

rather than for causes of strife; complete loyalty to defined Catholic doctrine, and, above all, a profound understanding of the mystery of the Church as it is made known to us in the Old and New Testaments and in the commands and the prayers of our Lord; all these gifts are as much needed today.



THE LITURGY OF THE SACRAMENTS

F. A. MCGOWAN

TO understand the sacramental principle, it is necessary to recall the Plan of Redemption. God, three Persons, knowing and loving each other, exists from all eternity. When he chose to create other beings out of nothing, there was but one model, himself. Therefore, each creature is a unique reflection of God. It is itself and, at the same time, it is, to intelligent beings, a revelation of God. This quality of being real yet symbolic makes every creature, in the wide sense of the Latin word, a *sacramentum*, or, in Greek, a 'mystery'. The correct attitude towards creatures saves their dignity from two false extremes. Some people would make each creature an absolute in itself—unrelated to anything else, no more than its physical constituents. The opposite error limits the creature to its function of symbol, ignores its value as an individual reality, credits it only for the power to suggest something else. Saint John Chrysostom has neatly described the creature as sacrament: 'that of which one aspect is seen and the other aspect is believed'. The sacramental principle may be summed up: Not only are all creatures reflections of God but Christ has given certain signs, which appeal to the senses, that capacity, under certain conditions, of transmitting his divine life.

This statement covers sacrament in the wide sense, anything that reveals divinity, as well as in the technical application to the system of seven channels instituted by Christ to give special graces.¹ In the wide sense, the greatest sacrament is our Lord's humanity. It is a real human nature yet the instrument of his

¹ Cf. *THE LIFE OF THE SPIRIT*, Editorial, June 1955.

divine nature. Since the early years of the Church, the heresies have tended to deny one or other of the natures of Christ. Sometimes today we blur the distinctions, thinking of our Lord as a super-man rather than true God and true man; thinking of the saints as out-of-this-world instead of beings human like ourselves and, like ourselves, endowed by supernatural adoption with powers of divine nature exercised through this real and very fragile human nature. Some sincere seekers after God, such as Aldous Huxley and Gerald Heard, who have gone to Hinduism for what they call a 'purer religion', see an insurmountable barrier between matter and spirit. They cannot accept the Incarnation; it seems too good to be true. Though they see manifestations of divine life in men on earth, yet, by denying matter its role, they cannot get in touch with the explanation—the God-man now living in the glorified state in heaven continues his life on earth as Head of the Mystical Body, the visible Church, for which we, the members of Christ, united to his humanity, furnish the human element of the Mystical Body. They cannot see that we, who are creatures, sharing in the priesthood of Christ, can continue his historical work of teaching, directing and sanctifying individuals throughout time and space. Particularly, they cannot see how the work of sanctification, the work of communication of divine life, which is the function of liturgy, can be done through material aids.

The liturgy uses visible and or audible signs in the sacraments, the sacramentals, Divine Office, ritual blessings, and the liturgical year. Those who despise matter cannot grasp the sacramental principle that creatures which can be comprehended by the senses give more than knowledge about their material structure because creatures signify not only themselves but God whom they reflect. These idealists, as well as the materialists, resent the claim of efficacy for the seven sacraments. Forgetting that Christ is the principal priest in every sacrament, observing but not analysing the form of the sacrament, they accuse us of refined magic. They say that we put our trust in unspiritual fetishes and ritual ceremonial. There is space to quote only the concluding sentence of Saint Thomas Aquinas's reply:

Now an instrument is effective, not by virtue of its nature, but by virtue of the principal agent, by whom it is applied to act. So, too, these visible elements effect spiritual well-being, not by any property of their nature, but by Christ's institution,

from which they derive their instrumental efficacy (*Summa Contra Gentiles*, IV, 56).

In the technical use of the word 'sacrament', we mean the seven channels of the sacramental system. This, the official continuation in time and space of the sanctifying work of Christ's historical life, is defined in the *Summa Theologica*, Part III, as:

the established medium through which Christ continues to give life to men, his Body, the Church, and to offer himself in unceasing praise to his Father.

We shall confine our study to the liturgy of the sacramental system. It is the contact of the individual with the Way, the Truth, and the Life. The essence of the sacrament is some sign perceptible to the senses—that is, consisting of 'matter' and 'form' (these must be united, i.e., the words of baptism must be said as the water is poured); and instituted by Christ to signify grace *and* to confer grace if (1) the minister has the intention of doing what the Church does, and (2) the recipient has the proper dispositions. (It would be magic if a priest consecrated every time he used the words and happened to be holding bread or wine.)

The sacramental ceremonies do not necessarily constitute the matter and form and they may, in case of necessity, be omitted or abbreviated. But they fulfil four purposes: direct our attention to the graces received in the sacraments; prepare us for those graces; represent to us the dignity of the sacrament; increase our devotion and reverence.

In the quotation from Saint Thomas, the position of principal agent was remarked. The minister of a sacrament is, by definition, he who has the power to dispense Christ's life through the sacraments. The *principal* priest of every sacrament, even of matrimony, is Jesus Christ. The secondary minister is he who, in the name of Jesus Christ, may validly dispense the sacrament. There are ordinary secondary ministers—those who act by right of office in virtue of ordination (in all the sacraments except matrimony where the bride and groom, in virtue of their share in Christ's priesthood received at baptism and increased at Confirmation, administer the sacrament to each other); and, extraordinary secondary ministers in virtue of a special privilege (deacon to distribute Holy Communion); or of delegated power (a missionary priest to confer confirmation or minor orders); or by reason of pressing necessity (lay person to baptize). For *valid* administration, Holy Orders is

required for all sacraments except baptism and matrimony. In case of emergency, anyone with the use of reason and the intention of doing what the Church does may baptize. For matrimony anyone may administer the sacrament to another of the opposite sex if both are free from impediment of law—natural, divine, ecclesiastical. It is significant that just because these two sacraments do not require an ordained minister, the Church never re-baptizes nor re-marries; the most that she does is to baptize conditionally and to give such blessings as were omitted in the original ceremony of baptism or of matrimony.

The efficacy of the sacraments may be considered under *what* and *how*. The effect of the sacraments is sanctifying grace: sanctifying grace as such—either grace of justification, divine life where it was lacking, or increase of habitual grace; and, secondly, sacramental grace in the technical sense. Sacramental grace is not distinct from sanctifying grace . . . the right to special actual graces which enable the recipient to obtain the end for which the sacrament was instituted. This sacramental grace is given according as circumstances demand, not merely at the time of the reception of the sacrament.

Matrimony is an obvious case. On the wedding day, even the best prophet could not foretell all the occasions when the couple will need special help to live up to their mutual obligations and bring up their family. The fact that the right to the actual graces is theirs is not sufficiently stressed in teaching young people. Some years ago, a much tried young woman after eight years was considering legal separation. Someone reminded her that on her wedding day she had received the right to the actual graces necessary to carry her through the trials she was then experiencing. That realization and the chapter on matrimony in Father Vann's *The Divine Pity* gave her the strength to carry on. Another case is that of a fourteen-year-old student in a 1949 Budapest trial. When asked how she ever managed to hold out during hours of interrogation and physical violence (her jaw was broken in the courtroom with a revolver butt for not giving the judge the answer he wanted), she said that she kept telling herself that this was what God was thinking about the day she was confirmed.

But the critical point of sacramental efficacy is its *manner*: what is the source of the power by which they produce what they signify? Here we distinguish between the *conferring* of grace and

the *receiving* of grace. As far as the conferring of divine life is concerned, the sacraments infallibly and invariably produce what they signify, *ex opere operato*, by the very doing of the act if administered validly *because Christ is the efficient cause and the principal priest*. But where the receiving of the grace is concerned, the sacrament must be received not only validly but worthily. A person in the state of mortal sin receiving validly a sacrament of the living—say, Confirmation or Matrimony—receives the sacrament but not its graces. As soon as he is restored to the *state* of grace, all the graces of the sacrament begin to operate.

As has been mentioned several times, there is much criticism, within the Church and outside, of undue stress on the efficacy of the sacraments, an emphasis which makes for a so-called 'automatic liturgy'. Less attention should be given to apologetics and more should be centred on efforts to arouse in ourselves the proper dispositions. These must be distinguished from emotions. When we have the proper dispositions, it means that we are disposed to do God's will and to accept the joys and afflictions of life. We may or may not have great devotion because of our temperament or health. (It has been said that a robust constitution may be such a temptation to self-reliance as to endanger salvation.) The graces of the sacraments are made accessible to us through the liturgy but the degree of our benefit depends upon us.

The seven sacraments satisfy our supernatural needs which parallel those of human nature. Through the Church, Christ communicates to us life, the divine-human life of the union of two natures in One Person. Baptism, birth or initiation, gives divine life and draws from our Lord's historical life the power to raise human nature to a capacity for divine nature. Confirmation, spiritual maturity, enables us to live an adult divine life because our Lord's historical life has raised restored human nature to a capacity for full life of Trinitarian Love. Holy Eucharist, nutrition, offers us nourishment for divine life because our Lord's historical life has provided him the means of remaining, Incarnate God, as acceptable sacrifice, supernatural food, and object of Eucharistic worship.