

## MARKED OUT BY CHRIST

Many years ago for most of us, back in the days when we were memorizing our catechism, we can remember learning that three of the sacraments can be received only once. And the catechism told us why: these three sacraments, baptism, confirmation, and holy orders, imprint on the soul an indelible character, a spiritual mark, a sign which shall last forever. Since this mark, this character endures forever, these sacraments are not repeated. Some catechisms went on to explain what these marks symbolize: baptism marks us as members of Christ, confirmation indicates we are soldiers of Christ, and holy orders marks one as a priest of Christ. Of course we have learned all this; but what does it really mean? How many of us today understand the doctrine about sacramental characters? Where did the doctrine come from? What does the Church teach about it? What does it mean for us now? This article is an attempt to answer these questions.

In trying to explain sacramental character, we will do three things: first, we must look at the origins of this doctrine. Next, we shall consider how theologians penetrated such sources in order to draw out the full richness of the subject. Finally, we can point out what the Church officially teaches.

It seems that our knowledge of sacramental character comes from two different, yet related, streams of tradition. One source is the teaching of the Church Fathers that some of the sacraments in a special way configure us to Christ, really mark us with the mark of Christ. A second tradition appears in the rebaptism controversies of the third and fourth centuries—this time pointing out that certain sacraments cannot be repeated, since they mark the soul permanently. We shall briefly consider both of these sources.

The first mentioned tradition is indeed one of the especially beautiful teachings of the Fathers. From earliest times, in both East and West, the Fathers repeatedly tell us, for example, that when we are baptized, our souls are marked with the sign of Christ. They are explaining the Pauline idea that we Christians have been signed with the seal of the Lord. And this signing is something over and above receiving grace. To explain this sign, this spiritual mark which we receive, many Fathers compare it to a brand, such as we see on cattle. Just as all the cattle belonging to one ranch are branded with its sign, so also all the baptized receive a special seal.

But this is a spiritual mark, coming from Christ; somehow this mark, this character, makes us conformed to Him.

The other tradition stems from the doctrine involved in the early re-baptism and reordination controversies. Basically the Donatist heretics held that unworthy ministers could not validly confer the sacraments. Thus, for example, if a priest apostatized during a persecution, he lost his priestly powers; to regain them, he would need to be ordained again. But the Catholic Church always maintained the opposite position. Once a person is baptized, he remains baptized forever; once a man is ordained, he will always be a priest. The reason is that these sacraments produce permanent effects in the recipient. Even if the recipient later sins and loses the *grace* of the sacrament, nonetheless *something* still remains. The baptized Christian who has sinned still remains a Christian; he still has, through his baptism, power to receive the other sacraments. The priest who sins remains a priest. Of course, in both cases, the sinner ought to go to confession and return to the state of grace. The important point, however, for us at the moment is that even a sinner retains his Christian powers. Thus these early sacramental controversies brought out some important doctrinal points. First, some of the sacraments mark the recipient permanently. This permanent mark is indifferent to whether the recipient perseveres in the grace of that sacrament or not. Secondly, this permanent thing is the root of the recipient's Christian powers and rights—he retains the power to do validly whatever the sacrament in question gave him power to do. From these two streams of tradition later theologians were able to elaborate a fuller statement of the role of sacramental character.

The word "character" is taken from the Greek word for "mark" or "stamp." Just from the little we have already mentioned, one can perceive many elements of the doctrine on sacramental character. Certain sacraments mark a man with a very special mark from Christ. This mark is permanent. Thus such sacraments are not to be received more than once. Again, this permanent marking is the stable basis of our Christian powers. The theologians of the middle ages were to work from these ideas, and to considerably deepen our knowledge of sacramental character.

However, before we take up the contributions of the medieval theologians, we must first add one more fundamental idea, one more notion which is necessary for understanding sacramental character. This last point concerns all the sacraments in general. It concerns especially the idea of "Christian powers" of which we spoke above. The idea is this: the whole sacramental order is sort of a two-way street. Through the sacraments,

grace flows from God to us. Also through the sacraments, worship goes from us to God. Most of the time we tend to think of the sacraments in the first way, as means of grace for us. But the second aspect concerns us here: all Christian sacraments are rites of worship. This is because all seven sacraments are external sacred actions. Such actions involve worship. Thus the sacraments constitute a properly Christian order of worship. By receiving a sacrament, a man shows outwardly that he submits himself to Christ, and to the rites derived from Christ. The perfection of the sacraments is found in the Eucharist. It is here that we find, flowing from God to us, the grace and love actually uniting us to God Himself. But also in the Eucharist, going from us to God, there is the perfection of worship—the representation of the sacrifice of Calvary. And so when we said that certain sacraments mark the soul so as to permanently give that soul Christian powers, the powers involved concern not only the ability to receive other sacraments, but also the ability to share in Christian worship.

Now we can turn our attention to the contribution made by medieval theologians to the understanding of sacramental character. We shall consider three points: first, the character is a type of consecration. Secondly, the character singles out the soul that receives it. Finally, the character gives us a new power.

In the first place, the sacramental character is a kind of consecration. By "consecration" we mean the setting of a thing apart from profane service, its complete reservation to God. Thus we speak of consecrating a chalice for use by a priest at Mass. Now we have already noted that the character is a mark on our souls which configures us to Christ. The precise point of this configuration is to make us sacred, to make us consecrated, somewhat as the humanity of Christ was consecrated by its personal union to the Person of the Word. Of course, the humanity of Christ was entirely, substantially consecrated to His Father by reason of the Hypostatic Union. Thus every act of Christ was performed in service of His Father—all of Our Lord's actions were sacred, were consecrated. And yet the Father designated *one* act, Calvary, as the perfect expression of Christ's service. And so all Christ's sacred acts have some reference to Calvary, to this one most perfect act of worship. Thus, the sacramental character, making us share in Christ's consecration, aims to make us share in His perfect worship, the sacrifice of Calvary. This is the primary function of the character, to make us sacred, to make us participate in the sacred liturgy of Christ. The other two points which the theologians have taught stem from this basic idea.

In the second place, the character singles us out, distinguishes us. The

reason why the recipients of baptism, confirmation, and holy orders need to be singled out is to stabilize Christian worship. Since Calvary all true worship of the Father passes through Christ. The Father has designated Him as the one mediator between heaven and earth. But how can we be sure which persons have received consecration to join in Christian worship? Surely sanctity of life cannot be a stable basis for determining this. Barring a private revelation, we do not even know for sure if we are in the state of grace. Furthermore, the whole argument of St. Augustine against the Donatists was precisely this: holiness of life is not the basis of, for example, the priesthood. Rather, the basis for determining whether a man is a priest or not, is the question: "Has he received the sacrament of holy orders?" Holy orders marks the recipient with the priestly character; this character always remains, even if holiness of life is absent. From all this, we can see that character-giving sacraments stabilize Christian worship. If a person has received one of the sacraments which gives a character, we know for sure that he has received the character, that he has received the consecration. We can know for certain which persons are Christians, and which of these are confirmed, and which of these are priests. In this way the character singles out and distinguishes the different sacred functions in the Church.

We might add here that the character is not unrelated to holiness of life. If a person has received baptism, the character on his soul is a sign showing that he is also supposed to enjoy all the graces of baptism; the confirmed Catholic is marked as one who should have strength for professing his faith publicly; the priest is stamped as one due to have all the grace requisite for his office. Since by the character we are objectively consecrated to God, it is obvious that we should subjectively co-operate in this by holiness of life.

But let us now return more directly to the function of the sacramental character in Christian liturgy. We can come now to our third point, namely that the character gives us a new power.

We might begin by raising a question: Why do we need the character to worship God in the first place? We know the faithful of the Old Testament truly worshiped God, yet they did not have our sacraments nor the sacramental characters. It seems there is no need of the character in order to worship God. Is not man's natural equipment alone sufficient for this? Man's mind can know God, and his will can choose to offer suitable worship to his Creator. Thus we are left with the problem: Why do we need the character to worship God?

The answer is fairly easy. Christ has instituted a new religion, an entirely supernatural and utterly perfect worship of God. Since the coming of Our Lord, there is now only one religion acceptable to His Father. Christ is the Head of all creation, and all creatures must go to God through Him. All worship must now pass through Christ, and apart from Him no cult is adequate. On Calvary Christ instituted the new and perfect homage to His Father, the new and eternal covenant. Thus we humans can no longer worship God on our own. When we honor God, we must be united to the worship instituted through His Son on the cross.

There are two elements necessary for sharing in Christ's worship. One is holiness; the other is sacramental character. Let us illustrate this by an example. Suppose two men come to Mass together on a Sunday—the one is a Catholic, the other a convert, under instruction but not yet baptized. Both attend Mass. Both do so from a good motive. Thus both men, presuming they are in good faith and in charity, perform a meritorious act, a holy act. Yet only the baptized person shares in Christ's worship; the unbaptized convert does not. Both perform an act of the *virtue* of religion, but only the baptized Christian *validly shares* in Christian cult. For to share in Christ's worship, to be joined to the one High Priest, a person must have the sacramental character. If a person without the character is present at Catholic worship, he may be performing a good act, but he does not validly participate in Christ's sacrifice. It is the character which makes us objectively, validly share in His new order of worship. And as we have said, all true worship of the Father must now pass through Christ.

Therefore to share in Christ's worship, we need the sacramental character. Without the character of baptism, we are merely men. Once baptized, we are consecrated men, men set apart for a sacred function, partakers of the priesthood of Jesus Christ. It is Christ Himself who imprints the character on our souls, and this imprint gives us a new power, power to share in Christ's priestly actions. Of course, the power given in holy orders makes the priest share more actively in Christ's worship, whereas the powers given in baptism and confirmation make us share more as recipients in His religion. But in all cases, one needs a character even to belong to Christian worship. It is the character which gives us this power to share in Christ's worship of His Father. It is the character too which gives us the receptivity to share in the sacramental benefits of Calvary. The character is the instrumental cause in us by which Christ unites us to Himself in His consecration to, and worship of, His Heavenly Father.

It is evident that sacramental character is the basis for all participation

in the liturgy. Primarily, the character unites us to Christ our High Priest on Calvary and in the Mass. But also, in a secondary way, the character makes us participate in all the lesser acts of the Church's liturgy, and gives us the power to benefit from them. The consecration we receive from sacramental character gives us the power to join in all the liturgical rites of the Mystical Body of Christ.

We have been speaking of some of the many implications of the doctrine of sacramental character. It was the theologians of the middle ages, including St. Thomas of course, who penetrated the truths about this subject. In this article we have not presented all their teaching. In particular, we have not paid much attention to the differences between the three different characters. Naturally, the three characters all play differing roles in the religion of Christ. This, however, is a more complicated problem, outside the scope of this paper. We have confined ourselves to a more general consideration, to matters which are true of all three characters.

The Church itself does not officially teach every single detail we have been discussing. The main source of the Church's official teaching about sacramental character is to be found in one of the definitions of the Council of Trent. As is usual, the Church did not define the many positive aspects of her own teaching. She merely rejected the errors of the early Protestants on this subject. Thus the definition merely lists the three sacraments which imprint a character on the soul, then points out that the character is a spiritual and indelible mark, so that these three sacraments may not be repeated.

After the time of the Council of Trent, the use of catechisms became widespread. Most of these catechisms, however, do not see fit to go too deeply into matters not settled by the Council. As a result, they tend to teach only the basic minimum about sacramental character. Such teaching is true, of course. But there is so much more to say. If we stop at this point, we miss all the deeper significance of this doctrine. How much more meaningful it is to know that the characters consecrate us, single us out, and give us wholly new powers, make us join in the new, infinite worship Christ offers to His Father! Sacramental character is the whole basis for participation in the liturgy. The character is significant; it is vital. For by the character, Christ truly marks us out to share in Himself.

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