



## THE SACRAMENTS: SYMBOLS OF LIFE

**H**OW MANY TIMES have you heard the expression: "You can't overdo a good thing?" Perhaps you've used the saying yourself. Like most adages, there's a lot of truth to it. Apply the saying to the sacraments and see how true it is. These channels of life-giving and soul-nourishing grace are "good things" we can never use too much. No matter how many times we avail ourselves of them, no matter how well we use them, Christ wants us to return to them again and again, because they are among the surest ways to grow in holiness. Unless we become more and more like Christ we cannot become saints, or be able to enjoy the eternal reward that Almighty God has prepared for His children. But how do we become more Christlike? By sharing in the life of Christ, by doing as much as we can to put on the Christ. Our Lord calls us all to Himself and has given us the sacraments as effective means to put on Him "whom the heavens and the earth could not contain."

Why did the Son of God give us these life-giving sacraments? The answer is simple: because He loved us. His greatest act of love during His Incarnate life among men was His Passion and Death. "Greater love than this no one has, that one lay down his life for his friends" (*John 15:13*). With His death, Jesus sealed His love for all men; sinners and wanderers from God could now rejoice and proclaim the Good Tidings: 'By His death, we are free. We were dead to the life of grace, now we live. It is not we who live, but Christ lives within us.' It seems paradoxical doesn't it, that His death purchased our life; that Love Incarnate had to die in order to lead us from the death of sin to the life of the sons of God.

When Our Lord sacrificed His life for us on Calvary, His death became the source of our life of grace. When blood and water poured out of His lance-pierced heart, the life-giving sacraments received power "to raise all men up." When the soldier's spear opened the Saviour's side, the gate of life was opened, said St. Augustine. From the pierced heart of Jesus rivers of grace were to be poured out upon the world to sanctify the Church.

How are we to understand the full meaning of the sacraments in our lives? Can we do so? By our senses we only perceive the water, bread, wine, oil, words, etc., which go to make up the external elements of the

sacraments. But faith helps us see the hidden reality which the sacraments represent and bring about. When the priest pours water over a baby's forehead and says the words: "I baptize you in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit," we know with the certainty of faith, that the soul of that baby has begun to live in Christ, has been raised to a life of grace.

From the time of Christ the Church has cherished and guarded from error the teaching and use of the sacraments. Our Lord left to His Spouse, the Church, these most precious gifts because He wanted the fruits of His Passion and Death applied to sinners in all ages and places.

In order that we might better understand and love these gifts of God's love, let us now consider the meaning of the word "sacrament." The Latin word, *sacramentum*, means a thing made sacred. A thing made sacred can be such, either because of the very sort of thing it is, or because it is designated sacred and reserved for sacred use. The very name of God is sacred, not to mention God Himself. Also, any altar, building, chalice, prayer, etc., which is dedicated, consecrated to God and His service, is sacred. The sacraments are sacred things because we become sanctified through them. Christ instituted them so that His grace could be applied to us whenever we used them. The grace we receive with the use of the sacraments is truly that sacred thing which is symbolized by the external thing, such as the water and words used in Baptism. Thus Jesus Christ, because He loved us, not only died for us, but left us these very simple, but most effective means of becoming partakers, sharers with Him, in life ever-lasting.

We define sacraments as "visible signs, instituted by Christ, which sanctify man and lead him to life ever-lasting." A sign is a symbol, an image, an indication, a token. By the symbol we are led to that which is symbolized, to that which is signified. The curl of smoke seen from a forester's fire-tower is a sign or indication that fire has begun in the forest and may soon become a devastating conflagration unless it is put out in time. The traffic lights and hand signals of policemen are signs or symbols which motorists learn to respect and obey in order to keep traffic moving smoothly and efficiently. The importance of the symbol lies not in itself, but in the thing symbolized.

The knowledge of signs and their meaning has always fascinated the mind of man. Our Lord referred to signs very often: "You know then how to read the face of the sky, but cannot read the signs of the times" (*Matt.* 16:4). "An evil and adulterous generation demands a sign, and no sign

shall be given it but the sign of Jonas the prophet" (*Matt.* 12:39). "And then will appear the sign of the Son of Man in heaven" (*Matt.* 24:30). In Mark Twain's *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, Ole Jim tells Huck that: ". . . signs is signs, . . . en I knowed jis' 's well 'at I 'uz gwinter be rich ag'in as I's a-stannin' heah dis minute!" (Jim knows that, because he had a hairy chest and had been rich once before; he would be rich again.) There's no point in going into more examples of the knowledge and use of signs and symbols. Everyone knows and uses hundreds of them daily. The very words we speak and write are but signs, expressive of ideas and emotions which we could never communicate intelligently to others without some pre-arranged symbols.

When Our Lord left us symbols of life-giving and life-nourishing sanctification in the sacraments, He used ordinary and common things like water, bread, oil and wine. He knew that we have to rely on sensible objects to arrive at a deeper knowledge of spiritual truths. When we see the bishop imposing his hands and hear the words of Ordination, we know that grace and spiritual power is poured forth into the soul of the one being ordained, and that his soul receives a mark, a character which sets him apart forever. In the celebration of the Eucharist, the priest in the name of Christ is able to change bread and wine into the true Body and Blood of Christ. The symbols and indicators, are representatives, so to speak, of the hidden realities. The workings of grace within the soul are symbolized and brought about by the sacraments.

Because Christ so intends it, the sacraments of the New Law contain and confer life-giving grace. The sacraments of the Old Law, such as circumcision, the Paschal Lamb, sacrifices of animals, tithes, etc., did not effect grace in this way. Because they prefigured, in one way or another, the redemption that was to come in the Christ, they caused grace in virtue of the faith the Israelites had in the Christ. The sacraments of the New Law work differently. They are not only symbols that the one who uses them believes in Christ. These seven sacraments actually bring about what they symbolize or signify. The penitent who contritely confesses his sins and receives absolution really has all his sins forgiven in virtue of the power of the sacrament of Penance. Christ, to Whom all power in heaven and on earth had been given, willed that His life-giving and life-nourishing grace be applied to us through the sacraments.

The Angelic Doctor has exposed for us in a most lucid way the reason why there are seven sacraments. Of course, Catholic faith teaches us that there are seven, but St. Thomas wants to show how completely reasonable

and fitting it is that we have seven sacraments. His explanation is based on comparisons between the life of the body in relation to man's life in this world, and the life of the soul in relation to man's life in Christ. To begin life in this world man must be born; in his spiritual life man is born in Baptism, and begins to live a life of grace in Christ. Then man must grow and gain in strength to meet the rugged and difficult situations of this world; in his life of grace, man needs Confirmation to strengthen him and bring him to maturity in Christ's society. Without food our bodily life and strength would weaken and eventually cease; through the Eucharist, the sacrament of Christ's Body and Blood, we are nourished by a food more powerful than the manna which fed the Israelites in the desert. ("Unless you eat the body of the Son of Man and drink His blood, you shall not have life in you" *John* 6:54.) Because man is subject to sickness and infirmity, he needs medicines and diets to restore his health; the sacrament of Penance renews the spiritual life in man which has become weakened or destroyed by sin. After medicines and diets have cured him from a serious illness, a long period of convalescence may be needed to insure a return to full strength and health; Extreme Unction removes the remains of sin which weaken the soul, and prepares it to pass from this world to the glory of heaven. In order to safe-guard and insure the social aspects of man's life on earth, men assume the role of leadership in order to rule and direct others, and to perform public acts; in the life of the soul, some men are marked by the sacrament of Orders to rule over Christ's fold and to perform communal acts. Life on earth would vanish without the propagation of off-spring; the sacrament of Matrimony insures graces to those who accept partnership with God in bringing souls into the world. Thus by means of the seven sacraments, man's life of grace is begun, matures, is nourished, repaired and fortified, and man's society is insured of spiritual leaders and future generations.

Just as the symbols vary from sacrament to sacrament, so too the effect of each of the sacraments varies in our souls. Christ instituted each of them with a definite purpose in mind; the sacramental grace given in each one is a definite aid from God in achieving the particular purpose which Christ intended. Besides the addition of special graces to the soul, the reception of these channels of Christ's life also brings to the soul sanctifying grace and the grace of the virtues and the gifts of the Holy Spirit. The soul already in the state of sanctifying grace receives an increase of these graces as often as it receives the sacraments, and a soul in the state of sin is regenerated to a life of grace by the sacraments of Baptism and Penance.

Although the graces vary according to the different sacraments, they are all life-giving; so too, although the symbols vary they are all symbols of life. But the Eucharist, symbolized by food, the bread and wine, is more intimately connected with life than the other sacraments. Without food there would not be any life. Most of man's efforts on this earth are directly or indirectly concerned with obtaining food. Rulers will plunge whole nations into bloody wars to assure adequate food-supplies for their citizens. The majority of the inhabitants of this globe are engaged in raising edibles for themselves and their families. A famine or flood will upset governments until adequate emergency measures are taken to assure the people of enough food; the Red Cross is always alerted for such crises. The Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations works continually to better the methods of agriculture, and individual governments allot billions of dollars annually for the same purposes. Enough food guarantees the continuance of life; without it life would cease. Food is one of the elemental necessities of life.

We have often heard that of all foods, bread is the "staff of life," and it is true in the supernatural order too, for the Eucharist, the Bread of Life, is the staff of the spiritual life and the key to the other sacraments. Baptism is received to prepare the Christian for the Eucharist; Confirmation strengthens the soul in public profession of the faith that it may continue to frequent the sacrament of life, and the only reason for Penance is the immediate preparation to receive Holy Communion. Holy Orders pledges the continuation of the "other Christs," who will bring the bread of life to God's people, and finally, Extreme Unction prepares and strengthens the sick to receive Viaticum. The Eucharist is the heart and soul of the sacramental system.

We need food to sustain life in our bodies in order to keep functioning. There is not much point in being alive if we cannot perform the vital functions of the living. Movement and activity are the sure signs of life; we call a person vital, full of life, when he manifests enthusiasm and activity. But the person that we admire most, the hero of the great novels and plays, the hero of our own dreams, is the lover. And this is understandable, for to love is the highest activity, the most God-like of all man's activities in this life. So . . . food to sustain life and life to be spent in loving. It is the same in the life with God. We need union with the Bread of Life to sustain our souls in grace so that we may continue to grow in the love of God and our neighbor. As food is for our bodies, so is the Eucharist for our souls.

It would be foolish to pay more attention to the symbol of the Eucharist than the reality itself. But we can realize ever more deeply that the life-giving food symbolized by the bread and wine points to the mysterious reality of the life-giving sacrament of the Bread of Life:

I am the living bread that has come down from heaven. If anyone shall eat of this bread he shall live forever; and the bread that I shall give is my flesh for the life of the world. For my flesh is food indeed, and my blood is drink indeed. He who eats my flesh and drinks my blood abides in me and I in him. As the living Father has sent me, and as I live because of the Father, so he who eats me, he also shall live because of me (*John 6:51-58*).

—Arthur Bernardin, O.P.

## ONLY THIS AND NOTHING MORE

*Once upon a midnight dreary,  
while I pondered weak and weary,  
over many a quaint and curious volume  
of forgotten lore,  
while I nodded nearly napping,  
suddenly there came a tapping,  
as of someone gently rapping,  
rapping at my chamber door.  
" 'Tis some visitor I muttered,  
. . . only this and nothing more."*

**P**ROBING THE THINGS that make men happy, St. Thomas Aquinas in his *Summa of Theology* reminds me of a poetic picture by Poe. The likeness revolves around a vivid image used by both although in different ways. Pondering the riddle of happiness, each artist employs the concept of a "visitor": Poe, directly and by name in his morbid poem, "The Raven"; St. Thomas, deftly hinting in his animated question, "Concerning the Things in Which Man's Happiness Can Consist."