

The Sacramental Life

One of the goals for every Catholic should be to live a sacramental life. This means striving to be related and connected to God through the means that He has given us to share in His life.

The sacraments are visible signs of an invisible reality. They are the instruments that Christ established to communicate to us the invisible reality of His grace. The grace that the sacraments confer is both a participation in God's divine life and also divine assistance (cf. *Catechism*, 1996-1999). It gives power to the soul to live as Christ taught, and it makes us capable of living beyond the natural powers of the soul.

All grace comes from the Trinity and is channeled through the Incarnation of Christ, and then through the Church which is the Body of Christ, and ultimately through the sacraments, which are like faucets through which grace is poured into the world. Jesus said, "*I am the vine, you are the branches*" (Jn 15:1). He said, "*Remain in me, as I remain in you. Just as a branch cannot bear fruit on its own unless it remains on the vine, so neither can you unless you remain in me*" (Jn 15:4). So, the sacraments are the channels through which the divine life of Christ flows from Christ, the vine, to us, the branches. As one theologian puts it, the sacraments "are like the hands of Christ reaching out to us across space and time" to sanctify us and to help us live a redeemed life (Cardinal Charles Journet, *Theology of the Church*, 61).

But the sacraments are not magic. They don't automatically produce effects without our openness and our proper intention to cooperate with the divine life they confer. The sacraments are encounters between Christ who is alive in Heaven and the souls whom He died to save. They require a movement of will and proper intention on our part. The sacraments have no effect if the recipient does not desire them or does not intend to meet Christ with the proper attitude, disposition and intention (cf. *Catechism*, 1128).

Sometimes, even faithful Catholics can begin to think of the sacraments as a kind of divine magic, thinking that they might produce effects in spite of our freedom and in spite of our intentions. For example, people might think that the sacrament of Anointing of the Sick absolves all sins even if the recipient is not repentant and not willing to make a sincere confession. Or, some might think that a baptism changes the soul even if the recipient (or the parents, in the case of an infant) does not intend to practice the faith and live the Christian life.

The sacraments are not magic, but they do produce supernatural effects in our souls, when we approach them with the proper faith, disposition and genuine conversion. They are the ordinary means of sanctification and grace, instituted by Christ to help us live the Christian life. They were given to us to give us certainty at the stages and moments of life when we need certainty the most (cf. *Catechism*, 1210). And so, it should be a goal of every Catholic to live a sacramental life.