



Sacraments 1/35: Introduction to the Sacraments

This week we begin a new bulletin series. For the next nine months we will be examining the seven Sacraments of the Catholic Church: Baptism, Confirmation, Eucharist, Matrimony, Holy Orders, Reconciliation, and Anointing of the Sick. We see these Sacraments throughout our lives, but we probably do not fully understand them.

At the basis of the discussion, we can point to the definition of a sacrament given in the Baltimore Catechism: What is a Sacrament? “A sacrament is an outward sign instituted by Christ to give grace.” Though we have this three-part definition, we are not going to go into the history of how Christ instituted each one. The focus will be on the outward sign and the grace imparted.

One of my favorite points of Sacramental Theology is the combination of the human and the divine in each of the Sacraments. As the person of Jesus Christ is both 100% human and 100% divine; as the human person is a body-soul union capable of hearing the divine Word and receiving God’s grace; so too, all of the sacraments have earthly and heavenly aspects to them. The physicality of the Sacraments is based upon the teaching in the beginning of John’s Gospel where “the Word became flesh.” God, in the second person of the Trinity, took on flesh and became a human in the person of Jesus Christ. St. Anselm, in the late 11th century, wrote a treatise called “*Cur Deus Homo?*” which translates as “Why the God-Man?” Why was it fitting that God became a human being to save us? It was humanity that sinned in Adam and Eve, and so it needed to be a human that atoned for that sin. Yet to make full atonement would take someone divine. The answer and remedy is in the person of Jesus Christ, fully God and fully human. It is through the divine working in our physicality that we obtain salvation. Jesus knew our weaknesses and our natural abilities. The Sacraments, then, assist and enable the physical and human within us to be transformed into the supernatural.

The American novelist and social worker Fr. Andrew Greeley wrote about the *Catholic Imagination*, which follows the ideas of German theologian Fr. Karl Rahner, in that all of natural reality has the ability to point to the divine. All things can be vehicles of God’s grace. All is grace.

Notice that, although all people and all things have the ability to receive grace, not all things are automatically holy. The catch comes in original sin. The sin of Adam and Eve was the desire to be in charge, to make their own decisions, to not have to obey someone else. It was, and continues to be, unnatural desire that caused sin. Buddhists teach a cessation of all desire as the path to holiness. With our sacramental understanding of the world, Christians follow instead the teaching of St. Augustine: the path to holiness is through rightly ordered desire. The Sacraments and the whole life of grace are about helping us along this path. As it was physicality and a disobedience to God that brought sin into the world in the first place, so it will be through physicality and obedience to the helps of grace that will lead us to heaven.

-Fr. Kopp

Next Week: Why seven?