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STD 440

July 28, 2011

### A Shift in My Understanding of Sacraments

With all of the rhetoric tossed around by Catholic school districts, the media, the local Catholic diocese and, traditionally accepted wisdom or modern thinking citizens, it can be difficult to wade through and access the truth about the Church and its traditions. In particular, it has been my contention that no matter how much 'they' pray, preach, legislate, cajole and coerce I must have accuracy of knowledge and make my own judgment, like a journey to the truth. Recently, ascertaining and enhancing my understanding has come through participating in theological courses. Thus, to ensure that false values and blind obedience are not promulgated as well as to navigate the rapid paced newly developed personal freedom of the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> century with vast advances in a multitude of areas, one must slow down and take the time to analyze pockets of interest within the Church. Hence, in securing a better understanding of sacraments through this course, I will examine historical implications, developments due to the Middle Ages, contemporary tensions, spirituality and sacred time, sacred space and sacred meaning, which will encompass all of the sacraments and distinguish whether my interpretation has changed, grown or been challenged.

First, early Christianity left behind a record of its activities through scriptures. However, it is important to note that sacraments in these passages were generally portrayals. Thus, “they had to develop their theology as they went along, relying on what they remembered of what Jesus had said and done, relying on the religious interpretations given by the spiritual leaders of the community, and relying on their own insight in what they and other experienced.” (DS, 27) This is not to say that their analysis was completely unfounded, but to mention that the remarks from that time suited the life in which they were taking part. After that, the Fathers in the patristic period evolved slightly more by taking the Bible seriously and literally, as well as tying experience to the value, the meaning and the perception surrounding sacraments. This study, through each sacrament, of the early church allowed me to change my mind about the foundations of the sacraments. For example, both ordination and marriage had no particular ritual because the people selected their own elders or those who had the most knowledge to guide the members of the church, and arranged marriages were ‘de rigueur’ and did necessitate consent by the church. My knowledge of history was weak in this area and my ability to connect what is discussed in the Bible and its surrounding time periods to the evolution of sacraments was almost non-existent.

Second, the influence of fall of the Roman Empire, invasions of Germanic tribes and Islamic countries, Scholastic philosophers attempting to reconcile faith and reason as well as a permanent schism between branches of Christianity all contributed to an enormous amount of destabilization and change during the Middle Ages. Of note is the rise of the Church to become the dominant power due to a lack

of a single secular government, which would then create the concept of church and state at odds in a power struggle over ultimate authority. In regards to the sacraments, two particular concepts have grown my insight into the Catholic Church. To begin, my knowledge about transubstantiation was severely skewed. With a balance in the presentation of consubstantiation, transfinalization, and transubstantiation, I am able to fully distinguish that “the notion that the reality or substance of the elements truly changed while their appearance remained those of bread and wine.” (DS, 240) Also, I am reaffirmed in understanding that the Protestants had valid reasons to be upset and angered over the institution of the Church and its practices. Now, I am armed with much more information with which to have a discussion regarding the differences between Catholics and Anglicans.

Third, modern society has made its presence known to the Church, in questioning its practices and its traditions. With advances in the social sciences, technology, education and science, one can comprehend the overwhelming amount of pressure that is sure to be felt by the institution and its leaders. However, all is not lost. What is needed is an open dialogue where both Catholicism and progress can be examined and potentially interconnected. Thus, “[i]n technologically advanced cultures where the level of education is high, [sacraments] will need to be a more sophisticated sign of [renewal] and forgiveness, perhaps one that in a liturgical setting enables people to recognize and overcome their estrangement from one another, and in doing that recognize and overcome their estrangement from God.” (DS, 321) For me, the possibility of progression within the Church seemed insurmountable, specifically under the lens of controversial topics such as

birth control, homosexuality, and celibacy within the priesthood and female priests. But, my awareness has been challenged due to our study of the Second Vatican Council. I must admit that I am not quite at the point of expecting to hear the call for a 'Third Vatican Council', particularly with Pope Benedict at the helm. However, in my mind, there is a glimmer of hope due to my ability to see the slow progression that the Church has made in the last 50 years.

Fourth, "[k]nowledge of the psychological and social, ritual and historical, theological and moral dimension of liturgical ceremonies makes us aware that the sacraments have been and still are shaped by individual, institutional, cultural, and even ideological forces." (TS, 218) Thus, the spirituality surrounding sacraments can be viewed through a variety of lenses. However, let us not forget that "the opposite is also true, that is, sacraments have a shaping force of their own." (TS, 218) This interconnectedness demonstrates that personal, communal, ecclesial and global spirituality are avenues with which to investigate and perhaps be open to modification of sacraments based upon newfound appreciations. In my opinion, my perception of the correlation between spirituality and sacraments was a deep chasm. In particular, as I have mentioned previously about meditation, my thought was that the Catholic Church associated spirituality with horoscopes, tarot card readings and yoga. Therefore, I have experienced a great change in my thinking. If I can remain hopeful about the Church being open-minded enough to consider a Third Vatican Council, then I am also able to remember that "it is the heritage of a sacramental church to develop liturgical rites that mediate the eternal in a symbolic language that is always contemporary." (TS, 256) Truly, through proper individual

disposition, “[i]t is the business of sacramental worship to transform us inwardly and outwardly, by awakening in us the dynamics of religious self-transcendence, and by making available the grace to be what we are called by God to be.” (TS, 256)

Fifth, the greatest change in my understanding has been the ‘other’ components that make up sacraments – sacred time, sacred space and sacred meaning. Eliade’s discovery of common elements reinforced that we are invited through “doors to the sacred.” (DS, 7) As well, our disposition is integral in ensuring that the sacred can be experienced because “faith is the key that opens the doors to the sacred.” (DS, 11) Thus, it can be stated that rituals allow one to enter into the sacred in a valid way thereby allowing for reaffirmation of faith, deepening of understanding and significance and, entering into a relationship with God. Further, “[r]ituals are not escapes from life but intensifications of it.” (DS, 17) It is this concept that has allowed for exceptional growth on my part. I am on a continual faith journey and this notion has finally opened up my understanding about another element in my faith. There are moments in one’s life where it can be extremely annoying not to be able to attribute understanding or meaning to what is happening. These three principles allow me to explore memories and encounters where there has been a “transformation of consciousness, an alteration of [my] experience of space and time, in which things have become imbued with new meaning and value.” (DS, 8)

In conclusion, it is difficult to truly grasp the multitude of facets that compose the meaning of sacraments and therefore any one individual’s understanding of this vast notion within the Catholic Church can be rather narrow. Therefore, to reconcile

all of the parts to be examined, one should look at a true integration of all of the qualities and characteristics that allow for the best understanding of the entirety. It is through the examination of the history of the sacraments that one can add tiers of new awareness to a seemingly limitless topic. Further, specifically in reference to me, this course has enabled me to extend my ability to answer questions, to continue my expansion of knowledge regarding the Catholic Church and to foster more conviction and curiosity on the subject of my faith journey.