

Association of Hebrew Catholics Lecture Series  
*The Mystery of Israel and the Church*

Fall 2012 – Series #10

*Sacraments: From the Old Covenant to the New*

Talk #2

*The Grace and Power of the Sacraments*



© **Dr. Lawrence Feingold STD**  
Associate Professor of Theology and Philosophy  
Kenrick-Glennon Seminary, Archdiocese of St. Louis, Missouri

Note: *This document contains the unedited text of Dr. Feingold's talk. It will eventually undergo final editing for inclusion in the series of books being published by The Miriam Press under the series title: "The Mystery of Israel and the Church". If you find errors of any type, please send your observations to [lfeingold@hebrewcatholic.org](mailto:lfeingold@hebrewcatholic.org)*

*This document may be copied and given to others. It may not be modified, sold, or placed on any web site. The actual recording of this talk, as well as the talks from all series, may be found on the AHC website at: <http://www.hebrewcatholic.org/Studies/MysteryofIsraelChurch/mysteryofisraela.html>*



Association of Hebrew Catholics • 4120 W Pine Blvd • Saint Louis MO 63108  
[www.hebrewcatholic.org](http://www.hebrewcatholic.org) • [ahc@hebrewcatholic.org](mailto:ahc@hebrewcatholic.org)

## 2. The Grace and Power of the Sacraments

### *Sacraments as Instruments of Christ's Humanity*

The seven sacraments of the Church have the mysterious capacity to directly cause the grace that they signify. But how can sensible signs cause grace? Since sanctifying grace is a participation in the divine nature (see 2 Pt 1:4), grace can only be produced in a creature through the omnipotence of God. How then are the sacraments true causes of grace? The problem would be insoluble without the notion of instrumental causality.

Philosophers speak of instrumental causality when a cause produces its effect *by means of an instrument*. An instrument is an efficient cause that produces an effect higher than itself, by executing a design which does not originate in itself, but in a higher cause, referred to as the principal cause. The artist's paintbrush, for example, is an instrumental cause that executes an intention that originates in the artist's mind, which is the principal cause of the artwork. Almost all human production makes use of instruments and instrumental causality. For example, the human hand itself and all our other organs serve as instruments of our soul (of our will and intellect). And all our tools are instruments to enhance the capacity of our hands, eyes, ears, and other organs.

What is the relationship between the instrumental and the principal cause? The instrumental cause acts as a kind of *servant* of the principal cause, and the effect is produced through the cooperation of the instrumental cause *under the direction of the principal cause*. A paintbrush in the hands of a painter, a chisel in the hands of a sculptor, a pen in the hands of a writer, a violin in the hands of a violinist, an orchestra under the direction of a conductor or composer, are examples of instrumental causes. The canvas is painted by the paintbrush under the direction of the hand, eye, mind, and will of the artist. In this way, the paintbrush produces *an effect which it could never have achieved without this superior direction and impulse* stemming from the artist's mind. The instrument thus produces an effect that surpasses the capacity of its own nature. *An instrument gives what it does not have*, but only insofar as it is moved by a superior cause which does have what is communicated to the effect. Therefore, the effect is most properly attributed to the principal cause which is the artist, and only secondarily to the paintbrush, chisel, pen, violin, or orchestra.<sup>1</sup>

The notion of instrumental causality is difficult and profound, and has many applications in theology. For example, the sacred writers of the books of Scripture

<sup>1</sup> See St. Thomas, *ST*, I-II, q. 16, a. 1: "An action is not properly attributed to the instrument, but to the principal agent." See also *In IV Sent.*, d. 47, q. 2, a. 1, sol. 3, ad 2.

wrote as instrumental causes inspired by the Holy Spirit. Ultimately all creatures and their operations are instruments, each in their own way, of God's providence which directs all things to their ends for the realization of God's plan in the universe. Even the humanity of Christ works as an instrumental cause moved by the divinity, and the sacraments also are clearly instrumental causes, which are like "extensions" of the humanity of Christ.

God alone can be the principal cause of the infusion of grace in the soul which produces justification and sanctification. However, there is nothing to prevent God from producing this effect by means of instruments situated in the created and sensible order. As the mind of the artist produces beauty in a statue by means of his hands and chisels, so God produces grace in the soul by means of Christ's humanity (through which all grace was merited), and through the sacraments, as if they were chisels or paintbrushes in the hands of Christ.

There are actually two levels of instrumental causes in play here. The hands, eyes, ears, and voice of an artist are instruments of the mind of the artist which is the principal cause. We can call these organs "*conjoined instruments*." However, the chisels, paintbrushes, trumpets, flutes, etc., are *external and separated instruments*. Normally we make use of separated instruments by means of our own conjoined instruments: our hands and voice, etc.

If we apply this distinction to the sacraments, it is clear that the sacraments are *separated and extrinsic* instruments, whereas the sacred humanity of Christ is an instrument of the divinity most intimately *joined* in the unity of the one divine Person through the hypostatic union. Thus the sacraments are separated instruments wielded, as it were, by the humanity of Christ, who merited their efficacy and instituted them. The sacraments function as instruments in the hand of Christ that extend the reach of His sacred humanity to all men throughout the world and throughout the time from His Ascension to the Second Coming.

### *The Power of the Sacraments Does Not Depend on the Holiness of the Minister*

Because the sacraments are instruments wielded by the humanity of Christ, they are *intrinsically efficacious*, as long as the minister validly produces the sacramental sign with the intention of doing what the Church does, and as long as there is no obstacle blocking their realization on the part of the recipient. This is a dogma of faith defined in the Council of Trent.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>2</sup> Council of Trent, session 7, canons 6, 7, 8, and 12.

The intrinsic efficacy of the sacraments comes from the fact that Christ is the principal minister, who, through His omnipotence, efficaciously moves the instrumental cause—the sacramental sign—to enable it to give grace and imprint character. St. Thomas explains that “the sacrament is not wrought by the righteousness of either the celebrant or the recipient, but by the power of God.”<sup>3</sup> This is implied by St. Paul in 1 Corinthians 3:6–7: “I planted, Apollos watered, but God gave the growth. So neither he who plants nor he who waters is anything, but only God who gives the growth.”

The *Catechism of the Council of Trent* expressed this point with clarity, for it was being denied by the Reformation:

Because in the performance of their sacred functions they represent not their own but the person of Christ, these instrumental ministers validly effect and confer the sacraments—no matter how good or evil they may be in their persons. The only conditions for this validity are that they use the matter and the form instituted by Christ and preserved in the Catholic Church, and that they intend to do what the Church does. Therefore, unless the recipients on their own part deliberately resist the Holy Spirit, nothing can prevent them from receiving the sacramental grace. . . . Just as in planting trees, the vices of the planter do not impede the growth of the tree, so too—the comparison is obvious—those who were planted in Christ by the ministry of bad men sustain no injury from a guilt which is not their own. Thus, as some Fathers of the church have noted, Judas Iscariot must have baptized many people; yet none of them was ever known to have been rebaptized.<sup>4</sup>

The interior efficacy of the sacraments is expressed by John the Baptist in John 1:33: “He who sent me to baptize with water said to me, ‘He on whom you see the Spirit descend and remain, this is he who baptizes with the Holy Spirit.’” It is Christ who baptizes as the principal minister in every Christian Baptism, and the same is true of the other sacraments. St. Augustine has a marvelous commentary on John 1:33:

Judas baptized, and after Judas’ baptism it was not repeated. John baptized, and after John’s baptism it was repeated (Acts 19:3–5). For the baptism administered by Judas was the baptism of Christ, whereas that administered by John was the baptism of John. Not that we prefer Judas to John, but that we prefer the baptism of Christ, even if administered by Judas, to the baptism of John, even if administered by John himself.<sup>5</sup>

## Sacraments Work ex Opere Operato

Catholic theology expresses this intrinsic efficacy of the sacraments of the Church through the phrase *ex opere operato*, which literally means “by the work that has been worked.” This means that grace is produced by the fact that the sacramental action has been realized: “by the very fact of the action’s being performed” (CCC 1128). The “work” here refers to the valid realization of the sacramental sign. Thus we say that the sacraments achieve their effect not from the sanctity of the minister, but by the performance of “all the essentials which belong to the effecting or conferring of the sacrament,”<sup>6</sup> with the intention to do what the Church does. The *Catechism* continues: “From the moment that a sacrament is celebrated in accordance with the intention of the Church, the power of Christ and his Spirit acts in and through it, independently of the personal holiness of the minister.”<sup>7</sup>

Prayers in general, on the contrary, are not fruitful merely from the fact of the action’s being performed (*ex opere operato*), but from the personal contribution of the one praying.<sup>8</sup>

The words spoken in the essential form of the sacraments have the power of Christ Himself, for they are words of Christ given in the institution of the sacrament. St. Ambrose gives a magnificent explanation of the power of Christ’s words in the sacraments to effect what they represent. In his *Sermons on the Sacraments*, addressed to the neophytes, he said with regard to Baptism:

The priest comes, he says a prayer at the font, he invokes the name of the Father, the presence of the Son and the Holy Spirit; he uses heavenly words. They are heavenly words, because they are the words of Christ which say that we must baptize in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.<sup>9</sup>

With regard to the Eucharist, he explains:

Perhaps you say: “The bread I have here is ordinary bread.” Yes, before the sacramental words are uttered this bread is nothing but bread. But at the consecration this bread becomes the body of Christ. Let us reason this out. How can something which is bread be the body of Christ? Well, by what words is the consecration effected, and whose words are they? The words of the Lord Jesus. All that is said before are the words of the priest: praise is offered to God, the prayer is offered up, petitions are made for the people, for kings, for all others. But when the moment comes for bringing the

6 Council of Trent, session 7, canon 12.

7 CCC 1128.

8 Theology expresses this with the phrase, *ex opere operantis*: by the work of the one working.

9 St. Ambrose, *Sermons on the Sacraments (De Sacramentis)* 2. 14, in Edward Yarnold, ed., *The Awe-Inspiring Rites of Initiation: Baptismal Homilies of the Fourth Century* (Middlegreen, Slough: St Paul Publications, 1981), 114.

3 ST III, q. 68, a. 8, cited in CCC 1128.

4 *The Roman Catechism*, part 2, intro., section 25, p. 158.

5 St. Augustine, *On the Gospel of St. John*, tractate 5, section 18, translation from *The Roman Catechism*, 158.

most holy sacrament into being, the priest does not use his own words any longer: he uses the words of Christ. Therefore, it is Christ's word that brings this sacrament into being.

What is this word of Christ? It is the word by which all things were made. The Lord commanded and the heavens were made, the Lord commanded and the earth was made, the Lord commanded and the seas were made, the Lord commanded and all creatures came into being. See, then, how efficacious the word of Christ is. If, then, there is such power in the word of the Lord Jesus that things begin to exist which did not exist before, how much more powerful it is for changing what already existed into something else.

To answer your question, then, before the consecration it was not the body of Christ, but after the consecration I tell you that it is now the body of Christ. He spoke and it was made, he commanded and it was created. You yourself were in existence, but you were a creature of the old order; after your consecration, you began to exist as a new creature.

You see from all this, surely, the power that is contained in the heavenly word. If it is effective in the earthly spring [in reference to the words of Moses that brought water from the rock in Ex 15:23–25], if the heavenly word is effective in the other cases, why should it not be so in the heavenly sacraments? So now you have learnt that the bread becomes the body of Christ, and that, though wine and water are poured into the chalice, through the consecration effected by the heavenly word it becomes his blood.<sup>10</sup>

He then goes on to reiterate the same point:

The day before he suffered, it says, he took bread in his holy hands. Before it is consecrated, it is bread; but when the words of Christ have been uttered over it, it is the body of Christ. Listen to what he says then: "Take and eat of this, all of you, for this is my body." And the chalice, before the words of Christ, is full of wine and water. But when the words of Christ have done their work, it becomes the blood of Christ which has redeemed the people.<sup>11</sup>

The sacraments realize what they represent because the words, being the words of Christ, have been given the power to effect what He wishes.

Although the sacramental graces are given through the power of Christ and the merits of His Passion, the amount of grace received from the reception of the sacraments—their fruitfulness—will vary, for this depends also on the disposition of the recipient.<sup>12</sup> The philosophical principle

10 Ibid., Sermon 4.14–19, in Yarnold, 133–35.

11 Ibid., 4.23, in Yarnold, pp. 137–38.

12 See CCC 1128: "Nevertheless, the fruits of the sacraments also depend on the disposition of the one who receives them."

is applicable here: everything is received according to the mode of the receiver. In other words, the personal disposition of the recipient, but not that of the minister, affects the fruitfulness of the sacrament.

Here one might pose the following objection: There is a philosophical principle that no one can give what they do not possess. A minister in a state of mortal sin does not possess sanctifying grace. How can he give it to another through the celebration of a sacrament?<sup>13</sup>

The answer should be clear from the explanation of instrumental causality given above. The objection would be valid if the minister of the sacrament were the principal agent of the sacramental action. With regard to a principal agent, it is absolutely true that no one can give what he does not possess. It is not true, however, with regard to an instrumental cause. A chisel in the hand of Michelangelo can communicate a form that the chisel as such does not itself possess. Likewise, a pen in the hand of Shakespeare communicates a rational beauty that the pen cannot know. The instrument can give what it does not possess because it is being moved by a higher cause that does possess what it imparts. The chisel can impart a form of beauty because it receives movement from the artist's mind. The movement passes from the principal agent through the chisel to the effect.

Likewise in the sacraments, it is Christ who gives grace through the instrumentality both of his priests (or other ministers) and the sacramental sign that they realize. The minister of a sacrament is simply an instrument or conduit of a movement that has a far higher source, which is the divine power itself. St. Thomas states that "Christ works in the sacraments, both by wicked men as lifeless instruments, and by good men as living instruments."<sup>14</sup>

Does this mean that it makes no difference whether the minister of a sacrament is a great saint or a great sinner or heretic? Or that it makes no difference whether it is celebrated with reverence or irreverence? Not at all. Directly and per se, the holiness of the minister and the reverence of the celebration do not determine the validity or fruitfulness of the sacrament. Indirectly, however, the holiness and reverence of the minister have a great effect on the fruitfulness of the sacrament, because a holy priest and a reverent celebration are greatly conducive to inciting greater devotion, contrition, reverence, and faith in the recipient. Heightened devotion, faith, and contrition on the

13 St. Thomas, in *ST* III, q. 67, a. 5, ad 1, makes a similar objection with regard to the minister of Baptism. In an emergency a non-baptized person can baptize if he intends to do what the Church does. But how can he give what he does not possess? St. Thomas responds: "The man who baptizes offers but his outward ministration; whereas Christ it is Who baptizes inwardly, Who can use all men to whatever purpose He wills. Consequently, the unbaptized can baptize: because, as Pope Nicolas I says, 'the Baptism is not theirs,' i.e. the baptizers', 'but His,' i.e. Christ's."

14 *ST* III, q. 64, a. 5, ad 2.

part of the recipient make it possible for him to receive the sacrament with much greater fruitfulness. What is received is received according to the mode of the receiver. This is a key principle of pastoral theology.

There is also a second reason the reverent celebration of the sacrament contributes to the fruitfulness of the effect. The sacramental liturgy includes many prayers that do not belong to the essence of the sacrament itself. These prayers, instituted by the Church, are not efficacious *ex opere operato*, but through the faith and devotion of the participants (*ex opere operantis*).

### ***The Sacraments of the Old Covenant Did Not Function ex Opere Operato***

The intrinsic efficacy of the sacraments that function *ex opere operato* is a property unique to the seven sacraments of the New Covenant. The sacraments of the Old Covenant did not have this property of being intrinsically efficacious. They served as public signs and manifestations of faith in God's redemption (through the Messiah) which would justify Israel. Through this manifestation of faith, God conferred grace on Israel. This is taught by St. Paul in Romans 4:9–11:

We say that faith was reckoned to Abraham as righteousness. How then was it reckoned to him? Was it before or after he had been circumcised? It was not after, but before he was circumcised. He received circumcision as a sign or seal of the righteousness which he had by faith while he was still uncircumcised.

Furthermore, St. Paul speaks of the rites of the Old Law, in comparison with those of the New, as “weak and needy elements” (Gal 4:9). The contrast between the sacraments of the Old and New Covenants is brought out in Hebrews 9:13–14:

For if the sprinkling of defiled persons with the blood of goats and bulls and with the ashes of a heifer sanctifies for the purification of the flesh, how much more shall the blood of Christ, who through the eternal Spirit offered himself without blemish to God, purify your conscience from dead works to serve the living God.

We see from this that the rites of the Old Testament did not have the intrinsic power to purify man's interior, for they were outward signs that “point to what would be effected by our sacraments of the New Law.”<sup>15</sup> They were not yet instruments applying to the faithful the merits gained from the Blood of Christ.

The Council of Trent defined that the sacraments of the New Law differ essentially from those of the Old, and not merely in their outward forms.<sup>16</sup> This implies that the sac-

raments of the Mosaic Law do not have the same property of being efficacious *ex opere operato*.

St. Thomas gives a profound reason for this difference between the sacraments of the Old and New Covenants. The sacraments of the Old Covenant could not fittingly work *ex opere operato* simply because Christ had not yet become incarnate. They could only work as still obscure signs of faith and hope in the coming Incarnation and Passion which would work man's salvation. The sacraments of the New Covenant can have this power to work *ex opere operato* because they are instituted by the Word Incarnate, who alone among men has the power to make His words and gestures—and words and gestures realized in His Person through ministers—efficacious in producing grace and applying the fruit of His Passion to men.

The faithful of Israel were justified by their faith in the coming of the Messiah. A future event can achieve its effect in advance of its actual occurrence insofar as it is somehow known, desired, and loved, and thus already active in man's spiritual life. The rites of Israel are signs of these future salvific events. They are also memorials of events of God's saving action in Israel's history, which typologically prefigure Christ and the Church. These signs are not efficacious in themselves as the words of the Word Incarnate, for they were given prior to the Incarnation, but rather are signs of His future working.

An instrumental cause such as a chisel can work as an efficient cause only when the sculptor is physically present and holding the chisel in his hand. Before that time the chisel cannot carve the statue. However, it can produce some effect in the mind of an observer. It can be a sign that the statue will soon be made, when the sculptor finally arrives. The chisel waiting to be used can give hope to a client that the statue he has commissioned will one day be completed. The rites of Israel were like chisels without the hand of the sculptor physically present to wield them. They were signs, instituted by God, manifesting faith and hope in future salvific events, and their pious use drew down God's grace upon Israel. The sacraments of the New Covenant, on the other hand, are instruments in the hand of Christ who, having come and merited the successful completion of the entire work, has ascended into heaven, and yet has these instruments working on earth through words and gestures realized in His person through ministers in the Church marked by Holy Orders.

Does the fact that the rites of Israel did not cause grace *ex opere operato* mean that they were not at all efficacious in imparting grace? No. Pope Innocent III, in a letter of 1201 to Humbert, Archbishop of Arles, teaches that “original sin was remitted by the mystery of circumcision and the danger of damnation avoided,” although no one could enter heaven until the Sacrifice of Christ was sacraments of the Old Law, save that the ceremonies are different, and different the outward rites; let him be anathema.”

<sup>15</sup> *The Roman Catechism*, part 2, intro., section 29, p. 161.

<sup>16</sup> Council of Trent, session 7, canon 2 (Denz 845): “If anyone says that these said sacraments of the New Law do not differ from the

accomplished.<sup>17</sup> St. Thomas Aquinas explains that grace was conferred on the faithful of Israel on the *occasion* of receiving the sacraments of the Old Covenant, such as circumcision, by a direct act of God, but not *opere operato*.<sup>18</sup> Interestingly, he states that all theologians were in agreement that original sin was remitted by the rite of circumcision. They differed, however, with regard to the effects of grace bestowed. Some theologians held that circumcision only remitted original sin, but bestowed no grace. This is impossible, however, because original sin essentially consists in the privation of sanctifying grace. Thus the remission of original sin necessarily implies the giving of sanctifying grace.

If original sin was remitted on the occasion of circumcision, which was received only by boys, what about the girls of Israel? To my knowledge, St. Thomas does not address this issue. However, the fact that the rites of Israel did not function *ex opere operato* is helpful here. Reception of the rite of circumcision was the *occasion* of God's remitting original sin, but the salvific effect was not coming uniquely *through* circumcision as through the only efficacious instrument. Thus the giving of sanctifying grace was not limited to circumcision. God could equally remit original sin for the girls in the ceremony in which they received their names (*Simchat bat*), which like circumcision, is a ceremony that incorporated a person (in this case, a girl) into the people of Israel.

The best way to explain, it seems to me, why the giving of grace in the Old Testament was tied to circumcision is that circumcision was the visible sign by which males became members of the people of Israel, and salvation was given by God to the members of Israel on the occasion of their incorporation into the People of God.<sup>19</sup> In this way girls likewise could be participants of this grace when they were incorporated into the People on the celebration of their naming.

---

17 See the text in J. Neuner and J. Dupuis, *The Christian Faith in the Doctrinal Documents of the Catholic Church*, 7<sup>th</sup> edition, (New York, Alba House, 2001), p. 582: "Even though "original sin was remitted by the mystery of circumcision and the danger of damnation avoided, human beings could not reach the Kingdom of heaven, which remained closed for all till the death of Christ. But through the sacrament of baptism . . . the guilt is remitted and one also reaches the Kingdom of heaven, whose gate the blood of Christ mercifully opened to his faithful. Far from us the thought that all the small children, of whom such a great multitude dies every day, should perish without the merciful God, who wishes no one to perish, having provided for them also some means of salvation."

18 St. Thomas explains how grace was conferred with circumcision in *ST III*, q. 70, a. 4.

19 See Christianus Pesch, *De sacramentis*, pars 1: *De sacramentis in genere. De Baptismo. De Confirmatione. De Eucharistia* (Friburgi Brisgoviae: B. Herder, 1914), 76 (my translation): "Being incorporated into the People of God was the condition of sanctification for Israelites. Circumcision was the instrument of incorporation into the People of God. Thus man attained to justification by way of circumcision."

St. Thomas also held that the grace of God would have been given to remit original sin also prior to the institution of circumcision under the Patriarchs and also to the nations outside of Israel. He hypothesized that this gift would have been given on the occasion of the prayers of parents for the sanctification of their children, according to whatever rite was traditional in their culture:

Just as before the institution of circumcision, faith in Christ to come justified both children and adults, so, too, after its institution. But before, there was no need of a sign expressive of this faith; because as yet believers had not begun to be united together apart from unbelievers for the worship of one God. It is probable, however, that parents who were believers offered up some prayers to God for their children, especially if these were in any danger. Or bestowed some blessing on them, as a "seal of faith"; just as the adults offered prayers and sacrifices for themselves.<sup>20</sup>

### ***Protestant Rejection of the Doctrine that Sacraments Operate ex Opere Operato***

One of the principal issues dividing the original Protestants from the Catholic Church was the question of how the sacraments contribute to man's justification and whether they are efficacious *ex opere operato*. Indeed, over half of the dogmatic canons of the Council of Trent concern the sacraments. It is not hard to understand that the power of the sacraments to work *ex opere operato* would be a sign of contradiction, for it is a sublime mystery, intimately related to the Incarnation. The *Catechism of the Council of Trent* draws attention to this:

How so great and marvelous an effect is produced by the sacraments—how, to use St. Augustine's expression, "water cleanses the body and reaches the heart"—is indeed something that man's mind by reason alone is unable to comprehend. For it is self-evident that nothing of a purely sense nature can reach the soul. Yet, by the light of faith, we know that in the sacraments exists the power of the omnipotent God, effecting that which natural elements of themselves can never accomplish.<sup>21</sup>

It is useful to compare the Catholic doctrine with that of John Calvin, who among the Protestant reformers has the merit of presenting his thought in a systematic way. Calvin directly denied that the sacraments work *ex opere operato*. In fact, he saw this to be a "fatal and pestilential" invention of the devil:

For the schools of the sophists have taught with general consent that the sacraments of the new law, in other words, those now in use in the Christian church, justify, and confer grace, provided only that we do not interpose the obstacle of mortal sin. It is impossible to

---

20 St. Thomas, *ST III*, q. 70, a. 4, ad 2.

21 *The Roman Catechism*, part 2, intro., section 27, p. 160.

describe how fatal and pestilential this sentiment is, and the more so, that for many ages it has, to the great loss of the church, prevailed over a considerable part of the world. It is plainly of the devil.

In summary, Calvin defines the sacraments of the New Covenant in the same way as those of the Old Covenant, because he rejects the notion that the sacraments have an intrinsic power to realize the sanctification they signify.<sup>22</sup> He therefore equates the efficacy of the sacraments of the New Covenant with those of the Old. The only difference between circumcision and Baptism would lie in the outward rite.<sup>23</sup> Finally, he rejects the “fiction by which the cause of justification and the power of the Holy Spirit are included in elements as vessels and vehicles.”<sup>24</sup>

### ***The Three Levels of the Sacraments***

Since the sacraments are sensible and sacred signs of our sanctification that produce what they signify, it follows that the sacraments must all have at least two dimensions: the outward sign, and the inward grace that they produce. In addition to these two dimensions, however, there is, surprisingly, a third dimension that lies between them: a sacred and invisible reality represented by the outward sign. However, this sacred and invisible reality is itself also an efficacious sign of interior grace.

Thus we have three levels: the outward sacramental sign, a sacred reality signified by the outward sign which is itself an invisible sign, and the interior grace represented by the two dimensions of signs. These three levels are often spoken of using the Latin terms *sacramentum tantum*, which means the sign alone; *res et sacramentum*, which means that which is both (interior) reality and sign; and *res tantum*, which means the (interior) reality alone. “Reality” (*res*) here refers to a supernatural reality that is signified by the sacred sign.

<sup>22</sup> See John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, book 4, ch. 14.1, p. 843: Sacraments are “a testimony of the divine favor toward us, confirmed by an external sign, with a corresponding attestation of our faith toward him.”

<sup>23</sup> Calvin, *Institutes*, bk. 4, ch. 14.23, p. 855. “The Scholastic dogma . . . by which the difference between the sacraments of the old and the new dispensation is made so great that the former did nothing but shadow forth the grace of God, while the latter actually confer that, must be altogether exploded. . . . Therefore, he [Paul] first makes them [Jews] equal to us in the sacraments, and leaves us not one iota of privilege which could give us hopes of impunity. Nor can we justly attribute more to our baptism than he elsewhere attributes to circumcision, when he terms it a seal of the righteousness of faith (Rom 4:11). Whatever, therefore, is now exhibited to us in the sacraments, the Jews formerly received in theirs. . . . The same efficacy which ours possess they experienced in theirs—i.e., that they were seals of the divine favor toward them in regard to the hope of eternal salvation.” It is this thesis of Calvin which was condemned by the Council of Trent in session 7, canon 2 (Denz 845).

<sup>24</sup>

Ibid., ch. 14.17, p. 852.

St. Thomas makes this distinction in the first article in the *Summa of Theology* on Baptism:

In the sacrament of Baptism, three things may be considered: namely, that which is “sacramental sign only” [*sacramentum tantum*]; that which is “reality and sign” [*res et sacramentum*]; and that which is “reality only” [*res tantum*]. That which is sacramental sign only, is something visible and outward; the sign, namely, of the inward effect: for such is the very nature of a sacrament.

The three levels of the sacraments differ in terms of their duration. The outward sacramental sign (*sacramentum tantum*), by its very nature, is transient. It passes with the passing of the words and actions that comprise it.<sup>25</sup> The intermediate level of non-sensible sign and reality, on the contrary, has a durable nature, although the extent of the duration differs in the different sacraments. In Baptism, Confirmation, and Holy Orders, the intermediate level is character, which is indelible and can never be lost. In marriage, the intermediate reality is the marriage bond, which lasts until death. In the Eucharist, the intermediate level is the Body and Blood of Christ, which lasts until the corruption of the sacramental species (the appearances of bread and wine).

The interior grace—sanctifying and sacramental—is also durable. Sanctifying grace is possessed in a habitual way, introducing a state of grace. This is lost, however, by mortal sin. Sacramental grace is a series of actual graces aiding the recipient in all that to which the sacrament is ordered. Actual graces are transient, but the “title” to them that comes from sacramental character is lasting.

### ***The Sacramental Sign: Matter and Form of the Sacraments***

Let us first examine the *sacramental sign*. The sacramental sign of the sacraments includes two different kinds of elements: matter and form. The matter includes material elements and sensible gestures. The material elements include bread, wine, water, and oil. The sensible gestures include washing or pouring, anointing, holding bread and the chalice of wine.<sup>26</sup> The form is given by words that make explicit the meaning of the sensible elements and gestures.

Matter and form are understood by analogy with the hylomorphic theory, according to which all material things are composed of matter and form. The matter is the principle of potency that receives the form, and the

<sup>25</sup> The Eucharist is an exception. Although the words of consecration are transient (and thus the realization of the sacrifice), the sacramental species last until they are naturally corrupted, as in digestion.

<sup>26</sup> Theologians distinguish the matter of the sacraments into proximate and remote. The remote matter is the material element in itself, as in the water of Baptism, and the proximate matter is the use that is made of it, as in washing or immersion. The form is the formula of prayer that is applied to the proximate matter.

form is the principle that makes the thing be what it is, actualizing the matter.

An example of this distinction of matter and form is implied by St. Paul in Ephesians 5:26 when he says that Christ gave himself up for the Church, His bride, “that he might sanctify her, having cleansed her by the washing of water with the word.” The washing of water is the matter of the sacrament, and the form is the word. This word would be the baptismal formula in the name of the Trinity given by Christ in Matthew 28:19.

This distinction between matter and form is taught by the Council of Florence in the Bull *Exsultate Deo*:

All these sacraments are realized by the presence of three components, namely, by things as the matter, by words as the form, and by the person of the minister conferring the sacrament with the intention of doing what the Church does. If any of these are lacking the sacrament is not realized.<sup>27</sup>

The classical expression of this composition of matter and form in the sacraments comes from St. Augustine, who, speaking of Baptism, said:

Take away the word, and the water is neither more nor less than water. The word is added to the element, and there results the Sacrament, as if itself also a kind of visible word. . . . And whence has water so great an efficacy, as in touching the body to cleanse the soul, save by the operation of the word.<sup>28</sup>

Theologians further distinguish the matter of the sacraments into proximate and remote. The remote matter is the material element in itself, as in the water of Baptism, and the proximate matter is the use that is made of it, as in washing or immersion. The form is the formula of prayer that is applied to the proximate matter.

### ***Matter, Form, and the Validity of the Sacraments***

Since the essential matter and form of the sacraments were instituted by Christ, as we have seen, neither the Church nor her ministers can change the essential matter and form of the sacraments. In order for a change in matter or form to affect the validity of the sacraments, it must be an essential change; an accidental change does not affect their validity.

What is meant by the distinction between essential and accidental change here? An essential change with regard to the matter would be substituting one substance for another, such as using some other liquid instead of water for Baptism, or using something other than wheat bread for the Eucharist.

With regard to the form of the sacraments, a substantial change would be a change in the meaning of the words. A

<sup>27</sup> Bull *Exsultate Deo*, DS 1312.

<sup>28</sup> St. Augustine, *Lectures or Tractates on the Gospel of John*, tractate 80.3, trans. John Gibb and James Innes, in NPNF1, 7:344.

change from one language to another, or from one grammatical form to another (active or passive voice), as long as the meaning is essentially the same, would be merely accidental. For example, the formula of Baptism differs in the eastern and Latin rite with regard to grammatical form. The Eastern rite uses a passive construction whereas the Latin rite uses an active construction, but the meaning is the same.

In determining whether there has been a substantial change, it is sufficient to go by the common estimation of mankind, and thus the criterion should be common sense, always in deference to the judgments of the Magisterium of the Church.

### ***Sacramental Character***

The intermediate level of the invisible sign (*res et sacramentum*) is clearly found in five of the seven sacraments: Baptism, Confirmation, Holy Orders, the Eucharist, and Matrimony. In the first three, this is given by the character that is imprinted by the sacrament: the character of Baptism, Confirmation, and Holy Orders. In the Eucharist, the intermediate level of sign and reality is given by the Real Presence of Christ in His Body and Blood under the species of bread and wine. In Matrimony, the intermediate level is the matrimonial bond that results from the mutual consent of the spouses.<sup>29</sup>

In the case of the three sacraments that imprint character, the character is indelible. It is a spiritual sign imprinted on the soul that will never be deleted, for which reason the sacrament cannot be received more than once. That Baptism, Confirmation, and Holy Orders imprint character is a dogma of faith, defined in the Council of Trent:

If anyone says that in the three sacraments—Baptism, Confirmation, and Holy Orders—there is not imprinted in the soul a character, that is, a certain spiritual and indelible Sign, on account of which they cannot be repeated; let him be anathema.<sup>30</sup>

The expression “character” comes from the notion of a seal by which an image or insignia is imprinted on something as a sign of possession, identity, authority, or mission. It is unrelated to the normal use of the word “character” in English. The term “character” is thus practically synonymous with the term “seal.” Often the seal was a relief carving which was imprinted on wax or clay.

The king’s letter or decree was stamped with the king’s seal to show that the message had the authority of the king. The seal also served to signify that the letter was unopened, and thus genuine. A brand, which is a kind of seal, was also used in military service to visibly show one’s membership in the legion, and thus one’s military identity and mission.

<sup>29</sup> See John Paul II, Apostolic Exhortation *Familiaris consortio* 13: “The first and immediate effect of marriage (*res et sacramentum*) is not supernatural grace itself, but the Christian conjugal bond.”

<sup>30</sup> Council of Trent, session 7 (1547), canon 9, DS 1609.

If a soldier deserted his army, his seal also served as a sign of his betrayal. A seal can also be put in a book to show its owner. A seal thus has three principal purposes: to show identity and possession, to give a mission (as to a soldier or minister), and to confer delegated authority to the thing sealed (the king's letter).

All of these meanings of a seal are realized analogously in sacramental character. First of all, sacramental character is a sign of identification with Christ. The sacramental seal of character imprints on the soul, although invisibly, the image of its new owner: Jesus Christ. Sacramental character is an invisible sign on the soul by which the soul is marked as belonging to Jesus Christ, to His Mystical Body, and to His Priesthood. This incorporation into Christ's Priesthood happens in three ways: by Baptism, by Confirmation, or by Holy Orders. The sacramental sign thus confers ownership and Christian identity.

Secondly, sacramental character is the sign of a mission given to the recipient by the one whose image is imprinted on the soul: Jesus Christ. Sacramental character is the permanent sign of a mission received. The mission carries with it the authority of the one sending: Jesus Christ. The mission is to participate, although in three distinct ways, with the mission of Christ the high priest, prophet, and king. As the soldier or slave was marked by a seal on the body to show that he has been deputed for bodily service, so the Christian is marked by a spiritual seal to show that he has been deputed to a spiritual service—the worship of God.

In order to participate in the mission of Jesus Christ and the Church, the recipient of the mission must receive the spiritual power to carry it out. Thus character entails a permanent spiritual power to carry out the enduring mission received, a power to participate with Christ in His priestly office. St. Thomas thus holds that sacramental character essentially consists in the reception of a spiritual power ordered to the worship of God in the Mystical Body:

Now the worship of God consists either in receiving Divine gifts, or in bestowing them on others. And for both these purposes some power is needed; for to bestow something on others, active power is necessary; and in order to receive, we need a passive power. Consequently, a character signifies a certain spiritual power ordained unto things pertaining to the Divine worship. But it must be observed that this spiritual power is instrumental: as we have stated above (Question 62, Article 4) of the virtue which is in the sacraments. For to have a sacramental character belongs to God's ministers: and a minister is a kind of instrument.<sup>31</sup>

Sacramental character thus confers an instrumental power on the members of the Church to act as instruments

of Jesus Christ in His mission to glorify the Father and sanctify men.

How do these participations differ in the three different characters? Baptism gives an initial power to participate in the worship of the Eternal High Priest in His Mystical Body, and to live the supernatural life of that Body. Confirmation strengthens that mission by giving the recipient the mission and the corresponding power to act as a witness of Christ in the world, a mature participant in the divine worship of the Church, and to participate in consecrating the world to God. Holy Orders gives the further mission of enabling the recipient to participate in Christ's priestly office by acting in the very person of Christ (*in persona Christi*) and sharing in His headship. This is manifested above all in the administration of the sacraments.

Each successive character and corresponding sacred power presupposes what has come before. Thus the character of Confirmation, deputing one to mature service and witness, presupposes the character of Baptism, by which one is made a member of Christ capable of receiving the other sacraments. Similarly, the character of Holy Orders presupposes that of Confirmation. One must first be a mature witness of Christ before one can fittingly be deputed to act in His Person.

The *Catechism of the Council of Trent* explains sacramental character as a sacred power and as a distinguishing mark of those who have received that power in the Church. The three levels of sacred power are distinguished as follows:

The character has a twofold effect: it enables us to receive or perform something sacred; and it distinguishes those who have received it from those who have not. By virtue of the character of Baptism both effects are evident: by it we are qualified to receive the other sacraments, and by it the Christian is distinguished from those who do not profess the faith. The same is true of the characters of the other two sacraments. By the character of Confirmation we are armed and trained as soldiers of Christ, publicly to profess and defend his name against our enemies—whether the enemy within, or the spiritual powers of wickedness in high places (see Eph 6:11–12), and by it we are distinguished from those who are only baptized and thus, as it were, but newborn infants (see 1 Pt 1:22). By the character of Holy Orders the power of consecrating and administering the sacraments is conferred; as is also the distinction of those who possess it from all the rest of the faithful.<sup>32</sup>

Since the mission conferred by sacramental character is supernatural, that mission requires grace to be realized. One of the axioms of theology is that when God gives someone a mission, He gives him the grace necessary to accomplish the mission. The mission conferred by

31 St. Thomas, *ST* III, q. 63, a. 2.

32 *The Roman Catechism*, part 2, intro., section 31, p. 162.

sacramental character is supported by sacramental grace, which is the invisible reality signified by the character itself and by the outward sign. Character therefore is a kind of invisible title to the reception of all the graces necessary for the mission, provided that no obstacle to those graces is placed by the recipient (such as mortal sin or the lack of repentance).

### **Sacramental Grace**

Sacramental grace is the invisible reality sanctifying man that is signified both by the outward sacramental sign and by the intermediate level of the invisible sign (*res et sacramentum*). There are two kinds of grace that are given in each sacrament. First and foremost is the gift of sanctifying grace, which is a participation in the divine nature or divine life (see 2 Pt 1:4). From sanctifying grace flow the three theological virtues: faith, hope, and charity. Together with charity, the faithful receive the seven gifts of the Holy Spirit, the infused moral virtues, and the indwelling of the Blessed Trinity.

In addition to sanctifying grace (and all that accompanies it), sacramental grace also involves actual graces that are tied to the purpose of each of the sacraments. The sacraments give a particular mission, especially those that imprint character, and the sacramental graces include a series of specific graces that enable the recipient to worthily fulfill the mission given by the sacrament. However, these graces depend on our correspondence with the graces we have already received. The more we cooperate with grace, the more sacramental graces we shall receive. In other words, the sacraments confer both sanctifying grace and the “title” to a series of actual graces tied to the purpose of each sacrament.

The sacraments are the means chosen by God to infuse those on earth with a mysterious participation in God’s own inner life. In order to reach our supernatural end consisting in the vision of God, it is absolutely necessary that we be given *supernatural means*. For the means to an end must always be proportionate to the end.

Natural things get to their natural ends because they have been equipped from the very start with an interior principle of movement and action leading them to their end. We call this interior principle the nature of a thing. Natural things have natural means built into them that correspond to their natural ends. In order for an oak tree to grow to its proper stature, it has to be equipped from the start—already in the seed—with an inner principle of growth proportionate to its final state. The same thing must be true analogously in the supernatural order. In order to journey effectively to a supernatural end, we have to be given a supernatural path, and be equipped with a supernatural gift that is already a seed or germ of that end, to make us proportionate to it and capable of arriving. This seed or germ of the supernatural end must be an interior principle of supernatural

movement and action. But this interior principle cannot simply be our nature, for our nature is not proportionate to our supernatural end. Thus this interior principle must be supernatural. It is called sanctifying grace.

Although supernatural gifts are totally gratuitous, God has willed to give them through ordinary channels that are intrinsically efficacious and infallible: the sacraments of the New Covenant. Just as God’s love is the source of grace, so it is the source of the sacraments, the ever-flowing channels of that grace.