

Mistakes Catholics Make When Talking About Sacraments^{*}

My book on the history and theology of the sacraments, *Doors to the Sacred*, was first published over twenty years ago. Since then I have been thinking, writing and teaching about the sacraments more than about any other topic in theology. I mention these facts because some of the things I am about to say run counter to Catholic common sense, canon law, and the Catechism, and I want you to know that these are ideas that I have pondered very deeply.

Receiving the Sacraments

While it is true to talk about receiving the Eucharist when we are talking about Holy Communion, it is no longer helpful to talk about receiving the other sacraments. We might even call it dysfunctional.

This manner of speaking originated in the early church, when bishops were not only ecclesiastical administrators but also civil magistrates. They administered Roman justice as well as Christian baptism. It became common to speak about receiving baptism, just as one speaks about receiving justice. Also, in disputes with heretical groups, it was sometimes important to know whom they had baptized, for those who had received baptism from them were also regarded as heretics.

The phrase got set in stone, as it were, in the Middle Ages, when scholastic theologians took the words literally and developed a theory that explained this manner of speaking. For every visible sacrament or sacramental ritual, they reasoned, there was also an invisible sacrament that was received by one or more participants in the ritual. No one seemed to mind that an invisible sacrament is an invisible sign—an obvious contradiction in terms.

Except for the most conservative among them, today's sacramental theologians avoid using the phrase, "receiving the sacraments." For them, sacraments are first and foremost church rituals, and it is not correct to speak about receiving a ritual. Rituals are things that are participated in, engaged in, presided over, and so on; they are not things that are received.

Ordinary Catholics still speak about "receiving the sacraments," however, and this sometimes creates problems. For example, parents want their children to "receive" the sacrament of confirmation, as though it will give them something they did not have before. Experience tells us, though, that going through the ritual of confirmation does not change a thing for most children.

Sacramental Character

In three cases—baptism, confirmation and holy orders—the sacrament that was "received" was called a character. This idea goes back to St. Augustine around the

^{*} Unpublished. © 2002 by Joseph Martos

year 400, who wanted to explain why people should be baptized only once. (In some places, people were being rebaptized when they returned to the church after having given up their faith.) He said that when people are baptized, they receive a permanent configuration to Christ as well as membership in the church. If they leave the church and then want to return, therefore, the proper ritual is reconciliation, not baptism. Augustine called this configuration to Christ an indelible seal or character.

Theologians in the Middle Ages expanded on Augustine's idea and applied it to two other sacraments that were "received" only once: confirmation and holy orders. They reasoned that if an indelible character made a person permanently baptized, the same sort of thing should make a person permanently confirmed or ordained.

The nature of the priestly character was easy to figure out since priests had powers (to say mass, etc.) which lay people did not; the priestly character was therefore a set of priestly powers. It was not easy to figure out what the confirmation character did, except prevent a person from going through the ritual a second time. Then as now, the confirmed did not seem much different from the unconfirmed.

According to the medieval theory, the sacramental character explained why the effects of some rituals were permanent. Today, however, the effects are far from permanent. Baptism does not prevent a person from becoming a Buddhist or even an atheist. Ordination does not prevent a man from leaving the priesthood. Yet we continue to maintain the fiction that the effects of these sacraments are permanent, and we enforce it with canon law.

The Bond of Marriage

Much the same can be said about the sacrament of marriage, also known in Catholic theology as the marriage bond. The bond (or sacrament) is thought to come into existence when two people pronounce their wedding vows. It too is permanent, although not indelible, since it vanishes when one of the spouses dies. It is also called indissoluble, although death easily dissolves it. Just how the death of the body causes the dissolution of a spiritual bond is not explained.

The theory of the marriage bond necessitates the erection of an elaborate bureaucracy known as the marriage tribunal. Since the bond is thought to come into existence when two people say "I do," the spiritual state of the couple at that moment needs to be carefully scrutinized. If there are grounds for judging that one or both of the parties was incapable of entering into a valid marriage contract, the tribunal issues a declaration of nullity. After this judgment is issued, the parties are free to remarry—actually to marry for the first time, since their first marriage was invalid.

An invalid marriage is the same as a non-existent marriage, yet no one wants to say that the couple was living in sin or that their children are illegitimate. Theology and canon law want to have it both ways, which is self-contradictory. Add to this the fact that 90% of Catholics who divorce do not seek an annulment before remarrying, and

it becomes clear that the time and money put into diocesan tribunals could be better spent on the pastoral care of marriages and families.

Magical Thinking

Many of the dysfunctional ways that Catholics speak about sacraments can be attributed to magical thinking, which can be defined as the perception of cause and effect without understanding the connection between the two. All of us become capable of magical thinking (as psychologist Jean Piaget called it) early in childhood, and we retain this ability for the rest of our lives.

There are all kinds of processes that we do not understand, and magical thinking is an efficient way to deal with them. We use electric appliances, plumbing fixtures, automobiles and computers without having to understand how they work. We only need to know that if we flip this switch (cause) the lights come on (effect). If we do not understand the electrical system, when it does not work properly, we are at a loss to repair it.

We perceive the effects of rituals the same way. When an elected official is sworn into public office (cause), we instantly look at him or her as mayor, governor or president (effect), without having to understand the complex social process behind it. In the same way, we look at the baptized as Christians, the confirmed as strengthened, the ordained as priests, and the wedded as married.

Our theology of these sacraments developed in an era when the effects of these rituals was in fact permanent. In the Middle Ages, people did not switch religions, men did not leave the priesthood, and marriages were arranged so divorce was impossible. By holding on to that theology in the 21st century, we deceive ourselves into perceiving effects that are not really there. It is rather like the story of the emperor's new clothes: the people were told he was wearing them, so they perceived him as dressed—except for the child who hadn't yet learned to look at things the way people were told to.

There is nothing bad about magical thinking (we all do it every day), but it is nonetheless naïve and uncritical. In the case of these four sacraments, we perceive them as having permanent effects, when in today's world, they don't. Such thinking is naïve and uncritical.

Instituted by Christ

Older Catholics were taught that the sacraments are “outward signs instituted by Christ to give grace.” The new Catechism uses essentially the same language.

Such language is deceptive. It conveys the idea that Jesus himself told his followers to perform seven religious rituals. New Testament scholars, however, say that only baptism and Eucharist can be traced back to Jesus. Historians, moreover, tell us that ecclesiastical reconciliation probably began in the second century, that the earliest ordination rites on record are from the third century, that confirmation was split off from baptism in the fourth century, that anointing of the sick was first reserved to

priests in the ninth century, and that that church weddings became common only in the twelfth century.

When these facts came to light in the last century, theologians such as Karl Rahner reinterpreted the traditional teaching to mean that the risen Christ had instituted the sacraments. Since the church is the body of Christ, according to St. Paul, whatever the church does is done by Christ, even if it is centuries after Jesus lived on earth.

This reinterpretation tends to reinforce and perpetuate the older and more naïve interpretation of the phrase, however. Rather than saying the sacraments were instituted by Christ, therefore, it is better to say that all of them are rooted in the life and ministry of Jesus. Jesus called people to conversion and he formed a community around himself (baptism); he communicated his spirit to others and strengthened them (confirmation); he shared table fellowship with others and was present to them (Eucharist); he forgave sins and asked people to forgive each another (reconciliation); he healed the sick and the lame (anointing); he invited his followers to be united in love and to lay down their life for one another (marriage); he ministered to those in need and called his disciples to a life of service and ministry (holy orders).

Transubstantiation

Older Catholics—and younger conservative Catholics—are apt to say that transubstantiation is a dogma of the Church and that all Catholics are obliged to believe it. They are mistaken.

The actual Catholic doctrine (or dogma) is the real presence of Christ in the Eucharist: Christ is truly present in the Eucharist under the appearances of bread and wine, which Christians since the earliest centuries have referred to as the body and blood of Christ.

Transubstantiation is a theory that was introduced by scholastic theologians in the Middle Ages to explain how bread and wine become the body and blood of Christ. In this theory, they used explanatory terms derived from the Greek philosopher, Aristotle: substance and accidents. These words do not mean what they appear to mean in ordinary English, so unless people are trained in scholastic or Aristotelian philosophy, they literally do not know what they are saying when they talk about transubstantiation and use these words.

The Council of Trent in the sixteenth century recognized the theory of transubstantiation as a possible explanation of Eucharistic change when it said, “This change is aptly referred to as transubstantiation,” but it nowhere said that this is the only possible explanation, that is, the Council did not declare it to be a doctrine of faith. Interestingly, the word does not appear in the new Catechism except in the above quotation from Trent. In other words, the Catechism acknowledges that one can use this language in talking about the Eucharist, but it does not require Catholics to do so. Indeed, in the rest of the article on the Eucharist, the term is never used.

Conclusion

In talking about our sacraments, we need to be more careful about the words we use and the impressions we convey. Otherwise we are likely to say things that fool ourselves and mislead others, even if unintentionally.

One way to do this is to study the history and theology of the sacraments. Learn how today's theologians are talking about sacraments in today's terminology. Some of the better books (besides my own, mentioned at the beginning of this article) are *Sacraments: A New Understanding for a New Generation* by Ray Noll, *A New Look at the Sacraments* by William Bausch, *Rethinking Sacraments* by Bill Huebsch, *Sacraments Alive* by Sandra DeGidio, and *Teaching Sacraments* by Patricia Smith. If you cannot find these books in a bookstore, you can get them through a library.

Another way to do this is to reflect on our own experience of sacraments and to base what we say on that experience. The great sacramental theologians, including St. Augustine and St. Thomas Aquinas, always began by reflecting on their experience, and what they said about sacraments reflected their experience of sacraments.

This way of theologizing is more honest and spontaneous than reciting words from memory. Especially when we are speaking with teenagers and catechumens, it is important that they sense that we are being truthful with them. If what we say is based on our experience of sacramental worship, they will easily see that we know what we are talking about.