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Sacraments

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THE SACRAMENTS

magic or mystery?

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Deacidified

For most Protestants, the Catholic attitude toward the seven sacraments seems to be quite superstitious. We baptize infants while they are still too young to know what is going on; we commit sin and run to the confessional to get a quick absolution; we store up grace by frequenting the Communion table. All this strikes the non-Catholic as service-station salvation.

It all seems pretty much like an automatic lunch counter operation: so much grace from each slot, a specific grace at each reception of the sacraments.

A recent book written by Dr. Jaroslav Pelikan, a Lutheran theologian, presented — in a friendly way — a Protestant criticism of the Catholic Church. The book included a chapter on the sacraments with the title "Mystery and Magic." Dr. Pelikan's argument went something like this: The Catholic Church has certainly retained some truly admirable elements of Christian worship in its fidelity to the sacramental system. But Catholics are too mechanical, too automatic in their emphasis of them. Protestants would gain

by looking more deeply into the real meaning of the sacramental system and Catholics would gain by giving more thought to the worthiness and dispositions of the one receiving the sacrament.

Personal Aspects of the Sacraments

And maybe Dr. Pelikan has something there. The Protestants at the time of the Reformation thought to emphasize inner religion, the more spiritual reality of the kingdom of God as against the external, visible and institutional aspects of the Church. To achieve this emphasis, they did away with most of the external elements of the Church's organization and prayer life. They were impatient like all revolutionaries and, instead of purifying, they overthrew in order to get their way more quickly. The Council of Trent, reacting to Protestant excesses, emphasized the external, institutional aspects of the Church to the point of slighting and subordinating the personal aspects of the doctrine of the sacraments as we find them in earlier Catholic traditions.

The Catechism of the Council of

teaching on the sacraments in dry abstract formulas appealing only to a theologically trained mind. The early Church never taught the faithful in this abstract way; it used the liturgical celebrations and the actual conferring of the sacraments as means of teaching Christians their full meaning. The modern catechetical movement within the Church is a return to this more living and vivid explanation of the sacramental life.

Acts of Christ

The sacraments are, first of all, acts of Christ. Christ instituted the sacraments and they receive from Him their divine power. But He did more than just set up a system of external rites and ceremonies. He continues His influence on our souls and His presence among us through the sacraments. They are His way of continuing His work of salvation in space and time through His Church and through His members. It is through the sacraments that we become members of Christ's Mystical Body and increase His life within us. It is this

aspect which has been little emphasized in the recent past.

The Primary Role of the Sacraments

We learned from our penny catechism that the sacraments are channels of grace; they dispense Christ's graces and Christ Himself in the Eucharist. But the primary role of the sacraments is to unite a person ever more closely to Christ so that he shares more intimately the life of Christ, His grace.

Thus in the sacrament of Baptism, it is not so much the washing away of sin that needs to be emphasized. Rather, it is the fact that Baptism associates us with Christ's Death and Resurrection. We die with Christ to a life of sin and spiritual disorder in order to rise with Christ to a life of faith and hope and love. From now on, Christ Himself is being renewed in this person and He lives in this new member of the Church. And as a child of God acting under the sanctifying influence of the Holy Spirit, the new Christian's whole life is oriented to lead the life of Christ. This participation in the Easter Mystery, the mystery of Christ's Death and Resurrection, is the important aspect of Baptism and, indeed, of all the sacraments.

Prayers of Preparation

The prayers that precede the essential part of each sacrament are meant to prepare us for the action of Christ in the sacrament. In Baptism, for example, the candidate is called by name; he is signed by the sign of the cross on the forehead and on the breast as a symbol of his union with Christ through the Cross and the invocation of the Holy Trinity. He is given the blessed salt, the symbol of Christian wisdom, as the prelude to the instructions he will receive. The exorcism and testing that he undergoes is meant to purify the candidate; his senses, his ears and lips are opened just as Christ opened the ears of the deaf and the lips of the dumb in the miracles we read about in the Gospel. The solemn anointing with the oil of catechumens symbolizes the strength the Christian needs to endure the combat against the world, the flesh and the devil. After a final profession of faith, the sacrament is conferred.

And after Baptism there is another

anointing with chrism, the same oil that is used to anoint kings, to consecrate and ordain Bishops and to consecrate altars and chalices. This anointing symbolizes the candidate's participation in the priesthood of Christ and in His kingship. The white garment and the candle are reminders of the purity of the newly baptized and the light of faith that will enlighten him.

All these ceremonies surround the sacrament in order to explain the action of Christ in the sacrament of Baptism, in order to prepare the candidate (and it must be remembered that these ceremonies extended over the whole period of Lent in the old days of the Church).

Sacraments in the Bible

If Christ is the Author of the sacraments, should we not be able to find in the Gospels the account of just how and when He instituted them? The Protestants ask us, and with a certain amount of self-righteous justification: When did Christ institute the sacrament of Matrimony? When did He institute the sacrament of Confirmation? When did He practice Extreme Unction?

Except for the Eucharist, we find ourselves in an embarrassing position in trying to find the exact historical moment of the institution of the various sacraments. Even for Baptism, which we know Christ and His disciples used in imitation of John the Baptist, we can wonder when and at what moment the rite of purification became a Christian sacrament, the initiation into the company of the faithful.

The Role of the Church

And yet it is a dogma of the Church that Christ instituted the seven sacraments and is Author of them. To grasp this, we need an understanding of the role God gave His Church in continuing the work of Christ after His Death and Resurrection. And we can find this understanding in Scripture and tradition, which tell us the practices of the early Church. Already in the time of St. Paul the external ceremonies of the Eucharist were undergoing a transformation because of the large increase in the number of the faithful. They could no longer be practiced in the framework of the Last Supper, a family gathering, but took on more the appearances of a "potluck" supper, with everyone bringing his own food. We find St. Paul encountering certain difficulties because some came with a good deal of food and drink, while others had to remain hungry. So it is not so much the precise historical moment when Christ instituted the sacraments that we point to in the New Testament, but rather the general direction that the whole of Christ's life and action took in order to continue His mission through the Apostles and His Church.

Frequently in the New Testament — especially in the Gospel and Apocalypse of St. John — we find Christ pointing to persons, events and things of the Old Testament to explain the reality of the New. For instance, when He made His promise of the Eucharistic food which He would leave His followers (John 6:51-61), He first recalled to them the manna with which God had fed the Israelites during their 40-year wanderings in the desert.

And in foretelling His own Crucifixion, Christ did so with a reference to the bronze serpent with which Moses had healed those who had been bitten by the fiery serpents for their sins (Num. 21:5-6). "And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the desert, even so must the Son of Man be lifted up, that those who believe in Him may not perish, but have life everlasting" (John 3:14-15).

To understand the significance of Christ instituting the sacraments and being their sole and unique Author, we must look at the whole mystery of Christ and see it as does the liturgy of the Church, foreshadowed and typified in the Old Testament, lived and enriched by Christ through His career, and faithfully transmitted and constantly reenacted by the Church. Christ was forever appealing to the faith of His hearers: He cured people and ordered His disciples to anoint the sick; He forgave sins and commissioned the twelve to forgive in His name; He multiplied bread and promised that this would be done more marvelously with Bread that would sustain the believer for life everlasting, not as the manna which did not prevent people from being destroyed and from perishing. We know that He spoke of His Baptism as being a rebirth in water and the Holy Spirit.

Encounters With God

There is much foundation in the Scriptures for the divine authorship of the sacraments. It is not a question of determining the exact moment when Christ instituted this or that sacrament; it is not a question of the precise rite that Christ may have established. The important reality is that He continues His presence and His action through the Church in this sacramental way. And for this reason they must also bear His seal. Christ is God-Man, perfect God and perfect man; He is both Mystery and external Sign. So, too, the sacraments must have both characters - a sensible sign and a divine power.

Since Christ saved us by His life and Passion, all the sacraments must be reenactments of His Passion. They must make His members associates in this Passion. Therefore, the sacraments are means of individual salvation only in the measure that they associate us with the Body of Christ, His Church. Since Christ rose again from the dead, the

sacraments pledge that we shall rise with Him in the final glorious resurrection.

And, of course, the Church establishes this connection between the life and Passion of Christ and the gradual incorporation of its membership in Christ through the liturgical cycle of the Church year. The liturgy of the Mass becomes a school of indoctrination as well as a tool of incorporation into the Body of Christ. This is the whole function and purpose of the sacramental system. The sacraments are the point of encounter between God and man in the God-Man, Christ. To understand this ever more fully, a study of Holy Scripture is most important and indispensable. Rather than dispensing us from the Bible, the sacraments should lead us into the study and perusal of the word of God. The liturgical revival is serving a great purpose in a renewal of biblical study and interest.

Acts of the Church

The sacraments are, then, the actions of Christ. He is the Author and the principal Actor in the sacraments.

As St. Augustine so strikingly says, when Peter baptizes, it is Christ Who baptizes; when John baptizes, it is Christ Who baptizes; when Judas baptizes, it is Christ Who baptizes. But the sacraments are also an action of the Church. The action is carried out by the Church on behalf of Christ's members in His stead. Christ is no longer visible, and man needs other men—other Christs—and external signs in order to be conscious of the supernatural happenings that are taking place.

The Mystery of the Church

The Church is Christ incarnate throughout the ages, the Church is the extension of Christ, the Church is Christ. In a sense, the Church is the supreme sacrament — the external, mysterious sign which contains all the others. It is through her ministers that the sacraments are effectively and authoritatively administered and safeguarded. It is through the Church and her authorized worship that the sacraments are preserved from falling into disuse or mere external symbolism. The

history of the Protestant infidelity to the sacraments is a good case in point.

Freedom with the sacred signs soon left them meaningless and reduced them to pure formalism even though the original intent of the Protestant reform was a return to the purity of the Gospels and the early Church practice. In our day many Protestants are realizing that they have lost the sense of the sacraments and are reinstating Catholic practices once thrown out by their forefathers.

But above all, the sacraments are actions of the Church because they aim to bring the members ever more closely into the life of the Church. It is not merely with the Head of the Mystical Body that the sacraments unite the faithful but also with each of the other members. As St. Paul so energetically brings out in his first letter to the Corinthians, "A man's body is all one, though it has a number of different organs; and this multitude of organs goes to make up one body; so it is with Christ. . . . And you are Christ's Body, organs of it, depending upon each other" (I Cor. 12:12, 27).

The Social Aspect of the Sacraments

This social aspect of the sacraments needs to be stressed again and again if they are to accomplish the purpose for which Christ instituted them. This is to build the Body of Christ both individually for the perfection of each member and collectively for the harmonious achievement of the entire redeemed mankind in view of the final resurrection. The sacraments signify and hasten the return of Christ because they build up the Body of Christ, bringing it to its full count in preparation for the day when the whole Christ will be glorified.

The sacraments of Matrimony and Holy Orders are obviously social sacraments. Each is meant in its own way to build up the Church. Holy Orders provides the Church with ministers; Matrimony with new members. But the Eucharist, too, is principally a social sacrament. It is in the Sacrifice of the Mass that the unity of the Mystical Body is best achieved. Together the members offer themselves with Christ as their High Priest and Victim to God the Father, so that they can be truly one

body and one community united in the breaking of bread. Communion is more than a union with the Head; for this is already achieved in Baptism and at the Consecration of the Mass. In Communion, Christ is the bond of love which serves to unite the members of His Mystical Body with one another.

Signs of Faith

The sacraments are signs of faith. They are mysteries of faith. They are divine actions because they are Christ's actions and, therefore, their meaning is never fully understood or fully exhausted by the human mind. We take them on Christ's word and authority. Yet He did select the signs, these particular signs, in order to communicate to us something of their meaning in our supernatural lives. Because we are human and immersed in material creation we need signs to communicate knowledge. Christ understood this need and, in order to communicate His infinite riches to us, He made use of signs.

Even the simple material things used, such as water for Baptism and bread and wine for the Eucharist and the laying on of hands for Holy Orders, tell a story, but the full richness of the symbolism is brought out only by the Thus Bapwhole sacramental action. tism is not merely a washing; it is a burial with Christ and a resurrection with Him from the death of sin. To convey this meaning, the sacrament of Baptism has to be thought of in the light of the Easter Vigil ceremony. Baptism and the Eucharist are a mysterious association with Christ's Passion, Death and Resurrection. Just as Christ died to sin as our representative and guarantor, so we must die to sin with Him and be renewed with Him on Easter Sunday.

The Importance of Faith

Christ demanded faith of those for whom He worked miracles. He did not and could not work miracles for those who did not believe. The Pharisees were always asking for signs in heaven. These impertinent demands Christ refused to heed. On the other hand He came to the rescue of the Phoenician woman even outside of the confines of Israel, although in His own words, He

was "sent only to the lost sheep of Israel." Faith is the act by which the believer enters into the plans of God and takes His word on face value. "Unless a man be born anew in water and the Holy Spirit, he cannot enter into the kingdom of heaven" (John 3:5).

Although the sacraments do not depend on the worthiness of the minister but on the word of Christ for their power to instill divine life, nevertheless, our dispositions and particularly our faith is of the greatest importance if the sacraments are to help us as Christ willed them to. It is this aspect which has not been stressed enough in recent decades.

Because the Protestants stressed this aspect and wanted to eliminate the role of the priest, the Church put its emphasis on the "ex opere operato" aspect of the sacrament. That is, while the recipient's dispositions sometimes prevent him from receiving the grace of the sacrament, the actual conferring of the sacrament does not depend on the recipient but on the power and intention of the one performing the sacramental sign — in most sacraments, the priest.

Acts of Worship

The sacraments are acts of worship. While it is true that the sacraments were instituted for our sake, they are also intended as a sacrifice of praise, a movement of man toward God. While Christ is the principal Author of the sacraments and their effectiveness, we must nevertheless be properly disposed and prepared when we receive them. Hence every sacrament is surrounded by acts of adoration, acts of abasement or contrition, acts of self-offering and acts of gratitude.

These are to dispose our souls to receive the mystery of God's intervention and to dispose us toward fuller incorporation into the Body of Christ. The whole first part of the Mass, what we call the Mass of the Catechumens, is precisely man's opportunity to praise, thank, and petition God that the miracle of Christ's re-enactment of His Passion may be fruitful in our lives.

The sacrament of Penance, we know, is preceded by an act of contrition, of self-accusation, and a promise of amendment. In the early days of the Church the amendment had to be demonstrated

before absolution was given, hence the 40 days of penance during Lent. In the sacrament of Extreme Unction, the prayers leading up to the sacramental anointing not only explain the significance of the sacrament, but try to elicit great confidence in Christ's curative power.

The Church's Sacramentals

As a matter of fact, the Church's sacramentals are a preparation and a flowering of the sacraments. We recite the blessing before meals as a reminder of the Eucharistic table. We ask the priest to bless our home as a forceful reminder of God's protective presence through the sacrament of Matrimony. The blessing of children in time of health or sickness, the use of holy water, blessed candles and palms — all these gestures are related to the sacraments. They prepare us for the fruitful reception of the sacraments, or for renewing the fruit of the sacrament through the celebration of the anniversaries of our Baptism, our Confirmation, wedding or ordination.

The life of the Christian is indeed a

life of mystery, a life of constant divine intervention. This is the great difference between the Christian and the pagan religion. It is not so much a difference of dogma, or worship, or even of morals. The great difference is that in the religion of the Christian people, God Himself has intervened; He has spoken. He has spoken not merely through the Bible, not merely in the person of the Incarnate Word of God, but also through the Church in the great acts of the sacraments. God speaks through actions more than through words. If we conceive of the sacraments as God's acting in our lives and our responding to that action, then we have the correct notion of the role of the sacramental life in the Church.

Undoubtedly, the fact that these very rich prayers are recited in a foreign tongue adds to the difficulty of understanding the sacraments and makes them appear more like mumblings or magic than like the mysteries of life that they are. A mystery is a deep truth that transcends the natural order; nevertheless it helps when we learn to appreciate and understand more and

more each single mystery. The mystery is a truth that touches us very deeply. Our understanding must enter into the act for maximum effectiveness.

It was a great help, therefore, when the Holy See gave us permission to recite many of these preparatory prayers in the English language a few years ago. For instance, the meaning of Baptism can now be understood much more easily since almost all the ceremony can be followed in English. The same awareness will take place when the prayers of the Mass, at least up to the Offertory, are permitted in the mother tongue of the faithful.

Signs of the Passion

Finally, St. Thomas Aquinas (and he is the doctor of sacramental theology) teaches that the sacraments are *signs* of grace. They confer divine life in a threefold way: First, they signify the source of grace, which is the Passion of of Christ. Every sacrament applies the merits and the power of the Cross of Christ to the faithful. It is the principal purpose of the sacramental system; it

is Christ's way of uniting Himself to His members or, better still, of uniting His members to Himself. It is the reason for which He instituted the Church and set her up to be the temple of God, of which we are the stones, as St. Paul describes it in his Epistle to the Ephesians. "You are no longer exiles, then, or aliens; the saints are your fellow citizens, you belong to God's household. Apostles and prophets are the foundation on which you were built, and the chief cornerstone of it is Jesus Christ Himself. In Him the whole fabric is bound together, as it grows into a temple dedicated to the Lord; in Him you too are being built in with the rest, so that God may find in you a dwelling place for His Spirit" (Eph. 2:19-22).

The Church and the sacramental system is the principal means of incorporation into Christ, of having access to Christ's Passion and Resurrection. Unless the Church is understood, the sacramental system will also remain incomprehensible.

Because the Mass is the renewal of Christ's Passion, the Eucharist is the pinnacle of the sacramental system. It is the high point of the sacraments not merely because Christ is present there in a more permanent and personal fashion, but because through the Mass the faithful are most intimately associated with the Passion, Death and Resurrection of Christ. All the other sacraments are preparatory to the union achieved in the Eucharist between Christ and the faithful.

Signs of Particular Graces

Each sacrament does not merely enrich the person with additional sanctifying grace but gives a specific grace, proper to this particular sacrament and needed to carry out a specific responsibility. And this is the second way in which the sacraments are signs of grace. Each signifies the particular grace which it brings in answer to a specific need of the supernatural life.

The grace of marriage, for example, is there for the full flowering of the committed status of the married partners. Their love needs to be purified and the grace of marriage corresponds to this need. Their love needs to be transfigured to a new level of union

usually achieved through crisis and suffering; there is a grace for this greater love. And their love needs to be fruitful, and there is grace available not merely for the task of bringing children into the world, but for the arduous task of raising them to be temples of God.

Signs of the Final Coming

Thirdly, the sacraments signify their ultimate purpose, which is to prepare us for the final return of Christ. The sacraments bring the Body of Christ to its final maturity and completion. The sacraments are for our present existence, they are part of the temporal phase of the Church, they are part of the scaffolding that is needed to build the temple of God. This designation is not intended to take away from the dignity that they possess, but to emphasize their principal function, namely to perfect the Body of Christ.

The sacraments are like Jacob's ladder of the Old Testament. They are a two-way street bringing the gifts of God to man and carrying man's offerings to the throne of God. This spiritual

ladder is operative until that blessed day of the final espousals between the Lamb and the people of God as described in the book of Apocalypse: "The time has come for the wedding feast of the lamb. His bride has clothed herself in readiness for it; hers it is to wear linen shining white, the merits of the saints are her linen" (Apoc. 19:8).

Indelible Character

A pamphlet on the sacraments in general cannot be complete without a word about the indelible character which some of them imprint on the soul. We know that there are three sacraments which cannot be repeated because of this indelible character. We must ask ourselves the specific function of the character. How does it mark the person? What does it confer on the soul?

Basically, character means seal; it is the seal of Christ on the person who receives the sacraments of Baptism, Confirmation and Holy Orders. It constitutes the one who receives the sacrament in a special relation to Christ and specifically to His priestly role. Christ as the God-Man, as the Mediator between God and man, as the "Pontifex," the Bridge-builder, exercises by virtue of His Incarnation the high priestly role. He is the great High Priest, the new Head of the human race.

You need only read the Epistle to the Hebrews to catch the meaningfulness of the priestly character of Christ and of His sacrifice. The Apostles wanted to wean away the Jewish Christians from the magnificent spectacle of the temple service and of the Jewish worship. The early Christian prayer meetings, even accompanied by the "breaking of bread" must have appeared rather unimpressive in those days as against the elaborate service of the Jewish temple.

The character of the three sacraments, Baptism, Confirmation and Holy Orders, progressively incorporates the bearer into the priestly function of Christ. In all three sacraments an anointing takes place to symbolize this function. The baptized person immediately after receiving the sacrament is anointed on the head with chrism, the

same oil used to consecrate Bishops and the sacred vessels and the church. A similar anointing is performed in Confirmation on the forehead and in Holy Orders on the hands. In both of these latter sacraments the essence of the sacrament consists in the laying on of hands, the conferring of power, and in both the normal minister is the Bishop who has the fullness of the priestly power.

The Priesthood of the Laity

The Church has been emphasizing of late the theme of the priesthood of the laity. It should be understood right away that the laity is not participating in the priestly function of the priest, but both layman and priest participate in the priestly function of Christ, the universal High Priest. If the Christian is incorporated into the body of Christ through Baptism, it is obvious that he participates at the same time in some way in the functions and prerogatives of Christ. The priest participates in Christ's priestly function by representing Him, by performing the actions of

Christ: "I absolve thee," "This is My Body." Obviously it is Christ Who absolves, it is Christ Who changes the elements of the offertory. But it is the people who offer themselves with Christ, it is the people who, according to St. Peter, are "a royal priesthood, a priestly nation."

At Mass the threefold participations in the priesthood of Christ are most effectively carried out. It is the Christian people who offer themselves with Christ at the Offertory. To participate in the Holy Sacrifice one has to be baptized. So this offering is already a priestly function. Through the character of Confirmation, which is the sacrament of Christian adulthood, the Christian is responsible for others. He must be a witness (in Latin, a martyr) to the Christian way of life and his witnessing is part of the offering he brings to the altar. But it is the priest — identified with Christ through the character of Holy Orders — who represents Christ at the moment of Consecration when he changes the offering of the Christian community into the Body and Blood of Christ Himself.

God's Chosen People

This teaching concerning the character conferred by the sacraments emphasizes again the basic role of the sacramental system which is to incorporate us into the Body of Christ, to make us more fully other Christs, sons of God, heirs and co-heirs of heaven. The vocation of the Christian in possession of the divine life is, indeed, an enviable condition.

The grace received in the sacraments is quite different from the state that Adam possessed in the prime of his innocence when he walked in the friendship of God. Adam was a child of God, true, but never in the intimate and divine relationship that links the member of Christ to God the Father. That is why immediately after the Consecration at Mass we can say with utmost confidence and reassurance "Our Father." We are together with Christ, His unique and acceptable children, His Chosen People. All this is effected through the sacraments.

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