



### Sacraments 3/35: Tri-Partite Theory

The Tri-Partite Theory is part of a deeper and more complicated Sacramental Theology. In his theology of the Sacraments, St. Augustine originally saw 2 parts: 1) the sacramental action that we see and 2) the thing that the Sacrament does, the grace given, or its effect. In Baptism, we see (1) the washing with water and the words spoken, and we know that its purpose (2) is to wash away original sin and incorporate the person into the Church. With some Sacraments, Augustine also saw an ongoing “character”. St. Thomas Aquinas will pick up this idea of the ongoing character and develop all three parts into the Tri-Partite Theory. My own understanding comes from my seminary classes under the tutelage of Fr. Paul Keller, OP. The three parts are:

- 1) *Sacramentum Tantum* (“The Sacrament itself,” or “the Sign only”)
  - This is the sacramental ritual itself, what it looks like.
  - Here we have the Matter and the Form of the Sacrament: the physical elements and the form of the Rite, which includes all of the words and gestures.
- 2) *Res Tantum* (“The Thing itself,” or “the Reality only”)
  - This is the grace conferred in the sacrament, its ultimate effect.
- 3) *Res et Sacramentum* (“The Thing and the Sacrament,” or “the Reality and the Sign”)
  - This includes the “character” that Augustine saw, and is more fully explained by Aquinas.

We will be exploring the three parts for each Sacrament as we go through this discussion. It will make more sense as we proceed. For now, 1) we have the Sacramental action that we see, 2) the knowledge that some type of grace, or special gift from God, is given in each Sacrament, and 3) something continues to exist after the Sacramental action is complete.

One more point before we jump into Baptism next week: there can also be an *obex* that we place in the sacramental action. An *obex* is an “obstacle.” It is a block we put between ourselves and the grace coming from God. We will discuss this more when we come to Matrimony, but it first comes up in Augustine’s discussion of Baptism. Everyone saw that the baby was baptized; we were present at the washing and ritual. Our theology tells us that the grace of incorporation into the Church was given and that the baby was washed clean of original sin. But this is not a magic formula. This is only the first step of a life-long process of holiness. While the “character” of baptism can never be removed from the child, the person, as they grow, can freely decide to place “obstacles” that block the ongoing grace of the sacrament. They have the free will to refuse God’s ongoing grace in their lives. If the person removes this obstacle, though, we never “re-baptize.” The character is eternal. But we have the Sacrament of Reconciliation to remove the obstacle and open them to the grace of the Sacrament of Baptism once again. While the *Res et Sacramentum* (3), the character, continues, there is a block to the ongoing grace: *Res Tantum* (2). While the character of Baptism eternally remains, the person, through their sin, has blocked (placed an *obex*) between themselves and the grace of participation in the Body of Christ.

-Fr. Kopp

Next Week: The Sacrament of Baptism