

WHY SEVEN SACRAMENTS?

It is a teaching of our Faith that our Divine Lord instituted seven Sacraments, to convey to our souls the treasures of grace; which He merited for us by His painful passion and death. "Gratia Dei salvati sumus" (by the grace of God we are saved). Surely then the sacraments are not only reminders of the passion and death of our Blessed Saviour, they are indeed the means—the ordinary means by which God infuses grace into our souls.

His holy Church through the Council of Trent declares that these sacraments are seven: "And if any one should say that the sacraments of the New Law to be more or less than seven, namely, Baptism, Confirmation, Eucharist, Penance, Extreme Unction, Holy Orders and Matrimony, or even that any one of these seven not to be truly and properly a sacrament; let him be anathema" (Sess. 7. De Sac. in gen. Can. 1).

But why seven rather than six or eight? What reason can be advanced for this specific number? Assuredly the only *a priori* reason is the will of our Divine Redeemer. Had He so willed He could have instituted any number of sacraments. Why then is it fitting and proper that there should be seven sacraments and only seven? This is the question which the scholastics sought to answer, and of which St. Thomas furnishes the beautiful solution. (Ques. 65, artl. 3 pars.) The substance of his teaching we shall briefly set forth.

The Angelic Doctor in order to justify the fitness of the septenary number of the sacraments proves that they were instituted for a twofold purpose, for the perfection of man, and as a remedy against the defects caused by sin. There is a close analogy between the natural life of the body and the supernatural life of the soul as we shall presently see. Man is composed of body and soul. One a substance entirely corporeal, the other purely spiritual. When these two are substantially united there results human life and this life is common to all. But every human being may share in a higher and nobler life, for the soul not only vivifies the body, the soul itself is also vivified, and raised to a higher sphere through the influence of Divine Grace; and they both should work in harmony, until the fulness of rational and spiritual life is attained. Should there not be then a spiritual growth corresponding to this

physical development? Yes. Just as the child is born physically so he must be born spiritually. For by reason or original sin he comes into the world spiritually dead. Baptism raises him from the death of sin to the life of grace; "for as many of you as have been baptised in Christ have put on Christ," and St. Thomas quoting St. Augustine says: "That the water touches the body and cleanses the heart." Evidently then the saving waters of baptism have a regenerating and cleansing power, by which the infant spiritually dead is revived, becomes united to the mystical body of Jesus Christ, is made a "nova creatura," capable of possessing eternal life, by inheriting an eternal kingdom.

And just as the little tot naturally grows in size and strength he should likewise increase in spiritual vigor; and corresponding to this second stage of his natural life, there is in the spiritual life, the sacrament of confirmation, by the worthy reception of which he becomes a strong and perfect Christian through the power and operation of the Holy Ghost. With the pledge of the Spirit in his untarnished heart, fearlessly the youth enters the arena of life, eager to defend his Christ. But in this mighty conflict that is ever being waged around him; he must take food to sustain his youthful vigor, he must eat to live. Likewise if he is to preserve his spiritual strength he must partake of a Heavenly Food, and there is the Blessed Eucharist; the Bread of Life, the Bread that strengthens man's heart, and "except you eat the Flesh of the Son of Man and drink His Blood you shall not have life in you." Nourished, strengthened, reinvigorated by the Body of his Lord, and with animation and courage redoubled, the young man faces life's ceaseless battle in the great world.

These three, Baptism, Confirmation, Holy Eucharist, would in truth suffice, were the Christian soldier invulnerable. But unhappily the contrary is too true. However wary the soldier of Christ may be, it is morally impossible for him to escape wounds from the insidious shafts of the Evil One. And just as he should have at hand the remedies to heal the bruises of the body, so he should have the spiritual medicine to cure the wounds of the soul. Special nourishment, medicine and proper exercise will perhaps restore health to the body; but sin is the leprosy of the soul, and to remove this hidden disease, the Divine Physician instituted the Sacrament of Penance: "Heal my soul," cries the Royal Psalmist, "for I have sinned against Thee." The Sacred Tribunal of Pen-

ance is the only tribunal wherein the wounds of the soul are healed and Divine Life imparted.

But just as the body after its recovery from a severe sickness retains certain marks of its infirmity which only tender care and special medicine can remove, so the soul cured of its maladies still bears marks of its illness even when quitting its tenement of clay. At that last awe-inspiring moment the soul finds itself stained by the dust of imperfections, which Satan craftily employs to terrify and discourage it in its final struggle against the powers of darkness. But however weakened in body the dying Christian may be there comes to his help the Sacrament of Extreme Unction, which removes the last vestiges of sin, diminishes the terrors of death, fortifies the departing soul; purifies, comforts, and prepares it for final glory in the life to come. The Apostle St. James explicitly mentions this sacrament and tells us of its efficacy in these words: "Is any man sick among you; let him bring in the Priests of the Church and let them pray over him, anointing him with oil in the name of the Lord; and the Lord shall raise Him up; and if he be in sins they shall be forgiven him" (James V, 14). These five then, Baptism, Confirmation, Eucharist, Penance, Extreme Unction perfect man as an individual, the other two perfect him in relation to society.

Man is indeed a social being, and as such he has certain perfections to acquire in the society or community to which he belongs. No society or community can endure unless it has an authority to direct and govern it. The Church is a perfect society founded by Our Lord Jesus Christ for the sanctification of mankind and she has her authority from God to teach regarding Faith and Morals.

And just as man must be governed and subject to temporal superiors, so must he likewise be directed and governed by spiritual rulers, lawfully placed over him through the Sacrament of Holy Orders—a sacrament which invests the ministers of God with a power far exceeding that of any earthly potentate, for they are the anointed of God and dispensers of the graces and mysteries of God. Lastly the society of which man is a member must be kept up by the influx of new members, so too the Christian Church of which he is a member, must be continually furnished with new members to insure her perpetuity, and to take the place of those whom death daily snatches from her arms. And so there is the Sacrament of Matrimony by which the nat-

ural propagation of human kind is perpetuated, the sanctity of marriage safeguarded and children assured to Mother Church. Hence we see the necessity and fitness of seven sacraments, and their conformity to the needs and nature of man. They gradually perfect man and free him from sin and its dreadful consequences. Through their worthy reception his natural life is supernaturalized, for grace is the perfection of nature, and if this admirable harmony exist during life between soul and body perfection is progressively, yet surely attained.

St. Thomas likewise tells us that the number of the sacraments may also be accounted for from their being instituted as a remedy against the defects caused by sin. Baptism is a remedy against the absence of spiritual life, Confirmation strengthens us in this life, Holy Eucharist enables us to resist our proneness to sin, Penance remits actual sin committed after baptism and the last remains of sin are blotted out by Extreme Unction. Holy Orders keeps a religious community united in harmony, Matrimony offsets decrease in number resulting from death. Truly the seven sacraments accomplish their twofold purpose—perfection of man in the spiritual life and a remedy against sin. Blessed Albert the Great seemed to think that the seven sacraments were instituted to combat the seven capital sins, but the explanation given above by his pupil St. Thomas is more fitting. For in truth we can say that the seven sacraments were instituted so that man while living the natural life of the body, may also live the supernatural life of the soul and enjoy those supernatural gifts lost by the first man Adam but found and transmitted by the second Adam Jesus Christ—"I am come that they may have life and have it more abundantly" (John X, 10).

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