

The Church as the Body of Christ and Sacrament

The Church as the Body of Christ

One of the earliest Christian reflections on the Church is Paul's conception of the Church as the "Body of Christ." "Now you are Christ's body, and individually parts of it" (1 Corinthians 12:27). Paul compares the individual parts of the human body (eye, hand) with the individual members of the Corinthian church: all the parts / members must work together so that the whole body can function properly.

Paul's conception of the Body of Christ is closely tied to two rituals that later came to be called sacraments. A person joins the Body of Christ through the ritual of baptism: "For in one Spirit we were all baptized into one body" (1 Corinthians 12:13); "For all of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ" (Galatians 3:27). The Body of Christ understood as the Church community is tightly connected to the Body of Christ understood as the Lord's Supper (Eucharist): "Because the loaf of bread is one, we, though many, are one body, for we all partake of the one loaf" (1 Corinthians 10:17).

By joining the Body of Christ, the Church, a person unites with Christ in a mystical way: "Or are you unaware that we who were baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death?" The idea that the believer is united with Christ in his death is one way to understand how Jesus' atoning death can bring about forgiveness for the sins of the individual person: "We know that our old self was crucified with him, so that our sinful body might be done away with, that we might no longer be in slavery to sin" (Romans 6:6).

Paul's thought thus draws out a specific reason why the Church is necessary for salvation: it is only through joining oneself to Christ's Body, the Church, that a person's sinful way of life can "die with Christ" and the person is freed to live a life not dominated by sin.

The Church as Sacrament

Aquinas defined a Sacrament as the "sign of a holy thing so far as it makes men holy" (*Summa Theologica* 3.60.2) and thus leads a person toward salvation (*Summa Theologica* 3.60.4). The "signs" are physical, since it "is part of man's nature to acquire knowledge of the intelligible from the sensible" (*Summa Theologica* 3.60.4): we learn things through our senses. A Sacrament, however, is not simply an external symbol of a spiritual reality, it is rather "efficacious"—it brings about the reality of the thing signified. "Celebrated worthily in faith, the sacraments confer the grace that they signify. They are efficacious because in them Christ himself is at work" (*Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 1127). Thus in the Sacrament of Baptism, according to Catholic belief, the spiritual grace of Christ works through the physical means of water to cleanse sins. The water, then, is not a symbolic extra—it is essential, because God has chosen (to speak analogically) to work through the physical.

The Sacraments (seven, in the Catholic Church), as Newman saw, are related to the Incarnation.¹ The *Logos* of God became incarnate in a human body so as to bring the opportunity of salvation to humanity. In the same way, God chooses to continue to communicate supernatural benefits ("grace") through the physical means of the Sacraments. Both the Incarnation and the sacramental system are radical affirmations of the Christian belief in the goodness of God's creation (see Genesis, chapter 1).

Logically, prior to the Seven Sacraments, however, the Church itself is a sacrament. The Christian Church, as a visible, physical institution, continues to offer the spiritual grace of Christ long after Christ himself is no longer physically in the world.



In the Incarnation the divine *Logos* was revealed in the human man Jesus. If the divine teaching, authority, and power of the *Logos* can be communicated through the human nature of Jesus, it is consistent to suppose that his divine teaching, authority, and power could continue to be expressed through a human institution such as the Church. De Lubac writes,

If Christ is the sacrament of God, the Church is for us the sacrament of Christ; she represents him, in the full and ancient meaning of the term, she really makes him present. She not only carries on his work, but she is his very continuation, in a sense far more real than that in which it can be said that any human institution is its founder's continuation.ⁱⁱ

(This article is adapted from *Reason, Faith, and Tradition: Explorations in Catholic Theology*, by Martin C. Albl [Winona, MN: Anselm Academic, 2009], pages 338–339. Copyright © 2009 by Martin Albl. All rights reserved.

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ⁱ John Henry Newman, *An Essay on the Development of Christian Doctrine* (Westminster, MD: Christian Classics, 1968), 93–94.

ⁱⁱ De Lubac, *Catholicism*, 29.

