

ANNOUNCING A SERIES ON THE SEVEN SACRAMENTS

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“Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing in the heavens” (Eph 1:3). The supreme gift of God is nothing less than God Himself—the blessing whereby creatures participate by grace in the eternal love of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. *Gratia supponit naturam*. God’s gift of grace presupposes and perfects the original gift of creation. Through the life, death, and Resurrection of the Incarnate Son, God has revealed his plan to gather creation into a new unity established by Christ. “For he has made know to us in all wisdom and insight the mystery of his will, according to the purpose which he set forth in Christ as a plan for the fulness of time, to unite all things in him, things in heaven and things on earth” (Eph 1:10). This divine plan to recapitulate all things in Jesus Christ is accomplished in and through the sacraments, “the actions of the Holy Spirit at work in Christ’s Body, the Church . . . the masterworks of God in the new and everlasting covenant” (CCC 1116).

There is an inexhaustible depth and beauty hidden in the seven sacraments of the Church. First and foremost, the sacraments represent an unfolding in time of the historical life and love of the Incarnate Son. In the words of Pope Leo the Great, “what was visible in our Savior has passed over into his mysteries.” The Incarnate Son’s mediation of the Father’s love through the outpouring of the Holy Spirit has “passed over” and remains present in the sacraments. Each of the seven sacraments, especially the Eucharist, the “Sacrament of the sacraments,” unveils a dimension of how Christ loved us “to the end” (Jn 13:1) by offering his life as a gift to the Father and the Church:

There is a particular event which moves me deeply when I consider it. “When Jesus had received the vinegar, he said, ‘It is finished’; and he bowed his head and gave up his spirit” (Jn 19:30). Afterwards, the Roman soldier “pierced his side with a spear, and at once there came out blood and water” (Jn 19:34). Everything has now reached its complete fulfillment. The “giving up” of the spirit describes Jesus’ death, a death like that of every other human being, but it also seems to allude to the “gift of the Spirit,” by which Jesus ransoms us from death and opens before us a new life. It is the very life of God which is now shared with man. It is the life which through the sacraments of the Church—symbolized by the blood and water flowing from Christ’s side—is continually given to God’s children, making them the people of the New Covenant.¹

At the same time and for the same reason, the sacraments presuppose and reveal the original purpose and destiny of the elements of creation and culture (water, oil, bread, wine), the stages of human life (birth, growth and maturity, the need for forgiveness, healing in illness, and accompaniment in death), and the call to self-gift (marriage and holy orders). As Alexander Schmemmann argues, the sacraments are “a revelation of the genuine nature of creation, of the world . . . a revelation of the sacramentality of creation itself, for the world was created and given to man for conversion of creaturely life into participation in divine life.”² The world was created as a gift from God and

1. John Paul II, *Evangelium Vitae*, 51.

2. Alexander Schmemmann, *The Eucharist: Sacrament of the Kingdom* (Crestwood, New York: St. Valdimir’s Seminary Press, 2000), 33–34.

for God. Through her sacramental rites, the Church gives thanks to God for the blessings of creation and for the “inexpressible gift” (2 Cor 9:15) of divine life. The sacraments are not merely medicinal or instrumental; each sacrament mediates and reveals an aspect of the new and eternal covenant established by Christ. Through the sacraments, divine love reaches into the heart of matter, allowing created things to participate in God’s own life and love. “The Church never ceases to present to the Father the offering of his own gifts and to beg him to send the Holy Spirit upon that offering, upon herself, upon the faithful, and upon the whole world, so that through communion in the death and resurrection of Christ the Priest, and by the power of the Spirit, these divine blessings will bring forth the fruits of life to the praise of his glorious grace” (CCC 1083).

A survey of recent Catholic sacramental theology reveals light and shadows: on the one hand, there is a renewed emphasis on the Christological and ecclesiological dimension of the sacraments, which includes more attention to the symbolic dimension of human existence, and the sign-character of the sacraments. However, these developments have gone hand-in-hand with an impoverishment in metaphysical thinking and an anthropocentric turn. Thus, the emphasis on the symbolic nature of the sacraments has tended to coincide with a disparaging of the sacraments as “causes of grace”; the ecclesiological context has overshadowed the priority of God’s self-communication in Christ; the “personal” has tended to replace the “ontological.” This is just to name just a few matters calling for deeper formation.

A second challenge confronting Catholic sacramental theology is more diffuse and more difficult to identify. It stems from our basic sense of the meaning of the natural world. Joseph Ratzinger characterized our situation as follows:

We have grown accustomed to seeing in the substance of things nothing but the material for human labor . . . there is no room left for that symbolic transparency of reality toward the eternal on which the sacramental principle is based. Oversimplifying somewhat, one could indeed say that the sacramental idea presupposes a symbolic understanding of the world, whereas the contemporary understanding of the world is functionalist: it sees things merely as things, as a function of human labor and accomplishment, and given

such a starting point, it is no longer possible to understand how a “thing” can become a sacrament.³

In response to this twofold difficulty, *Communio* has inaugurated a new series on the sacraments of the Church. For the next seven years, the Spring issue will be devoted to each of the sacraments in turn. The fundamental aim of the series is to reflect anew on the meaning of the sacraments in the context of God’s plan “to unite all things in [Jesus Christ], things in heaven and things on earth” (Eph 1:10). We hope to show how each sacrament represents a mystery of nature and grace, that is, a revelation of something essential both about the nature of the world and the nature of God. Such an endeavor recommends itself both because of the sacraments’ importance in Christian life, and because the sacramental life of the Church offers a profound response to some of the major crises in modern culture, for example, the contempt for the body and the loss of a sense of the symbolic meaningfulness of material things.

“Our way of thinking,” writes Irenaeus, “is attuned to the Eucharist, and the Eucharist in turn confirms our way of thinking.” With this series on the seven sacraments of the Church, *Communio* hopes to encourage a renewal of thought and a renewal of gratitude to God, who has blessed us by uniting all things in heaven and things on earth in the body of the crucified and Risen Lord. □

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3. Joseph Ratzinger, “The Sacramental Foundation of Christian Existence,” in *Collected Works*, vol. 11 (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2014), 153–54.