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Introduction to the Sacraments  
Spring 2009

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

June 28, 2009

My understanding of the Sacraments has grown tremendously during this class. Learning the history and evolution has brought about a greater understanding in the how's and whys of all the sacraments. This class was well worth the time it required. By learning how the sacraments evolved through via regular use, political limitations, and physical limitations, I have begun to understand the reasons behind many of the why questions I still have floating around in my brain.

### **Sacrament Overview**

The best part of this section was learning about sacramental magic. Just by learning that concept, I am able to apply it as a filter in most every theological discussion. I thought it was very interesting that sacramental magic was prevalent in the Middle Ages because of lack of education, however some of my questions were answered with an explanation of sacramental magic during my RCIA time. I think it has circled around now because of the lack of time devoted to catechesis by laypeople. Some of my friends have passed into the thinking of sacramental magic just because they are looking elsewhere for answers to Life's Mysteries.

I also enjoyed learning about how things can be sacramental vs. just being about the sacraments. I did not realize the sacramentals I had in my life until I understood the definition. While I suspect this distinction was discussed in RCIA, it was a case of the person explaining it did not understand it enough to use different words in order to explain the concept. I also loved the discussion on sacred space, objects and symbols. It really helped with the understanding of my personal experiences.

Since I did not grow up with religious instruction, I do have to admit that the majority of the information presented was new to me. I think this was an advantage since I did not have to

re-program myself in order to understand the material in a new way. As my children go through their Catholic school education, I will call upon the information I was exposed to during this course in an attempt to give the rites a deeper meaning for each one of them.

## **Baptism**

My initial understanding of baptism was as a joining ritual. I thought of baptism as an initiation rite into the membership of a particular church. Something along the lines of joining country club or a sorority as opposed to theological understanding of the event.

Now I see Baptism as the beginning of a covenant with God. Now I see it as a public statement that I am willing to change my life in order to bring it in line with God's plan for me. In the case of baptizing my children, it becomes my public statement that I intend to raise them with the understanding of God's place in their lives.

My understanding of the public aspect of the rite has also changed. With the act of baptism, you are joining a community of faith. Just as you are professing a desire to join the community, the community professes with you, professing to help you in your journey in faith. So the ritual is just not about you but also about the entire community.

Studying the way the rite evolved throughout the ages was instrumental in my new understanding. From the early ages when study was long and intensive to the middle ages when things were quick and hasty, I can see the road this rite has traveled to reach today's form. Understanding the evolution of the ritual throughout the ages has progressed my understanding of the how and why of the current day ritual.

It was most interesting to see how the original rite of baptism broke apart into the rites of infant baptism, communion, and confirmation. It was also interesting to learn the various

reasons for the use of water and oil. I have heard many reasons why they were used but nothing explained the way until I understood that really that was all they had to work with. Also the long initiation period, I know that would not work in today's culture but imagine the catechesis that could be achieved if each person had that personal attention.

### **Confirmation**

Prior to this course, my definition of Confirmation was the time when the Holy Spirit gave you the seven gifts and when teenagers decided for themselves that they were going to follow the Catholic faith.

I never did understand the need for the Bishop's touch or of a combined baptism/communion/confirmation come into play. In fact Confirmation was a barely touched on in RCIA and I think I now understand why.

To be honest, the comment "Legally Catholics were required to be confirmed, though few could explain why" seems to still apply for the most part. I did find it interesting that Confirmation is not a required rite according to theological reasons but is more of a celebration of a person and his/her acceptance of God in their lives. While my confirmation was a huge deal for me, I do not believe my children will have the same experience at their confirmation. As we discussed in class, I am going to try and make the occasion a beginning not an end, a sign of their maturity not just a sign of their age. I do understand why the cookie cutter mentality for teenage confirmation does not seem to speak to our youth. My future hope is that I as a parent will be able to pass on to my children the necessary understanding and faith so their confirmation will be more than just something they should do in their sophomore year.

Confirmations multiple personality over the years seems to have left this option open for me. I plan to still have my *Doors to the Sacred* book and to educate my little ones as to the history so they can have an increased understanding of why they are participating in the rite

### **Eucharist**

The Eucharist was the most fascinating rite to learn about. I do not know if that is because we participate in it more often or if it is because it is more complex. Once again the history we covered in this class, answered many questions for me. In the beginning of this rite, could it have been foreseen to grow into what it was today?

In the early rite, the full meal and companionship of people who believed the same must have been very fulfilling. I had no inkling that this started as a way of discussing and remembering the lessons Jesus taught. It must have been something like an impromptu storytelling session over a meal. I did not fully comprehend the sense of community this would bring about over time. The connections and closeness that this probably engineered must have been a very helpful support system in harsh times.

I had not previously considered how the early Christians would have dealt with the persecution throughout the ages. Since my experience does not include any type of state sanctioned religious persecution, I find the fact that the Christians faith survived amazing. It was interesting to learn that a ruler helped its survival by attempting to unite his kingdom with one religion. I imagine had he picked another faith, where would we be today?

I had previously learned that regular people did not always take communion but I did not understand the complete impact of it until we placed it in the historical perspective. I had never considered the impact of art in religion. Just by depicting Jesus as so far grand and pure, the art

brought about the idea of a person feeling so beneath as to be unworthy of touching the Body and Blood.

### **Reconciliation**

I thought it was very interesting the cycle reconciliation had taken throughout history. I had not ever considered it a public rite as it was first practiced. I also had not considered the fact that the early Christians did not just practice forgiveness. In some cases it almost seemed like prolonged torture. But I know see it was used as a rite of prevention since people would not want to go through the process. I guess it was also a rite of prevention.

### **Anointing**

Understanding the Ritual of Anointing as a early form of healing really framed it for me. Realizing that oil and prayer were really their only options for medicine really ratchets up the importance of this rite for early Christians. With the advent of our scientific and medical advances, I can understand why this rite has faded into the background.

I have heard of some people now using this rite in an attempt to combat emotional/spiritual sickness, i.e. gambling, pornography, and addictions. Maybe this will bring the rite back into the spotlight.

My first understanding of the anointing was of course, the Last Rites. I thought that the Anointing of the Sick had evolved out of Last Rites, instead of the other way around. It places this rite in a different light in this day and age for me.

## **Marriage**

The history of the Marriage Sacrament, I admit was nothing like I expected. Nowadays, I understood the Church's stance on Marriage was based on something like theology of the body – one man, one woman, committed to each other with the intent to procreate. Instead I find out the Church became involved in Marriage in order to protect their lands and assets; a political reason as opposed to a theological reason. That changes my understanding of things a bit for me.

I understand the historical need for someone in authority to witness a valid marriage but what about now? I'm not so sure that reasoning applies anymore based on our readings. After all based on the number of annulments granted each year by the Catholic Church, a percentage of marriages are invalid even when a priest officiates.

## **Ordination**

With ordination, my biggest surprise was how many levels there are in the Church. Popes, Cardinals, Bishops, Priests, Deacons, seems like a lot of levels of management for tending to spiritual vs. material needs. I was also surprised to find out how centric the Church is in reality. It seems to me that the way to help people on their spiritual journey is provide them with charts to navigate by while the Church marks the channels and powers the engines. The level of micromanagement I read about amazes me.

The one thing I found pretty fascinating was the community electing their own leaders vs. being dictated to by someone in authority. I also thought it was interesting that the deacons were more the everyday priest while ordained priest concentrated on only those functions they could perform. I wonder if this will be the future for us as the number of priests decline.