

Sacraments: A Constant Source of Grace

A man is walking down the street one day when he falls into a hole. The sides are so steep that he can't get out. A doctor passes by and the man calls up to him, "Hey, can you help me out?" The doctor writes him a prescription, throws it into the hole and walks on. Next a priest comes by and the man shouts, "Hey, Father, I'm down in this hole, can you help me out?" The priest writes out a prayer, throws it into the hole and walks on. Then a friend walks by and the man shouts, "Hey, Jim, it's me, can you help me out?" Jim jumps into the hole. The man says, "Are you stupid? – now we're both down here!" His friend says, "Yes, but I've been down here before and I know the way out."¹

This is a great little parable that can be applied to any number of situations. In this case the man in the hole is us and God is the friend who jumps in with him. Through the Incarnation, God has shared our human condition, he knows what it's like to be human. He says, "I've been down there with you and I know the way out" – in fact he is the way out. "I am the Way, the Truth and the Life."

His first and constant aid to us is his grace, defined by the catechism as *the free and undeserved help that God gives us to respond to his call to become his children... infused by the Holy Spirit into our soul to heal it of sin and to sanctify it.*² It's a gift from God that is always there for us to call upon and yet all too often we try to deal with situations, occasions of sin, temptations or personal faults and failings all by ourselves and consequently it should be no surprise to us if we fail or fall. To use another little parable, it's like going for a bus and finding it already at the stop when we turn the corner. Do we simply not even bother because we know we've missed it, or do we break into a sprint, still miss it, but then – because we're so out-of-shape – have to sit down for ten minutes to recover? God's grace, in this example, would be checking on the time of the bus in the first place and making sure we were at the stop in plenty of time rather than putting our plans at risk – and our health!

God's other constant aid to us is the sacraments. The catechism says: *Christ now lives and acts in and with his Church through the sacraments... He manifests, makes present and communicates his work of salvation through them. They are the signs of grace, instituted by Christ and entrusted to the Church, by which divine life is dispensed to us.*³

¹ overheard in an episode of US television series "The West Wing".

² paras 1996 & 1999

³ paras 1076 & 1131

The word sacrament comes from the Latin *sacrare*, meaning “to consecrate” or “to make holy”. Just as we celebrate significant social milestones in our life’s journey such as birthdays, marriages and anniversaries, one aspect of our sacramental celebrations is to make holy significant milestones in our faith journey too:

- When someone is born, in our culture we celebrate that birth, that gift of life, as also its yearly anniversary. In baptism, we thank God for that gift and we welcome the person into the Christian family as they begin their journey of faith. Unfortunately we don’t seem to do very well in celebrating our re-birthdays!
- As young people reach the ‘age of majority’ and begin to take on new social responsibilities, this would seem another fitting occasion for a sacramental celebration. Whilst it wasn’t intended as such, the sacrament of confirmation seems to have taken on that character, inviting from young people an adult commitment to their faith and the acceptance of new responsibilities within their faith community.
- The previously important social contract involved in marriage is being increasingly eclipsed by the choice of many couples simply to live together. However the Church continues not only to teach its moral message with regard to marriage, but also to spiritually celebrate and seal that vowed commitment, affirming its importance in and through the sacrament of matrimony.
- Socially speaking, ordination to the priesthood celebrates a “career choice” though it is, of course, much more than that as a response to a religious vocation. As a sacrament it mirrors that of matrimony very closely, though it isn’t always seen that way. A priest makes a vowed commitment not just to another person, but to the person of Christ and to all people as members of his body, the Church.

With each of these sacraments come the graces specific to them through the work of the Holy Spirit who thus provides the potential for our living out the particular stage in our spiritual life that we are entering into. Let’s say, for example, that you have just been offered a job. The first thing your employer does is to make sure you know what you are expected to do and to provide the tools to enable you to do it. That’s what the graces of a sacrament are all about – they enable us to accept and live out, spiritually and socially, the commitment we have made and the responsibilities that we have taken on. In that respect, to borrow a well-known line from Gerry Marsden (and the Liverpool “Kop”) we never walk alone.

Though slightly different in their purpose, two other sacraments also have parallels in our secular life:

- The sacrament of reconciliation (or confession) involves not only forgiveness for sins, but also the opportunity for spiritual direction. It has

been suggested that there might be fewer unnecessary visits made to counsellors of one sort or another if, where appropriate (and that is an important point of course), more people sought spiritual counselling from their priests.

- And then at a time when people are dealing with ill-health or facing the possibility of admission to hospital, the Church offers the sacrament of the sick as a source of spiritual encouragement and strength and to complement and place before God the medical care they receive. When a person is nearing the end of their life then the eucharist they receive as part of the sacrament becomes *viaticum*, “food for the journey”, in preparation for their death which, as the final of our life events, will be marked by the social and spiritual ritual of a funeral.

In both cases the graces of the sacraments are very specifically healing graces – whether healing of the soul, or of the mind or body.

The remaining sacrament, the eucharist (or holy communion), is described in the catechism as being the *source and summit of our Christian life*⁴ occupying a unique place as the *Sacrament of sacraments to which all the others are ordered*⁵. It is the central and perhaps most important way in which Our Lord “makes present and communicates his work of salvation” because it is the gift of his very self, his body and blood, which he invites us to receive as spiritual nourishment and sustenance whenever we are able, and whenever we need, to do so. The symbolism of holy communion as a meal is particularly helpful in this regard. Just as we need to eat regularly to keep our bodies healthy and as a source of energy, so we can and should approach the eucharist regularly as a primary aid to our spiritual health and well-being and to give us the sacramental energy (the grace) we need to live out our Christian vocation and bear witness to the gospel in our life.

I have used this quotation from St Ephraim before. What he was saying was in reference to the word of God, but it applies equally to the sacraments and in particular those, like the eucharist, that we can receive over and over again:

The thirsty man rejoices when he drinks and he is not downcast because he cannot empty the fountain. If your thirst is quenched and the fountain is not exhausted you can drink from it again whenever you are thirsty. What you have received is your share, what remains is your heritage.

If we were planning a long or strenuous walk, and especially in the heat, we would need to remember the importance of drinking plenty of liquids in order to keep our body properly hydrated. Everywhere these days, and not just on strenuous walks, you see people carrying bottles of water and drinking from them at regular

⁴ para 1349

⁵ para 1212

intervals. This is how we might helpfully see the sacraments – again particularly the eucharist - and the stream of God’s grace that comes to us through them.

The thing is though, that we aren’t always the best at asking for the help we need and that God offers. We put ourselves in situations of risk by repeatedly courting the occasions of sin that have caused us to fall in the past; spending time with people who can be occasions of sin for us, joining in the gossip, criticising and judging others, blaspheming and using bad language. At what point do we recognise what we are doing and do something else, something better, instead? At what point do we seek the help of God’s grace to walk away, change the subject, or in some way speak up for God and the things of God? Whatever courage and resolve it may take, we won’t be doing it alone if we seek God’s help. All we have to do is ask.⁶

As we mentioned earlier, every sacrament brings graces specific to the occasion they celebrate. Those that we can celebrate over and over again – reconciliation, the eucharist and the sacrament of the sick – are a constant source of sacramental help to call upon whenever we need it. To do otherwise is to set out on a walk but with no water, to sit by the fountain and not drink from it. If we fail not only to refresh, but also to “re-hydrate”, our spiritual selves with the graces the Holy Spirit offers, then we run the risk of becoming increasingly parched and spiritually weary. To put it another way, they are a gift left on a shelf unopened.

As we strive for God’s kingdom, we never do so alone. In the person of Jesus Christ, God has shared our human condition. He knows first-hand what it’s like being us. If ever anyone was best placed to help us deal with life and deal with ourselves, it is God. His call to be holy as he is holy, to be worthy of the salvation he promises to those who are faithful, may sometimes feel like being in a steep-sided hole. God is the friend who jumps in, who enters into life with us. He knows the way out – he is the way out. His graces are there for the asking and his sacraments for the celebrating.

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⁶ The old catechism used to talk about Actual Grace - “a passing grace (that we should pray for) which inclines our will to avoid evil and to do good”.