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The Mystery of Israel and the Church

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Sacraments: From the Old Covenant to the New

Talk #1

Why Do We Need the Sacraments?



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1. Why Do We Need the Sacraments

In this lecture series we shall reflect on the seven sacraments of the Church. We shall look at the fittingness of the seven sacraments, how they were prefigured in the worship of Israel, and how they sanctify Christ's Mystical Body.

What Is the Liturgy? Public Worship of the Body of Christ, Head and Members

The sacraments are the summit of the Church's liturgy. So before we examine the sacraments, let us briefly reflect on the liturgy. What is the liturgy and why do we need it? The Greek word *leitourgia* is composed of *leitōs*, which means public, and *ergon*, which means a work. Therefore, the original or etymological meaning of liturgy is a *public work, function, or office*, in service of the common good.

As a theological term, liturgy is the public prayer of the Church, the mystical Body of Christ. The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* 1069 explains:

The word "liturgy" originally meant a "public work" or a "service in the name of/on behalf of the people." In Christian tradition it means the participation of the People of God in "the work of God." Through the liturgy Christ, our redeemer and high priest, continues the work of our redemption in, with, and through his Church.

What is public prayer? Prayer can be individual, collective, or public. It is individual when offered by individuals, in the sanctuary of the heart. It is collective when offered by a group of worshippers together, as in a family or prayer group. Prayer is public when it is offered in the name of the community by those who have the authority to represent the community. In the Church this authority is given by the sacrament of Holy Orders.

Why is public prayer important? Man is naturally a social creature, in virtue of being a rational animal. Therefore every aspect proper to man's life is also endowed with a social dimension, and religion is no exception. As it is necessary for men to pray individually to God, so it is no less necessary for men to pray collectively and publicly. All religions have liturgy, comprised of public rites and public prayers offered for four ends: to give glory and adoration to God, to give Him thanks, to offer propitiatory sacrifice, and to call down blessings from heaven by petition. In public prayer, the prayers are offered on behalf of the entire people, through their legitimate representatives and religious authorities, who are the priests.

In the Old Testament we find a most special example of liturgy, legislated by God Himself for the public worship of Israel. God stipulated the sacrificial rites in detail, determined the place in which they were to be offered

(the Temple), and stipulated that the persons by whom the prayers were to be said would be priests of the house of Aaron and the Levites, a tribe set apart for the service of the Lord, consecrated to the divine liturgy. The liturgy of Israel centered on the worship in the Temple through the ministry of the priests; but after the destruction of the Temple in 70 AD that liturgy continues in the prayer of the synagogue.

Public prayer is an even more essential aspect of Christianity. Since Christ has willed to supernaturally incorporate His disciples into His own Mystical Body, the Catholic Church, the prayer of Christ is the prayer of His Mystical Body, Head and members. Therefore the liturgy of the Church has an unfathomable, infinite, infinitely mysterious dimension, for it is the public prayer of the whole Christ, Head and members. It is not just, nor even principally, our public prayer. Rather, it is the prayer of Christ Himself, our eternal High Priest, on our behalf, and of the members of the Church joined mysteriously to Him through grace and sacramental character. As St. Ignatius of Antioch says, in his *Letter to the Ephesians*, 5: "For if the prayer of one or two possesses such power, how much more that of the bishop and the whole Church!"

The liturgy is therefore the act of worship of the *whole Christ*, Head and members, *hierarchically ordered*. The liturgy is a prolongation or continuation of the priestly worship of Christ. Pius XII states this beautifully in his great encyclical on the liturgy, *Mediator Dei* 2:

The divine Redeemer has so willed it that the priestly life begun with the supplication and sacrifice of His mortal body should continue without intermission down the ages in His Mystical Body which is the Church. That is why He established a visible priesthood to offer everywhere the clean oblation which would enable men from East to West, freed from the shackles of sin, to offer God that unconstrained and voluntary homage which their conscience dictates. In obedience, therefore, to her Founder's behest, the Church prolongs the priestly mission of Jesus Christ mainly by means of the sacred liturgy.

The liturgy is thus a "prolongation" of the priestly mission of Jesus Christ throughout the life of the Church. The liturgy, however, does not "prolong" the priestly mission of Christ simply by commemorating it. It continues to be the supplication of Christ the eternal High Priest, together with the Church, His bride. It is the prayer of the whole Christ: Head and members. The entire Church is associated with her divine head in the offering of the prayer of the liturgy.

This great truth is taught in both *Mediator Dei* of Pius XII and *Sacrosanctum Concilium* of Vatican

II. *Mediator Dei* 20 states:

The sacred liturgy is, consequently, the public worship which our Redeemer as Head of the Church renders to the Father, as well as the worship which the community of the faithful renders to its Founder, and through Him to the heavenly Father. It is, in short, the worship rendered by the Mystical Body of Christ in the entirety of its Head and members.”

Sacrosanctum concilium 7-8 restates the same teaching:

Rightly, then, the liturgy is considered as an exercise of the priestly office of Jesus Christ. In the liturgy the sanctification of man is signified by signs perceptible to the senses, and is effected in a way which corresponds with each of these signs; in the liturgy the whole public worship is performed by the Mystical Body of Jesus Christ, that is, by the Head and His members.

From this it follows that every liturgical celebration, because it is an action of Christ the priest and of His Body which is the Church, is a sacred action surpassing all others; no other action of the Church can equal its efficacy by the same title and to the same degree.

In the earthly liturgy we take part in a foretaste of that heavenly liturgy which is celebrated in the holy city of Jerusalem toward which we journey as pilgrims, where Christ is sitting at the right hand of God, a minister of the holies and of the true tabernacle; we sing a hymn to the Lord’s glory with all the warriors of the heavenly army.

This beautiful teaching sheds a great light on the liturgy: it is not just our worship, but in fact *it is principally the worship of Christ Himself*, the divine head and bridegroom of the Church, and through Him, with Him, and in Him, as members of His Body, it is the worship of His Bride, the Church. The real protagonists in the liturgy are not simply those whose faces we see. The chief protagonist in every liturgy is Christ, and, inseparable from Him, His mystical Bride.

Definition of Sacrament

“Sacrament” in classical Latin has various meanings, of which the most important is “a hidden sacred thing,” generally synonymous with “*mysterium*.” However, the Latin Christian tradition soon came to use the word *sacramentum* in a more precise theological sense, to indicate the seven sacraments of the Church, and secondarily, to indicate the rites of Israel that prefigure the sacraments of the Church.

What is the meaning of “sacrament” in this theological sense? The Christian tradition understands the sacraments to belong to the category of signs. However, these sacred signs not only *represent* man’s sanctification; they also have the power *to produce or realize what they signify*. This power is given to them by Christ, who uses the sacraments as continuations, as it were, of His sacred humanity

to touch the members of His Mystical Body until the end of time. Through the sacraments, the redemption won by Christ on Calvary is made continually present in the life of the Church, and its fruits are applied to men. The sacramental economy of grace is a sublime property of the Church founded by the Word Incarnate.

Sacraments can be defined by theologians in two senses: broad and specific. In the broad sense, theologians speak of sacraments also with regard to the rites of the Old Covenant (or even, in a still broader sense, of religious rites in the natural religions of the world). In this broad sense sacraments are *sacred or religious signs that represent man’s sanctification*.¹

The specific sense of sacrament is proper to the New Covenant, and adds to the broad notion the aspect of *intrinsic efficacy*. The sacraments proper to the New Covenant are **sacred signs representing man’s sanctification, which produce or cause what they signify** through making present the paschal mystery of the Word Incarnate, by whom they were instituted. Here lies the unfathomable dignity of the sacramental economy of the New Covenant.

The *Compendium of the Catechism of the Catholic Church* 224 defines the sacraments as “efficacious signs of grace perceptible to the senses” that were “instituted by Christ and entrusted to the Church. Through them divine life is bestowed upon us.” The *Catechism of the Council of Trent* defines the sacraments of the New Covenant as “something perceptible to the senses which, by virtue of its divine institution, has the power both to signify and to effect holiness.”²

There are four essential parts to the definition of the sacraments of the Church. Remember that a definition is formed by determining a thing’s genus and specific difference. First, all sacraments are sensible signs; this is their genus. But what kind of signs are they? Their specific difference has three parts: 1) they represent man’s sanctification, which is equivalent to saying they represent the infusion of sanctifying grace and sacramental graces by which man is sanctified; 2) they were instituted by Jesus Christ to sanctify His Church; and 3) they have the power to realize the effects of grace that they signify.

The mysterious capacity of the sacraments to cause the sanctification they signify was challenged at the Reformation. John Calvin defined the sacraments as “a testimony of the divine favor toward us, confirmed by an external sign, with a corresponding attestation of our faith toward him.”³

1 St. Thomas Aquinas, in *ST* III, q. 60, a. 2, defines a sacrament in this broad sense as the “sign of a holy thing so far as it makes men holy.”

2 *The Roman Catechism*, part 2, intro., section 11, trans. Robert I. Bradley and Eugene Kevane (Boston: St. Paul Editions, 1985), 149.

3 John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, book 4, chapter 14.1, trans. Henry Beveridge (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 2008), 843.

With all due respect, this is doubly insufficient. First, the sacraments are signs not simply of divine favor, but of interior *sanctification*. Secondly, he does not mention their mysterious intrinsic causality. The sacraments *cause* the interior sanctification that they signify, if no obstacle is posed to their action.

The CCC 1116 gives a marvelous description of the sacraments:

Sacraments are “powers that come forth” from the Body of Christ, which is ever-living and life-giving. They are actions of the Holy Spirit at work in his Body, the Church. They are “the masterworks of God” in the new and everlasting covenant.

As signs, the seven sacraments have an outward and sensible dimension that was chosen by Christ for its natural capacity to signify what belongs to man’s sanctification. As *sacred* signs, the sacraments belong in the context of the worship of God. They are divinely given means to worship God and sanctify men, immeasurably surpassing all other religious rites.

As religious rites, the sacraments are endowed with a twofold movement: ascending and descending. They express man’s interior worship which seeks to give glory to God, and they give divine gifts to man that effect his sanctification. Thus there is a dual direction of gift in the sacraments: from man to God and from God to man. St. Thomas explains succinctly: “In the use of the sacraments two things may be considered, namely, the worship of God, and the sanctification of man: the former of which pertains to man as referred to God, and the latter pertains to God in reference to man.”⁴ Man’s worship of God in the Church is the ascending dimension and God’s sanctification of man is the descending dimension. Christ’s mediation as eternal High Priest consists in perfectly realizing these two dimensions: giving glory to the Father and sanctifying His Mystical Body that He won with the price of His Blood.

Three Temporal Aspects of the Sacraments and the Liturgy

The entire liturgy, and the sacraments in particular, have a threefold temporal dimension, which signifies past, present, and future. The aspect of the past is the memorial of the works of salvation history, and particularly of the culminating event of salvation history: the paschal mystery—Christ’s Passion, death, and Resurrection. The present aspect is the fact that the supernatural is made present through the sacrament itself. The fruit of Christ’s Passion is applied to the soul and to the Church in the here and now. The future aspect is the dimension of heavenly glory to which the sacrament is ordered, and of which it gives a pledge, foretaste, and participation. In 1 Corinthians 11:26, St. Paul succinctly brings together these three

dimensions: “For as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord’s death until he comes.” In every Mass we commemorate the Last Supper and the sacrifice of Christ on Calvary. These past events become present by having their fruit applied to us in Holy Communion, which gives us a pledge and foretaste of the future glory to be revealed in Christ’s second coming.⁵

The past event that is commemorated is not limited to Christ’s Passion, but includes all the events of sacred history that are celebrated in the liturgy, such as the Resurrection, Pentecost, the Nativity, the Annunciation, etc. Thus in the liturgical celebration of Christmas, the past event of the birth of Christ is commemorated; the present event is the conferral of graces that conform us to Christ and His birth, by which Christ is born more fully in our hearts; and the future event is our birth into glory. Something similar could be said of the celebration of all the other mysteries presented in the liturgy.

St. Thomas Aquinas explains these three temporal dimensions of the sacraments in *ST III*, q. 60, a. 3:

A sacrament properly speaking is that which is ordained to signify our sanctification. In which three things may be considered: the very cause of our sanctification, which is Christ’s passion; the form of our sanctification, which is grace and the virtues; and the ultimate end of our sanctification, which is eternal life. And all these are signified by the sacraments. Consequently a sacrament is a sign that is both a reminder of the past, i.e. the passion of Christ; and an indication of that which is effected in us by Christ’s passion, i.e. grace; and a prognostic, that is, a foretelling of future glory.

The sacraments bring together the past, present, and future in a way greater than any other human action because of the divine power that transcends time that operates in the sacraments, and also because of their mysterious power to realize what they symbolize. Since they symbolize past, present, and future events—as salvific cause, present application, and future fulfillment—all of these dimensions are mysteriously made present through the sacrament. The past is made present as a cause is present in its effect; the present regards the actual reception of grace; and the future fulfillment is made present through the communication of the seed, foretaste, and pledge of that future fulfillment.

The sacraments and feasts of Israel also have these three dimensions. Most obviously, they commemorate the great events of Israel’s history. Thus Passover commemorates the first Passover before leaving Israel. The feast of Pentecost commemorates the giving of the Torah on Mt. Sinai and the sealing of the covenant. The feast of Booths commemorates the wandering in the desert for forty years. Secondly, the feasts of Israel make those events liturgically

4 St. Thomas, *ST III*, q. 60, a. 5.

5 See also *The Roman Catechism*, part 2, intro., section 12, pp.150–51.

and spiritually present throughout the course of Israel's history. Through celebrating the Passover, for example, all generations of Israel are brought into spiritual connection with the generation that left Egypt and witnessed God's great prodigies. Finally, all the feasts have a future dimension that is directed to the coming of the Messiah, the final salvation of Israel, and the eternal tabernacles of heaven.

The liturgy of the Church takes this basic threefold framework, but modifies it in a way fitting for the liturgy of the New Covenant. In the Church the principal events of sacred history to commemorate are no longer those of the first Exodus, but those of the Paschal mystery of Christ, which is the new Exodus. Secondly, the future events that are hoped for no longer include the first coming of the Messiah and His redemption, but rather His second coming and the heavenly glory that will be the final fruit of the salvation He merited for us on Calvary.

Christ Instituted the Sacraments

All seven sacraments by which the Church is formed, gathered, and sanctified were instituted by Christ⁶ and promulgated either by Christ in person or by the Apostles, as witnessed in Scripture and Tradition. That Christ Himself instituted the sacraments is a dogma of faith defined in the Council of Trent.⁷

Baptism was explained to Nicodemus (Jn 3:1–6) and promulgated before Christ's Ascension, as recounted in Matthew 28:19: "Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit." Confirmation was first given (in an extraordinary way!) on Pentecost, and we see it administered by the Apostles Peter and John in Acts 8:14–17 and by St. Paul in Acts 19:6. The Eucharist was explained in the synagogue of Capernaum after the miracle of the multiplication of the loaves and fishes (Jn 6), and was formally instituted in the Last Supper. Penance was instituted on Easter Sunday, as we read in John 20:22–23: "He breathed on them, and said to them, 'Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained.'"⁸ The anointing of the sick was perhaps instituted by Christ when He sent out the Twelve, for in Mark 6:13 we read that "they cast out many demons, and anointed with oil many that were sick and healed them."⁹ The anointing of the sick is promulgated in James 5:14–16. Matrimony was raised

to a sacrament by Christ, and we see it promulgated by St. Paul in Ephesians 5:31–32. Holy Orders, finally, was instituted during the Last Supper, when Jesus said, "Do this in memory of me." The entire life of the Church has been structured by the seven sacraments since Pentecost.

The Church cannot institute sacraments for four reasons. First, the sacraments are instruments that effect a mysterious extension of Christ's humanity, enabling Him, His words of power, and His Spirit to touch us today. They are external instruments that gain their power by being moved by the hands of Christ. Christ thus needed to personally institute the sacraments to give them this mysterious instrumental power of being capable of performing supernatural effects by being moved by His humanity.

Second, Christ had to institute the sacraments because they are works of the divine omnipotence, and the only man who personally possesses divine omnipotence is the Word Incarnate. St. Thomas argues succinctly: "The institutor of anything is he who gives it strength and power: as in the case of those who institute laws. But the power of a sacrament is from God alone, as we have shown above. Therefore God alone can institute a sacrament."¹⁰ Every celebration of the sacraments involves a supernatural power to sanctify man that is proper to God alone. In other words, every sacrament involves a divine power greater than that displayed in any miracle of physical healing or in the suspension of the laws of nature. It is greater for it gives to the creature something infinitely disproportionate to him: sanctifying grace, which is a participation in the divine nature.¹¹

Third, the sacraments give the Holy Spirit in different ways, and it belongs to Christ as the Second Person of the Trinity to send the Third Person. Among men, only Christ has authority over the Holy Spirit.

Fourth, the sacraments are what give rise to the Church; she is born from the sacraments, and not the reverse. The Church is the mother of all the faithful because she has been endowed with life-giving fruitfulness through her sacraments. That the Church is born from the sacraments is indicated in the Patristic understanding of the Church as the New Eve born from the pierced side of Christ. A beautiful explanation of this idea is given by Quodvultdeus, bishop of Carthage at the time of St. Augustine:

Let our Bridegroom ascend the wood of his bridal-chamber; let our Bridegroom ascend the wood of his marriage bed. Let him sleep by dying. Let his side be opened, and let the virgin Church come forth. Just as when Eve was made from the side of a sleeping Adam,

⁶ See the Council of Trent, session 7, canon 1.

⁷ See the Council of Trent, session 7 (1547), Decree on the Sacraments, canon 1, DS 1600–1, cited in CCC 1114.

⁸ It is true that certain modes by which the sacrament has been administered have varied, for in the early Church there was a practice of giving severe public penance for very grave sins, which is no longer done. Nevertheless, the essence of the sacrament is the same throughout the centuries.

⁹ See also Mark 16:18: "They will lay their hands on the sick, and they will recover."

¹⁰ St. Thomas, *ST III*, q. 64, a. 2, sed contra.

¹¹ See *The Roman Catechism*, part 2, intro., section 23, p. 157.

so the Church was formed from the side of Christ, hanging on the cross. For his side was pierced, as the gospel says, and immediately there flowed out blood and water, which are the twin sacraments of the Church: the water, which became her bath, and the blood which became her dowry.¹²

Although the sacraments are “of the Church” in the sense that she is their home, nevertheless, the Church is both *from* and *for* the sacraments. The CCC 1118 explains:

The sacraments are “of the Church” in the double sense that they are “by her” and “for her.” They are “by the Church,” for she is the sacrament of Christ’s action at work in her through the mission of the Holy Spirit. They are “for the Church” in the sense that “the sacraments make the Church,”¹³ since they manifest and communicate to men, above all in the Eucharist, the mystery of communion with the God who is love, One in three persons.

St. Thomas poses the question of whether the Apostles or their successors could institute other sacraments, and he responds:

The apostles and their successors are God’s vicars in governing the Church which is built on faith and the sacraments of faith. Wherefore, just as they may not institute another Church, so neither may they deliver another faith, nor institute other sacraments: on the contrary, the Church is said to be built up with the sacraments “which flowed from the side of Christ while hanging on the Cross.”¹⁴

The Church therefore cannot institute any sacraments, or even radically change the essential matter or form of the sacraments as instituted by Christ. The Church is not master of the sacraments, but rather she is born from them and draws her entire supernatural life from them.

Why Did Christ Institute a Sacramental Economy Using Sensible Signs?

Why did Christ choose to bring about the sanctification of man using visible sacraments? It is a good question, for we might have thought that it would have been better for God to bring about our sanctification in a purely spiritual way. Since the grace that is signified and truly conferred by the sacraments is something invisible and spiritual, we might think that that grace would best be conferred in a purely invisible way.

The key to understanding why Christ chose a sacramental economy to impart grace lies in a consideration of the fact that man is a rational animal. Our place in the hierarchy

of creation is to be the intersection of the material and spiritual worlds. Our bodies situate us firmly in the material world. Our rational and spiritual souls, however, place us in the spiritual world, as the lowest level of spiritual creatures. Men are at the top of one half of creation, the physical creation, but at the bottom of the other invisible half of creation, the spiritual creation, peopled by myriads of angels above us.

This understanding of man’s place in the universe is the profound sense in which man is said to be a *microcosm*, meaning a cosmos in miniature or “little universe.” Man is a little universe because he has in himself both orders of God’s Creation. We have in our bodies the perfection of the physical universe, summing it up, and we have in our souls a part of the spiritual universe, although in its lowest form. We unite in ourselves all the different levels of God’s creation.

Because modern man has lost his understanding of his place in the universe, he tends to fall into one of two opposing heresies: materialism and angelism. The more common error of materialism consists in denying the existence of the spiritual realm altogether. Man would simply be a highly organized body, and what we think of as our soul would just be our marvelous organization.

Angelism, on the other hand, consists in thinking of ourselves as if we were angels in some way. This comes from the founder of modern philosophy, René Descartes, who thought of man as two things: a thinking thing (*res cogitans*), and an extended thing (*res extensa*), a body endowed with dimensionality. For Descartes, our soul would be a kind of angel that is somehow stuck to a body.¹⁵ The problem with this conception is that it fails to do justice to the profound union of body and soul in man. Our body as well as our soul is an essential part of who we are. Angelism thus tends to diminish the profound unity between body and soul in man.

Both materialism and angelism make it impossible to understand why God wanted to institute sacraments. The materialist will simply dismiss the sacraments as mere outward rites, mere religious signs. The angelist, on the other hand, prefers that invisible graces be given only through a purely spiritual means, such as faith. The sacraments will be recast as mere signs of the giving of grace in a purely spiritual way through faith. This is the tendency of Protestantism.

Man’s nature as a rational animal, however, makes it fitting that worship be given to God and grace be conferred on man in a sensible way involving our sense experience and the material universe. As a rational animal, man can grasp spiritual realities only through abstraction from sense knowledge. Thus it is natural for man to learn about

12 *Quodvultdeus of Carthage, The Creedal Homilies*, trans. and ed. Thomas Macy Finn, Ancient Christian Writers (New York: The Newman Press, 2004), 37.

13 St. Augustine, *De civitate Dei* 22.17, PL 41:779.

14 St. Thomas, *ST III*, q. 64, a. 2, ad 3.

15 See Jacques Maritain, *Three Reformers: Luther, Descartes, Rousseau* (New York: Scribner’s, 1940).

spiritual realities through some kind of sensible contact.¹⁶ The *Catechism of the Council of Trent* explains:

We are so constituted by nature that we can understand nothing intellectually unless it is first perceived through the senses. Out of his goodness, the Creator of all things wisely decreed that the mysterious effect of his infinite power should be made intelligible to us by means of certain signs evident to our senses. If man were not clothed, as it were, in a material body, St. John Chrysostom tells us, goodness would have been presented to him in a manner likewise unclothed; but since his soul is in fact embodied, it is absolutely necessary that certain sensory signs be used if he is to have any understanding of what goodness is.¹⁷

By choosing to sanctify us by sensible sacraments, Christ has chosen the instruments of our sanctification to be analogous to the sacramental rites of Israel, which always involve both a sensible and a spiritual dimension. The CCC 1152 comments:

Since Pentecost, it is through the sacramental signs of his Church that the Holy Spirit carries on the work of sanctification. The sacraments of the Church do not abolish but purify and integrate all the richness of the signs and symbols of the cosmos and of social life. Further, they fulfill the types and figures of the Old Covenant, signify and make actively present the salvation wrought by Christ, and prefigure and anticipate the glory of heaven.

That God sanctifies us through sensible sacred signs is another example of the divine condescension which reaches its summit in the Incarnation. Since the Word has taken on flesh and conversed with mankind in sensible fashion appropriate for men, it is likewise fitting that He sanctify us making use of sensible signs that realize some kind of mysterious contact with His sacred humanity. The sacramental economy is thus profoundly fitting for the Church founded by the Word Incarnate.

The sacraments therefore reflect not only man's nature, but still more profoundly, they reflect the two natures of the Word Incarnate, and they serve as extensions of His touch and of His words after His Ascension into heaven. Just as Christ is sensible through His humanity but invisible in His divine power, so the sacraments are sensible in their aspect as sign, but carrying a word of omnipotent power to sanctify and realize what they represent.

Furthermore, these two visible and invisible dimensions of the sacraments structure the two dimensions of the Church. The Church is the image of Christ, the Word made flesh, and so the visible structure of the Church formed by her visible sacraments is the sign and instrument of

the invisible communion in grace effected by the Holy Spirit, as Christ's sacred humanity was the instrument and "sacrament" of His divinity. *Lumen gentium* 8 explains the inseparable unity of these two dimensions:

Christ, the one Mediator, established and continually sustains here on earth His holy Church, the community of faith, hope and charity, as an entity with visible delineation through which He communicated truth and grace to all. But, the society structured with hierarchical organs and the Mystical Body of Christ, are not to be considered as two realities, nor are the visible assembly and the spiritual community, nor the earthly Church and the Church enriched with heavenly things; rather they form one complex reality which coalesces from a divine and a human element. For this reason, by no weak analogy, it is compared to the mystery of the incarnate Word. As the assumed nature inseparably united to Him, serves the divine Word as a living organ of salvation, so, in a similar way, does the visible social structure of the Church serve the Spirit of Christ, who vivifies it, in the building up of the body.

The sacramental system is the divinely appointed means by which the Church is given both a *visible* dimension and an *invisible* supernatural life! Through their visible nature as signs, the sacraments make visible the members of the Church, her hierarchy, her worship, and sanctification. The *Catechism of the Council of Trent*, drawing on St. Augustine, explains:

There have to be certain distinguishing marks and symbols to identify the faithful. According to St. Augustine, there is no human society—whether its religion is true or false makes no difference—which can become as it were one body, unless it is held together by some bond of visible signs. Both these purposes are met by the sacraments of the New Law; they distinguish Christians from unbeliever, and they bind together the faithful themselves by a kind of sacred bond.¹⁸

The Protestant revolt was in large part an attack on the visible aspect of the Church; Luther and Calvin tended to conceive the Church as essentially invisible. Not surprisingly, such a conception of the Church went together with a loss of comprehension of the entire sacramental system.

Another reason for the sensible nature of the sacraments is that it is fitting to place a remedy where there is a wound. As a result of original sin, we have suffered the loss of the preternatural gift of integrity by which our sense appetites were kept in conformity with reason. We see that Adam and Eve had this gift because they were naked and not ashamed. However, after the Fall, our sensible appetite frequently seduces us into acting against reason, in that we are vehemently attracted by some sensible and disordered good. Since the senses are a frequent cause of sin, God has

¹⁶ See St. Thomas, *ST* III, q. 60, a. 4, and *ST* III, q. 61, a. 1. See also *The Roman Catechism*, p. 151.

¹⁷ *The Roman Catechism*, part 2, intro., section 14, p. 151.

¹⁸ *The Roman Catechism*, part 2, intro., section 14, p. 152.

willed to cure us from disordered concupiscence precisely by means of something sensible.¹⁹

By giving us spiritual medicine in sensible form, the sacraments inculcate humility, reminding us that we are not angels but human beings wounded by disordered attachment to physical things. The *Catechism of the Council of Trent* explains:

This thought is of great importance in the pursuit of the Christian life—the sacraments repress and subdue the pride of the human heart and encourage the practice of humility, by forcing us in this submission of ourselves to things of sense to obey God, from whom we had wickedly departed in order to serve the elements of this world.²⁰

Fittingness of the Seven Sacraments and Their Harmony

Why did Christ institute these particular seven sacraments? Theology would not be able to deduce in advance what God ought to do for our salvation, but after He has done it, theology can reflect on God’s action in order to better appreciate its beauty and marvel. This is the value of what theologians call “arguments of fittingness.”

St. Thomas gives a classic answer to why there are seven sacraments by creating an analogy between natural life and supernatural life.²¹ As certain elements are necessary for man’s natural life, so analogous elements are necessary for man’s supernatural life. St. Thomas divides these necessary elements into two groups: that which is necessary for the life of each individual, and that which is necessary for man as a social creature. What is necessary for each individual is birth, nourishment, maturity, healing in times of illness, and preparation for death. What is necessary for man’s social life is marriage and government. So likewise in the supernatural life these elements are necessary: spiritual rebirth through Baptism, spiritual nourishment in the Eucharist, spiritual maturity through Confirmation, spiritual healing through Penance, spiritual preparation for death through the sacrament of Anointing of the sick, the elevation of matrimony to a sacrament, and spiritual government through the sacrament of Holy Orders.

This explanation of fittingness was taken up by the Council of Florence in its decree for the Armenians (1439):

There are seven sacraments of the New Law. . . . The first five of these are ordained to the interior spiritual perfection of the person; the last two are ordained to the government and the increase of the whole Church. For by baptism we are spiritually reborn and by confirmation we grow in grace and are strengthened in the faith; being reborn and strengthened, we are nourished with the divine food of the Eucharist. If by sin we become

sick in soul, we are healed spiritually by penance; we are also healed in spirit, and in body in so far as it is good for the soul, by extreme unction. Through Orders the Church is governed and receives spiritual growth; through matrimony she receives bodily growth.²²

The sacraments of Israel performed a similar function, prefiguring those of the Church. Circumcision prefigured Baptism, the Passover prefigured the Eucharist; the strengthening of Confirmation was prefigured by the anointing of prophets, priests, and kings. Spiritual healing was prefigured through baptismal ritual immersions and sin offerings; matrimony and Holy Orders were likewise parallel.

Another argument of fittingness connects the seven sacraments with the seven principal virtues. In reality, all the sacraments give all the virtues. Nevertheless, the particular mission of each sacrament, and the sacramental graces associated with it, can be connected with a particular virtue. St. Thomas reports this argument of fittingness as something already traditional:

Some, again, gather the number of sacraments from a certain adaptation to the virtues and to the defects and penal effects resulting from sin. They say that Baptism corresponds to Faith, and is ordained as a remedy against original sin; Extreme Unction, to Hope, being ordained against venial sin; the Eucharist, to Charity, being ordained against the penal effect which is malice; Order, to Prudence, being ordained against ignorance; Penance to Justice, being ordained against mortal sin; Matrimony, to Temperance, being ordained against concupiscence; Confirmation, to Fortitude, being ordained against infirmity.²³

Such reasoning would be insufficient to establish that Christ established seven sacraments. However, once we know the seven sacraments through Tradition, theology reflects on why Christ instituted precisely these seven sacraments.

The Seven Sacraments and the Holiness of the Church

The seven sacraments are the source of the holiness of the Church. Another way of looking at the seven sacraments is as seven divine means of generating, maintaining, and nourishing her in holiness.

The Church is holy first of all through Baptism, by which she is endowed with the means of granting a person a new birth into the life of grace, cancelling all the stains of sin incurred in his past life. The Church, therefore, is holy in that she is spiritually fecund: she has been endowed with the supernatural ability to engender into the supernatural

²² DS 1311; D 695; *Christian Faith* 1306. See also Paul VI in his Apostolic Constitution on the sacrament of Confirmation, *Divinae consortium naturae* of 1971; St. Thomas, *ST III*, q. 73, a. 1.

²³ *ST III*, q. 65, a. 1.

¹⁹ See St. Thomas, *ST III*, q. 61, a. 1.

²⁰ *The Roman Catechism*, part 2, intro., section 14, p. 153.

²¹ St. Thomas, *ST III*, q. 65, a. 1.

life of grace all who enter her life-giving waters with the right disposition.

Second, she is holy in strengthening that supernatural life through the sacrament of Confirmation, in which a fuller outpouring of the gifts of the Holy Spirit is given to advance the recipient in spiritual maturity. This makes one capable of fighting the good fight of the faith, thus becoming a soldier of Christ (*miles Christi*).

Third, she is holy in giving a spiritual nourishment that is no less efficacious for the spiritual life than healthy food is for the physical life. The Eucharist, worthily received, communicates a greater union with Christ through an increase of charity. The extent of the increase depends on the fervor of one's disposition. Furthermore, this sacrament sanctifies the Church by making Christ substantially present on every altar, so that He may reside in every tabernacle. The Eucharist also makes the Church holy in that it makes her capable of offering an immaculate and infinitely pleasing sacrifice to God the Father: the very sacrifice of Calvary, made present on our altars in every valid Mass.

Fourth, the Church is holy through having received a sacrament by which to restore the supernatural life when it is unfortunately lost through grave sin: the sacrament of Penance. Fifth, the Anointing of the Sick gives added grace in times of grave physical illness. Sixth, the sacrament of Matrimony sanctifies the fundamental building block of society, the family, and gives the spouses a series of sacramental graces to sanctify their marriage, educate their children in the grace of God, and to be a sign in the world of Christ's love for His Church and of her love for Him.

Finally, the sacrament of Holy Orders sanctifies the Church by enabling the recipients of the sacrament to act in the very person of Christ, the Head of the Church, in the consecration of the Eucharist, and in absolution of sin. Holy Orders also provides a sacramental foundation for the exercise of authority in the Church for teaching and governing. That authority is not a mere exercise of human power, but a sacramental sharing in the power of Christ for the building up of His Body. The recipients of Holy Orders, like those who receive the sacrament of Matrimony, are also given a series of sacramental graces to make them worthy ministers of the multiform grace of Christ.

The Church herself can also be spoken of as a "universal sacrament of salvation" (LG 48) This is because the Church was born from the seven sacraments, and holds them in her bosom, and is thus an efficacious sign of union with God and all men, and a source of salvation. Just as Eve was called the "mother of the living" (Gen 3:20), so the Church is the new Eve, the mother of those living in the order of

grace. The sacraments serve as the nerves and arteries of the Church, by which her supernatural life spreads from the head into the members. Through these arteries and nerves, the life of the Head is given to the members, as they receive and are nourished by sanctifying grace and sacramental graces.²⁴

The Church is a sacrament also because as the Mystical Body of Christ she is a visible sign of the grace of God and an instrument of the distribution of that grace. Again like the sacraments, she is a sign that brings together past, present, and future, for Her unity as the Mystical Body of Christ recalls the Incarnation of Christ; through her sacraments she distributes the grace of God in the present; and as the visible Mystical Body of Christ she is a figure of the ultimate union of mankind with God in the Church triumphant.²⁵

Why Can Some Sacraments Be Repeated and Others Not?

The analogy given by St. Thomas relating the sacraments to the things essential for natural human life also explains why certain sacraments cannot be repeated whereas others can. Since the Eucharist is the sacrament of spiritual nourishment, and we repeatedly take nourishment, so it is fitting that the Eucharist be a sacrament that not only can be repeated, but frequently should be repeated. Since medicine is something that we need to take whenever we are ill, the spiritual medicine of Penance should be taken at frequent intervals to combat our spiritual ills, at least for venial sins. Preparation for death or serious illness is rare, but it also can happen more than once, and so the Anointing of the Sick can be taken more than once (although not in the same illness). A second marriage can be entered into after the death of a spouse. Birth, however, is something that happens only once, and thus Baptism is received but once. Spiritual maturity, likewise, can be received but once, although we continue to grow in it throughout our lives. Hence Confirmation cannot be repeated. Holy Orders also cannot be repeated (although there are three grades) because it conforms the recipient with Christ, *eternal* High Priest. As Christ's priesthood cannot be lost, so neither can the priesthood of those who are conformed to Christ's priesthood through the sacrament of Holy Orders. A priest can lose the faculties to exercise the priesthood, but he cannot lose the priesthood itself.

Another reason the sacraments of Baptism, Confirmation, and Holy Orders cannot be repeated is because they

²⁴ See *Lumen gentium* 11.

²⁵ See *Lumen gentium* 1: "The Church is in Christ like a sacrament or as a sign and instrument both of a very closely knit union with God and of the unity of the whole human race." *Lumen gentium* 48 returns to this same idea: "Rising from the dead, he sent his life-giving Spirit upon his disciples and through him has established his body, which is the Church, as the universal sacrament of salvation."

imprint a character that is indelible, whereas the other sacraments do not.

Hierarchy of the Sacramental Economy

In all the works of God, where there is multiplicity there is order and hierarchy. Thus there must also be hierarchy in the seven sacraments. Baptism is first in terms of necessity, and Holy Orders is necessary for the Church as a whole, but the Eucharist is by far the first in dignity. All the sacraments communicate the grace won by Christ on Calvary. The Eucharist alone, however, substantially contains the very Author of grace—the Word Incarnate—and makes present the very sacrifice by which the world was redeemed, and from which the other sacraments draw their efficacy. The *Catechism of the Council of Trent* explains:

Although all the sacraments have a divine efficacy, it is nevertheless very important to note that they are quite unequal in terms of necessity and dignity. This inequality is based, of course, on the differences in their respective significations. Three of the sacraments are clearly more necessary than the others; but even among these three the nature of their necessity varies. The only sacrament which is universally and uniquely necessary is Baptism. . . . Secondly, there is a necessity for the sacrament of Penance, but only in a relative sense. . . . Thirdly, the sacrament of Holy Orders, although not for each one of the faithful, is absolutely necessary for the Church as a whole. If, on the other hand, we compare the sacraments in terms of dignity, we immediately recognize the Holy Eucharist as far and away superior to all the others. This is because of its substantial holiness, and the number and greatness of its mysteries.²⁶

²⁶ *The Roman Catechism*, part 2, intro., § 22, pp. 156–57. See St. Thomas, *ST* III, q. 65, a. 3.