

Catholic

UPDATE

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Exploring the History of the Sacraments

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Until the mid-twentieth century, the Roman Catholic Church's understanding of its seven sacraments was largely independent of historical facts. According to one definition, sacraments were "*signs instituted by Christ to give grace,*" even though there was little evidence in the Scriptures that Jesus of Nazareth actually instructed his followers to perform some of these rituals.

And the sacramental rituals themselves were assumed to have remained substantially unchanged for 1,900 years, even though there was no direct evidence that this was actually so. Yet it is not as though Catholic theologians intentionally decided to ignore historical facts in developing their explanations of the sacraments. Many of the facts were simply out of sight, buried in the archives of the Vatican and other old libraries. More importantly, though, the reason they did not bother to dig through these documents was that they believed that the truths of faith were changeless and unaffected by history.

But research in the nineteenth century helped lead Catholics to reevaluate this position, and by the early twentieth century it was generally accepted that many of the Church's beliefs and practices had changed through the years. Catholics believed the Church was entitled to modify its ecclesiastical regulations and adapt its forms of worship to the customs of different peoples, provided that nothing essential was altered. Changed teachings could be understood as doctrinal development.

An Evolution Toward Perfection

Catholics believed the Church, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, was becoming more aware of the fullness of divine revelation. Thus, what was perhaps only implicit in Scripture could, over time, become part of the Church's doctrines. Likewise, anything that was accepted throughout the Church's history could become an explicitly proclaimed doctrine. In short, Catholics admitted a certain amount of doctrinal development that was considered to be an evolution to better formulations of Christian doctrines.

During this period, historical differences in the theology of the sacraments were usually regarded as stages in the evolution of the Church's understanding of its sacramental rituals, with the doctrinal pronouncements of the Council of Trent in the sixteenth century being considered final and normative for all subsequent centuries. Historical accounts of the sacraments were thus written from a terminal point of view: the Church has finally arrived at the best understanding of the sacraments, but we can go back in history to discover how it came to these truths.

This point of view often led to the assumption that the most recent customs in sacramental practice were the best since they also were the result of a long evolution. But historical studies in the twentieth century began to suggest that this model for interpreting changes in the Church's beliefs and practices was inadequate. Historians began discovering that some Church practices were not ancient. And liturgical experts began to awaken suspicions that some sacramental rituals were not always the best, especially since they had undergone little change since the Renaissance.

The Second Vatican Council (1960s) and liturgical reforms did much to revise the Church's sacramental practices. Efforts were made to update the sacraments and incorporate the insights of biblical, historical, and liturgical research into the new rites. Catholic theologians were concerned about showing that the revised rites represented a recovery of older traditions, not a break from tradition. The new model must acknowledge the validity of previous traditions and allow for growth. It must account for the evolution of sacramental theory and practice without appealing to external causes such as divine providence, and yet it must remain open to further interpretation.

Theology of the Sacraments

That such a model is available can be learned from looking at writings on the history or theology of the sacraments in Catholicism. Many authors use this model without expressly advertising to it, particularly in their studies of individual sacraments. Basically the model applies the notion that experience gives rise to ideas that bring about changes in behavior and experience, which suggest new ideas that lead to new experiences.

In short, the things that people do influence what they think, and what they think influences what they do. Applying this basic notion to the history of theology, we can say that the religious experience of the early Christian community triggered theological ideas that influenced the religious experiences of Christians in the Roman Empire, and those experiences generated ideas that affected the religious experiences of Christians in medieval Europe. More specifically, the sacramental experiences of Christians in one period of history generated a sacramental theology that in turn influenced the sacramental experiences of Christians in a later period. The actual historical process of sacramental experience affecting sacramental theology affecting sacramental experience was hardly ever as neat and simple as this basic notion. Plus, there have been dead ends and untried paths.

Properly speaking,
a sacrament is something
that is a sign of a sacred reality
pertaining to human beings; so that
what is properly called a sacrament
in the present sense of the word
is a sign of a sacred reality that
makes people holy.

THOMAS AQUINAS

Twists and Turns

We've seen radical turning points and places where no turns were possible. There has been backtracking, and even some going around in circles. Also, the sacraments were not immune from political and cultural influences. The key thread is the notion that ideas and experiences, thinking and doing, theory and practice, influence each other over time.

There are also some fundamental assumptions of note. One is that religious experience, and specifically sacramental religious experience, is a human experience. For those who have had it, it is as real as fear and as important as love. It is also a common human experience. It is not restricted to primitive peoples, and it is not exclusive to religious fanatics. And though there are many such experiences and an even greater diversity in the descriptions of them, there is a sameness that often pervades these descriptions and makes it possible to recognize one's own experience in the words of another. But religious experiences are as transpersonal and as transcultural as the experience of joy or sorrow. Sacramental experiences happen to people, and so they have a place in a work of history; they can be historical facts.

The second assumption is that the Catholic understanding of the word *sacrament* can be broadened, and it has to be broadened if we are going to use the model mentioned earlier to explain the history of the sacraments. Not long ago,

sacraments referred exclusively to seven liturgical rites. Since Vatican II, Catholic theologians have expanded the meaning of the term so it can be applied to Christ and to the Church as well. But before the Middle Ages it had an even broader meaning, and it is this meaning that we must use if we are to develop an understanding of the sacraments that can cover the past twenty centuries and be open to developments. Doing this will enable us to regard narrow theological definitions of “sacrament” as authentic Catholic applications of this broader meaning, while retaining the broader meaning when discussing sacraments in other religions.

Sacraments Today

The life of Jesus provided both the historical starting point and the existential meaning of the Christian sacraments.

All deeply interpersonal encounters change a person inwardly and call for an outward response, and in the same way some sacramental encounters have a permanent effect on those who fully participate in the Church’s rituals. The sacramental characters of baptism, confirmation, and orders, then, are these permanent effects of the encounter with Christ, calling Christians to live a life of faith, of witness, and of service. These three sacraments signify that Christ’s call for a response is real and permanent even if people do not immediately recognize who it is that is speaking to them in and through these rituals. This is particularly true of infants who, when they are baptized, are not yet capable of fully encountering Christ for responding to his call.

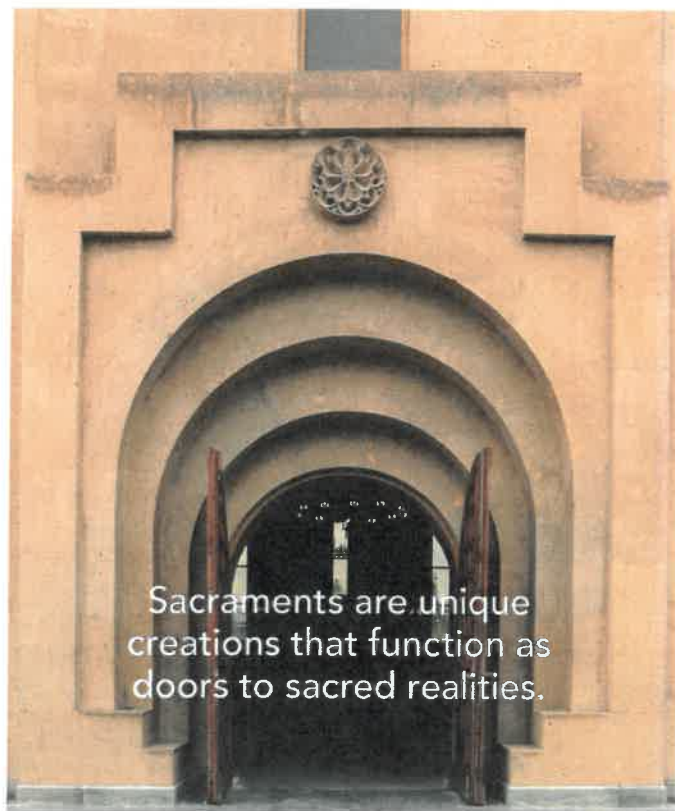
Christ showed that salvation from the stagnation and self-centeredness of sin was possible, and since he was the first and only person to do this completely, Christians have regarded him not only as God’s perfect Son but also as their personal Savior and the Redeemer of human nature. In this sense, Christ was and remains a sacrament, a sure sign of what is humanly possible with the help of God’s grace.

Christians see that if they live like Christ they, too, can stretch beyond their abilities and limitations. Although they do not embody God’s grace as perfectly as Jesus did, those who accept Christ as their Savior and live as he did become in their turn sacraments to others. Traditional theology spoke of the Church as a source of salvation because through the community people were introduced to Christ and to the life of self-transcendence that he made possible. The Church was thus and continues to be a sacrament, a sign of Christ and a channel of grace in the world.

In the course of history, the Church came to adopt seven ritual signs of God’s grace. These are symbolic activities in the sense already described because, when they are performed, the community collectively expresses what it is and what it is becoming more fully: a community of those who are saved by grace, confirmed to live in the Spirit, willing to forgive, and more. At the same time these are also symbolic activities for those who fully participate in them because when they consciously make these ritual activities their own they individually express who they are and who they are becoming more fully: persons who are saved by grace, living in union with Christ and the Church, willing to be forgiven and healed, and more.

On one hand these ritual sacraments are expressions of the nature of the Church, and on the other hand they are signs and means of grace to those who deeply enter into them. They are signs of the self-transcendence that God makes possible, and they are means of acknowledging, experiencing, and incorporating grace in daily life. The sacraments of course do not exist in isolation but they are part of a larger symbolic network that constitutes the Church. Christian faith (and especially Catholic faith) is structured sacramentally in that what is not present is made present through symbols. For this reason, the Church can be said to be the fundamental sacrament in Christianity because it mediates Christian truth and meaning, thereby creating Christian faith, Christian community, and so on. Even Scripture is sacramental because it is a complex linguistic symbol of the divine, and for this reason it is called God’s word. In this light, reading the Scriptures is a symbolic performance that makes God present to the reader through understanding, reflection, and openness to self-transformation.

Sociologically speaking, sacraments are celebrations and transition rituals. They symbolize what people believe and move them into new phases of living what they believe. Psychologically speaking, they are intensification rituals. They express what people are already living and deepen their commitment to it. Historically speaking, they are therefore human creations, as human as works of art, types of education, or styles of recreation. But they are also very unique human creations, for they function as doors to sacred realities, not by chance as art and education and other experiences do, but deliberately. And so what really counts is not the doors themselves but what lies beyond them.



"Adhering to the teaching of the Holy Scriptures, to the apostolic traditions, and to the consensus...of the Fathers," we profess that "the sacraments of the new law were...all instituted by Jesus Christ our Lord."

CATECHISM OF THE CATHOLIC CHURCH, 1114; QUOTATION FROM THE COUNCIL OF TRENT



Baptism

Anointing after Baptism—Almighty God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, has freed you from sin, given you new birth by water and the Holy Spirit, and joined you to his people. He now anoints you with the Chrism of

salvation, so that you may remain members of Christ, Priest, Prophet and King, unto eternal life.

ORDER OF BAPTISM



Anointing

Lord God, loving Father, you bring healing to the sick through your Son Jesus Christ. Hear us as we pray to you in faith, and send us the Holy Spirit, our Helper and Friend, upon this oil, which nature has provided to serve the

needs of your children. May your blessing come upon all who are anointed with this oil, that they may be freed from pain and illness and made well again in body, mind, and soul.

RITE OF ANOINTING OF THE SICK



Confirmation

Almighty God, Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who brought these your servants to new birth by water and the Holy Spirit, freeing them from sin: send upon them, O Lord, the Holy Spirit, the Paraclete; give them the

spirit of wisdom and understanding, the spirit of counsel and fortitude, the spirit of knowledge and piety; fill them with the spirit of the fear of the Lord.

ORDER OF CONFIRMATION



Marriage

Father, you have made the union of man and woman so holy a mystery that it symbolizes the marriage of Christ and his Church....Father, keep them always true to your commandments. Keep them faithful in marriage and

let them be living examples of Christian life. Give them the strength which comes from the gospel so that they may be witnesses of Christ to others. Bless them with children and help them to be good parents. May they live to see their children's children. And, after a happy old age, grant them the fullness of life with the saints in the kingdom of heaven.

ORDER OF CELEBRATING MATRIMONY



Eucharist

At the time he was betrayed and entered willingly into his Passion, he took bread and, giving thanks, broke it, and gave it to his disciples, saying: Take this, all of you, and eat of it: for this is my body which will be given up

for you. In a similar way, when supper was ended, he took the chalice and, once more giving thanks, he gave it to his disciples, saying: Take this, all of you, and drink from it: for this is the chalice of my blood, the blood of the new and eternal covenant, which will be poured out for you and for many for the forgiveness of sins. Do this in memory of me.

LITURGY OF THE EUCHARIST—EUCCHARISTIC PRAYER II



Ordination

We ask you, all-powerful Father, give these servants of yours the dignity of the presbyterate. Renew the Spirit of holiness within them. By your divine gift may they attain the second order in the hierarchy and exemplify right

conduct in their lives. May they be our fellow-workers, so that the words of the gospel may reach the farthest parts of the earth, and all nations, gathered together in Christ, may become one holy people of God.

RITE OF ORDINATION

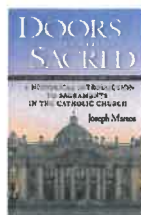


Reconciliation

God, the Father of mercies, through the death and resurrection of his Son has reconciled the world to himself and sent the Holy Spirit among us for the forgiveness of sins. Through the ministry of the Church may God give

you pardon and peace, and I absolve you from your sins in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.

ACT OF PENITENCE



Source: *Doors to the Sacred: A Historical Introduction to Sacraments in the Catholic Church* by Joseph Martos, text and copyright updated 2014 (Liguori #824517).

Joseph Martos (1942–2020) was a respected educator, speaker, author, and authority on the interaction of religious experience, theological ideas, cultural developments, and liturgical ritual through the ages. His work takes interdisciplinary, accessible, and balanced approaches.

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