

Intro to the Sacraments

How My Understanding of the Sacraments
Has Grown, Changed, or Been Challenged

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Beth Kroft

bethkroft@hotmail.com

I. Baptism

Initially, I struggled to identify which sacrament to begin this paper. After contemplation, I felt that it was very fitting to begin with the sacrament that we begin with in our infancy, and that is recognized as a beginning of our faith. Just as the very beginnings of life came from water, so does our initiation into the Christian community through baptism.

Through this class, I became more aware of the history of baptism. I knew that the apostles baptized the faithful after Jesus' death and resurrection. I also knew that baptism was not a new ritual. However, its meaning has changed from the rituals of old, which was new to me. It was interesting to see how baptism has transformed through the years. I have been familiar with the adult baptisms through time, but understanding the evolution to infant baptism was of interest. I remember watching a movie in my youth that had a missionary in a Polynesian village scrambling to baptize a newborn that had died. In the scene, the priest had scolded the parents for not bringing the child to be baptized, claiming that their negligence cost the child's soul to be lost to Hell. I remember then questioning why one could condemn a baby to damnation. Of course, the work of Hollywood fiction probably skewed the facts and dramatized any reality. However, the context was still interesting. As was covered in the book, this was a theological discussion that had taken place during the Middle Ages and a belief by St. Augustine as well. The concept of limbo brought a light to God's mercy if an infant died before being baptized. That notion satisfied the believers of the time, but is not sufficient for my thinking. I think the road to salvation is much more complicated than "baptized line here" and "non-baptized go down to Hell." Baptism plays a significant role

in initiating one to a family that desires salvation, but I do not feel that it defines whether one goes directly to Heaven or Hell.

It was also refreshing to hear clearer context on Paul's belief of baptism during his time. As stated in the book, Paul felt that baptism was an immersion in Christ. Baptism was a plunge into the new life that Christ died to provide for us. The ritual dunking represented the cleaning of one's sinful past life, and a refreshing plunge into a community of Christ. Although it is now with children and infants, I still feel that baptism shares that welcoming one to a community. It also harbors a spiritual cleaning from mortal sinfulness, and blessings of the Spirit on the infant being embraced as a member of the Body of Christ.

The book discusses how the modern day sacrament is not necessarily have the heartfelt intentions in the past. The audio lecture gives the example of people coming from a foreign country to be a part of a ritual to make them still a part of that foreign entity, but really have no intention of doing anything else in that country. I have seen others, including some friends of mine go through this very practice. It is a social expectation (locally) that you baptize your child. However, if you are not going to raise your child Catholic, or even Christian, you are doing the child, the parish, and yourself a disservice by participating in a sacrament if there is no intention in pursuing the teachings of Christ through the Church further. Yet, the more difficult question is how to proceed. Catholicism is not the only Christian denomination struggling with this question. We want to welcome as many into our community, but also want our community to live life for God. I do not know the best avenue to approach those who are socially baptizing their children. The only thing I can say is that programs that

prepare parents for before and after baptism are probably the first step in how to proceed.

II. Reconciliation

The sacrament of Reconciliation was a huge lesson in learning for me. I honestly knew next to nothing on the origins of confession. The only historical aspect of reconciliation I knew was the selling of indulgences that were tied to confession during the Middle Ages. Therefore, I was ill equipped to speak with any declaration on confession, other than my own experiences. Yet, it has only been in the last 5 years that I have been actively going to confession myself. I was another one of those Catholics who sought forgiveness in private, but lost that special connection that takes place during the sacrament of reconciliation.

Looking back, it is easy to see how private confession became a natural part of Christian life. Since the public decries of atonement for sins was so severe, it was a deterrent for many to come forward and express repentance. However, public penance did deter individuals from going back to a sinful life, as well as serve as an example for others who may stray themselves. It was therefore insightful for those monks described in the book, who went out to the people and listened to the sins of those who had true contrition, and no other means to express and resolve their grief. In reading about these people who would wait a year or more just to have a priest come back and give them God's blessing, not even absolution, for their very long penance made my heart smile and my senses weak.

Throughout my adult life, I had often shrugged aside the blessings of the sacrament of reconciliation due to a combination of pride, ignorance, and fear of opening my fallible self to another person. I have since resolved some of those struggles, but learning about the desire of many pious people to bear their weaknesses knowing the consequences for admission was sometimes severe, was enlightening. In many ways we as a society have lost this humility for sin. I do not believe that public shame for coming forward to ask for God's mercy is necessarily correct, but I do think that there is little examination of conscience by society. Perhaps that is a mix of self involvement, comparison to the sins of Washington and Hollywood's representatives, and loss in fear of God, but regardless, I feel we have lost something in the repentance of sins. Perhaps we can re-educate our youth to understand the acknowledgement of this sacrament of the Church to its current practice so that a more reflective people will come forward for God's mercy through confession.

III. Eucharist

The Eucharist is a sacrament that has always been very special and dear to me. Since I was very aware of Catholicism's belief in the Divine Presence of the Bread and Wine, I have been drawn to educate myself on why we are unique to this theology. Therefore, I had read the history of Eucharistic adoration by John Hardon and was therefore familiar with *Quarant' Ore*, or 40 hour adoration in preparation of celebrating it within our own parish. Although the origins of this devotion took place during a time in which the Eucharist was more magical than spiritual, I have drawn a great deal of admiration and understanding from the devotions of the medieval church.

By participating in the Mass with understanding that it is in preparation for the Liturgy of the Eucharist, one can identify the special sacramental events that happen on the altar with the priest saying the words "This is my Body, given up for you." It makes sense then why bells are chimed during this period, and the genuflection by the priest. To me, it has always been a matter of fact that Jesus is present in the Bread and Wine at the altar. I was not foolish enough, as many medieval and pre-Vatican II Catholics had been, to think that Jesus "lives" in the tabernacle. I know that He is not a genie in a wafer rather than a bottle, waiting for magical words to release Him. However, I do concede that something special does happen at the altar when we remember the Lord's Supper. By revisiting the paschal banquet we honor the sacrifice that was made, the offering of the Lamb of God.

Perhaps the most intriguing lesson I obtained from the Eucharistic portion of the book is directed at how people responded to Communion in medieval, modern church, and even pre-Vatican II church. A lady from our previous class was raised during the Latin Mass practice, and said that she was terrified when going up to receive communion in her hand for the first time for fear that it would burn her hand. This idea was believed by many who felt they were unworthy of even touching Christ in the Eucharist. I wish we could instill a healthy respect for the sacrament of the Eucharist while still feeling comfortable with the blessing of being able to partake in it. The best words in understanding the Eucharist come from Our Lord to St. Maria Faustina Koalska, *"I desire to unite Myself with human souls; Know, My daughter, that when I come to a human heart in Holy Communion, My hands are full of all kinds of graces*

which I want to give to the soul. But souls do not even pay any attention to Me. Oh how sad I am that souls do not recognize Love!"

IV. Confirmation

The sacramental development of Confirmation was particularly interesting to me since it is the core of my involvement in my current parish. I teach religious education to the high school students of the parish, as well as prepare the candidates for confirmation. It always seems that this is the sacrament that we lose the experiential element during the ritual. Many of the kids that I teach go through the motions of Confirmation. They memorize the symbols and try to congeal their recollection of different elements of Church teachings. However, when it gets to the part where they write the Bishop to explain why they are deciding to become adult members in Catholicism, they fall short of looking for Cliff notes. It is almost as if they void all possibility to connect with the spiritual calling. As I stated during class and in previous homework, I feel this is a direct correlation to the "age of consent." The early and current Church's idea that there is a specific age in which one will wake up and decide whether to be a Catholic is rather unfounded. I believe that it is more fitting for young adults to come to that decision in their own time. This will allow for a more meaningful and heartfelt decision, as opposed to our current checklist sacrament.

It was invigorating to go back to the time of the apostles and understand what Confirmation meant for them in practice and in spiritual connection. I drew a lot of inspiration for how to approach some of the events for the next set of candidates (even if they are just going because of their parents). I also have a better understanding of

what aspects of the sacrament should be highlighted for those who are ready.

Specifically, I will be sure to emphasize Confirmation as the initiation of an adult, active member of our Catholic faith who will offer their gifts with us to glorify God.

V. Marriage

The sacrament of Marriage is one that I have experienced first hand. Not only in my own marriage, but the 31 year marriage of my parents, and 50+ year marriages of both my grandparents. I have been blessed with the exposure to this vocation which can be understood as more of a hobby than a sacrament.

This sacrament is one that is as old as time remembers. Although the legality of the sacrament came much later, the premise of two people expressing their love or just arranged commitment to one another has been commonplace in humanity. The lawful aspects of matrimony and the need for a priest to witness the vows for the protection of women was interesting to learn.

I think that the purpose of marriage has perhaps changed making it more sacramental through time. Since arranged marriages for wealth or politics is a thing of the past, marriage has had more opportunity to surface as the joining of two through Christ. I always believed that it is not just two that enter a marriage; it is three, because without Christ, it is not possible to know true love.

Unfortunately, as with many things in society, weddings have become more commercial in nature. Shows like “Who’s wedding is it anyway” and “Bridezillas” would not be popular if there were not an element of reality to their dramatic portrayal. So many people fall in love with the idea of the party and glitz that they lose sight of the

meaning in the act. In these cases the sacramental aspect is overthrown for the infatuation with each other and the “event.” In today’s Church I hope more people take away the hullabaloo in the ceremony, and look for the spiritual connection that starts from I Do, and ends in the last breath. This union is indeed sacramental because it takes Christ’s presence to bind the failures, successes, struggles, and the triumphs. It is sacramental to have a physical and spiritual tie with another human being, and to enhance that connection for the next 60 years with everything that life throws at you.

VI. Anointing of the Sick

The sacrament of the Anointing of the Sick is one that has not changed much throughout the history of the Church. There have always been sick and dying people, and there have always been others praying and trying to heal the physical and spiritual pain of the afflicted. This sacrament did not have many alterations throughout time, other than including ill people to the anointing as opposed to just the dying. By allowing those who are ill to experience the healing of Christ, the sacrament opened up to many who had a spiritual need long before their death.

Anointing of the Sick is a sacrament that I have no direct experience. I have been aware of the history of healing, as well as the current day need for those in my community. However, I have never been present during the sacramental ritual. Therefore, I feel inadequate in speaking to my feelings on the matter. The only thing that I can contribute is a repetition of my experience with praying over my husband’s dying grandfather. Although it was not in presence of a priest, and there was no oil to anoint, I felt as if God was there easing the pain that could not be spoken by grandpa at

the time. It put ease to my mind that I prayed for him so shortly before death, for I do not feel he had the ability to pray for himself. In this way, we were perhaps both anointed through this sacramental act.

VII. Holy Orders

The most monumental learning during this course was the education of the sacrament of Holy Orders. In many ways the sacrament was an enigma to me. However, recently, a childhood friend of mine decided to go to seminary and is currently in discernment. This aspect of my personal life brought about a deeper desire to understand this sacrament.

The first enlightening aspect of Ordination was that it did not exist for at least a century. Many were considered holy people and elders of the Church, but these people were never initiated into the role through any ritual or laying on of hands. As a child, I was taught that St. Peter was our first pope. I was foolish enough to never challenge or pursue further interest in thinking that Peter designated bishops and priests from his position. Rather, it was the need to prevent rogue and incorrect doctrine being spread amongst the churches that created a need for more authoritative clergy figures. In addition, Christianity was growing so rapidly that there was a need for more leaders who could perform priestly duties for the people where the bishop could not. I liked the idea that the people had some input into who would be chosen to be a leader for the flock. As we had stated in class, our Bishop Gettelfinger will be due to retire after this year. It is a complete mystery to us whether he will continue to be our bishop, or whether the Pope will decide to choose another individual. This divorce from the bishop's

appointment has affected our community. Many are ready for our current bishop to retire, while others are scared what direction we will be going with a new person. Regardless, the idea that the community could at least have some voice in possible candidates, as was in the past is valid today.

The other and most riveting thing about Ordination history was the existence of married priests. I had no concept that priests married or even bore children. The very thought of this being an accepted practice was very hard for me to swallow initially. My thoughts were further challenged when learning that priests and bishops were leaving church land to be inherited by their children, which was a contributing factor to the requirement of celibacy later (although it took many years to 'enforce'). Prior to this class, I felt very strongly about priests remaining celibate. The vow of chastity, in my mind, prevented priests from being distracted by the needs of a wife and children. It also could help the priest focus on the many sacramental acts through which Christ is present through priestly action. However, after this course, that belief has weakened. I am not fully convinced of whether married priests are more "pertinent" than chaste priests. I cannot say with any distinction if Marriage is a conflict of interest with Ordination. However, I can say that it has been a very difficult road for my childhood friend. He talks about how he still weighs whether he wants to give up the opportunity for a family for the life of a parish. I then think of how few priests this community has, and is dwindling still. Coupled with the huge problems our clergy has had in the last several years over the scandals of sexual abuse of children, perhaps it is a good time to revisit the sacrament of Holy Orders. Maybe we can see past the legalisms and see what God is trying to tell us. Whether that means priests can be single or married men,

or even women, I cannot say. I do think it is worth looking back to what it means to be priestly, and what role this vocation has in our communities.

VIII. Sacraments

Overall, I can walk away from this course honestly saying that I have been challenged. Sacraments have always been very black and white in my mind. My concept of their meaning and impact on the individual has always been concrete and unchanged since my youth; that is until taking this course. Although the meanings that the sacraments have for me is unchanged, some of my reflection on their future with the Church has been opened. Quite frankly, I am a conservative Catholic for most of my beliefs. I am not opposed to change, but like some structure to my faith. I am not so rigid as to be a Pharisee and count steps on the Sabbath. However, I do think that doctrine can help direct us to the true meaning of our faith, including the sacraments. This is one of the few things that have kept the Catholic tradition alive for centuries. Yet, as I have learned in this book, Catholicism is not without evolution itself. As time passes, there will always be theologians and philosophers asking and seeking further meaning. I encourage this thought, and think that it is necessary in this modern society. Although God never changes, humans do, and that often warrants action to express belief in a way that makes sense for the time without losing sight of the spirit of the belief. Many of our sacraments are especially in this

As I'm sure you noticed, I went through each of my dissertations on the sacraments in the order that I celebrated them (excluding the last two). This is to serve a dual purpose. My original intention is to show how my understanding has grown as I

develop as an active Catholic. However, it also is to express how I have matured in understanding in the class as well. My first and last sacraments of discussion were not intentionally the longest. Yet, they both express my interest to learn and my acknowledgement to the winds of change in our Church. Although you made statements that could be provocative to the mind, I appreciate the challenge to question my belief. It is healthy and necessary for us to validate our understanding. I have found that this class did that very thing. Even though it took me out of the comfort of my science and engineering brain, the philosophical reflection was good for my heart.