

## THE SACRAMENTS: A BRIDGE OR BARRIER TO REUNION?

St. John's gospel, the most sacramental of the four, has been called a liturgical "Vademecum" for the faithful. Many sacramental themes in John are only now being appreciated because of a failure to read him as a Semite writing in the Semitic tradition which shaped its theology according to the symbols of saving history. But we scarcely need help from the exegetes to be aware that the Fourth Gospel places Christ's Last Discourse in a sacramental, above all Eucharistic, setting. References to the Mission of the Paraclete and the Divine Indwelling, the Mystical Body explained in terms of the vine and branches, Christ's earnest prayer to the Father for the oneness of the disciples in Him as He is one in the Father, all are charged with the import of the Eucharistic Banquet which is here evaluated rather than described.

### Christ's Spirit

The Protestant scholar, Neville Clark, has a caution perhaps as timely for Catholics as it is for Protestants when he deplors the contrast set up between Baptism as the Sacrament of the Spirit and the Eucharist as the Sacrament of Christ's reception. "To ignore either the Lord or the Spirit in the interpretation of the sacraments is, in the end, to deprive them of the fulness either of their personal, redemptive significance or their dynamic power."<sup>1</sup> The sacraments are at once cosmic and personal, for Christ's humanity, which was and is the instrument of salvation for all men, mediates the imparting of the Spirit to the souls of individual men made one with Christ in the Spirit. Scripture, in fact, does not hesitate to refer to the Spirit as it works to build up the Mystical Body which is the Church as Christ's Spirit. It is only when Baptism is seen in its Christ and Spirit dimension (sanctification by way of incorporation into Christ) that the Eucharist can be appreciated as the pattern and fulfillment of all that is set forth in the Baptismal rite.

This dual aspect of the sacraments, Christ and His Spirit, which we find so graphically and yet mystically described in St. Paul's sacramental

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<sup>1</sup> Neville Clark, *An Approach to the Theology of the Sacraments*, No. 17 in "Studies in Biblical Theology." (London: SCM Press, 1956), p. 77.

passages, alone prevents a distorted view of the process of Christian sanctification. This distorted view in one case might make the process too "spiritualized" and all but angelic (Protestantism); in the other it might so highlight the role of the objective "church" symbols that the necessity of the response of the believer through faith to these, in fact, Christ-symbols is downgraded or lost from view altogether. This last is a perennial danger in the Catholic Church whenever the liturgy appears to be more a spectacle than a sacred action to be done by priest and people in union with Christ, the High Priest. Though it is perfectly true that objective cult rendered to the Father by Christ and His priest-ministers on behalf of the people cannot be vitiated by any human deficiencies, the vitality and clarity of the liturgy has profound repercussions on both the believing and worshipping of the priesthood of the faithful.

Again, Catholic catechesis and even Catholic theologians have sometimes so stressed the Christ-efficacy of the sacraments that interior preparation for receiving Christ's Spirit and the need of a faith-response to the symbols of Christ's mysteries are thrust into the background of the Catholics' religious experience.

The Protestant Reformers, for their part, failing to strike a proper balance in their salvation theology between the God-Man and His Paraclete, however much the redeeming work of Christ be prized, inevitably led men along to think of the period in human history which lies between Pentecost and the Parousia as the "Age of the Spirit." The full implications of the fact that the grace imparted by the Spirit is Christ's grace were never developed by the Reformers and their disciples, for their march was in quite a contrary direction. With such an overemphasis on the Spirit and the subjective, liturgy and *ekklesia* were bound to suffer. It is only when the mediating role of Christ's humanity in man's redemption, not at Calvary only, but in the present moment, is made an integral part of salvation theology, that a firm and comprehensible place can be found for a visible church, sacraments and ritual. If we do not see that we live in the "Age of Christ's Liturgy" as well as in the "Age of the Spirit," we are not in a position to grasp how, to use Father Weigel's neat phrase, "liturgy and ecclesiology are functions of each other" and how both in turn show us the way Christ intended us to become members of the community of the saved.

### **The Word of Promise**

It should hardly surprise us that Luther, who grounded his faith in Christ's Word of Promise but failed to relate Christ's physical reality to

here-and-now sanctification, would be at a loss to see any purpose behind the Eucharistic Real Presence. He stoutly affirmed it, for Scripture told him Christ was really present, but the why of it seems totally to have escaped him. This blind spot also made the Catholic doctrine of the Eucharistic Sacrifice incomprehensible and repugnant to him. Modern Protestant exegetes and liturgists are slowly and painfully coming to see that some kind of Real Presence is necessary to make tenable an interpretation of the Communion Service as a corporate, ecclesial action of worship in the fullest sense, i.e. a true communion of sacrifice achieved by a corporate union with the Eucharistized Christ.

The setting for Christ's plea for unity—the Last Supper—shows clearly enough where Protestants and Catholics must concentrate their study and prayer: the true and complete meaning of the Lord's Supper and the relating of this meaning to Christ's humanity now in glory at the right hand of the Father.

While it is encouraging that both Calvin and Luther tried to foster sacramental practice, their failure adequately to relate the sacraments and especially the Real Presence to Christ's glorified humanity, the only grounding for a sacramental church and a sacramental life, made the relatively swift and prolonged desacramentalization of Protestantism all but inevitable.

### **The Synagogue of Satan**

Against this theological background, it should be possible for us to appreciate why the Reformers reacted as they did to Roman institutionalism and its man-contrived sacramental "machinery." The Reformers were attacking far more than current abuses and pastoral deficiencies. They had evolved a theory of salvation which saw the presence and activity of the Spirit in the Scriptures and in the hearts of believers in the Word, but not in a human institution, a creaturely and historical entity which sacrilegiously usurped prerogatives proper to God alone. The full implications of the God-Man's intrusion into human history could find no room in a theology that so emphasized the subjective. Christ was hailed as Redeemer of men, but the causal role of Christ in His humanity, as well as His divinity, as it is prolonged in history through His Church, was missed or denied. Christ is Lord of History as well as Redeemer. That visible Church which is the sacrament of His glorified body, now hidden from us as wayfarers, is used by Christ to save men and to bring the entire historical process to its appointed goals. The Christian who lacks or spurns a theology of history will

have no way of distinguishing man-made corruption in the Church from those stages of development in any institution's history which witness to its vitality and purposefulness.

I have felt it worth the trouble to sketch in the general sacramental outlook of the sixteenth century Reformers because this subjective and anti-Scholastic inheritance continues profoundly to affect all branches of modern Protestantism. Encouraging efforts are being made today, especially in the European communions, not only for worship revival (a balanced, aesthetically pleasing service) but for a deeper liturgical renewal, passing beyond mere art-forms to the sacramental basis of community worship. Still, while the Protestant liturgists and biblical theologians who spearhead this revival acknowledge receiving invaluable insight and inspiration from "fellow" Catholic liturgists like Casel and Jungmann, their alienation from official and Scholastic theology, if anything, has grown more absolute. It is crucial, then, accurately to relate Scholasticism to the development and formulation of Catholic sacramental teaching so that Augustine, Aquinas and twentieth century Catholic liturgists (widely read and appreciated) might be shown to be in a direct and coherent line of descent. This clarification should help the liturgists themselves to relate sacramental theology to liturgy and, in the process, perhaps win converts to the sacramental revival among those Protestants who, for whatever reasons, are unresponsive to aesthetic or liturgical values in public worship.

### **Institutionalism Versus the Spirit**

One of the salient facts in the development of sacramental theology is its relative tardiness. If we grant that the Reformers were striving for true union with God, in sincerity and purity, could they help but be struck by the fact that the Roman Catholic Church seemed to offer many arresting and inexplicable contrasts to the simple Gospel message and to primitive Christianity which first received and lived that Message? The Church of the Middle Ages presented to view a vast, complex and powerful society, claiming control and direction over the secular as well as the religious sphere. She had, as she has today, an elaborate cult, a tightly structured hierarchy; in a word She was a highly institutionalized entity.

We cannot hope to understand Protestantism unless we see it, at least in part, as a spontaneous and intensely hostile reaction to institutionalism. This is not to deny that from the Catholic point of view this attack was unduly radical, often confusing the superficial with the essential, denying to authority its rightful place, and too easily identifying all change and

adaptation as unevangelical and corruptive of true Christianity. But we must, at the same time, see the positive and dynamic direction that reaction often took. When Luther, set off by special personal needs and by Gabriel Biel's "Pelagianism," advised his fellow Christians to look at the Scriptures and then at the Papal Church—simplicity and complexity, spirituality and worldliness—there were fifteen centuries intervening that were sketchily known even to the most learned of the doctors.

Even with the recent improvements in discovering and evaluating historical data, Christian sacramental history still remains too often disappointingly meagre and ambiguous. But we do have a much better notion why sacramental teaching was the last of the major theological tracts to take shape.<sup>2</sup> There may be a large measure of truth in the observation that in the early Church the theologians and the Councils were too taken up with problems of Christology and the Trinity to even worry about secondary questions relating to the sacraments.

But if this is taken to be a completely satisfactory answer, we may well miss the relevance here of the attitude of the early Christians towards the sacraments. For them the sacraments were ritualistic actions, liturgical mysteries by which one entered into the Divine Presence, rather than something to be formulated, something to be thought through in terms of a dogmatic definition. The first Christians saw themselves as united to the Lord—as playing a dynamic role in saving history through this sacramental drama. So the definition and numbering of the sacraments would have seemed a peripheral issue if it occurred to them at all. The life of the Church and hence of the Christian was a liturgical unity. It was more important to dispose the soul to take part profitably in this organically unified worship than to dissect its individual components.

### **Pastoral Problems**

What then actually gave chief impetus to the development of sacramental teaching along its present lines? Protestants will frequently remark with some dismay that Catholic teaching, even in the case of doctrine with direct and obvious pastoral relevance, is coldly and mechanically abstract. Starting out with certain vague and rationalistic assumptions torn from Plato or Aristotle's pagan philosophy, the Church strives to unravel and analyze sacred mysteries too slavishly after the fashion of the Western tra-

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<sup>2</sup> Ecclesiology remained in the preserve of the canonists until Cardinal Cajetan snatched it from them on the eve of the Reformation. It is still coming into its own.

ditions in philosophy. In the process, the Divine Mysteries are buried under an ever more imposing dialectic of human devising.

It is crucial to remember that the teaching of the Church on the sacraments unfolded largely as a response to controversy, and controversy played out on the pastoral level. For an early instance, in A.D. 256 Pope St. Stephen at Rome was consulted as to whether sacraments administered by schismatical priests were valid and his answer was that such baptisms were valid, for this was the practice of the Church. "Let nothing be introduced that has not been handed down," he cautioned. The tradition of the Church, its pastoral practice, will be the first norm for the solution of sacramental questions. If Pope St. Stephen knew the theological, as against the pastoral justification for saying that such sacraments were valid in their conferral, he didn't reveal it. It remained for St. Augustine, also provoked by pastoral disputes, fully to develop the classic response: these sacramental acts are more the acts of Christ and His Church than they are the acts of the church's ministers; you cannot frustrate the power and will of Christ provided only that you do what Christ intended to be done. Out of this Augustinian solution to a pastoral problem widespread in North Africa emerged a maturer doctrine of sacramental character bestowed by Baptism, Confirmation and Holy Orders. More than a thousand years later Trent will make this an explicitly defined article of Catholic belief, but it will formulate very little about sacramental character beyond what the Fathers, especially Augustine, have already said.

Another crucial stage in the development of Catholic sacramental teaching occurred when the Scholastics of the Middle Ages developed a definition of sacrament, perfect enough and precise enough to mark off the seven major rites of the New Law from the lesser rites or sacramentals and from other institutions and practices not properly sacramental. How was such a definition fashioned? Largely by applying traditional teaching to a crucial Eucharistic error of Berengarius, a priest of Tours, who wrote about Eucharistic questions in the eleventh century, a time when many thorny but basic issues relating to the Supper of the Lord as meal and sacrifice remained to be worked out. Berengarius maintained that even after the words of consecration have been duly pronounced the Real Presence of Christ has not been achieved but rather a Divine sign has been manifested. Purely and simply a sign to serve as an object for faith. The great Scholastics, above all Peter Lombard, reviewing the controversy that centered about Berengarius' Symbolist theories, and appreciating that such a point of view, whether applied to the Eucharist in particular or to the entire sacramental

system, failed to do justice to Patristic teaching and ran contrary to the obvious intent of the Scriptures, were at pains to point out that a sacrament is not merely a sign but it must also be a cause for it is a sacrament of the New Law founded by Christ—the all-efficacious Redeemer.

So, largely out of reaction to error, a more adequate definition of sacrament was being worked out. Hence, this definition, to take another important instance, was not something arbitrary or bloodless, not something pulled out of the air.

Again, the extensive body of sacramental teaching we find in the decrees of the Council of Trent is largely a condemnation of errors and exaggerations in the Protestant Reformers with a reaffirmation of what the Church traditionally believed and did. A reading of the acts of Trent covering the sessions devoted to sacramental issues reveals the great care exercised by the Fathers of Trent to avoid taking up the nice points of domestic controversy and to leave inviolate the sacredness of God's saving Mysteries viewed as Mysteries.

To be sure, the sacraments have a human, visible, physical side to them, something you can see or feel, e.g., water; something you can hear, and this something can be investigated. Through this human and approachable side to the sacraments as structure, one tries to penetrate their spiritual meaning. But since approach is by what is human and visible, pointed to and explained by the words of Revelation, it is evident from the very method of approach that you can only really *touch* the Mystery, point out what is itself ineffable. There should be no illusion that "Wayfarers" can come to terms with it. The Church is often accused of being overly rational in its treatment, of being "syllogism-happy," eager to draw ever new conclusions apparently for their own sakes. And the concerned critic may well ask: "How does a genuine spiritual life, not to speak of mysticism, flourish here? How can the sacredness of Revelation be preserved when the Divine Message is subjected to such a cold and almost geometrical analysis?"

### **Semitic Theology**

To begin with, allowance must be made for the fact that Western philosophy, Platonist and Aristotelian in its principal sources, inevitably played a very large role in determining the character of Catholic theology both in its lines of development and in its forms of expression. But many reject outright the whole traditional idea of theology as an understandable but vain and often mischievous attempt by men to bring the sublime down

to their own level. It is instructive in any discussion of the validity and merits of traditional theology to recall that the New Testament itself is theological, that its authors were thinking about the Mysteries themselves and were reflecting the thinking of the primitive communities which believed and worshipped under Apostolic guidance.

A human being simply cannot accept in faith a Mystery and drop it into a mental vacuum or freeze it into a kind of mystical abstraction. There has to be the moment when the mind tries to make the Mystery more meaningful in human terms. Otherwise the Mystery itself becomes a philosophy, a subjective view of things. Because man is both body and soul, he strives to express through images, through the concrete, the deeper spiritual realities. Otherwise they will not mean anything to him. And this is exactly what we find in the New Testament. The first Christians were constantly trying to better express who Christ is: is He God?, is He man?, is He both? What is Baptism? When is the Holy Spirit given and what does this mean? These questions can only be approached on a theological plane but a startling thing is that for centuries Christians forgot or ignored just how much theology there is in the New Testament. The New Testament authors were almost exclusively Semitic in their cast of thought. The Semites reasoned about things through images because they were an Eastern people, but they had received as a bequest from their Greek conquerors an alphabet-language. So there was an immense enterprise to express image-ful thoughts through an alphabet built on sounds rather than pictured realities. And the story of the New Testament in relation to the sacraments in particular is the struggle of the Semitic mind to take up the familiar images of the Old Testament—Creation, Noah's Ark, the Crossing of the Red Sea, the Crossing of the Jordan, and so forth—and attempt to give them new meaning and life in the dimension of Christ's transforming actions. For these Old Covenant happenings were the philosophical and theological tools, the mental furniture, of the Jews. And we with Western minds, trained in Plato and Aristotle, or positive and negative reactions to the same, when reading the New Testament which lies in direct line of inheritance, spiritual and intellectual, to the Old, are inclined to say: "Here at last I'm away from the involvements of philosophy and theology. Here is the Pure Word of God." It *is* the Pure Word of God but none the less affected by the encounter of the human mind with it. God's giving was according to the Jews' own capacity and manner of receiving. For the truth of God is for man—for the mind and spirit of man and it must be assimilated in a meaningful way.



Another characteristic of Western theology too little appreciated is that the Scholastics didn't really go so very far beyond what the Fathers of the Church had presented as the Deposit of Faith. They expressed it in a more technical language than the Fathers who were thoroughly Biblical and therefore Semitic in the sources of their theology. As Canon Kelly has pointed out in his useful survey *Early Christian Doctrines*, we can notice in the fourth and fifth centuries the emergence of certain ideas, ideas which were to pave the way for the mature Mediaeval doctrine. The Protestant Reformers, with a sparse and desultory knowledge of sacramental theology's evolution, saw its Mediaeval form as a kind of theological "Topsy." They wondered how it had come about and found culprits ready-to-hand in the despised Schoolmen. Was there not an obligation to cut away what was un-Scriptural, to destroy this contrived system, an encumbrance blocking approach to an unchanging and ineffable God?

A further difficulty preventing them from seeing the matter in full perspective was their slight contact with the Eastern Church where there was very little of Scholasticism, but where the authentic Church tradition had been preserved. The Reformers saw the Church's teaching only in its Western and dialectical forms and being, as a movement, anti-Scholastic in temper, there was always the temptation to equate Church Tradition, from its earliest appearances, with the gross and ungodly arrogance of the Scholastics. Corruption was to be found not merely in the Schoolmen but even in "the following of the Apostles." It is instructive to see the moderating and sacramental effect Protestant contact with the Orthodox has had in our own era.

Sacramental teaching is rooted in the Mystery of Christ. We believe as Christians that the humanity of Christ is the instrument of our salvation. The Fathers of the Church clearly saw that the sacraments were a part, an extension of the Sacred Humanity, bringing grace to men as instruments of Christ in his human nature, supreme instrument of our salvation. The crucial problem in the dialogue between Catholics and Protestants in almost all areas of thought is going to be—What relation is to be set between the physical and the spiritual; the mystical and the ritualistic? Protestants and Catholics now realize the degree to which the Scriptures and the Fathers emphasized the role of the material as signs and vehicles of approach to Christ. And they are in some agreement as to what this role is that the sensible order plays both in the thinking of the Fathers, and more important, in the life of the early Church.

### The Hinge of Salvation

Tertullian, writing in the third century as a Catholic Apologist, paid this eloquent tribute to the role of the sensible in the plan of our sanctification:

The flesh is the hinge on which salvation depends. As a result, when the soul is dedicated to God it is the flesh which actually makes it capable of such dedication. For surely the flesh is washed that the soul may be cleansed, the flesh is anointed that the soul may be consecrated, the flesh is sealed that soul too may be fortified, the flesh is shadowed by the imposition of hands that the soul too may be illumined by the Spirit; the flesh feeds on the body and blood of Christ that the soul as well may fatten on God.<sup>3</sup>

It is instructive to compare this moving early third century tribute of Tertullian, the Catholic, to the dynamic contribution made by matter to the sanctification of man's spirit—"The flesh is the hinge of salvation," with Zwingli's attack on Eucharistic realism, "The flesh profits nothing." The text cited by Zwingli is Scriptural in source, the sixth chapter of John, but the intent of this thought is all but Gnostic. In Zwingli's theology we see in its most extreme form, the radical difference in point of view between traditional Christian thinking and the Protestant critique, with its often arbitrary and gratuitous theological presuppositions. St. Thomas offered a number of explanations, called reasons of convenience, for this fact scandalous for the Gnostic in temper, that the flesh should be a hinge or door of salvation. We are flesh and blood creatures, remarks St. Thomas; we are powerfully taught, are deeply impressed by sensible images. The humility proper to us as flesh and blood creatures requires that we not approach God as spirit to Spirit only, but rather use the mediation of God's commonplace and lowly creatures, water and oil, bread and wine, to enter God's holy presence.

A modern philosopher has said of metaphysics that it is very much like a coral reef; one should know just enough about it in order to be able to avoid it. But if one of the Reformers, particularly Luther, Calvin or Zwingli, had been expressing something of the same thought, he would say that philosophy, our human, natural powers of knowing, is a coral reef which can shipwreck the soul. Yet, while this warning may have been

<sup>3</sup> *On the Resurrection of the Flesh*, (CSEL, 47, 36).

repeated countless times, we should not conclude that in practice the Reformers did not employ philosophy in one way or another to explain and even buttress their religious insights. But it is still true that there was a deep and bitter animus in most of the Reformers against Scholasticism's presuppositions, and this remains true of Protestantism today. We recognize how useful and inevitable the development of formulas of belief cast in philosophical language may have been. But we should also recognize how even for ourselves, at the outset of our study, they rankle, and it can take a long time before we swallow them comfortably. If that is true of those raised in the Catholic tradition, we shouldn't find it too difficult to imagine how irritating and baffling such expressions as matter-form, *ex opere operato*, physical cause, instrument of grace can be for our Protestant brethren. It would be enough to make anyone cringe.

A Vatican Radio broadcast, on the eve of the Council, singled out as a change needed for fostering greater understanding and respect between Protestants and Catholics the "breaking-down" of this traditional terminology; not abandoning it, but bringing into clearer evidence the deeper Scriptural, spiritual meanings. Such an ecumenical effort would certainly entail the substitution, for purposes of inter-communal conversations, of other expressions which convey the same truth but do not cause the same misunderstandings and hostile emotional reactions.

### **Troublesome Expressions**

The expression "matter-form" for one example—what, at first sight, would it suggest to Christians commonly, be they Protestant or Catholic, when they encounter it as a description of the structure of the sacraments as signs? One's first inclination might be to think of pottery molds or a chemistry set, or formulas scientific and mathematical. This pair of terms, matter-form, may definitely have that psychological reaction today. We have to recognize it, and the hazards associated with it. Regardless of how useful these precise tools of theology may be, nonetheless they still have many disadvantages, notably in apologetics and catechesis. St. Augustine used the expression "Word and Element" rather than matter-form; Word immediately suggesting, in its Augustinian context, the Word of God and the Word of the Gospel. This emphasizes more the role of belief, personal human response to the sign and not a kind of chemical process set in a ritualistic context, out of which grace seems to emerge in a mechanical or perfunctory fashion. In witnessing a liturgical action, as the case of an adult convert about to receive Baptism, you see clearly the convert's deeply

felt personal response to a sacred symbol—not to the matter and form as such but to a symbol which results from their union—a sacred meaning which points to a hidden spiritual reality.

The origin of the terms matter-form, at least for Mediaeval theologians, was in Aristotle who employed them to explain the composition of the physical world. In a statue we detect matter or the stuff out of which a statue is made and form or the shaping of the material. Why not apply this, with reservations, Aristotle argued, as an appropriate, if oblique, pointer of what goes to make up the whole physical order? There is a "thingness" about reality but also form or shape which makes it to be what it is. And the Scholastics, taking their cue from St. Augustine, noted that in a sacramental symbol you have, for an example, the pouring of water and a verbal explanation of the purpose for this liturgical ablution. Such an explanation provides form or meaning, gives intellectual shaping, to the matter or action, in this case water poured on the candidate for Baptism.

We must never lose sight of the crucial reality at stake in the Christian sacraments: that God, through Christ, took the natural things of this world, such as water, food, gestures, which from the beginnings of human experience had mystical and religious significance, and through them revealed and imparted something of His hidden Trinitarian life. A new and richer meaning proper to the New Dispensation was bestowed. That which is natural is transformed through Christ's setting it apart for His own sacred purposes. The words or formulas provide insight into what Christ is doing through the natural elements as taken up into dynamic and unmistakably ritualistic actions, similar to and yet infinitely transcending those of the ancient religions.

*Ex opere operato*, frequently translated as "automatically" or "in virtue of the rite performed," is another expression that has often proved mischievous for the faithful quite as well as for others. In its setting of origin this expression had been used by the Schoolmen to make more emphatic the Catholic doctrine of sacramental efficacy, a truth subtly but powerfully challenged by Berengarius in the case of Eucharistic realism—the center from which radiated the Church's whole sacramental and liturgical life. These actions are the actions of Christ and derive their power from Him. Lack of proper dispositions in the minister performing the rite, provided only that he be acting as a deputy of the Church Christ founded and animates, cannot frustrate the saving work Christ, the High Priest, intends to accomplish. Nor does the outward message conveyed by signs to the human intellect, if evaluated within the narrow confines of the physical

or cognitional order, give any true idea of the inner reality, the supernatural, Christ-efficacy of the sacraments. *Ex opere operato* or "in virtue of the rite performed" means that Christ the High Priest, in both His humanity and divinity, is more truly acting than the visible minister.

"Physical causes of grace" is another and particularly misleading expression for it suggests to those uninitiated into theology's refinements something material or bodily. If the sacraments are physical causes of grace, then grace itself must in some way be physical or corporeal. If coupled with the expression matter-form which describes sacramental composition, the inevitableness of a materialistic view of sacramental grace appears even more assured. While Catholic catechetics is constantly striving to find better ways to teach the Christian Mysteries to believers, we should not imagine that even the young Catholic has such a material view of the supernatural life of the soul. But the danger is always there and must be guarded against. As for Protestants, these terms of Scholastic sacramentology such as we have just mentioned go far towards proving to them that Mystery was cheapened and betrayed by clever but gross minds, grown insensitive to the spiritual message of the untrammelled Gospel.

### **Incarnational Theology**

But the Church as the Bride of Christ is in fact Incarnational. It is no more absorbed in or obsessed by the material than Christ Himself. There is present in the sacraments, as in Christ, a physical reality—water, which can be touched and words we can hear, but there is also in the baptistry, just as there was in Nazareth at the moment of Christ's conception in Mary's womb, the overshadowing presence of the Spirit. This is a reality graspable only by faith. The word physical was used to underscore the dynamism of the the New Testament sacraments. It was certainly never intended to deny that the natural contribution of the sacrament, physical in make-up though it is, belongs to the order of symbol; it is an intellectual reality grounded in the physical. That is why a faith-response to the sacrament as a sacred symbol is an absolute prerequisite for the reception of any sacramental effects in the soul. The Christian must make an act of faith in the real presence of Christ's power in His sacraments seen as something far more than mere dramatic representations of His saving work. The Jews saw their sacred rites as making present anew the realities of God's successive interventions into history on behalf of His Chosen People. It is in this perspective that we must evaluate what the liturgical symbols, which presented anew the Sacred Mysteries wrought by Christ, the High Priest,

meant to the first Jewish converts to Christianity. It is in this perspective, too, that we can best grasp the essential message of the New Testament Revelation. The first Christians, nurtured in the Jewish tradition, grasped the meaning of the Christian revelation through the performance of the New Liturgy. Its superiority over the Old reflected the transcendent superiority of Christ and the salvation history He brought to fulfillment. The growing readiness of Protestants to accept this evaluation of Judaeo-Christian theology and the largely liturgical genesis of so much of the New Testament, brings them to a more open attitude towards the function and value of Tradition. They more and more see the Word of God as the achievement of the living Church, inspired by the Spirit and functioning under Apostolic guidance.

### **St. Thomas in the Semitic Tradition**

The excellence and timelessness of St. Thomas' sacramental teaching is that he studies the sacraments as they belong to the order of sign. His contemporaries had approached the sacraments as causes of grace, thus making the New Testament sacraments in their uniqueness the unifying principle of their sacramental theologies. St. Thomas returns to the Semitic tradition in taking sacred signs, cult, as his unifying principle. The Christian sacraments are true and efficient causes of grace because of the perfection of the cult that they constitute. Christ was final cause of the Old Testament sacraments which pointed to a redemption yet to be accomplished; He is efficient cause of the New Testament sacraments. As St. Thomas remarks: "However, His flesh [of the Word] and the mysteries wrought in it, work instrumentally for the life of the soul."<sup>4</sup> Here surely is the authentic Semitic tradition set out in Aristotelian terms!

Scholasticism, with its penchant for the deductive process and its concern with the essence or whatness of things, was always tempted to rob Christianity of its existential reality and its historical, space-time dimension. St. Thomas is called today the Doctor of the Sacraments largely because he shunned this temptation. Impressed by Augustine's insistence that human religion and cult are indissoluble, he follows the same historical approach. There is, then, in Aquinas, no tendency to make static the spiritual life which is supremely dynamic. Individual men achieve sanctity through cultural *acts*, and the human race has used different sacraments convenient to the various moments of faith in its history (natural and super-

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<sup>4</sup> *Summa*, III, q. 62, a. 5, ad 1<sup>um</sup>.

natural). Emphasis upon sacraments as signs enables Thomas to unify the entire ritualistic life of the Church, thus avoiding any artificial cleavage between the sacraments and sacramentals. Liturgy is thus given its rightful, central position. This liturgical context for the sacraments permits the easy assimilation and evaluation of findings from comparative religion by the modern Thomist. Since ritual reflects man's religious instincts and needs, approach to the Christian sacraments under the structure of liturgical signs facilitates the evaluation of man's psychological response to, say, the sacrament of Penance, and comparison of these data with reactions to other and non-Christian rites of forgiveness.

St. Thomas has, I think, a tremendous pertinence today in all areas of sacramental research. He was profoundly interested in all those questions which most exercise the talents and energies of Protestant, Catholic and non-Christian scholars. But this fact is not appreciated. Thomas' friends have often overemphasized the precision and symmetry of his *Summa*. The unity and coherence of his tract on the sacraments, in the third part of the *Summa*, was achieved by taking an historical phenomenon, cult, rather than a metaphysical reality, causality. And a careful reading of question seventy-two, on the sacrament of Confirmation, should settle rather decisively the point of whether, in St. Thomas, dialectic made positive theology dance or *vice versa*.

The degree to which the sacraments have, in recent years, proved to be a bridge of reunion is due, in part at least, to the liturgical approach to the sacraments which St. Thomas transmitted from Augustine to the modern age. A more direct exploitation of his sacramental insights by Catholics and Protestants alike might well lessen prejudices against the Scholastic and Thomistic tradition which are hardly confined to Protestant circles. At the same time, Protestants in search of a sacramental Church will find in him both a friend and guide. Thomas had great metaphysical acumen, but he was above all else a prayerful scholar of the Word, using all the tools at his disposal to explain and to live that Word ever more perfectly day by day.

—Paul W. Seaver, O.P.

*Father Paul W. Seaver, O.P., is Professor of Natural Theology at St. Stephen's College, Dover, Massachusetts, and Visiting-Professor of Modern Philosophy at the Marist Seminary, Framingham, Massachusetts. Prior to this assignment he was Professor of Sacramental Theology at the Dominican House of Studies, Oxford, England.*