

Why “Receiving the Sacraments” Is Wrong*

Unlike other Christians, Catholics talk about “receiving the sacraments.” What do they mean when they say this? And where does this manner of speaking come from?

What they mean is that there is something called a sacrament that people get when they go through certain church rituals—which, by the way, are also called sacraments. It can be a bit confusing.

Origins of the Phrase

The confusion goes back to Christianity in the days of the Roman Empire. Since bishops were respected in their local communities, they were often appointed to be civil magistrates and given the power to decide cases that today might go to small claims court. The bishops administered Roman justice as well as Christian baptism, in addition to being administrators of the church.

Occasionally, questions were raised about baptisms and ordinations by heretical bishops, and also about baptisms by the priests they had ordained. Sometimes the questions were posed in this manner: From whom did they receive their priesthood? From whom did they receive their baptism? Since the bishops were said to administer holy orders and baptism, it seemed a natural way to ask the question.

Medieval Theology

Centuries later, in the Middle Ages, Christian thinkers for the first time began to systematically examine church rituals that were believed to have important spiritual effects—not only baptism and ordination, but also marriage and confirmation, and most importantly, the Eucharist. The seven that were singled out for special attention were called the sacraments.

Since the Eucharist is received in the form of holy communion, it was natural to speak of the Eucharist as a sacrament that is received. But where was the sacrament that was said to be received when Christians went through the other sacramental rituals?

The scholastic theologians (so-called because they taught in schools and universities) developed a theory that accounted for this familiar way of speaking. In addition to the sacrament that is a church ritual, they said, there is also a sacrament that is administered and received. The ritual is a visible, material and external sacrament, and when the ritual is properly or validly performed, it bestows an invisible and spiritual sacrament on the soul of the recipient. Does this language sound familiar?

The theory worked fine for five of the seven sacraments, especially for the Eucharist and for those that could be “received” only once. It was difficult to specify what was received

* Originally published in *Ministry and Liturgy* (vol. 30, no. 3) 2003. © 2002 by Joseph Martos

in the other two, but Catholics nonetheless spoke about receiving the sacrament of penance and receiving extreme unction, just as they spoke about receiving the other sacraments.

Contemporary Theology

As long as scholastic theology was synonymous with Catholic theology, there were no problems with this manner of speaking. Since just before the Second Vatican Council, however, Catholic thinkers have been borrowing insights from their contemporaries in trying to better understand their faith—much as medieval thinkers borrowed insights from the Greek philosopher Aristotle in developing scholastic theology.

Contemporary thinking has for the most part returned to the pre-scholastic distinction between sign and signified, between symbol and symbolized, between sacrament and reality. This is the way early Christians thought about their rituals and symbols, and this is the way ritual and symbol are treated in academic religious studies.

In this way of looking at it (which coincides with the visible, external sacrament acknowledged by the scholastics), a sacrament is a church ritual, an ecclesiastical rite, a liturgical ceremony. Since we do not speak about receiving rituals, rites or ceremonies, it is improper to speak about receiving sacraments.

It is also misleading. It has misled older Catholics into wanting their grandchildren to be baptized, even though their parents don't go to church, because they believe the ritual has an automatic effect on the soul. It has misled Catholic parents into wanting their children to “receive the sacrament of confirmation” for much the same reason. It has misled young Catholics into believing that if they got married in church, they would receive a sacramental bond to strengthen their marriage. It misled many Catholics into thinking that if a man was ordained a priest, he received a priestly character that made him safe to be with children.

When a way of talking and thinking becomes misleading and harmful, it is proper to call it dysfunctional. It functioned well in the Middle Ages, when it reflected the experience of life in a Catholic society, and it worked reasonably well until the 1960s, when social changes led to a much different experience of life in the church. Today there is a disconnect between theoretical permanence of the “received” sacrament and the actual impermanence of church membership, marital commitment, and priestly ministry.

Changing the Way we Speak

What sort of language should we use, then, in talking about the sacraments?

First off, since the sacraments are rituals, we should talk primarily about what the rituals represent, what the symbols symbolize. We should talk about life in the church, about commitment to Christ, about marriage and family life, about priestly and lay ministry.

Going along with this, then, we should not talk about preparing for baptism but preparing for membership in the church, and we should not talk about preparing for confirmation

but preparing to reaffirm and deepen our Christian commitment. We already make a distinction between preparing for marriage and preparing for the wedding, and between preparing for the priesthood and preparing for ordination.

Secondly, we should talk about participating in sacraments, engaging in sacraments, presiding at sacraments, and so on, just as we talk about participating in rituals, engaging in ceremonies, and presiding at worship.

Thirdly, we should think twice about using the phrase, “celebrating the sacraments.” Since the sacraments are rituals, they *are* celebrations. It is better to think and talk about what they celebrate, what they point to, what they symbolize, as was said above. After all, we don’t celebrate a birthday party; we celebrate a birthday by having party, which is a type of secular ritual.

Fourthly, we should ask ourselves what we are talking about when we talk about sacraments. There are many phrases that can be used to say what we mean: sacramental rituals, church ceremonies, ecclesial rites, liturgical worship, and so on. Sometimes it takes a bit of creative reflection, but it can be done.

It is only by saying what we mean that we can eliminate some of the current dysfunctionality in sacramental theology. And if, by saying “receiving a sacrament” we don’t mean “receiving a ritual,” we shouldn’t say it.