritual is the silent language of mystery and miracle.



SACRAMENTS ARE ABOUT NAMING



And a voice from heaven said, "This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased."

—Matthew 3:17

“What’s in a name?” It is a familiar question for which faith has a resounding answer. Names are most significant in life and faith, for names confer meaning, affirmation, and identity. Without names, the spiritual impulses and graces within us may never be fully recognized, nurtured, or realized. Children may very well be good girls or boys, but if are never told as much, but instead are constantly scolded or demeaned, they may internalize that message and become less than their best selves. The sacraments are graceful ways of naming us as good boys and girls so that we may realize our full potential as people made in God’s image.

When Jesus was baptized in the Jordan, a voice came from the heavens to identify and affirm him. Even for

Christ, the experience of being named as God's beloved son was essential for him to discover his identity and embrace his mission. Throughout salvation history, key figures are given new names to signify new identities and callings. So it is that Abram becomes Abraham and Simon becomes Peter: "I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church." In the same way, we are given names when we are baptized as a way of expressing our new selves, new identities, and new missions in Christ.

Church teaching has rightfully emphasized the power of sacraments to confer grace. Experience and reflection have opened our eyes to realize that sacraments also name the grace of God that is already present. Thus, newborn infants are not "godless," but children of God who have not yet been fully recognized as such. Baptism not only creates a familial relationship with God, but it seals and enhances a relationship that already exists. All sacraments tend to work in this two stage dynamic by which they express what is true, but by doing so they make it even more true. Sacraments name us as "married," "forgiven," "healed," "ordained," etc., not simply to create those realities, but to express and deepen them.

SACRAMENTS ARE ABOUT PASSAGES



There was a wedding in Cana of Galilee and the mother of Jesus was there. Jesus and his disciples had also been invited to the wedding. —John 2:1-2

Every life has pivotal moments of growth and transition. Faith believes that God is never more present to us than in these graceful passages from one phase of life to another. Examples of such events in life are birthdays, graduations, new careers, and retirement. The sacraments are the Church's way of pausing to note the significance of certain waypoints on our spiritual journey. Faith presumes such events to be sacramental and thus marked by God's presence and power. It behooves us to observe them with prayer and to celebrate them as blessed times in our lives.

We celebrate baptism, then, because we believe that

God embraces us as children from the moment of our birth and calls us to be a holy people. We celebrate the Eucharist in the conviction that we are never alone and that God feeds us on our journey with the Bread of Life. Perhaps this role of sacraments has never been more important in a culture that sometimes misses, cheapens, or dilutes the sacred elements of human passages. Getting married while skydiving may be a dramatic personal statement, but it overlooks love's sacramental reality, the role of lovers as hopeful witnesses of Christ's faithful love for the Church.

SACRAMENTS ARE ABOUT COMMUNITY



*When the day of Pentecost had come,
they were all together in one place. —Acts 2:1*

During the Tridentine liturgies of the 1950's, Mass was a highly individual exercise. This practice was very sin-

cere and devout, but it had little interest in celebrating with others. For the most part, worshippers were a collection of individuals who only happened to be in the same sacred space for Mass. When the liturgical renewal of Vatican II arrived in the 60's, many Catholics experienced a painful period of readjustment as they struggled to understand why they suddenly were being asked to pay attention to those around them or wish "strangers" peace.

The truth is, however, that it was the "me and God" dynamics of those times that were an aberration from the true nature of sacraments. Private prayer is an essential part of faith, but it is not the primary function of the sacraments. In an older bishops' document on art and environment in liturgy, the communal nature of sacraments is beautifully expressed: "The cultural emphasis on individuality and competition has made it more difficult for us to appreciate the liturgy as a personal-communal experience. As a consequence, we tend to identify anything private and individual as personal. But, by inference, anything communal and social is considered impersonal. For the sake of good liturgy this misconception must be changed."

Both faith and life confirm the unique power of communal experience. There is a power and exhilaration in certain human events that is diminished by the ab-

sence of community. Imagine a homerun at a baseball game without a cheering crowd or a brilliant comedian onstage without a laughing audience. So it is that the community's graceful gestures, joyful acclamations, heartfelt credos, uplifting hymns, and solemn processions give sacraments a power and grace that would be lacking if they were experienced alone. The most real and sacred moments of life were intended to be shared and enhanced by community.

In a large and diverse Church, the sacraments will continue to serve complex pastoral needs and circumstances. Yet, the renewal of Vatican II and the restoration of the *Rite of Christian Initiation* for Adults signal the Church's desire to reintegrate the meaning and celebration of sacraments with the practice of the early Church. This shows how the sacraments evolve, like all sacred institutions, in an effort to be responsive to pastoral needs and circumstances, yet ever more faithful to the heart and mind of Christ.

