

## REVIEW

The Seven Sacraments of the Catholic Church by Romanus Cessario O.P., Baker Academic, Grand Rapids, Michigan, 2023, pp. xiv+290, \$32.99, hbk

Like other theological truths, the theology of the sacraments does not change, but theologians continue to hone their explanations of the supernatural reality, elaborating the same truths with differing nuances and emphases. Thus, Romanus Cessario explicitly references Colman O'Neill and his *Meeting Christ in the Sacraments* (1964), a book Cessario himself revised and reprinted in 1991. Now he offers a new text for a similar audience, a thorough systematic study of the sacraments available for all students (informal and formal) of theology.

The work is logically divided into two parts. The first half, presenting general principles of sacramental theology, opens with an overview of 21st-century theology followed immediately by a focused analysis of sacramental theology in the period leading up to and following the Second Vatican Council. Cessario references two lists of theological trends and challenges of the Conciliar period, one from Bernard Leeming SJ (pp. 19–24), the other of Cardinal Godfried Danneels (pp. 29–32), arguing that these same issues addressed by the Council still merit discussion today for a proper understanding of the sacraments.

Cessario presents sufficient evidence of this necessity in the area of sacramental causality and related philosophical theories. In this context, he addresses what could be considered a foil for his entire theology – the influence of two theories: Dom Odo Casel's *Mystery-Presence* and Edward Schillebeeckx's *Encounter*, which served to eclipse metaphysical and ontological principles, particularly the traditional teaching of efficient causality. Chapter three formally addresses the notion of causality but the topic reappears in almost every chapter since it is through the saving work of Christ that the entirety of the sacramental economy flows. Sacramental economy, the topic of chapter four, develops in the context of Christ establishing the sacraments for humanity, who though created *imago dei*, as a consequence of original sin requires a 'new' means of redemption.

Sacramental economy reappears in chapter six, but only after Cessario directly speaks to Christology and the sacraments as the saving work of Christ. The preface for the Feast of the Most Sacred Heart of Jesus offers a beautiful a summary of this teaching while at the same time capturing the essence of *lex orandi, lex credendi*:

For raised up high on the Cross, he gave himself up for us with a wonderful  
love  
And poured out blood and water from his pierced side,  
the wellspring of the Church's Sacraments. (p. 63)

Cessario emphasizes that this new dispensation is one of sacramental realism rooted in three principles: the sacraments are (1) 'separated instruments' of the

Trinity; (2) lived professions of faith though distinct from the faith; and (3) true worship of the Father (pp. 67–70). Each chapter delves deeper into the sacramental reality. Chapter seven, dedicated to the sacraments as the saving acts of Christ serves as a foundation for a discussion of the efficacy and sacramental character and the notion of grace. Here Cessario returns to Casel's weak notion of the sacraments as merely 'mystery presence', in contrast with the more theological profound notion, of a perfective transformative causality which includes a 'certain exemplarity' (p. 81). This teaching has its foundations in Scripture, is developed by the Fathers and Scholastics, and revisited in *Lumen Gentium* which speaks of humanity 'redeemed and remolded' (LG 7). Causality reappears in the discussion of the specific nature of sacrament in chapter nine, for sacraments, though signs, are both cause and form of our sanctification and the ultimate end (p. 95). Cessario deftly inserts Thomas's three arguments for the necessity of sacraments: (1) as signs they are in accord with human nature which requires corporeal and sensible realities to arrive at the spiritual; (2) they manifest divine mercy as remedies for wounded human nature; (3) established by Christ they are true acts of worship (pp. 109–111).

The last two chapters of the first part address mediation and the number of the sacraments. Regarding mediation, Cessario speaks to the role of Christ's human nature as well as the mediation of the human minister whom God can use in spite of his imperfection (p. 126). As to the number, here we see another argument from Aquinas on the sacraments as remedies for sin, but also as perfecting the *imago dei*. But just as human nature is wounded in various ways, the remedies and means of perfection vary.

Prior to addressing part two, I would highlight the moral undertones present throughout the work. This is not surprising on two counts. First, there are obvious connections between the sacraments and the moral life. These include but are not limited to the sacraments serving as a foundation for the moral and spiritual life; sacramental grace justifying but not inhibiting human freedom; baptismal grace freeing the soul from original sin; penance cleansing the soul of personal sin; all the sacraments imparting grace which assists the soul in achieving its final perfection. The second point is particular to this work and expected from someone who has taught and written so eloquently on virtue and the moral life. One noteworthy point is Cessario's reference to John Paul II's encyclical *Veritatis Splendor*. As a document concerned with moral teaching, it does not directly address sacramental theology, but Cessario draws attention to the fact that the moral distortions addressed in the document impacted sacramental theology and theologians writing liturgical texts. True sacramental theology and Catholic liturgy cannot ignore the sinful nature of humanity and must align with a simple yet profound teaching of Aquinas: 'sacraments were not necessary in the state of innocence' (*Summa Theologiae* III.61.2; p. 112).

The exposition of the individual sacraments in part two reflects this teaching, beginning with the baptism, the first remedy for original sin and its effects. Cessario also includes significant historical errors and ecclesial responses for each of the sacraments, primarily from the Patristic period or the Reformation and Trent, or both, if relevant to the historical development of the theology and practice. Baptism, the longest chapter, opens with an historical overview of the patristic period where debates first appeared but continued across the centuries, pushing theological thought forward until the Council of Trent authoritatively defined on the essence of baptismal character. Questions of confirmation and anointing of the sick, on the other hand,

develop in light of the Council of Florence with further elucidation at the Council of Trent.

Father Cessario set as his goal to 'ensure that the sacraments of the Church are properly understood in a correct theological presentation that enables the attentive reader to understand 'both the Church's liturgical practices and prayers and her canonical discipline' (p. 45). In his analysis of 20th-century challenges to sacramental theology, he mentioned interdisciplinary studies, particularly human sciences, not condemning such approaches, but urging care to avoid distortions. His work follows this interdisciplinary approach to the sacraments, integrating philosophical, historical, and moral principles, with the dogmatic and fundamental theological teaching. His work offers readers and opportunity to understand the significance of the sacraments as "'powers that go forth'" from the Body of Christ to heal wounds of sin and to give us the new life of Christ' (p. 47, citing CCC part 2 frontispiece), the incredible gift of these 'rhythms of salvation' (p. 272).

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