

The Two Basic Sacraments of Christ and Church

The years before Vatican Council II (1962–1965) saw a renewal of sacramental theology as theologians sought to return to the historical roots of the Sacraments by recovering their original and primary meaning. In particular, the ideas of two theologians spearheaded the renewal: the German Jesuit Karl Rahner (1904–1984) and the Belgian Dominican Edward Schillebeeckx (1914–2009).

These two theologians explained the Sacraments in ways that were both new and traditional, because the same basic sacramental principles of Jesus and Church were operative at the inception of Christianity and are still operative today. Both of their groundbreaking works appeared in 1960. On the one hand, Rahner's *The Church and the Sacraments* envisions the Church itself as the basic or "fundamental" sacrament. The Seven Sacraments are Sacraments because they are the ritual actions of that sacrament that is the Church. On the other hand, Schillebeeckx considers Jesus Christ the basic or "primordial" sacrament of God. As such, Jesus is the preeminent outward sign of God's love and favor, so the Church and the Seven Sacraments are themselves Sacraments because of God's self-communication in Jesus Christ.

Jesus, the Primordial Sacrament of God's Presence

The person of Jesus Christ pinpoints the mystery of the Divine-human encounter. Specifically, Jesus' actions, as the Gospels record, provide us with the primordial meaning of the Sacraments: "If you want to know what a sacrament is and what a sacrament does you can do no better than look at Jesus as we find him in the New Testament" (Noll, 1999, 20). In effect, the Sacraments are the acts of Jesus Christ, and all other Sacraments derive from him. But what does this mean? How is this possible? Schillebeeckx provides us an answer for the first question: "Even in his humanity Christ is the Son of God. The second person of the most holy Trinity is personally man; and this man is personally God. Therefore Christ is God in a human way, and [human] in a divine way" (1963, 13–14). The foundation for such thinking goes back to Jesus' words: "Whoever has seen me has seen the Father" (John 14:9; also see 1:18). Christ reveals the personal encounter with God, and celebration of the Sacraments draws the Christian believer into personal relationship with Christ in his human actions that point to and manifest God's presence. Thus, to answer the second question—How is this possible?—we need to understand how the Sacraments participate in Jesus' own ministry as performed and enacted in his life, death, and Resurrection. Otherwise the Sacraments may become passive observation instead of active participation, service to rituals rather than service to neighbor, impersonal obligations instead of personal encounters, and abstract theory rather than embodied praxis.

Jesus' actions remind us that Sacraments are not things but religious actions that express particular relationships that manifest presence. On one level Jesus is God's mystery, personified by revealing the relationships that both form and transform our human experience. On another level Jesus is God's meaning, personified by revealing who God is and who we are and should become through and in our human relationships. Together the mystery and meaning of Jesus' life, death, and Resurrection transform our human reality because the significance of Christ's actions forms our understanding of human experience and existence. Jesus embodies a new way of human existing, and he gives ultimate meaning to everything that was and is human. To perceive this significance is to open the door to a fresh understanding of the Sacraments and sacramentality. For example, Baptism celebrates the mystery of birth and transforms its meaning by recognizing that Christ himself invites the believer to participate in the mystery of his death and Resurrection. Thus the relationship expressed in Baptism gives new meaning to



the archetypical mystery of birth / death / rebirth, because the significance of Jesus' past and present actions transforms how Christians experience God's presence in their lives.

Church, the Fundamental Sacrament of Jesus' Presence

With the birth of the Church in the gift of the Holy Spirit, Jesus gave the world a sacrament of himself: "Rising from the dead, [Christ] sent his life-giving Spirit upon his disciples and through this Spirit has established his body, the Church, as the universal sacrament of salvation" (*Dogmatic Constitution on the Church [Lumen Gentium, 1964], 48*). Through and in the activity of the Holy Spirit, the Church prepares for the reception of Christ by recalling the mystery of Christ and by working to make that mystery present in the world today. Thus the Church is authentically so to the degree it manifests Christ's humanity, actions, and ministry in the world. Just as Jesus taught only the words of the Father (see John 8:28, 14:24), the Church should teach only the example of Christ, but because sinful humans comprise the Church, it often falls short of this realization. This fact should remind us that the Church is a sign of salvation, but that it is Christ through the Spirit's activity that makes the sign effective.

Specifically, it is the Spirit that animates Christ's body, the Church. This imagery teaches us that the "Spirit is the very soul of the Church" (Noll, 1999, 36) because the Spirit brings our human community into relationship with the divine community: "The universal Church is seen to be 'a people brought into unity from the unity of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit'" (*Church, 4*). Thus, just as the Father sent Jesus, Jesus sends forth the Apostles by sending forth the gift of the Spirit (see John 20:21–22). In short, the actions of Christ become the actions of his Church through and in the Spirit's power.

As a fundamental sacrament of Christ's presence and actions, the Church's vitality springs from the Spirit-filled celebration of the Seven Sacraments in a twofold sense.

They are "by the Church," for she is the sacrament of Christ's action at work in her through the mission of the Holy Spirit. They are "for the Church" in the sense that "*the sacraments make the Church*,"¹ since they manifest and communicate to [humans], above all in the Eucharist, the mystery of communion with the God who is love, One in three persons. (*Catechism of the Catholic Church, 1118, emphasis added*)

These two dimensions of Christ and Church express the Divine–human encounter. On one level, the Sacraments are the acts of Christ in the Church, which means that the Church can only be a sacrament because it is in proper relationship with Christ. On another level, as sacrament, the acts of the Church sacramentally "incarnate" Christ's presence and actions in our world today through the communal celebration of the Sacraments by the human and Divine communities.

This article is adapted from *Theological Foundations: Concepts and Methods for Understanding Christian Faith*, by J. J. Mueller, SJ, et al. (Winona, MN: Anselm Academic, 2007), pages 187–190.

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Endnote Cited in a Quotation from the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, Second Edition

1. Saint Augustine, *De civ. Dei*, 22, 17; J. P. Migne, ed., *Patrologia Latina* (Paris: 1841—1855) 41, 779; cf. Saint Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae* III, 64, 2 *ad* 3.

