

CHAPTER 1

SACRAMENTS IN SCRIPTURE

The meaning of the sacraments flows from Scripture like water flows from a spring. What happens when a river is cut off from its source? Cut off the sacraments from Scripture, and the understanding and appreciation of the sacraments dry up. Too often the sacraments are taught without any reference to their relationship with Scripture, and thus many Catholics do not have a solid understanding of what the sacraments mean. For example, most Catholics have witnessed a baptism. But few understand how the water used in Baptism relates to the Old and New Testaments. Without this understanding, the faithful are unable to open themselves up to the meaning and mysteries of the sacraments (cf. Catechism, no. 1095).

The sacraments effect grace by their very operation, which is the meaning of the Latin theological axiom, *ex opere operato*.¹ “Nevertheless, the fruits of the sacraments also depend on the disposition of the one who receives them” (Catechism, no. 1128). How can one be fully disposed to receive the grace of the sacraments if there is no understanding of what the sacrament signifies? Without an adequate biblical formation, one could view the sacraments simply as Church rituals that somehow give grace—an understanding that leads many

¹ *Ex opere operato* is a “term in sacramental theology meaning that sacraments are effective by means of the sacramental rite itself and not because of the worthiness of the minister or participant.” Fr. Peter M.J. Stravinskis, ed., *Catholic Dictionary* (Huntington, IN: Our Sunday Visitor, 1993), 205.

outside the Church to view the Catholic teaching on the sacraments as primitive ritualism or even magic.

Before I explain how Scripture sheds a floodlight upon the significance of the sacraments, it will be helpful to give a brief review of what a sacrament is. A simple definition of a sacrament is that it is an outward sign that gives grace. As Saint Thomas Aquinas wrote, “Sacraments are visible signs of invisible things whereby man is made holy.”²

A sacrament consists of two parts, matter and form. This philosophical terminology, taken up by Saint Thomas Aquinas from the Greek philosopher Aristotle, can seem a bit abstract to us, but is really quite simple. The matter relates to the physical elements of the sacrament, and the form to the words used. Both are essential. For example, Baptism consists of the matter, water, and the form, “I baptize you in the name of the Father, the Son, and Holy Spirit.” Both the water and the Trinitarian formula are required for the Sacrament of Baptism. Every sacrament has an outward sign (matter) accompanied by the words (form). Saint Augustine noted how the physical element and the word are the basis of a sacrament: “The word comes to the element and a sacrament results.”³

Sign Language

The meaning of a sacrament is tied up in the sign. To understand what the signs of the sacraments signify is the key to understanding the sacraments. What is a sign? Something that communicates something else. A natural sign is smoke. When we see smoke, we know that there must be a fire. Dark clouds are a sign of a coming storm. Flocks of birds heading south are a sign that winter is coming. We see these natural signs and they communicate something to us.

² *Summa Theologiae*, IIa IIae, q. 61, art. 4.

³ Augustine, *On the Gospel of Saint John*, 80.3; cf. Catechism, no. 1228.

It is the same with man-made signs. These signs point to something beyond themselves by convention—that is, by people investing these signs with meaning. Traffic signs are a good example of man-made signs. A red octagon standing on an eight-foot post signifies that we must stop. There is nothing about the color or shape of the sign that inherently means stop. The sign communicates to us that we should stop simply by convention; that is, the traffic laws invested the sign with a particular meaning: Red was chosen to get people’s attention, with the octagon shape for those who are color-blind. When people drive up to an intersection, they see a red stop sign but think in their minds that it *means* stop. The visible sign leads them to think of an invisible meaning. One thing is seen, another understood. A sign has tremendous power to communicate a message that transcends the sign itself.

Like natural and man-made signs, sacramental signs also communicate a message, but they do much more than that. One of the most important characteristics of a sacramental sign is that it is *efficacious*. This means that the sign effects what it signifies. In contrast, take, for example, a sign that is not efficacious. The stop sign at an intersection symbolizes that cars should stop, but it does not have the power to effect their stopping. Someone in a hurry may decide to ignore the sign and drive through the intersection. For the stop sign to be efficacious, it would not only communicate that cars should stop, but also have the power to physically make that happen. That is what is so unique about the sacraments; they have the God-given power to actually effect what they signify.

God’s Masterpieces

According to the Catechism, the Holy Spirit is the divine artisan of “God’s masterpieces,” which are the seven sacraments of the New Covenant (Catechism, no. 1091). What makes the sacraments the grand “masterpieces” of God’s work is that God

has endowed the signs of the sacraments so that they truly effect what they signify. More than just signifying faith, the sacraments cause God's grace to be made present. This is the defining characteristic of the sacraments in Catholic teaching.

It was common in scholastic language to refer to the signs given by God in both the New and Old Testaments as sacraments. For example, circumcision was a sacrament. It was a sign that expressed faith in the God of Israel. But scholastic theologians, such as Saint Thomas Aquinas, always distinguished between the sacraments of the Old Covenant from those of the New. The Old Testament sacraments were signs, but they were not efficacious. Martin Luther and other Protestant reformers denied this distinction between the Old and New Testament sacraments. Luther argued that “[i]t is wrong to hold that the sacraments of the New Law differ from those of the Old Law in point of their effective significance. Both have the same meaning.”⁴ For Luther, the signs of the New Covenant are no more effective in giving grace than those of the Old. John Calvin also rejected any notion that the sacraments of the New Covenant had any special efficacy:

The scholastic dogma (to glance at it in passing), by which the difference between the sacraments of the old and the new dispensation is made so great, that the former did nothing but shadow forth the grace of God, while the latter also confer it, must be altogether exploded. . . . The same efficacy which ours possess they experienced in theirs—viz. that they were seals of the divine favour toward them in regard to the hope of eternal salvation.⁵

⁴ Martin Luther, *Babylonian Captivity*, chap. 3, part 1, as quoted in E.L. Mascall, *The Recovery of Unity* (London: Longmans, Green and Co., 1958), 97, footnote 2.

⁵ John Calvin, *Institutes of Christian Religion*, bk. IV, chap. 14, no. 23, as quoted in E.L. Mascall, *The Recovery of Unity*, 97.

Calvin well represents the Protestant reformers' view in holding that the sacraments are simply signs of faith, signs that do not effect any grace or change in their recipients. The sacraments are celebrated in order to increase and express faith, but in his view they have no supernatural power or effect.

Sign or Sacrament?

In order to illustrate how the Old Testament signs differ from those of the New, let's look at the example of the Eucharist. At the Last Supper, Jesus inaugurated the New Covenant by saying: "This cup which is poured out for you is the new *covenant in my blood*" (Lk. 22:20). Jesus' words echo those of Moses, when the first covenant was made with Israel at Sinai: "Behold the *blood of the covenant* which the LORD has made with you in accordance with all these words" (Ex. 24:8). Many animals were sacrificed the day the Old Covenant was made. Moses took half of the blood and poured it upon the altar, and the other half he put in basins from which he threw blood upon the people as he declared, "Behold the *blood of the covenant.*" Why did the blood signify a covenant? Because covenants create kinship. Covenants create familial bonds, thus marriage and adoption are covenants, because they take two parties who were not in a familial relationship and make them family. On a natural level, families are constituted by those who share the same blood, so this sign of family becomes the symbol of a covenantal bond. By pouring half of the blood on the altar and half upon the people, Moses was saying in action that the people of Israel and God were now covenanted—they were now family. That is why the prophets compare Israel's infidelity to that of an adulterous wife: because Israel and God were bound by family ties through the covenant.

The animal blood poured out upon the stone altar at the base of Mount Sinai and thrown upon the people was a sign that they were now God's family. But this was simply a sign:

The blood they shared symbolically was the blood of sheep and goats. The blood in the veins of the Israelites was no different after the covenant ceremony. Thus the Old Covenant had signs, but they were not efficacious. For the sign of the Old Covenant blood to be efficacious, it would not only signify a blood relation, but would actually effect it.

Indeed, this is precisely what the blood of the New Covenant effects. Jesus' words over the cup at the Last Supper transform the wine into blood. And when the apostles drank from that cup, they actually partook of the blood of the Son of God, Jesus. Thus the New Covenant Sacrament of the Eucharist not only signifies a family bond between God and His people, but actually effects it. Through the Eucharist we share in the body and blood of Christ, true God and true man. The Eucharist is a sign that we are family, and as an efficacious sign it actually makes us family. For this reason, Saint Peter can say that we have "become partakers of the divine nature" (2 Pet. 1:4). This is the source of the apostolic teaching that the Church is the Body of Christ. No wonder the early Christians called themselves brothers and sisters in Christ, because through Christ the Church is the Family of God.

Luther and Calvin fail to make the crucial distinction between the blood of the Old and New Covenants, the distinction between the symbol of the Old and the efficacious power of the New. How can they claim that the New Testament sacraments are no different from those of the Old? Circumcision was a sign of belonging to the People of God, but Baptism actually makes us reborn as God's children (cf. Gal. 3:26-27). In the Old Testament there were many kinds of ritual washings but, in the New Covenant, Baptism not only signifies a cleansing, it also actually effects a washing away of sin. If the sacraments of the New are no more powerful than those of the Old, what difference did Jesus make?

“But as it is, Christ has obtained a ministry which is as much more excellent than the old as the covenant he mediates is better” (Heb. 8:6). The New Testament often contrasts the differences between the covenants. “For since the law has but a shadow of the good things to come instead of the true form of these realities” (Heb. 10:1), and again in Colossians, “These are only a shadow of what is to come; but the substance belongs to Christ” (Col. 2:17). It is clear that there is a tremendous difference between the Old and New Covenants, between the shadow and reality, sign and sacrament.

What makes the sacraments so powerful? Why are they always efficacious? The answer is Jesus Christ. The sacraments are instituted and empowered by Jesus.

Celebrated worthily in faith, the sacraments confer the grace that they signify. They are *efficacious* because in them Christ himself is at work: it is he who baptizes, he who acts in his sacraments in order to communicate the grace that each sacrament signifies (Catechism, no. 1127, original emphasis).

God has established that when the proper matter of the sacrament is present along with the words, then the sign is efficacious, which means that the sign is a sacrament.

Water from a Rock

In order to illustrate the nature and power of an efficacious sign, let’s look at an example from Scripture. As Israel was sojourning in the wilderness, the shortage of water was sometimes acute. The first time Israel ran out of water, the Israelites vehemently blamed Moses and also questioned whether the Lord was with them (cf. Ex. 17:7). When the crisis reached the boiling point, the people were about to stone Moses, but God intervened. God told Moses to strike the rock at Horeb and, when he did, water flowed from the rock. Years later, the people once again ran out of water, and once again they

rebelled (cf. Num. 20:2-5). Again God told Moses to take up his rod and go before the rock. But this time Moses was not to strike the rock, instead he was instructed to “tell the rock before their eyes to yield its water” (Num. 20:8).

The Lord’s command to speak to the rock in Numbers 20 teaches us how a sacrament works. The rock had already been struck by Moses once, yielding salvation in a miraculous way for the Israelites. Now the rock did not need be struck again: Moses needed only speak the word, and the rock would once again flow with the life-saving water.

The rock had previously been struck by Moses at Meribah. The salvation wrought at Meribah was to be made present for the people through the matter of the rock and staff in conjunction with the words Moses was to speak. Thus the salvation of the past was made efficaciously present through sign and word. This is exactly how a sacrament works. A sacrament makes present the saving grace wrought by God in the past. For example, the Eucharist makes present the body and blood of Christ. However, the Mass does not re-crucify Jesus. In Mass Jesus is not sacrificed another time. Rather, the once-and-for-all sacrifice of Jesus Christ on the Cross is made present through the words spoken over the elements of bread and wine by the priest (cf. Catechism, nos. 1366-67).

Past Event	Made Present
Rock struck in Exodus 17	Moses to speak to rock in Numbers 20
Water flows	Water flows

Past Event	Made Present
Jesus dies on the Cross	Mass
Water and blood flow	Body and blood present in Eucharist

Unfortunately, Moses did not follow the rubrics. He did not speak to the rock but struck it two times with his staff. God reprimanded Moses, saying:

Because you did not believe in me, to sanctify me in the eyes of the people of Israel, therefore you shall not bring this assembly into the land which I have given them (Num. 20:12).

Moses' decision to strike the rock again, rather than simply speak to it, was a failure in faith. To trust that God Himself will act through the sign and word takes faith. To believe in the sacraments takes faith in God. Failure to trust the power of God's signs can keep one from the Promised Land.

The rock at Meribah differs from a sacrament in that its power was to be a one-time event, whereas the seven sacraments of the New Covenant have an abiding power. Both the miraculous flow of water from the rock and the grace that comes forth from the sacraments derive their efficacy from God. The minister of the sacrament, like Moses, is not the source of the sacraments' power, but simply their instrument and steward.

Ultimate Power Source

The Catechism makes it clear that the effectiveness of the sacraments is absolutely dependent upon Jesus Christ. "Sacraments are 'powers that come forth' from the Body of Christ, which is ever-living and life-giving" (Catechism, no. 1116). In describing the sacraments as "powers that come forth" from Christ, the Catechism is alluding to the story of Jesus' healing of the hemorrhaging woman in Luke 8:42-48. As Jesus was traveling with a large crowd, a woman who had a hemorrhage reached out and touched the fringe of His garment (v. 44). She was immediately healed. Jesus then said, "Some one touched me; for I perceive that power has gone forth from me" (v. 46).

Peter observed that many in the crowd must have touched Jesus, since the crowd pressed upon Him. But only one person reached out and touched Jesus in faith, and that allowed “power” to flow from Him. How many Catholics go to Mass or receive Confirmation and nothing changes in their life? They are like the crowd that was very close to Jesus, but did not reach out to Him in faith. That, the Catechism says, is how the sacraments work. Through the sacraments we encounter Jesus Himself, and if we come to Him in faith, then power will flow forth for us just as it did for the woman whose faith allowed her to be touched by grace. The sacraments are channels of God’s powerful grace, but that grace will bear fruit in our lives according to how well we are disposed to receive Jesus in the sacraments with faith.

Christ-Centered Vision of Sacraments

The grace of the sacraments flows forth from the “paschal mystery of the Passion, Death and Resurrection of Christ” (SC 61). The victory of the Cross and Resurrection are made present to the People of God through the sacraments of the Church. The sacraments are the portals of grace, the means God has chosen to abide with His people. The sacraments not only come from Christ, but they also make the life of Christ present in our lives.

The mysteries of Christ’s life are the foundations of what he would henceforth dispense in the sacraments, through the ministers of his Church, for “what was visible in our Savior has passed over into his mysteries” (Catechism, no. 1115).

The Catechism is quoting Saint Leo the Great, a famous fifth-century pope. By Christ’s “mysteries,” Saint Leo literally means sacraments. The Greek-speaking Fathers of the Church called the sacraments “mysteries.” Thus the life of Jesus is given in the sacraments.

Why? Saint John Eudes claimed that the goal of our lives is to continue the life of Christ. Thus the sacraments are the means to living the life of Christ. Saint John Eudes says:

We must continue to accomplish in ourselves the stages of Jesus' life and his mysteries and often to beg him to perfect and realize them in us and in his whole Church. . . . For it is the plan of the Son of God to make us and the whole Church partake in his mysteries and to extend them to and continue them in us and in his whole Church (as quoted in Catechism, no. 521).

We are powerless to live the life of Christ without God's grace. That is why the Catechism teaches us about the sacraments and the liturgy (the channels of God's grace) before teaching us about the moral life. There is wisdom in the ordering of the four pillars of the Catechism. First comes the Creed (Pillar I), for we must start with faith in God. Then comes God's action in the sacraments and the liturgy (Pillar II), which enables us to live the life of Christ (Pillar III). Then we can pray as God's children (Pillar IV). Grace must come before action, the sacraments before morality.

It is important to maintain a Christ-centered approach to the sacraments. That means more than just realizing that the power of the sacraments is rooted in Christ. Rather, we must also see how "what was visible in our Savior" has passed over into His sacraments. Each sacrament is rooted in the life and death of Jesus. Baptism, for example, is rooted in the Cross. Thus Saint Paul says, "Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death?" (Rom. 6:3). If we simply understand Baptism as a rebirth and cleansing apart from the death of Christ, we do not fully grasp its meaning. Every sacrament must be taught in relation to Jesus.

An example of how sacramental catechesis can tend to drift away from a focus on Jesus Christ is illustrated in the way

Confirmation is frequently taught. I often ask my students, “What event in the New Testament does the Sacrament of Confirmation refer to?” Their answer is invariably “Pentecost.” When I inform them that they are wrong, they are genuinely surprised. Confirmation does not find its primary reference in Pentecost. Rather, Confirmation relates, as all the sacraments do, first and foremost to the life of Jesus. So to what part of Jesus’ life does Confirmation relate?

The Baptism of Jesus is the basis of Christian Confirmation. When Jesus was baptized by John, He was also anointed by the power of the Spirit. The dove that descends upon Jesus is His anointing in the Spirit. From then on, Saint Luke tells us that He goes forth in the power of the Spirit (cf. Lk. 4:1, 14, 18). In the first recorded baptismal homily, Peter refers to “how God anointed Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Spirit and with power” when He was baptized by John the Baptist (Acts 10:38). Luke shows us that at the beginning of Jesus’ mission He is anointed with the power of the Holy Spirit. This is what is happening in Confirmation—we are sharing in the mission of Jesus. Just as priests, prophets, and kings were anointed, so too is Jesus—and so too are His disciples. We need to be anointed with the Spirit to live the mission and life of Jesus. That is what Confirmation is all about.

How is Pentecost relevant to Confirmation? Saint Luke tells us that Jesus begins His mission with an anointing of the Spirit. In his sequel to the Gospel (Acts of the Apostles), Saint Luke also tells us that the Church begins her mission with an anointing of the Spirit. Luke parallels the anointing of Jesus at the Jordan to the Church’s anointing in the Upper Room. To really understand Pentecost, as in the case of Confirmation, we must see how it is an extension—a making present—of Jesus’ anointing in the Spirit. All the sacraments, as the fol-

lowing chapters will highlight, are rooted in the person and mission of Jesus.

Context Is Everything

The *General Directory for Catechesis* teaches that catechesis “should situate the sacraments within the history of salvation” (GDC 108). When the sacraments are taught, they must be explained in the context of salvation history, which means Scripture. This was the point of the discussion above about Confirmation. To teach Confirmation apart from Jesus’ anointing or the Church’s anointing at Pentecost is to lose sight of its meaning. This is why the Catechism, at the outset of each of its articles on the sacraments, has a section that places that sacrament in the context of salvation history. For example, the first section in the article on the Anointing of the Sick is entitled, “Its Foundations in the Economy of Salvation.” By economy of salvation, the Catechism means salvation history. “Economy” is a biblical term, and in Greek it refers broadly to a family plan or household management. Saint Paul and the Fathers of the Church refer to salvation history as God’s household plan—the plan for how God fathers His people through time.

The signs of the sacraments take their primary meaning from the events of salvation history: those events that were prefigured in the Old Testament and made present in Christ. Thus both the Old and New Testaments are very important in understanding the sacraments. The mystery of Jesus’ anointing is manifest in the New Testament, but prefigured in the Old by the anointing of priests, prophets, and kings. Both shed light on the present meaning of the sacrament.

In order to understand the sign of Confirmation, which is the anointing with oil, one must know how the sign is related to the anointings described in Scripture. “Catechesis helps to make the passage from sign to mystery” (GDC 108), thus when one is anointed with oil in Confirmation, the sign leads them

to contemplate the anointing of those chosen by God, most especially His Son. Reading the sign language of the sacraments is crucial to being Catholic. Thus Vatican II teaches: “It is, therefore, of the greatest importance that the faithful should easily understand the sacramental signs, and should eagerly frequent those sacraments which were instituted to nourish the Christian life” (SC 59).

Since “it is from the Scriptures that the . . . signs derive their meaning” (Catechism, no. 1100), it is necessary that the biblical basis of the sacramental signs be taught. This is why this book focuses on placing the sacraments in the context of salvation history. The approach taken here is not an exhaustive study of the sacraments, but rather a first step toward a biblical literacy of the sacramental signs. We simply cannot understand the sacramental signs without Scripture. The Catechism underscores how proper sacramental catechesis must enable people to read the “sign language” of the sacraments:

Liturgical catechesis aims to initiate people into the mystery of Christ (It is “mystagogy.”) by proceeding from the visible to the invisible, from the sign to the thing signified, from the “sacraments” to the “mysteries” (Catechism, no. 1075).

When we are unable to read the signs of the sacraments, there will be no movement from the visible to the invisible, from the sign to the thing signified, from the sacrament to Christ. That is because we need the perspective of the history of salvation to clearly understand the nature of the sacraments.⁶

⁶ Jean Danielou, “The Sacraments and the History of Salvation,” as found in his larger work, *The Liturgy and the Word of God* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1959), 31.

The Book's Blueprint

Therefore, the method of this book is to place each sacrament in the context of salvation history. The chapters on each sacrament have three main parts. The first part places the sacrament in the context of the Old Testament, because “[i]n the sacramental economy the Holy Spirit fulfills what was prefigured in *the Old Covenant*” (Catechism, no. 1093, original emphasis). As Cardinal Danielou once observed, “[w]e rediscover the true symbolism of the rite by referring to the realities of the Old Testament.”⁷

For example, the water of Baptism relates to the waters of the flood and the Red Sea. Water in Baptism is not merely a natural sign of cleansing, but also a sign of death, harkening back to the flood. Thus Lactantius (cf. 245-323) wrote, “Water is the figure of death.”⁸

The second and central part looks at the sacrament in light of Jesus’ life and death. “By this re-reading in the Spirit of Truth, starting from Christ, the figures are unveiled” (Catechism, no. 1094). The Catechism teaches that we should be able to see the relationship between the Old and New Testaments, as Cardinal Danielou remarked:

Knowledge of these correspondences [between the Old and New] is the Christian wisdom as the Fathers understood it, the spiritual understanding of Scripture. And this is where the liturgy is the mistress of exegesis.⁹

The third part employs Scripture as a lens to see how the mystery of the sacrament is made present in the here and now of our daily lives. This “Application” section tries to drive home an all-important aspect of the sacraments. The sacraments make present God’s saving deeds of the past. “Christian liturgy

⁷ *Ibid.*, 32.

⁸ *Divine Institutes*, bk. II, chap. 10.

⁹ Danielou, *The Liturgy and the Word of God*, 23.

[including the sacraments] not only recalls the events that saved us but actualizes them, makes them present” (Catechism, no. 1104). The Holy Spirit enables the past victories of God to be made available to us *today*. “By his [the Holy Spirit’s] transforming power, he makes the mystery of Christ present here and now” (Catechism, no. 1092).

Past Made Present

When we read the Bible, we easily notice all the great miracles and mighty deeds of the past, and wonder why God does not act in our lives. But that is where the sacraments and the liturgy come in. Christianity is not a “religion of the book,” in that we only read about what God did in the past; no, through the sacraments and liturgy God continues to make present His saving grace.

Thus the sacraments turn past history into present mystery. For example, God’s salvation of Israel from her bondage to Egypt through the waters of the Red Sea and the anointing of Jesus by the Holy Spirit in the Jordan become present for us in the Sacrament of Baptism. In Scripture we hear what God has done for His people before us, but through the sacraments we experience how these deeds are effective *for us*. The liturgy and sacraments are our doorway into the story of salvation. Thus the covenant drama is not simply the story of Israel, Jesus, the disciples, and others, but through our participation in the sacraments, beginning with Baptism, it is our own story.

This calls for a Catholic worldview, a new vision to see how the sacraments make present the power and life of Christ in our lives. “The catechetical message helps the Christian to locate himself in history and to insert himself into it, by showing that Christ is the ultimate meaning of this history” (GDC 98). We see, then, that salvation history does not end with the death of the apostles, but continues

in our day. Our lives are part of the story—our own story is a chapter in the life of Christ through all time. This is the mystery of the economy of salvation, that Jesus is prefigured in the Old Testament, made manifest in the New Testament, and “post-figured” by us living the life of Christ today. This is a profoundly spiritual vision that the sacraments invite us to live out. “But this also demands that catechesis help the faithful to open themselves to this spiritual understanding of the economy of salvation as the Church’s liturgy reveals it and enable us to live it” (Catechism, no. 1095).