

How My Understanding of Sacraments Has Grown

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Reflecting back on the past 18 days since the beginning of the course, I am amazed at how much material was covered and how much I have learned about sacrament in the broad sense and about in the restricted sense, the seven sacraments. I appreciated the fact that the course syllabus started from a broad perspective of sacrament and then continued onto the individual sacraments in more detail. The study of how psychology and sociology provide the necessary tools and methods to understand the sacraments I found refreshing. It makes logical sense approaching the sacraments first beginning with the human practice and then reflecting on the Christian community and then specifically how we as Catholics approach and understand the sacraments. I think understanding that sacraments in a broad sense can be understood as universal for all societies and cultures provides the wonderful insight that what we do as Catholics is not something foreign to the human experience but rather comes from a unique perspective of how we interpret meaningful events as individuals and as a community. Applying methodologies from psychology and sociology provides the cultivation of language about societies and cultures that allows Christians to be sympathetic towards understanding a plurality of ways to approaching the study of the sacraments.

The class on the different sacramental theologies was very stimulating for the very fact it introduced us to a wide range of approaches for viewing and understanding the diverse sacramental practices we have in the church. It was nice to be aware of the distinction between the different models from the scholastic period into the modern era and the influence they had on the post Vatican II church. It was during this class that I realized how influential sacramental theology can be and perhaps how exciting a field of study it can be. Focusing a spotlight on not only what we pray but also how we pray shows us what we believe as a church to ourselves and the society around us. The maxim, *Lex orandi, lex credendi*, helps us realize that a key

purpose of the sacraments is to show us what we as a faith community understand as sacred and holy.

I was pleased to discover that even within scholasticism there wasn't a total homogeneous understanding of sacraments and that there were differences between the early and later scholastics. I leave this class with a greater insight and appreciation of the scholastic thought even though I don't find it helpful as an explanation for sacraments in a post-Vatican II church. The two models that intrigued me the most were the liberation and the postmodern approaches because they seem to challenge the church to be relevant and current to the sensibilities and issues' confronting the church as a community.

I thoroughly enjoyed chapter VII in *Doors to the Sacred* and the class that we covered on the eucharist. It provided me with a global understanding of how from a brief and simple meal the eucharist developed into an elaborate and magnificent liturgy sung in Latin and hardly understood by the people participating other than the clergy. In reading the chapter, what stood out for me was how very soon the early Christian church was gathering on a regular basis to share a fellowship meal which included a ritual of bread and wine as a symbol of their unity as a community. I was amazed at how the liturgy of the mass has gone through so many changes and developments and I, like so many people raised in a the Vatican II liturgy, have not always been very understanding of how monumental the new liturgy was to those who underwent the transition. It is only by reflecting on how massive and difficult the changes were that I can put into perspective my own worries about the liturgical changes that will occur this year at the start of advent. Understanding that the eucharistic celebration has not been a static ritual but rather one which is continually evolving to the needs of the times helps me to view liturgy in a more organic manner.

The next exciting section of the course after the chapters on the sociology, psychology and ritual studies were the chapters in *Doors to the Sacred* on baptism and confirmation. I have always struggled with the sacrament of confirmation and I never knew why until I read that part of the book and we discussed baptism and confirmation in class. The sacraments of initiation had separated centuries ago, and the church has had difficulty finding a theology which makes sense of it. Like many cradle Catholics, I was confirmed around 13 years old, and the catechesis that I recall having on the sacrament was that it was about the strengthening of the Holy Spirit. I still remember that fact that I couldn't understand what it was about and thinking perhaps it was because I hadn't paid enough attention. And when the day of my confirmation came I didn't have any spiritual experience other than it was a very long Sunday mass and I was feeling very tired and bored. I have always looked back at my confirmation as a blank experience, and now after taking this class, I know why. It was not so much my inability to understand but rather how the sacrament was taught and the fact the sacrament was no more clearer to the volunteer catechetical teacher than it was to me.

After taking this class I think I have gained a very solid overview of the history and development of the sacraments and how they developed from the apostolic and patristic period through the medieval ages and the impact the scholastics theologians had on Trent and the twentieth century. I appreciated that the course developed a coherent approach and that you used the social sciences to explain how ritual, ceremonies and sacraments in a broad sense are common to all cultures and societies and not unique to Catholics. I believe that by understanding that there are a number of sacramental theologies will assist me with my future theology classes and provide me with a number of different approaches to understanding liturgical practice.

I totally enjoyed the fact that you favour a bottom up and historical approach to liturgy and sacraments, which I believe leads to a much richer understanding of the practice and the theology behind the practice. Also by approaching sacraments from practice, I believe it allows us as students to experience how the fathers of the church and the scholastics too must have struggled to make sense of the signs and symbols they used as doors to the sacred. Although some individuals may have found the experiential approach too uncertain and contingent, I believe it allowed for a greater and more meaningful learning opportunity. Because sacraments are the revelation of the sacred through the human understanding of experiences and symbols, it makes sense to allow students to reflect on them with each other in a dialectical process.