

# LIFE THROUGH THE SACRAMENTS

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HE activity to which man in this world is apparently so indissolubly wedded and upon which he seems so irrevocably to depend is not and cannot be the sole reason for his existence.

For the importance of material things does not so much depend upon what these things are in themselves as upon the manner in which they can be put to man's use. If man may be said to depend upon material things, it is much the same sort of dependence as a carpenter places upon his tools and building supplies, or a doctor of medicine upon his drugs and scalpel. Without them neither the carpenter nor the doctor can perform the necessary acts of their professions. But certainly neither the tools nor the supplies are necessary to prove that the doctor and the carpenter are men. It ought to be fairly evident, therefore, that material things do not make a man any more than a man may be said to make himself, i. e., in the sense of bringing himself into existence. For the ultimate or proximate end of anything is the ultimate or proximate reason and purpose for that thing's existence. Now, no man has, or even is, in himself the proximate reason for his own existence. The very powers of his being, which he so energetically exerts in subduing and mastering the forces about him, are eloquent clues of his insufficiency, since for their own perfection those powers must turn to things outside of themselves before they can begin to bring about the perfection of man himself.

Now in what does the perfection of man consist? It has always been the teaching of Faith that the perfection of man consists in acknowledging and honoring God, not only as the Creator of all things, but also as the Author of the supernatural and spiritual life in which man by a practical, persevering love of God will one day participate eternally. Coming from the hand of God as a perfect specimen of the creative act, man knows and acknowledges God as his Maker and the Lord of the universe. It is precisely because man before the fall knew the essences or natures of things which he observed or turned to his own advantage, that he aligned and ordained all things to the ultimate end. This, briefly, is the reason for asserting that man,

while not his own end, is the proximate end of the material things about him. For it is only through man composed of body and soul—the material and the spiritual—that natures wholly material are brought to participate as perfectly as possible in the Last End of all Creation, i. e., in God.

But because it is one thing to know the purpose or end of a thing and quite another to employ it in such a way as will rightly and surely attain its end, man, by voluntarily falling away from his original perfect state, by losing sight of the End common to himself and to material things, and being unable of himself to effect a recovery, lost to himself and to material things their destined participation in the End of Creation. However, the Creator was not to be thwarted in His designs. In His goodness and wisdom He provided a means of restoring what man had lost; and by the actuality of this provision man and material creation were guaranteed an attainment of their respective ends in a manner greater and richer than before.

To effect this, the incomprehensible mystery of the Incarnation took place. It was through the instrumentality of Jesus Christ, the Redeemer, that order was to be restored. The salvation of those who preceded Him could be had solely by a belief in His coming; to those who followed Him salvation was granted only on condition of perseverance in the observance of His Commandments.

Manifesting the mandate of the Divine Will, Jesus determined that material things which had suffered, so to speak, because of man's default, should again be brought into harmony with the Ultimate End by becoming for man the material instruments of salvation. In order to accomplish this Christ brought all things under subjection to His human nature, and He perpetuated and elevated this subjection through the Institution of the Sacraments. This subjection of the material things used in the Sacraments is absolute. Saint Ambrose and Saint Thomas Aquinas are of the opinion that Christ, at the Baptism in the Jordan, entered the water that He might, at that very moment, substantially purify it. Indeed, there are numerous accounts in the New Testament wherein Christ makes use of material things when performing His wonders and cures: the mixture of His spittle with the earth, the waters of the pool, the bread and wine of the First Mass. Christ was not limited to this or that instrument either in effecting His cures or in instituting His Sacraments. But since He did choose to use particular material things He gave to them an efficacy which in themselves they did not possess. Furthermore, since man is the principal object in God's plan of Redemption, it seems only reasonable that Christ, in instituting the Sacraments, should take into

account the psychological make-up of man. He ordained, therefore, that these Sacraments should give to man, not only a sensible indication that in their application a supernatural work had been performed upon the soul, but also that the instrument effecting this work should have some quality about it analogous to the effect produced. By Christ's ordinance, then, the Church not only uses certain, determined, and appropriate things as the material of the Sacraments, but prescribes also that these must be used, together with the disposition and application of definite matter, certain definite words. These words are the formal or determining elements of a Sacrament since they designate the purpose for which the Sacrament is intended. Thus the recipient is able to know in a more precise way the work which the Sacrament is destined to perform.

According to Saint Thomas Aquinas<sup>1</sup> the Sacraments of the Church were instituted for the purpose of attaining two things: the perfection of man in those matters which pertain to the worship of God, and the protection of man against the damaging effects of sin. From a comparison of the corporal with the spiritual life of man the unique power of the Sacraments in accomplishing this two-fold supernatural end will be clearly evident.

From the very moment of his conception man is dependent upon the good offices of another for existence itself. His parents, under the providence of God, have given him life and nurtured him. They have provided for his future by giving him as sound an education as their means have permitted, and by doing everything in their power to guard his physical and mental health. With the attainment of man's estate his dependence diminishes, it is true, for no longer does he depend upon others to obtain what he can himself procure. But he is still subject to natural limitations and accidents. So, for the retaining or regaining of his health he seeks the good advices of a reputable physician. Then, for the realization of his natural desire to be happy he looks for a well-ordered society to give him security and peace, and for a woman who, as his wife, will give him love and consideration and help. In the natural order, therefore, extrinsic agencies play a vital part in the perfection of an individual person.

As it is in the natural order so also is it in the supernatural order. God, through His Church, has provided man with the means of commencing and sustaining a life of supernatural perfection and these means are ordinarily indispensable if man is to reach eternal life. The Church, as a Mother, inspired by the love and efficacious grace of the

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<sup>1</sup> *Summa Theol.*, III, q. 65, a. 1.

Holy Spirit, has regenerated men through the waters of Baptism. She has made them participants in that Divine life to which of themselves they could not attain: "Unless a man be born again of water and the Holy Ghost, he cannot enter into the kingdom of God."<sup>2</sup> As a man is physically nourished in his mother's womb for the purpose of reaching, through natural growth, the perfection of body necessary for birth into the world, so the soul of a man, through the Sacrament of Confirmation, is enabled to grow strong in grace. The Bread of Life, which is spiritual nourishment, is contained in the Holy Eucharist: "Except you eat the flesh of the Son of man, and drink His blood, you shall not have life in you."<sup>3</sup> Against the calamity of sin there stands the defense of the Sacrament of Penance. Extreme Unction, the medicine of a contrite soul, removes the sinful inclinations which still impede the preparations for final glory; and it often happens that the holy oils restore health to an ailing body. In his worship of God and in his spiritual relations with his fellows, man is guided by his faithful priests who have been raised to their sacred office and prepared for their duties by the Sacrament of Holy Orders. By the special graces which the Sacrament of Matrimony bestows upon its recipients the primary end of marriage can be achieved and the concupiscences of a nature can be satisfied meritoriously. Furthermore, a man in the married state has the sublime privilege of peopling heaven with saints.

This sanctification brought about by the Sacraments of the Church is the work of Christ. By His Passion and Death He merited, over and over again, a glorious participation in the life eternal; the Seven Sacraments flow from His pierced side as from an inexhaustible source. It is through these that Christ and His Church generate heirs of Divine life; and it is only by rightly using them that we can merit our own eternal reward. What a price was exacted both to guarantee a continuance of this Divine life and to wipe out the awful effects of sin felt even by the insensible and brute elements of creation! Somehow, it seems that only when this is brought forcefully to our consciousness do we become aware of the Ubiquitous Personal Presence of a Being Whose provident hand touches intimately and essentially the very roots of all created natures, and Whose inscrutable plan has decreed that sinful creatures and the sufferings of His Son should be occasions manifesting His Glory and Goodness Eternal.

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<sup>2</sup> *John*, iii, 5.

<sup>3</sup> *John*, vi, 54.