

## THE SACRAMENTS – 1

The traditional definition of a sacrament was that it was “a visible sign of invisible grace”. There is nothing terribly wrong with that. But it does suffer from an individualistic conception of grace, one that focuses on the relationship between God and the person receiving the sacrament. So I prefer to define a sacrament as follows: *the sacraments are ceremonies that symbolise and make real for individuals the fact that they share in one or other aspect of the life of the Church.*

Thus **Baptism**, the first of the sacraments to be received, symbolises and brings about the beginning of someone’s visible sharing in the Church and therefore in salvation.

The pouring of the water symbolises the washing away of the person’s previous life without Christ so as to make way for the new life he now receives in Christ. Another form of administering baptism is by what is called immersion. Here, the person to be baptised goes into a pool that will cover his or her head while the priest says words of baptism. The person then arises out of the pool. This was the normal way of administering baptism in the early church. St Paul saw in the descent into the pool a symbol of dying and being buried with Christ to sin and the ascent out of the pool is a symbol of rising from the dead with Christ.

As the first of the sacraments, baptism is the necessary foundation for receiving all the other ones. Indeed, it is so necessary as a foundation that it is the only sacrament that a lay person or even someone who is not a Christian at all can administer validly. Moreover whoever receives the sacrament is marked out for life as having done so. Hence someone who has been baptised can never be baptised again. The churches who practice baptism of adults who had already been baptised as children do so because they do not believe that infant baptism is valid.

I said earlier on that baptism is the beginning of a person’s initiation into membership of the Church. That means that something more must be done to complete the process of initiation. That something more is *the sacrament of confirmation*. In the early centuries of the church’s life confirmation formed the second part of one ceremony. It was distinguished from the first part by a special anointing of the recipient and calling on the holy spirit to come and dwell within him or her. This second part was regarded as completing a person’s initiation *by symbolising and making real for a newly baptised person that he or she now has Christ’s spirit of love dwelling within his or her soul.*

With time these two parts of the original single ceremony – rebirth and sharing in the spirit – became two separate ceremonies: what we now know as the sacraments of baptism and confirmation. But confirmation retained its basic meaning of completing a Christian’s initiation. It never had as part of its meaning the Protestant idea of confirming personally what was done for you when you were baptised as a baby. Nor was it viewed as a religious parallel to secular rites of passage celebrating the entry into adulthood. It was simply the celebration of the gift of the spirit together with the strength required to live and witness to the gospel of Christ. It can therefore be given with baptism to babies, as is still done by the Greek Orthodox church. I think it was Pope Pius X’s devotion to the Eucharist that led to children being admitted to the Eucharist and receiving confirmation sometime later. Unfortunately his action created a contradiction between the classic doctrine of the sacrament of confirmation and the actual practice of the church. In theory confirmation is the second of the sacraments, the completion of a Christian’s initiation. Once the new Christian had received baptism and confirmation – then and only then was he or she able to participate fully in the mass, by receiving holy Communion. In practice it has become part of the school leaving events. There is of course great psychological value in linking it with the time when one is on the verge of adulthood. But then proper thing to do is to delay first Communion until one has been confirmed. I believe this would be most suitably done on the day of the confirmation when they would receive the spirit followed by holy Communion.

### *The Sacrament of the Eucharist*

The Eucharist is a sacrament that symbolises and deepens our unity with Christ and each other and our sharing in the sacrifice that made such unity possible. It is the celebration by God’s people of what they are: the Body of Christ. The structure of the sacrament is a meal in which the participants are told that the food given them is Christ’s body and blood, sacrificed for them. It is therefore a sacrificial meal in which the food, victim and priest is Christ.

The believer’s unity with Christ is dramatically symbolised by the fact that the food we eat and drink is Christ himself. The believers’ unity with each other through Christ is symbolised by the fact that we all eat and drink that same food. Our sharing in Christ’s sacrifice on the cross is made clear in the age-old way by eating sacrificial food: Christ’s body and blood.

From very early on in the church's history these symbols of Christ's death and presence in our midst were seen as more than mere symbols. On the contrary the bread and wine were seen as being the outward form in which Christ becomes visibly present to us. This presence is called "the real presence".

How exactly Christ can change bread and wine into his body and blood is something incomprehensible to us, even though St Thomas Aquinas made a valiant attempt to explain it. But, in trying to make clear just how special that presence is, theologians spoke about the various ways in which Christ was present to us. For example he is present in all the sacraments, and in the preaching of the word, where two or three are gathered in his name, et cetera. None of these were regarded as Christ's real presence such as we have it in the Eucharist. The result was to give the impression that there are umpteen presences of Christ, only one of which is real. But the presence of Christ at the baptising of a baby is as real as his presence in the Eucharist. For there is only one presence of Christ in the church and that is a very real presence indeed. As we gather in the church before mass begins Jesus is already present, really present. Even if there is no tabernacle there. He is present in each of us. Indeed he is really present in the Eucharist because he's really present in us. What happens at the consecration is that Jesus creates for us symbols of his real presence in us so that we can celebrate with our eyes, with our hands, with our mouth – indeed with every part of our being, the fact that we are Christ's Body.

In preparing his catechumens for receiving the Eucharist, St Augustine got across this point in a stunning manner by pointing out to them that when the priest holds up the host to them he will say: "The Body of Christ" to which they answer "Amen", which means "yes it is". However it has a deeper meaning at communion time: it means yes I am! ***The Body of Christ! Yes I am***". Remember Augustine's words when you come to receive communion later on.

So there is only one presence of Christ in the Church and that is a very real presence. But there are many *signs* of that presence – e.g., the other sacraments. But of those signs there is only one that is designed not to represent Jesus actively doing something but to represent Jesus' presence in our midst, to represent Jesus himself, and that is the Eucharist. Here and here alone are we presented with symbols that represent Jesus himself and the sacrifice he made of himself for our sakes. And since they are symbols of his real presence in our midst we relate to the symbols for what they are: the visible embodiment of that presence. And so we bend the knee in adoration.

Similar comments can be made about Jesus' self-sacrifice on Calvary. Wherever Jesus goes, there too go the power and the value of Calvary. Its time-bound elements, e.g., he died at a certain time of a certain day, can never return. But Calvary's time-less elements – Jesus the victim and its power and value – accompany Jesus wherever he is present. In this way the sacrifice offered centuries ago on Calvary take on a new shape, the shape of bread and wine symbolising the presence not only of Jesus but also of his sacrificial death. This is why it is a dogma of our faith that every mass is a sacrifice, not a new sacrifice, but the one and only sacrifice offered on Calvary, visibly present in all its saving power.

I wish there were time to talk about how all Christian spirituality is basically a Eucharistic spirituality. But there isn't. Suffice it to say that at every mass we confess our sinfulness, we experience God's forgiveness, we celebrate our unity with God and our neighbour and this calls us to deepening our commitment to them, which has implications for the way we live our lives.