



Sacraments 2/35: Why seven?

There are many lists of “7s” in Scripture (just look at the Book of Revelation). However, the number of the Sacraments is not about numerology, but about revelation. As part of the Sacred Deposit of the Faith, these particular Sacraments have been revealed as the only ones. It just so happens that the number is seven. These Sacraments were always in the Church, but there were times in the early years that we did not fully understand them. There was a discovery and a development of them over time. To speak about the “development” of theology can strike some as heretical, as development means change, which leads some to the conclusion that the Church has just made it up over time. St. John Henry Newman, who was just made a saint in the past couple of weeks, is still one of the best writers on this idea of the development of dogma. While the truth was revealed with Christ, it took time for our own discovery and understanding of the Deposit to develop. The Sacraments themselves were not “created” or “invented.” What changed is our own human understanding and way of describing them.

The early years of the Church had other things to focus on: martyrdom, the nature of Jesus as divine and human, and the nature of the Trinity as both one and three. Once enough peace, reflection, and development of our understanding had happened, theologians could finally turn their attention to sacramental theology and delve into these other aspects of our faith. Though many early Church Fathers, especially St. Augustine in the 400s, had already spoken about various Sacraments and their nature; around 1000 AD, others started to question the nature and number of the Sacraments. St. Peter Damian in the 1100s had a list of about 12: including religious vows, consecration of a king, consecration of a church, etc. Through theological study, the nature of each Sacrament was defined, the number limited to these seven in particular, and the teaching set.

There will be multiple parts to our discussion, split over many Sundays. Each of the Seven Sacraments will have discussions on:

1. The Natural and Supernatural Meanings of the sacramental action (A repeating point in the theology is that “grace builds on nature,” it does not replace it. Each of the sacramental actions has a natural/ earthly meaning. Through grace, this meaning is made supernatural, but the natural meaning remains. This will make more sense when we get into each Sacrament.)
2. The Scripture quotations that point to the Sacrament’s foundations
3. The Essential Elements of the Rite: including Matter, Form, and Minister.
4. The Tri-Partite understanding of the grace in the Sacrament (to be explained next week)

The Catechism summary of the Sacrament. (The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (CCC) is divided into section numbers (§). This is so that reference can still be found across different editions.

An online version can be found at:

<http://www.usccb.org/beliefs-and-teachings/what-we-believe/catechism/catechism-of-the-catholic-church/>

The whole discussion on Sacraments is found in Part III of the Catechism, which includes a discussion on the Liturgy and each of the Seven Sacraments: CCC § 1066-1690.

-Fr. Kopp

Next Week: Tri-Partite Theory