

The Changing Nature of Sacramental Theology*

After introducing the notion of paradigm shifts, first popularly introduced in the 1960s by Thomas Kuhn but anticipated by Bernard Lonergan in his concept of higher viewpoints, I will argue that Catholicism today is moving through just such a shift in sacramental theology – and indeed in all of theology, but our focus will be on the field with which I am most familiar.

Central to traditional Catholic sacramental theology is the concept of *sacramentum et res*, a "sacramental reality" which is, from a contemporary perspective on scientific methodology, not a reality but a conceptual construct introduced as part of a theoretical explanation of how sacraments (i.e., certain church rites or *sacramenta tanta*) produced observable effects such as turning pagans into Christians, turning single people into spouses, and turning laymen into priests. Scholastic theologians were able to agree on the nature of the sacramental reality for four out of the five sacraments, but the *sacramentum et res* in penance and extreme unction remained elusive and a matter of unresolved dispute.

The *sacramentum et res* is, in scholastic theory, the "sacrament" that is "administered" and "received" in a validly performed sacramental rite. In the understanding of Aquinas and others, it is a supernatural power (or better, a collection of such powers) received into the soul that enables the recipient to perform acts of which the individual was previously incapable. Thus in baptism one receives the supernatural virtues of faith, hope and charity. Likewise, in marriage one receives an indelible bondedness to one's spouse. Similarly, in ordination one receives priestly powers to consecrate the Eucharist, to absolve from sins, to administer extreme unction, etc. Based on the methodological principle, *Ab esse ad posse valet illatio*, scholastics argued from the exercise of supernatural powers to the possession of supernatural powers, reasoning that such powers were received through the valid performance of the liturgical rites with which they were associated.

Although scholastic theology often appears rather abstruse, it can be understood as medieval common sense elevated to the level of theoretical explanation. The terminology, which often appears complex, becomes greatly simplified when, from a methodological perspective, one distinguishes between what the medievals were saying and what they were talking about. What they were talking about were experienced and perceived Christian social realities in the Middle Ages; these were not much different from those same realities as they were experienced and perceived by Catholics through the modern era and up to Vatican II. The language of the scholastics, however, was a complex and shifting blend of ordinary and ecclesiastical Latin, with a certain amount of Aristotelian and patristic terminology added to the mix.

Today, Catholics live in a society in which, for example, baptized persons are indistinguishable in their behavior from non-baptized persons (and *a fortiori* this is also true of the confirmed and the non-confirmed), in which persons marry and unmarry with statistical regularity, and in which priests are not necessarily priests forever. Changes in the eucharistic liturgy have affected Catholics' perceptions of what happens at mass, changes in the understanding of sin as well as in

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the sacramental rite have affected their experience of confession, and changes in the rite and theology of anointing have affected their experience of that sacrament as well. In other words, the object of sacramental theology, or what needs to be explained by it, has changed.

Moreover, what counts as an acceptable explanation, or a theoretical frame of reference within which particular explanations can be posed, has also changed. The Aristotelian-Thomistic synthesis, although adequate to the experience of medieval Catholics, is not adequate to the variegated and culturally pluralistic experience of contemporary Catholics. Various frames of reference have been proposed by twentieth century theologians (existential phenomenology, process thought, liberation theology, etc. – see *Doors to the Sacred*, chapter 5), but none has succeeded in becoming the new Catholic synthesis.

What is emerging as the new paradigm in sacramental theology (and in other areas of theology as well) is the coexistence of a plurality of interpretive frames of reference within which liturgical actions and sacramental experiences are understood. Such a pluralism inescapably relativizes the traditional theology despite attempts in the 1983 Code of Canon Law and the 1994 Catechism to absolutize certain features of traditional Catholic thought and behavior. Barring a global catastrophe that would return the Church to the simplicity and uniformity of the Middle Ages, the current trend cannot be reversed.

Please note that this is an exercise in theological methodology, or a meta-theological reflection, with philosophical implications for theology. It is not, strictly speaking, a theological discussion.