

FIRST THINGS FIRST

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O be consistent means to stand by one's principles and to follow them out in action. A man is consistent who at least tries to carry out what he believes and professes. In every walk of life consistency is desirable. The man who is consistent in his temporal affairs is usually the successful man of the world. He is successful because he realizes the end for which he is striving, and utilizes the means necessary to reach that end. He uses his intelligence and strives most where the means are most important—he *places first things first*. He realizes well that if he is inconsistent his loss may be great, that he may suffer, or that he may lose prestige or popularity that otherwise might be his.

Consistency in religion is especially desirable. If we fail to be consistent in matters of the world the loss may be great, but at worst the loss is only material. On the contrary, to be inconsistent in the matter of giving to God the worship that belongs to Him brings a spiritual loss and often spells destruction. To be a consistent Catholic means to live up to your religion, to act according to its principles. It is easy to say that we believe and assent to all that the Catholic Church teaches, but it is much more difficult amidst the daily trials and temptations of this life to live what the Church teaches and commands, to express in all our actions the faith that is in us. If we say we believe all the Church teaches and our lives are a contradiction of the truth we say is in our hearts, then it avails us but little. "Every one that heareth these my words and doth them not shall be like a foolish man that built his house upon the sand; and the rain fell and the floods came, and the winds blew, and they beat upon that house and it fell, and great was the fall thereof."¹

There are many Catholics who are utterly inconsistent in all that pertains to their religion. There are those who come to church three times a year. They come on St. Blase's day to have their throats blessed, on Ash Wednesday to have the ashes put on their foreheads,

¹ Matt. vii, 26-27.

and on Palm Sunday to receive the palms. These people, while they profess a great love for the sacramentals, almost entirely disregard the Sacraments. They seem to salve their consciences by participating in such ceremonies which require little worthiness on their own part; they hope that the sacramentals will in some miraculous way make up for their neglect of the Sacraments. These same people frequently are most consistent in their temporal affairs; and yet when it has to do with their eternal happiness, with the salvation of their immortal souls, their inconsistency shows a woeful lack of reasoning. They lay more stress on the less important means in striving for their salvation—they fail to place first things first.

What is the cause of this regrettable condition of so many of our people? Why is it that so many of them stress the sacramentals and show so little regard for the Sacraments? To us it simply means that they do not understand them properly, that they do not realize fully the difference between the Sacraments and the sacramentals. Particularly, they have not the proper idea of the Sacraments. Their knowledge is not only scant but often erroneous, and it seems that this is why they show such disregard for them.

Let us reflect briefly upon the difference between the Sacraments and sacramentals, and in particular on certain aspects of the Sacraments. A *sacramental* is anything set apart or blessed by the Church to excite good thoughts and to increase devotion, and through these movements of the heart to remit venial sin. A *Sacrament*, on the other hand, is a visible and outward sign instituted by Christ to signify grace and to give the grace it signifies.²

It is evident from the above definition of sacramentals that they are only exterior signs or symbols. But it is of faith that the Sacraments, besides being exterior signs and symbols of grace, contain the grace they signify; that is, they produce grace *ex opere operato*, or *of themselves*, grace which sanctifies man, provided no obstacle is in the way. Here lies the essential difference between the Sacraments and the sacramentals. However good and perfect the sacramentals may be, they cannot *of themselves* produce grace, but are dependent upon the dispositions of the one receiving. For example, the Sacraments produce grace of themselves as the sun produces light. We say "if no obstacle is put in the way." For it is with the grace of the Sacraments as with the rays of the sun which cannot give light to the earth if an obstacle is in the way.

² Council of Trent—Sess. VIII, Canons 1-12.

The sacramentals act like a prayer of petition. They are not causes of grace. Their efficacy depends partly on the dispositions of the one receiving and partly on the mercy of God. The Sacraments however are true causes of sanctifying grace. They have been likened to the distant reservoir from which water gushes forth to fountains and hydrants all over the city. So the great reservoir of grace, which has been filled for us by the Passion and Death of Christ, sends forth its living waters at its appointed outlets, the Sacraments.

To fully appreciate the use of the Sacraments we should consider the following reasons why they were instituted. *The first reason is to increase our faith.* The human mind is so constituted that it cannot attain knowledge except through the senses. Thus the merciful God out of His supreme goodness helps us to understand more easily the effects wrought by His hidden power, by wisely manifesting that power through the medium of certain sensible signs. St. John Chrysostom expresses this admirably when he says: "If man were free from the burden of a body, those good gifts would have been presented naked and covered by no veil; but because the soul is joined to the body, it was altogether necessary to use the help of sensible things in order to have them understood."

The second reason is to confirm our hope. Most of us are like "doubting Thomas" and not easily induced to believe in mere promises. Therefore God from the very beginning of the world has indicated His Will by words, and frequently He has added signs to His words, signs which often had a miraculous appearance. Recall when God sent Moses to liberate the people of Israel, how Moses distrusted the aid even of God Who had sent Him, not of course because of audacity, but because he feared he could not bear the burden or that his people would not readily listen to the divine promises. In this case the Lord confirmed His promises by many signs, in order to strengthen the hope, not particularly of Moses, but of the Jewish people. Just as in the Old Testament God confirmed His promises by certain signs, so in the New Law Christ instituted certain sensible signs to serve as pledges of the obligations contracted by Him, to increase our hope in the fulfillment of His promises.

The next or third reason is a remedy for our souls. St. Ambrose says that the Sacraments were instituted to be available, as the remedies and medicine of the Samaritan in the Gospel, to restore or preserve the health of the soul. Consider that the animating principle of our body is our soul, and that the animating principle of our soul is sanctifying grace. Mortal sin causes the soul to die spiritually; that

is, it causes sanctifying grace to depart. Now the function of the Sacraments is either to restore or to increase sanctifying grace so that the soul takes on new life, or becomes strengthened and invigorated. Therefore our Divine Lord has bequeathed to his Church Sacraments guaranteed by His word and promise, through which we may be certain that the fruits of His Passion and Death are truly communicated to us, provided that each applies that remedy to himself.

The fourth and final reason for the Sacraments is for a bond of union among the faithful. They serve as notes and symbols to distinguish the faithful from all others. St. Augustine tells us: "There can be no society of men belonging to any religion, true or false, consolidated into one body, unless they are bound together by some bond of visible signs." The Sacraments of the New Law bind the faithful together by a holy bond, as well as distinguish Christians from infidels.³

We have it on faith that Christ instituted the seven Sacraments of the New Law. The Church has no power to institute a Sacrament, for the Sacraments, as we have seen, produce grace. St. Thomas tells us: "None but God can cause grace, since grace is nothing else than a participated likeness of the divine nature."⁴

The seven Sacraments of the New Law are mentioned more or less explicitly in the New Testament. Naturally one will not find a systematic account of them, or of the teachings of Christ, as one will find in a book of theology. Nevertheless Christ entrusted the Sacraments to His Church just as He entrusted the Bible to her safe-keeping. Simply because they were not drawn up in a complete systematic list as they are today is no reason to say that they did not exist then as they do today.

The Abbé Broglie expresses this truth very forcibly and very completely when he says: "After all, the doctrine has been the same during all ages, because all our sacramental rites have always been used with faith in their efficacy. But the systematic and philosophic has progressed. The proposition that there are seven Sacraments of the New Law, which alone produce grace *ex opere operato*, now a dogma of faith, could not have appeared evident in the eleventh century on account of a lack of precision in language. The Church advances in her knowledge of the truth; she advances slowly and prudently, but she does advance; each century adds more precision in

³ Msgr. Hagan—*A Compendium of Catechetical Instruction*. Vol. II, p. 7.

⁴ *Summa Theol.*, III, q. 62, a. 1.

language, more completeness in her knowledge. The condition of this progress is the assistance of the Holy Ghost, directing human thought, and repressing its errors."⁵

Since we believe that the Sacraments are a divine remedy prescribed by Our Lord for the salvation of man, should we neglect and ignore them? It is not our purpose to belittle the sacramentals. Holy Mother Church has always recommended the sacramentals as most profitable for our spiritual welfare. The sacramentals are clearly connected with the Sacraments, inasmuch as they prepare the soul for a more worthy reception of the Sacraments. They should be made use of by all Catholics; much merit will be derived from them. But sacramentals are not and cannot be substitutes for Sacraments, nor should they be so used. *Let first things be first*, especially when the objective is as great as it is in this case.

⁵ *Conferences sur la vie surnaturelle*, p. 307.