

## SIGNS FOR OUR TIMES

---

MATTHEW DONAHUE, O.P.



*CERTAIN MAN* was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho, and he fell in with robbers, who after both stripping him and beating him went their way, leaving him half-dead."

(Luke 10, 30) Adam was the first wounded man; Satan, the first robber. Thousands of years after Adam, Christ, the Good Samaritan, was moved with compassion for wounded man and "bound up his wounds, pouring on oil and wine." (ibid. v.34) Today, twenty centuries after Christ, we poor banished children of Eve are languishing "half-dead" by the wayside once again. Though very much alive to material progress, we are dead to the supernatural life of grace. The medicine urgently needed is the sacramental "oil and wine" left with His Church by the Good Samaritan.

In any age the sacraments must play a vital role in the sanctification of men and the worship of God. But in our times these instruments of Divine Providence seem to be particularly suited to a spiritual reawakening. This conviction is based on two things: the nature of the sacraments, and the materialistic condition of our modern world. The graces which flow from the three sacraments of Baptism, Confirmation and the Eucharist would seem to be especially necessary. This necessity is strikingly manifest when the traditional doctrine of sacramental signification and causality is related to the ills which beset modern society.

### I—SACRAMENTS ARE SIGNS OF OUR SANCTIFICATION

A sign represents to us something other than itself. All sensible things have a kind of natural aptitude for conveying spiritual effects. The eyes, for instance, are natural signs reflecting the condition of the soul. "When Irish eyes are smiling," as the song goes, you know there's joy within; on the other hand, tears are the sign of sorrow in the soul. Conventional or arbitrary signs are distinguished from purely natural ones because they are not designed by nature but by the mind of man. Such signs are significant only to intelligent beings, contrary to the opinion that animals have their own sign language. Probably the most common arbitrary sign today is the STOP sign. We judge almost automatically when we see a STOP sign that it

means "stop your automobile," and not "stop smoking" or "stop talking." The sacraments are HOLY signs and we should be just as familiar with their meanings as we are with STOP signs. There is an initial difference, however, between divine and human signs: the human mind of itself can interpret *human* signs, but to understand *divine* signs it must be aided by Faith, the Scriptures and theology.

Our Divine Savior chose certain material things to be arbitrary signs or symbols of our sanctification because of their natural aptitude to signify the spiritual effects of His own Passion and Death in the souls of men. Water, which is present in all life-giving seeds, He chose as the symbol of regeneration in the spiritual life. The anointing with oil, which relaxes the muscles and strengthens the limbs of athletes, is a fitting sign of the spiritual strength and joyful grace derived from the Passion of Christ. Bread and wine, common elements of nourishment and merriment, become the Divine Food and Drink which nourishes and rejoices the Christian soul.

The sacraments are HOLY signs, pointing to holy things. Like the eyes, they are natural signs of joys and sorrows connected with the interior life of the soul. Like STOP signs, they are arbitrary signs representing things to be done for our own personal sanctification. They point in a special way to the past, present and future.

In recalling the past, the sacraments remind us of the sorrowful passion and death of Our Lord, the source and cause of our sanctification. The waters of Baptism covering our bodies symbolize the spiritual rebirth in the soul caused by the death of Christ and His entombment in the sepulcher. "For we were buried with Him by means of Baptism into death, in order that just as Christ has arisen from the dead through the glory of the Father, so we also may walk in the newness of life." (Rom. 6, 4) The anointing with chrism in the form of a cross in Confirmation directs the attention of the newly-confirmed person to the spiritual strength of the cross. It is from Christ, the One Anointed "with the oil of gladness above his fellows" (Ps. 44,8) that we draw the supernatural courage and grace to persevere in the way of sanctification. The separate consecration of the bread and wine, and the subsequent commingling of the Body and Blood before reception of the Sacrament of the Eucharist signifies the union of the Mystical Body of Christ which was effected only at the price of the separation of the physical Body and Blood during the passion. "For as often as you shall eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the death of the Lord, until He comes." (I Cor. 11, 26)

In signifying the present, the sacramental elements are a graphic

chart of the virtues and joyful blessings that come with the fruitful reception of the Sacraments. The washing of the body with water in Baptism suggests the washing of the soul by sanctifying grace, and the coolness of the water indicates the infusion of virtues which will mitigate concupiscence. "For the death that He died, He died to sin once for all, but the life that He lives, He lives unto God. Thus do you consider yourselves also as dead to sin, but alive to God in Christ Jesus." (Rom. 6,11) The anointing of Confirmation suggests a soldier armed with the grace of the Holy Ghost for spiritual combat, while the mixture of sweet-smelling balsam and olive oil—the ingredients of the chrism of Confirmation—points to the special virtues needed "for the building up of the body of Christ, until we all attain to the unity of the faith and of the deep knowledge of the Son of God, to perfect manhood, to the mature measure of the fullness of Christ." (Ephes. 4,13) The species of bread and wine suggest that whatever food and drink do to the body—that is, nourish, sustain, repair and delight—the Eucharist is doing to the soul of the communicant. "For My Flesh is meat indeed; My Blood is drink indeed." (Jn. 6,56)

The Sacraments also give us a kind of travelogue of far-away places: the future glory of heaven, the goal of our sanctification. Rising from the font we are reminded again that Christ rose from the dead and this points to our own future resurrection of the body. "For if we have been united with him in the likeness of his death (in Baptism), we shall be so in the likeness of his resurrection also." (Rom. 6,5) The oil of chrism reminds us that "we ourselves also who have the first-fruits of the Spirit" are destined for the joys of heaven and the society of the saints forever—"we ourselves groan within ourselves, waiting for the adoption as sons, the redemption of our body." (Rom. 8,23) The Eucharistic bread and wine puts us in mind of a Sacred Banquet, since "This is the bread that has come down from heaven. . . . He who eats this bread will live forever." (John 6, 59) The gathering of the faithful around the banquet-table recalls the parable of Christ, "The kingdom of heaven is like a king who made a marriage feast for his son." (Matt. 22,2) And it points to the words of the Apocalypse, "Blessed are they who are called to the marriage supper of the Lamb." (Apoc. 19,9)

## II—SACRAMENTS ARE CAUSES OF GRACE

When He instituted the sacraments, Christ established the first "air lift" between earth and heaven. It was a supernatural forerunner of the "Berlin air lift" of a few years ago. The air lift to Berlin was a sign to the people of West Berlin and to the whole world that

the free world would come to the aid of a city surrounded by Communist blockade. It also had the effect of maintaining the normal free life of the people of the city by supplying food and other necessities of life. Just as the purpose of the Berlin air lift was to keep Berlin and Western Germany in close union with the Western Allies, so the purpose of the sacraments is to bring us into union with Christ. "Father, I will that where I am, they also whom Thou hast given may be with Me." (John 17, 27) To keep the citizens of Berlin living like free men it took plane loads of supplies; to keep us living with Christ it takes sanctifying grace. If Christ did not leave us these supernatural vehicles of grace, union with Him in this valley of sin would be well-nigh impossible. We can be sure, then, that when St. Paul says Baptism incorporates us with Christ, he means that Baptism is the cause of grace, which makes us pleasing to Christ. "For all you who have been baptized in Christ have put on Christ." (Gal. 3, 27) Baptism, the Eucharist and the other sacraments form an air lift which is a sign of Christ's promise to remain with us all days, and which also confers upon us that divine life of grace which enables us to live the Christian life though we be surrounded continuously by a blockade of sin.

To appreciate the efficiency of this supernatural air lift and to see the dignity of sacramental causality, we must contrast it with the other ways of gaining grace. First, there is the occasional cause of grace. This is not really a cause of grace, but rather God just takes the opportunity to give us grace. A feast day of Christ or the Blessed Mother can be the occasion for the bestowal of grace; at these times God is like a wealthy father who takes this opportunity to lavish His riches on His loving children. The conferral of a sacrament and the giving of grace, however, are not just coincidental. For, when we "put on Christ," as St. Paul says, the consequent incorporation into the Mystical Body of Christ is the result of true efficient causality on the part of the sacrament of Baptism.

An efficient cause is a positive principle that sets the effect in motion. As an engineer simply pulls the lever and the engine begins to move the train, so the water of Baptism, as St. Augustine writes, just "touches the soul and cleanses the heart." It would seem, then, that the efficient cause must somehow, contain the effect and yet be distinct from that effect. Thus it is that Tertullian could say that at the moment of Baptism the waters "imbibe the power of sanctifying." They are in that one instant more powerful than the power-laden waters of Niagara Falls.

Another bugaboo to the true appreciation of sacramental causal-

ity is the distinction between the moral cause and the physical cause. The professional lobbyist has a great deal to do with the passage of a bill in Congress, but does he really enact any law? He does not enact a particular law, but, by convincing the congressmen of the benefit and the necessity of a proposed bill, the lobbyist becomes a moral cause in passing legislation. His is the power of persuasion. We are all lobbyists of one kind or another at the court of heaven. Sometimes we carry our lobby straight to the throne of God; more often than not, we seek the intercession of one or more of the saints, who are undeniably more powerful lobbyists than we. Moses, on the other hand, is an example of a true physical cause in a miraculous way. When the Israelites were encamped in the desert without water, Moses "struck the rock in the wilderness and gave them to drink, as out of the great deep." (Ps. 77, 15) The sacraments are physical causes like the rod of Moses which struck the rock and brought forth water. The sacraments touch the body and cleanse the heart in a quasi-miraculous manner. If Christ left us no more than moral causes of grace, or letters of recommendation to God the Father for grace, we might well have reason to complain that grace and salvation were too hard to attain. But we have the assurance of the Council of Trent that the sacraments confer grace of themselves. Yet to avoid attributing too much to sacramental causality, we must make it clear that the sacraments are not principal causes of grace.

Only God can be the principal cause of grace, for grace is the participation of the divine life in the soul. A sacrament is no more the cause of divine life in the soul without God than John Hancock's celebrated quill was the cause of inscribing his name on the Declaration of Independence. Without the hand of John Hancock directing this quill, there would have been no signature; without God, there is no grace.

But this does not mean that the sacraments are only dispositive causes in the production of grace. A preacher may be a dispositive cause in the production of grace. He is like a man who plants and waters a garden, disposing the soil to yield bountifully at harvest-time. The preacher's sermon helps prepare the soul for grace, but it is only God who achieves the final effect of grace. "I have planted, Apollos watered, but God has given the increase." (I Cor. 3, 6) Now the sacraments do more than just help us to gain grace; they actually work *instrumentally* towards the ultimate effect, grace in our souls.

John Hancock's quill, we said, could not presume to sign the Declaration of Independence, but in the hand of its owner it performed one of the boldest acts of all history. This is because an



instrument does not act on its own power, but in virtue of the impetus it receives from its principal cause. The only apparent work of a quill is to scratch some ink across a parchment. Hancock's quill, however, drank in all the daring of its owner and poured it out into the Declaration. The final effect of the quill and the signature was to ignite revolution, to assert "these united colonies are and of right ought to be, free and independent states."

When Tertullian writes that the waters of Baptism imbibe sanctification, and when St. Ambrose speaks of the very presence of divinity in the water at the moment of Baptism, we are to understand that grace is in the water as revolution was in Hancock's quill. Divine grace does not remain in the water—only an intellectual creature is a fit subject for the reception of grace permanently—but pours forth into the soul, just as revolution burst forth from Hancock's quill into the hearts of the American colonists. Grace frees the soul from Satan and makes the Christian burn with love of God. Moved by this sacramental effect, the Christian soul becomes free in the liberty of divine grace; his most insignificant act takes on a supernatural character, echoing in heaven like the revolutionary "shot heard round the world."

### III—SACRAMENTAL LIFE IN OUR TIMES

When Our Lord departed this world, He was like the Good Samaritan who gave two denarii to the innkeeper and pointed to the wounded man, saying: "Take care of him and whatever more thou spendest, I, on my way back, will repay thee." (St. Luke 10, 35) We have seen how sacramental signification and causality are two precious denarii of salvation. It is humbling, but nonetheless necessary, to recognize our dependence on water, oil, bread and wine for instruction in the way of salvation, for grace and ultimate friendship with Almighty God. God's use of these material elements in conferring grace further underscores the fundamental truth that material things, created by God, are good in themselves and useful for man. By the same Divine Plan, the sacramental elements are also spiritual "life preservers" that will save us from the superstitious waters of godless materialism.

We live in an age dazzled by material progress. Three things are held sacred: production, the atom and the dollar. Secularistic propaganda constantly seeks to eradicate the Most Holy and Eternal Trinity in favor of this human triad. To see the broad import of the sacraments, we need only contrast these holy signs of *spiritual* advancement against the pragmatic signs of *material* progress.

Production is the materialistic symbol of reorganization. It represents steady scientific and technological advances under Capitalism. For the Communists, production is the hope of future glory. Ultimately, they maintain, productional difficulties in capitalistic society will cause tremendous conflicts which will usher in their goal of world communism. Actually, the inhuman methods of mass-production emphasize the pressing need, not for Communism, but for the grace of Christian Baptism. Baptism is the sacrament of spiritual rebirth. Spiritual reorganization must keep ahead of material progress and scientific discovery if sanity is to be preserved in the world. The light of faith received at Baptism acknowledges the true value of the human laborer: a child of God reborn for eternal life. Mass-production thus becomes geared for the service of man, enabling him more readily to worship the God Who died to redeem him.

The most recent offspring of modern scientific production is the incarnate atom. Naturalistic scientists, overwhelmed with the power unearthed in a senseless, material atom, would have us worship this atom as the savior of mankind. Atomic power is the end and the consummation of modern scientific achievement. But the world will never be saved by this superstitious cult of a tiny particle of matter. Catholics have a far more effective Savior in the Blessed Sacrament. Superficially, the Eucharist is but a tiny particle of matter. Yet It contains the living substance of Christ's Body and Blood. And Christ alone has the wisdom and power to discourage war. In splitting the atom men found a hidden storehouse of natural energy which they have not yet learned to control for the service of mankind. If they would only go to the Eucharistic Heart of Jesus, the Font of supernatural life and holiness, they would learn how to convert the atom of war into the atom of peace.

The spirit of pragmatism has spawned our policy of dollar diplomacy. We have envisioned the dollar not only as the elixir of our national growth but as the cure-all for international problems: witness the Marshall Plan for European recovery. Economic strength is only part of the answer; Europe needs spiritual strength. The fragrant chrism of Confirmation, "the good odor of Christ" (II Cor. 2, 15), should remind us that international friendship can never be purchased by material wealth alone. To prove to the world that American generosity is not prompted by selfish economic expediency, our gifts must radiate this good odor of Christ."

#### IV—CONCLUSION

The conflict between Christianity and materialism lines up like

a battle between David and Goliath. "David took a sling and went forth against the Philistine. And the Philistine came on and drew nigh against David, and his armour-bearer before him." (I Kings 17, 40-41) As individual Catholics we have water, oil, bread and wine—our sacramental life in Christ—with which to go forth against mass-production the atom bomb and a multi-billion dollar budget. But, as "David prevailed over the Philistine with a sling and a stone" (ibid. v.50), so Christ, Our Good Samaritan, prevails over sin and Satan with sacramental "oil and wine."