

The Sacraments. An Interdisciplinary and Interactive Study. By Joseph Martos. Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2009. A Michael Glazier Book. Pages 274. Paper, \$24.95. ISBN 978-0-8146-5369-2.

Conventional pre-Vatican II textbooks on the sacraments were divided into *de sacramentis in genere* and *de sacramentis in specie*. Depending on where and when these texts were written their contents were almost always determined by the necessary Catholic apologetic deemed required at the time. For “sacraments in general” such topics often concerned the nature and number of the sacraments, the sacrament as a sign, the minister of the sacrament, their effects, whether they convey a character and what is a sacramental character, the subject or recipients of the sacrament, the institution of the sacraments and how they cause grace *ex opere operato* and *ex opere operantis* (see, H. Lennerz, *De Sacramentis Novae Legis, In Genere*, 1950). In the post-Vatican II Church the need for such apologetic texts ceased and the field of study that now comprises “sacramental theology” is nothing short of vast and for the serious researcher inescapably complex (see for example, the multi-volume bibliographical resource *Sacramenta: Bibliographia internationalis*, edited by Maksamilian Zitnik and the regular distillation of topics on and related to the sacraments in the annual bibliographical reference in the *Ephemerides Theologiae Louvaniensis*. That we still do not have a post-Vatican II text book in English for the college and seminary level may well be because of the disciplinary complexity involved. Unfortunately, despite the subtitle of this book, this work by Joseph Martos does not fit the bill. It is dated, oversimplified and at times misleading.

Approximately three-quarters of this book is taken word for word from Martos’ 1983 book *The Catholic Sacraments*, the first volume in the “Message of the Sacraments” series edited by Monika Hellwig. The “interdisciplinary” approach sketched out in 1983 remains about the same save for a (highly over-generalized and seriously flawed) chapter on “ritual.” Martos’ new approach to sacraments in general deals with psychology, sociology, ritual studies, sacraments in history, theology, morality and spirituality. Just this listing makes one wonder whether and how a new book on sacramental theology can do all of this with any degree of adequacy. Unfortunately the same over-generalizations offered in 1983 remain, all based on English language sources only. This new book contains none of the updating and commonly accepted critiques of authors such as Clifford Geertz and Ronald Grimes as their theories apply or do not apply to Catholic ritual (see the highly intelligent and probing book *Consuming Religion* by Vincent Miller). Martos neither updates nor critiques anything that he wrote previously. The new chapter on ritual suffers from the usual flaws in Martos’ writing, i.e., over-generalizations and a zeal to move almost immediately

to practical applications which themselves are debatable, not to say flawed. The new section on a postmodern approach to sacraments does not contain any reference to David Power's highly influential volume, *The Sacraments: The Language of God's Self Giving*. Martos' use of Chauvet's two books (translated into English) deserves some careful probing as to its faithfulness to the Chauvet project. Thus the text is seriously flawed, not to say unusable.

The word "interactive" in the subtitle refers to a website which Martos has constructed containing questions for further reflection/discussion. That there is an accompanying question to what is asserted is marked in the margins of the book. The website contains the accompanying question as a pedagogical aid. However, those who use typical web based interactive tools such as "Blackboard" or "Sakai" will be disappointed that Martos' effort is not truly interactive on that level of usefulness. There is nothing to prevent one from printing out all of the questions and reading them along with the text. Even then the questions more often than not invite the reader's individual assessment and judgment. There is little that is communal or ecclesial about the questions as they relate to sacraments. They most often highlight the reader's human experience, not the liturgical reality enacted in the sacraments.

The disciplinary complexity involved in crafting an appropriate post-Vatican II textbook on sacraments in general needs to be admitted. That there are far more who have attempted this feat than those who have been (at least moderately) successful needs to be admitted. Martos is therefore in good company. But for the English language professor and student of sacraments there is still a void here that needs to be filled.

*The Catholic University of America
Washington, D.C.*

Kevin W. Irwin

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Reply to Kevin Irwin

Were *The Sacraments* a work of sacramental theology, much of what Msgr. Irwin says about it would be valid. But the book is not a work of sacramental theology. The last paragraph of the book's introduction makes this clear: "This is not a book of sacramental theology, although it is in part a book about sacramental theology" (4).

If *The Sacraments* were an attempt to offer a post-Vatican II textbook on sacraments in general, the shortcomings noted by Msgr. Irwin would be relevant. But the book is not trying to be a contemporary version of *de sacramentis in genere*. In fact, the book makes a deliberate attempt to break with the past and offer something that has not been done since the medieval scholastics used the ideas of Aristotle to understand Christian faith and ritual.

The discovery of the complete works of the Greek philosopher Aristotle in the thirteenth century revolutionized Catholic theology. Although occasionally condemned by the hierarchy for using the ideas of a pagan to explain the Christian mysteries, St. Thomas Aquinas and other medieval theologians showed how Aristotle's philosophical ideas could be used to demonstrate the logic and reasonableness of Catholic beliefs and practices. In the long run, this medieval innovation became the backbone of Catholic theology and canon law.

The principal project of this book is to invite the reader into that same sort of process: to take ideas offered by the secular sciences of psychology, sociology and ritual studies and apply them to the sacraments and their experienced effects. Thus the purpose of the interactive questions (found on the website) is not for reflection and discussion but for application and verification: to determine whether and to what extent the ideas presented in summary form illuminate the reader's personal and social experience. (The section on ritual studies, by the way, was sent to Ronald Grimes and met with his approval.)

Now Aquinas understandably accepted many of the ways that sacraments were talked about in the Middle Ages. Sacraments were spoken of both as rituals and as entities that were conferred and received through the performance of the rituals. Some sacraments were said to convey an indelible character, and others were said to bestow supernatural powers such as the ability to consecrate the Eucharist. The task of theology, as Aquinas and the other scholastics understood it, was not to question the language of faith, but to explain it.

Thirty years ago, I wrote *Doors to the Sacred: A Historical Introduction to Sacraments in the Catholic Church*, which was my attempt to provide a usable text for undergraduate and graduate students of theology. The fact that it has gone through three editions and is still in print suggests that the void which Msgr. Irwin laments has indeed been filled, although not in the way he envisions.

One of the (unpublished) conclusions I came to when writing that book is that the language of sacramental theology, which served the Catholic Church quite well from the

Middle Ages to modern times is no longer serviceable. I do not favor speaking of sacraments as administered and received, or as bestowing indelible characters and supernatural powers. Such language fails to convey to contemporary Catholics the intelligibility that such language conveyed to earlier generations. Thirty years in the classroom has been more than enough to confirm this conclusion.

Rather than argue with such language (trying to prove, for example, that sacraments cannot be received or that there is no such thing as an invisible character), I believe it is better to simply offer an alternative. We are members of a multicultural church who need to think about our religious rituals and spiritual experiences in ways that make sense to us rather than to medieval Europeans or contemporary academicians.

This book is an invitation, offered personally to each reader, to engage in the process of theologizing not about what others have said about sacraments but about what actually happens in and through them.

Joseph Martos