An Overview of Catholic Sacramental Theology

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Association of Pastoral Ministers
Pax Christi
Fr. Jan Michael Joncas
Theology

- Etymology: theos + logos
- Anselm: “Faith seeking understanding”
- Macquarie: “The study which, through participation in and reflection upon a religious faith, seeks to express the content of this faith in the clearest and most coherent language available”
- Lonergan: “Mediati[on] between a cultural matrix and the significance and role of religion in that matrix”
Sacrament

# Etymology:
- The sum which the two parties in a suit at first deposited, but afterwards became bound for/a civil suit or process
- The preliminary engagement entered into by newly enlisted troops / the military oath of allegiance / an oath, a solemn obligation or engagement
- Something to be kept sacred / a secret / the gospel revelation / a mystery / an office of ministry
Augustine: “Signs, when they pertain to divine things, are called sacraments.” *Epistle 138, 1*

“A sign of a sacred reality” / “a visible sign of invisible grace”

In controversy with the Donatists concerning rebaptism of those baptized by heretics, apostates and other sinners, Augustine argued from the Church’s practice that baptism must have two effects: one permanent, and one that could be lost through sin.

The permanent effect was the sacramental **seal** or **character**. Just as a sheep was not rebranded when returned to the fold or a soldier not retatooed when returned to the army, the Church does not rebaptism.
In opposition to the Donatists who argued that an apostate or heretical minister could not give what he did not have (i.e., grace), Augustine argued that it was not the minister but the rite that conferred the sacramental seal or character. The seal bore the image of Christ, not that of the minister.
Three consequences of Augustine’s sacramental theology:

1) the meaning and effects of the sacrament were properties of the rite and not of the worthiness of the minister
2) sacraments are “administered” and “received”
3) distinction between the “reception” and the “fruitfulness” of a sacrament
Hugh of St. Victor: “A sacrament is a corporeal or material element sensibly presented from without, representing from its likeness, signifying from its institution, and containing from sanctification some invisible and spiritual grace.” *De Sacramentis Book I, P. IX, c. II.*

Baptism, Confirmation, Eucharist, Anointing of the Sick, Ordination, Incarnation, Church, Death
Peter Lombard: “That is properly called a sacrament, which is in such a manner the sign of the grace of God, and the form of invisible grace, that it bears its image (i.e., signifies it), and is its cause. Sacraments therefore were instituted not only for the sake of signifying, but also of sanctifying. Those which were instituted only for the sake of signifying, are only signs and note sacraments.” *Distinction I, 2*

- Baptism, Confirmation, Blessing of Bread (Eucharist), Penance, Extreme Unction, Ordination, Marriage
Thomas Aquinas: "Properly speaking, a sacrament is a sign of a sacred reality pertaining to human beings; so that what is properly called a sacrament in the present sense of the word is a sign of a sacred reality that makes people holy." Summa Theologiae, P. III, q. 60, a. 2.

Sign + Cause
Aristotelian Causes

- Material: the aspect of a change or movement which is determined by the material from which the moving or changing thing is made (wood → table; marble → statue)

- Formal: the aspect of a change or movement caused by the arrangement, shape or appearance of the thing changing or moving (rectangle set on four legs = table; chiseled human figure = statue)

- Efficient: the things apart from the thing being changed or moved which interact so as to be an agency of the change or movement (carpenter → table; sculptor → statue)

- Final: the aim or purpose being served by the thing; that for the sake of which a thing is what it is (holder for plates, cups and silverware → table; aesthetic delight → statue)
“A sacrament properly speaking is that which is ordained to signify our sanctification. In which three things may be considered, viz., the very cause of our sanctification, which is Christ’s passion; the form of our sanctification, which is grace and the virtues; and the ultimate end of our sanctification, which is eternal life. And all these are signified by the sacraments.
Consequently a sacrament is a sign that is both a reminder of the past, i.e., the passion of Christ; and an indication of that which is effected in us by Christ’s passion, i.e., grace; and a prognostic, that is, a foretelling of future glory.” ST, III, 60, 3.
Material Cause

“In the use of the sacraments to things may be considered, namely, the worship of God, and the sanctification of man: the former of which pertains to man as referred to God, and the latter pertains to God in reference to man. Now it is not for anyone to determine that which is in the power of another, but only that which is in his own power.”
Since, therefore, the sanctification of man is in the power of God Who sanctifies, it is not for man to decide what things should be used for his sanctification, but this should be determined by Divine institution. Therefore in the sacraments of the New Law, by which man is sanctified according to 1 Corinthians 6:11, ‘You are washed, you are sanctified,’ we must use those things which are determined by Divine institution.” ST, III, 60, 4
Formal Cause

- "The sacraments...are employed as signs for man’s sanctification. Consequently they can be considered in three ways: and in each way it is fitting for words to be added to the sensible signs.

- For in the first place they can be considered in regard to the cause of sanctification, which is the Word Incarnate: to Whom the sacraments have a certain conformity, in that the word is joined to the sensible sign, just as in the mystery of Incarnation the Word of God is united to sensible flesh."
Secondly, sacraments may be considered on the part of the man who is sanctified, and who is composed of soul and body: to whom the sacramental remedy is adjusted, since it touches the body through the sensible element, and the soul through faith in the words. Hence Augustine says on John 15:3, ‘Now you are clean by reason of the word,’ etc.: ‘Whence has water this so great a virtue to touch the body and wash the heart, but by the word doing it, not because it is spoken, but because it is believed?’
Thirdly, sacraments may be considered on the part of the sacramental signification. Now Augustine says that “words are the principal signs used by men”; because words can be formed in various ways for the purpose of signifying various mental concepts, so that we are able to express our thoughts with greater distinctiveness by means of words. And therefore in order to insure the perfection of sacramental signification it was necessary to determine the signification of sensible things by means of certain words. For water may signify both a cleansing by reason of its humidity, and refreshment by reason of its being cool: but when we say, ‘I baptize you,’ it is clear that we use water in baptism in order to signify spiritual cleansing.”
ST III, 60, 6
Efficient Cause

“There are two ways of producing an effect; first as a principal agent; secondly, as an instrument.

In the former way the interior sacramental effect is the work of God alone: first, because God alone can enter the soul wherein the sacramental effect takes place; and no agent can operate immediately where it is not; secondly, because grace which is an effect of certain sacraments, is an instrumental power which flows from the principal agent, which is God.
In the second way, however, the interior sacramental effect can be the work of man, in so far as he works as a minister. For a minister is of the nature of an instrument, since the action of both is applied to something extrinsic, while the interior effect is produced through the power of the principal agent, which is God.” ST, III, 64, 1
Final Cause

“We must say...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 a fire by its own heart makes something hot. In this way none but God can cause grace: since grace is nothing else than a participated likeness of the Divine Nature....
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 axe which is in the craftsman’s mind. And thus it is that the sacraments of the New Law cause grace: for they are instituted by God to be employed for the purpose of conferring grace.” ST III, 62, 1.
Sacramentum tantum = “the sign alone” (e.g., bread and wine + words of consecration)

Res et sacramentum = “both sign and reality” (e.g., the body and blood of Christ under the appearances of bread and wine)

Res tantum = “the reality alone” (e.g., the grace of union with Christ)
Baptism

# Material Cause:

# Formal Cause:

# Efficient Cause(s):

# Final Cause(s):

# Sacramentum Tantum:

# Res et Sacramentum:

# Res Tantum
Confirmation

# Material Cause:

# Formal Cause:

# Efficient Cause(s):

# Final Cause(s):

# Sacramentum Tantum:

# Res et Sacramentum:

# Res Tantum:
Eucharist

# Material Cause:
# Formal Cause:
# Efficient Cause(s):
# Final Cause(s):
# Sacramentum Tantum:
# Res et Sacramentum:
# Res Tantum:
Extreme Unction

- Material Cause:
- Formal Cause:
- Efficient Cause(s):
- Final Cause(s):
- Sacramentum Tantum:
- Res et Sacramentum:
- Res Tantum:
Ordination

# Material Cause:

# Formal Cause:

# Efficient Cause(s):

# Final Cause(s):

# Sacramentum Tantum:

# Res et Sacramentum:

# Res Tantum:
Penance

# Material Cause:

# Formal Cause:

# Efficient Cause(s):

# Final Cause(s):

# Sacramentum Tantum:

# Res et Sacramentum:

# Res Tantum:
Matrimony

# Material Cause:

# Formal Cause:

# Efficient Cause(s):

# Final Cause(s):

# Sacramentum Tantum:

# Res et Sacramentum:

# Res Tantum:
Karl Rahner


Central notion = “Realsymbol”

Without symbolic acts and their revelatory character, human persons would not be able to actualize their human nature.

In the very act of transcending their limits, human beings are engaged in an existence shaped by symbolic activity.

In turn, the human encounter with God is premised on the symbolic possibilities of created reality.
The Church, recalling Christ’s humanity as the perfect symbol of God’s redemptive love and action, continues this symbolic presence especially in its sacramental praxis.

It is the Church as the visible manifestation of grace which provides the understanding of the sacramental sign as a cause of grace, since grace is given by being signified.
In keeping with the soteriology which focuses on the cross of Christ as the manifestation of divine love in its very concealment of the Godhead and on the kenosis of Christ’s descent into hell, Balthasar explains the sacraments as the Church’s communion with Christ in this mystery.
In explaining the mystery of the Church, he exploits the bride/bridegroom imagery of salvation through Christ. Thus he finds the Church’s form in the complementarity of Mary’s spirituality to the pastoral office, expressed especially in the office of Peter.

All Christians are called to model their lives on that of Mary in her relation to Christ, and through him to the Father and the Spirit. But the continued presence of Christ the bridegroom in the Church is represented by ordained ministers, who act in persona Christi, in their teaching, sacramental and pastoral charge.
Edward Schillebeeckx

# Christ the Sacrament of the Encounter with God.

# 1. Christ is the Primordial Sacrament of God

- Encounter with God is always sacramental, i.e., achieved in visibility, a visibility that points beyond itself thus involving sign-mystery. Historically there are three ascending levels on which this occurs: in creation, in Israel and in Christ.
a) Christ as the revelation of God’s love for humanity in its specifically Trinitarian character
b) Christ’s humanity as Sacrament is dually directed (bestowal/worship)
c) This sacramentality is initially perfected in the Passover
d) This sacramentality is consummated with the Father’s response to Christ’s sacrifice: the Resurrection and Ascension
2) The Church is the Sacrament of the Risen Christ, the prolongation of the Incarnation

3) The seven Sacraments are saving acts of the heavenly Christ in ecclesial visibility
   a) They demand the presence of Christ and the mysteries of his earthly life
   b) They work *ex opere operato* understood in a Christological sense
   c) They demand four basic conditions:
      i) a two-fold liturgical structure
      ii) intention on the part of the minister to do what the Church does
      iii) intention on the part of the recipient to receive the sacrament
      iv) institution by Christ
d) They establish mutual availability between God and man

e) They immediately produce an ecclesial effect: commissions to carry out visible activities within the Church

f) They secondarily produce sacramental grace: configuration of the recipients into Trinitarian relations
# God <-> Christ <-> Church <-> Sacraments
Postmodern Sacramental Theology

Postmodern critique is rooted in Heidegger’s critique of Western metaphysics and in Nietzsche’s critique of the will to power.

A critique of “ontotheology” negates the analogy of being and all thought of God as foundation of created being or as first cause, since this is to think of God within the limits of human concept, even when it is modified by the via negationis and the via eminentiae.
Louis-Marie Chauvet


1) From the Metaphysical to the Symbolic

The notion of causality debases the gratuitous and personal character of divine grace celebrated in the sacraments.

Human communities must learn to see themselves as addressed and possessed by the language which they inherit rather than as users of language systems to meet their programmatic purposes.
2) The Sacraments in the Symbolic Network of the Faith of the Church

As an alternative to metaphysical explanations, Chauvet appeals to studies of language and ritual which he places within the framework of a Church which acts as a community of grace and of interpretation, maintaining its institutionally expressed commitment to originating event and to biblical word within the ritual practice of paschal memorial.

N.B. use of Scripture within liturgy / symbolic rites / the ethics that develop within this context
Meaning is not constituted in the (immediate) presence of self to self, nor of thought in speech, but to be clearly and firmly established it needs the distanciation of writing (primacy of writing over speech).

Ethical decision and sacramental celebration have in common the constant effort to retrieve into the present what has been set down in the Bible; hence ethical practice serve as a gauge of adequate sacramental practice.
3) The Symbolizing Act of Christian Identity

- Rituality and “Institution” understood as human dynamisms, not juridically

- Distinguish between semiotic entities (finite and determined) and semantic entities (various possibilities of expressing reality that creative use of semiotic elements allows)
4) Sacramental Theology and Trinitarian Christology

Sacrament as gift recognizes in the Church’s lex orandi the primacy of the proclamation of the Pasch: God gives his love to humanity in the self-effacement of the divinity on the cross of Christ.

Through the power of the Spirit and in the memorial of the cross, God continues to reveal himself as the other in human bodiliness, where he continues to efface himself.
As sacramental celebration unfolds, it shows the presence of this self-giving and self-effacing God in the body of the Church which lives for others, and in the bodies of the suffering and despised of the earth whom in Christ’s name and Spirit it serves.

It is in the symbolic web of sacrament that this divine presence as other is manifest, as it is also in sacrament that the Church is configured to the Christ of the Pasch.
N.B. For Chauvet, the importance of the relation between word and rite in terms of an idea of antiritual, related to the word of the cross/Pasch and to the anamnesis and epiclesis which flow from the word.

Thus there is a non-identity of God or of Christ with the ritual, indeed introducing an element of the antiritual, breaking the pattern of the theophanic.

Lest the idea of divine manifestation in visible symbol overshadow proclamation, there has to be the measure of antiritual in sacrament.
Stanislas Breton


Writing distances what is said from what is thought, but communication and transmission are impossible without it.

Interpretation, however, must take this distancing into account.
God’s Word is necessarily made known in words that fall short of the mystery and require interpretation, not merely speculative but practical.

When something in human history is established through an event, the event receives its power within human affairs through narrative, which may be primarily oral but which has to take on written form, where it is enriched by interplay with a variety of other genres.
This necessarily means a distance between the event and later time, a distance at times experienced almost as an absence.

The Christ event is present to the Church through narrative and its varied interpretation.

Breton likes to speak of “trace” rather than representation and this carries over into Chauvet.

God acts in human time, but what is left is the trace of the divine action.
On the basis of the traces found in the Scriptures, the Church “writes itself” through its preaching, its ritual, and its ethics. This allows for the historicality of Christian expression and practice, for the presence of the Church as sacrament of Christ in divergent historical and cultural conditions, without having recourse to a theory of divine or instrumental causality.

The cross has a critical role in the life of the Church, not only in its prophetic challenge, but also in the way that it calls into question explanations offered in myth and in metaphysics.
Jean-Luc Marion

- The language of perception (Husserl’s phenomenology) only presents things as seen by the I
- The language of Being and beings (Heidegger) only presents the distance between Being and beings, and the call of Being to beings, the call the recognize the difference. This is not enough to allow God and creatures to enter into exchange. It is more important to perceive negatively that God is nothing of anything that is created.
What then bridges the distance? On the divine initiative, God’s advent in self-giving, in agapaic love, in the drama of Christ’s self-giving, self-emptying, as the drama of his relation to the Father who pours himself out in love through the Son.

This is what is expressed and realized in sacrament and Eucharist within the communion of the Church.
The response of the “faithful” is confession of faith, praise, thanksgiving and this has to be the basic language of theology.

Hence Eucharist is the hermeneutic site for all interpretation of revelation.

Three important words for Marion with implications for sacramental theology: idol, icon, and donation (gift/giving)
The making of artefacts into idols comes from the fact that the gaze of the beholder stops at an expression of the divine instead of seeking to see beyond it.

The icon on the contrary presents itself as the face that endows the visible with the inexhaustible invisibility of God. It does not offer itself to human conceptualization but invites the one who sees it to bypass it, to venerate what is revealed through it and towards which it invites the gaze and desire.
Gift can be spoken of in terms of appropriation of the gift, or in terms of the distance of the giver, but both ways of speaking falsify the giving. It is simply to be praised for what it is, as manifested in the cross of the Word incarnate, divine agape. God does not offer himself as an object of our vision, but as one who in silence looks upon us.
To know God, then, is to let oneself be known by God, to cease to appropriate the gift given, or the giving, or to distance it, but to receive it purely as gift.
Further Approaches

- Rather than starting with a set notion of sacrament, many begin with the Church’s sacramental practice and look for ways of interpreting it, even critically.

- Some examine particularly the laws of celebration with emphasis on the axiom *lex orandi, lex credendi*.

- Others look at the relation of sacrament to a larger ecclesial praxis, to issues of full human liberation and empowerment.
For liberation theology, feminist theology, and African and Asian contributions, this involves a critique of sacramental practice and sacramental thought, done from different angles, in view of their renewal.

These theological approaches in order to understand sacramentality also look outside formal sacramental rites to other celebrations and ritual experiences, whether these be found in women-church, popular religiosity, or cultural religious rites.