



North Thompson Catholic Parishes

Roman Catholic Diocese of Kamloops

INTERNATIONAL THEOLOGICAL COMMISSION SELECT THEMES OF ECCLESIOLOGY

VIII. THE CHURCH AS SACRAMENT OF CHRIST

VIII.1. *Sacrament and Mystery*

The Church of Christ, “God’s new people”, presents herself as inseparably mystery and historic subject. To express the simultaneous divine and human reality of the Church, *Lumen gentium* has recourse, as we have seen, to the term “sacrament”. The importance of this word is seen from the crucial place it occupies in the opening paragraph of that text: “Since the Church, in Christ, is in the nature of a sacrament —a sign and instrument, that is, of communion with God and of unity among all men”. As *Lumen gentium* unfolds, we find two more applications of “sacrament” to the Church (9, 48), neither further explained. Apparently the principle laid down in the first paragraph is meant to suffice. As applied to the Church, “sacrament” has become a somewhat popular term, though not as much so as “people of God”. In any case, some clarifications of its bearing will not be amiss.

The application of the word “sacrament” to the Church allows one to underline the Church’s origination in and absolute dependence on God and Christ (cf. *SC* 5). It also makes clear the Church’s orientation toward the manifestation to men, and presence among them, of God’s universal love—something that comes about through the intimate union or communion of all men with Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, as well as by the communion of men with each other. “Sacrament” brings into sharp relief the deep structure of Christ’s “mystery” and, in relation to that, the authentic nature of the true Church. “The Church is essentially both human and divine, visible but endowed with invisible realities, zealous in action and dedicated to contemplation, present in the world, but as a pilgrim, so constituted that in her the human is directed toward and subordinated to the divine, the visible to the invisible, action to contemplation, and this present world to the city yet to come, the object of her quest” (*SC* 2; cf. *LG* 8). It is worth remembering that when, half a century ago, Catholic theologians restored to a honored place the Church’s title as sacrament, they wanted to give back to Christianity its ample communitarian and social, rather than individualistic or even institutional, character. Christianity is in its very essence a mystery of union and unity: intimate union with God, unity of men among themselves.

The ecclesiological use of the term “sacrament”, translating as that does the *sacramentum* of Latin, sends us back to the Greek *mysterion*, whose meaning it fundamentally shares. As we have already stressed, the “mystery” is the divine decree whereby the Father effects his saving will in Christ, while revealing that will through the created consistency of temporal reality.

VIII.2. *Christ and the Church* Certainly we must not lose sight of the fact that the expression “sacrament” can no more serve as a rigorous definition or exhaustive description of the Church than can any other word, metaphor, image, analogy, or comparison. Still, calling the Church “sacrament” strikingly highlights the Church’s link with Christ. And so the biblical images of the Church as Christ’s Body and Bride can be brought into connection with the Church as sacrament. The same is true of the “new people of God” formula, in the two distinct yet inseparable refractions to which that formula leads: mystery and historic subject. In fact, the term “sacrament” can serve as a formal transcript on all of the biblical images of the Church listed in the first chapter of *Lumen gentium*, bringing home to us as these do the complementary notes of identity and difference by which Christ and the Church are related. The Church is truly indwelt by the presence of Christ in such a way that who finds her, finds him. Thus Christ is present in baptism and Eucharist, in the Word of God, in the Christian assembly (Mt 18:20), in the witness of the apostolic ministry (Lk 10:16; Jn 13:20), in the service of the poor (Mt 25:40), in the apostolate... Yet at the same time, the Church, as made up of men, and sinful men at that, needs conversion and purification. She must ask from her Lord the spiritual gifts that are needful for her mission in the world. It is true that the Church is the efficacious sacrament of union with God and of unity for the human race. But at the same time, she must ceaselessly implore God’s mercy, praying first of all for her own members, that they may not lose the unity of God’s sons and daughters. In other words, the Lord is present in the

Church (Rev 21:3, 22), but he never ceases to stand before her, drawing her on in the Holy Spirit to greater things still (cf. Jn 5:20), toward the definitive presence of God as “all in all” (1 Cor 15:28; Col 3:11).

In expectation of Christ’s Coming at the end of time, the Church experiences the ravages of sin in her members and undergoes the trial of their divisions. The men and women who compose the Church can sometimes present obstacles to the action of the Holy Spirit. Just because pastors enjoy legitimate authority does not mean that they will automatically be safeguarded from malpractice and error. More structurally, because the sacrament is “sign and instrument”, the symbolic and social reality that constitutes it at one level (*res et sacramentum*) initiates us into a greater and more fundamental reality, a reality that is divine (*res tantum*). And this is true in the case of the Church. She depends wholly on Christ her goal, without ever becoming confused with the One who is her Lord.

VIII.3. *The Church, Sacrament of Christ* It should be clear by now that when “sacrament” is applied ecclesiologically, some further explanation is required. Manifestly, the Church cannot be an eighth sacrament, if only because when we use that word for the Church we use it analogically. In fact, the meaning at stake here is more basic than with the seven sacraments, yet also more diffuse. As already pointed out, not everything in the Church has the same efficaciously saving quality as in the seven sacraments. Let us note too that if the Church is a sacrament, Christ himself is the “primordial” sacrament on which the Church depends: “He is before all things, and in him all things hold together. He is the head of the Body, the Church” (Col 1:18). Through the category of sacrament, something quite essential about the Church’s reality finds expression. The meaning of this term as applied to the Church is not a fiction. The reason why, long before the Council, Catholic theologians were turning again to this word bequeathed them by the Church Fathers was precisely so that they could help the Church come to a better grasp of herself. So the sense here is that of “the Church, sacrament of God”, or “sacrament of Christ”. More precisely, since Christ himself may be called “the sacrament of God”, the Church, in an analogous way, may be called “the sacrament of Christ”. It is because she is his Bride and Body that the Church has bestowed upon her this name, “sacrament”. And yet it is self-evident that the Church can only be a sacrament by way of total dependence on Christ, who is intrinsically the “primordial sacrament”. And as for the seven sacraments, they have neither reality nor meaning except in the total context of the Church.

Finally, let us note that, as applied to the Church, “sacrament” connotes the salvation that, realized through union with God in Christ, leads men to common unity. One might indeed link “sacrament” and “world”, stressing that the Church is the sacrament of the world’s salvation, inasmuch as the world needs salvation, and the Church has received a mission to offer that salvation to those who need it. In this perspective we can say that the Church is the sacrament of Christ for the salvation of the world.

A theology of the Church as sacraments allows us to be more attentive to the concrete responsibilities of the Christian community. It is through the life, witness, and daily action of Christ’s disciples that men will be led toward their Savior. Certain men, through a knowledge of the “sign” that the Church is and through the grace of conversion, will discover for themselves the greatness of God’s love and the truth of the Gospel, so that for them the Church will be quite explicitly the “sign and instrument” of salvation. Others, more mysteriously and in a fashion known only to God, will be associated by the Holy Spirit with Christ’s paschal mystery and so with the Church (*LG* 14, 16; *AG* 7; *GS* 22, 5).