

Teams of Our Lady

The International Leading Team - ERI

The Sacraments of the Catholic Church

A Document prepared by the Satellite Team for Christian Formation

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IMPORTANT NOTICE

In composing our work on the 'Lodging place' of the sacraments, we have used as our reference *Pour vivre les sacrements [To Live the Sacraments]* (2nd ed., 1991), by Philippe Béguerie and Claude Duchesneau, experts on the subject.

We have chosen this work after much bibliographical research and after consulting many documents. We found in this work the specific grouping of themes ('Parts') that we would like to treat, presented in simple language – a solid theological and catechetical approach.

This work is part of a collection published by the editions Novalis/Cerf. These authors use a very specific, specialized approach. This collection contains such themes as 'Living the Eucharist', 'Living Marriage', and 'Living the Liturgy'. We found the same information in the other works that we consulted, though treated differently. Thus we have chosen to use a single primary document, giving a certain uniformity and cohesiveness to this 'Lodging place'.

There are also some references to the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (CCC, 1993 edition).

OBJECTIVES OF THE 'LODGING PLACE'

General Objective:

To engage in a global process of Christian initiation and establish an unfailing foundation in the faith.

Detailed Objectives:

1. To give answers to the questions raised by the current culture on the sacramental life and the Christian community.
2. To give historical, theological and pastoral backgrounds to each of the sacraments, in conformity with the teachings of the Church.
3. To raise a greater awareness of how the plan of God is realized in the life of the believer through the sacraments.
4. To promote the witness of faith and the engagement in the Mission so that the kingdom of God will come.

INTRODUCTION

Do the sacraments still have a future? This question was asked in the 1970s, a time when some were tempted to advance a theology of *secularization*. This theology was latent in all that was done to religion in the name of faith, and all that was done to sacramental praxis – and its deviations – in the name of engaging the culture. It was also latent in the rejection of the sacred vision of the universe. Some asked then if the sacramental rite was not just a residue of a bygone culture, and therefore completely obsolete.

This question – do the sacraments have a future? – is not adequate to explain the complete divorce between certain Christians and the celebration of the sacraments. This divorce has other causes and is, it seems, at the very heart of the matter: these people seem to be attempting to live their faith in their daily lives without participating, except sporadically, in the celebration of the sacraments. At the same time, and from the opposite direction, priests have been disturbed – and still are – by some who manifest what appears to be a mere formalistic approach, rather than an approach of faith.

The sacraments were being questioned, and yet they continued to pose questions themselves. While we certainly regret the abandonment of the practice of the sacraments by sincere Christians (an abandonment that both raised these questions, and also was a consequence of them), we also rejoice at the theological reflection and the catechetical and pastoral effort that were borne out of this radical and multivalent process of questioning.

This crisis has, therefore, a very positive dimension. It has awakened a renewal of sacramental theology. The studies that have been recently undertaken on this subject have benefited from biblical and historical research, and also from the contributions of the human sciences, most noticeably the studies on rite and symbol.¹

We are here invited to embark on a journey that will gradually reveal the riches of the mystery of salvation. Whoever takes this journey and follows it step by step will discover the link between the sacrament of Christ, the sacrament of the Church, and our seven sacraments, an illuminating link that simultaneously immerses us more profoundly into the mystery of Christ and of the Church and reveals to us the true nature of the sacraments. For don't we still have a tendency to think of the link between Christ and the sacraments in purely abstract terms?

Let us consider the sacrament, instead, as the ever-present word and gesture of the Lord *in His Church, by His Church, for His Church, and for all men.*

Whoever follows step by step on this journey will discover the celebration of the sacraments that give rhythm to our lives, making of our whole existence a *sacramental* existence. The Christian who participates in the sacraments *becomes*, in a way, a sacrament for the world, in such a way that his entire life is transformed and animated by the Holy

¹ Philippe Bégurier and Claude Duchesneau. *Pour vivre les sacrements* [To Live the Sacraments]. (Paris: du Cerf, 1989), 2nd ed., p. 9.

Spirit. (This is an important point, because it is a partial answer to the questions that were asked about the sacraments which were mentioned earlier.)

We must not forget that the crisis which has affected the sacraments is part and parcel of much larger cultural changes. The accelerated development of technologies that seem to have transformed the world into manipulatable objects, as well as the type of thinking that dominates in our society, seem to make the celebration of the sacraments anachronistic. Yet, at the same time, recent studies on the symbolic nature of man and the significance of ritual in human existence also illuminate the richness of the sacramental path. For the same sacrament that is the revelation of the mystery of God, who gives Himself in Jesus Christ, is also the revelation of the mystery of man. The sacrament, more than all words, tells us who man truly is. To celebrate the sacraments is to make of one's existence a sacramental existence, to become a witness, a declaration of the grandeur of man, and a challenge to the culture that traps man in a stifling universe of rationalism and the heavy weight that threatens to transform him into an object.²

Consider the exhumation of the mummy of Ramses II from the tomb, where he had laid in the deeply symbolic realm of the dead, afterwards doomed to succumb to the conditions of our time by being turned into a museum object. Does not this prefigure the exhumation of modern man, who is torn from the symbolic universe in which he lived and consigned to the material world, where he is forced to endure the exploitation of a factory workyard?

Removed from the symbolic order which gives meaning to his existence, doesn't man himself run the risk of being reduced to a mere object? The sacraments have, then, an important future, and there has never been a time when their role has been more urgent. True, they still are what they have always been, gestures that the Lord makes on man's behalf, gestures efficacious in bestowing grace, gestures by which man is configured to the crucified and risen Christ and becomes a new creature, a son in the only-begotten Son. The sacraments are moments of encounter between God and His people, moments of encounter between God and each member of the Church. It is by His Word and by the sacraments that the Lord edifies His Church, makes it believe, and sends it on mission.³

It is good today to underline another dimension of sacrament: that the revelation of the sacrament of the mystery of God is at the same time a revelation of the mystery of man. When he participates in a sacramental celebration, the Christian proclaims that he has received from God the meaning of his own existence. In living his existence sacramentally, he witnesses to the grandeur of man as a son of God. And we must bear forth this witness if we are to have any hope that man will escape the fate of the exhumed Ramses II.⁴

² Ibid., p. 10.

³ Ibid., p. 11.

⁴ Ibid., p. 12.

TABLE 1: A BRIEF HISTORY OF THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE SACRAMENTS

THE SACRAMENTS IN THE HISTORY OF THE CHURCH

Twenty centuries of Church history, twenty centuries of possessing the sacraments in this history, is quite considerable in itself, even admirable! But at the same time, because it is a history, a life, there is both permanence and change, both stability and evolution.

Almost every Christian has asked questions which show an interest in the fundamental life of the Church and of Christian existence: at the end of the story, what are the sacraments, where do they come from, and what do they represent today?

THE TIME OF FOUNDATION

We can never return to the primitive Church. It would be unhealthy to get trapped in nostalgia regarding one's origins. Yet we know that our Christian life today is profoundly connected to the time when Christianity was founded, and our faith makes certain claims about what took place during this time of foundation. What can we say in this connection about the sacraments?

This was the situation of the first Christians: the majority of them had known Jesus, had lived with Him for about three years. Yet Jesus came not merely to live, but to die. He was crucified, but God resurrected Him. The first Christians are witnesses of this (Acts 2:32): Jesus "vanished from their sight" at Emmaus (Lk. 24:31). Yet behold, He is alive! (cf. Rev. 1:18), and "God has made Him both Lord and Christ" (Acts 2:36). The first Christians wanted their relation with Jesus to continue, to celebrate the fact that "God raised Him up, having loosed the pangs of death" (Acts 2:24), and to announce this Good News to all men.

How will they do this? By means of two different but complementary activities. The first, directed outwards, is the **missionary proclamation** (see Peter's preaching at Pentecost, the scattering of the Jerusalem church due to persecution, cf. Acts 8:4); the other, directed inwards, is **baptism**, a sign of union with Christ and incorporation into the community (see Pentecost, Acts 2:41), along with the **communal meal** in which "the bread is broken" and shared in memory of the Lord Jesus (see Acts 2:42, 2:46).

It is in in this latter activity, which is directed toward the origination (baptism) and preservation (the breaking of the bread) of the community, that we find the founding nucleus of what we today call the sacramental life of the Church.

To continue our reflection further, we notice that the baptismal and Eucharistic life are the result of the joining of three elements: faith, rite, and memorial.⁵

⁵ Philippe Bégurier and Claude Duchesneau. *Pour vivre les sacrements* [To Live the Sacraments]. (Paris: du Cerf, 1989), 2nd ed., p. 82.

Thus the ancient rites are to be used in a new way, in accordance with Jesus' charge (at the institution), not only to remember Him as the one who has "vanished" (at Emmaus), but to "do this in memory of him," meaning to permit the living Jesus to continue to act among them, causing them to benefit from His Paschal mystery – historically in the past, but always mystically in the present.

It is only of the Eucharist that Jesus said, "Do this in memory of me," but baptism and all the other sacraments are just as much a memorial of the Paschal mystery of Christ as the "broken bread."

In this way, what we call the **founding nucleus** of the sacramental life of the Church was put into place. This nucleus has no other name than the two acts which constitute it: baptism and the breaking of the bread (the "Lord's Supper," as it is called by Paul, who is chronologically the first to speak of the Eucharist, cf. 1 Cor. 11:20).⁶ Nevertheless, alongside these we observe the presence of a certain number of additional actions that serve the life of faith of the first communities. But their practice lies in a hazy history; we no longer even have a precise name to call them, and above all we have no theological notions (such as 'sacrament') by means of which to reassemble them. This is what made Maurice Jourjon, an expert on the Church Fathers, say "the sacraments were born before they were named, before there was a term to designate them."⁷ The only task of the first Christians was to live for and with Christ in every situation of existence.

Here are some examples of the history of the development of the sacraments:

Confirmation

During the first three centuries of the Church, Christianity was essentially urban (Jerusalem, Antioch, Alexandria, Rome, Lyons, etc.), and the communities were rather small due to the persecutions. The bishop was like the "parish priest" of each one: he is present and nearby. At Easter he baptizes the catechumens and carries out all the rites that precede or follow the immersion in water. Thus it is he who, after baptism, imposes his hands on the neophyte, calling upon the Spirit, and it is he who anoints with oil. It did not occur to anyone that there were two distinct operations occurring (e.g., baptism and confirmation).⁸

But when Christianity, after the Constantinian peace in 313 AD, could finally spread into the countryside surrounding the large cities, the bishop became more and more distant from those who were baptized in faraway communities. The priest, therefore, baptized the catechumens in the community where he presided, but they still waited for the bishop so that he could impose his hands and anoint them. It was not until the year 465 AD that Faust, the bishop of Riez, used the term "confirmation."⁹

⁶ Ibid., p. 83.

⁷ Maurice Jourjon. *Les sacrements de la liberté chrétienne* [*The sacraments and Christian liberty*]. (Le Cerf), p. 9.

⁸ Béguerie and Duchesneau, op. cit., p. 84.

⁹ Ibid., p. 85.

Reconciliation

The history of reconciliation (i.e., confession) is the most intriguing of any of the sacraments. In the West, it has known at least three different and successive forms (without counting the times of its absence), and it is only at the beginning of the seventeenth century that *private* confession became common.

St. Augustine never had recourse to confession between his conversion and his death
But St. John Bosco confessed every day.

Matrimony¹⁰

Christians, of course, have always married, but in the first centuries there did not exist a particular ceremonial or religious format. Marriage took place “according to local custom” that satisfied the demands of both faith and law. Little by little the custom came about to ask the permission of the bishop at the time of marriage, and at the occasion of marriage there would be a blessing and a Mass for the couple.

But it was only in 1563, in an effort to combat the abuse of illegitimate marriages, that the Council of Trent posited for the first time an obligatory canonical form, which is still in effect today: the presentation of the couple in church and their exchange of vows in the presence of a priest.

Holy Orders

It was not until 1947 that Pope Pius XII made it clear that the act of ordaining a priest was not the presentation of the chalice and the paten but the imposition of hands by the bishop, along with the prayer of consecration that accompanied it. How, then, can we speak of the institution of the sacraments by Christ? If we mean by this that Jesus, during His earthly existence, personally put into practice the different sacraments, this would be doubly false. First, because the rites that developed into the sacraments all existed before Him. Secondly, because many of these rites (all except baptism and the Eucharist) had to wait numerous centuries after Jesus to clearly manifest their identity *as sacraments*.

What we mean by the fact that Christ instituted the sacraments, therefore, is that each one of them is justly and rightly considered *an act of Christ* corresponding to a particular gift of grace that Christ expressly desired, all the while leaving to the Church the task of concretely specifying *how* human actions would carry out that grace.¹¹

¹⁰ *Editor's note:* As is the custom in the English language, the term ‘marriage’ will be used for the natural, civil institution common to all cultures; ‘matrimony’ will be used for the distinctively Christian sacrament associated with this institution.

¹¹ Béguerie and Duchesneau, op. cit., p. 85.

There are Seven Sacraments

- Seven, like the days of the week.
- Seven, like the gifts of the Holy Spirit.
- Seven, a highly symbolic number, suggests to us that all of life becomes sacramental when it is lived under the influence of the Holy Spirit and in light of God's Word.
- There are seven sacraments, but we need not treat them all equally, as though the realities they pointed to were identical.

At the center we find the Eucharist, the sacrament of Easter, the sacrament of the Body of Christ, the sacrament of the Church. "Two other sacraments, Holy Orders and Matrimony, are directed towards the salvation of others; if they contribute to personal salvation as well, it is through service to others that they do so. They confer a particular mission in the Church and serve to build up the People of God."¹²

Baptism, Confirmation and Eucharist [First Communion] are called the sacraments of Christian initiation. They are like a path that leads toward full participation in the Eucharist, full participation in the life of the Church. By baptism and the Eucharist the whole life of the Christian is configured to the death and resurrection of the Lord. Baptism is like the foundation, Eucharist the summit. Yet it is necessary to live the Paschal mystery in daily reality. In this sense we could say that through baptism and the Eucharist the whole life of the believer becomes sacramental.

The sacraments of Reconciliation and Anointing of the sick make us live the Paschal mystery of our Lord, His death and His resurrection, in the important events of our lives. We could, of course, speak at length as to why it is these two that have been retained by the Church: it is more the result of actual history and the real life of communities than to some pre-fabricated theory.

There is no human life without conflict. To live the Paschal mystery means to work toward reconciliation, since God is forgiveness.¹³ There is no human life untouched by sickness, suffering and death. To live the Paschal mystery is to discover that the life of man is greater than what we have already been given to live.

Jesus Christ is dead and risen so that the world can have life. Those who agree to put their lives under the sign of the Paschal mystery of the Lord become the members of this Body of which He is the Head. Together through the celebration of the sacraments they welcome the gift of the Spirit to announce to the world this new Kingdom constituted by the presence of God among men.

¹² *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 1534.

¹³ Béguerie and Duchesneau, op. cit., p. 109.

THE ORIGIN OF THE SACRAMENTS

In our Christian faith we affirm that “the sacraments were instituted by Jesus Christ.” This signifies that there was no sacrament before Him, and that the sacraments draw their meaning and their power from Jesus, who chose them as means of grace.¹⁴

But that Jesus Christ instituted the sacraments does not mean that He came up with the gestures and the ritual actions that are their human substructure. Though Christian baptism is not the same as that of John the Baptist, the existence of John’s baptism reveals clearly enough that Jesus adopted a rite that existed before Him.

BIBLICAL AND JEWISH ROOTS OF THE SACRAMENTS

The Christian sacraments have their roots in biblical events (the crossing of the Red Sea for baptism; the covenant at Sinai for the Eucharist, etc.) and in the practices of the Jewish religion that came before Christianity:

- Baths of purification (as with the Essenes and John the Baptist);
- The baptism of incorporation (the baptism of proselytes who converted to Judaism);
- The anointings of consecration (Saul and David: 1 Sam. 10:16), or of healing (Tob. 11);
- The thanksgiving sacrifices in the Temple, followed by the sacrificial meal in the home, as in the case of the Passover meal;
- penitential celebrations and practices (Yom Kippur or the Day of Atonement);
- marriages (Tob. 7, Cana).

Although none of these practices are sacraments, all of them – by their ritual process and their relationship to the covenant – prefigure the sacraments of the New Covenant.¹⁵

QUESTIONS FOR FURTHER REFLECTION: “HISTORY OF THE SACRAMENTS”

1. Which aspects of the origin of the sacraments seem to you the most important to perpetuate today?
2. How does the history of the sacraments enrich our understanding of them?

¹⁴ Ibid., p. 110.

¹⁵ Ibid.

TABLE 2: THE FOUNDATIONS OF SACRAMENTAL DISCIPLINE

We are here at the heart of all sacramental theology:

- A sacrament is always carried out in the name of Jesus Christ;
- All sacraments are actions of the Spirit: they are always both a gift and a call;
- They are situated at the heart of the life of man: they continue the mission of Jesus, which is to reveal to the world the true face of God.

St. Augustine said that the first sacrament is Jesus Christ. He is in some way the sacramental source of all the others. Jesus is truly a “worldly reality”: “Is not this the carpenter, the son of Mary and brother of James and Joses and Judas and Simon, and are not his sisters here with us?” (Mk. 6:3)? Jesus “reveals the mystery of salvation,” for He is Salvation in person. He reveals it simply by making it present. He alone truly merits the name of “Sacrament.” One can also call Jesus the “sacrament of the Father”: “Christ is the sacrament of the encounter with God.”¹⁶

To accomplish so great a work, Christ is always present in His Church, especially in her liturgical celebrations. He is present in the sacrifice of the Mass, not only in the person of His minister, “the same now offering, through the ministry of priests, who formerly offered himself on the cross,” but especially under the Eucharistic species. By His power He is present in the sacraments, so that when a man baptizes it is really Christ Himself who baptizes. He is present in His word, since it is He Himself who speaks when the holy scriptures are read in the Church. He is present, lastly, when the Church prays and sings, for He promised: “Where two or three are gathered together in my name, there am I in the midst of them” (Matt. 18:20).

Christ indeed always associates the Church with Himself in this great work wherein God is perfectly glorified and men are sanctified. The Church is His beloved Bride who calls to her Lord, and through Him offers worship to the Eternal Father.¹⁷

JESUS CHRIST, SACRAMENT OF THE FATHER

In the first place, we turn our attention to Jesus. When we say that He is the sacrament of the encounter between God and Man, we are affirming not only that He is the sign of this encounter, but also that He accomplishes what He signifies.

Jesus, Presence of God

Jesus is not only a man who signifies God: He is the very presence of God. When we say that He is sacrament, the efficacious sign of the salvation of the kingdom, we do not only mean

¹⁶ Edward Schillebeeckx (Ed. du Cerf, 1960), as cited in Philippe Béguerie and Claude Duchesneau. *Pour vivre les sacrements* [To Live the Sacraments]. (Paris: du Cerf, 1989), 2nd ed., p. 21.

¹⁷ See *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, 7; cf. Béguerie and Duchesneau, op. cit., p. 93.

that He announces salvation and the kingdom, or that He shows the way. Even more than this, He is its very realization. He is “Emmanuel, God with us,” who is the Kingdom in person.

This is why Jesus reveals God not only in His Words and in His mission, but through the entirety of the mystery of His life. In and through Christ, God gives Himself to the world. Jesus is the living Word of God; He is the Word Incarnate, the Word made flesh, the Image of the Father. The words spoken by Jesus are not the most important part of His message: rather, far more eloquent than these is His very presence in our midst, His way of being with us. Whenever He acts, His presence is manifested by the reality that He signifies. This is why we can say that Jesus is an **efficacious sign**.

Jesus, Turned Toward His Father

The reality which is signified is always more important than the sign. When a mother holds her child, her love holds far more value than the loving gesture that manifests it.

Likewise, Jesus Himself does not say that He is the goal, but rather the ‘way’. To go to the Father, one must go by way of Him. We could say, then, that Jesus constantly effaces Himself in the presence of His Father.

John the Evangelist loved to highlight this characteristic of Jesus: “The words that I say to you I do not speak on my own authority; but the Father who dwells in me does his works” (Jn. 14:10, cf. 14:24).

The most important scene in this connection is the one where John relates Jesus’ appearance to Mary Magdalen after the resurrection. Jesus detaches Mary from Himself; He will not let her hold onto Him as a ‘prisoner’; rather, He turns her toward the Father: “Do not hold me, for I have not yet ascended to the Father; but go to my brethren and say to them, I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God” (Jn. 20:17).

Jesus also says: “the Father is greater than I” (Jn. 14:28). This self-abasement of Christ, His effacement before His Father, is an essential part of His mystery. This attitude is what allows us to say that He is a sacrament of God.

Jesus teaches us to follow this same movement toward the Father. This is why the liturgical prayer of the Church does not primarily address Christ, but prefers that prayer be directed **to the Father, through the Son and in the Spirit**.¹⁸

Jesus, Servant

“God so loved the world that He gave His only Son” (Jn. 3:16). Jesus did not live for Himself, but for the world that He saved. He affirms: “I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly” (Jn. 10:10). Christ “did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself, taking the form of a servant” (Phil. 2:6-7). He is the **servant** of God, and yet

¹⁸ Béguerie and Duchesneau, op. cit., p. 26.

assuredly, at the same time He is the servant of His brothers, giving them life by revealing the Father to them.¹⁹

<p>“For he whom God has sent utters the words of God, for it is not by measure that he gives the Spirit; the Father loves the Son, and has given all things into his hand” (Jn. 3:34-35).</p>	<p>“I can do nothing on my own authority; as I hear, I judge; and my judgment is just, because I seek not my own will but the will of him who sent me” (Jn. 5:30).</p>
<p>“Jesus said to them, ‘My food is to do the will of him who sent me, and to accomplish his work’” (Jn. 4:34).</p>	<p>“So Jesus answered them, ‘My teaching is not mine, but his who sent me; if any man’s will is to do his will, he shall know whether the teaching is from God or whether I am speaking on my own authority. He who speaks on his own authority seeks his own glory; but he who seeks the glory of him who sent him is true, and in him there is no falsehood’” (Jn. 7:16-18)</p>
<p>“Jesus said to them, ‘Truly, truly, I say to you, the Son can do nothing of his own accord, but only what he sees the Father doing; for whatever he does, that the Son does likewise. For the Father loves the Son, and shows him all that he himself is doing; and greater works than these will he show him, that you may marvel. For as the Father raises the dead and gives them life, so also the Son gives life to whom he will. The Father judges no one, but has given all judgment to the Son’” (Jn. 5:19-22).</p>	<p>“Do you not believe that I am in the Father and the Father in me? The words that I say to you I do not speak on my own authority; but the Father who dwells in me does his works” (Jn. 14:10).</p> <p>“He who does not love me does not keep my words; and the word which you hear is not mine but the Father’s who sent me” (Jn. 14:24)</p>

From the preceding verses – and many similar ones that can be found in the Gospel of John – we can see how Jesus describes the relationship that unites Him to His Father. Thus we can understand more readily how we can say that Jesus is the ‘sacrament of the Father’. He shows forth the works of His Father; He does not try to reclaim the glory for Himself.²⁰

The world needs God to show Himself, needs the activity of God to become visible, to take flesh in the realities in our lives. This is what all of the sacraments make possible.

¹⁹ Ibid., p. 27.

²⁰ Ibid., p. 27.

Looking at Jesus Christ in this way, we can observe three components:

1. Jesus is sacrament because He is the efficacious presence of God in the life of the world. In this manner He is truly an efficacious sign.
2. Jesus is sacrament because He always points to His Father as the source of His work, as the destination of His own Way: in this way He announces the Gospel.
3. Jesus is sacrament because He is at the service of the life of the world. In this He is the very presence of salvation.

THE CHURCH, THE SACRAMENT OF CHRIST

The visibility of God in and through Jesus of Nazareth was not for one time only. In our time Jesus seems almost as distant as God Himself: we cannot see Him or touch Him. It is the mission of the Church to prolong and extend the mission of Christ, to assure the continuity of His visibility in the unrolling ages of history. This is why the council says: "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."²¹ What does it mean, then, that the Church is a sacrament?

Christ is the sacrament of God for the world. In the same way, the Church is the sacrament *of Christ* for the world. "[B]y 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."²² Thus, the three components that we observed when we turned our focus to the Christ-sacrament are also found when we observe the sacrament of the Church.

The Church, Presence of Christ

"Go, therefore . . . remember all that I have told you, and I will be with you always to the end of the world." In this way the risen Christ addresses His apostles: yet He has already told them: "For where two or three are gathered in my name, there am I in the midst of them" (Mt. 18:20).²³

The founding event in the biblical tradition is the Exodus of the people of God from Egypt, led by Moses. This Exodus strikes us as a great act of liberation, a passage from slavery into freedom. In this way the Exodus becomes the pattern for the larger activity of God: it is the very pattern of salvation.

The God of the Bible must always therefore be considered a *saving* God: He is the God who brings liberty, and 'liberty' in Hebrew has no other meaning than 'to lead out'.

²¹ Vatican II, *Lumen Gentium*, 48.

²² *Lumen Gentium*, 8.

²³ Béguerie and Duchesneau, op. cit., p. 28.

The image is beautiful; the image is striking: MAN, this being who is fashioned of clay, stands always in need of being 'led out', being liberated. But liberty is not given all at once, not in its full scope: liberty comes to us as a kind of *birth*. As man goes through this perpetual process of being 'reborn', God stands by His side, as the very source of the liberty that man strives unceasingly to attain.

In the setting of this history, Jesus appears to us as the *entirely liberated man*, and the Spirit that He gives us appears as *the true source of liberty*, for He is the source of salvation. Salvation: freedom from idols (whether of money, power, violence, deceit, or domination), and undoubtedly even more, freedom from ourselves, and from this fallen world which we unceasingly strive to rebuild.

The Body of Christ is the place where the Spirit summons us, a place where He can lead us along the path of liberty.

On the day after Pentecost, Peter, having healed the paralytic in the name of Jesus Christ, proclaims "there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved" (Acts 4:12).

Just as Jesus is not content merely to *speak* of the Father, but He *is* the presence of God among men, in the same way the Church is not content merely with recounting the life of Jesus and of carrying on His teachings: she must be a place where the presence of the Risen One is received and welcomed. When she does this, she becomes an efficacious sign, a sacrament of Christ.

It is not enough that she reveal the face of God in her words. She must *live* like Jesus, by her very way of being: it is Christ Himself, in and through the Church, who gives Himself to others. She is not only the announcement of the Kingdom of God; she is already the place where this Kingdom is realized. The efficacy of the Church does not come from herself but from the Spirit that is given to her: "Thus those whose life has been transformed enter a community which is itself a sign of transformation, a sign of newness of life: it is the Church, the visible sacrament of salvation."²⁴

The Church, Witness of Jesus

The Church is not a goal or destination; she is the *way*. She has no other function than to reveal another than herself, to designate Jesus Christ as the Savior of the world, and the one who saves her from her own sins. She leads men to Christ, who then leads them to the Father. She is but the Body of which Christ is the Head.

Like Jesus, she does not say her own words, but the words of the One who sent her. She does not do her own works, but the works of the Lord. This always remains the obligation of the Church, to efface herself before the one who is Head of the Body. Not only the *way* of salvation, she is still more a *sign* of salvation for the world. In her God's Kingdom is realized in part, and yet she cannot be confused or identified with the Kingdom. She is at the same

²⁴ Pope Paul VI, *Evangelii Nuntiandi*, 23.

time *saved* and *that which saves*. There is in her a real sanctity, given her by God, but at the same time there is also sin, inasmuch as she is made up of sinful people.

There is indeed, as we sometimes say, a need to avoid a *triumphalism* in regards to the Church. This triumphalism occurs when Christians prioritize the Church itself, rather than the way to God. They forget that their community is but a *path* and not a goal or destination.²⁵

This has always been the special vocation of the covenant people of Israel, to proclaim a Word which judges them at the same time as it judges the world. The same is true of Christians: the Gospel that we announce denounces our own sin at the same time as it denounces that of all men. We are appointed to bear this Word, despite the fact that we are ourselves incapable of listening to it and putting it into practice. Despite our own weakness we do not cease to announce Jesus Christ as the source of all power, of all justice, of all truth. The Church is nothing else but the sacrament of Jesus Christ.

The Church, Servant

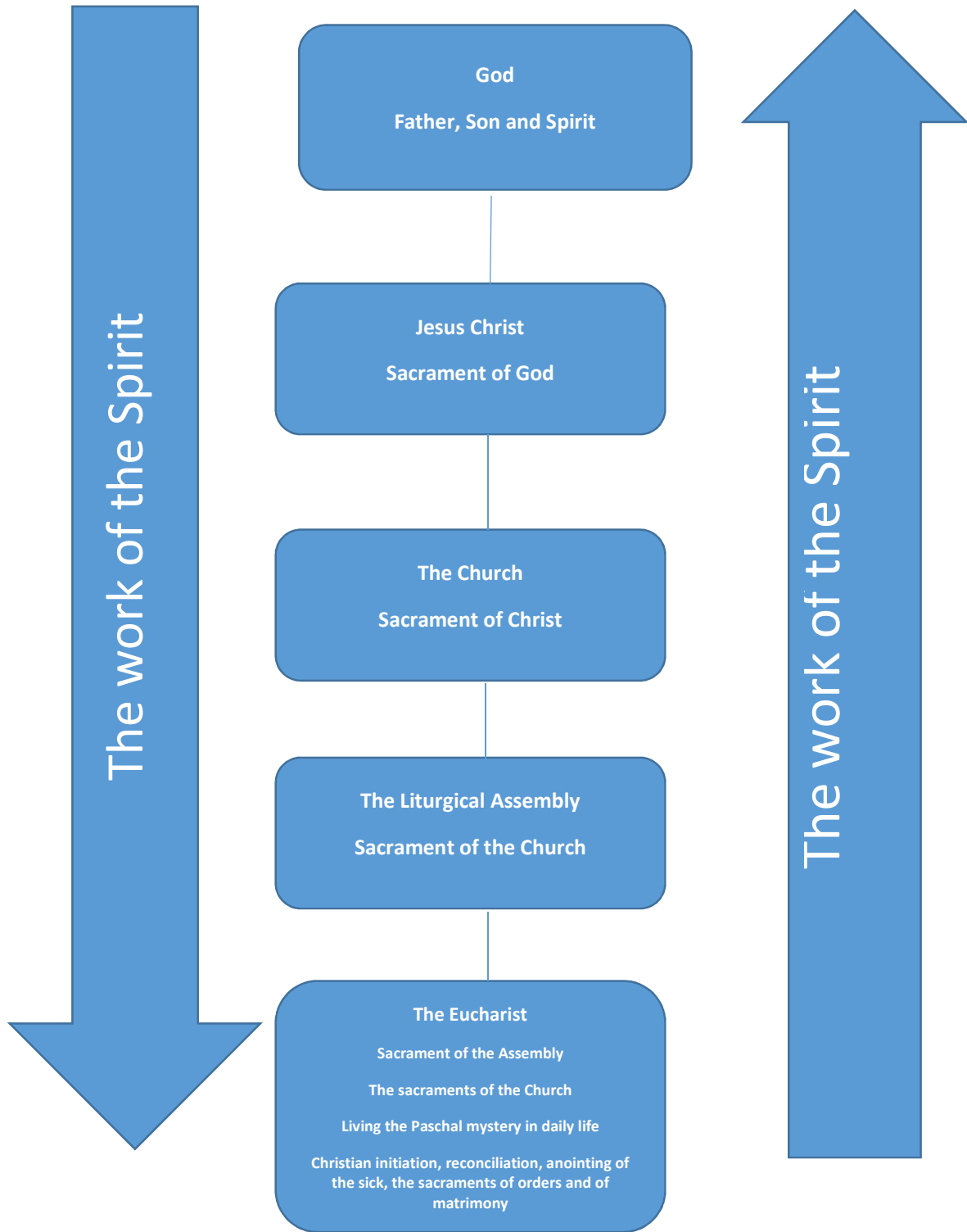
The Church cannot become closed in upon herself. She has no other purpose than as a witness to the Gospel. She is given to the world by God, just as the Son is given by the Father.

To accomplish her mission she must become a servant, just as the Lord made Himself a servant. And just as Jesus served His Father by becoming a servant of His brothers, at the same time the Church cannot serve God without serving others. The Christian community continually finds herself struggling with the question: how much of her resources (her influence, her time, etc.) should be devoted to her own needs, and how much should be devoted to those of others? Is she a club for the satisfaction of the desires of her members, or does she have the courage to be leaven in the dough, a light for the people of the earth? In the Church's own history, then there were periods when the Church grew closed in on herself, consumed by internal debates, and there were moments where she had the courage to announce the Gospel, even at the risk of great sacrifice: it is these latter moments that were the truly great periods of the Church.²⁶

²⁵ Béguerie and Duchesneau, op. cit., p. 29.

²⁶ Ibid., p. 30.

GOD REVEALS HIMSELF TO THE WORLD



The descending arrow shows how, in progressive stages moving closer to daily life, God becomes visible in history, with the scope contracting at each stage. The ascending arrow shows how the life of man returns, stage by stage, toward the face-to-face vision of God.

The sacramental life enacts perpetually this double movement: God comes down to man and man rises up to God. Jesus is manifested in His Church as the true path which leads man to God. As in our earlier reflection on Jesus of Nazareth, we draw the same conclusions when examining the sacrament of the Church – i.e. these three points.

- The Church is sacrament when the Spirit gives her the ability to welcome the presence of her Lord and the ability to live in accordance with this presence – when this happens, the Spirit makes the Church into an efficacious sign.
- The Church is sacrament when she effaces herself in front of her Lord and Master, when she proclaims Him as Head of the Body, and when she announces the Gospel of Jesus Christ.
- The Church is sacrament when she does not turn in upon herself, but rather accepts her role as servant of the world, putting her saving mission into practice.

THE SACRAMENTS OF THE CHURCH

The Church herself is, in a sense, invisible “Christians are dispersed throughout the world,” says one of the most ancient Christian writers, a second-century work known as the *Epistle to Diognetus*: “Inhabiting Greek as well as barbarian cities, according as the lot of each of them has determined, and following the customs of the natives in respect to clothing, food, and the rest of their ordinary conduct, they display to us their wonderful and confessedly striking method of life.²⁷ They are not visible *as Christians* – unless, that is, they have the courage to confess their faith in the Lord Jesus in their own lives. This is exactly where the Church’s sacraments come in.

We believe that there are seven sacraments. Seven is a number with a great symbolic significance, giving expression to the fact that all of life must become sacramental. To confess faith in the Lord Jesus does not prevent us from living the same life as others, but it does require that we live it differently – like Jesus, who lived our human life, but lived it in a new way. “If any one is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has passed away, behold, the new has come” (2 Cor. 5:17).

There are seven sacraments, but we allow that they exist in a certain hierarchy. At the center we must place the Eucharist, the sacrament of the Body of Christ, the sacrament of the Church. “Baptism, Confirmation, and Eucharist are sacraments of Christian initiation. They ground the common vocation of all Christ's disciples, a vocation to holiness and to the mission of evangelizing the world. They confer the graces needed for the life according to the Spirit during this life as pilgrims on the march towards the homeland.”²⁸

²⁷ *Epistle to Diognetus*, 5.

²⁸ *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 1533.

The sacraments of penance and anointing of the sick are called the 'sacraments of healing'. "The Lord Jesus Christ, physician of our souls and bodies, who forgave the sins of the paralytic and restored him to bodily health, has willed that his Church continue, in the power of the Holy Spirit, his work of healing and salvation, even among her own members. This is the purpose of the two sacraments of healing: the sacrament of Penance and the sacrament of Anointing of the Sick."²⁹

"Two other sacraments, Holy Orders and Matrimony, are directed towards the salvation of others; if they contribute as well to personal salvation, it is through service to others that they do so. They confer a particular mission in the Church and serve to build up the People of God."³⁰

The first of the sacraments of the Church is therefore the Eucharist. Whenever the community assembles around the table of the Lord, she becomes manifest and visible. It is at this time and place that she manifests her mystery, the reuniting of the Body of Christ with the Lord who is her Head. We can say, therefore, that if Jesus is the sacrament of the Father, the Church is the sacrament of Jesus Christ, and the Eucharistic assembly is the sacrament of the Church. Each of these realities corresponds well to our definition of the concept of sacrament, but each one in its own unique way.

The Sacraments, Presence of the Spirit

The sacraments are not merely words or empty talk, voiced by Christians as a way to announce Jesus Christ. They are not a mere announcement, or a declaration of intention. They are a time and a space where man welcomes the Spirit and accepts His activity within himself. They therefore make possible a manifestation of the face of God within the life of man. This presence of the Spirit allows us to speak of an efficacious sign.

It is vital to understand that before any sacrament is a religious ceremony, it is a reality of human life.

Reconciliation, for one, does not occur first in the confessional. It begins when men become reconciled among themselves, and with God. To welcome the Spirit into one's life, to be able to live *a life of reconciliation* – that is the essence of the sacrament.³¹

In the same way, the sacrament of matrimony is not limited to a ceremony in the church. When a man and a woman decide to make a covenant and to live this covenant in faith, in light of the Word of God, and under the direction of the Spirit, they welcome this sacrament into their lives, and then they truly begin to live the sacrament. When this happens, their relationship becomes sacramental.

²⁹ Ibid., 1421.

³⁰ Ibid., 1534.

³¹ Béguerie and Duchesneau, op. cit., p. 32.

In the same way, when a member of the community endures his sickness and suffering in the light of faith, when he accepts the Spirit into his life, then he truly lives out the sacrament of the sick.

Baptism, too, is not limited to a ceremony, no matter how solemnly that ceremony is done. It opens up a life which is lived entirely as a manifestation of the Paschal mystery, through the death and resurrection of the Lord.

In the sacrament, God gives Himself to us: He gives Himself to illuminate the realities of our life. He gives Himself so that we can see these realities more clearly. In the sacrament of Christ, Christ, by His Church, gives us His Spirit, so that we can reflect His image and live in His life. Because of this, the sacraments are not only to be 'received', as we commonly say – they are to be *lived*.

The Sacraments, Submission to the Spirit

Like Jesus who leads us to the Father, and like the Church which effaces herself before her Lord, in the same way the sacrament makes present a richness that comes to us from something other than ourselves. It is, in the end, nothing less than to welcome God's gift of the Holy Spirit.

Thus, when a man and a woman carry out the sacrament of matrimony, they do not have any pretensions that their relationship will serve as a model for the covenant of God with His people. They simply recognize that the covenant that they will live out will be *a reflection* of that covenant. For this reason, they eagerly welcome the Spirit, to the end that God will make present the mystery of His love in them.³²

In the same way, when the Church gathers for the Eucharist, she is not the owner of what she celebrates. She proclaims the coming of Another, other than herself, and she gives thanks for this coming.

The sacrament cannot truly be lived except by those who allow themselves to become *poor*. "What have you that you did not receive? If then you received it, why do you boast as if it were not a gift?" (1 Cor. 4:7), says St. Paul. The sacrament puts us in situation of profound humility, because it puts us in a position to welcome one much greater than ourselves. It invites us to give thanks, to give back to God what He has given us. This is the opposite of the attitude of the Pharisee in the Gospel [see Lk. 18:9-14] who is proud of his own righteousness.

The Sacraments, at the Service of the World

Christians do not 'consume' the sacraments merely to enrich themselves. The sacraments put them in a position to be servants. We do not receive Christ to keep Him for ourselves but to give Him to the world. We do not get married in the Church simply in order to follow

³² *Ibid.*, op. cit., p. 33.

the rules, but to accept the mission of showing to the world our faith in a covenantal God. If we do not understand this properly, we will sometimes oppose to each other the sacrament, on the one hand, and the announcement of the Gospel, on the other. On the pretense that the sacraments are “the source and summit of the Christian life,”³³ we will end up compromising the Church’s mission. It is not enough to say that the sacraments are a means of announcing the Gospel: they are the very form that this announcement takes.

When I forgive my brother I *become* a sacrament of forgiveness. I unveil the face of a God who pardons, just as Jesus Himself did.

This missionary vision of the sacraments is undoubtedly what is missing the most in Christians today. They will never discover it if we present the sacraments merely as means of individual salvation for ourselves. They are ways of salvation, yes, but of the salvation of *all the world*. They are the revelation of God, the presence of God in our history.

Only the contemplation of Jesus *the Servant* can heal Christians of such a distortion of the notion of sacrament. In living the sacraments, they must know that they themselves become servants.

We can find in the sacraments the points already proposed for Jesus and the Church:

- All sacraments **make the Spirit present** in the life of the believer. Only thus we can say that they are **efficacious signs**.
- We must profess **the Spirit as the source** of every sacramental action, in every single sacrament. In this, **He announces the Gospel**.
- All sacraments commit us to the service of our brothers. In this way they contribute to the salvation of the world.

In this way, we begin to understand the richness of the notion of sacrament. We are caught up in Jesus Christ and of His relation to God the Father. We have fully understood the Church and her relation to her only Lord. But all of this has but one goal: to permit us to give the fullest possible scope to the life of man.³⁴

QUESTIONS FOR FURTHER REFLECTION ON THE FOUNDATIONS OF THE SACRAMENTAL DISCIPLINE:

1. The Church is a sacrament of Christ, just as Christ is Himself the sacrament of the Father, in such a way that He becomes a servant to His brothers and sisters. What changes does this affirmation suggest for the life of our Christian communities?
2. How can we celebrate the sacraments in such a way as to be a witness to Jesus Christ?

³³ *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 1324.

³⁴ Béguerie and Duchesneau, op. cit., p. 34.

TABLE 3: FAITH, RITES, SYMBOLS, MEMORIAL

FAITH

Faith is paramount. No other activity can exist without it. All the baptisms on the day of Pentecost happened because Peter's preaching sparked faith in his hearers. "Repent, and let every one of you be baptized" (Acts 2:38). The disciples broke bread in their homes because they wanted to keep the memory of their Lord alive. When we are told that, on the road to Emmaus, the Lord disappeared from the sight of the disciples the moment they recognized him, we receive a striking confirmation of this fact. We cannot believe as long as we see Him, because faith has no place. It is only because we cannot see that we are led to believe.

THE DIFFERENT DIMENSIONS OF THE SACRAMENTAL SYMBOL

In a larger sense the sacrament is a human reality that realizes and manifests an intervention of God in our world for the salvation of men. It has a visible aspect that *signifies*, and an invisible aspect that *is signified*. As a worldly reality, it may be rationally analyzed; as a divine reality, it is to be believed with faith. On the one hand, it is important not to confuse the two aspects; on the other, we must remember that we cannot attain that which is *signified* except through the *signifier*. The visible reality is illuminated by faith as the saving action of God.³⁵

Humanly speaking, the sacraments make up the world of rite and of symbol.

- The sacraments are complex realities: it takes time and effort to understand them.
- The sacraments are rich realities: even with the best analysis, we can never fully exhaust them.
- The sacraments are misunderstood realities, often disparaged, especially when the rite is badly performed: for this reason it is necessary to restore the proper performance of the rite.
- The sacraments concern what is most profound in man: to understand them well is to better understand man himself.
- The sacraments are those realities that the Lord chose to maintain His active presence with us: He comes in the life of our faith so that we know what is at stake.³⁶

THE RITE

A rite is a communal act that is prescribed, repetitive and symbolic, that in various ways engages both the irrational and the sensible domains, in the process of establishing communication with the unknown, mysterious and sacred realm.

³⁵ Philippe Béguerie and Claude Duchesneau. *Pour vivre les sacrements* [To Live the Sacraments]. (Paris: du Cerf, 1989), 2nd ed., p. 71. Cf. R. Coffy, *L'Eglise* [The Church] (Desclee, 1984), p. 32.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, p.72-74.

- A rite is an *act*.
 - It is an action, a directive, something that we do; it is neither emotions nor states of the soul: fiancées' marry because they love each other, yes, but the mere fact that they love each other does not itself make them married. Neither is a rite a mere 'rubric' that prescribes how the rite is done. 'Ritualism' and 'rubricism' are reprehensible deviations, the fact that we find them here or there does not undermine the necessity or the dignity of the rite.

- A rite is a *communal act*.
 - It is not something we do alone. One does not even offer a 'toast' alone. And if by chance we do carry out a rite alone (e.g., funeral rites carried out alongside the tomb of a deceased person who has come and gone like a solitary pilgrim), it is precisely to cease being alone and enter into a relation with someone or something else.

- A rite is a prescribed ('pre-scripted') action.
 - What is to be done is known in advance, and must be, in order to achieve the desired effect, so that there can be a rite at all. The rite of baptism aims to bring about the initiation of the individual into Christ and His Church. To this effect the rite has been codified in advance. It is necessary, if nothing else, so that we can know, once the rite is over, if the individual has been actually baptized or not, initiated or not. In this sense, the rite is the 'conservator,' without ceasing at the same time to be uplifting and 'democratic'.

We did not invent the rite, nor can it become the subject of creativity in its most fundamental elements. Its 'fixed' nature is a safeguard against the unpredictable, protecting us against those who would abuse their power by using the rite as a tool for manipulation.

- The rite is a *repetitive operation*.
 - Since it is foreseen and prescribed, the rite does not exist except as something essentially repetitive. It is given like a precondition that we must enter into if we wish to obtain its effect. Obviously, a man can only die once. But we do not invent for him an utterly new, custom-made funeral rite. Instead, he submits to being the next link in the long chain of rites which are carried out for the dead. At first glance, this repetition can seem like a weakness, a deficiency. But if one looks at it more closely, it reveals a genuinely astonishing aspect of the rite. Precisely because it is repetitive, the rite proclaims that no man is a solitary man, a man alone, but rather that he cannot be truly man unless he is integrated into a *humanity* that is larger than himself. By the rite the individual receives his human identity from outside of himself, and thus adheres to this human identity outside of himself and integrates it into himself. (It need hardly be said that all these

observations take on a greater dimension when applied to the Christian sacraments!)

- A rite is a *symbolic* activity.
 - Behind this communal repetition of the rite is hidden its symbolic character. We will go further in our analysis of what we mean by symbol, but we must first note that the rite is an action that reattaches and reassembles. It does not exist for itself but for the relationship that it establishes. It is necessary, yes, but it is not an end in itself. We do not baptize simply for the purpose of carrying out the rite of baptism: rather we baptize because of the effect the rite brings about. It is only the 'ritualist' who is satisfied merely to note that the rite has been carried out effectively, in conformity to the rules, and it is only the deviant who mocks the effect and retains only a social need to have the rite carried out.

- The rite is an operation in the domain of the irrational.
 - The anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss tells us how to understand rites: "They are a way to make immediately intelligible to the soul a number of values that cannot be made intelligible by means of purely *rational* channels."³⁷ Is this not why there is water in baptism, and not merely a profession of faith?

The Symbol

"The term 'symbol' always implies the piecing together of two halves," says G. Durant. The word comes from the Greek word *sum-balein*, which means 'to put together', or 'to assemble.' (Its exact opposite is *dia-bolos*, 'that which divides'!) The 'symbol' was a process used in ancient times by two allied cities or countries. They would break a round piece of pottery in two, and each city would take half. When one city had a message to communicate to its ally, it would give its half to a messenger. If at his arrival in the other city, his piece had 'assembled' well with the other piece, they would be sure the messenger came from the allied city and was not a spy.³⁸

The role of symbol

When a child uses a transitional object [e.g., a blanket] to be 'assembled' with his absent mother, this is another example of a symbolic activity. We must now go further in our analysis of the nature and role of symbol.³⁹

³⁷ See *La Croix* (Jan. 24, 1979).

³⁸ Béguerie and Duchesneau, op. cit., p. 74.

³⁹ Ibid., p. 76.

Real absence

Human life, especially in its religious dimension, has a peculiar way of constantly making reference to realities which, although they truly exist, do not register in the sense perception of those who speak about them. Justice, freedom, homeland, and love, for example, truly exist, but they are abstract realities that impinge on none of man's senses, except perhaps by intermediaries that are used to represent them. The same is true – even more so – in matters of religion. Believers know that grace, forgiveness, and communion exist, but as realities which we can experience sensibly only in indirect ways, by water, bread, and gestures, etc.

And God?

Is He not also real, the one who is so woefully absent from our sight, from our touch, from all of our senses? “No one has ever seen God” (1 Jn. 1:18).

Now man is not merely a brain: he is body, heart and spirit, and nothing essential can engage him unless his *entire being* is captured. What is corporeal must be spiritualized (e.g., work, time, sexuality, etc.), and what is spiritual must be corporealized! And precisely here emerges the role for symbol, which is nothing more or less than a sort of corporealization of all that is in the domain of the spirit.

There are many kinds of signs:

- There are natural signs that are not man-made, but happen naturally to man whenever the requisite physical conditions are in place: smoke is a sign of fire, a footprint signifies a footstep, etc.
- There are conventional signs that man selects and organizes according to a code: signs of politeness, the rules of the road, etc.
- There are symbolic signs: of these, we can say that man does not invent their materiality (we did not invent water!), but defines and codifies the way that they are used. In this way man obtains a meaning which is much larger and richer than the sign itself: water, therefore, is able not merely to quench our thirst or nourish our faith – it is able to be used in such a way as to signify the gift of life or of purification.

When man wishes to enter into a relationship or communicate with someone who is far away, and to all appearances absent, he must put into play an entire system of communication by signs which are proportionate to the distance that separates the two: verbal signs (questioning), gestures, neon signs, telephone, letters, etc. In the case of signs of politeness, the other person is clearly present, but the fact that we use the signs (salutations, handshakes, hands, hellos, hugs, etc.) shows that the other, although he is present, is nevertheless in some way ‘distant, simply because of the fact that he is ‘other’, i.e. different. And what can one say when the other is The Entirely Other! The sign, therefore, will always be necessary as a method of communication.

The *symbol* is also a way of communication, but a communication that rises even to the level of communion, because it has as its function *to assemble together*.

- Like other signs, the symbol always has as its point of departure a physical, sensible element.
- Like other signs, the symbol uses this physical, sensible element to indicate the existence of something which we cannot see, and which is therefore absent to the senses.
- But while this procedure allows conventional and natural signs to indicate the hidden existence of another sensible element (fire, a crossroads), the symbol points the way to a totally different reality, a reality that will never be physically sensible, because it is by nature abstract, immaterial, spiritual – e.g., justice, homeland, grace, etc.

Thus, the symbol (the symbolic object) is like the material window into an immaterial reality, that man, who is body and spirit, cannot access except by an operation that reassembles the body and spirit.

We understand also that a true symbol is not a singular, clear-cut reality: there is the way that we use it on the one hand, and the 'work' that it accomplishes on the other. There is always a correspondence between an exterior symbolic action (sight, smell, touch, sound, taste) and an interior one (impressions, emotions, ecstasies, wonder, etc.). Although the exterior action is limited to the act which produces it (i.e., setting off a firework), the interior action is unlimited, entirely open-ended (i.e., the effect of the firework is potentially unmeasurable).⁴⁰

The symbolic function is the capacity of man to realize that there is a reality that is distinct, or other, than himself, and to represent this reality when it is absent from him.⁴¹

"I call 'symbol' all structures of signification where a direct, primary, and literal sense designates in addition another indirect, secondary, and figurative sense, which cannot be understood except by means of the first."⁴² Antoine Vergote adds that religious symbolism constitutes an additional level.⁴³

⁴⁰ Ibid., p. 77.

⁴¹ See the work of Jacques Lacan.

⁴² See Paul Ricœur, *L'Conflit des interprétations* (Seuil), p. 16.

⁴³ *Interprétations du langage religieux* (Seuil), p. 70.

The linguistic explanation of the symbol

Structure of signification

Religious symbol	Sacramental link	Indirect sense of the word 'link' that is based on human symbolism, based on the direct sense of the word.
↑ Human symbol	Matrimonial link	The indirect sense of the word 'link' that, based on the direct sense, signifies that which passes between a man and a woman which joins them by marriage.
↑ Materiality of an act	Link	The direct sense of the word that designates the material act of joining.

SYMBOLS, RITES AND SACRAMENTS

In and of itself, anthropology cannot say what the sacraments are. It is faith that does this, and theology gives an account of it. But inasmuch as the sacraments are human acts (they have a 'visible face', says Msgr. Coffy), anthropology can analyze the human element of which the sacrament is composed.

We see, therefore, that the way that the Church proceeds with the sacraments perfectly plays out the symbol and the rite. The Church draws them from the common depths of humanity, but it 'evangelizes' by giving them significations and specific effects.

In the end, symbols and rites in the Christian system acquire a meaning and efficacy that cannot be explained by science, but only by faith, because they become a link to the action of God. It also remains true, in the case of the sacraments, that God does not intervene without human mediation.⁴⁴

THE MEMORIAL

The faith which is God's gift, and the rite that is a human action, come together to bring about the memorial. The memorial is rooted in a past event, the death and resurrection of the Lord Jesus. The reenactment of this event through the symbolic activity of the rite both affirms its enduring efficacy and announces its future consummation. Inasmuch as they are human beings, the first Christians could not continue their relationship with the invisible

⁴⁴ Béguerie and Duchesneau, op. cit., p. 79.

God except through the visible mediation of these memorial rites of baptism and the breaking of the bread. They did not invent the rites, but thanks to Christ and the Holy Spirit they were able to give them an entirely new content and signification.

Thus, the ancient rites are to be used in an entirely new way, in obedience to Jesus' charge at the institution – not merely to remember Him as the one who has 'vanished' (as at Emmaus), but to "do this in memory of him," meaning to permit the living Jesus to continue to act among them, allowing them to benefit from His Paschal mystery, an event historically in the past but always mystically in the present.

It is only of the Eucharist that Jesus said, "Do this in memory of me," but baptism (and all the other sacraments) are just as much a memorial of the Paschal mystery of Christ as the "broken bread."

In this way, what we call the **founding nucleus** of the sacramental life of the Church was put into place. This nucleus has no other name than the two acts which constitute it: baptism and the breaking of the bread (the "Lord's Supper," as it is called by Paul, who is chronologically the first to speak of the Eucharist, cf. 1 Cor. 11:20⁴⁵). Nevertheless, alongside these we observe the presence of a certain number of additional actions that serve the life of faith of the first communities. But their practice lies in a hazy history, we no longer even have a precise name to call them, and above all we have no theological notions (such as 'sacrament') by means of which to reassemble them. This is what made Maurice Jourjon, an expert on the Church Fathers, says "the sacraments were born before they were named, before there was a term to designate them."⁴⁶ The only task of the first Christians was to live for and with Christ in every situation of existence.

QUESTIONS FOR FURTHER REFLECTION: "FAITH, RITES, SYMBOLS AND MEMORIAL"

1. Taking into account the cultural realities of our time, is there space to develop other rites that correspond better to the faith of our contemporaries?
2. What place do rites and symbols have in your personal life, as a couple and as a family?
3. What ways does God 'mediate' His presence to you in your faith life? What symbols does He use to do this?

⁴⁵ Ibid., p. 83.

⁴⁶ Maurice Jourjon. *Les sacrements de la liberté chrétienne* [The sacraments and Christian liberty] (Le Cerf), p. 9.

TABLE 4: A BRIEF OVERVIEW OF THE SACRAMENTS TODAY

THE EUCHARIST TODAY

The liturgical renewal started well before the Second Vatican Council. This undertaking was an effort that had been building up for many years. Pope Paul VI in his introduction to the Roman Missal speaks of centuries of progress in the liturgical sciences. The Council of Trent finished in 1563 with the mandate that we return to the riches of the witness of the ancient traditions. The work was therefore begun, and was continued through the 17th and 18th centuries thanks to the Benedictine abbeys. In the recent past we can cite the names of Dom Gueranger (1840) and Dom Lefevre (1920).

In 1948 Pope Pius XII created a commission for liturgical reform, which began by restoring the Easter vigil.

To acknowledge this past work, and the direction suggested by the preceding popes, Vatican II reinvigorated the liturgical gatherings of the faithful, universalizing what had hitherto been permitted only in certain restricted, privileged circles. It wanted the Eucharist to become the source and summit of the life of the Church. Here we will list the four most important points that accompanied these changes: the rediscovery of the assembly, of the place of the Word, of the importance of the act of thanksgiving, and the prayers of the faithful.

The Body of Christ

The most significant changes concerned the general understanding of the liturgical celebration. There is no longer a celebrant and those who ‘assist’ at Mass. The *whole assembly* is invited to celebrate by associating its prayers with those of the presiding priest. We forget that in the past we spoke of ‘low masses’. Now we have instituted true liturgical ministers: cantors, lectors, extraordinary ministers of the Eucharist. We have forgotten the time when the priest ran a ‘one man show’.

The usage of the language of each country has profoundly changed the attitude of the participants. Understandably, certain people regret the loss of a part of our musical heritage, which has accumulated through tradition. Pope Paul VI declared on this occasion:

The introduction of the vernacular will certainly be a great sacrifice for those who know the beauty, the power and the expressive sacrality of Latin. . . . But why? . . . Understanding of prayer is worth more than the silken garments in which it is royally dressed. Participation by the people is worth more—particularly participation by modern people, so fond of plain language which is easily understood and converted into everyday speech.”⁴⁷

⁴⁷ Paul VI, General Audience, Nov. 6, 1969.

Conscious, Active and Full Participation, of both Body and Spirit

The celebration of Mass, as the action of Christ and the People of God arrayed hierarchically, is the center of the whole Christian life for the Church both universal and local, as well as for each of the faithful individually . . . It is therefore of the greatest importance that the celebration of the Mass, that is, the Lord's Supper, be so arranged that the sacred ministers and the faithful taking part in it, according to the proper state of each, may derive from it more abundantly those fruits for the sake of which Christ the Lord instituted the Eucharistic Sacrifice of his Body and Blood

This will best be accomplished if, with due regard for the nature and the particular circumstances of each liturgical assembly, the entire celebration is planned in such a way that it leads to a conscious, active, and full participation of the faithful both in body and in mind, a participation burning with faith, hope, and charity, of the sort which is desired by the Church and demanded by the very nature of the celebration, and **to which the Christian people have a right and duty by reason of their Baptism.**

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The reason for all these changes is simple: all liturgical action is the work of Christ the priest, and of His Body which is the Church. All the members of the Body of Christ must manifest, according to the formula frequently repeated by the council, "fully conscious and active participation in liturgical celebrations."⁴⁹

The Two Tables

"Man does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God" (Deut. 8:3, Matt. 4:4). The ancient tradition of the Church loves to highlight the fact that the liturgy gives us access to two profound means of nourishment: the bread of the Word and the bread of the Eucharist.

The readings from the Word of God were considerably expanded by the council. They are divided into a cycle of three years for Sundays and two years for weekdays. The people of God have slowly rediscovered their taste for the Holy Scriptures, a taste that had diminished during the struggles of the Counter-Reformation.

The homily has rediscovered its true place in the liturgy of the Word. It clearly shows its relationship both with the Word that is proclaimed and with the lives of the faithful. It introduces us to the Eucharist, so that the proclamation of the Word of God is not reduced to mere instruction, but as a wellspring of Eucharistic praise within us.

⁴⁸ *General Instruction on the Roman Missal*, 16-18, emphasis added.

⁴⁹ Philippe Bégurier and Claude Duchesneau. ***Pour vivre les sacrements*** [*To Live the Sacraments*]. (Paris: du Cerf, 1989), 2nd ed., p. 131. Cf. *Sacrosanctum concilium*, 14.

Alongside liturgical reform, we have seen an explosion in the number of Bible studies, and biblical instruction has become an essential part of the formation of clergy and in Catholic universities.

Eucharist

While we still sometimes speak of 'going to Mass' or 'assisting at Mass', these days we are more likely to say "participating in the Eucharist" or "celebrating the Eucharist."

As we have seen, the Eucharist is the true sacrifice of Thanksgiving, and the renewed liturgy fully brings out its character of praise.

The Missal has been enriched with many prefaces: there are 88 in the official edition of the Missal! Eucharistic prayers which promote the praise of the whole community have been placed alongside the Roman canon. There are several new Eucharistic prayers in the Missal, several of which recall the liturgical prayers of the first centuries.

We have also seen the formation of numerous prayer groups, stimulated by this rediscovery of the Eucharistic prayer.

The Prayers of the Faithful

The first centuries of the Church testify to the great tradition that all Christians together must join in Christ's prayer for the world. By doing so they manifest that every Christian, by virtue of his baptism, participates in the unique priestly function of Christ. This prayer was slowly abandoned over time, sometimes replaced by the prayers of confession, in which the priest mainly extolled all the shortcomings of the parish community. In restoring the prayers of the faithful, which we also call the 'universal prayers,' the council invites us in our celebrations to intercede for all the Church, for all the world, for all the powerless, and for our community.

In this way, communities avoid turning in upon themselves, the prayer becomes less abstract, and the echoes of human life can resound in the assemblies.

In many countries of the world, and in particular in the younger churches, the Eucharist has truly rediscovered its central place in the life of the community. From week to week, throughout the entire year, the disciples of Christ are found gathered together. And they discover – beyond all words, beyond all explanations – the true image of their Church, and all those whom she has called, those out of whom the Spirit has fashioned her, in all their poverty and imperfection.

QUESTIONS FOR FURTHER REFLECTION: "THE EUCHARIST TODAY"

1. What does the Eucharist represent *for you*?

TABLE 5: A BRIEF OVERVIEW OF THE SACRAMENTS TODAY (CONTINUED)

THE SACRAMENTS OF CHRISTIAN INITIATION TODAY: BAPTISM, CONFIRMATION, EUCHARISTIC COMMUNION

Since the liturgical reform of the Second Vatican Council, there are three rituals for baptism; that is, three ways to begin the process of Christian initiation:

1. The ritual of baptism for adults,
2. The ritual of baptism for children at the age of catechism, and
3. The ritual of baptism for infants.⁵⁰

THE BAPTISM OF ADULTS

The meeting of two persons always begins with a mysterious encounter. Something begins to rise up in the innermost, secret place of each person, something sings within the heart. Then follows the mutual discovery, the first, unsteady step, the moments of happiness, the questions and doubts. The adult who discovers Christ follows a similar path.

A friend, a fiancée, a joyous or tragic event, one's professional or social life, a good book, a personal journey: all these permit us to catch a glimpse of the Risen One. A seed is planted deep within us: it must grow, like all seeds. The Church seeks to guide this growth without disturbing its spontaneity.

Often today, when a man becomes a candidate for baptism, a small group of Christians will offer him their services. They give him room to pick his path, to discover the riches of Christian tradition which have been elaborated through the centuries. Together they re-read the Gospels. Bonds of friendship are formed, and periods of common prayer shape the life of the group. For the more important celebrations, they join the rest of the parish, or perhaps other groups also preparing for baptism.

Through this process – i.e., by journeying with these candidates for baptism as they discover, for the first time, the presence of the Risen Lord – the Church is able to relive her own youth.

Since the earliest centuries of the Church, the time in which the Church carries out the stages of preparation for baptism has been called the catechumenate. How long each stage will take – how many months or weeks – cannot be determined in advance. Instead, it will depend on the freedom of each person in the slow germination of his faith, which is the work of the Spirit. The number and significance of each of the major stages, however, are established by fixed rituals.⁵¹

⁵⁰ Philippe Béguerie and Claude Duchesneau. *Pour vivre les sacrements* [To Live the Sacraments]. (Paris: du Cerf, 1989), 2nd ed., p. 163.

⁵¹ Ibid., p. 164.

Since the beginning of the Church, adult Baptism is the common practice where the proclamation of the Gospel is still new. The catechumenate (preparation for Baptism) therefore occupies an important place. This initiation into Christian faith and life should dispose the catechumen to receive the gift of God in Baptism, Confirmation, and the Eucharist.⁵²

Entrance into the Catechumenate

This is a person's official welcome by the Church. After several weeks, in which a mutual friendship has been allowed to deepen, the one to be baptized takes his place in the community. He is marked with the sign of the cross, the first Christian sign, after which follows his preparation for baptism. The path is the one marked out for us by the Lord with His disciples on the road to Emmaus, recounting events in the light of God's Word. Similarly, each person who prepares for baptism, alongside the Christians who accompany him, takes up the great texts of Scripture. Through this dialogue, his outlook on the world progressively changes, his life is transformed, and the riches of the faith are discovered.

The Decisive Call of the Church

Once the person is ready to make the decision, the date of baptism can be fixed. This sets the stage for the second great celebration, the 'Rite of Election', generally taking place at the beginning of Lent.

The whole Church, so to speak, enters into Lent alongside those to be baptized, traveling along the path to the coming Easter, which will be the first Easter for some of her members. The bishop begins by calling up, one by one, those who are to be baptized. He hears the witness of those who have accompanied them, and receives their pledge of commitment. At the same time, the bishop represents in his person the community as a whole, welcoming its new members. Thus the decision of this man becomes the decision of the whole Church.

The Great Prayers and Traditions

Look at the Sunday Gospels during Lent (Year A): the temptations of Christ, the Transfiguration, the dialogue of Jesus with the Samaritan woman, that with the man blind from birth, the resurrection of Lazarus. Since the first centuries of the Church, these passages were chosen to illuminate the final weeks of preparation for baptism. They are calls to conversion; they reveal the action of God in Jesus Christ.

Even today these Sundays are marked by a time of prayer for the catechumens. We call these the 'scrutinies,' because according to Scripture, God 'tries the minds and hearts' (Ps. 7:9). To accept His gaze in our lives is to acknowledge that the light triumphs over the darkness. This is conversion: 'those who do what is true come to the light' (Jn. 3:21).

⁵² *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 1247.

With the scrutinies come the 'traditions'. "I received from the Lord what I also delivered to you," said St. Paul (1 Cor. 11:23). The Church transmits and entrusts to the catechumens two great treasures of tradition: the creed ('I believe in God . . .') and the Lord's Prayer ('Our Father . . .'). On the day of his baptism the new Christian will repeat these two great liturgical proclamations with all of his new brothers and sisters in the faith.⁵³

The Easter Vigil

The Easter Vigil is the night of the Resurrection. It is the night of that liberation that comes to us from the dawn of history, of the departure from Egypt, the night of the Exodus, the night of the pillar of fire that led through the desert, the night of the Lord's presence, which nourishes His people and quenches their thirst. For twenty centuries the Church has celebrated the baptism of adults on this night. What night could be more appropriate for giving the gift of baptism? The community is assembled together in faith, and the newly baptized becomes their prophet. He announces to all his brothers and sisters that even today the Lord still travels with us on the road, making us recognize His presence [cf. Emmaus, Lk. 24].

THE BAPTISM OF INFANTS

The Christian initiation of an adult takes several months, or even years. This is also true, although in a different way, for an infant, who must continue to grow in his faith until he becomes "mature in Christ," as St. Paul says (Col. 1:28), and this is only attained in the fullness of life.

The ritual pouring of the water in the celebration of baptism is only the first stage on the long path of initiation, containing the seeds of its final hope. This path begins in the home and continues through the long course of the years of catechesis. At this later time the child will receive the other sacraments of Christian initiation: confirmation and Eucharist.

IS IT NECESSARY TO BAPTIZE INFANTS?

This question often comes up in family discussions at the time of a child's birth. Parents understand that they bear the responsibility for making this significant choice. Every sacrament is an event which concerns the whole Christian community. It is not enough to ask about the reasons for a baptism, to consider its significance only for the one being baptized. In administering a sacrament the Church celebrates the manifestation of the face of God in our life. The birth of a little child, the springing up of a new life, is a manifestation of God's presence.

Since the first centuries, the Church has invited the children of Christian families to baptism. In doing so, she announces to the world that God does not *wait* to love us until we are old

⁵³ Béguerie and Duchesneau, op. cit., p. 165.

enough to appreciate this love. It is worth noting that the Church also baptizes children who, due to some life circumstances, are unable to reach full development. She baptizes those who, for one reason or another, will always remain (at least to human eyes) marked by some deficiency or handicap. What we see as a limitation is not always seen this way by God.

Every child is born into a particular human family, which he is in solidarity with: he receives from the family his name, his race, his language, his habits. In this diversity lies the richness of what it means to be human. Once the parents have experienced faith in the Church, they naturally want their child, at the proper time, to come to know the love of the Risen One. This baptism is a hope, a path that opens up.

Nevertheless, the newborn must someday make the choice for himself. He must ratify – or not – the gifts he has received in baptism. Only he alone can do this: step by step, within the womb of the Church, he is able to accept for himself the life he received in baptism, and in doing so to ‘convert’ in the fullest sense of the term. To assist in this process, the Church invites him to participate in catechesis.

Other parents make a different choice. They decide that it is up to the child himself to make this decision, and only when he has reached a certain maturity. They do not disown their own responsibility: rather, they want to give their child the possibility to choose in all freedom, anticipating that he will be better prepared to do this after he has discovered the faith himself through the years of catechesis.⁵⁴

The Church has always known this diversity of positions. To show this, it is sufficient to cite some of the first Christian writers.

Hippolytus of Rome (3rd century):

In the first place, we baptize infants. All those who can speak for themselves do so. As for those who cannot, their parents or someone from their family speak for them.

Origen (3rd century):

The Church has received from the apostles the tradition of administering baptism even to infants.

Tertullian of Carthage (beginning of the 3rd century):

It is preferable to delay baptism, especially when in the case of infants. Yes, the Lord said: ‘Let the little children come to me’. They should come, yes, but when they are older; when they are of the age that can be instructed, once they know Him to whom they are going. In this way, they become Christians when they are capable of

⁵⁴ [Editor’s note: The law of the Church specifies that “Parents are obliged to take care that infants are baptized in the first few weeks; as soon as possible after the birth or even before it” (Code of Canon Law 867§1). The present text should not be read as advocating the conscious, deliberate delay of a child’s baptism, but rather as encouraging a sensitive pastoral approach to parents who, regretfully, have chosen to do so. Note also that Tertullian, who is quoted below, died an apostate from the Church, and his distaste for infant baptism, altogether unique at the time, should not be taken seriously as a model approach to the sacrament.]

knowing Christ! Why, in this age of innocence, are they so rushed to receive the remission of sins?

The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* says, additionally: "Since the earliest times, Baptism has been administered to children, for it is a grace and a gift of God that does not presuppose any human merit; children are baptized in the faith of the Church. Entry into Christian life gives access to true freedom."⁵⁵

THE BAPTISM OF CHILDREN IN THE AGE OF CATECHESIS

It sometimes happens today that children come to be catechized without first having been baptized. Sometimes they are brought by friends, but more often their parents themselves desire catechesis, even though they did not baptize their child at birth. The Church anticipates a special ritual for their situation. They are not baptized like little infants who are not able to truly understand what is going on; but at the same time, they are not as responsible as adults, and they are younger than those who instruct them.

There are four steps. The earlier celebrations are marked by their simplicity, and envision that the child will progress through catechesis alongside other friends of the same age.

- At the outset, the Rite of Acceptance marks a child's enrollment in catechesis. The child declares for himself that he would like to join his friends in learning how to know Jesus.
- After a certain amount of time, sometimes in the first year of catechesis, the child learns to discover the contents of the faith. He knows certain Scriptures in the Word of God, and he knows what the Gospels are. It is an appropriate time, then, to reunite all the children of the same age with their parents, their catechists, and the other adults accompanying them. This happens during the celebration of their entry to the catechumenate. Just as in the case of adults, the child to be baptized is solemnly marked with the sign of the cross of Christ.
- Another step occurs several weeks before the date set for baptism. It is a more penitential step, and reminds us that even children have difficulty remaining faithful to their friendship with the Lord.
- Finally comes the time of baptism, normally scheduled during the Easter season. It takes place during the sequence of Mass, and the newly baptized is expected to participate in the Eucharist at this Mass.
- Confirmation can also be given by the priest himself during the same baptismal ceremony, but it is also common that the newly baptized will simply join their friends in being confirmed over the course of the following year.
- In a catechetical group, the baptism of one's friend is a great treasure for all the children. It allows each one to rediscover his own baptism.

Whether it is adults, young children or infants who are baptized, the rite only takes on its full significance when it is seen in the full context of Christian initiation. Through this rite

⁵⁵ *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 1282.

one becomes a member of the Body of Christ, part of the priestly people, “God’s own people, that you may declare the wonderful deeds of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light” (1 Pet. 2:9). This rite entrusts to the baptized the mission to participate in the universal Paschal mystery, to make of this world a new creation that proclaims the praise of its Creator.

The effects of baptism

The fruit of baptism (i.e., baptismal grace) is a rich reality. It bestows upon us the remission of original sin and all personal sin, the birth to a new life by which we become adopted sons and daughters of the Father, members of Christ, and temples of the Holy Spirit. By virtue of all this the baptized is incorporated into the Church, the Body of Christ, and becomes a participant in the priesthood of Christ.⁵⁶

CONFIRMATION

The entirety of the Christian life is already contained in baptism: yet the Eucharist and confirmation reveal new avenues to the infinite riches of God, and man, for his part, stands in need of a variety of different signs. It takes him time to attain a greater degree of maturity.

Some ask why baptism and confirmation are celebrated as two distinct sacraments, when in the beginning they were celebrated together as one. They are like the two panels of a diptych, two complementary processes, two blades of a scissors. They correspond perfectly to our way of life.

Baptism, most of the time, severs a man from his past. There is a combat to be had, a choice to make. Often chasms are opened up between two friends: a friend looks at the baptized with astonishment, disapproval, and incomprehension. In baptism, God is truly calling for a *death*, which we must undergo in order to attain the resurrection.

But we cannot stop there. After having followed Christ into His death, we must afterwards welcome the Spirit. We must participate in the wind of Pentecost, open ourselves up to a new life, and have the courage to announce to the world the joy that God has given us. The apostles experienced the Easter of the Lord, but their discipleship was only truly and fully manifested at Pentecost. They crossed over a threshold. Afterwards, the Holy Spirit lived in them and they could accomplish their task in the world, continuing the mission of Christ, announcing the Good News. The same is true today. Confirmation celebrates the mystery of Pentecost: the Spirit sustains the Church in the service of humanity. By the Spirit each person is integrated into the Church as into a living Body. No member is useless, says St. Paul (see 1 Cor. 12). Everyone receives a gift of the Spirit for the service of others. Everyone is invited to discover the particular role that he can exercise, the ‘ministry’ he must exercise as part of the common mission.

⁵⁶ Béguerie and Duchesneau, op. cit., p. 165. Cf. *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 1279.

In the hope of a new life, confirmation appears as the future to which baptism looks forward. Because the baptized is a man of the future, the Church believes in him. She recognizes that Christ charges each one of His members to do its part to build up the whole body. If we wish to rediscover today the riches of the sacrament of confirmation, must we not rediscover the wind of Pentecost in the Church?

Confirmation can be given by the priest who baptizes in the course of the same celebration as baptism. It consists of an imposition of hands and an anointing. But for personal or pastoral reasons, sometimes we prefer to allow some time to elapse between the two sacraments. Often baptism occurs at one time in the parish, and at a later celebration the bishop gathers the newly baptized at the diocesan level. In confirming them he thus gives a more universal dimension to their baptism.⁵⁷

The Effects of Confirmation

It is evident from its celebration that the effect of the sacrament of Confirmation is the special outpouring of the Holy Spirit as once granted to the apostles on the day of Pentecost.

From this fact, Confirmation brings an increase and deepening of baptismal grace:

- it roots us more deeply in the divine filiation which makes us cry, "Abba! Father!" [Rom. 8:15];
- it unites us more firmly to Christ;
- it increases the gifts of the Holy Spirit in us;
- it renders our bond with the Church more perfect;
- it gives us a special strength of the Holy Spirit to spread and defend the faith by word and action as true witnesses of Christ, to confess the name of Christ boldly, and never to be ashamed of the Cross.⁵⁸

EUCCHARISTIC COMMUNION

The 'breaking of bread', the ancient name given to the Eucharist, stands at the center of the daily life of the community. The Acts of the Apostles mentions it immediately after the event at Pentecost: "So those who received his word were baptized, and there were added that day about three thousand souls. And they devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers." (Acts 2:41-42).

Participation at the Eucharistic table manifests a person's full integration into the community of believers. It is the last step in Christian initiation.

First Holy Communion. Having become a child of God clothed with the wedding garment, the neophyte is admitted "to the marriage supper of the Lamb" and receives the food of the new life, the body and blood of Christ. The Eastern Churches maintain a lively awareness of

⁵⁷ Béguerie and Duchesneau, op. cit., p. 166.

⁵⁸ *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 1302-1303; cf. *Lumen Gentium*, 11-12.

the unity of Christian initiation by giving Holy Communion to all the newly baptized and confirmed, even little children, recalling the Lord's words: "Let the children come to me, do not hinder them." The Latin Church, which reserves admission to Holy Communion to those who have attained the age of reason, expresses the orientation of Baptism to the Eucharist by having the newly baptized child brought to the altar for the praying of the Our Father.⁵⁹

QUESTIONS FOR FURTHER REFLECTION: THE SACRAMENTS OF CHRISTIAN INITIATION

1. What have you discovered about the sacrament of baptism? How do these discoveries help you to better live your faith?
2. What effect of the sacrament of confirmation is the most meaningful to you? How does this help you to take part in the mission entrusted to the Church?
3. Can you witness to the fruits of the sacrament of the Eucharist in your life?

⁵⁹ *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 1244.

TABLE 6: A BRIEF OVERVIEW OF THE SACRAMENTS TODAY (CONTINUED)

THE SACRAMENTS OF HEALING TODAY

THE SACRAMENT OF PENANCE AND RECONCILIATION

The new rite of penance emerging from the Second Vatican Council is remarkably rich, following in a long tradition of giving reconciliation its rightful place in Christian communities. We can highlight three principal positions in the council's reforms.

- The council restored the ancient name, 'reconciliation', which was formerly used to designate this sacrament.
- The council intended to restore a place for the proclamation of holy Scripture in the celebration of all the sacraments, and the ritual for reconciliation lends itself to this.
- The council wished that "whenever rites, according to their specific nature, make provision for communal celebration involving the presence and active participation of the faithful, this way of celebrating them is to be preferred, so far as possible, to a celebration that is individual and quasi-private."⁶⁰ The ritual therefore envisions a certain diversity in the celebration of this sacrament.⁶¹

RECONCILIATION

We speak out of habit of the 'sacrament of penance' or of making a regular practice of 'going to confession'. This way of speaking puts the stress on *man's* role more than *God's*. Yet, since "in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself" (2 Cor. 5:19), Christians must become accustomed to using the language of 'Reconciliation'.

THE PLACE OF THE WORD OF GOD

Before the council, the reading of the Word of God was most glaringly absent in the case of Reconciliation. After the council, how have we restored its place in the sacrament?

For communal celebrations, it is fairly simple: the rite begins with a liturgy of the Word. The main purpose of the first reading is to proclaim a God who loves and forgives us. Additionally, it reveals the call of God and the invitation to conversion, thus becoming a sort of mirror to reflect our own shortcomings.

For individual confessions, inserting a reading of the Word of God would seem like a complete novelty. Instead, the penitent himself, in preparing for confession, can choose a

⁶⁰ *Sacrosanctum concilium*, 27.

⁶¹ Philippe Béguerie and Claude Duchesneau. *Pour vivre les sacrements* [To Live the Sacraments]. (Paris: du Cerf, 1989), 2nd ed., p. 182-183.

passage of the Bible that seems adapted to his situation. He could then begin his confession by saying, "I chose this passage of Scripture, and in light of this passage I would like to confess these faults . . ." If the penitent does not choose a text, it would be up to the priest, at an appropriate time, to bring up a relevant passage of Scripture.

THE DIVERSITY OF CELEBRATIONS

None of the forms of celebration which the ritual proposes can exhaust the riches of the sacrament: all are complementary.

INDIVIDUAL CONFESSION most clearly reveals a personal encounter with God. There are moments in life where the road to conversion can only be one's own, individual road. This is clearly the case when grave sin occasions a severe rupture in our relation to God. But it is also the case before particularly important events, like in the preparation for marriage or religious consecration, or when we must simply make a major decision. This personal path is also appropriate in the setting of a retreat, or when we must make a significant spiritual self-assessment.

COMMUNAL CELEBRATIONS better show the ecclesial aspect of confession. The ministry of the priest is situated in the heart of the community's prayer. We understand more clearly, in this setting, that it is not enough to ask God's forgiveness, but we must also forgive our brothers and sisters, while working to create a world where human relationships can flourish through the process of reconciliation.

These celebrations are also the place where we can make clear that our world contains (using the expression of John Paul II) 'structures of sin,' for which we are partly responsible, each one in his or her own way. They have the great advantage of permitting all the members of a community to prepare together for the great celebrations like Christmas and Easter. They create a rhythm in the unfolding of the liturgical year. They call each one to the work of conversion, and reveal the concrete implications of this conversion. Even though this is not their primary motivation, they are also a true form of *catechesis*, and they often revitalize the *examination of conscience* which otherwise tends to get bogged down in mere outdated catalogues of sins.

The normal format will be individual absolution, but the ritual allows in certain extraordinary cases for recourse to communal absolution (sometimes improperly called 'collective absolution') – it is up to the episcopal conferences to regulate this.⁶²

⁶² *Ibid.*, p. 183.

CELEBRATIONS WITHOUT ABSOLUTION

Some people find it curious that a sacramental ritual could allow for celebrations of reconciliation without absolution. But isn't this a good way to highlight the way that the sacrament *endures* as a larger pattern of our lives?

These sort of celebrations include a liturgy of the Word, a call to conversion, and an examination of conscience. In this way they form the mere beginning of a path that will continue on in the days and weeks that follow. They usually occur on Ash Wednesday or another day at the beginning of Lent. Each person is therefore given the liberty to choose the particular point in his life on which to focus his efforts during Lent. He or she will then make a spiritual self-assessment and a confession sometime before Easter.

In small communities it might happen that, at the conclusion of a sort of general assembly, an occasion might arise for all of the members to join together for a sort of assessment of the state of the community. In this case, efforts toward 'conversion' will be institutional and communal, and each member will be called to play his or her own part in these efforts.

Communal reconciliation services also have this special advantage, that they easily facilitate an invitation to those Christians whose daily situation has hindered them from fully participating in the sacraments of the Eucharist and reconciliation. This is especially the case with those who do not feel ready for a full reconciliation with the Church; for example, those from certain countries where polygamy is still practiced, or elsewhere, for couples who are not married in the Church, or who are divorced and remarried.

"The whole power of the sacrament of Penance consists in restoring us to God's grace and joining us with him in an intimate friendship."⁶³ Reconciliation with God is thus the purpose and effect of this sacrament. For those who receive the sacrament of Penance with contrite heart and religious disposition, reconciliation "is usually followed by peace and serenity of conscience with strong spiritual consolation." Indeed the sacrament of Reconciliation with God brings about a true "spiritual resurrection," restoration of the dignity and blessings of the life of the children of God, of which the most precious is friendship with God (see Lk. 15:32).

This sacrament *reconciles us with the Church*. Sin damages or even breaks fraternal communion. The sacrament of Penance repairs or restores it. In this sense it does not simply heal the one restored to ecclesial communion, but has also a revitalizing effect on the life of the Church which suffered from the sin of one of her members. Re-established or strengthened in the communion of saints, the sinner is made stronger by the exchange of spiritual goods among all the living members of the Body of Christ, whether still on pilgrimage or already in the heavenly homeland.⁶³

THE SACRAMENT OF THE ANOINTING OF THE SICK

Liturgical actions are not private actions, but celebrations of the Church, affirms the Second Vatican Council in its document on the liturgy. This is why the council recommends,

⁶³ *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 1468-1469; cf. *Lumen Gentium*, 48-50.

whenever possible, a preference for ‘communal celebration involving the presence and active participation of the faithful’ rather than a ‘celebration that is individual and quasi-private’.⁶⁴

This is particularly opportune in the case of the sick, because their life situation threatens to cut them off from the community altogether. The new ritual for the ‘sacraments for the sick’ called for by the Second Vatican Council is inspired precisely by this idea.⁶⁵

THE COMMUNION OF THE SICK

To bring communion to the sick is one of the most profound ways to show them that they are genuinely considered members of the community. According to the ancient tradition of the church, all Christians must make this their concern.

Such is the origin, in fact the primary reason, that a portion of the Eucharist is reserved at the end of Mass. Rome’s *Instruction on Worship of the Eucharistic Mystery* recalls this.⁶⁶

In many parishes we see the following attempts to implement this ritual:

- Teams of laity formed specifically to carry out this ministry: mainly the visitation of the sick, but also, having spoken with the priest, they can be deputized to offer communion. In this way they can regularly bring the Eucharist to the ones they visit, as was done in the first centuries.
- In order to give tangible expression to the direct relationship between the communion taken to the sick and the Eucharistic celebration, those who bring communion to the sick receive the requisite hosts during the Sunday Mass in the presence of the whole assembly. They approach the altar for this purpose before or after the communion of the faithful. The celebrant gives them the holy Sacrament, using a formula such as, “Go assist our sick brothers in their participation in the Eucharist that we have celebrated.”
- Those who are sick, who will participate in the Eucharistic celebration by receiving communion in their homes, are included in the prayers of the faithful, or the Eucharistic prayer. In this way the community is made aware of the presence of those who are unable to attend Mass.
- In the same way, when giving the Eucharist to the sick, we read to them the Gospel that was read at Mass. We can also give them news of the community, and when possible, bring them the parish bulletin.⁶⁷

⁶⁴ *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, 27.

⁶⁵ Béguerie and Duchesneau, op. cit., p. 206-209.

⁶⁶ *Eucharisticum Mysterium* (Rome, 1967), n°. 49.

⁶⁷ Béguerie and Duchesneau, op. cit., p. 207.

THE SACRAMENT OF ANOINTING

All too often we hesitate to ask a member of our family to receive the anointing of the sick. We are afraid that such a request will cause them psychological shock, that it will diminish their determination to struggle against their sickness, or that it may obscure their last moments of lucidity. We wait, therefore, for them to lose consciousness before calling a priest.

In responding to this situation, the new rite proposes several pastoral initiatives:

Great care and concern should be taken to see that those of the faithful whose health is seriously impaired by sickness or old age receive this sacrament.⁶⁸

A prudent or reasonably sure judgment, without scruple, is sufficient for deciding on the seriousness of an illness.⁶⁹

In public and private catechesis, the faithful should be educated to ask for the sacrament of anointing and, as soon as the right time comes, to receive it with full faith and devotion. They should not follow the wrongful practice of delaying the reception of the sacrament. All who care for the sick should be taught the meaning and purpose of the sacrament.⁷⁰

The sacrament may be repeated if the sick person recovers after being anointed and then again falls ill or if during the same illness the person's condition becomes more serious.⁷¹

A sick person may be anointed before surgery whenever a serious illness is the reason for the surgery.⁷²

Elderly people may be anointed if they have become notably weakened even though no serious illness is present.⁷³

The sacrament of anointing is to be conferred on sick people who, although they have lost consciousness or the use of reason, would, as Christian believers, have at least implicitly asked for it when they were in control of their faculties.⁷⁴

The celebration of the anointing of the sick or of the Eucharist at the center of the assembly is of great importance: it manifests a solidarity between the healthy and the sick; it is lived in a festive, fraternal atmosphere, especially where it is prepared in common; it nourishes the faith and the hope of the participants and strengthens their endeavors; it shows the sacraments to be signs of the covenant between God and His people.

⁶⁸ *Pastoral Care of the Sick: Rites of Anointing and Viaticum*, 8.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.* Note: In most cases, the sick person is expected to speak with the priest whenever his health, either by sickness or old age, causes him sufficient difficulty that he needs new strength to keep going.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 13.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, p. 9.

⁷² *Ibid.*, p. 10.

⁷³ *Ibid.*, p. 11.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 14.

We must first rediscover the name by which the ancient tradition of the Church knew this sacrament. We have had the habit since the Middle Ages of calling it 'last rites' [extreme unction], giving the impression that it is administered only when the recipient is near death. Now, however, we speak of the sacrament of "anointing" or "the anointing of the sick."

Further, we are asked to celebrate this sacrament at any time that the sick person faces an ordeal that demands courage and lucidity. It can also be given to those who have been forced to substantially adjust their ways of living due to old age.

Thus the reception of this sacrament is not necessarily an indication of the immediate approach of death. It is even envisioned that it could be received many times in the course of a long sickness, or when, after recovering, a person is stricken again by sickness.

Finally the council has asked that this sacrament, like all the others, be celebrated in a way that is more communal. In many parishes this sort of a celebration occurs each year. Participants can prepare themselves through a time of self-reflection and prayer, including a short recollection in which the entire community can participate.

This communal celebration has a double advantage. First, it allows the whole community to discover more fully the rich meaning of the sacrament. Secondly, it helps to change the old mentality and the trepidation that is often associated with this sacrament.

It is difficult to change old ways of thinking. In the case of the sacrament of anointing, the difficulty comes just as much from the sick person as from those surrounding him. The Church can contribute significantly to helping change the way people think about this sacrament by opting for a communal celebration.⁷⁵

VIATICUM

A 'viaticum', by definition, is a provision given to someone to help them reach the end of a long journey. In the Middle Ages, it was money given to religious men or women to help them with expenditures incurred from moving from one abbey to another. This is the origin of the custom of saying, when one takes communion to the dying, that they are going to receive the Eucharist 'viaticum'. The image is beautiful: death is not the end of life, but a departure for a journey.

We have all had the experience of a departure. It is meaningless to the one who is left behind, because he only experiences separation. But for the one who goes, even though he also experiences separation and uprooting, for him the departure takes on profound, positive meaning, because it opens up a path, a direction.

Look at our life. Each time that we do something important, it is necessary to 'depart'. To marry is to 'depart'; to take a job is to 'depart'; each major decision is like a new departure. Whoever is afraid to depart has never done anything of value. It is necessary to have had

⁷⁵ Béguerie and Duchesneau, op. cit., p. 208.

many occasions of departure in order to understand, finally, that all departures open up new paths.

If it is true that our departures find their significance in the Lord's Paschal mystery, if each one of our departures manifests the truth of the law of the grain of wheat, then we must be ready to welcome the departure of *death*. Despite its apparent absurdity, death, too, is like a departure or a new path. This does not take away its agony or its suffering, but it does allow us to catch sight of its true significance.

The Church, the Body of Christ, has collectively gathered together the experience of all her members who, throughout the centuries, have lived the mystery of death. She announces and welcomes in each one the Paschal mystery of the Lord.

She does this by the Viaticum, which is a special participation in this Paschal mystery given in the Eucharist:

- When is man closer to the memorial of the Passion than at the hour of his agony?
- When are we closer to Holy Thursday than at the hour of our own personal Good Friday?
- When is the presence of the Risen One more necessary than on our road to the place which leads into darkness?
- When do we prophesy best the story of the faith than at the moment when we begin our last struggle?⁷⁶

QUESTIONS FOR FURTHER REFLECTION ON THE SACRAMENTS OF HEALING:

1. What aspects of this presentation on the sacrament of reconciliation strike you as the most interesting and most enriching?
2. How can Christian communities live and help others live the sacrament of the anointing of the sick in a manner more 'full of life'?

⁷⁶ Ibid., p. 209.

TABLE 7: A BRIEF PRESENTATION ON THE SACRAMENTS TODAY (CONTINUED)

THE SACRAMENTS IN THE SERVICE OF COMMUNION AND MISSION TODAY

THE SACRAMENT OF HOLY ORDERS

Today the Church is living in the midst of a great renewal of its ministries. While some Christians fear that the new responsibilities entrusted to the laity will diminish the significance of the priest, this fear is unfounded. On the contrary, in the communities where tasks previously reserved to the priest have been allotted to others, we find that the uniqueness of the priestly ministry is all the more illuminated.

It is normal, though, that we discover this through trial and error. In the course of history the clergy have progressively accumulated all the responsibilities of the parish. At one time the word 'cleric' was synonymous with an educated person, and for this reason, it was an understandable habit to entrust the major part of ecclesial responsibility to the clergy. A new coordination of the various ministries in the parish can only be done with great sensitivity to the pace of change and the needs of the community.

The Second Vatican Council has revitalized an expansion of the life of Christian communities, and a document from Rome on August 15, 1972 (i.e., the *Motu proprio Ministeria quaedam*) established the following distinctions⁷⁷:

There are **ordained ministers**: this includes bishops, priests and deacons. These orders are conferred by the imposition of the hands of the bishop during a sacramental celebration.

Today the Catholic Church is undergoing a renewal of the diaconate. The office of deacon is no longer a mere stepping stone to the priesthood. We have renewed the ancient tradition of the Church by ordaining *permanent* deacons, that is to say, men who, while still maintaining their job and their place in society, are nonetheless ordered in a particular and permanent way to the service of the community. It is certainly too early to give this ministry any definitive assessment. The instruction has been given, but the framework will be supplied in the course of time.

Regarding the diaconate, we reference first the passage in the Acts of the Apostles that recounts the institution of the Seven (Acts 6:1-6). The 'service at the table' which is entrusted to them may be interpreted in different ways:

- First, there is the straightforward service in connection with the meal, which may be understood as including everything involved in mutual aid, works of charity and the distribution of alms to the poor.
- But 'table' (Greek *trapeza*) can also mean the money-changing table at the bank (Matt. 21:72; Mk. 11:15; Jn. 2:15), which suggests that deacons can be

⁷⁷ Philippe Béguerie and Claude Duchesneau. *Pour vivre les sacrements* [To Live the Sacraments]. (Paris: du Cerf, 1989), 2nd ed., p. 145.

administrators of the financial affairs of the Church. In Rome they served as the bishop's administrative assistants. Hippolytus of Rome wrote in the 3rd century: "The deacon is ordained for service to the bishop . . . he carries out his ministry and keeps the bishop informed about whatever is necessary."

- The "Table," in the Jewish tradition, is also where the priests placed the 'Bread of Presentation', the offerings of the faithful in the Temple of Jerusalem (Heb. 9:2). We can understand this as anticipating the deacon's role in the Eucharistic celebration.

There are also **instituted ministers**: these are ongoing ministries. The institution, which is conferred in the course of a proper liturgical celebration, establishes the Christian in an ongoing role. The Roman document envisions two ministries in particular:

- The 'service of the Word', understood as a catechetical mandate to prepare the faithful for the reception of the sacraments;
- The 'service of the communal prayer and the Eucharist', understood as a particular responsibility for the Sunday assembly and for the service of communion to the sick.
- But it is clearly indicated that episcopal conferences can foresee other instituted ministries, for example the catechist, who might be responsible for a small ecclesial community in certain countries.

There are also more temporary ministers, commissioned for a time; they might carry out different services necessary for the life and activities of the community. The *General Instruction of the Roman Missal* speaks explicitly of those who are associated with the liturgical celebration, in particular of the lector and the extraordinary ministers of Holy Communion. These are formally instituted by the community's pastor.

It is too early to make a complete assessment and to form a comprehensive vision of all the different ministries that might be occurring in the Church today. We can only bring attention to some situations.⁷⁸

In his letter to the Latin American episcopate, Cardinal Villot declared in 1977: "The discovery and actualization of new forms of ministers who embrace liturgical life and other aspects of the human and religious life in communities . . . is one of the goals that must be intensely pursued in the Latin American church. These lay ministers who in the past were devoted almost exclusively to the life of prayer of the community . . . find themselves faced today with a field of action much larger, especially in the liturgy. It is necessary to adequately train those who are so engaged; they are a gift of the Spirit and the hope for the future of ecclesial communities."

The evolution is not over. It is a sign of the times that the topic of 'ministries' is frequently on the agenda of diocesan synods in numerous regions. The points of interest are as follows:

⁷⁸ Ibid., p. 146.

The re-appreciation of baptism

The impetus of the council also includes a new re-appreciation of the responsibility each Christian receives as a result of his baptism. Baptism makes him a member of the Body of Christ. The Spirit distributes His gifts to each believer with a view to the common good. Christians therefore find themselves acting in solidarity, and the full significance of their gifts is bound up in the entirety of the body.⁷⁹

Building the Church

St. Paul, when he speaks of ministers in his great text of the epistle to the Ephesians, refers to the entire body which, "joined and knit together by every joint with which it is supplied, when each part is working properly, makes bodily growth and upbuilds itself in love" (Eph. 4:16).

Since the entire body acts in coordination, it makes no sense to put the priesthood and the laity in opposition to each other. Rather, we must see them as complementary, bringing each ministry together to work in coordination for the whole group. It is false to imagine that the laity live 'in the world' while the priests alone are charged with the ecclesial community. It is the Church in its entirety, priests and laity, under the guidance of the Spirit, who must live like the Body of Christ to continue the mission of her Lord.

Since it is the entire body that is engaged in this, the community must stand in solidarity with those among her ranks who carry out a particular ministry. These persons make visible and operational what is in the interest of all. Some are charged with catechesis, true, but it is everyone together who have a responsibility to transmit the faith. Some have the role of supporting others, yes, but they do it in the name of all. Others supervise the overall coordination, yes, but the care of the community falls to all.

The whole Church is a priestly people. Through Baptism all the faithful share in the priesthood of Christ. This participation is called the "common priesthood of the faithful." Based on this common priesthood and ordered to its service, there exists another participation in the mission of Christ: the ministry conferred by the sacrament of Holy Orders, where the task is to serve in the name and in the person of Christ the Head in the midst of the community.

The ministerial priesthood differs in essence from the common priesthood of the faithful because it confers a sacred power for the service of the faithful. The ordained ministers exercise their service for the People of God by teaching (*munus docendi*), divine worship (*munus liturgicum*) and pastoral governance (*munus regendi*).⁸⁰

⁷⁹ Ibid., p. 147.

⁸⁰ *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 1591-1592.

One Mission Only

“I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly,” says the Lord (Jn. 10:10). The Church has no other reason for existing other than to carry on the mission of Jesus Christ. Any reflection on the ministries of the Church must take as its starting point this mission. Yet this mission is vast in scope. We understand immediately that this mission summons *all* Christians to contribute in some way as ministers.

In order for the Church to accomplish this mission in its fullness, it is necessary to distribute the necessary tasks within the Church. In view of this mission, we cannot act in rivalry or competition with one another: rather, we must coordinate all our activities. Priests and laity together give a joint witness to Jesus Christ before the world. Together they have the task of announcing the Gospel. Together they represent communities that are places where the Spirit is welcomed among all those who wish to live in the light of the Word of God. Together they lift the world toward God in praise and Eucharistic worship.

New tasks can emerge, new ministries can be conceived. In our days we have seen a host of new initiatives in the development of health care in third world countries. Similarly, we also see in our regions, as elsewhere, the emergence of *Sunday assemblies in the absence of a priest*. Here, Christians must take responsibility for roles which have never been theirs in the past.

These Sunday assemblies in the absence of a priest represent a particularly delicate case. On the one hand, we rejoice in the dynamism which allows communities to respond to this need. We must, on the other hand, recognize that we are dealing with a situation that is *theologically abnormal*, in the precise sense of that term. It is not *normal* that the Eucharistic celebration cannot be found regularly at the center of the life of the community. It is a limited case, even if it is rather common, especially in young churches where there are not many priests, such as Latin America or Africa. It raises serious questions of the entire ecclesial community. We pray that the Spirit will awaken in our Church sufficient young people to give a truly faithful solution to this problem.

For new needs, new ministries? Yes, but only on the condition that the relationship is respected between the two commitments we have. Commitment to the Church, her vocation, and her very being: is she not the Body of Christ sent, like her Lord, to the world? Commitment to the world and to history: Jesus Christ the Word was Incarnated in the village of Nazareth in Judea, yet the Incarnation is an ongoing, unceasing reality. The Church is confronted with the problem of ‘inculturation’ with regard to the human sectors, geographical or cultural, that she still has not reached. Only in fidelity to both of these commitments can the Church unceasingly grow and renew her way of being and acting.⁸¹

⁸¹ Béguerie and Duchesneau, op. cit., p. 149.

QUESTIONS FOR FURTHER REFLECTION ON THE SACRAMENTS AND COMMUNION:

1. What elements from this reflection on the theology of the sacrament of holy orders could help us to encourage young men to consecrate their lives as priests?
2. How can we become more of a Church of communion?

TABLE 8: BRIEF PRESENTATION ON THE SACRAMENTS TODAY (CONTINUED)

THE SACRAMENTS IN THE SERVICE OF COMMUNION AND MISSION TODAY

THE SACRAMENT OF MATRIMONY

The theology of the sacrament of matrimony

We can readily note that marriage, this ancient institution which was universal and unquestioned for the past fifty years, is in quite a sad state today. Nevertheless, there is still interest in an idealized romantic relationship, and we see many young people around us who still have an elevated view of such a romantic relationship. It is the *institution*, civil or religious, that is rejected, or at least called into question. People wonder why romantic love, which is so intimate to each individual, has to submit to laws and rules.

This chapter will not attempt a sociological study or a rallying cry in defense of marriage. It will also not attempt to present the entire doctrine of the Church or her legislation, however well-founded this may be. Numerous works already exist on this subject. We mention once again one that has appeared in the same collection we have been using: Jean-Pierre Bagoa, *To Live Marriage* (Cerf, 1986).

The Church did not invent marriage. It pre-existed the Church, and the first Christians entered marriages in much the same way as their neighbors, without expressing any need for a special religious ceremony. Nevertheless, marriage was considered important in the Christian community since the beginning. After all, St. Paul can affirm: “*husbands, love your wives as Christ loved the Church*” (Eph. 5:25).⁸²

Marriage was always truly ‘a reality of human life’, and it is easy to see why it has secured a place among the signs of the Kingdom.

To begin life as a couple marks an important step in the development of one’s personality. A man and woman change their entire way of being, and their relationship to all those around them. Early on, children live in the domestic sphere, where each one accepts his place. Later on as adolescents, they win the right to express their own identity, sometimes with difficulty or pain. But eventually it becomes necessary for them to live life as adults: now, those who have received everything from others must take their turn to be sources of new life. They are no longer solitary beings. They appear together, as a couple, before their families and their circle of friends.

Solitude is a fundamental human condition. It cannot simply be denied: it can only be transformed; and it can only be transformed by being accepted and endured. As paradoxical it may seem, solitude is a prerequisite for communion. One must first be by oneself, faced with one’s own personality, in order to enter into a relationship with another. Dare we

⁸² Philippe Béguerie and Claude Duchesneau. *Pour vivre les sacrements* [*To Live the Sacraments*]. (Paris: du Cerf, 1989), 2nd ed., p. 185.

assert that life as a couple is the crucible where solitude finally becomes enriched, transforming itself into something capable of communion?

The Bible presents it exactly in this way. It shows us 'Man' from his very beginning scouring the universe for a fit companion for himself. The Bible recounts his joy when he finds 'the flesh of his flesh' (Gen. 2:23). The Bible sings of the consuming love between two hearts:

My beloved is mine
And I am his . . .
Love is strong as death,
jealousy is cruel as the grave.
Its flashes are flashes of fire,
a most vehement flame.
Many waters cannot quench love
Neither can floods drown it (Ct. 2:16; 8:6-7).

But the Word of God is even bolder than this. It takes these words of passion that burn in the heart of lovers and uses them to explain the marvelous love that unites God to His people.⁸³

HUMAN LOVE, THE FACE OF GOD

We have already spoken of how difficult it is to speak of God, the risk we run in trying to capture Him in our words; whenever we try to speak of God in such abstract and surreal language, we naturally fear that we are not speaking of Him at all. Oh, if only God were not merely the one we were *speaking* of, but the one we *lived with*, or even more, the one who brings us to life! God is present in our daily lives, yes, without a doubt. But He remains nevertheless a *hidden God*, a *mysterious God*, whose face is difficult to discern.

And it is exactly here where we discover sacramental reality. The mystery of man is exactly what leads to the mystery of God. And this mystery which leads to God is nothing more than our daily life, but only when this is lived in its fullness, becoming thereby a witness of the invisible.

What is as common, and at the same time so utterly mysterious, as the encounter of two persons who love each other, know each other, and unceasingly seek to discover each other? Here is daily life in all of its poetry, in its richness, and its monotony; here daily life becomes the mirror of the infinite.⁸⁴

From the first page of the Bible, the encounter of man and woman is presented as the place where the invisible is revealed. God Himself wished to imprint His face on the human couple, who appear on the sixth day as the summit of creation:

Then God said,

⁸³ *Ibid.*, p. 186.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 187.

“Let us make man in our image,
after our likeness”
So God created man in his own image,
in the image of God he created him;
male and female he created them (Gen. 1:26, 27).

If man and woman in their life as a couple are truly able to become the image of God, then they are a marvelous fulfillment of the definition of a sacrament, “a human reality that realizes and manifests an intervention of God in our world.”⁸⁵

And among all the sacraments, matrimony is the one where we see most clearly that human reality is inseparable from sacramental reality.

Already the prophet Micah proclaimed that the true act of worship is not found in the sacrificial offering of goods outside of ourselves, but in the daily accomplishment of what is right, in a way of living with humility, and . . . tenderness!:

“With what shall I come before the LORD,
and bow myself before God on high?
Shall I come before him with burnt offerings,
with calves a year old?
Will the LORD be pleased with thousands of rams,
with ten thousands of rivers of oil?
Shall I give my first-born for my transgression,
the fruit of my body for the sin of my soul?”
He has showed you, O man, what is good;
and what does the LORD require of you
but to do justice, and to love kindness,
and to walk humbly with your God? (Mic. 6:6-8)

Love and Covenant

We seem to be caught between two expressions. Is matrimony a sacrament of love or a sacrament of the covenant? We might imagine that these expressions are equivalent, but this is not entirely the case.

The meaning of the word ‘love’ is difficult to express. It is sometimes used as an all-encompassing word that includes a dizzying variety of ideas. There is passionate love and romantic love, there is ‘love of women’, and ‘love of neighbor’. We speak of ‘making love’ and ‘dying of love’ . . . How can we ever define this word?

The rich biblical tradition gives the word ‘love’ a meaning which is linked to the fulfillment of the covenant. To discover the covenant, then, is to discover the meaning of the word ‘love’.

⁸⁵ Ibid., p. 71.

In our age we see many young people who love each other and live together for many years, yet who one day finally take the step of getting married. This shows that the concept of 'marriage' is something quite different than a mere amorous relationship: it is something more. In this way the couple is discovering the reality of covenant.

To say 'covenant' instead of 'love' not only clarifies the meaning of the latter term, but it also articulates the fact that the couple has entered into a living reality which is greater than themselves, a reality which serves as a witness to their entire group of relatives and friends.

If matrimony were only a sacrament of love, we could imagine that the sacrament ceases when love disappears. But things are not so simple. There are days when love is veiled and shrouded, but nevertheless the faithfulness of the covenant loses none of its significance. In a larger sense, have there not always been in the world two kinds of civilizations: those where we marry because we love, and those where we love because we marry? It is hard to say which of these assures the greatest happiness!⁸⁶

What does 'covenant' mean?

The theme of 'covenant' is so constant and pervasive throughout the Old Testament that it is difficult to select the most significant texts. It would be necessary, indeed, to re-read the entire Bible. The covenant was lived for long centuries before it was ever analyzed as a theological concept. It is the same with the human couple: the theory never does full justice to the reality which is lived year after year.

Which text should we choose to illustrate the meaning of covenant? Those that reflect joy or suffering, difficulties or tenderness, estrangement or reconciliation? All these, certainly, and there are no shortage of them.

In every covenant there are two parties, and this is obviously true of marriage. One of the most daring proposals of the biblical tradition is to envision that such a relationship exists between God and man. How is this possible? Two concepts stand out as particularly important: faithfulness and reciprocity, and it seems best to underscore these two.

Faithfulness

In His covenant with his people, God takes the lead, the initiative, in faithfulness. The central meaning to all covenant reality, then, becomes the summons to reciprocity, as all the prophets unceasingly call the people of God to live out this same faithfulness.

And it is exactly here that we discover the reality of forgiveness. For it will not take long in a covenant before one of the parties will have to release the other from the mistakes of the past, a past which has become a burden too heavy to carry. To the gift of covenant must be added the gift of forgiveness, and it must be unceasingly renewed. The God of the covenant must also become the God of forgiveness.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 188.

The covenant of man and woman, too, is a fragile one, and since the human couple is meant to be the image and likeness of God, they too are called to live in faithfulness.

It is not too much to say that marriage, in its evangelical aim of absolute faithfulness, is 'foolishness'. Without doubt, it is neither more nor less so than the life of celibacy for the Kingdom.

The deepest reason is found in the fidelity of God to his covenant, in that of Christ to his Church. Through the sacrament of Matrimony the spouses are enabled to represent this fidelity and witness to it. Through the sacrament, the indissolubility of marriage receives a new and deeper meaning.

It can seem difficult, even impossible, to bind oneself for life to another human being. This makes it all the more important to proclaim the Good News that God loves us with a definitive and irrevocable love, that married couples share in this love, that it supports and sustains them, and that by their own faithfulness they can be witnesses to God's faithful love. Spouses who with God's grace give this witness, often in very difficult conditions, deserve the gratitude and support of the ecclesial community.⁸⁷

The Apostles understood this well. In the Gospel of Matthew, when Jesus affirms that a man is not permitted to divorce his wife, they immediately respond: 'If such is the case of a man with his wife, it is not expedient to marry!' And Jesus responds by putting marriage and celibacy on a common plane, affirming: "Not all men can receive this saying, but only those to whom it has been given" (Mt. 19:10-11).

In marriage, even more than in other domains of life, faithfulness and forgiveness are always linked. Both have the same source. When one spouse pardons the other, it is because he remains with her, so that tomorrow might be different than today. It does not mean forgetting the past; instead, it is a matter of not retaining bitterness about it. But there is even more than this: to forgive as God forgives is to love the other so much as to want to keep building a future together.

This is why the human couple, just like the entire family unit, is the sphere where we can see played out, and come to understand, all the difficulties and the rewards of forgiveness. And this, too, reveals to us the face of God.⁸⁸

Reciprocity

It seems shocking that reciprocity could be envisioned between God and His people. Is there not too great a disparity between the two parties? Is God not simply the 'Master' who commands, and we those who obey? How could He therefore become a reciprocal partner?

⁸⁷ *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 1647-1648.

⁸⁸ Béguerie and Duchesneau, op. cit., p. 189.

A RECIPROCAL JOY

I will greatly rejoice in the LORD,
my soul shall exult in my God;
for he has clothed me with the garments of salvation,
he has covered me with the robe of righteousness,
as a bridegroom decks himself with a garland,
and as a bride adorns herself with her jewels.
For as the earth brings forth its shoots,
and as a garden causes what is sown in it to spring up,
so the Lord GOD will cause righteousness and praise
to spring forth before all the nations
You shall no more be termed Forsaken,
and your land shall no more be termed Desolate;
but you shall be called My delight is in her,
and your land Married;
for the LORD delights in you,
and your land shall be married.
For as a young man marries a virgin,
so shall your sons marry you,
and as the bridegroom rejoices over the bride,
so shall your God rejoice over you (Is. 61:10-11, 62:4-5).

In many civilizations the husband, as head of the family, is something like a god in the midst of his family; it should therefore not shock us that we rarely find human societies where man and woman have equal roles. And the man is rarely prepared to abandon his prerogatives and privileges. In many places marriage is understood as a contract that the man enters into to advance his life goals.

Is it surprising that St. Paul, often misconstrued as a misogynist, was the first one to pose in systematic terms the idea of equality of rights in marriage? For it was he who affirmed that “each man should have his own wife and each woman her own husband. The husband should give to his wife her conjugal rights, and likewise the wife to her husband. For the wife does not rule over her own body, but the husband does; likewise the husband does not rule over his own body, but the wife does” (1 Cor. 7:2-4).

In the slow evolution of humanity, the human couple are likely only at the beginning of their path. And as the Gospel enters into a dialogue with each one of us, the changes brought about in history become enriched, places where the truth is discovered. Isn't it precisely this that summons all men to give witness to the God of faithfulness and reciprocity?⁸⁹

⁸⁹ Ibid., p. 190.

CHRIST AND THE CHURCH

Therefore be imitators of God, as beloved children. And walk in love, as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us, a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God

Husbands, love your wives, as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her, that he might sanctify her, having cleansed her by the washing of water with the word, that he might present the church to himself in splendor, without spot or wrinkle or any such thing, that she might be holy and without blemish. Even so husbands should love their wives as their own bodies. He who loves his wife loves himself. For no man ever hates his own flesh, but nourishes and cherishes it, as Christ does the church, because we are members of his body. "For this reason a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh." This mystery is a profound one, and I am saying that it refers to Christ and the church" (Eph. 5:1-2, 25-32).

Paul concludes his discussion of the union of a man and his wife by noting, "This mystery is a profound one, and I am saying that it refers to Christ and the church" (Eph. 5:32). By speaking in this way, Paul shows his willingness to consider matrimony one of the sacraments, even before that precise term existed.

As in all the sacraments, there is a dynamic interaction between the two realities: the human reality manifests to us God's relationship to man, and our new understanding of God enriches our understanding of the human reality. How could we possibly understand the relationship between Christ and His Church if the union of man and woman had not revealed it to us? Inversely, when we contemplate the gift Christ makes of Himself to His church, we understand both the riches of marriage, and the demands which it makes upon us.⁹⁰

MARRIAGE AND CELIBACY

Man is a social creature, and he cannot become himself except in relation to others. If he refuses this relationship, he harms his own nature. If we imagine that human relationships can be sustained in frigidity, with each being 'standoffish' and refusing to engage the other, we court disaster. Here, as in other areas, the saying from the Gospel applies: "For whoever would save his life will lose it, and whoever loses his life for my sake will find it" (Mt. 16:25).

But, of course, not everyone gets married. There are multiple reasons for this, and Jesus knew this well: "For there are eunuchs who have been so from birth, and there are eunuchs who have been made eunuchs by men, and there are eunuchs who have made themselves eunuchs for the sake of the kingdom of heaven. He who is able to receive this, let him

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 191.

receive it" (Mt. 19:12). To abstain from marriage is not necessarily to refuse all relationship. In a culture like ours, where the number of single people is considerable, the single life is often a call to make a gift of oneself.

In certain periods of church history, religious consecration was considered a sacrament, and not without reason. Marriage and celibacy are two ways to live out the covenant: both can be sacraments of the covenant.

Marriage and celibacy are complementary. We cannot exalt one at the expense of the other, or degrade one in order to elevate the other. Some people, under the pretext of a profound spirituality, demote marriage into the position of second place after religious consecration. Others, on the opposite extreme, exalt marriage to such an extent that they consider celibacy unnatural, an abnormality.

The truth is, we have two complementary ways of living in the world, which must mutually enrich each another:

- both can be ways of giving oneself completely;
- both can be a source of fruitfulness;
- both demand a similar level of faithfulness;
- both know joy and suffering, success and failure;

When we choose one, we enter unconsciously into a relationship with the other. One is not more difficult than the other, since living in truth is not easy for anyone.

An accepted celibacy.

But the truth of the covenant is not reserved only to those who have chosen celibacy through a religious vocation. There are other single persons, both men and women, who are also genuine witnesses of the covenant. Perhaps they did not choose their state, which is often the result of various circumstances and diverse factors. Many have the desire and the hope to one day have their own families, while others are confirmed in the single life. Faithfulness, fruitfulness, reciprocity and the gift of self are not excluded from their lives.

We see a 'relation' to others and a rich life of service to others carried out by many single people. They live the Paschal mystery and thus enter into the mystery of the covenant. We ourselves can witness, and they also can witness, the richness that God has put into their hands.

Failure in marriage

Marriage can subsist even in tragic situations which end in the failure of the relationship between the couple. Should we conclude, then, that in these situations the sacrament has dissolved? Far from it. It is no use at all to ascertain which of the two is to blame for what has happened in the past. We must live in the present situation, and we must live it even more in faith and in the light of the Word of God. Even through His very Passion, Jesus gave

witness to life. In the same way, even in the midst of their suffering and their failure, separated spouses can still give witness to the truth of the covenantal God.

All Christian traditions agree that the *ideal* pattern of marriage is the persistent faithful union of the couple. The Gospel calls us precisely to this – it calls us, indeed, without a shred of ambiguity. But many of our contemporaries view the discipline of the Catholic Church with regard to the divorced and remarried as too rigid, too severe. The Church maintains the principle of the absolute indissolubility of marriage precisely in order to give witness to the grandeur of the sacrament.

The Orthodox Churches, along with the ecclesial communities which have come out of the Protestant Reformation, exercise what they call the ‘principle of mercy’ towards the divorced, which in certain cases results in the authorization of a remarriage. The framework of this chapter does not allow us to treat this problem with adequate nuance. The reader may address the book *To Live Marriage* (Cerf, 1986) for further detail.

We can nevertheless affirm, however, that the divorced and remarried retain a place in the Christian community. Although the discipline of the Church does not allow them to participate fully in Eucharistic communion, they can still be part of the communion of the Church. They can join their brothers and sisters in the liturgical assembly, and can be nourished along with them by the Word of God. For this reason, we should not describe those in this situation as ‘excommunicated’, which would be utterly inappropriate in their situation.

Today, preparation for marriage is most often done in the context of meetings with the priest, along with meetings with other couples, meetings run by a team of Christians who have volunteered to carry out this service to the community.

Frequently these meetings are places of fruitful exchanges between couples, and allow couples to receive answers to many questions that they have. These meetings engage the entire complex of human reality: the relations of a man and his wife, their psychological differences, the question of children, conjugal difficulties, as well as the contents of the faith, the explanation of the Church’s teaching on marriage.

This time of preparation can be, for many couples, an occasion to discover a little-known face of the Church; for this reason, these meetings should be a place where people can speak seriously to each other about questions of importance – any and all questions that might be involved in life as a couple.

Meetings with a priest involve more specific forms of preparation. Passages of God’s Word are chosen, passages that will be at the heart of the celebration. The texts are read, listened to, responded to. Is this not exactly what happened between Jesus and His disciples on the road to Emmaus, when they recognized His presence on the road?

The priest is there to guarantee freedom, not only the kind of freedom from various kinds of external pressures, but also the kind of freedom that ensures that the future act of marriage is carried out with a clear conscience.⁹¹

THE FAITH OF THE MARRIED COUPLE

Those who request to be married in the Church are often non-practicing Christians. Some of them have trouble identifying their own stance in regards to the Catholic faith. This should not shock us. The last decades have brought, for many young people, a significant rupture from previous generations. Much of the language of the Church has become strange to them, and they have great difficulty figuring out how to respond to it.

All the sacraments are sacraments of faith. The priest is always at their service, to ensure that they are lived in all of their truth. But he is also at the service of the espoused couple, to ensure that they stay true to the path that they have undertaken. We should not be surprised that the attitude of the Church is, at one and the same time, an attitude which welcomes with open arms, and an attitude which demands a particular response.

In summary:

The sacrament of Matrimony signifies the union of Christ and the Church. It gives spouses the grace to love each other with the love with which Christ has loved his Church; the grace of the sacrament thus perfects the human love of the spouses, strengthens their indissoluble unity, and sanctifies them on the way to eternal life.⁹²

QUESTIONS FOR FURTHER REFLECTION ON THE SACRAMENTS OF COMMUNION:

1. In what way can we understand that consecrated human love in marriage shows us the face of God?
2. What do you think of the distinction made above between marriage as a sacrament of love and marriage as a sacrament of the covenant?
3. How can what we have just learned about the sacrament of marriage open to us new approaches to marriage that speak more to couples of today?

⁹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 196.

⁹² *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 1661.

CONCLUSION:

JESUS, WORD OF GOD

“In many and various ways God spoke of old to our fathers by the prophets; but in these last days he has spoken to us by a Son, whom he appointed the heir of all things, through whom also he created the world” (Heb. 1:1-2).

Jesus is the living Word. He is neither a preacher nor a teacher: He speaks through *His life*. His words are also His actions, His words are a place of encounter. And the one with whom He speaks, whether it is a disciple or an adversary, whether a solitary interlocutor or a pressing crowd, whether an outcast or a representative of the people, whether a scribe or a high priest, whether a centurion or a Roman procurator, each knows that he is also *known*. The word of Jesus both announces the faith and *is itself* the gift of faith.

His Word is both forgiveness and announcement. It insinuates itself in the lives of all persons. His Word gives the sign, and man is raised up. The Word of Jesus is living because it is the encounter with man at the heart of his life. And His Word is submission to the Other, a revelation of the Other whom He calls His Father. Jesus *is* the Word of the Father.⁹³

WORD AND SACRAMENT

The Word of Jesus is not cut short on the tragic eve of Good Friday. On Easter morning, Jesus is still there in the midst of His own. He gives them His Spirit and His ever-living Word.

The first Christian communities did not have the audacity to speak in their own name. After having received the Holy Spirit on the day of Pentecost, when Peter and John healed the lame man at the ‘Beautiful Gate’, they did it in the name of Jesus Christ (see Acts 3:1-10). It is in His name that we forgive and baptize, in His name that we share the bread, in His name we pray and anoint the sick brother with oil.

Thus are born the sacraments of the Church through the movement of the Spirit. They are the living presence of the Risen Lord. They are a ‘memorial’ of His word and of His gestures. They continue to be, in our time, the living encounter of God with man through Jesus Christ His Son.

The sacraments are life in the Spirit. They are a dialogue where we discover Jesus of Nazareth as the one who calls us, the one who approaches us to meet us in our existence and in all the realities of our life, the most intimate and also the most mundane. They do not exhaust our dialogue with God, but they encompass essential elements of it.

God speaks in the sacrament, and His Word is the invitation to who we are and what we are living. In the sacrament God Himself speaks, and His Word is efficacious.

⁹³ Philippe Béguerie and Claude Duchesneau. *Pour vivre les sacrements* [To Live the Sacraments]. (Paris: du Cerf, 1989), 2nd ed., p. 212.

God speaks and everything happens. His Word is a creative Word: the world, its constitution and those who populate it, with man as its summit – all is the fruit of ten words!

God speaks! In the silence or in the clamor of worlds, God speaks, and His Word brings things into existence.

The Word of God is the true light who, in coming into the World, enlightens all men (see Jn. 1:9) Light can be seen only when it illumines something. In the same way, the Word of God is not perceptible until it comes into contact with the events of our life. The sacrament is the place of encounter between the Word and our life.

Life can become the place of mysterious dialogue with the one who is the source of life and who can become the horizon of life. It is still necessary for us to learn the words.

As the child learns the language of his mother, we also learn the words of our faith from the long line of witnesses who have brought us the book of God's Word. These persons are the Church, and in helping us learn to speak of our faith, they bring it into being.

The sacraments are sacraments of the faith, not only because they demand that the faith be lived in truth; even further, they are also privileged moments where the faith is spoken and lived.

These are not dialogues led in solitude, but in solidarity with the believing community; they are the sacraments of the faith of the Church. It is in their faith that our faith is found.⁹⁴

To live the faith is to make of our life a place where the Kingdom comes.

To live the faith is to accept that life becomes the sacrament of salvation.

To live the faith is to live the sacraments.

⁹⁴ Ibid., p. 213.

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