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Tell Me Why I Should Be a Catholic When...
What Catholics Call Sacraments Seem Like Empty, Ineffective Rituals?

by Ronda Chervin, Ph.D.
any non-Catholics wonder why so much emphasis is placed on sacraments by Roman Catholics. They don’t notice baptized Catholic children acting so different from other kids. Right after receiving Communion some Catholics go right back to gossiping, drinking, or conniving. Teenage Catholics seem just as wild as others even after confirmation. What is confession but a way to feel clean for a few hours only to sin again? Some say the divorce rate of Catholics is equal to that of non-Catholics — so marriage can’t be that powerful a source of grace. Holy Orders? Not so good a picture from the secular press, which doesn’t have to cover up for scandals! Anointing of the sick? Comforting, no doubt, but you could go to a healing service by an anointed healer and get more “cures.”

Others may not want to take such a skeptical approach about the effects of the sacraments but will question the scriptural justification for most if not all of the sacraments, at least as practiced in the Catholic Church.

One Catholic response to such questions is contained in my booklet Signs of Love (Boston: St. Paul Books and Media). This treatment is threefold: (1) the scriptural basis for each sacrament; (2) reasons why Catholics consider the sacraments to be signs of Christ’s love; and (3) explanations for why these great gifts are not always effective.

Brief answers to questions 1 and 2 will follow. Afterward a general section will address the issue of effectiveness.

As Catholics, we believe that Christ, the love of the Father made manifest, chose to come to us in intimate love through the sacraments. Love is never static. Love tends toward greater and greater intimacy of union. As the human lover continually strives to become closer and closer to the beloved, so the Divine Lover seeks means of entering deeply within us. Through the sacraments Christ comes to us concretely and visibly, though mysteriously: both visible and hidden. Is this not a material substance, and yet it manifests itself in visible signs — embraces, gifts . . . ?

Baptism

"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." (Matthew 28:19).

Although every creature is born out of the loving hand of God, yet, because of original sin, we have lost spiritual participation in God's life. We are turned toward the pursuit of worldliness rather than toward God. But Christ's redemption has removed the barrier between us and God and opened the way to an essential reunion! We believe that Christ embraces his creatures in baptism and joins himself to them with a bond of love that can never be destroyed by him but only by us.

Thus, the purpose of baptism is not to provide us with a conscious religious experience but rather to open within us a door through which divine love can flow, to turn the soul toward God by implanting on it his first kiss, as it were.

To deny the child this expression of Christ’s self-giving, on the grounds that the infant is too young to freely choose, would be similar to withholding parental love until the child is at the age of reason. Psychological studies show that tiny orphans have actually died when they were tended impersonally, so deeply did the lack of love affect them!

Given the infinite gulf between the reality of divine love and even the adult's ability to appreciate it, who shall set a time when the entering of Christ's love into the soul would have its greatest effect? In comparison with the love on God's part, we are always half asleep. Just as Christ has infinite love for this fresh individual, uniquely conceived, so the Church, manifesting the divine love, hastens to bring the infant into contact with her by making the child a member of the mystical body of the Church.

Holy Communion

"Take, eat; this is my body. Then he took a cup, and after giving thanks, he gave it to them, saying, 'Drink from it ... for this is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins' " (Matthew 26:26-28).

Many say that Christ is to be found primarily in loving one's neighbor. They consider misspent the time taken to adore Christ in the Eucharist. To them, receiving Communion is less an immediate union with Christ than a symbol of Christ's desire to see his people gathered together at a communal meal.

True as it is that Christ wishes us to find him in the midst of human love, it is very clear that the truth of Christ's real presence in the Eucharist aims at a still more direct form of love. Even in human love, we find a great desire to be actually in the presence of the beloved one. If someone would be willing to do
anything for me but would shun my presence, I would feel hurt and unloved.

Being in the actual presence of someone I love causes a deep happiness, as tenderness heals the deep wounds of loneliness. Ultimately, when the love is strong enough, one longs for this person not only to be near but to become a part of one — in the intimate unity of marriage. It appears, upon studying the gospels, that Christ wanted very much for us to experience his presence, to have us near him. He would gather his people "as a hen gathers her brood" (Luke 13:34). He lets the little children come to him. He permits the crowds to cluster around him. He even begs his friends to be present in his agony.

The deepest physical desire of lovers is actually to become one with each other, the physical act of intimacy being not only an ecstatic experience in itself but also, where it is the fruit of true love in marriage, a real union of hearts and spirits.

Jesus also wants to be absolutely one with us. He sees his beloved creatures wandering around aimlessly, inwardly locked up in their lonely egoism. Filled with compassion, he longs to enter into them, to comfort them, to let the leaven of his love lift up their spirits. Like a human lover, he cannot bear to see the ones he loves bowed down with melancholy, but instead he would give anything to be able to inject his own joy into their hearts.

Just as one kiss does not suffice for a lover, but he would come close to his loved one every day, so Christ offers himself to us in the intimacy of Communion every day, if we will. Each day we can live out of the unity of love, fed by the food of divine love, by the very being of Christ our Lover, who wants us to be part of him and, what is just as astounding, wants to be part of us.

Saints and mystics have experienced the truth of the real presence of Christ in the Eucharist in ecstasies not given to most Catholics. Frequently utilizing the analogy of romantic love, they have painted a vivid portrait of how Christ, like an unrequited lover, burns for the day when his beloved (each of us) will open to him so that he can pour his love into that soul, possess it, and, finally, bring it to perfect union with him in eternal bliss.

The gifts of the Holy Spirit flow from the inner bond of love the Spirit brings. Real Christian love is so much stronger than any attempt to become virtuous simply through idealism, because the Spirit of Love becomes ours in a much more intimate way through the sacraments.

Confirmation

What does the young person admire more than strength? Hardly anything. It is one's inability to find a genuine source of real inner power which leads him or her into the spirit of ambitious competitiveness. This can also lead one to pursue amusement, in despair of living up to any higher ideal, or to succumb to vanity as a way of building up a self-image through the admiration of others, and finally, to fall into rebellious delinquency which pretends not to fear jail or even death.

The promise of the Holy Spirit, the Spirit of Love, is that of an outpouring of strengths, of wisdom and fortitude and understanding. Our human love is weak; but divine love is power itself, since it is the very root of being. Confirmation signifies the dwelling of the Spirit of Love in the spirit of the young person. He or she will not be alone to face the world, but rather infused with strength from God — not the sham strength of worldliness or brutality, but the strength of that unconquerable faith which filled the saints.

Penance

Let us begin by considering the psychology of a couple in love, who have looked forward to seeing one another all week and yet, when the time comes, withdraw from each other and brood unhappily.

Then, because they realize that there is very little time left to enjoy one another, they do everything they can to make up, so that the last half hour, at least, may be spent in each other's arms.

By analogy, a person in sin, sensing the approach of communion with Christ, and drawn by the desire for this moment of union, tries to work out the hateful rages and despairs in his soul. He goes to the confessional and lets the grace of Christ flush out the polluted water in his heart through which the pure stream of God's love can no longer flow.

This is the sacrament which is perhaps the least understood and most scorned by those outside the Church, and often, the most resented by those within. "If God knows you are sorry, why go tell a priest?" We hear this over and over again.
This question may be divided into two parts. The first is why sorrow should be expressed in words, and the other is why forgiveness should pass through the mediation of a priest.

Turning to the first question, and using the analogy of human love, we can go more deeply into the logic of the emotions attending contrition and forgiveness.

Rather than let the woman he loves think that he doesn't care, or that he will never change, he rushes eagerly to say that he is sorry. He doesn't just feel sorry; to make a definite disavowal of his act, he also needs to tell her that he is sorry. Even this does not satisfy him. He needs to know that she accepts his sorrow and most of all, that his act did not irrevocably destroy the bond of love. The spoken words, "I forgive you," are the seal of this reunion.

For example, if a couple is engaged to be married, and the man should enter into a love affair with another woman, this act truly destroys the inner bond of self-giving to his fiancée. Unless he pledges himself to change, he really has given up the original bond and nullified it from his side.

It is in the context of this analogy that the notion of "mortal sin" can be understood in relationship to love. Just as in a human love, there are some acts which are unloving but which do not essentially disturb the deeper bond of unity, while others attack the very essence of the relationship. In our love of Christ, certain acts are a betrayal of that bond and cannot be shrugged off as nothing.

If, in human love, forgiveness is followed by the embrace of reconciliation, how is this to be duplicated in our relationship with Christ, who is not physically present to us? It must be through some spiritual presence which is yet concrete enough to serve our human need. We cannot show that the sacrament of Penance is the only way that Christ could have accomplished this result; but perhaps analysis may help us to understand Reconciliation as an invention of love. Let us consider the words Christ said to his disciples: "If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven" (John 20:22). The priest serves not as a particular man—certainly not as a mere busybody, or even as a psychologist of the spirit—but as the visible representative of Christ's forgiving love. This sacrament concretely applies the redemption of Christ enacted for those sins which negate, and even sometimes destroy, the bond of love between the soul and God. The grace (divine love) in the words of absolution and the deed of penance reseal the bond.

In the sacrament he pours into our trembling hearts his healing, forgiving grace right into the wound we have made by our sins. As we sin as individuals, so we long to be forgiven individually or how many has the confessional represented the open arms of Christ, waiting patiently for the return of the Prodigal Son.

Marriage

Some say that since marriage consists of the mutual self-giving of a man and a woman, there is no reason to introduce Christ as a "third party," or to submit this love to the formalism of a ceremony.

The assumption here is that human love, when it reaches the point of marriage, is in and of itself so perfect that to think that an added dimension can be reached through the grace of Christ is superfluous. Furthermore, it is assumed that human love is something so intimate to the two people involved that it should exclude all other persons, even Christ.

Many consider it very primitive to think that "marriages are made in heaven," and yet there is a great metaphysical foundation underlying this assertion. God has created each human being to be absolutely unique. The individual personality is the invention of his love, and its development is the fruit of its response to his providential care. In a very real and not merely sentimental sense, it is true to say that we meet each person as walking toward us out of God's hands. Each person is presented to us by God as his creation, distorted by the human environment and his own faults, but nonetheless containing a splendid inner mystery.

What, then, does the couple seek in the sacrament of marriage? They come to Christ and inwardly say, "You through whom we were created, who have made each of us lovable and have given us the hearts to discover it, live in the midst of our love. Be the bond which unites us, so that no human frailty may destroy it. Let this love, which is now so at home in the mystical depths of our beings, always increase. You who are Love, make our love bond fruitful—a radiant source of new human beings and of more love in the world. We gladly invite you into our love, because it is you alone who gave us being and blessed us by bringing us together. Through your loving care, let our destiny be the fulfillment of this love, so that when we come into eternity it may be hand-in-hand to meet you face-to-face."
Many people have wondered why the following of Christ involves having a priesthood. If all Christians love Christ and he loves them, why do they need a middleman? To some, the priestly function appears to reduce the mystery of Christ's love to mere formulas and rites. Others even see the priest as a sort of front man for a self-serving bureaucracy which lives off the exploitation of man's religious needs, somewhat as a marriage broker makes his money off the romantic exigencies of his clients.

In what way, then, can Christ's founding of the priesthood be considered an invention of love?

What the priesthood as a sacrament involves is a specific participation in the sacrificial love of Christ. A man who feels called to the priesthood comes more and more to adore in Christ that love which overflowed even unto the sacrifice of the cross. This man's adoration reaches the peak at which he longs to commit himself to this mystery and even identify with it. Simultaneously, his love for men comes to the point where he realizes that he can help them.

A few brief words about the celibacy of the priesthood are relevant here. That celibacy and priesthood have been combined is not an unchangeable teaching of the Church, but rather, a Church law which has been in effect for many centuries. However, it can be seen as very appropriate that those who live for the inner sacrificial mystery of Christ's love should be marked by a devotion so great that this fills their hearts and renders possible, and even glorious, a life in which marital love is sacrificed.

Therefore, we see that the priest is not to be considered as a substitute for Christ or as a spiritual bureaucrat. Neither is he simply a guide who, through study and prayer, is most familiar with the journey ahead. Rather, he is one who has been given power to draw the "raft" of Christ's divine love in the sacraments right up to us. And he does this by consecrating his own life to the mystery, which consecration is matched by Christ's pledge to give himself through the priest in the graces of ordination. Henceforth, through him Christ's invisible love becomes concrete in the sacraments. The priest does not give us himself or a set of formulas or mere signs and symbols; it is Christ who gives himself to us through the mystical words and acts of the priest.

The Anointing of the Sick

This sacrament used to be given exclusively to those in danger of death, but now it is administered to all those who are seriously ill. Every sickness is an intimation of possible death and in this time of physical and mental anguish, we need especially the sense of Christ's presence with us and his providential love. We need to be reminded that he is one with us in every suffering, and that death is the time when our love finally becomes liberated, taking wings to leave this earth for the arms of the divine Lover.

One of the great differences between merely being liked and being loved is that someone who loves us wants to be with us not only when we are happy, but also when we suffer. Liking someone often has to do with the fact that this person "turns me on," and generally when that someone is in difficulties, his or her companionship is not too pleasant. Therefore, we are both surprised and moved when we discover that a person is not alienated by our sickness of some other misfortune. This faithfulness is a real sign of love.

So, too, every suffering exists within the I-and-Thou of the soul and Christ. He wants to be present to the sick especially. He sends his priests to anoint them, so that he may be present to them concretely. At death, he would be especially near to those whose whole lives have been spent in his company. Have you ever seen an elderly woman who faithfully attends Mass every day? It seems to me that Christ regards her as a husband looks upon an elderly wife in whose lined face he can still detect the image of his bride. He is impelled to press on her lips a special kiss at the moment of her departure from the earth. Doesn't Christ draw even nearer to those who will soon come into the very center of the mystery of death? "I am the resurrection and the life" (John 11:25). In eternity, she will be adorned with a perfect body, fully expressive of the youthful love which will fill her soul.

Christ longs to help his beloved betrothers. "Forgive them; for they know not what they do" (Luke 23:34). A man or woman whose whole life was one long flight from Christ can yet be reconciled in love if only Christ's final offer of forgiveness is not spurned; and it is this hope which sends priests out to brave the contempt of hardened sinners, bringing them the offer of Christ's visible, reconciling sacrament.
A very striking example of one who became a Catholic in spite of great doubts about our sacraments beforehand is Scott Hahn.

Scott Hahn was a Presbyterian minister, married with three children. As a seminarian he was known for his hatred for the Catholic Church, which he considered to be the personification of the devil—the anti-Christ to come as portrayed in the New Testament.

In the course of his Protestant studies he began to find that contrary to all expectation, many times it was the Catholic Church that held to truths he wanted to emphasize himself as a minister of God’s word. As he describes it, his ardent interest in finding where Christian truth was believed and lived became first a detective story, then a horror story when he found more and more of this truth in the Church he had regarded as hellish, and finally a romance. By the end of his long journey he was fairly panting for the Eucharist he had previously so scorned.

Scott Hahn and his wife, who afterward also came into the full communion of the Catholic faith, are now ministering at the Franciscan University of Steubenville in their program of teaching Catholics how to evangelize.

It would be counterproductive to summarize Hahn’s manner of defending the sacraments. Thousands of Protestants and also Catholics are enjoying his fine tapes covering the sacraments and every other topic that alienates Protestants from the Catholic Church—taught from the point of view of a former Protestant minister in a tremendously dynamic, convincing manner. (These and other tapes under the title of Answering Common Objections by Scott Hahn are readily available.)

Ross Porter is another witness coming from a Protestant church background. Ross was studying to be a Presbyterian minister and Christian psychologist when he discovered that more and more he agreed with Catholic rather than Protestant theological positions. Easter of 1992 was when he was brought into full communion in the Catholic Church. Here is what Ross Porter says about the Eucharist, which seems to him, as a psychologist, such an important source of wholeness as it reaches into the soul through the body’s reception: “Give us this day our daily bread” . . . the Eucharist is so full of meaning and power that words and concepts could never fully define it. The Eucharist makes explicit the Life of the Body. The Risen Lord offering Himself to me, and integrating the splintered parts of my being: mind, body, spirit. Who am I? “You are a new creation.” Where am I going? “Take, eat, this is my body.”

The Body and Blood of my Savior reminds me of my true identity, and my eternal destination. Images flood my mind: the Sacred Heart, bursting for love; the Unblemished Lamb sacrificed for love; the New and Everlasting Covenant, Incarnated for love. The Word became flesh, and what God has brought together, let no one put asunder. Christ the High Priest, communicating His grace to me; tears of thanksgiving flow as I experience His healing touch. He wants to give Himself to me, completely. It is more than I can grasp; much more than I deserve. “Come unto me you who are heavy laden and I will give you rest.” The Eucharist is rest; it is a safe haven, a refuge. A Priceless Gift offered for free. "Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled."