Kenrick-Glennon Seminary

"Is This Not the Son of Joseph?":
The Thomistic Theory of the Instrumental Efficient Causality of the Sacraments As a Means of Restoring Man's Supernatural Sense

by

Rev. Mr. Ryan T. Quarnstrom
Archdiocese of Saint Louis

Dr. Lawrence Feingold, S.T.D.
Advisor

Rev. Kristian Teater, S.Th.D.
Reader

A Thesis Submitted to the Faculty of the Kenrick School of Theology
in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the
Degree of Master of Arts in Theology

Saint Louis, Missouri
December 19, 2022

Abstract

A survey of contemporary society's relationship with the sacramental economy reveals an immense challenge for the Church's mission, which must help the faithful receive the fullness of grace God wishes to dispense through the sacramental mysteries. Although the Church officially teaches no system of causality, the Thomistic theory of the Sacraments as instrumental, efficient causes of grace serves the New Evangelization by emphasizing how God works through ordinary, created realities to accomplish supernatural effects. In this way, St. Thomas offers something fundamental to the development of a sacramental spirituality, especially if it will be equipped to combat the obstacles of the modern age and its difficulty in interpreting the symbolic language of the liturgy. While non-Thomistic theories rightly emphasize important elements of the sacramental economy, the Thomistic theory of sacramental causality and efficacy, by understanding the Sacraments as instrumental, efficient causes of grace, provides an accurate theological framework for the restoration of man's supernatural sense and the construction of a properly-informed sacramental spirituality, indispensable elements of the New Evangelization.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION **2**

CHAPTER I: The Sacramental Economy and the Modern Era **7**

The Incarnation 7

The Institution of a Sacramental System 10

The Church's Missionary Mandate 13

Contemporary Survey 16

Sheed's Disease 19

The Struggle with Symbols 21

The New Evangelization 22

Recovering Man's Supernatural Sense 24

CHAPTER II: Instrumental Efficient Causality According to St. Thomas **29**

Ex Opere Operato 29

Aristotelian Causes 31

Sacramental Instrumentality 32

Conjoined and Separated Instruments 35

Obediential Potency of the Recipients 37

Twofold Instrumental Causality 38

How God Employs a Created Thing as an Instrument of Grace 41

CHAPTER III: Toward a Sacramental Spirituality **47**

The Primacy of Faith 47

Sacraments and the Liturgical Cycle 50

Calling on the *Res et Sacramentum* 52

Medicinal Sacramentality 55

The Sunday Obligation 58

Restoring the Supernatural Sense 63

Marian Wonder 68

CONCLUSION **71**

BIBLIOGRAPHY **75**

INTRODUCTION

"Is this not the son of Joseph?"[1]

To the modern reader of Scripture, these words pierce the heart. They must have pierced Jesus's heart, too. Ultimately, the question communicates a deep suspicion: Jesus must be a mere man. Gathered that day at the synagogue in Nazareth, some wondered at His words of preaching, while others perhaps grew jealous. As they listened in, the bystanders whispered, "Is this not the son of Joseph?" By reducing Him to being only the carpenter's son, they can avoid confronting the scandalous possibility of His divinity. If they can assure themselves of His humanity, perhaps they can dismiss His message. If they can only explain where He is from, then perhaps they can remain unaffected by His power. Perhaps nothing has to change.

In so many ways, this question has echoed throughout the history of the Church, and it continues to do so today. Albeit in a different mode, the same Jesus longs ardently to meet the people of this age, and to do so through the power of His Sacraments, by which His saving power transcends the centuries to reach souls today. Beneath all the visible signs and external layers, is there really something divine? Can that same Jesus of Nazareth work His marvelous healings today with the same effect? Can His power still reach souls 2000 years temporally distant? In the hearts of today's faithful, the same question resounds, "Is this not the son of Joseph?" When they approach the Sacraments, they ask, is this not only bread and wine? Is this not just olive oil? How does God communicate His saving grace in the Sacraments?

[1] Luke 4:22 *Literal Standard Version (LSV)*; cf. Matthew 13:55, John 6:42

Truly, the incarnational reality of the Sacraments gives rise to many of the same questions that Jesus prompted in His hearers that day in the synagogue. How can this man, who appears so ordinary, accomplish such extraordinary things? As Cyprian Vagaggini notes in *Theological Dimensions of the Liturgy*, "Christ Himself, whose humanity was but a transparent veil through which, to the eyes of faith, the divinity shone forth, did not prevent that same humanity from being for many a stumbling block. How much more inevitable, then, that the externals and the human element in the liturgy . . . should also be a stumbling block and a scandal to many."[2] Without a doubt, this still constitutes a challenge for the Church's mission. In her efforts at evangelization, the Church must help her people to pierce the sacramental veil, to be inspired by and attracted to all that happens in the supernatural realm, beneath the visible surface of Christ's saving work.

When one understands how these Sacraments work, one learns to answer the question: "Is this not the son of Joseph?" Does this same Jesus really work *now* through such human means in the Sacraments? In his writings, St. Thomas Aquinas (AD 1225-1274) proposes one such way of explaining sacramental operation: the theory of instrumental, efficient causality, which understands the Sacraments as true instruments and efficacious causes of grace. While non-Thomistic theories rightly emphasize important elements of the sacramental economy, the Thomistic theory of sacramental causality and efficacy, by understanding the Sacraments as instrumental, efficient causes of grace, provides an accurate theological framework for the restoration of man's

[2] Cyprian Vagaggini, *Theological Dimensions of the Liturgy*, trans. Leonard J. Doyle and W. A. Jurgens (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1976), 305.

supernatural sense and the construction of a properly-informed sacramental spirituality, indispensable elements of the New Evangelization.

In order to understand its vital role within the mission of the Church, this thesis begins by providing an overview of the sacramental economy. During His earthly life, Jesus instituted a sacramental system, whereby He incorporates souls into the Church He founded and sustains them on their journey to eternal life. By these Sacraments, He configures men to Himself by giving them a share in His own divine life. As the ordinary means of man's salvation, the Church strives to introduce everyone to their power. A look at contemporary society, however, reveals serious difficulties in helping people perceive their necessity, most notably an inability to read the symbolic language of the liturgy and perceive their supernatural effects. By diagnosing these obstacles, this thesis hopes to propose an aid adapted to the particular needs of the New Evangelization.

As the second chapter explains, St. Thomas proposes such an aid in his mature theory of sacramental causality, which argues that the Sacraments cause the grace they signify by acting as true instruments of Christ's humanity throughout time. After establishing the general fact of sacramental efficacy, this chapter reviews Aristotelian causes in order to identify one of them as especially relevant to the sacramental order. Next, it considers the nature of instruments and how they might operate within the sacramental system as causes of grace, which the Sacraments educe from the obediential power within souls. Lastly, this chapter considers the mechanics of instrumental, efficient causality, defending against the objection that a created thing cannot act as an instrument of divine life. Ultimately, how one understands sacramental causality has implications for

one's participation in the Sacraments and his broader approach to the practice of spirituality.

Based on the importance of the sacramental system and the Thomistic theory of causality within it, this thesis directs its attention to pastoral considerations regarding sacramental spirituality. Recognizing the foundational role of the gift of faith, this final chapter proposes a way of approaching the sacred liturgies of the Church as the vital contexts for the communication of sanctifying grace. By causing real changes within souls, the sacramental instruments confer an abiding power to fulfill the particular mission of each Sacrament, which should be called upon as a vital resource for each soul in its life of grace. Particularly suited to human anthropology with their exterior and interior components, the Sacraments act as a healing remedy for the wounds of sin, which offers an important foundation for sacramental spirituality. As the weekly commemoration of the Lord's Resurrection, Sunday remains a sacred day for the communal worship of God. Instead of being perceived as an obligation, the New Evangelization can equip souls instead to perceive the spiritual benefits they receive by means of instrumental causality. As a result, man possesses an important insight into the divine pedagogy, which allows him to perceive the supernatural order in profound and inspiring ways. If his supernatural sense operates correctly, man approaches the Sacraments with a living and vibrant faith, which sees beyond the bread, wine, and oil to contemplate true spiritual realities. This, in turn, leads man to wonder with Our Lady at the marvelous mysteries of divine providence, by which God divinizes souls and accomplishes the world's salvation.

Having explored these topics, this thesis aims to promote something essential in the Church's missionary efforts, by which the faithful should be strengthened in their practice of the faith. Far from being empty rituals devoid of meaning, the Sacraments cause sanctifying grace in the souls of all who approach them with the proper disposition. As the word *Catholic* means "universal," the Church strives eagerly to extend their reach throughout the whole world, so that Christ's saving humanity continues to work through the Sacraments. By preaching and teaching about the Thomistic theory of instrumental, efficient causality, the Church sharpens the faithful's supernatural sense and disposes them rightly to receive that fullness of life God intends for all.

CHAPTER I: The Sacramental Economy and the Modern Era

In every age of the world, God draws close to His people that they might know the richness of His love and so respond in the fullness of faith. St. Paul declared, God "desires all men to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth."[3] While respecting their free choice, God the Father, through the work of His Son, offers man a unique interchange of His own divine life by which this work should be accomplished. Powered by the Paschal Mystery, this sacramental economy serves as the ordinary means of salvation for the whole human race, yet so many remain far from its life and blessings.

With responsibility for the whole human race, the Church strives to overcome this distance in her catechetical and evangelical efforts. Regardless of the reasons or extent of this chasm, a survey of contemporary society reveals that it is necessary to restore the supernatural sense in those for whom the Sacraments have lost their sacred character and vital efficacy. In order to see how the Thomistic theory of sacramental causality serves this end, it will be necessary to understand the sacramental economy more broadly and to see the Incarnation as its essential foundation.

The Incarnation

Since the Fall, God longed to reconcile and restore His relationship with humanity, which had been devastated by original sin. Where there once had been immortality, sin brought death. Where there once existed harmony and life without pain, sin brought disorder and suffering. To offer a remedy, then, God assumes human nature in order to redeem it, sending His only Son so that the whole world might be saved

[3] 1 Timothy 2:4 *Revised Standard Version Catholic Edition (RSVCE)*. Unless otherwise noted, all translations use the *RSVCE*.

through Him.[4] Yet time and again throughout the Scriptures, the logic of superabundance characterizes divine wisdom, because God refuses to content Himself with a mere restoration of the original condition. On the contrary, he surpasses it.

In his treatise, *De Incarnatione*, St. Athanasius (c. AD 293-373) famously explained:

> He [God], indeed, assumed humanity that we might become God. He manifested Himself by means of a body in order that we might perceive the Mind of the unseen Father. He endured shame from men that we might inherit immortality. He Himself was unhurt by this, for He is impassible and incorruptible; but by His own impassibility He kept and healed the suffering men on whose account He thus endured.[5]

God the Creator, eternally perfect in Himself and lacking nothing, desired to become human, so that these human creatures might become divine. Theologians refer to this marvelous mystery of God's Providence as "divinization" or "deification," whereby men receive the grace to be transformed into God Himself, while always retaining their distinct personhood and individuality. By this grace, most easily received through the Sacraments, men are made holy. As Jesus Himself expressed it, "I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly."[6]

For a fuller understanding, one may consider this reality according to the *exitus-reditus* schema, founded upon the reality of God as man's primal origin and final end. Manifested by the Incarnation, this descending dimension of God's plan for human divinization may best be understood as an *exitus*, God's "going out" from His own interior communion towards mankind. The Word Made Flesh takes on human nature, and then dignifies and elevates it by His *reditus* ("return") back to the Father. In this *reditus*,

---

[4] Cf. John 3:16-17
[5] Athanasius, *On the Incarnation*, 8, 54, trans. Religious of C.S.M.V. (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Orthodox Theological Seminary, 1982), 93.
[6] John 10:10

God lovingly invites men to cooperate with Him, so that they might be enriched and enlivened by His graces and gifts. The prophet Isaiah alluded to this cycle centuries earlier:

> For as the rain and the snow come down from heaven, and return not thither but water the earth, making it bring forth and sprout, giving seed to the sower and bread to the eater, so shall my word be that goes forth from my mouth; it shall not return to me empty, but it shall accomplish that which I purpose, and prosper in the thing for which I sent it. For you shall go out in joy, and be led forth in peace.[7]

Observing the ascending and descending dimensions of this divine interchange, one comes to an awareness of God's immense gift. In the words of St. Paul, "No eye has seen, nor ear heard, nor [has] the heart of man conceived, what God has prepared for those who love him."[8]

When the Word Made Flesh enters into time, God fulfills the central promise of salvation history. Incarnate by the Holy Spirit in the womb of the Virgin Mother, Jesus becomes the perfect mediator, gloriously uniting His own divine nature with that of His created humanity. Indeed, as Pope St. Leo the Great (c. AD 400-461) wrote in AD 449, "We could not overcome the author of sin and death had not Christ taken on our nature and made it His; sin could not defile Him nor death hold Him in bondage."[9] Providentially, this hypostatic union of two distinct natures in a single divine person makes Jesus of Nazareth the perfect bridge between God and man, and this unique capacity composes the necessary foundation for the sacramental order.

---

[7] Isaiah 55:10-12
[8] 1 Corinthians 2:9
[9] Leo the Great, *Letter to Bishop Flavian*, 28, in *The Fathers of the Church: St. Leo the Great*, trans. Edmund Hunt (New York: Fathers of the Church, 1957), 93.

The Institution of a Sacramental System

Saints in every age have marveled at the Incarnation, the pivotal moment in human history. In his famous Christological defense known as *The Tome*, St. Leo the Great continues,

> The Son of God, then, enters into this weakness of the world, coming down from His heavenly throne, begotten in a new type of birth, but not departing from His Father's glory in the new order. The 'order was new' in that, being invisible in His own nature, He became visible in ours; incomprehensible, He desired to be comprehended; enduring before time began, He began to exist in time; the Lord of the universe assumed the aspect of servitude *with a shadow veiling the immensity of His majesty*. A God incapable of suffering, He deigned to become a man who could suffer, and, being immortal, to become subject to the laws of death.[10]

In order to appear among men, God veils Himself from their eyes, concealing His divinity so that the people of first century Palestine could interact with Him. Centuries earlier, Moses veiled his face after speaking with God, because it emitted a strange light to Aaron and the other Israelites.[11] At the Transfiguration, St. Peter was so moved by a glimpse of Jesus' divinity that he never wanted to leave—a foretaste of Heaven![12]

In just the same way, God hides His power in the Sacraments. Considering the Eucharist above all, one sees the glorious humanity of Jesus veiled from human eyes, while simultaneously preserved in tens of thousands of tabernacles throughout the world. Put differently, the divine logic of the Incarnation carries over into the Sacraments. Yet while this so adeptly serves God's purpose, it also poses a great challenge and obstacle to man, because in so doing, God permits the deniability of His power and divinity. By

[10] Leo the Great, *Letter to Bishop Flavian*, 97. Emphasis added.
[11] Cf. Exodus 34:29-35
[12] Cf. Matthew 17:4, Mark 9:5, Luke 9:33

making Himself so hidden and small, He allows Himself to be denied, ignored, overlooked, and even rejected, just as He was in the flesh.

Within this framework, Jesus institutes a system of seven Sacraments, understood by the *Catechism* as "the signs and instruments by which the Holy Spirit spreads the grace of Christ the Head throughout the Church which is his Body."[13] In the Sacraments, external signs of deeper, interior realities cause the communication of grace to the souls of the recipients, thereby divinizing them and configuring them more closely to God. To accomplish this, the sacramental order relies on matter (the physical, material object) and form—the words spoken which give meaning to the matter. Together, they compose the sacramental sign.

While the recipient only sees the physical action, faith leads him also to know and believe in the parallel, interior reality. In the Sacrament of Baptism, for example, one receives an exterior, physical washing with water, which signifies and simultaneously causes an interior, spiritual cleansing from sin. Throughout the Gospels, one sees real power communicated by Christ's words. Commenting on this point, Lawrence Feingold in *Touched by Christ*, writes, "Two thousand years ago the Word Incarnate pronounced words of power in His public ministry. At His word, the wind and sea were calmed, lepers and paralytics were healed, the dead rose, and sins were forgiven. His words accomplished what they signified because the Son of man is also the Son of God by whose word all things are governed."[14] Today, when Jesus "speaks" through His Sacraments, His words are no less effective.

---

[13] *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 2nd ed. (Washington, DC: United States Catholic Conference, 2000), § 774.
[14] Lawrence Feingold, *Touched by Christ: The Sacramental Economy* (Steubenville: Emmaus Academic, 2021), xxxi-xxxii.

In fact, the Church has always insisted so strongly on the efficacy of these sacramental signs that they compose the ordinary means of salvation for the entire human race after Christ. The Church is only able to call herself the ordinary means of salvation because of the immense power entrusted to her in the Sacraments. By them, she receives new members, strengthens them, feeds them, reconciles them, and prepares them for death. In *Meeting Christ in the Sacraments*, Colman O'Neill, O.P., illustrates this well:

> The body of Christ was the sacrament of redemption while Christ was on earth; it retains its sacramentality now that Christ is glorified. On earth the divine mystery of redemption was carried out by Christ in his humanity; and, just as man's external actions execute and make known his intentions, so Christ's body, in its actions and in what it suffered, signified or made known the hidden movements of Christ's soul by which he freely obeyed the command of his Father offering his life for our redemption . . . Now that Christ is glorified in heaven and has become the source of the Spirit, his body remains for the eye of faith the sacrament of salvation.[15]

While Christ is the Head, the Church is His Mystical Body. Through Him and His Church, He opens up for the faithful the wellspring of divine life hidden in the Sacraments.

In every age, the Church offers the world that stream of living water about which Jesus spoke in the Gospels.[16] To all who approach in right faith, the Church offers a fountain of grace, according to the invitation of Christ: "Whoever drinks of the water that I shall give him will never thirst; the water that I shall give him will become in him a spring of water welling up to eternal life."[17] As an ever-flowing torrent of living water, the Sacraments satiate spiritual thirst. Responding to this invitation, the prayer of every believer should echo the words of the Samaritan woman: "Sir, give me this water, that I

[15] Colman E. O'Neill, *Meeting Christ in the Sacraments* (New York: Society of St. Paul, 1991), 80-81.
[16] Cf. John 7:37-38
[17] John 4:14

may not thirst."[18] Although Jesus reveals this truth in first century Palestine, He intends it to be shared with the people of every time and place until His return.

The Church's Missionary Mandate

In the Holy Spirit, God the Father invites all people to salvation through His Son. At the conclusion of Matthew's Gospel, Jesus presents His Apostles with the Great Commission: "Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, to the close of the age."[19] When Jesus sends His Apostles throughout the earth, He sends them with the Sacraments. Indeed, by means of these mysteries, He fulfills His promise to remain with His Church for all time. Since the day of Pentecost, the Holy Spirit has protected, guided, and inspired the People of God in every century.[20] Yet beyond this, Christ also remains with His Church through the sacramental mysteries He instituted—above all and most importantly, in the Eucharist.

While itself a historical event, the sheer power of Christ's Paschal Mystery cannot be contained to a single moment in time; by means of the Sacraments, it transcends time and touches every age.[21] Christ's saving humanity, which establishes His role as perfect

---

[18] John 4:15
[19] Matthew 28:19-20
[20] Cf. Acts 2
[21] The *Catechism* expounds this beautifully: "In the liturgy of the Church, it is principally his own Paschal mystery that Christ signifies and makes present. During his earthly life Jesus announced his Paschal mystery by his teaching and anticipated it by his actions. When his Hour comes, he lives out the unique event of history which does not pass away: Jesus dies, is buried, rises from the dead, and is seated at the right hand of the Father 'once for all.' His Paschal mystery is a real event that occurred in our history, but it is unique: all other historical events happen once, and then they pass away, swallowed up in the past. The Paschal mystery of Christ, by contrast, cannot remain only in the past, because by his death he destroyed death, and all that Christ is—all that he did and suffered for all men—participates in the divine eternity, and so transcends all times while being made present in them all. The event of the Cross and Resurrection *abides* and draws everything toward life" (*CCC*, 1085).

mediator, did not serve an isolated, singular purpose, but one that is all-encompassing and infinite. For this reason, the Fathers of the Second Vatican Council taught the following in its decree *Ad Gentes*: "What the Lord preached that one time, or what was wrought in Him for the saving of the human race, must be spread abroad and published to the ends of the earth (Acts 1:8), beginning from Jerusalem (cf. Luke 24:27), so that what He accomplished at that one time for the salvation of all, may in the course of time come to achieve its effect in all."[22] Empowered by the infinite and transcendent nature of Christ's sacrifice, the Sacraments apply the fruits of the Passion to the souls of their recipients—a fundamental principle for understanding the entire sacramental economy.

As that "true light that enlightens every man," the Incarnate Word extends His power throughout history.[23] Illustrating this further, Feingold explains, "The Sacraments are instruments that effect a mysterious extension of Christ's humanity and the merit of His Paschal Mystery, enabling Him, His words of power, His Passion and Resurrection, and His Spirit to touch us today."[24] Primarily and ordinarily by this means, then, will St. John's vision in Revelation reach fulfillment: "I looked, and behold, a great multitude which no man could number, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and tongues, standing before the throne and before the Lamb."[25] Herein lies the true meaning and purpose of the Catholic Church, since *catholic* means "universal."

Through the Sacraments, He intends to draw all people into His Mystical Body, and Our Lord insists quite firmly on this point. In *General Principles of Sacramental*

---

[22] Vatican Council II. Decree on the Missionary Activity of the Church *Ad Gentes*, (7 December 1965) §3, at The Holy See, https://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_decree_19651207_ad-gentes_en.html.
[23] John 1:9
[24] Feingold, 114.
[25] Revelation 7:9

Theology, Roger Nutt notes, "God is not the author of many plans of salvation, as if the plan realized in Christ and passed on to the Church with the commission to 'baptize all nations' was but one among many."[26] Until the end of time, the Catholic Church and her Sacraments remain the ordinary means of salvation for the whole human race. Where there exists a great dignity, so also a great responsibility. In subsequent ages, Christ calls every member of the Church—clerical, religious, and lay—to take up this responsibility faithfully, and with great joy, to extend His kingdom throughout the earth.

Consequently, the Church must ensure access to these instruments of Christ's saving work in every corner and age of the world. More difficult, however, may be presenting these sources of grace not only as necessary, but also in themselves, desirable. Extending the effects and power of the Sacraments only composes one aspect in the larger mission of evangelization. In 1990, St. John Paul II acknowledged this broader, daunting task at the outset of his encyclical *Redemptoris Missio*: "The mission of Christ the Redeemer, which is entrusted to the Church, is still very far from completion . . . an overall view of the human race shows that this mission is still only beginning and that we must commit ourselves wholeheartedly to its service."[27] As the world grows, so do the number of those who have never heard the Gospel. In today's society, especially, even if they have heard the Gospel, an ever-increasing number reject the premise of organized religion. Through her evangelizing efforts, then, the Church must propose to every soul the transcendent beauty and ritualized power of Christ offered in His Sacraments.

---

[26] Roger W. Nutt, *General Principles of Sacramental Theology* (Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America, 2017), 90-91.

[27] John Paul II, Encyclical on the Permanent Validity of the Church's Missionary Mandate *Redemptoris Missio* (7 December 1990) §1, at The Holy See, https://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_jp-ii_enc_07121990_redemptoris-missio.html.

Contemporary Survey

Surveying ecclesiastical history, one quickly realizes that every century brings its own unique challenges into which the Gospel must be preached and the kerygma proclaimed. While maintaining some redeeming qualities, this century is no exception. With all its modernist and secularist tendencies, today's culture finds great difficulty allowing the Gospel to take root.[28] As a modern commentary on the Church's mission, Ralph Martin's *A Church in Crisis* decries the current milieu:

> Great masses of Catholics have not been properly evangelized, formed in the faith, and incorporated into local church bodies and are being blown about by 'every wind of doctrine' and seduced by the lies of the culture. The statistics that continually show the unrelenting decline of true Catholic belief among those who identify as Catholic and who increasingly are taking on the 'mind of the world' are clear evidence that something is radically deficient in the effectiveness of our pastoral strategy and in our teaching and preaching.[29]

Although he acknowledges that some obstacles appear perennially, Martin considers the current anti-Christian animus to be pervasive and powerful, maintaining a much stronger hold than in recent ages.[30] Even within this climate, the power of the Sacraments must reach souls and sanctify the world.

In the summer of 2019, the Pew Research Center released a now-famous study, to which Martin perhaps refers, with striking figures about Catholics' belief in the Real Presence. Remarkably, only 31% of the Catholics polled indicated belief in the Church's teaching about transubstantiation. Of the remaining two-thirds, 22% claimed to know about transubstantiation, but persisted in seeing the bread and wine merely as symbols.[31]

---

[28] Cf. Matthew 13:1-23, Mark 4:1-20, Luke 8: 1-15
[29] Ralph Martin, *A Church in Crisis: Pathways Forward* (Steubenville, OH: Emmaus Road Publishing, 2020), 233-234.
[30] Cf. Martin, 233.
[31] Gregory A. Smith, "Just One-Third of U.S. Catholics Agree with Their Church That Eucharist Is Body, Blood of Christ," *Pew Research Center* (Pew Research Center, May 30, 2020), last modified May 30,

Among those who reported attending Mass weekly or more, the number only rises to 63%; in other words, a striking 37% of weekly Mass-going Catholics believe the bread and wine are symbols, missing the substantial presence of Jesus in front of them every Sunday! While every polling mechanism expects some margin of error, these numbers are bleak. Put differently, a majority of U.S. Catholics only admit belief in what they can see, in what appears merely physical, corporeal, and tangible. Large numbers of the faithful miss the spiritual and supernatural reality entirely.

In response to this survey, the U.S. Bishops saw an impetus for change. When the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops (USCCB) approved their next strategic plan for 2021-2024, the Eucharist became a central focus:

> The Committee for Evangelization and Catechesis is coordinating the effort to explore, plan and execute a National Eucharistic Congress. Declining Mass attendance, the lack of understanding of the real presence of Christ in the Eucharist, and increasing religious disaffiliation are major challenges facing the Church today. The committee has recognized that the return to the Eucharist as the 'source and summit' of who we are and what we do as Catholics is key to revitalization.[32]

For the USCCB, the strategic process of reviving Eucharistic faith will culminate in Indianapolis in 2024 with the National Eucharistic Congress. Until that time, individual U.S. dioceses are expected to consider how they can best revitalize the Eucharist in their own regions, catechizing the faithful on the reality of transubstantiation.

While the Eucharist remains only one among seven Sacraments, a trend has become clear: lack of faith in the hidden and unseen of the Sacramental order poses a serious obstacle for today's Church. In his first Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii*

2020, accessed November 24, 2021, https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2019/08/05/transubstantiation-eucharist-u-s-catholics/.

[32] United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, *Thematic Framework of the 2021-2024 USCCB Strategic Plan* (Washington, DC: United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, 2020), 7.

Gaudium, Pope Francis himself notes, "In the prevailing culture, priority is given to the outward, the immediate, the visible, the quick, the superficial, and the provisional. What is real gives way to appearances."[33] As a result, the seeming obscurity of the Sacraments' spiritual nature has become harder to see. A pragmatic society accustomed to efficiency and transactionalism possesses a waning interest in the supernatural order of grace, in what appears small, invisible, and hidden. In fact, Pope Francis considers this skeptic malaise to result from a wholesale rejection of the supernatural, which has led to many other challenges to evangelical efforts: "The process of secularization tends to reduce the faith and the Church to the sphere of the private and personal. Furthermore, *by completely rejecting the transcendent*, it has produced a growing deterioration of ethics, a weakening of the sense of personal and collective sin, and a steady increase in relativism. These have led to a general sense of disorientation."[34] When one approaches the Sacraments within this haze of modern life, it undoubtedly becomes harder to believe in God's power and presence beneath the sacramental signs.

If one rejects the transcendent, there exists no possibility of understanding the Sacramental economy. Indubitably, the reasons for this crisis vary immensely in both their number and their complexity, and in some degree, this challenge will always be present, just as it was for those who walked with Jesus Himself. In order for the Sacraments to achieve a fuller effect in the lives of believers, the Church must teach clearly and catechize strongly on the interaction between the physical and the spiritual. As a composite of body and soul, man himself has the same divine logic written within

[33] Francis, Apostolic Exhortation on the Joy of the Gospel *Evangelii gaudium*, (November 24, 2013), §62 (Boston: Pauline Books and Media, 2013), 45.
[34] *Evangelii Gaudium*, §64, emphasis added.

him that also serves as the basis for the Sacramental economy. The Sacraments cause real, spiritual effects through sensible, external signs, and an excessive focus on the physical fails to acknowledge the primacy of the spiritual.

Sheed's Disease

In the last century, Frank Sheed (1897-1981) was a Catholic author and commentator who drew attention to this same danger, offering a diagnosis for this seemingly unavoidable challenge. "Sheed's disease," as it may be called, refers to the difficulty in piercing through the exterior veil of the sacramental mysteries into the interior reality. Toward the end of his autobiography *The Church and I*, Sheed muses, "The trouble about sacraments is that the whole atmosphere of our world makes it hard to feel their reality. It is not only the non-Catholic who asks how pouring water on the head can make an eternal difference to the soul. How can it affect the soul at all?"[35] Even for believers, he admits, acknowledging the supernatural order poses a real and significant hurdle, because it demands what the author of Hebrews calls "the conviction of things not seen."[36] For the Catholic, this hurdle provides precisely for the merit of faith, choosing to accept and be nourished by transcendental realities, albeit invisible and mysterious.

One might reasonably struggle to see why God wrote this difficulty into the sacramental order, for He could have communicated His grace in a way that does not present the same struggle. This view, however, misses the crux of the divine pedagogy concerning the Sacraments, which are particularly suited to human anthropology. The human person consists of body and soul, physical and spiritual elements. So, the

[35] Frank Sheed, *The Church and I* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday & Company, 1974), 362.
[36] Hebrews 11:1

operation of the Sacraments corresponds to man's nature as a composite creature. In His wisdom, God wills man's participation in ritualized, exterior actions that the body senses and observes. These signs represent the interior effects the body fails to see, but the soul experiences by faith. Since God does not require man to rely solely on the spiritual and invisible, He provides a material action to aid our belief in the concomitant interior reality. For this reason, Sheed makes the following point:

> We are not baptizing a soul; we are not even baptizing a body; we are baptizing a person. And the human person has a soul and has a body. In fact he is spirit *and* matter: so is baptism. So are all the sacraments. God, having made us a combination of spirit and matter, does not treat us as if we were spirit and nothing else.[37]

Wise as the Divine Plan may be, the hurdle still exists. How can seemingly mundane, everyday things contribute meaningfully to such marvelous effects? In response, Sheed admits, "It is hard to see [the body] as sacred. Quite apart from what it necessarily lacks simply because it is material, the body seems to go out of its way to remind us of its ignominiousness—what with pus and mucus and all the things it expels from itself because it can find no use for them."[38] Although it highlights the mystery, the bodily reality creates a difficulty in piercing through the exterior veil.

Undoubtedly, this same point has proved a stumbling block for dualists throughout the Church's history. Perhaps the body hinders union with God, as it so often remains the source of temptation and difficulty. If the body can be downplayed or minimized, one might be freer for genuine, spiritual progress.

[37] Sheed, 363.
[38] Sheed, 363.

The Struggle with Symbols

Even with a multiplicity of rites, the sacred liturgy speaks a common language: signs and symbols. God communicates to humanity through spoken words and rich gestures. If God has adopted this language, humanity better speak it. Regrettably, as Sheed pointed out, this language proves particularly difficult for the modern era, which struggles to see beyond the external. Without a doubt, advances in modern technology and the advent of social media have contributed to this crisis. Whatever the reason, man's inability (and even refusal) to speak this divine language is costing him. He forfeits grace, in the fullness that God intends. Through his ignorance, he blocks occasions to share more fully in the divine life.

Understandably, this reality has risen to the forefront of magisterial consciousness. In the recent Apostolic Letter *Desiderio Desideravi*, Pope Francis laments bluntly, "Modern man has become illiterate, no longer able to read symbols; it is almost as if their existence is not even suspected."[39] Without perceiving their deeper meaning, liturgical signs appear merely as empty gestures and hollow movements, so the Holy Father continues his dirge:

> We no longer have the gaze of St. Francis, who looked at the sun — which he called brother because so he felt it to be — and saw it beautiful and radiant with great splendour, and, full of wonder, he sang that it bears a likeness of You, Most High One. To have lost the capacity to grasp the symbolic value of the body and of every creature renders the symbolic language of the Liturgy almost inaccessible to the modern mentality.[40]

On the contrary, the liturgical language should evoke wonder and awe in its participants.

[39] *Desiderio Desideravi*, §44.
[40] *Desiderio Desideravi*, §44.

In the Sacraments, God's finger reaches down to touch humanity. Liturgies are sacred ceremonies where heaven and earth collide, where the physical and spiritual worlds cooperate in a marvelous display of divine power. Quite literally, souls are reborn to new life, strengthened in their mission, nourished with celestial food, healed from their wounds, and prepared for eternal life. To accomplish this work, God uses oil, water, bread, wine, flame, smoke, bells, and hymns. He endowed man with five distinct senses, and indeed, makes use of them all in the Sacraments. Far from being empty and hollow, the sacramental economy is wondrously rich! May humanity recover its literacy for the language of God. With St. Thomas upon touching Christ's glorified and risen humanity, men ought to exclaim: "My Lord and my God!"[41]

The New Evangelization

In order to reach this goal, the Church in recent decades has called for a re-evangelization, in which she proposes the full force of the Gospel anew. First popularized by St. John Paul II in 1983, the New Evangelization seeks to offer every person an encounter with Jesus, who always leads souls to a deeper and more thorough conversion. It hopes to mobilize the Church for mission in a manner akin to that first evangelization by the Apostles, who first took the Gospel into new lands. Approaching the dawn of the third millennium, the saintly pontiff wrote in *Redemptoris Missio*: "God is opening before the Church the horizons of a humanity more fully prepared for the sowing of the Gospel. I sense that the moment has come to commit all of the Church's energies to a new evangelization and to the mission *ad gentes*. No believer in Christ, no institution of the

[41] John 20:28

Church can avoid this supreme duty: to proclaim Christ to all peoples."[42] Though simply put, the task demands all of the Church's resources, especially the irreplaceable witness of holy and deeply joyful lives.

Within this new proclamation of the Gospel must be a revitalized and inspiring catechesis about reading and perceiving liturgical signs, but more importantly, to see beyond the signs by faith to the realities those signs contain. The Eucharist, for example, offers the flesh and blood of Jesus under the appearance of bread and wine. One should never be content to perceive in the Eucharist merely the *sign* of Christ's presence, but the reality and the true presence of His sacred humanity. In the *Oxford Handbook of Sacramental Theology*, Bruce Marshall mused, "Perhaps it was this degenerate, purely subjective understanding of the Eucharist as a symbol that provoked Flannery O'Connor memorably to say, 'Well, if it's a symbol, to hell with it.'"[43] People would rightly be disinterested in a purely symbolic faith or one void of deeper meaning. If this New Evangelization does not seek to bring men and women into contact with Jesus through the Sacraments, it will be missing the heart of the Gospel.

After all, the Church considers itself the ordinary means of mankind's salvation *because* of its divinely-instituted sacramental system, the safest, most sure path of sanctification. Acknowledging that reality, Nutt warns, "The necessity of the sacraments is not the result of some misguided Christian exclusivity. To the contrary, God's love for all people is the impetus of the Church's mission and the rich mercy that is available

[42] *Redemptoris Missio*, §3.
[43] Bruce D. Marshall, "What is the Eucharist? A Dogmatic Outline," in *The Oxford Handbook of Sacramental Theology*, eds. Hans Boersma and Matthew Levering (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2015), 501.

through the sacraments."[44] To be clear, the Sacraments have never been a result of some secret *gnosis*, which only admits the enlightened. After Christ's earthly life, there is no one in human history for whom the Sacraments are not intended. God desires it, and the success of the New Evangelization depends on it.

While the Church's members grow old, God's love and mercy are always new. The Gospel never becomes stale; by its nature, the Gospel is *news*—destined for every person from the moment of their conception. At the outset of his pontificate, Pope Francis reflected on this newness:

> Even if the Christian message has known periods of darkness and ecclesial weakness, it will never grow old. Jesus can also break through the dull categories with which we would enclose him and he constantly amazes us by his divine creativity. Whenever we make the effort to return to the source and to recover the original freshness of the Gospel, new avenues arise, new paths of creativity open up, with different forms of expression, more eloquent signs and words with new meaning for today's world. Every form of authentic evangelization is always 'new.'[45]

At this moment, many have still not heard of Jesus, and still more have not encountered the beauty that life with Christ offers them. For the New Evangelization to succeed, it must be deeply sacramental. Souls can learn *about* Jesus, but then they ought to meet Him directly in the Sacraments. If that encounter with Jesus in the Sacraments is going to bear fruit, it will be due in no small part to literacy with the sacramental signs, to a living faith that sees beyond the external veil.

Recovering Man's Supernatural Sense

In her efforts at evangelization, the Church must help humanity recover its supernatural sense. Eroded by recent times, the supernatural sense refers to that ability

[44] Nutt, 92.
[45] *Evangelii Gaudium*, §11.

within man to perceive divine action in, through, and above the natural order. Within the Sacraments, God uses common objects in the natural order to work supernatural effects. The Church's missionary efforts should teach man this vital way of seeing. Although modern challenges have perhaps increased the difficulty, reading liturgical symbols and perceiving the deeper action of God are not new hurdles. Already in the first centuries of the Church, early Christians noticed the dual nature of Christ's work. Jesus was manifestly human, though capable of miraculous and divine feats. In the fifth century, St. Leo the Great reflected, "To hunger, to thirst, to grow tired, and to sleep: these are evidently human. But to satisfy 5,000 men with five loaves of bread and to give the Samaritan woman living water, a drink which frees the one drinking from further thirst, to walk on top of the sea without sinking, and to calm the waves stirred up by a storm—are doubtless the work of God."[46] Just as first century Palestinians saw Jesus work in human and divine ways, so too in the Sacraments, God continues His work according to human and divine modes.

In a real way, the divinity became accessible through Christ's humanity. So too, the physicality and visibility of the Sacraments make present Christ's divinity, whose power continues to transcend time. God did not will to confine the power of His saving work to past ages, but rather makes it present to every time and place through His Sacraments.[47] Admittedly, the exercise of man's supernatural sense requires a willing faith, because it remains an arduous task.

---

[46] Leo the Great, *Letter to Bishop Flavian*, 99.

[47] On this point, Feingold writes, "Today His words and gestures of power continue to be heard and seen throughout the world at every moment in the sacramental liturgy of His Church. As they accomplished what they signified during His earthly life, they continue to do so today. Yet whereas in His miraculous words of healing there was sensible evidence of their efficacy, His sacramental words, although no less efficacious, must be believed in the darkness of faith" (Feingold, xxxiii).

Throughout His earthly ministry, His teachings were often difficult to accept. Even with the accompanying signs and works, many struggled. That the God of the universe should become flesh and walk before men, what a mystery! That He should veil Himself as bread so that men could eat Him, what a seeming impossibility! Indeed, the divine pedagogy is perplexing, just as Sheed described. When he considers the Eucharist, he recalls the account from the Bread of Life discourse:

> When Jesus spoke of eating his flesh and drinking his blood, John says that many of his followers 'found it a hard saying,' and 'walked no more with him.' It is still a hard saying, and many of his followers have found another way of removing its 'hardness.' They accept the Real Presence, while finding other meanings for 'Presence' which would mean that we are not receiving Christ himself. But the phrase 'Real Presence' is not in the Gospels. What Christ said was, 'This is my body.' So they find meanings for 'body' which make it mean anything but his body: but they find it hard to apply them to 'This is the cup of my blood.' They have removed the hardness by altering the saying! Do they walk no more with him? Only he can say.[48]

Though the times have changed, the thirst for God has not. The men and women of today thirst for the same Living Water that Jesus promised to the Samaritan Woman, but they need to know where to find it. Although faced with a bleak horizon, the Church draws courage from her founder; her mission is clear.

Recovering man's supernatural sense will require the capacity to speak the symbolic language of God, but this necessitates analogical language to point to the supernatural. In this sense, *supernatural* refers to God communicating His own life or nature to humanity, which man cannot receive without the divine initiative. Natural realities fail to depict supernatural realities directly and adequately, unless helped by analogical language. Consequently, man requires a language of symbols through which he can exercise faith, and these symbols come to him from God.

---

[48] Sheed, 364-365.

Spoken languages require the hearer not only to identify the words formed by various sounds, but also to possess a knowledge of the deeper meanings those words represent. When that process fails, nothing has effectively been communicated. The hearer may have received the sounds, but it only appears to him as noise. Only when the speaker and hearer share knowledge of the concepts those sounds represent can they effectively communicate. In a similar way, the Sacraments foresee recipients who understand the deeper meanings and spiritual concepts that the Sacraments signify. Otherwise, they appear as noise and empty gestures. God intends to pour out an abundance of grace on those who seek Him, especially and most assuredly in the Sacraments. By these gratuitous gifts, God divinizes humanity and raises it up to Himself. If His people intend to receive the fullness of these gifts and be transformed by this saving work, they should speak His liturgical language.

Insofar as the Church accomplishes this with each person, she facilitates a real encounter with God, between the Lover and the beloved. When a soul receives this love in a deeply personal and intimate way, everything changes. Pope Francis noticed this about the Apostles' encounter with Jesus in the Gospels: "The apostles never forgot the moment when Jesus touched their hearts: 'It was about four o'clock in the afternoon' (Jn 1:39)."[49] What a curious detail! Of all the details to include in a limited space that accurately records the life of God on earth, it was four o'clock. They would never forget the circumstances of their first encounter with the Lord. The entire sacramental economy, the New Evangelization, the recovery of man's supernatural sense, all aim to help each person meet Jesus Christ. Although God works to draw souls to Himself outside these

[49] *Evangelii Gaudium*, §13.

bounds, He still waits in the Sacraments, with the full power of His Paschal Mystery. One way or another, every person should be able to speak of the moment they met Jesus: it was four o'clock. With a sharpened supernatural sense, the Sacraments can offer something unique to that encounter, allowing the faithful to approach them as true instruments of Christ Himself. In that way, they stay attuned to the supernatural realities operating through natural, human means, and so encounter Jesus in the Sacraments with the proper disposition.

CHAPTER II: Instrumental Efficient Causality According to St. Thomas

If the Sacraments offer such a radical transformation in grace, one rightly inquires how. How is the power of the Paschal Mystery communicated to souls centuries later through words and material objects? Indeed, the *Catechism* notes, "As fire transforms into itself everything it touches, so the Holy Spirit transforms into the divine life whatever is subjected to its power."[50] The Church strives to surrender the whole world to the transformative action of the Holy Spirit, but this occurs first in the lives of individuals, always being made new in Christ. By serving as instruments of divine power, the seven Sacraments are a type of "fire" that consumes the lives of believers and conforms them to God.

Writing in the thirteenth century, St. Thomas Aquinas sought to clarify the operation of grace within the Sacraments, even maturing his own theory as his life advanced. Instead of being mere occasions or opportunities for grace, the Sacraments themselves effect real change. Material objects become instruments in the hand of God for causing new, interior realities. According to the Thomistic tradition, the Sacraments act as instrumental, efficient causes of sanctification and divinization within souls.

Ex Opere Operato

In the theological debate about how the Sacraments communicate grace, much remains unclear. Within the current milieu, a few theories figure prominently. The concept of instrumental, efficient causality hails largely from the thought of St. Thomas, and remains one of those leading theories. Despite this space for theological debate, the

[50] *CCC*, 1127.

Church does speak definitively about the efficacy of the Sacraments. The manner merits further discussion, but the *fact* of their efficacy does not.

Whenever they are celebrated properly, the Sacraments work *ex opere operato*, literally "by the work having been worked." God has bound Himself to the sacramental order in such a way as to guarantee the communication of grace to those properly disposed. By the very fact that a minister possesses the right intention, speaks the given words, and utilizes the correct matter, a Sacrament is effective. This type of efficacy reassures the recipients, because it never depends upon the personal holiness of the minister. Reflecting on this reality, the *Catechism* expounds, "Celebrated worthily in faith, the sacraments confer the grace that they signify. They are *efficacious* because in them Christ himself is at work: it is he who baptizes, he who acts in his sacraments in order to communicate the grace that each sacrament signifies."[51] Even if the minister is a saint, the real spiritual significance lies in Christ's action beneath the sacramental veil. On the level of grace, it makes no difference whether Fr. X or Fr. Y is present, but simply that Jesus is. No matter the priest, the transformative power of the Holy Spirit works beneath the sacramental signs.

Sacramentals, on the other hand, work *ex opere operantis*, "by the work of the worker." Whereas the Sacraments possess an intrinsic efficacy by their proper execution, sacramentals function as occasions of grace for those properly disposed, and always point back to the Sacraments themselves. Unlike the Sacraments, they rely on the personal holiness and disposition of those involved in order to be effective. Regardless, even with the Sacraments, one may present an *obex*, or "obstacle," which can limit the personal

[51] *CCC*, 1127.

fruitfulness of an otherwise effective Sacrament. This *obex* appears when one chooses to remain in a state of unrepentant mortal sin or approaches the Sacraments with a serious lack of faith. In Confirmation, for example, the sacramental character may be imparted *ex opere operato*, but an *obex* will prevent that character from giving rise to the sacramental grace, so long as it continues to exist. Although a Sacrament may be effective apart from personal disposition of the minister, recipients should always ask God to grant them as much grace as possible.

Aristotelian Causes

In order to adequately understand the causality at work within the Sacraments, one must know something of the various types of causes. Once this has been established, the types of causes functioning in the sacramental economy can be identified. Any modern discussion of the types of causes owes a debt to Aristotle, the ancient Greek philosopher who first distinguished them. In the second book of his *Physics*, he identifies four: material, formal, efficient, and final causes.[52]

The material cause is that from which a thing is made. A formal cause consists in a thing's essence, indicating what it is or is becoming. The efficient cause, knowledge of which helps explain the sacramental economy, identifies the primary source of change or stability in the object considered. Lastly, the final cause points to a thing's end or purpose, the sake for which action is taken. To concretize these terms, consider Leonardo da Vinci's painting of the *Mona Lisa*. An archetype of the Renaissance era, the *Mona Lisa* was painted with oil on a wooden panel from poplar trees, its material cause. The

[52] Aristotle, *Physics*, in *The Basic Works of Aristotle*, trans. R.P. Hardie and R.K. Gaye, ed. Richard McKeon (New York, NY: Modern Library, 2001), 240-241.

formal cause is to be a painting of a particular woman, while the efficient causes would be Leonardo da Vinci himself as well as his painting tools. The purpose, or final cause, was money for da Vinci, as he created the piece in response to a commission from an Italian nobleman. Secondary final causes, moreover, may also be beauty itself or the prospect of fame, especially for such a skilled artist. For that nobleman, however, the final cause is simply his desire to hang a portrait of his wife in their home.

Given this example, the *Mona Lisa* has more than one efficient cause, da Vinci himself and his paintbrushes. In order to distinguish between these efficient causes, it helps to identify the paintbrushes specifically as *instrumental*, efficient causes. Da Vinci, a higher, rational agent, employs the brushes to produce an ordered, intelligible result. Subjected to his hand and skill, the paintbrushes create one of the most famous artistic pieces in the world. Having made these distinctions, the Sacraments can be identified as such instrumental, efficient causes in the hand of the divine agent pouring forth His grace.

Sacramental Instrumentality

Christ's mode of operating within the sacramental order often mirrors the way He worked on earth. To accomplish many healings, He often employed various instruments, through which He worked as the principal agent and cause of a new reality. As God, a simple act of the will would have sufficed, but instead, He accomplishes His will according to the mode of the human receiver. Such actions which jointly display Christ's humanity and divinity may be called *theandric*. Consider the account of the Man Born Blind in John 9:

> As he passed by, he saw a man blind from his birth. And his disciples asked him, 'Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?' Jesus

> answered, 'It was not that this man sinned, or his parents, but that the works of God might be made manifest in him. We must work the works of him who sent me, while it is day; night comes, when no one can work. As long as I am in the world, I am the light of the world.' As he said this, he spat on the ground and made clay of the spittle and anointed the man's eyes with the clay, saying to him, 'Go, wash in the pool of Silo'am' (which means Sent). So he went and washed and came back seeing.[53]

Before the greatest light in the world, still the man fails to see. In a remarkably earthy and tactile way, Jesus opens his eyes. To some, He simply pronounces a word of healing; to others, He engages more of the senses.

When He spits on the ground, Jesus takes something from inside Himself, which He then combines with something exterior, the dirt, in order to make clay. With this chosen instrument, Christ *anoints* the man's eyes, and then speaks words that invite his participation and cooperation in his own healing. Having heeded this command, the man gains his sight, even to the disbelief of those around him. Christ chose an instrument through which He would communicate His healing power. So too, in the Sacraments, Christ reaches out to touch His people, with the full power of His Paschal Mystery. To them, the Light of the World has never stopped dispelling the darkness and opening the eyes of the blind in every age. He is the sun that never stops rising over humanity, even as it grows temporally distant from His earthly life.

Given the fact of sacramental efficacy, St. Thomas Aquinas possessed a great confidence in the power of Christ's work, but still had to treat a difficult question: how can a lower ontological object bring about an effect above its own level? This question prompted St. Thomas to declare:

> We have it on the authority of many saints that the sacraments of the New Law not only signify, but also cause grace. We must therefore say otherwise, that an efficient cause is twofold, principal and instrumental. The principal cause works by the power of its form, to which form the effect is likened; just as fire by its

[53] John 9:1-7

> own heat makes something hot. In this way none but God can cause grace . . . But the instrumental cause works not by the power of its form, but only by the motion whereby it is moved by the principal agent: so that the effect is not likened to the instrument but to the principal agent: for instance, the couch is not like the axe, but like the art which is in the craftsman's mind. And it is thus that the sacraments of the New Law cause grace.[54]

In the Sacraments, God always remains the principal cause, but accomplishes His work through lower, subordinate objects, the instrumental causes. These lower objects produce effects higher than themselves, but only on the power of the higher, principal cause. Da Vinci's paintbrushes produced an intelligible and beautiful effect, much higher than the brush itself. Da Vinci, as the principal cause, directed the lower object to execute his vision. Indeed, these instances occur throughout all of creation.

As St. Thomas points out, the lower, instrumental cause can only work on the higher level when directed by the principal cause; otherwise, its natural power only allows it work effects on its own level, according to its nature. The paintbrush itself gives rise to more than what it possesses by nature, but only because it acts in cooperation with another efficient cause directing its work. The end result transcends the instrumental cause, but not its principal cause and intelligent designer. So in the Sacraments, water, oil, bread, and wine cannot, on their own, make a soul like God by conferring grace. Only when employed by a higher agent—in fact, infinitely higher—can they accomplish an effect as marvelous as the divinization of a soul. The objects themselves do not possess the divine nature, but give rise to the intelligent plan of the principal efficient cause, which makes use of them. In Baptism, the water possesses no innate power to cleanse a soul from sin and adopt it as a child of God, but it nevertheless accomplishes those

[54] Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, III, q. 62, a. 1, in *Summa Theologiae: Latin/English Edition of the Works of St. Thomas Aquinas*, vol. 20, trans. Laurence Shapcote (Lander, WY: Aquinas Institute for the Study of Sacred Doctrine, 2012), 22.

effects by the power of God as principal cause, working through His ministers as further instruments and extensions of His saving work.

Conjoined and Separated Instruments

In his writing, St. Thomas makes a further distinction between instrumental causes that helps explain the Sacraments. As human experience reveals, a principal agent may employ instrumental causes that are either united to it or separated from it. St. Thomas explains,

> A sacrament in causing grace works after the manner of an instrument. Now an instrument is twofold: the one, separate, as a stick, for instance; the other, united, as a hand. Moreover, the separate instrument is moved by means of the united instrument, as a stick by the hand. Now the principal efficient cause of grace is God Himself, in comparison with Whom Christ's humanity is as a united instrument, whereas the sacrament is as a separate instrument. Consequently, the saving power must needs be derived by the sacraments from Christ's Godhead through His humanity.[55]

Considering a human person, the hands, feet, eyes, and ears, for example, all act as conjoined instruments of the rational agent as principal cause. That instrumentality may be extended through separated instruments, such as a pen, paintbrush, or hammer. Through use of those separated instruments, the rational agent extends the reach of its power, giving rise to new realities higher than the instruments considered individually. Both the conjoined and separated instruments act in coordination with one another.

In the hypostatic union, Christ unites humanity to His divinity in a single divine person, thereby making His humanity a conjoined instrument of His divinity and becoming the perfect mediator between the Father and humankind. Recalling John 9, the acts of creating clay from His spittle and anointing the man's eyes are divine acts of a conjoined instrument, His humanity. Even with His divinity, Jesus still utilizes the

[55] *ST,* III, q. 62, a. 5, trans. Laurence Shapcote, 28.

separated instrument of mud to accomplish this earthly healing, and so the Sacraments that same pattern. The conjoined instrument of Christ's humanity still operates within the sacramental order as its prerequisite and condition, but now also employs separated instruments throughout time. The minister, matter, and form of the Sacraments function as those separated instruments by which Christ's humanity still reaches souls today. The Sacraments apply the power of the Paschal Mystery throughout the ages to accomplish in today's disciples what He once accomplished in the first disciples, newly "born of water and the Spirit."[56] At their baptisms, they, too, received the spiritual effects through the separated instruments of water and spoken words.

These different types of instrumental causes function as a chain. God, as the principal agent, employs the conjoined instrument of Christ's humanity and the separated instrument of a minister, in whom Christ lives and works. In turn, the minister uses signs and words as additional separated instruments that communicate His grace and plan for sanctification. Acknowledging this, St. Thomas writes, "Just as the one same power of the principal agent is instrumentally in all the instruments that are ordained unto the production of an effect, forasmuch as they are one as being so ordained: so also the one same sacramental power is in both words and things, forasmuch as words and things combine to form one sacrament."[57] Although Christ's humanity remains the preeminent instrument, still God intends the others for the sacramental system. A carpenter, for example, uses a hammer and nails to build a table, and relies on separated instruments to achieve his vision. To build the table, the power of the carpenter animates the extrinsic

[56] John 3:5
[57] *ST,* III, q. 62, a. 4, trans. Laurence Shapcote, 27.

instruments. So in the Sacraments, the one power of the Paschal Mystery animates a whole series of separated instruments.

Obediential Potency of the Recipients

Part of the development of St. Thomas's view on sacramental causality arose from the realization that grace abides as a quality of the soul and not as a subsisting reality created out of nothing. Prior to this theological conclusion, many speculated that grace was created immediately by God in the same manner as a human soul.[58] If grace is not created out of nothing, then from where does it originate?

Articulating his developed position, St. Thomas explains, "In the human soul, as in every creature, there is a double passive power: one in comparison with a natural agent; the other in comparison with the first agent, which can reduce any creature to a higher act than a natural agent can reduce it, and this is usually called the obediential power of a creature."[59] By this, he suggests that God leads grace out of the obediential potency of the human soul, since sanctifying grace exists as a supernatural quality of a soul and not as subsistent being in its own right. With an increase in sanctifying grace comes supernatural change in the soul, not a new subject. Obediential potency, as St. Thomas explains, implies the capacity to obey God when He intends an effect in a creature beyond its normative function. Consider, for example, how the wind and sea had the obediential potency to be calmed by Christ at His word, though they had otherwise

[58] Feingold, 434-435.
[59] Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, III, q. 11, a. 1, in *Summa Theologiae: Latin/English Edition of the Works of St. Thomas Aquinas*, vol. 19, trans. Laurence Shapcote (Lander, WY: Aquinas Institute for the Study of Sacred Doctrine, 2012), 134.

acted according to their nature in response to the storm.[60] All of creation possesses an obediential potency for God to work miracles, to accomplish effects above nature.

Mysteriously, only human souls, created by God and destined for Him, possess the potency to be divinized, to receive grace, and to be conformed to Him. This unique capacity sets man apart from the rest of creation, because only he is offered such intimacy with the Creator. In the New Evangelization, the Church should propose this special aptitude as a gift to both contemplate and reverence, but people first must know it exists. Mankind, made in God's image, can receive a closer likeness to God, which fulfills an innate desire present in humanity. By nature, mankind is already inclined toward God as its final end. The unique capacity for divinization suits this intrinsic orientation, and by man's free cooperation, helps to bring it about.

When the Sacraments act as instrumental causes, they call upon the obediential power in souls. With God as the primary actor, the Sacraments cause a supernatural change in the soul, which is itself immeasurably higher than the instruments that bring it about.[61] Through various extrinsic instruments, God acts upon that potency to conform souls to Himself, so long as they do not prevent Him. Put differently, humans inherently possess the capacity for divinization as rational agents. God, through the sacramental economy, simply actualizes that potency.

Twofold Instrumental Causality

In the most mature form of his theory on sacramental causality, St. Thomas understands the work of the Sacraments as causing a twofold effect.[62] First, they produce

[60] Cf. Matthew 8:27
[61] Feingold, 436.
[62] An ongoing theological debate concerns whether to classify the Sacraments as *perfective* or *dispositive* causes of grace. They would be *perfective* insofar as they perfect or bring about the final end toward which

the *res et sacramentum*, the abiding reality of the sacramental sign. Next, that *res et sacramentum* itself becomes an instrumental cause for the infusion of more grace, the *res tantum*. Literally, the *res et sacramentum* gives rise to an increase in grace, which will be assisted by a greater desire on the part of the recipient. This thesis becomes clearer in its application to particular Sacraments.

Considering the Eucharist, the material elements of bread and wine are joined to the spoken form from the priest, causing the process of transubstantiation. The *res et sacramentum*, or abiding reality, consists in the Real Presence of Christ's Body and Blood. When the faithful receive the Eucharist with the appropriate disposition and true desire, the *res et sacramentum* acts as an instrumental cause of the *res tantum*, the particular graces communicated to a soul by the Sacrament. Received properly, these graces increase sanctifying grace and enliven charity, prompting a greater participation in the life of God.

With the Sacrament of Penance, the spoken acts of the penitent and confessor cause and more clearly manifest one's interior contrition and repentance, the *res et sacramentum*. In turn, this abiding reality of true contrition and desire for reconciliation with God instrumentally causes and brings about the graces of the Sacrament, namely the forgiveness of sins.[63]

---

the instrument acts, but *dispositive* insofar as they merely incline the object towards or set up conditions by which some further instrumental cause could bring about that final end. According to St. Thomas's earlier writings, the Sacraments may be considered *perfective* with respect to the *res et sacramentum*, and *dispositive* with respect to the *res tantum*. For a fuller explanation of this debate, see Reginald M. Lynch, *The Cleansing of the Heart: The Sacraments as Instrumental Causes in the Thomistic Tradition* (Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 2017), 80-81.

[63] St. Thomas describes this in *ST* III, q. 84, a. 1, ad. 3. Of all the Sacraments, Penance may pose the greatest difficulty in identifying the *res et sacramentum*. For a fuller treatment of this debate, see Feingold, 287-299.

In the Sacrament of Matrimony, the exchange of consent between a man and woman and its ratification in marital intimacy produces the sacramental marriage bond, which endures until the death of one of the spouses. According to the theory of St. Thomas, that marriage bond serves the spouses as a continual and abiding cause of all the graces pertaining to the mission of marriage. By this means, a chain of instrumental causes leads to the *res tantum* and enables a couple to live out the otherwise daunting task of mirroring Christ's love for His bride, the Church. Without the assistance of God's grace, the mission of marriage undoubtedly proves more difficult.

With regard to Anointing of the Sick, the exterior anointing with oil and the spoken form by a priest configure the sick person in a unique way to the Suffering Christ, who in His Passion knew and embraced human pain. The anointing confers a durable, interior consecration that lasts as long as the illness, which is why the Sacrament may not be repeated in the same illness or condition. This abiding, interior reality can, in turn, cause many graces in the life of the suffering person, especially the spiritual healing of the remnants of sin. Beyond this, it becomes a source of encouragement and consolation in a time of physical trial, and it also awakens the redemptive power of suffering. United to Christ's own suffering, it too bears fruit for the world through endurance and a holy resolve. The Church employs oil in the Sacraments to consecrate sacred things, and so in the Sacrament of Anointing, the Church consecrates and sets aside a particular person as a unique participant in Christ's Passion. In a special way, their suffering can be united to the Cross of Christ to merit graces for the entire Church.[64]

[64] Cf. Feingold, 283-287; *CCC*, 1521: "In a certain way [the sick person] is consecrated to bear fruit by configuration to the Savior's redemptive Passion. Suffering, a consequence of original sin, acquires a new meaning; it becomes a participation in the saving work of Jesus."

In Baptism, Confirmation, and Holy Orders, the *res et sacramentum* abides as an indelible mark on the soul. Throughout one's life, that sacramental character can be called upon as a source of particular graces to assist one in fulfilling the sacramental mission.[65] Baptism enables a soul to share in the threefold mission of Christ as Priest, Prophet, and King, sanctifying the world and guiding it back to God. Confirmation commissions one as a soldier for Christ, fighting against spiritual evil with the full power of the Holy Spirit. Holy Orders grants a certain headship and consecration that allows the ordained to imitate Christ in a special way for the building up and governance of the whole Church. Through an eternal and indelible character, God remains with His people and enables them to accomplish His work in the world.

In each of the Sacraments, God brings about a true renewal within creation, and St. Thomas sees this achieved through these chains of instrumental causes. Strong catechesis and dynamic preaching on this reality will help the faithful pierce the sacramental veil. By understanding the power at work within the Sacraments, people will sharpen their supernatural sense, which in turn, helps dispose them to receive the fullness of grace that God wishes to give them. While St. Thomas's theory helps achieve that purpose, many still struggle to perceive how such an ordinary reality can be used in such an extraordinary way as to communicate God's very life to human souls.

How God Employs a Created Thing as an Instrument of Grace

In its mature form, the Thomistic theory of sacramental causality understands seemingly mundane, physical objects as vehicles of grace. Created realities communicate supernatural power. For many, this poses a serious stumbling block, because created

[65] Cf. Feingold, 270.

things often seem too ordinary to work such marvelous effects in the order of grace. How can a physical object act as an agent in the work of divinization?

At the outset, a few foundational truths must be noted in response to this objection. First, God created all things good, and He would never have created something without an intrinsic goodness to it. All of the material objects used in the Sacraments come in some way from God who created them and their component parts. In *Why Matter Matters*, David Lang argues the following to that same end: "The Church affirms a *sacramental* perspective on the physical world: material substances reflect and signify supernatural realities, some doing so in a more fitting manner than others. The Creator endowed things with definite natures to fulfill certain purposes, and so it cannot be a matter of indifference to Him what things are used as means to ends."[66] Even though He created material things in the natural order, God still employs them intentionally for supernatural ends. Created things possess an obediential potency to obey God's commands, even if those commands direct it to do things above its nature.

In order to overcome the eclipse of man's supernatural sense, the faithful must be taught how God still acts in the world He created to achieve His purposes, even to the point of utilizing seemingly insignificant created things. Recently, Pope Francis called for a revitalized appreciation in this regard:

> We must reacquire confidence about creation. I mean to say that things — the sacraments 'are made' of things — come from God. To Him they are oriented, and by Him they have been assumed, and assumed in a particular way in the Incarnation, so that they can become instruments of salvation, vehicles of the Spirit, channels of grace. In this it is clear how vast is the distance between this vision and either a materialistic or spiritualistic vision. If created things are such a fundamental, essential part of the sacramental action that brings about our salvation, then we must arrange ourselves in their presence with a fresh, non-

[66] David P. Lang, *Why Matter Matters: Philosophical and Scriptural Reflections on the Sacraments* (Huntington, IN: Our Sunday Visitor, 2002), 22.

> superficial regard, respectful and grateful. From the very beginning, created things contain the seed of the sanctifying grace of the sacraments.[67]

As the Holy Father notes, an appreciation for the created order must form part of a new approach to the Sacraments, through which man reverences not only created things, but also the way in which God intends to sanctify man through those chosen instruments.

Second, even though God employs a series of instruments in the sacramental order, He still remains the principal agent and cause. The principal agent, in turn, directs various instruments towards certain ends, and orders them toward the fulfillment of the final cause.[68] Within the Sacraments, the communication of grace to the soul and the work of sanctification compose the final cause. God, as the principal agent, chooses certain things in nature to communicate His own life and power. The composite sign of matter and form simply becomes a conduit of grace. When considering this reality, Reginald Lynch, O.P., offers the following example in his *Cleansing of the Heart*:

> The signate power of the tool in act is greater than the signification of the unused tool itself. A saw found lying on the ground might signify certain things, but a saw in the hand of a carpenter who is building a house signifies not only its own act of cutting but shelter, rest, warmth, and security as well. None of these effects is yet visible, but by association with the intention of the principal agent, the saw's instrumental action reveals some of his larger purpose.[69]

Considered in itself, the instrument has no power to accomplish such marvelous effects, but when moved by God, it does. In other words, the power at work in the Sacraments comes from God, not the instrument.

As the joint work of matter and form, the proper action of the Sacraments physically touches and is sensed by the body.[70] Man, as a composite creature of body and

---

[67] *Desiderio Desideravi*, §46.
[68] For St. Thomas's explanation of this reality, see *ST* I, q. 45, a. 5.
[69] Lynch, *Cleansing of the Heart*, 88.
[70] Cf. John F. Gallagher, *Significando Causant: A Study of Sacramental Efficiency*, (Fribourg: University Press, 1965), 209-210.

soul, experiences the sacramental action on both levels. By God's omnipotence, the instrumental action of the Sacraments extends also on the spiritual level to the soul, where God infuses His grace and makes man more like Himself. Without God as the principal agent, the instrumental action would be incapable of communicating anything above or beyond the purely physical level. In catechetical efforts, the faithful must hear how God's power animates and accompanies the exterior sign.

Having noted those foundational truths, the question remains: how is it possible for a material object to cooperate in the infusion of grace? At the time of St. Thomas, many theologians held that the Sacraments could only be considered as conditions, occasions, or even dispositive causes of grace.[71] Otherwise, a created thing appears to be producing human participation in the divine nature. St. Thomas, like his contemporaries, understood that God creates *ex nihilo*, without the use of an instrument. When He creates a new human soul, He does so *ex nihilo*, not from the generative power of the parents. Consequently, the Sacraments would seem to function in a similar way, in which the sacramental action provides the necessary context for God to infuse grace directly. By understanding the Sacraments as instrumental, efficient causes, one preserves God's role as principal agent and initiator in the infusion of grace, and more easily perceives how natural realities produce supernatural effects.

To answer the question fully, it will be necessary to recall the earlier consideration of the obediential potency present in sacramental recipients. In order for the change to occur in St. Thomas's thought, he came to an important distinction: a human soul has being in itself, while sanctifying grace does not. God creates a human soul *ex*

[71] For a more thorough treatment of St. Thomas's response to this question, see Feingold, 431-437.

nihilo, and infuses it into a person. On the other hand, grace exists as a supernatural quality of the soul, not as something self-subsisting. As a result, the human soul possesses the obediential potency for divinization, by which God supernaturally modifies an already subsistent reality. In the Sacraments, God uses instruments to act upon that existing reality, making use of its inherent capacity to become more like God. If grace was being created and infused *ex nihilo*, instrumental causality could not hold, because there would be no spiritual object upon which the sacramental action could work. In the Sacraments, the matter and form compose a single instrument, actualizing a properly-disposed soul's capacity for divinization.

To conclude, the Church proposes the power of the sacramental economy to the entire world, as it remains the ordinary means instituted by Christ for the sanctification and salvation of souls. As an issue with eternal consequences, how one settles the question of causality has serious effects for the devotion and participation of the faithful in God's sacramental system. In his own overview of sacramental causality's historical development, Gallagher notes,

> The magisterial statements of the church teach no system of causality. We cannot look back to councils and find words used by them and interpret them the way they are used today. Admitting that, we can still take those statements of the councils and say that theologically speaking they are best accounted for by efficient causality. When Florence and Trent say that the sacraments give, confer, cause grace, they do not exclude other opinions. But certainly the other opinions must use these words in a very broad sense, whereas they fall naturally into place in an efficient system.[72]

Nearly 800 years later, St. Thomas's theory of instrumental, efficient causality remains the most fitting option for an orthodox theological understanding and for a dynamic sacramental spirituality.

[72] Gallagher, 208.

By their divine institution, the Sacraments play an indispensable role in any efforts at evangelization. For the Church's New Evangelization to be successful, it must create a new wonder and amazement within man at God's work beneath the sacramental veil. It should propose a sacramental spirituality that restores man's supernatural sense and excites him to engage whole-heartedly with the sacramental mysteries.

CHAPTER III: Toward a Sacramental Spirituality

After surveying the sacramental economy in the world today and the Thomistic theory of sacramental causality, this thesis directs its attention to practical, pastoral application. In particular, it seeks to propose how the Thomistic theory of instrumental, efficient causality informs prayer and liturgical exercise, as well as why this theory positions itself well to overcome man's inability to read symbolic language and restore his supernatural sense.

This effort insists upon solid, theological catechesis as a prerequisite, and so focuses here particularly upon developing a sacramental spirituality—in general, but especially as informed by instrumental, efficient causality. A flourishing sacramental spirituality will necessarily overcome societal erosion of man's supernatural sense and possess the capacity to perceive and interpret sacramental symbolism. It will value the sacramental system as the most efficient means of receiving grace and growing closer toward union with God. It will also prioritize the Sacraments and liturgical participation as the divinely instituted method by which today's faithful come into contact with the full power of Christ's salvific work.

The Primacy of Faith

At the outset of any articulation of sacramental spirituality, one must recognize the primacy of faith as a foundation for any system of belief. While there may be many reasons for believing, there still exists a difficulty in acknowledging and even reverencing unseen realities. Despite that difficulty, faith, the *Catechism* explains, remains "more certain than all human knowledge because it is founded on the very word

of God who cannot lie."[73] The entire sacramental economy requires faith in marvelous, though invisible effects. Although the Church insists upon all that happens beneath the sacramental veil, no amount of catechesis substitutes for the gift of faith, an infused grace from God to see and accept the truth. In order for the faithful to understand sacramental causality and sharpen their supernatural sense, they must receive the gift of faith.

If the New Evangelization of humanity will be effective, it must bring people to faith in the ongoing effects of the Incarnation. God works through the sacramental economy in a deeper, more intimate way than one readily perceives. As Lynch explains, "In the sacraments God's intention is not simply to work towards natural ends through the process of natural potency and act but to achieve the renewal of the world through grace."[74] A sacramental spirituality for modern man should emphasize that the power of Christ exercised during His earthly presence remains just as powerful and effective during His absence. Between the Ascension and the Second Coming, His mode of presence has changed, but the strength of His power has not. God's Providence does not will that all people after Christ should receive a smaller share of His merits, but that they should be given just as much access. Although temporally distant to Christ, today's faithful actually have an advantage through their exercise of faith, which allows them to earn merit in a way different than the Apostles. For the immediate disciples of the Lord, His divinity was visibly manifested. For disciples today, it remains hidden. Believing in sacramental efficacy, therefore, requires a greater exercise of faith.

Consequently, the recognition of Sacraments as true causes of grace best serves the effort to restore man's supernatural sense, because it provides a reasonable and clear

[73] *CCC*, 157.
[74] Lynch, *The Cleansing of the Heart*, 78.

articulation of how God communicates His power through created things as chains of instrumental causes. The theory of instrumental, efficient causality offers a convincing account of the divine working through the human. Given the way God instituted the sacramental economy, this type of account proves immensely helpful in the development of a sacramental spirituality. The faithful need not *wonder* whether a Sacrament has been effective, but can *know* that it has. This knowledge and the exercise of faith allow one to focus on improving one's personal disposition and making more ardent one's interior desire.

Among theories of sacramental causality, the Thomistic theory maintains a serious advantage in its reliance and emphasis on the Incarnation, and this should not be overlooked in sacramental catechesis. It places sacramental recipients into direct contact with Christ's humanity, transcending time but losing nothing of its efficacy.[75] If souls approach the Sacraments with this faith and understanding, they will grow quickly in their share of His grace. On this point, O'Neill reflects beautifully:

> The renewal in the Church of the wonders of the exodus takes place in time. The relation between the Leader and his followers is basically one of faith which is indifferent to time and can reach back to the earthly phase of the mystery of Christ, upwards to the risen Christ and forwards to the repose of the whole Christ. The sacraments express this faith. Through the faith of the Church in the earthly mysteries the merit and reparation of Christ are brought to bear on the individual faithful.[76]

Indeed, the foundational role of the Incarnation and the sacramental economy's indifference to time should be hallmarks of a sacramental spirituality. Dynamic preaching and effective catechesis on these mysteries help the faithful perceive their proximity to

[75] Cf. Feingold, 453-455.
[76] O'Neill, 75.

supernatural realities. Equipped with the Thomistic understanding, preachers and catechists can more easily invite others to faith in God's work beneath the veil.

For many centuries, the Church has insisted on an important rule: *lex orandi, lex credendi*. As the Church prays, so she believes. The preceding insistence on faith and the incarnational foundation can be discerned in the Church's liturgical life and her own self-expression.

Sacraments and the Liturgical Cycle

Sacraments always occur within the context of a liturgy, and never apart from it. For this reason, any sacramental spirituality must acknowledge the role of the liturgy in its exercise and fulfillment. When the Sacraments extend the reach of Christ's Paschal Mystery throughout time, they do so in a liturgical cycle that can augment and intensify prayer. By proposing for consideration the mysteries of Christ's life and the witness of the Saints, the liturgical cycle creates a spiritual context in which grace is received. Any sacramental spirituality loses something vital when it forgets that context.

When the Fathers of the Second Vatican Council considered the liturgical year, they saw it as a means of catechetical formation. In much the same way, it becomes a means to strengthen one's sacramental spirituality. In *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, the Fathers taught, "Within the cycle of a year, moreover, [the Church] unfolds the whole mystery of Christ . . . Recalling thus the mysteries of redemption, the Church opens to the faithful the riches of her Lord's powers and merits, so that these are in some way made present for all time, and the faithful are enabled to lay hold upon them and become filled with saving grace."[77] One might imagine a treasury of graces from the saving works of

[77] *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, §102.

Christ's life which the Church guards and dispenses throughout time. Although we can access these graces in prayer at any time, there are certain times at which the Church proposes it for communal benefit.

Consider Jesus celebrating the Last Supper with His disciples. Every day, and at each Mass, the Church holds up this event of Christ's life as a particular means of man's sanctification, but it would be hard to miss the special sacredness of Holy Thursday night. The liturgy invites the faithful to re-live that night with the Lord, even to the point of keeping watch with Him in the garden of Gethsemane at various altars of repose. On that night especially, the Church makes present the rich power of Christ's final meal on earth, and proposes it as a special means of grace for the faithful in every age.

When the *Catechism* considers this reality, it notes how the liturgical cycle facilitates a unique accessibility *now* to the life of our Savior *then*: "When the Church celebrates the mystery of Christ, there is a word that marks her prayer: 'Today!' - a word echoing the prayer her Lord taught her and the call of the Holy Spirit. This 'today' of the living God which man is called to enter is 'the hour' of Jesus' Passover, which reaches across and underlies all history."[78] Whenever the Church recalls an event in the liturgical cycle, she does so as if that event occurred *today*, with fresh power to accomplish even now what it once accomplished then. When a bishop confers Confirmation, the Church prays that the Holy Spirit might fill the candidates in the same way as the Apostles on the day of Pentecost itself. When the world gathers to mark Christ's birth, the Church prays as if it occurred this very night.[79] When one incorporates these realities of prayer into a

[78] *CCC*, 1165.
[79] See Collect for the Nativity of the Lord, At the Mass During the Night: "O God, who have made *this most sacred night* radiant with the splendor of the true light, grant, we pray, that we, who have known the

sacramental spirituality, the efficacy of Christ's mysteries becomes deeply transformative.

So too, the unique efficacy of the Sacraments ought to inform one's approach to prayer. The three Sacraments which impart an indelible character do so on a particular date in history and in the life of an individual soul. With faith that they accomplished what they signified, one should celebrate those anniversaries each year, asking God for an outpouring of His grace as if that event occurred today. Situated within the liturgical calendar, these anniversaries offer something personal to the annual cycle. Christ worked in the past, yes, but He also worked in *my* life *today*, with the same power He exercised on earth. On the anniversary of one's baptism, call upon God to renew the grace to reject Satan and his temptations. On the anniversary of one's confirmation, invite God to stir up again the gifts of His Holy Spirit. With an ordination anniversary, may God remind His servant of that love which first attracted his 'yes.' These dates should be celebrated not as past, distant occasions of grace frozen in history, but as dynamic, living realities which still abide today as fresh fonts of grace.

Calling on the *Res et Sacramentum*

In each of the Sacraments, the theological tradition knows these abiding realities as the *res et sacramentum*. Though the technical language may not be important, an understanding of the Sacraments' continuing power should be a key component of a sacramental spirituality, which sees those Sacraments as the most effective way to grow in holiness and configure oneself more closely to God. The faithful risk forfeiting

---

mysteries of his light on earth, may also delight in his gladness in heaven." Emphasis added. *Daily Roman Missal* (Woodridge, IL: Midwest Theological Forum, 2012), 108.

sacramental grace if the Sacrament itself becomes simply a past event, in which a limited understanding traps Christ's work in history. On the contrary, the sacramental power remains fully alive and active, especially for the duration of the *res et sacramentum*. To this end, instrumental, efficient causality articulates convincingly the *ex opere operato* functioning of the Sacraments. The *res et sacramentum* itself acts as an *instrument* for additional graces, and faith in sacramental efficacy helps one see this more clearly.

While these abiding realities of the Sacraments possess so much power, perhaps the nuances of their theological operation render it inaccessible to the average parishioner. Can only the well-studied take advantage of these fonts of grace? Undoubtedly, the effectiveness of every catechist lies in the ability to make divine revelation clear and accessible in a contemporary context. On this point, Romanus Cessario, O.P., once offered a simple, but insightful reflection:

> It is not difficult to translate the technical language of sacramental causality into user-friendly language. For example, one may say that each of the seven sacraments changes us. This kind of change differs according to the sacrament. Baptism makes us justified. Confirmation makes us witnesses. The Eucharist makes us lovers. Marriage makes a man and a woman husband and wife. Holy Orders makes a man a priest. Penance makes a sinner effectively penitent. Holy Anointing makes a dying person ready to see God.[80]

With ease, the *res et sacramentum* can be similarly translated as an abiding consecration, by which the sacramental object or recipient is set aside for a particular supernatural purpose. In part, the Sacraments change their recipients by the *res et sacramentum*. As a supernatural reality that abides, the *res et sacramentum* should be called upon in prayer

[80] Romanus Cessario, "Sacramental Causality: *Da Capo!*," *Nova et Vetera,* 11, no. 2 (2013), 314-315.

for as long as it lasts. For Baptism, Confirmation, and Holy Orders, the indelible character on the soul should be called upon throughout one's life.[81]

In her efforts at evangelization, the Church should point the faithful to the supernatural realities that mark their souls, explaining the powerful instrument they bear within them. Precisely because instrumental, efficient causality emphasizes and explains the action of the instrument, it situates itself well to help man overcome the eclipse of his supernatural sense. The symbolic language perceived in the sacramental action directs the recipient to the real, interior transformation by grace. When instruments lie on the shelf, they cannot contribute to the project. Working toward man's sanctification and divinization requires the active employment of the instrument. A robust sacramental spirituality will employ the instruments at its disposal.

In moments of temptation, it would be helpful for one to recall his baptismal promises, by which Satan and his empty show were first rejected. By turning to the Lord on account of the *res et sacramentum* of Baptism, one can ask for the grace to conquer in the present what one hoped to definitively conquer in the past, namely the lure of sin. In moments of fear at publicly witnessing to the faith, a soul should make recourse to the graces of its Confirmation, when the power of the Holy Spirit strengthened the soul in the Gift of Fortitude to attack and to endure. In difficult pastoral decisions, a priest should call upon his sacramental configuration to Jesus as King, by which the priest now exercises governance of the flock entrusted to him.

Calling upon the *res et sacramentum* need not be complicated, but it also demands the soul's remaining in the state of grace. Every day, one should exercise discipline in the

[81] For the particular application of this aspect of sacramental spirituality to each of the Sacraments, refer back to the section on Twofold Instrumental Causality in Chapter II.

Christian life and direct oneself whole-heartedly toward the pursuit of holiness. The sacramental instrument will be effective when used according to its nature, and it requires the soul to be truly alive in its relationship with the Lord. In this manner, a vital reciprocity exists between the sacramental grace and the soul's disposition. On the one hand, the right dispositions come in part with the aid of the Sacraments. On the other hand, the human exercise of virtue constitutes a necessary act of cooperation, so that spiritual growth proceeds both from sacramental grace and the free, positive choice of the individual. For this reason, O'Neill noted,

> The central theme of sacramental spirituality fails unless it is accompanied by appreciation for the normal demands of traditional spirituality. God is not honored by 'fine words and theatrical gestures' if sin has not been uprooted (MD §25). The sacraments are certainly the dominant means given for progress in Christian virtue; but they do not provide an alternative route. Man has a certain kind of nature and one which is injured by sin; he can make himself a better man, he can intensify his union with Christ, only if he is prepared to undertake the painful task of ridding himself of bad habits and cultivating good ones.[82]

As the ordinary means of man's sanctification, the Sacraments work marvelous effects within the soul. With the appropriate disposition, one can advance quickly in the spiritual life through the help of the Sacraments, especially Confession and the Eucharist. Although their effects appear invisible, the Sacraments truly change the faithful as real causes. A properly-informed sacramental spirituality should not fail to take advantage of the *res et sacramentum* as a true instrument.

Medicinal Sacramentality

In developing a sacramental spirituality for the New Evangelization, the Church should propose the Sacraments not only as the ordinary means of man's sanctification but also as a medicinal remedy for the wounds of sin. The faithful should approach the

[82] O'Neill, 300.

Sacraments to receive the healing and strength that God offers them there—not as mere occasions for healing, but as efficacious causes of it. Restoring man's supernatural sense will involve reawakening a wonder and awe at the efficacy of sacramental medicine.[83] In part, God instituted the sacramental order as a means of healing, and this reality should form the faithful's disposition as they approach these various springs of grace.

Christ's sacramental healings, though invisible, function similarly to His earthly ones. In John 5, Jesus approaches a man in Jerusalem who had been sick for thirty-eight years. Recognizing how long he had been ill, Jesus asks the man a question with an obvious answer: "Do you want to be healed?"[84] The answer would have been as obvious then as it is today, but Jesus asks it anyway. The man objects that he has no one to help him perform the customary healing ritual, seemingly unaware that this would be unnecessary in the presence of the Divine Physician Himself. So, Jesus instructs him, "Rise, take up your pallet, and walk. And at once the man was healed, and he took up his pallet and walked."[85] The divine words of healing worked with immediate effect. As instrumental causes, the Sacraments accomplish real healing, and provide the appropriate remedy for the disease of sin. Through the sacramental economy, Jesus poses the same question to every person in history: "Do you want to be healed?"

This understanding of medicinal sacramentality led St. Thomas Aquinas to articulate this prayer in preparation for Holy Mass: "I come sick to the physician of life, unclean to the fountain of mercy, blind to the light of eternal brightness, poor and needy

[83] For more on the concept of medicinal sacramentality, especially based on the work of St. Augustine, see the conference: Reginald Lynch. *What is a Sacrament?: St. Thomas Aquinas on the Sacrament as Signs*, YouTube (The Thomistic Institute, 2021), accessed November 27, 2022, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4g6DGbTVD74.
[84] John 5:6
[85] John 5:8-9

to the Lord of heaven and earth. So I ask you, most generous Lord: graciously heal my infirmity, wash me clean, illumine my blindness, enrich my poverty, and clothe my nakedness."[86] Throughout the history of the Church, the Sacraments have provided man a remedy for the condition of sin. A dynamic sacramental spirituality will not see the Sacraments as a placebo effect, but as true causes of the healing they promise. With the proper faith, an encounter with Jesus changes lives. It restores their health, removes their blindness, and enables them to walk. Within the Sacraments, souls touch Christ's humanity. When they allow it, Christ can work extraordinary effects within His faithful people.

Any true healing evokes gratitude for the medicine and cause of restored health, and the Sacraments pose no exception. In his interior disposition, man feels indebted to the responsible party, and the expression of gratitude begins to pay that debt. The Gospel of Luke recounts this common human experience:

> As he entered a village, he was met by ten lepers, who stood at a distance and lifted up their voices and said, 'Jesus, Master, have mercy on us.' When he saw them he said to them, 'Go and show yourselves to the priests.' And as they went they were cleansed. Then one of them, when he saw that he was healed, turned back, praising God with a loud voice; and he fell on his face at Jesus' feet, giving him thanks. Now he was a Samaritan. Then said Jesus, 'Were not ten cleansed? Where are the nine?'[87]

In their obedience to the order established by Jesus, they were all healed, but only one returned to give thanks. Fulfilling the divine mandate, the Church calls the faithful to obedience to the sacramental order established by Christ. Fidelity to this order composes an important element of sacramental spirituality, by which the faithful submit themselves to Christ and the work of His Church. Holding to the Thomistic theory of sacramental

[86] *Daily Roman Missal*, 2307.
[87] Luke 17:12-17

causality aids one in better imagining Christ's humanity as the source, means, and true instrument of healing, an important recognition for a sacramental spirituality. As the faithful are healed, they experience the need to express their gratitude, and to begin paying back the debt.

The Sunday Obligation

To make this repayment to the Lord, the Church, based on the divine command,[88] requires her faithful to attend Holy Mass on every Sunday and holy day of obligation.[89] By exercising the virtue of religion in this way, the faithful express their gratitude to God for His abundant blessings and can receive the sacramental nourishment He provides them in the Holy Eucharist. Every Sunday, the *Code of Canon Law* mandates, "must be observed in the universal Church as the primordial holy day of obligation," since from apostolic times, the Church celebrates the paschal mystery weekly.[90] Although the faithful are not required to receive the Eucharist at every Mass, recent magisterial teaching since St. Pius X has encouraged a frequent reception.[91]

While the reasons for the Sunday obligation cannot be exhausted here, it will be helpful to consider how it fits into a sacramental spirituality. How does this spirituality look alongside an obligation? The Church must help the faithful go beyond external observance in order to see, desire, and be attracted by the supernatural order present in the sacred mysteries. Undeniably, this constitutes a difficult task, because it requires

---

[88] Cf. Exodus 20:8-11

[89] C. 1247: "On Sundays and other holy days of obligation, the faithful are obliged to participate in the Mass. Moreover, they are to abstain from those works and affairs which hinder the worship to be rendered to God, the joy proper to the Lord's day, or the suitable relaxation of mind and body." *Code of Canon Law*, c. 1247, in *Code of Canon Law: Latin-English Edition* (Washington, DC: Canon Law Society of America, 1999), 384.

[90] *CIC*, c. 1246, §1.

[91] See Pius X, *Decree on Frequent and Daily Reception of Holy Communion*, Sacred Congregation of Rites, Dec. 20, 1905.

tremendous faith in all that happens beneath the sacramental veil. Invisible to human eyes, the flowing of grace from the Head to the members occurs through ordinary, human realities. Consider the various factors of the Sunday experience that contribute positively or negatively to perceiving the divine: the humanity of the priest, the singing of the choir, the reverence of the servers, the beauty of the place of worship, the comfortability of the seating, the effectiveness of the preaching, etc. The divine often seems obscured by the human. At times, these remarkably human characteristics make it difficult to perceive God's work in their midst.

In his own reflection on the Eucharist, Pope Francis recognized that the disciples at Emmaus, too, had this difficulty in perceiving the Lord.[92] Only in the breaking of the bread were their eyes opened to His presence. Considering this reality, the Holy Father proposes an interesting thought experiment:

> If we had somehow arrived in Jerusalem after Pentecost and had felt the desire not only to have information about Jesus of Nazareth but rather the desire still to be able to meet him, we would have had no other possibility than that of searching out his disciples so that we could hear his words and see his gestures, more alive than ever. We would have had no other possibility of a true encounter with him other than that of the community that celebrates.[93]

If people today want to know Jesus, the same remains true: they must meet Him at Mass, where His Mystical Body gathers in prayer. Sacramental spirituality builds itself upon the primacy of Sunday, when the Church re-lives the Easter mystery week after week. In the New Evangelization, this foundation will be crucial. Every evangelical effort must have as its end the encounter with Christ's humanity present in the Sacraments. True

[92] *Desiderio Desideravi*, §7.
[93] *Desiderio Desideravi*, §8.

evangelization will necessarily be ordered towards introducing souls to the sacramental economy—if needed, Baptism, and then the Eucharist.

Attendance at Sunday Mass should be motivated by more than external obligation. Instead, it must be seen as the place of true encounter with the Risen Jesus, where the faithful kneel again beneath that Cross on which Our Savior once bled for love. The Church must help her faithful to think and pray this way, to perceive the true, spiritual reality present alongside messy, human circumstances. In that way, the obligation fades from view, and the true desire for sacramental encounter predominates.

Even if one attends more for true desire and less for external obligation, how might the theory of instrumental, efficient causality help the faithful understand the importance of their attendance? How might it change the way they pray and engage Eucharistic worship? With its particular emphases, the Thomistic theory of instrumental, efficient causality clarifies and sharpens for the faithful the form of this sacramental encounter. By understanding the Sacraments as true instrumental causes, the importance of attendance becomes clearer. The bodily presence of the faithful composes an indispensable part of the functioning of the Sacraments. God did not institute a sacramental economy in which the instruments work at a distance. The faithful may desire the effects of those instruments. God may even provide them through alternative means, but properly speaking, a Sacrament has not occurred without the instrumental contact. In that light, the faithful's presence at the Sunday Eucharist becomes nonnegotiable.

While God may always dispense grace as He pleases, He guarantees it in the Sacraments, always provided the requisite faith and true repentance for serious sin.

Physical attendance and participation in the Sacraments, especially at Sunday Mass, form a necessary component of the sacramental order. After all, Christ instituted the Sacraments *for* people, and on their account, instituted them in a way proper to human anthropology. As humans are body and soul, so the Sacraments communicate in physical and spiritual ways. Physical attendance at Sunday Mass suits the anthropological reality, and the Thomistic theory of sacramental causality emphasizes the power of physical instruments, which goes nowhere in the absence of human recipients. For this reason, Pope Francis writes,

> For us a vague memory of the Last Supper would do no good. We need to be present at that Supper, to be able to hear his voice, to eat his Body and to drink his Blood. We need Him. In the Eucharist and in all the sacraments we are guaranteed the possibility of encountering the Lord Jesus and of having the power of his Paschal Mystery reach us. The salvific power of the sacrifice of Jesus, his every word, his every gesture, glance, and feeling reaches us through the celebration of the sacraments.[94]

Through the words, gestures, and glances of Sunday Mass, the faithful meet their Lord. The Mass engages each of man's five senses in the worship of God, and one misses that entirely when one excuses oneself from Sunday worship.

With a sharp supernatural sense, man can readily perceive what happens at Mass on the spiritual plane. By reading the symbolic language of the liturgy, the faithful can see past the often disorganized, human circumstances. When pastors and catechists teach the Sacraments, they should explain how the physicality of the Sacraments assists one's prayer. Incorporating the Thomistic theory of causality would be especially helpful, since its account points one to prayer with the true instrumental power of Christ's mysteries. The faithful do not participate as mere spectators, but as full recipients of Christ's divine

[94] *Desiderio Desideravi*, §11.

power through a seemingly scandalous human mode. An effective sacramental spirituality for the New Evangelization must build itself on these realities, introducing in the faithful a true desire for the supernatural order.

If the faithful attend Sunday Mass with that spiritual outlook, they will value their own sacramental participation, and hope to help others see what they see. They will see their attendance and Eucharistic reception as directly linked to their own divinization and growth in charity. They will receive the abundance of grace that God desires to grant them, especially strength and courage in bearing the various crosses of life. Truly, the Sacraments are fountains of grace and wellsprings of divine life. A sacramental spirituality prioritizes placing oneself in their proximity, and maximizing one's treasury of divine life.

In catechizing people about all they receive in the Sacraments, especially at Sunday Mass, it will also be necessary to avoid an individualism, whereby a hyper-focus on personal gain blurs one's understanding of their place in the larger, ecclesial communion. Exercising their universal magisterium, the Council Fathers of Vatican II taught,

> At all times and in every race God has given welcome to whosoever fears Him and does what is right. God, however, does not make men holy and save them merely as individuals, without bond or link between one another. Rather has it pleased Him to bring men together as one people, a people which acknowledges Him in truth and serves Him in holiness. He therefore chose the race of Israel as a people unto Himself. With it He set up a covenant. Step by step He taught and prepared this people, making known in its history both Himself and the decree of His will and making it holy unto Himself.[95]

[95] *Lumen Gentium*, §9.

As He once worked with and through the people of Israel, so now He works with and through the Church, His instrument on earth for the salvation of all.[96] Through the paschal mystery, Jesus saved humanity as a people. As His Mystical Body, the Church worships Him as a community—made up of individuals, but drawn together as a community. A well-informed sacramental spirituality will also recognize and value the ecclesial community in which the Church celebrates her Sacraments. The Sunday Eucharist serves more than individual men, but all those who gather alongside one another to pray in the name of the whole Church.

Restoring the Supernatural Sense

At the heart of the New Evangelization must be the restoration of a foundational element of sacramental spirituality: the ability to perceive how the supernatural operates through natural means. In her missionary efforts, the Church should invite people to see with a different kind of vision, which senses the sacred beneath ordinary, human realities. Especially in the Sacraments, the Church must invite the faithful to see God's grace filling their souls and to be amazed at the wondrous display of His power. As the Lord once spoke to Samuel, so now He reminds the Church: "The Lord sees not as man sees; man looks on the outward appearance, but the Lord looks on the heart."[97] As one grows in holiness, they begin to perceive reality more like God, who beholds both the exterior and the interior. The rediscovery of man's supernatural sense involves this dual vision. When the faithful learn to see in this way, they engage the sacramental system with bolder and more accurate expectations, remaining true to its purpose.

---

[96] Cf. *CCC*, 1776.
[97] 1 Samuel 16:7

God instituted the Sacraments for this reason, but too often, man remains unable to perceive His presence. In his own reflection on this struggle, Pope Francis put it this way: "The fundamental question is this: how do we recover the capacity to live completely the liturgical action? . . . The challenge is extremely demanding because modern people — not in all cultures to the same degree — have lost the capacity to engage with symbolic action, which is an essential trait of the liturgical act."[98] Pope Francis's words on the issue make clear that the recovery of this supernatural vision in humanity and its ability to speak the symbolic language pose a real challenge for the Church today, but one that the New Evangelization must engage. If the Sacraments truly compose the ordinary means of salvation for the human race, then the ability to understand and value their functioning must remain a priority for any catechetical efforts. When the Church fails at this task, she fails at something essential.

Undoubtedly, the makeup of modern society creates a uniquely difficult context in which the sacramental mysteries may be encountered and lived. At the outset of his pontificate, His Holiness admitted, "It is undeniable that many people feel disillusioned and no longer identify with the Catholic tradition . . . The causes of this breakdown include . . . our *difficulty in restoring a mystical adherence to the faith* in a pluralistic religious landscape."[99] If the modern magisterium devotes this amount of attention to an issue, its importance should be clear, but the question remains: what can be done? How can we restore the supernatural sense in those for whom sacramental wonder has faded? In the first place, the Church must return the people of God to a fundamental truth: the work of divinization constitutes the pattern for human holiness. For the sake of human

[98] *Desiderio Desideravi*, §27.
[99] *Evangelii Gaudium*, §70, emphasis added.

salvation, this work should be the primary focus of every soul. As the *Catechism* explains, "The Spirit heals and transforms those who receive him by conforming them to the Son of God. The fruit of the sacramental life is that the Spirit of adoption makes the faithful partakers in the divine nature by uniting them in a living union with the only Son, the Savior."[100] Indeed, the Sacraments possess a transformative power, which affects the people of God to a greater degree as they can perceive the divine presence moving through external signs.

To this end, the intrinsic holiness of creation remains an important principle for developing a sacramental worldview: "God saw everything that he had made, and behold, it was very good."[101] By recognizing created things as coming from God and holy in themselves, one more readily accepts God's power to work through them as He accomplishes His purpose. Considering the relationship between the Sacraments and liturgical objects, Harrison Ayre points out the following in his *Mysterion*: "The use of these materials in liturgy foreshadows what God intends for creation at the end of time. Created things are lifted up to cooperate with God's saving action and made holy as a sign of what will happen at the end of time to everything God has created."[102] Sacramental matter contains the potency to act on souls as instruments of divine life, and a sacramental spirituality appreciates this design. Once one understands this dynamic, it becomes easier to see how the Thomistic theory of sacramental causality contributes to the restoration of man's supernatural sense and the growth of his interior life.

---

[100] *CCC*, 1129.
[101] Genesis 1:31
[102] Harrison Ayre, *Mysterion: The Revelatory Power of the Sacramental Worldview* (Boston: Pauline Books & Media, 2021), 102.

If the human component of the Sacraments poses a real difficulty, then the Church must provide an account of that component that overcomes the obstacle and sharpens man's supernatural sense. Instrumental, efficient causality is such an account. Not only does it offer an answer to the problem of physicality, but it also proposes a sacramental vision that can be integrated into prayer. In a way, the employment of created things as instruments of divine power dignifies the objects. When participating in the Sacraments, the faithful need not see them only as signs or material objects, but as truly containing and communicating Christ's power. Internalizing that simple truth helps one to see the Sacraments as sacred, because they no longer appear as empty rituals.[103] Instead, they become agents of a marvelous transformation: human souls being configured to their Creator. If, in part, the problem of physicality considers the created objects as unimportant or deprived of power, then it will be important to dignify and elevate those objects in a firm, catechetical response. An emphasis on the Sacraments as true instruments of Christ's humanity helps overcome that obstacle to faith.

In exercising a sacramental spirituality, the faithful learn to reverence those instruments and to approach the Sacraments as they would approach the Lord Himself, because they recognize their true contact with the saving humanity of Christ. When the supernatural sense functions as it should, everything changes. Recall the experience of the hemorrhaging woman in Luke 8:

[103] For more on modern man's relationship to ritual, see Ayre, 100-102. There, he notes the following: "Our resistance to ritual can be seen not so much as aversion to ritual in general as aversion to *religious* ritual specifically. In order to understand why this is so, it's helpful to recall the difficulties that modernism poses. Modernism denies that God can work in the world, which is why we doubt that God works through ritual. But the very reason the Church embraces ritual is because ritual is so human. God created us and knows how to reach us, so he works through the most human of things. We tend naturally to worshipful action because, in fact, we are created for worship, and ritual embraces our embodied, created nature to help direct our worship" (101).

> As he went, the people pressed round him. And a woman who had had a flow of blood for twelve years and had spent all her living upon physicians and could not be healed by anyone, came up behind him, and touched the fringe of his garment; and immediately her flow of blood ceased. And Jesus said, 'Who was it that touched me?' When all denied it, Peter said, 'Master, the multitudes surround you and press upon you!' But Jesus said, 'Someone touched me; for I perceive that power has gone forth from me.' And when the woman saw that she was not hidden, she came trembling, and falling down before him declared in the presence of all the people why she had touched him, and how she had been immediately healed. And he said to her, 'Daughter, your faith has made you well; go in peace.'[104]

In the passage, many people are touching Jesus, even if only brushing up against Him in the crowd. For the hemorrhaging woman, contact with the "fringe of his garment" cured instantly an ailment of twelve years. What accounts for the different results in all those who touched the Lord? The woman in the Gospels knew and perceived by faith the power that lay hidden beneath the Lord's external appearance. She reverenced his cloak, as she reverenced the Lord Himself. The Gospel account suggests that Christ's power worked through the seemingly normal and otherwise uninteresting article of clothing. On account of her faith, the hemorrhaging woman approached Jesus in a way different than all the others, because she approached Him with a supernatural vision that saw through mere physicality.

In the Sacraments, Jesus should wonder again: "Who was it that touched me?"[105] The Lord should know power has left Him. All too often, without the supernatural sense, the faithful limit their reception of grace or become entirely blind to it. They may be "pressed round Him," but experience no change. The New Evangelization must propose a sacramental spirituality that *sees* both Jesus and His cloak as sacred. By cultivating a true desire, the people of God see the sacramental action as the means of Christ's saving

[104] Luke 8:42-48
[105] Luke 8:45

humanity touching souls today. If they approach the Sacraments with this supernatural sense, they too will hear those words Jesus first spoke to the hemorrhaging woman: "Your faith has made you well; go in peace."[106]

Marian Wonder

In the pursuit of holiness, the people of God always find an example in Our Lady, whose life reveals much about how to engage the mystery of the Incarnation. At her most tender and intimate moments, Our Lady knew what it meant to *touch* Jesus, to receive from Him even as she provided for Him. The sacramental spirituality needed today finds its perfect fulfillment in her who carried the divinity within her humanity and who perceived God's work amid difficult, even tense human circumstances.[107] In a word, Mary knew how to *wonder* at the gifts of grace she received, cooperating with that grace in bearing fruit for the salvation of the world.

When the New Evangelization brings souls to the Sacraments, it must teach them how to *wonder* as Mary did. After the archangel Gabriel appeared to her, Our Lady was left marveling at the angel's words. At the mysterious news of a virginal pregnancy, Mary wonders to Gabriel: "How can this be?"[108] Quite humbly, she expresses her amazement at the divine invitation to cooperate in humanity's redemption. Mary adopts a posture of reverence before the greatest mystery in the world. Like Our Lady, every soul should adopt a similar posture before the great mysteries of faith found in the Sacraments. Every soul can wonder with her: "How can this be?" By grace, the God of

[106] Luke 8:48
[107] Cf. Matthew 2:13-23
[108] Luke 1:34

the entire universe comes to dwell in the souls of lowly men, and this occurs principally through the sacramental system.

In response to the divine initiative, the faithful should be deeply moved. When they participate in the sacramental liturgies, they should wonder like Our Lady, not with a disposition of doubt, but with rich faith. Calling the Church back to this holy vision, Pope Francis reflected,

> Wonder is an essential part of the liturgical act because it is the way that those who know they are engaged in the particularity of symbolic gestures look at things. It is the marveling of those who experience the power of symbol, which does not consist in referring to some abstract concept but rather in containing and expressing in its very concreteness what it signifies.[109]

As instruments of divine power, the Sacraments cause what they signify. When the archangel spoke to Mary, Gabriel effected what he communicated. Responding to that efficacy, both Mary and the faithful wonder at God's power. If something deeper and more interior was not occurring, there would be no reason for wonder. Everything on the physical, exterior level would seem self-explanatory. In sacramental action, the faithful wonder because of what unfolds on the spiritual plane. The most important work lies veiled behind sacramental signs.

In its articulation of sacramental instrumentality, the Thomistic theory of causality remains uniquely positioned to evoke this sense of wonder within man, because it considers the sacramental action to be more than occasions or necessary prerequisites. It understands the actions themselves as extending the reach of Christ's power throughout the ages. A chain of instrumental causes carries within itself the salvific power of Christ's

[109] *Desiderio Desideravi*, §26.

paschal mystery, flowing through created things to touch souls 2000 years later. That evokes wonder!

When the Church finds success in her missionary endeavors, it often occurs because she has appealed to man's sense of wonder, which occurs as the natural result of exercising the supernatural sense. The sacramental economy contains such tremendous power for the divinization and sanctification of humanity, but still, so many miss its richness. As the Church continues to fulfill Our Lord's mission, it must proclaim this power in new, bold, and engaging ways. Reflecting on the state of the Church in the United States, the Bishops issued a moving plea:

> In recent years, increasing numbers of Christians in our country have left their churches and become religiously unaffiliated. We invite Catholics who have left the Church or who no longer practice the faith to come home. We miss you and we love you. We pray that Jesus will draw you back to your Catholic family, his Mystical Body, through his Eucharistic Body. We repeat words attributed to Saint Teresa of Calcutta: 'Once you understand the Eucharist, you can never leave the Church. Not because the Church won't let you but because your heart won't let you.'[110]

If the heart refuses to permit one to leave the Church, it will be because the heart has learned Marian wonder. When one understands the Eucharist, one's heart has learned to see with the supernatural sense, to perceive the sacred realities present in ordinary, created things. Just as Our Lord descended to *be with* Mary, so He descends to *be with* souls today.

[110] United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, *The Mystery of the Eucharist in the Life of the Church*, §55 (Washington, DC: United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, 2021), 29.

CONCLUSION

At the Incarnation, the King of the whole world humbled Himself to become small, weak, and poor for men's sake. After that same pattern, He comes again in His mysteries, the Sacraments, where day after day, He veils Himself so that He can be known, loved, and adored. In one of the prefaces for the Nativity of the Lord, the priest makes a beautiful pronouncement: "For on the feast of this awe-filled mystery, though invisible in his own divine nature, he has appeared visibly in ours; and begotten before all ages, he has begun to exist in time."[111] Remaining invisible, he allows souls to grow in the merit of faith, so He remains as He was on earth: small, weak, and poor. Entirely dependent as He was on Our Lady, so now He remains entirely dependent on the work of His priests, who will serve until the end of time as His instruments of salvation.

Just as He employed instruments during His earthly healings, so today, He uses instruments as efficacious agents of grace, by which He remains with His people with the full power of His divinity. Never disadvantaged by existing so long after Christ, today's faithful have access to the overabundant treasury of the Lord's merits, which have the same power to accomplish today what they once accomplished then. This striking reality led Pope Francis to place himself in solidarity with the many characters of the Gospels:

> I am Nicodemus, the Samaritan woman at the well, the man possessed by demons at Capernaum, the paralytic in the house of Peter, the sinful woman pardoned, the woman afflicted by hemorrhages, the daughter of Jairus, the blind man of Jericho, Zacchaeus, Lazarus, the thief and Peter both pardoned. The Lord Jesus who dies no more, who lives forever with the signs of his Passion continues to pardon us, to heal us, to save us with the power of the sacraments. It is the concrete way, by means of his incarnation, that he loves us. It is the way in which he satisfies his own thirst for us that he had declared from the cross.[112]

[111] Preface II of the Nativity of the Lord, *Daily Roman Missal*, 734.
[112] *Desiderio Desideravi*, §11.

By uniting humanity to Himself at the Incarnation and extending that Incarnation through time in the Sacraments, humanity is never without its Savior or His power. In her efforts to re-evangelize the nations of the earth, the Church must express its sacramental confidence. Just as Jesus, the Divine Physician, *touched* the people in the Gospels, so today, He *touches* the faithful in the Sacraments. Having received such a gift, the Church cannot help but share it. Simply put, the New Evangelization must make its own the kerygmatic proclamation of the Samaritan woman after her encounter with Christ at the well: "Come, see a man who told me all that I ever did. Can this be the Christ?"[113] So too in the Sacraments, with their exterior obstacles, that question echoes throughout the ages: Can this be the Christ? Is it truly Jesus at work beneath the sacramental veil?

To answer this question, this thesis examined the sacramental economy and its role as the ordinary means of man's salvation. Commissioned as it is with a universal outlook, the Church works tirelessly to introduce every soul to Christ's sacramental power, but a survey of contemporary society reveals significant struggles in this regard. Modern man has lost his ability to read and understand the symbolic language of the liturgy, and as a result, often misses the most important work of the Sacraments, namely all that occurs in the supernatural realm. For the New Evangelization to be successful, it must help the faithful to overcome this obstacle and recover its supernatural sense.

As a means of accomplishing this, this thesis proposed the Thomistic theory of sacramental causality as a particularly helpful aid in piercing the exterior veil of the Sacraments. Given the fact of their efficacy, St. Thomas posited that the Sacraments act as instrumental, efficient causes of sanctifying grace, whereby a chain of these causes

[113] John 4:29

communicates God's power throughout time. Albeit separated instruments of the divinity, the Sacraments employ created things as real causes of divine life within souls. Accomplishing what they signify, they use lower, created objects to effect higher, interior changes, made possible by God acting as the principal agent. Through this series of instrumental causes, the Sacraments enable Christ's humanity to reach through the ages, providing souls with the necessary remedies for the wounds of sin.

In its third chapter, this thesis applied the theory of instrumental, efficient causality to a sacramental spirituality, arguing for the Thomistic theory as a particularly helpful aid to overcome the challenges of the New Evangelization. By emphasizing how God employs created things as instruments of His power, the Thomistic theory sharpens and restores man's supernatural sense, especially in those for whom the sacramental system has lost its attraction and significance. Considering pastoral application, the third chapter examined how such an understanding of sacramental causality might change one's approach to the Sunday obligation and sacramental participation in general. Instead of fulfilling a requirement in strict justice, the faithful can perceive the real spiritual benefits of Eucharistic worship and ecclesial participation, understanding the importance of their physical proximity to the sacramental instruments. In this way, they learn to see the attraction of the supernatural order, which works amid messy, human circumstances. As a result of this new vision, participants in the Sacraments learn how to wonder and marvel alongside Our Lady at all the workings of divine providence, especially when it employs seemingly mundane, physical objects as true efficient causes of grace.

Although alternative approaches to sacramental causality highlight important realities, the Thomistic theory of instrumental, efficient causality provides a strong

theological basis from which the New Evangelization can sharpen man's supernatural sense and develop a robust sacramental spirituality suited to overcome the obstacles of the modern age. Relying on the Incarnation as an indispensable foundation, the sacramental economy allows Christ's humanity to touch souls today. In his own exposition of this mystery, Vagaggini offers a helpful summary:

> The liturgy, like the Church itself and the sacraments which are actualized in the Church, is the continuous incarnate epiphany of Christ, just as Christ, when He was on earth, was, to the eyes of faith, the incarnate epiphany of God. In the liturgy more than in any other manifestations of the Church, the eyes of the believer, once they have overcome the obstacle of its externals and its materialness and the scandal of the incarnation, behold the epiphany of our great God and Savior Christ, whom, in the liturgy, the believer, in his own way, sees, hears, and touches.[114]

For the Church to flourish in her salvific mission, she must teach souls to pray according to this incarnational and anthropologically-suited mode, to read the external signs as true causes of life-changing, interior realities. Is it merely bread, wine, and oil, or is it something more? For the re-evangelization of humanity to be effective, the Church must revisit the synagogue at Nazareth. Before such mysteries of grace, it must help the faithful to pose this question anew—not with a sense of suspicion or doubt, but with all the wonder and awe of Our Lady: "Is this not the son of Joseph?"[115]

[114] Vagaggini, *Theological Dimensions*, 306.
[115] Luke 4:22 *LSV*

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Aristotle. *Physics*. In *The Basic Works of Aristotle*. Translated by R.P. Hardie and R.K. Gaye, Edited by Richard McKeon, 213-394. New York, NY: Modern Library, 2001.

Athanasius. *On the Incarnation*. Translated by Religious of C.S.M.V. Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Orthodox Theological Seminary, 1982.

Ayre, Harrison. *Mysterion: The Revelatory Power of the Sacramental Worldview*. Boston: Pauline Books & Media, 2021.

Catechism of the Catholic Church. 2nd ed. Washington, DC: United States Catholic Conference, 2000.

Cessario, Romanus. "Sacramental Causality: *Da Capo!*" *Nova et Vetera*, 11, no. 2 (2013): 307-316.

Code of Canon Law: Latin-English Edition. Washington, DC: Canon Law Society of America, 1999.

Daily Roman Missal. Woodridge, IL: Midwest Theological Forum, 2012.

Feingold, Lawrence. *Touched by Christ: The Sacramental Economy*. Steubenville, OH: Emmaus Academic, 2021.

Francis. Apostolic Exhortation on the Joy of the Gospel *Evangelii Gaudium*, November 24, 2013. Boston: Pauline Books & Media, 2013.

Francis. Apostolic Letter on the Liturgical Formation of the People of God *Desiderio Desideravi* (29 June 2022). At The Holy See. https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/apost_letters/documents/20220629-lettera-ap-desiderio-desideravi.html

Gallagher, John F. *Significando Causant: A Study of Sacramental Efficiency*. Fribourg: University Press, 1965.

John Paul II. Encyclical on the Permanent Validity of the Church's Missionary Mandate *Redemptoris Missio* (7 December 1990). At The Holy See. https://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_jp-ii_enc_07121990_redemptoris-missio.html

Lang, David P. *Why Matter Matters: Philosophical and Scriptural Reflections on the Sacraments*. Huntington, IN: Our Sunday Visitor, 2002.

Leo the Great. *Letter to Bishop Flavian*. Translated by Edmund Hunt. Fathers of the Church 28. New York: Fathers of the Church, 1957.

Lynch, Reginald M. *The Cleansing of the Heart: The Sacraments as Instrumental Causes in the Thomistic Tradition*. Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 2017.

Lynch, Reginald M. *What Is a Sacrament?: St. Thomas Aquinas on the Sacrament as Signs*. *YouTube*. The Thomistic Institute, 2021. Accessed November 27, 2022. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4g6DGbTVD74.

Marshall, Bruce D. "What is the Eucharist? A Dogmatic Outline." In *The Oxford Handbook of Sacramental Theology*. Edited by Hans Boersma and Matthew Levering, 500-516. New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2015.

Martin, Ralph. *A Church in Crisis: Pathways Forward*. Steubenville, OH: Emmaus Road Publishing, 2020.

Nutt, Roger W. *General Principles of Sacramental Theology*. Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 2017.

O'Neill, Colman E. *Meeting Christ in the Sacraments*. New York: Alba House, 1991.

Sheed, Frank. *The Church and I*. Garden City, NY: Doubleday & Company, 1974.

Smith, Gregory A. "Just One-Third of U.S. Catholics Agree with Their Church That Eucharist Is Body, Blood of Christ." *Pew Research Center*. Pew Research Center, May 30, 2020. Last modified May 30, 2020. Accessed November 24, 2021. https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2019/08/05/transubstantiation-eucharist-u-s-catholics/.

Thomas Aquinas. *Summa Theologiae: Latin/English Edition of the Works of St. Thomas Aquinas*. Vol. 19. Trans. Laurence Shapcote. Lander, WY: Aquinas Institute for the Study of Sacred Doctrine, 2012.

Thomas Aquinas. *Summa Theologiae: Latin/English Edition of the Works of St. Thomas Aquinas*. Vol. 20. Trans. Laurence Shapcote. Lander, WY: Aquinas Institute for the Study of Sacred Doctrine, 2012.

United States Conference of Catholic Bishops. *Thematic Framework of the 2021-2024 USCCB Strategic Plan*. Washington, DC: United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, 2020.

United States Conference of Catholic Bishops. *The Mystery of the Eucharist in the Life of the Church*. Washington, DC: United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, 2021.

Vagaggini, Cyprian. *Theological Dimensions of the Liturgy*. Translated by Leonard J. Doyle and W. A. Jurgens. Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1976.

Vatican Council II. Decree on the Missionary Activity of the Church *Ad Gentes*, (7 December 1965). At The Holy See. https://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_decree_19651207_ad-gentes_en.html

Vatican Council II. Dogmatic Constitution on the Church *Lumen Gentium*, (21 November 1964). At The Holy See. https://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_const_19641121_lumen-gentium_en.html

Vatican Council II. Dogmatic Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, (4 December 1963). At The Holy See. https://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_const_19631204_sacrosanctum-concilium_en.html