



Episode 7: Sacramental Signs

SUMMARY

The Catholic Church teaches that a sacrament is an outward sign, instituted by Christ, to give grace. Or as the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* puts it:

The sacraments are efficacious signs of grace, instituted by Christ and entrusted to the Church, by which divine life is dispensed to us. (n°. 1131)

In any case, a sacrament is comprised of two parts: the perceptible sign. It is something we can see, or smell, or touch, or taste, or hear. In the tradition, this is called the “*sacramentum*.” Then there is the invisible reality, called the “*res*” by the tradition. It is ultimately the grace of God.

We should consider these two things in every sacramental experience. Ideally the meaning of the sacramental sign should be evident. For this to happen, though, we must be completely invested in the Christian culture from which the meaning flows.

Baptism provides a great example, because to the Christian mind, water (the sacramental sign) is not simply a chemical formula: H₂O. It takes its meaning, not from science, but from the scriptures: Creation (Gn 1:2), the Great Flood (Gn 7), the crossing of the Red Sea (Ex 12-14), the Jordan (Jos 3-5; Mt 3; Mk 1; Lk 3), the blood and water flowing from the side of Christ (Jn 19: 34). Water for Christians means cleansing, washing, and purifying.

Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy

... the visible signs used by the liturgy to signify invisible divine things have been chosen by Christ or the Church. Thus not only when things are read “which were written for our instruction” (Rom. 15:4), but also when the Church prays or sings or acts, the faith of those taking part is nourished and their minds are raised to God, so that they may offer Him their rational service and more abundantly receive His grace. (n°. 33)

Dogmatic Constitution on the Church

Our union with the Church in heaven is put into effect in its noblest manner especially in the sacred Liturgy, wherein the power of the

Holy Spirit acts upon us through sacramental signs. Then, with combined rejoicing we celebrate together the praise of the divine majesty; then all those from every tribe and tongue and people and nation who have been redeemed by the blood of Christ and gathered together into one Church, with one song of praise magnify the one and triune God. Celebrating the Eucharistic sacrifice therefore, we are most closely united to the Church in heaven in communion with and venerating the memory first of all of the glorious ever-Virgin Mary, of Blessed Joseph and the blessed apostles and martyrs and of all the saints. (n°. 50)

IN THE TRADITION

There can be no religious society, whether the religion be true or false, without some sacrament or visible symbol to serve as a bond of union. The importance of these sacraments cannot be overstated, and only scoffers will treat them lightly.

Augustine of Hippo, *Contra Faustum*, n°. 19.11

THE TEACHING OF THE CHURCH

✠ “From where do the sacramental signs come? Some come from created things (light, water, fire, bread, wine, oil); others come from social life (washing, anointing, breaking of bread). Still others come from the history of salvation in the Old Covenant (the Passover rites, the sacrifices, the laying on of hands, the consecrations). These signs, some of which are normative and unchangeable, were taken up by Christ and are made the bearers of his saving and sanctifying action.”

Compendium of the Catechism of the Catholic Church (CCC), n°. 237

✠ “Actions and words are very closely linked in the celebration of the sacraments. Indeed, even if the symbolic actions are already in themselves a language, it is necessary that the words of the rite accompany and give life to these actions. The liturgical words and actions are inseparable both insofar as they are meaningful signs and insofar as they bring about what they signify.”

Compendium of the CCC, n°. 238

IN THE PRAYER OF THE CHURCH

Communion Antiphon

That life which was with the Father became visible, and has appeared to us.

1 John 1:2

Prayer after Communion

May your divine Sacrament, O Lord, which we have received, fill the inner depths of our heart and, by its working mightily within us, make us partakers of its grace. Through Christ our Lord.

Saturday, Second Week of Lent

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. What sacramental signs are most visible to you at the celebration of Mass?
2. How can you attune yourself to recognizing the sacramental signs?

FOR FURTHER READING

Randy Stice, *Understanding the Sacraments of Healing: A Rite-Based Approach*, (Chicago: Liturgy Training Publications, 2015).

Liam Walsh, op, *Sacraments of Initiation: A theology of Life, Word, and Rite*, 2nd edition, (Chicago: Hillenbrand Books, 2011). See especially chapter 1-3.