

“WHY THE CHURCH?” PART III  
Mark Hellinger | Most Precious Blood Parish  
Summer Series | 2020

---

Recap:

1<sup>st</sup> talk: Belief as trust; Church vs church; mystery and institution

2<sup>nd</sup> talk: The marks or characteristics of the Church.

Today: the Sacraments.

Introduction: What are we talking about and why?

One of the 3 bonds of unity we talked about is Sacramental life.

Catholics have been known to be “sacrament centered.” Sometimes to an extreme.

- Some of this is historically caused; post-Reformation drama, etc.

When we profess belief in the Church, we are also professing belief in what the Church hands down to us as matters of Faith (this is the meaning of Tradition).

But one of the key things people will know when you say “I’m a Catholic” probably has something to do with Sacraments.

-The three ancient charges for Christians in Rome were:

-Atheism

-Cannibalism (Eucharist)

-Incest

The Catholic vision of the world, the way that the Church functions, lives, and sees, is through a sacramental lens. Unlike talking about the four marks, this conversation (though it might not always seem like it) is from the beginning, a practical one. Why? Jesus took on a human nature.

Tonight we are going to talk about:

1. What a Sacrament is
2. The Body/Soul unity of the human person
3. The Seven Sacraments
4. Seeing life with the sacramental vision of the Church

## Part I: What is a Sacrament?

Mysterion: used frequently in the NT (and sometimes in the OT). Always is used in reference to “hiddenness.” Early on, and still today in the East, used for what we now call Sacraments.

A “mystery” as we understand it today is more like a puzzle that needs to be solved or something that is totally out of our grasp or ability to understand.

There is a danger here. The Faith is not a secret keeping society. We are not Gnostics. At the same time, the Faith is about a God who slowly and meticulously revealed Himself, and who has fully and finally revealed Himself in Jesus Christ. The way Christians used Mysterion is more in reference to the hiddenness of God’s plan for our Salvation, which is too wonderful for us to understand.

Mysterion is then connected to God’s plan of Salvation. “The Sacraments are points of contact between the mysterion and Christian Life in Christ.”<sup>1</sup> “Each of the Sacraments continue the visible unfolding of God’s hidden plan of salvation in Christ.”<sup>2</sup>

The switch to the word “Sacrament” has to do with the Latinization of the language of the Faith.

---

<sup>1</sup> Nutt, *General Principles of Sacramental Theology*, 53.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

In ancient Rome, a *sacramentum* was an oath that bound a person to some action. It was used especially with soldiers who would take the *sacramentum militare* to the consul. There were serious consequences for someone who failed to live up to the oath they made via a *sacramentum* because it wasn't just an oath, but a consecration. The oath made in this act consecrated the person to whatever they were promising.

*Sacramentum* is naturally usable to describe the Christian Mysteries, but in reverse from the logic of pagan Rome. In the Christian Sacrament, it is God who is making the promise, not the person. "This action does this."

A Sacrament is an efficacious sign. It rests on a promise of Christ who instituted it, and it is entrusted to the Church, because the promise is tied to a specific action and words.

## Part II: The Body/Soul unity of the Human Person

Body/Soul inseparable. Aristotle figured this out. The Christian faith has developed under this understanding. This is why we reject reincarnation and the like. You have one body and one soul. This is why we profess in the Resurrection of the body. God saves us, body and soul. Many of the great problems of our time in some ways stem from a separation of the body and the soul.

If we understand ourselves as a body/soul composite, then we can truly understand the importance of the Sacraments in the Salvific plan of God. If our soul was trying to be freed of the body, then a ritual washing of the body would be insulting, all we would need is the soul to be pronounced free. But that isn't how Jesus ministers to people.

In Jesus's ministry of healing, he often associates the forgiveness of sins with physical healing. "Go, your sins are forgiven" or "Rise, pick up your mat, and walk"

Jesus is always healing body and soul because you cannot heal one without healing the other in some way.

The Sacraments play directly into this conception of what a Human person is. Body/Soul ... Matter/Form.

The physical and the spiritual. Material and words. Actions done to our bodies mixed with the words Jesus gave us actually change us and the world.

Why? The Sacraments are the continuation of Jesus ministry and mission in the world. They are the means by which Grace enters our lives and we can encounter Christ in a real and concrete way.

-The Ascension makes the Sacraments possible because Jesus returns to heaven and sends the Spirit who is the agent who upholds the promise of the Sacraments.

-Think of how hard it is to see the Pope, imagine if Jesus was still physically walking this earth.

### Part III: The Seven Sacraments (Matter and Form)

Baptism – Water and "I baptize you..."

Confirmation – Laying on of hands and "Be sealed with the gift of the Holy Spirit"

Eucharist – Bread and Wine and "This is my body..."

Penance – Contrition/enumeration of sins and "I absolve you"

Anointing – Laying on of hands and "Through this Holy Anointing"

Holy Orders – A baptized man/laying on of hands and Prayer of Ordination

Matrimony – A man and woman and the exchange of consent

Intention is also a necessary part: “intending to do what the Church does”

*Ex Opere Operato* – from the work worked.

#### Part IV: Living the Sacramental Vision of the World

Sacraments vs sacraments and sacramentals

To profess belief in the Church is profess belief in the Seven Sacraments of the Church, which again, goes back to the profession of belief/trust in the Trinity itself. The Seven Sacraments are the ways we know, through the promise of Jesus given to us through the Apostles, that His Grace is present and active in the world in a real way.

To take the Incarnation of Jesus seriously is to recognize that God actually changes the world. He acts from all time to redeem all of Creation. And His action would be historically limited if he had not instituted the Sacraments and founded the Church to communicate and live them through the ages.

Without the Sacraments, we are stuck essentially on our own. Sure, some other people might have some nice and helpful thoughts about Jesus, but unless he appears to us like He did to Paul, we would be destined to experience Him like we do, say, Abe Lincoln. Abe’s words and actions still have impact and meaning, but reading his Gettysburg address does not make him present to us in the flesh. A priest, praying the Eucharistic prayer, with bread and wine in front of Him makes Jesus as present to us as

Jesus was to His Disciples and Apostles. The reality of the world changes with those words, the hidden and mysterious plan of God for our salvation is revealed a little more every time we come to the Sacraments.

The Sacramental vision of the world, then, is one that can see God's work in the world, can assist in the carrying out of the Mission of the preaching the Good News that death has been conquered. It is one that sees that our actions and words, good or bad, actually have real effects on reality.

Conclusion: Entering in, to be changed

Faith gives way, in the end, to Vision. In fact, when we die, we call meeting the Lord the Beatific Vision. We see this in the spiritual life, as we turn from sin and to God, we begin to see His action in our life more clearly.

We, as Catholics, need to work to rediscover the Sacramental vision and imagination that is at the very base of our Faith. We can do this by engaging the prayers of the faith more attentively. What exactly are we asking God to do when the priest is praying at the altar. It is more than just making the Eucharist appear.

We can ask ourselves, how do I intentionally connect my actions with the mission of Jesus in the world. How do I actually see God at work in what I do with my body and soul on a daily basis.

As we approach the Sacraments, we need to ask God for the Grace to see Him in them and in their effects in our lives and the world. God has made promises, and as we know from His Word, He does not go back on His promises