

Vatican II and the Year of Faith:
What Difference do the Sacraments Make?

I lived for 33 years as a man of faith, but without the Sacraments of the Catholic Church. For most of those years, I was a non-Catholic Christian who thought that all that mattered was "my personal relationship with God." The "external rituals" of Christian life were, at best, helpful reminders of Christian truth. At worst, they were unhealthy distractions from the interior life.

This is how my Protestant pastors and teachers urged me to think about Catholics and their Sacraments. Catholics were mere half-Christians, addicted to a cold, ritualistic faith of rule-based performance, and with no understanding of what it meant to have a personal relationship with Christ. Today, however, I am a Catholic who is enthusiastic about my faith and especially about the Sacraments. From this vantage point, I am in a better position to evaluate my earlier misguided criticisms. What follows, then is a brief reflection on the Sacramental life - both the before and the after.

To begin with, I should say that my experience has been almost the mirror opposite of what I was led to expect. My Protestant teachers taught that the Sacraments distract from "relationship with Christ." In reality, I think that "faith alone," without any tangible point of reference in the Sacraments, is the path that tends to distract. Why do I say that?

There are many good and sincere non-Catholics with a lively faith in Christ and a joyful relationship with God. But even the most sincere Christian must sometimes confront the question, "How do I know if I have really met Christ or understood him correctly?" Without an objective and tangible point of reference, the non-Catholic Christian is often forced into introspection. He must answer this question by subjective criteria. He may compare his experience to what he finds in Scripture, but in the end it is *his experience* that he is left trying to evaluate.

To make matters worse, leading Protestant theologians, like the Reformer John Calvin, often distinguish between "true faith," and merely apparent faith. Thus, the non-Catholic desperately wants to know that he has really met Christ. He is eager to assume that he is one of the ones who "gets it," one of the ones who has "true faith." But this means that his neighbor down the street - the one in that other denomination - is likely one of the ones who doesn't get it.

Where does this leave you? In my case, I tended to think that my most recent interpretation of the Bible was evidence of spiritual growth. Any delightful emotion was proof of God's Spirit in my life. And any disagreement was proof that my neighbor was not as spiritual as me. And I am not the only person to experience these symptoms. Cardinal Newman, even before he became a Catholic, once complained of the Protestant tendency to "self-contemplation."

As a Catholic, I now see this whole way of approaching the faith as misguided. I know that I meet Christ in the Sacraments - really, truly, and substantially. There is just no mystery to the question, "How do I know if I have really met Christ." I meet him where He said I would meet him.

But look where this now turns my attention. Instead of searching my interior life for signs of grace or evidence of election, I am freed up to contemplate the meaning of the Sacrament. Holy Communion, for instance, teaches me that I really quite desperately need Christ. I need him in the most intimate way possible. I must literally feed on Him, grow in Him, share in His sacrificial death, and hopefully grow ever more like Him. Because the evidence of Christ's presence is both tangible and objective (on the authority of His word), I am wholly relieved of the need to look for that evidence in me. Indeed, there is no point in looking there. I just come to Christ with my lack, my needs, my wounds. "Lord, I am not worthy that you should enter under my roof. . ."

In truth, I can say that as a Catholic, I think about Christ and my need for him far, far more. In large measure, I credit the Sacraments of the Church, since everything I do in the liturgy is aimed at meeting Him, being changed by Him, being made like Him. I think this is why Vatican II took up the Sacramental nature of our faith with such subtlety and beauty. The council fathers wrote that we are "plunged into the paschal mystery of Christ . . . it is really Christ Himself who baptizes" (SC 6,7) And the "Eucharistic sacrifice is the source and summit of the Christian life." (LG). This kind of language once frightened me. Today, I am so grateful for the sacraments of the Catholic Church.