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THE SACRAMENTS

THE SACRAMENTAL SYSTEM

WE receive grace by Baptism. One who, through no fault of his own, is not baptized, may still receive it; for the Church teaches that everyone who reaches the use of reason is given by God sufficient actual grace to enable him, if he will, to lift his soul in a movement of love to God and so receive from God sanctifying grace. In St. Augustine's words, "We are bound by the sacraments, God is not."

But Baptism is God's plan for us. In form it is the pouring of water on the head, accompanied by the words "I baptize thee in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Ghost." Its place in the giving of the new life was stated by Our Lord to Nicodemus: "Unless one be born again of water and the Holy Ghost, he shall not enter the kingdom of heaven." And St. Paul told the Romans (vi. 3-4): "We were taken up into Christ by baptism . . . in our baptism we have been buried with him, died like him, so that, just as Christ was raised up by his Father's power from the dead, we too might live and move in a new kind of existence."

One coming fresh to the idea might well feel a certain strangeness in Baptism—a material thing, water, having this essential place in our reception of grace, which is wholly spiritual. Indeed there are spiritual men who reject it as a monstrous union of unrelated things, a profanation of the

higher by the lower. In this they are forgetting themselves, I mean they are forgetting *themselves*, forgetting the persons that they are. If there are pure spirits—fallen angels—who also regard any union of matter and spirit as monstrous, they have a shade more excuse. For the men who thus reject it are themselves the result of a union of matter and spirit; grace is built into nature and our nature is like that. The union in man and union in sacrament are both mysterious; but the same God who made the one made the other.

We have twice used the word *sacrament* in the last two paragraphs. For Baptism is the first of seven ways established by Christ for the use of material things to bring grace to souls. "Sacrament" is not only used for the first conveying of grace, but for many others, as we shall see. It is worth looking at the idea of a sacrament more closely.

In two ways the sacramental system follows the same design as the nature into which grace is to be infused.

In the first place the materials used are water, bread, wine, oil and human speech. In a sense these five are a kind of skeleton upon which man's natural life is built; they are the basic elements, the first four making bodily life possible, the fifth being indispensable to social life. In the second place they are linked with what we may call the pattern or sequence or structure of human life in general. There is birth and growth and death; to these respond Baptism, Confirmation and Extreme Unction; in between comes the union of the sexes for the continuance of the race, to which corresponds Matrimony; and for some the duty of representing God in relation to the community and the community in relation to God, for which Christ provided Holy Orders. Of these five sacraments, three—Baptism, Confirmation and Holy Orders—cannot be repeated at all, because as St. Thomas tells us, they represent ways of sharing in the priesthood of Christ. We shall return to this. Matrimony can be repeated,

if a wife or husband dies; Extreme Unction can be repeated because it is given in danger of death, and although death comes only once, the danger of death may occur more frequently.

But there are two other elements, one essential to life and the other practically inseparable from it. One is the need for food, and the other the need for healing. These also have their corresponding sacrament. Penance is there, confession of sin to the priest followed by absolution, for healing; the Blessed Eucharist is there for the bread of our life.

A full treatment of the sacraments must come at a later stage of one's study of theology. Ideal for the purpose are the five volumes on the sacraments, written by Mgr. Pohle, translated by that wonderful lay theologian, Arthur Preuss, published by Herder. Here we may at least glance at three major questions affecting them all—who administers, how they are administered, and what they do for us.

THE MINISTER

Baptism is so vital—for it is the beginning of our life as members of Christ, and one who has not received it can receive no other sacrament—that God allows *anyone* to baptize. Ideally, of course, it should be administered by a priest; but if necessary a layman can baptize; even one not himself baptized may do so, provided he means to do what the Church does.

We have touched upon the intention with which the one giving Baptism gives it. It applies to all sacraments. The minister is acting in the power of Christ; he is giving himself to be used by Christ—giving himself, note. Our Lord is not using him as a tool, for tools are simply used at the carpenter's will, their consent is not asked. The minister gives himself

to be used as Christ wishes to use him—that, broadly, is the doctrine of Intention.

There is one sacrament which cannot be administered by a priest at all—it is Matrimony, for the man and woman to be married (provided they are baptized) administer it to each other. They must have their parish priest there, or another with his consent. If they live so far from a priest that it is practically impossible to have one present—a month's journey, for instance, or a desert island—then they may marry with no priest there.

The bishop confers Holy Orders, and normally Confirmation, though he sometimes delegates one of his clergy. The other three—Penance, Holy Eucharist, Extreme Unction—can be administered only by one who has received priestly orders.

HOW ADMINISTERED

How the various sacraments are administered does not require detailed treatment in an elementary outline of theology. The Church speaks of the matter and form of each sacrament, and upon some points there is vast discussion among theologians. Here we need glance only at what must be *done* and what must be *said*.

Of Baptism we have already spoken. In Confirmation there is the laying on of the bishop's hands and the anointing of the forehead with consecrated oil.

Matrimony requires that the man and woman make announcement in the presence of witnesses of their wish to be husband and wife.

The person seeking the sacrament of Penance must confess at least all mortal sins he has committed since he last received the sacrament, with contrition and the willingness to make whatever satisfaction is required. (Contrition and satisfaction will be explained later.) The priest must pronounce

the words of absolution, "I absolve you from your sins."

Holy Eucharist requires that the priest say the words "This is my body" over wheaten bread, and the words "This is my blood" over wine of the grape. Theologians have much more to tell, but it need not be set out here.

In Holy Orders, the bishop lays his hands on the person to be ordained and says a prayer that he may receive the power of sacerdotal grace (the word *sacerdotal* comes from the Latin word for the offering of sacrifice).

In Extreme Unction the organs of sense are anointed with oil, and the priest prays for the forgiveness of sins committed through each of them (though a general prayer that the sick man's sins be forgiven has been held sufficient).

What has just been said of the necessary acts and words of the sacraments is the barest outline. There are further refinements as to what is needed for validity; and there are other requirements not strictly essential for validity but called for by the Church's laws.

WHAT THE SACRAMENTS DO

All the sacraments give sanctifying grace. Baptism initiates it; Confession restores it when it is lost, or increases it if the penitent's sins are not mortal; the other sacraments all increase it. Each has its own special function as well. Here again only summaries are necessary at our present stage.

We have already spoken of Confirmation as comparable with growing up. By it we become adult members of the Church. It brings the life of grace in us to maturity: it might be better to think of it as bringing us to maturity in the life of grace. By Baptism, St. Thomas says, we receive powers to do things which pertain to our own salvation; but in Confirmation we receive power to do those things which belong to

spiritual combat against the enemies of the Faith. We receive the power of confessing our faith publicly and by words, as it were *ex officio*—that is, we have now not only the powers but an abiding right and duty to exercise them. We are not only members of the Church but soldiers, the Church's war is our affair.

Matrimony is—to some at least—the surprising sacrament: they had not expected that marriage, with the use of sex which is bound up with the primary reason for its existence as an institution, should be made a special way of receiving sanctifying grace. In fact, marriage is, supernaturally, in high honour. St. Paul (Eph. v. 23–30) compares the union of husband and wife with that of Christ and His Church. Once received, the sacrament of Matrimony is continually operative while both partners live, giving special graces and aids where new situations arise and new difficulties call for them.

Extreme Unction—the Last Anointing, which may not be the last, if the danger of death passes—is described in the Epistle of St. James (v. 14): “Is any man sick among you? Let him bring in the priests of the Church, and let them pray over him, anointing him with oil in the name of the Lord: and the prayer of faith shall save the sick man; and the Lord shall raise him up; and if he be in sins, they shall be forgiven him.”

The Council of Trent calls anathema upon anyone who says that Extreme Unction “does not confer grace or remit sin or comfort the sick.” Upon every phrase of this there is a great body of theological writing, beyond our present scope. At least we know with all confidence that there is increase of grace and strengthening of the soul for the trials inseparable from the approach of death; that sins are forgiven, even mortal, if there be no opportunity of the sacrament of Penance; and that there may well be bodily healing if it be for the

soul's good—if, for example, with longer life the soul might love and serve God better and grow in grace far beyond its present level.

With Holy Orders we come to the last of the three sacraments which can be conferred only once, because they are ways of sharing in the priesthood of Christ. The first two are truly ways of sharing, but small ways compared with Holy Orders; for whereas Baptism makes us members of the body of the High Priest and Confirmation gives us the duty and the power to serve the truths He revealed, Holy Orders makes a man a priest.

We have seen what sacraments he may administer; but two of the powers conferred upon him by the sacrament of Holy Orders are of supreme importance.

The first is that he can absolve from sin (though this power may be inoperative unless he also has jurisdiction, permission from the bishop of the diocese where he would use it: it is always operative if the penitent is dying).

The second is that he can offer the Sacrifice of the Mass; this power includes naturally the power to consecrate.

By Penance sins are forgiven; the Blessed Eucharist strengthens our union with Christ by love and nourishes the soul. Both these sacraments are of such importance that we must proceed to look more closely at each of them.

FORGIVENESS OF SIN

By the sins called "mortal"—death-bringing—we break the union of our will with God's and lose the supernatural life. There are lesser sins called "venial", which, because they are less serious or less deliberate, do not involve a rejection of God: they leave us with sanctifying grace still in our souls but they do weaken the nature in which grace is infused and thereby increase the danger of mortal sin.

It is not easy to find in Scripture a clear statement of the distinction between these two levels of sin—mainly because Scripture is almost wholly concerned with mortal sins. But the distinction is a plain matter of fact. In both we are breaking God's law, but the one breach involves rebellion and the other does not. There is something comparable in our relation to the law of the land. Aiding an enemy country in war breaks the law; so does driving beyond the speed limit. But one is treason, whereas many a man who would die for his country quite cheerfully does the other.

The sacrament of Penance as the means of obtaining forgiveness for sin was the first thing Our Lord established after His resurrection, on the very day in fact. Having died to win redemption from sin, He makes immediate provision for the forgiveness of each individual's sins. St. John (xx. 19-23) tells us how Christ came and stood in the midst of the Apostles and said, "Peace be to you. As the Father hath sent Me, I also send you." Then He breathed on them (only once before are we told of God breathing on man, at the very beginning, when He made man a living soul). And He said: "Receive ye the Holy Ghost: whose sins you shall forgive, they are forgiven them: and whose sins you shall retain, they are retained."

The Church, having thus received the power to forgive sins in Christ's name, has decided upon the way in which she shall exercise it: the Catholic confesses his sins to a priest. (Where individual confession is impossible—for example, when masses of men are exposed to immediate danger—the priest can absolve without it.) Sins thus confessed are under the seal—that is, the priest is strictly forbidden to mention them outside the confessional, even to the penitent himself—unless, of course, the penitent, seeking further advice, mentions them himself to the priest.

The first indispensable condition is that we be sorry for

our sins. And not any kind of sorrow suffices; it must be sorrow for sin as an offence against God. What makes sin sin is not the damage, if any, done to others—which they might forgive us—but the disobedience to God's law. For that only God can forgive us; and our sorrow must be directed towards Him. Ideally it should be what is called "contrition"—sorrow for having disobeyed a good and loving God, to whom we owe all we have, who is entitled to our obedience. But provided we obey God's command to confess to His priest, a lesser sorrow than that may suffice—sorrow for having forfeited heaven and earned God's punishment. This is "attrition". By itself it would not suffice, but by the power of the sacrament it can.

To the non-Catholic, and even sometimes to the Catholic unnerved by the weight or number of his sins, the priest seems to have no obvious function, to be in fact an intruder in a matter that does not concern him. It is God, they argue, whose law is broken, God whose forgiveness we want; why not tell Him alone one's sorrow? How can we receive divine forgiveness from anyone but God?

For the Catholic, whatever his occasional wish that it should be otherwise, the matter is settled by the words of Christ already quoted—"whose sins you shall forgive, they are forgiven them." It is not for the sinner to decide how his sins shall be forgiven.

But the question is worth a longer look, for a profound principle is involved—God's plan of using men to convey His gifts to men. Life itself is from God, but He uses a human mother and father to give it to us. That, of course, is in the natural order. But it applies to the supernatural as well. His revelation normally comes to men through other men. The men who feel so certain that they must go to God alone for forgiveness, would never know Christ lived, much less died for them, unless men had told them. It may have

been living teachers if they belong to a teaching Church, or the long-dead men who wrote the Bible (to say nothing of the living men who gave it to them and told them what it was).

Of the whole of God's revelation this is true; new birth in Baptism is given by God through man; so is Holy Communion (whatever the special value they attach to it). A reason, one imagines, for Protestants making this solitary exception of forgiveness for sin is that it involves confessing one's sins to a man, which naturally one dislikes.

In fact those who have practised confession see certain high points of suitability in it: two, perhaps, especially.

The first is that it is a direct reversal of the process of sin. In sinning, the will chooses what pleases it, as against what God wills for it. In confessing, the will chooses what displeases it, because God wills that it should.

The second is that in it our sins, put into words weeks or months after we enjoyed them, look their worst. A glass of beer—to take a comparison outside the field of sin—can be a joy in the drinking. But leave the glass unwashed, and come upon it a month after—it will nauseate with its smell. Last month's sins, when we are forced really to look at them, take on their own natural stench.

Provided we are truly sorry and are willing to do whatever is in our power to undo any damage our sins have done to our victims—restoring money stolen, for instance, or retracting accusations we have falsely made against others—we receive absolution. The guilt of our sins is taken away. If our sorrow, though genuine and rightly motivated, has lacked the intensity called for by the sin's wickedness, there may still be punishment to make up for it; but the guilt is gone and the penance—suffered by us in this world or in purgatory—is measurable and will end. For those sins we have escaped the punishment that is eternal. What has already been

referred to as "satisfaction" involves both repairing damage done to others and willingness to do the penance required.

But the great glory of the sacrament is not in the removal of guilt. The soul has been in the darkness of sin. The way to get rid of darkness is not to remove it in some suitable container, but to turn on the light. With confession and absolution, grace is restored to the soul. Once more we are supernaturally alive. As members of the Mystical Body we have been incorporated with Christ, but His life has been blocked from our soul by unrepented sin. Now, He is living in us again.