

The Christian Sacraments

The closest Greek word to *sacrament* in the Scriptures is the word *mysterion*, which means the hidden plan of God to save the world, hidden in that it is difficult for humans to know or understand the will of God. Christian symbols draw us into this saving plan, into God's saving grace. In the Eastern Church sacraments are still referred to as "mysteries." The Latin word *sacramentum*, from which our word *sacrament* comes, was first used in a religious sense by Tertullian in the third century. He borrowed the term from the oath a Roman soldier made to be faithful to the emperor. Tertullian saw a similarity with baptism, where the convert in a sense takes an oath to be faithful to Jesus Christ. Augustine (d. 430) was one of the first thinkers to develop a theology of marriage and viewed marriage as a sign of God's grace. Aquinas (d. 1274) further enlarged our understanding of sacraments by describing them as signs, "instruments" if you will, that contain and cause the grace of Christ's saving action.

Aquinas' thoughts on sacraments eventually came out in the definition of the famous *Baltimore Catechism*, by which many of your grandparents were trained. Ask them what a sacrament is and they will probably be able to tell you: "An outward sign, instituted to give grace." Unfortunately, this "instrumental" approach often made it look like sacraments were "things." Grace also was often thought of as a material "thing." This approach to sacraments was often mechanical, even cartoonish, and could at times approach the magical. For some, the sacraments were seen as huge pipes through which God's grace flowed into the soul. Small wonder why many simply lost interest in sacraments.

Contemporary approaches to sacraments have drawn from rich recent studies on language, symbols, culture, and religion as well as from new insights into Scripture, myth, and ritual. A major contributor has been Edward Schillebeeckx, OP, who describes sacraments in more intimate and personal language: sacraments are "encounters with Christ." He begins by describing Christ himself as the ultimate sacrament, the visible symbol of God's presence in the world. Sacraments, in turn, are visible encounters with Christ and thus with all his graces and powers. Along with seeing sacraments as dynamic encounters with Christ, theologians began to present a richer understanding of grace. Instead of seeing grace as mere "help" or as some kind of supernatural serum that was injected into us by the sacraments, modern scholars began to speak of grace as "the life of God," "the power of God," or "the energy of God." Here the actor in the sacramental encounter is God (Jesus Christ), sharing his saving life with us, moving our lives with divine energy. And the amazing thing about it, is that God's grace is freely given (graciously), free of charge (gratuitous). Here sacraments are viewed as powerful symbols where we can have free access to the blessings of God and be more closely connected with God, other disciples, and indeed with all people.

Here is the hitch. None of this comes about automatically, or by some kind of magic. Persons of faith must accept the grace of God in Jesus Christ, as they open their hearts to this life and energy. Hearts and lives that in faith are open and receptive, can receive new life and power from God. In this light, a sacrament can be a gift and privilege.

Sacraments, then, are powerful religious symbols, and Catholics believe that they can be deep experiences of the power of Jesus Christ. We can experience his welcoming friendship as baptism, the sealing of this relationship in Confirmation. We can know his nurturing and strengthening power in Eucharist. People experience his forgiveness in penance and his healing in the anointing. They can be made special sharers in his priesthood in ordination and be joined with him and their beloved in marriage. These are "the seven" and they are pillars of the Catholic experience of God and Jesus.

(This article is excerpted from *The Ongoing Renewal of Catholicism*, by Brennan R. Hill [Winona, MN: Anselm Academic, 2008]. Copyright © 2008 by Brennan R. Hill. Used with permission of Anselm Academic.)

