

The Spiritual Life

The Healing Gifts of the Sacraments

By

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St. Paul tells us in 1 Corinthians, “Eye has not seen, nor ear has heard, and no mind has imagined what God has prepared for those who love him.” (1 Cor 2:9). The spiritual life is a journey. It is a journey that recapitulates the history of the chosen people and their walk from enslavement to freedom. Our walk too, an individual walk, begins with the freeing from the enslavement of the sin through which man lost the Holy Spirit and living the life of God, original sin; and the continuation of our sojourn into a deeper life of grace, whereby we become more like Him. This is an individual journey, but one that is made in communion with Jesus and His Body, the Church.

Jesus said on the day He ascended into Heaven, “Behold I am with you always, to the end of the age.” (Mt. 28:20). Because Jesus continues to be with us, He continues to help us; and one of the ways He helps us is through the seven sacraments which are backed by an oath of God promising that if man does his part, God will do His: Baptism, Confirmation, Reconciliation, the Eucharist, Matrimony, Holy Orders and Anointing of the Sick. Each of these sacraments was instituted by Christ as an efficacious sign of grace and an instrument of the divine power of Christ through which divine life is dispensed to us as a share through the merits of the Passion and Death of Jesus. Each of the Sacraments are a liturgical means for growth in the spiritual life and a point of contact with Christ. The 2nd Vatican Council instructs us that we, the faithful, should understand these sacramental signs and symbols and should eagerly and frequently receive these sacraments, as they were given to us to nourish the Christian Life.¹ The sign and symbol of the sacrament passes away, but the grace remains. The grace given in each sacrament corresponds to the specific needs of the individual in the Christian life and effects the grace that they signify; i.e.: Baptism signifies cleansing; the Eucharist signifies nourishment and communion; through Confirmation we are strengthened through the laying on of hands; Penance signifies absolution (forgiveness) of sins; Anointing of the Sick signifies strengthening in time of illness; through the exchange of rings promises a unity of the couple; and Holy Orders, through the laying on of the hands of the Bishop

¹ Cf Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy, Vat. Council II, n. 59

ordains clergy for official leadership in the Church.² The efficacy of the grace received depends on the intensity and perfection of the individual's disposition.³

In order to receive the sacraments and have the grace of the sacrament conferred, a person must receive the sacrament worthily with faith and not put up a block to receiving the Holy Spirit's power to transform. There should also be a devotion to the Father for giving us such a gift of love and a gratitude for the love of Jesus who suffered and died for us and who acts in the sacrament to communicate the Grace.⁴ The grace is imparted *ex opera operato*, by the actions being performed through the Power of God.⁵ It is not communicated by any personal requirements on the part of the recipient or through the person administering the sacrament. It is the ritual performance of the sign and actions of the sacrament performed with the intention of the Church on an individual who is worthily disposed to its reception that passes on the grace and merits of the corresponding sacrament.⁶ However, it is the individual disposition of the person who receives the sacrament that produces in each soul the fruit of the sacrament.⁷ Each person is called to holiness. In the Dogmatic Constitution on the Church promulgated by Pope Paul VI it states, "Therefore, in the Church, everyone whether belonging to the hierarchy, or being cared for by it, is called to holiness, according to the saying of the Apostle:

*'For this is the will of God, your sanctification.' However, this holiness of the Church is unceasingly manifested, and must be manifested, in the fruits of grace which the Spirit produces in the faithful; it is expressed in many ways in individuals, who in their walk of life tend toward the perfection of charity, thus causing the edification of others; in a very special way this (holiness) appears in the practice of the counsels, customarily called 'evangelical.'*⁸

The Church, itself, has the nature of a sacrament in that it is a sign and instrument of communion with God and unity of all men. It is a means of the life of Christ being communicated to the faithful, especially through the sacraments which the Church has been given divine authority to administer.⁹ As such the sacraments are administered by the celebrant in and through the Church.

The life of Grace received through each of the sacraments and the fruit of the grace produced in each individual through the sacrament is dependent upon the disposition of each Christian.

The Sacraments of Initiation and the Indelible Seals - Baptism gives us a new birth into the life of grace through a dying and rising in Christ. Through this sacrament we make a commitment to conversion and an opportunity to frequently renew our Baptismal

² Just, Felix, S.J. The Seven Sacraments.

³ Cf Summa Theologiae, III, q. 68 a. 8

⁴ Cf CCC #1127

⁵ Cf CCC #1128

⁶ Cf CCC #1128

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Lumen Gentium, 1964, n. 39

⁹ Cf Dogmatic Constitution of the Church, n. 4 & 6

promises which will help us to remain faithful in face of temptations. We are also given all the supernatural powers of the virtues, both theological and moral; and we also receive the gifts of the Holy Spirit to help us grow into the fullness of Christian life and perfection of charity; enabling us to think (the wisdom gifts), to love (the love gifts) and to act (the power gifts) like Jesus. The more we obtain these virtues and utilize these gifts, the more the graces will be effective in our lives. Confirmation strengthens us to witness, stand firm and defend our faith. We receive the virtue of fortitude. The more mature we are and the more we step forth in faith in the power of the grace of this sacrament, the more effective it will be in our lives.

The Repeatable Sacraments of Healing - The Eucharist, worthily received, increases sanctifying grace in our lives, gives us a new mission in the Holy Spirit and a greater receptivity to the indwelling Trinity. We are able to participate in a more effective way in the celebration of the Mass and receive all the graces for ourselves as well as for those whom we intercede. Proper disposition is imperative to receive these graces, and we need to be in a state of grace and have the right intentions and sufficient knowledge of what is occurring during the Sacrifice of the Mass. Intentions of faith, profound reverence, deep humility and a loving confidence in the saving grace of Jesus is needed. Also needed is a preparation for receiving the sacrament and a prayerful thanksgiving and recollection for the Sacrifice and Sacrament of Christ. Reconciliation activates the virtue of penitence within us; a sorrow for our sins as offenses against God and a resolve not to sin again. It produces in us a firm purpose of amendment and conversion. The Council of Trent stated that what is needed in order to receive the full and perfect remission of sins is: contrition, confession, satisfaction and a resolve to amend one's life; and without such resolve the sacrament is not valid.¹⁰ The more intense and universal resolve to avoid sin the greater the forgiveness of all of our sins; the remission of temporal punishment due them and the increase in sanctifying grace that elevates the soul to a higher degree of holiness. In order to make a good confession of our sins an adequate examination of conscience is needed and an attempt to discern and understand the root causes of our sins. The effects of a worthy confession are: the Blood of Jesus purifies and sanctifies our souls; grace increases; peace and consolation is received; we also receive a greater understanding of our sinfulness and gift of repentance; and the powers of our soul increase with the strength to conquer temptations and perform our duties. The Anointing of the Sick disposes the soul to receive strength for the final journey. It is received with faith and contrition for our sins. Through it we receive the grace of complete forgiveness of our sins and remission of the temporal punishment due them. The sacrament can now be received by anyone who are in danger of death from sickness or old age.

The Sacraments of Vocation – Matrimony is a sacrament that a couple confers on each other through the witness of an ordained deacon or priest. Through the grace conferred the couple receives the virtues of total fidelity and unbreakable unity. They become one with each other and help and serve each other in mutual self-giving. It produces lives suffused with faith, hope and charity and renders glory to God, joy and gratitude. A disposition of receiving suitable and timely instruction renders a greater dignity to

¹⁰ Council of Trent, Session 14, chap. 3 & 4

married love. Finally, through the grace of Holy Orders an ordained bishop, priest or deacon receives the anointing to preach the Word of God, administer the sacraments and for priests and bishops celebrate the Liturgy. They are given the help to be the leaders within our Church and are obliged to strive for perfection of charity and configuration to Christ. Vatican Council II states:

“There is a relationship between the holiness of the priest and the fruitfulness of his ministry. God ordinarily prefers to show His wonders through those men who are more submissive to the impulse and guidance of the Holy Spirit and who because of their intimate union with Christ and their holiness of life, are able to say with St. Paul ‘It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me.’” (Gal. 2:20)¹¹

¹¹ Decree on the Ministry and Life of Priests, n.12