

CATHOLIC BELIEF AND PRACTICE

by Fr. John Ramsay

CHAPTER 11 – THE SACRAMENTS IN GENERAL

You will remember that at the beginning of the last chapter, when we were considering GRACE, we saw that the Sacraments are means of receiving this grace. Christ, the Head of that Body we call the Church, has ways in which He ENLIVENS and NOURISHES His Body. Since His work is all invisible, we visible human beings require visible EVIDENCE of His work among us - signs of His presence that are visible and readily understandable, and that is what the Sacraments are. Over the centuries, the Church has developed these visible signs adapting them from time to time to suit changing circumstances, while the inner reality, of course, remained the same, for the Inner Reality is JESUS CHRIST HIMSELF.

So, we call these signs of Christ's presence among us SACRAMENTS and there are seven of them. Though these visible signs may look very different from one another, they all have this much in common - they point to the presence of Christ. We are all familiar with the road-sign "MEN AT WORK" - well, the Sacraments are all "CHRIST AT WORK" signs and the different things said and done in the signs show us what sort of work Christ is doing. Thus, if the sign is FOOD, Christ is FEEDING us, if the sign is WATER Christ is giving life and so on. So far then, the Sacraments are like other signs - they point at something or, in this case, SOMEONE - and that 'someone' of course is Jesus Christ. But we say they are not just signs; they are EFFECTIVE signs - they don't just point at something: they make it happen. Imagine a revolutionary new type of traffic light which, when it turned from amber to red automatically APPLIED YOUR BRAKES! That would be an effective sign - not just warning you to stop but stopping you as well. The Sacraments are like that - they don't just say "Christ is here" - they MAKE HIM PRESENT, and what is said or done in the sign shows what He is doing, as we've seen.

Now, let's take things a stage further. Since Christ is present and the person who is receiving the Sacrament is present there is a MEETING. How much happens at that meeting will depend upon what sort of meeting it is, of course. Think of the various kinds of meetings we have all had experience of. Sometimes, they are truly memorable - we are completely absorbed by the person, taking in all that they are saying as that person is with us. You might say it is a meeting of minds and hearts - a WHOLE-HEARTED meeting. Then there is the kind of meeting where the person you meet is perhaps in pain.... or worried or bored... his attention wanders... he only takes in half of what you are saying. It is what you might call a HALF-HEARTED meeting. Then there is a third kind of meeting when two persons who are not on speaking terms, happen to meet. They may be physically close to one another but don't speak and maybe deliberately look the other way - what we would call a COLD-HEARTED meeting.

Well now, the sacraments are meetings with Christ and He is always WHOLEHEARTEDLY there, but He does not force Himself on us: He leaves us free to respond how we will. If He gets a whole-hearted response then His work in us will have its maximum effect. If the response is half-hearted then the results will be correspondingly less and if He meets with a cold-hearted person, He does not work at all... as I say, He leaves us free. It follows from this that the care I take to make these meetings whole-hearted is of paramount importance.

Having introduced the subject of the Sacraments in general, before going into detail on each individual Sacrament, which will cover the next three chapters, I am now going to make a few distinctions which I think will be helpful.

There are, as I have said, seven Sacraments: BAPTISM, CONFIRMATION, PENANCE, EUCHARIST, MATRIMONY, HOLY ORDER and the SACRAMENT OF THE SICK. THREE of the Sacraments can only be received once. They are the ones that confer what is called a CHARACTER or SEAL - marking us down as a particular kind of person. Baptism is a birth into the Body of Christ: you cannot be born twice. Confirmation makes you a fully mature, adequately equipped member of the Church: you cannot come of age twice over. And Holy Order makes you a priest: you cannot become a priest twice over. TWO of the Sacraments are NORMALLY only received once - Matrimony and the Sacrament of the Sick. It is comparatively rare to outlive a married partner and marry again. It is comparatively rare to be sick enough to be about to die and then survive... The REMAINING TWO are for day-to-day needs - the Eucharist, being the food of the soul; and Penance (also called Confession or Reconciliation) which obtains forgiveness for sins and healing for the damage done by sin. Now, let us examine two of the sacraments in detail.

BAPTISM

“UNLESS A MAN IS BORN AGAIN HE CANNOT ENTER THE KINGDOM OF GOD” was what Our Lord said - so Baptism is the beginning of a new life, the moment when God’s life begins in man. The stain of Original Sin is washed away, all actual sins (if the person being baptised was old enough to commit them) are also washed away, together with the after-effects of those sins. Man is now able to live in love and friendship with God and also able to do all the supernatural things which are required of him. The SIGNS used in the sacrament should therefore in some way indicate all this. What are they? The words used are “I BAPTISE YOU IN THE NAME OF THE FATHER, AND OF THE SON, AND OF THE HOLY SPIRIT.” So the Trinity is invoked, indicating that the one baptised has entered into a new relationship with God. Of the VISIBLE signs the first and most important is WATER, which symbolises LIFE - the new life that has begun in the soul of the one baptised - that share in God’s life which we call GRACE. To us who can obtain water at the turn of a tap, water does not immediately suggest Life, but it was highly significant to those whom Our Lord came to live among. Living, as they did, on the edge of desert, they were only too familiar with death from thirst.

When the priest pours the water over the forehead, Christ is pouring life into the soul, so He is ENLIVENING. Water is also a sign of cleansing so when the priest pours the water, Christ is cleansing the soul of Original Sin. The Paschal or Easter Candle, standing by the font, reminds us of the presence of Christ the LIGHT OF THE WORLD. At one point, a small candle is lit from the Paschal Candle and given to the father of the baby to hold - so Christ is ENLIGHTENING. Two kinds of oil are used - the first is applied with a prayer of EXORCISM. Oil is a sign of strength so Christ is STRENGTHENING and PROTECTING the one baptised from Satan, spirit of evil. The second oil is CHRISM - a word which has the same root as Christ which, you will remember, meant the “ANOINTED ONE”. Three kinds of people were traditionally anointed or set apart - PRIESTS, PROPHETS and KINGS. Now, Christ is the HIGH PRIEST, THE PROPHET and the KING OF KINGS and since we become a part of Him, we share in His priestly, prophetic and royal roles, so we are anointed. A white garment is put on the baby - white is the symbol of innocence reminding us that we must be ‘Clothed in Christ’ and live holy lives. I have talked of a baby but of course the same procedure is followed with an adult. I quoted Our Lord’s words “Unless a man is born again he cannot enter the kingdom of God”. Baptism is NECESSARY for salvation. That is not saying no unbaptised person will be saved. It IS, however, saying that it is through Christ’s Body the Church that all men will be saved even though they do not realise it. So, unbaptised persons who were martyred were said to have received the “Baptism of Blood”, and would-be converts who died before being baptised were said to have received the “Baptism of Desire”. Always, it is the redemption wrought by Christ and applied to men through His Body, the Church, that saves.

The MINISTER or one who gives the sacrament is normally a priest though in danger of death, ANYONE, even an unbeliever, can do it, if he or she does what the church wants. Once baptised, as we’ve seen, there can be no re-baptism though if there is grave doubt about whether it has been properly done or not, then it may be redone conditionally. A SPONSOR or “Godparent” is required to stand in for parents in the event of their death - and to assist by prayer and example. He or she must normally be over sixteen and ALWAYS PRACTISING. How could a lapsed person perform the necessary duty of good example?

Finally, it is impossible to exaggerate the importance of baptism - not just for the one being baptised but also for the Faith Community which he or she now joins as a member of Christ. That community is, of course, the Parish. Unbaptised adults who wish to join the Church have a long period of instruction called the Catechumenate. It is interspersed with services of preparation and the ideal time for their baptism is at the Easter Vigil which in the early church was when all converts were baptised.

CONFIRMATION

At one time this Sacrament was administered at the same time as Baptism - and it still is with adult converts. It completes the process begun at baptism, increasing the life of grace, conferring the fullness of the Holy Spirit and equipping the person to live a fully mature Christian life, able to stand up for and defend the Faith even at the cost of their lives. Children are generally confirmed when they are at Secondary School - which is often the first place they have to stand up for their faith! The audible sign is: "BE SEALED WITH THE GIFT OF THE HOLY SPIRIT." The visible signs are the LAYING ON OF HANDS by the bishop - this is mentioned in the New Testament whenever the Holy Spirit was conferred and the ANOINTING WITH CHRISM while the words mentioned above are said. There is a third visible sign - a tap on the cheek given by the bishop - reminding us that we must be prepared to defend the faith and live like good soldiers of Jesus Christ as part of the Church Militant!

I said we receive the "fullness" of the Spirit and indeed He does not come to us empty handed. He gives us seven GIFTS to equip us to live mature and holy lives. The seven gifts are as follows: WISDOM - which helps us to judge things by God's standards and so get our order of priorities right. UNDERSTANDING - which helps us to grasp the mysteries of the faith sufficiently to be able to accept them. COUNSEL - which enables us to make the right decisions in life. FORTITUDE - which gives us the courage to live good Christian lives no matter what the cost. KNOWLEDGE - which gives us a kind of sixth-sense helping us to see the good and evil in people and things, and finally PIETY and FEAR OF THE LORD - two gifts which are really COMPLEMENTARY because between them they give us a balanced relationship with God - that of a child with its father: - a mixture of LOVE... AWE... and WHOLESOME RESPECT..

The Ordinary minister or one who normally administers the Sacrament of Confirmation is a bishop though when a priest receives an adult into the church he may also confirm them. The Sponsor should have the same qualities as those demanded of one at baptism and, best of all, be the same person.

A Confirmed person will thus have all the assistance required to live a good holy life: the courage to defend and witness to the faith; the light to see things through God's eyes and make the right decisions; and to have the right relationship with God - full of love, awe and obedience. In short, the ability to be good members of Jesus Christ.