

THE SOURCE OF SACRAMENTAL GRACE

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"Yea, Everyman, hie you and make ready;
There is no Emperor, Baron, Duke, or King
That has from God such high commissioning
As has the humblest priest who daily stands
Holding his Lord and Maker in his hands.
Of the blessed sacraments most precious, rare,
He holds the keys, and thereof has the care.
God gave us sacraments with greatest pain
That on our souls He might blessings rain.
Here in this passing life for you and me,
Seven blessed sacraments there surely be.

When Jesus upon the cross hanged with great smart
He gave to us from out His blessed heart
This very Sacrament; to priests he gave
To give it out again men's souls to save."¹



THIS is a matter of Catholic teaching that the Sacraments of the New Law effect what they signify. According to the Councils of Florence and Trent, they contain the grace which they signify and confer it upon those who worthily receive them. From this fact alone one may easily see that our sacraments have and hold a totally unique position, not only in the whole range of religious doctrine, but even in the doctrine, liturgy, and discipline of the Roman Catholic Church. There is absolutely nothing like the sacramental system in all religious thought and action. Dom Anscar Vonier, O.S.B., brings this out: "The sacramental world is a new world created by God, entirely different from the world of nature and even from the world of spirits. . . . If we spoke with the tongues of angels and men it would not help us in the least to express the sacramental realities. . . . They are 'the mystery which has been hidden from eternity in God who created all things: that the manifold wisdom of God may be made known to the principalities and powers in heavenly places through the Church.' (Eph. III, 9)"² This singular character of the sacraments can be per-

¹ The old morality play *Everyman*, translated and adapted by Dr. William M. Lamers (Catholic Dramatic Movement, Milwaukee, 1936), pp. 38, 39.

² Vonier, Dom Anscar, O.S.B., *A Key to the Doctrine of the Eucharist* (London, 1925), p. 35.

ceived clearly by considering the tremendous work done, for instance, by the first of the sacraments, Baptism. Here we see a physical, sensible washing of the subject's head and hear the uttering of the words of the form; this much is external, visible and audible, but besides and because of this there is a pouring out and infusion of divine grace which produces an internal, spiritual ablution of the soul. Baptismal grace clears away original sin, restoring the soul to the supernatural, divine life of the Godhead and making it a member of Christ's Mystical Body and an heir of heaven. The way, closed before by sin, is now opened for the soul to live virtuously and to attain ultimate, perfect happiness in the possession of God. Baptism is responsible for this marvel, and the other six sacraments likewise each produce their own characteristic, marvelous results. Such results are considered under the caption of *sacramental grace* or *grace of the sacraments*, and it is our purpose to see how the sacraments confer this grace, to see in particular what part Christ's Humanity plays in the whole system.

The first part of our problem is easily settled. Our sacraments confer grace as instrumental efficient causes. Grace is a supernatural gift of God to intellectual creatures for the attainment of eternal life. Sacred Scripture, the decrees of the Councils, the doctrine of the Fathers and of St. Thomas are replete with evidences and proofs that God alone is the Author of grace, the primary efficient cause. "The Lord will give grace and glory."³ "The efficient cause of justification is the merciful God . . . who gratuitously washes and sanctifies."⁴ However, from the same sources we know that the sacraments also in some way confer grace. The sacraments effect what they signify. They are signs of a sacred thing which perfectly sanctify men. They signify grace, the sacred thing, and there is in them a certain power to cause grace in men's souls. This power they have from God, who communicates it to them in a transient manner at the moment the matter and form are actually applied. Thus God uses the sacraments as channels for His grace, as instruments for His work, and in this capacity their effects are to be attributed to God as to the principal agent. St. Thomas affirms this: "It is thus (instrumentally) that the sacraments of the New Law cause grace: for they are instituted by God to be

³ Ps. LXXXIII, 12.

⁴ Council of Trent, Sess. VI, c. 7. Denzinger, *Enchiridion Symbolorum*, no. 799.

employed for the purpose of conferring grace.”⁶ And again, this instrumental causality is both immediate and physical, not merely moral; in no other way can the words of Scripture and the Councils be reasonably interpreted; e.g., in the case of baptism: “Unless a man be born again of (*ex*) water and the Holy Ghost . . .” Besides, physical instrumental causality is more becoming the dignity and perfection of the sacraments of the New Law, since even those of the Old Law possessed the moral causality.

The second part of our discussion is more involved. In this we are concerned with the influence of Christ’s Humanity and Passion upon the sacraments. Just above, reference was made to the dignity and perfection of the sacraments of the New Law; Christ’s Passion is the cause and source of all this dignity and perfection; in that detail we see some of the influence He exerts in the Sacraments. But how is this done? So far we have in mind five things: God—through the sacraments—causes grace—in the souls of men—for eternal life; where in this series does Christ fit? To solve this it seems necessary to recall that Christ’s advent and mission upon earth were for the purpose of restoring a balance and reopening communications. With the fall of our first parents mankind became the heir to their sin and the gates of heaven were closed to all. The deordination of Adam’s will and act had the effect of upsetting the order planned by God for man’s happiness. God was infinitely offended and required an infinite reparation. But His justice was matched by His mercy and in His sheer goodness God sent His only-begotten Son to make reparation and to be “the way, the truth, and the life” for men. Christ, the Son of God, fulfilled this weighty task by being “obedient unto death, even to the death of the cross,” with the result that sin is conquered and man may rejoice in freedom. Finally, in the words of the liturgy, “Christ ascending on high led captivity captive,” bearing in His glorified body the livid marks of His Passion. However, during His sacred ministry Christ instituted the sacraments and that in order to impart grace, to effect man’s salvation: “Unless a man be born again of water and the Holy Ghost, he cannot enter into the kingdom of God,”⁸ and, “Except

⁶ St. Thomas, *Summa Theol.*, IIIa, q. 62, a. 1.

⁸ John, III, 5.

you eat the flesh of the Son of man and drink His blood, you shall not have life in you.”⁷

Above, it has been shown that God is the principal, and the sacraments are the instrumental, cause of grace. As God, Christ instituted the sacraments through the exercise of the Godhead's authoritative power to bestow grace. But the human nature of Christ also plays a part in this. As Man, He died to liberate man from sin and the devil, to effect man's reconciliation with God; since such liberation and reconciliation imply that grace was received by man we must conclude that Christ, as Man, also caused grace. The Humanity of Christ, then, is also an instrument of the Divinity, but certainly not in the same sense in which the sacraments are instruments. It seems, therefore, that while God is the principal efficient cause of sacramental grace, Christ as Man is an instrumental cause *united* to the Divinity through the hypostatic union, and that the sacraments are *separated* instrumental causes. Christ's Humanity is the instrument of His Divinity and in this we may perceive that of all the instruments used by God to impart His grace to men the Humanity of Christ is the most excellent. For this reason we say of Christ as Man that He has the power of excellence in the sacraments. Thus St. Thomas: "Since it is an instrument united to the Godhead in unity of Person, it has a certain headship and efficiency in regard to extrinsic instruments which are the ministers of the Church. Consequently, just as Christ, as God, has power of authority over the sacraments, so, as Man, He has the power of ministry in chief, or power of excellence."⁸

In this matter, then, we have God, the principal cause, bestowing grace on men through Christ, the God-Man and united instrumental cause, who uses for this purpose separated instrumental causes, our seven sacraments. Thus we are able to say with St. Thomas: "Consequently, the saving power must needs be derived by the sacraments from Christ's Godhead through His Humanity."⁹ Christ's Humanity which appeared in ancient Palestine and His glorified Humanity "sitting at the right hand of God" has produced its ageless, salutary effects throughout the years of grace, and from heaven above, even in these days of the twentieth century, is still producing them, through the sacramental signs and agencies. In Palestine He suffered and

⁷ John, vi, 54.

⁸ St. Thomas, *op. cit.*, IIIa, 64, a. 3.

⁹ St. Thomas, *op. cit.*, IIIa, q. 62, a. 5.

in heaven He still bears the wounds of that torture. His sacraments continue to connect men with Him on Calvary and in heaven; though they are separated instruments of the Divinity, they are nevertheless joined to the Trinity through Christ the Man and are applications of the merits and satisfaction of the suffering Christ. The sacraments, causing our justification, are prolongations and continuations of the Passion of Christ and His redemptive power. For though according to His words on the Cross, "it is consummated," His Passion is formally over and Christ will die no more, yet it still continues and remains virtually in the trophies imprinted upon His Body, in the marks of the scourging and in the wounds of His hands and feet and side. Hence when a person is baptized or absolved the Passion is renewed and Christ now actually suffers with the justification of the sinner; not formally but virtually, so that it is Christ who pardons or baptizes, principally by His Divinity, instrumentally by His Passion and His sacraments.

Another way of viewing this question is by considering the ends of the Passion and seeing their identity with the ends of the sacraments. Briefly and substantially this is the way St. Thomas puts it: sacramental grace does two things, removes the defects of sin and perfects the soul in those things which pertain to the worship of God according to the Christian religion. But by His Passion Christ freed us from sin and began the rite of the Christian religion. From this identity it is easy to conclude with St. Thomas: "Wherefore it is manifest that the sacraments of the Church derive their power specially from Christ's Passion, the virtue of which is in a manner united to us by our receiving the sacraments."¹⁰ Christ showed the ends of the sacraments when He spoke of the necessity of Baptism and the Eucharist, for instance; the kingdom of God and eternal life are gained only by the removal of sin and the living of the truly Christian life, all of which is effected by means of the sacraments. Likewise, we know that freedom from sin and the beginning of Christian worship are rooted in the Passion and are its fruit, because it was to redeem us that Christ suffered and died. For the sins of men He made a recompense that effected their redemption not only meritoriously and efficiently, as all His acts did, but especially by completely satisfying the requirements of divine justice. And He initiated Christian worship

¹⁰ St. Thomas, *op. cit.*, IIIa, q. 62, a. 5.

when He "delivered Himself for us, an oblation and a sacrifice to God for an odor of sweetness."¹¹

The identity of the ends of the Passion and of the sacraments seems clear; but there remains to be considered how the individual Christian partakes of and shares in this redemption from sin and in this worship of God provided by the Passion and the sacraments. How is the virtue of Christ's Passion affixed to us through the sacraments? First of all, faith is required, faith in the Passion and faith in the sacraments. This faith gives us our first and basic contact with Almighty God's plan for our redemption. St. Thomas points out that it is by faith in His Passion that men are especially liberated from sin, according to the words of St. Paul: "... Christ Jesus whom God hath proposed to be a propitiation, through faith in his blood . . . for the remission of former sins."¹² Therefore the power of the sacraments especially is had by faith in the Passion of Christ. Such faith was had even in the patriarchal régime of the Old Law, for the faithful of old could look forward and be justified by faith in the One who was to come and to suffer. We today look back to the crucified and risen Christ. This contact with Christ is by an act of the soul, it is a mental apprehension, a psychic thing. But there is also for us of the New Law a corporal contact, a physical possession of Christ in the reception of His sacraments. We do more than look back; we also reach back to that Passion and physically embrace our justification by means of the sacraments, which are both signs and causes of the grace derived from the Passion. Our sanctification implies a threefold causality: efficient, formal, and final; which causality corresponds to the threefold signification of the sacraments: the Passion of Christ, grace, and eternal glory. Thus, in signifying the Passion of Christ, the sacraments provide a unique contact with the efficient cause of our justification. By the *reception* of them, as well as by faith, we *are* in immediate contact with the Passion, and we are each witnesses to the fulfillment of Christ's prophecy: "And I, if I be lifted up from the earth, will draw all things to Myself"—all things, the material world through the matter of the sacraments, and the souls of men through faith and the use of the sacraments.

In conclusion, then, we may note that the causative power of the sacraments has much in common with their significative

¹¹ Eph. v, 2.

¹² Romans III, 25. cf. St. Thomas, *op. cit.*, IIIa, q. 62, a. 5, ad 2.

power. They signify grace, they cause grace, and they derive this grace from the Passion of Christ. From this much alone is seen the vastness of the sacramental sphere. Viewed merely from their significative side, the sacraments are not things of a particular moment or period but, instead, their signification reaches back to the suffering Christ, embraces the spiritual wonders of the present, and reaches forward from time into eternity. Thus, the Passion of Christ, the historical event of centuries gone by, continues to abide with us today in the sacraments where it is a vital principle of their causality and signification.

HOSTIA SALUTARIS

(At Easter)

Rejoice! The bard concealed a deeper truth
In titling her man's "*solitary* boast,"
Whose sinless Child in our frail flesh became
For her and us the Man men needed most—
A thorn-crowned, Cross-throned, conq'ring Victim King,
"Our tainted nature's" *salutary* Host.