

Reflection Paper

STD 440 Liturgical and Sacramental Theology

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My understanding of sacraments has changed, grown and been challenged during this course on liturgical and sacramental theology. I had ‘pockets’ of information and understanding about the sacraments, but this course has given me the skills to sort, refine and increase my knowledge in this area. My thinking regarding how sacraments function has changed by what I learned about their psychological and social effects and by studying the development of theology from the middle ages to the present day. Also, this course has given me an awareness of the sacramentality of everyday living that has also changed my understanding of the sacraments. Furthermore, my understanding of sacraments has grown through what I have learned about contemporary sacramental theologies. And finally, my understanding of sacraments has been challenged through what I learned about the importance of connecting theology and practice and the responsibility we have as educators to create meaningful experiences for our students.

Although I experience many sacramental effects as a result of partaking in sacramental rituals, I have never considered exactly what these effects are or how they function in my life as a Catholic Christian. A similar experience happened to me as a teacher when I went from teaching high school English to teaching adolescents how to read. I went from teaching students how to give meaning to words in a book to teaching them what specific sounds the letters made that formed the words. Although it sounds simple, it was not an easy task! Understanding my own sacramental experiences mirrored that process because it was also a process of understanding and naming what is at the core of the experience. It meant examining my own affects, or feelings, toward my sacramental experiences, in response to the symbols and the ritual actions and naming that process. In doing so, I am able to take responsibility for my own sacramental encounters. This has been an empowering and liberating way of understanding that will forever change my understanding of the sacraments.

Secondly, this course has changed my understanding of the ways in which I encounter Christ. I used to think that the only time I could have a meaningful encounter with God was when I received Holy Communion at mass. I perceived myself as receiving God's grace only when I was attending to a religious ritual. This course has given me a new understanding of the effects of sacraments that extends also to encounters of God through community and in sacramentals as ways in which I can encounter God's love. Learning about the concepts of sacred time and space was a way in which I was able to see the sacramentality of everyday living. I know now that I can encounter Christ's love not just in the formalized participation of religious rituals. In effect, I can live a more mindful, thoughtful life as I consider the many ways in which God reveals God's self to me and how I can reveal God's love to others. In my vocation as an educator, I have the privilege and the responsibility to communicate this way of living and understanding to my own students who often feel as though they are unwanted or unloved.

Thirdly, this course has given me an understanding of the development of sacramental practices in the early church and the development of theological thinking. I had a basic understanding of Church teachings, as outlined in the Catechism of the Catholic Church; however, before taking this course I did not have an understanding of why Church teaching is what it is today. I did not understand the historical development of sacramental theology. Once I understood the framework that scholastic theologians used to understand sacraments and their effects I was able to make the connection to theological thinking as it developed from the modern age up to the second Vatican council. Furthermore, understanding the concerns brought up by the reformers during the Protestant reformation was also important to appreciate how Catholic theology further evolved at the Council of Trent and in the Vatican II

reforms. Understanding how Catholic theology evolved and understanding the purpose of the sacraments at the time is necessary in order to fully comprehend their intended meaning. This historical information changed the way I understood sacramental theology, as it was understood in the middle ages, and how I now view contemporary approaches.

My understanding of sacraments has grown in this course through the study of contemporary sacramental theologies. These theologies reflect a renewed understanding of Christianity in modern society and they take purely traditional, canonical methodologies and provide them with a more experiential, organic understanding. Edward Schillebeeckx and his theology of the sacraments as encounters with Christ is a theology that resonates with my experience of the sacraments. I can also make connections with Karl Rahner and his theology of sacraments as symbolic actions of the church and to Bernard Cooke and his experiential approach of sacraments as transformations of human reality. Before taking this course, I did not understand my own experience in light of a specific sacramental theology. Once I understood that the sacraments can be understood from many perspectives, my thinking about the sacraments changed. I now have an appreciation for how humans understand and interpret their own experiences that has “opened the doors” to my own understanding of sacraments and has allowed me to consider both their experiential and humanistic elements.

Finally, this course has challenged my thinking about the responsibility I have as a religious educator to provide my students with meaningful sacramental experiences. Specifically, this course provided me with an understanding of the sacrament of confirmation and the disconnect that exists between the theology and its practice. Before taking this course, I did not consider the implications of confirming adolescents to partake in a leadership role in the church when there are essentially no leadership roles that exist for them. I firmly believe, as

Martos states, "...there is a prevailing sense in religious education and catechetics today that if the church's teachings about the sacraments are true, they need to make sense in terms of how people live their lives" (DS, p. 207). In the case of confirmation, while the theology (as expressed in the Catechism) defines specific powers and gifts of the Holy Spirit that are effects of this sacrament, there are limited and few guidelines as to how a lived or experiential effect can be offered to the recipients. If confirmation marks a rite of passage from being a child in the Church to making an adult commitment to the faith, it is obvious, then, that there is a disconnect between the theology and the practice itself since confirmation does not lend itself to leadership opportunities in the church. This understanding challenges my thinking about all of the sacraments and ways in which connections must be made in order to give the sacraments meaning. It is these connections, between what is said and what is done; between the letters on the page and the meanings they form, that provide deep, transformative experiences that touch both the mind and the heart and open doors to the sacred.

In conclusion, taking this course has transformed my view of the sacraments on many different levels and in many different ways. Studying sacraments as both religious rituals and as religious experience has expanded my understanding of how I may encounter these sacramental effects. Understanding the history of the theologies of the sacraments and studying the various theological frameworks of contemporary theologians has deepened my knowledge and given me a perspective in to how theology evolves over time. Finally, I have been challenged by the responsibility that I have, in my vocation as an educator, to provide meaningful experiences for my students so that they might encounter Christ in the official sacraments of the church and in the sacrament of community and fellowship. Furthermore, I feel knowledgeable in my understanding of the sacraments and in their history and psychology. I have the tools to think

critically and the ability to listen and understand and appreciate various points of view. I may have possessed some of these skills before, but I did not know how to use them effectively because I was never provided with a framework from which I could examine and assess and analyze these sacramental processes before. This course has provided me with all of these skills and I am grateful that I was challenged in this way. Thank you, Dr. Martos, for sharing your expertise and for providing a forum whereby both theology and experience were brought to life.