

The Sacraments

A Divine Sense of Humour

By a priest of Newark.

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No one can ever understand the sacraments unless he has what might be called a “divine sense of humour.” A person is said to have a sense of humour if he can “see through” things; one lacks a sense of humour if he cannot “see through” things. No one has ever laughed at a pun who did not see in the one word a twofold meaning. To materialists this world is opaque like a curtain; nothing can be seen through it. A mountain is just a mountain, a sunset just a sunset; but to poets, artists, and saints, the world is transparent like a window pane — it tells of something beyond; for example, a mountain tells of the Power of God, the sunset of His Beauty, and the snowflake of His Purity.

When the Lord Incarnate walked this earth, He brought to it what might be called a “divine sense of humour.” There is only one thing that He took seriously, and that was the soul. He said: “What exchange shall a man give for his soul?”

Everything else was a tell-tale of something else. Sheep and goats, wine flasks (or ‘bottles’) and patches on clothing, camels and eyes of needles, the lightning flash and the red of the sunset sky, the fisherman’s nets and Caesar’s coin, chalices and rich men’s gates — all of these were turned into parables and made to tell the story of the Kingdom of God.

Our Lord had a divine sense of humour, because He revealed that the universe was sacramental. A sacrament, in a very broad sense of the term, combines two elements: one visible, the other invisible — one that can be seen, or tasted, or touched, or heard; the other unseen to the eyes of the flesh. There is, however, some kind of relation or significance between the two. A spoken word is a kind of sacrament, because there is something material or audible about it; there is also something spiritual about it, namely, its meaning. A horse can hear a funny story just as well as a man can. It is conceivable that the horse may hear the words better than the man and at the end of the story, the man may laugh, but the horse will never give a horse laugh. The reason is that the horse gets only the material side of the “sacrament,” namely, the sound; but the man gets the invisible or the spiritual side, namely, the meaning.

A handshake is a kind of sacrament, because there is something seen and felt, namely, the clasping of hands; but there is something mysterious and unseen, namely, the communication of friendship. A kiss is a kind of sacrament: the physical side of it is present if one kisses one’s own hand, but the spiritual side of it is missing because there is no sign of affection for another. One of the reasons why a stolen kiss is often resented is that it is not sacramental; it has the carnal side without a spiritual side; that is, the willingness to exchange a mark of esteem or affection.

This booklet on the sacraments is written because men live in a world that has become entirely too serious. Gold is gold, nuclear warfare is nuclear warfare, dust is dust, money is money. No significance or meaning is seen in the things that make a sound to the ear, or a sight to the eye. In a

world without a divine sense of humour, architecture loses decoration and people lose courtesy in their relationships with one another.

When civilization was permeated with a happier philosophy, when things were seen as signs of outward expression of the unseen, architecture was enhanced with a thousand decorations: a pelican feeding her young from her own veins symbolized the sacrifice of Christ; the gargoyle peering from behind a pillar in a cathedral reminded us that temptations are to be found even in the most holy places. Our Lord, on the occasion of His planned entrance into Jerusalem, said that if men withheld their praise of Him, “the very stones would cry out,” which they did as, later, they burst into Gothic Cathedrals.

Now the stones are silent, for modern man no longer believes in another world; they have no story to tell, no meaning to convey, no truth to illustrate. When faith in the spiritual is lost, architecture has nothing to symbolize; similarly, when men lose the conviction of the immortal soul, there is a decline in the respect for the human. Man without a soul is a thing; something to be used, not something to be reverenced. He becomes “functional” like a building, or a monkey wrench, or a wheel. The courtesies, the amenities, the urbanities, the gentility that one mortal ought to have for another are neglected once man is no longer seen as bearing within himself the Divine Image.

Courtesy is not a condescension of a superior to an inferior, or a patronizing interest in another’s affairs; it is the homage of the heart to the sacredness of human worth. Courtesy is born of holiness, as ornamentation is born of the sense of the holy. Let us see if ornamentation returns to architecture, if courtesy also returns to human manners; for by one and the same stroke, men will have lost their dull seriousness, and will begin to live in a sacramental universe with a divine sense of humour.

Life is a vertical dimension expressed in the soaring spire, or in the leaping fountain, both of which suggest that earth, history, and nature must be left behind to seek union with the Eternal. Opposite to this is an error, which substitutes the horizontal for the vertical, the prostrate form of death for the upright stature of life. It is the disease of secularity and of naturalism. It insists on the ultimacy of the seen and the temporal, and the meaninglessness of the spiritual and the invisible.

Two errors can mar our understanding of the natural world: one is to cut it off entirely from Almighty God; the other is to confound it substantially with Him. In the first instance, we have the clock without the clock maker, the painting without the artist, the verse without the poet. In the second instance, we have the forger and the forged rolled into one, the melting and the fusing of the murderer and the victim, the boiling of the cook and his dinner. Atheism cuts off creation from its Creator; pantheism identifies nature with God. The true notion is that the material universe is a sign or an indication of what God is. We look at the purity of the snowflake and we see something of the goodness of God.

The world is full of poetry: it is sin that turns it into prose.

The Bible Is A Sacramental.

Coming closer to the meaning of sacrament, the Bible is a sacramental in the sense that it has a foreground and a background. In the foreground are the actors, the cult, the temple, the wars, the sufferings, and the glories of men. In the background, however, is the all-pervading presence of God as the Chief Actor, Who subjects nations to judgment according to their obedience or disobedience to the moral law, and Who uses incidents or historical facts as types, or symbols, of something else that will happen. For example, take the brazen serpent in the desert. When the Jewish people were

bitten by poisonous serpents, God commanded Moses to make a brazen serpent, and to hang it over the crotch of a tree; all who would look upon that serpent of brass would be healed of the serpent's sting. This apparently was a rather ridiculous remedy for poison and not everyone looked on it. If one could divine or guess their reason, it would probably be because they concentrated on only one side of the symbol; namely, the lifeless, shiny, brass thing hanging on a tree. But it proved to be a symbol of faith: God used that material thing as a symbol of trust or faith in Him.

The symbolism goes still further. The Old Testament is fulfilled in Christ, Who reveals the full mystery of the brazen serpent. Our Lord told Nicodemus that the brass serpent was lifted up in the desert, so that He would have to be lifted up on a Cross. The meaning now became clear: the brass serpent in the desert looked like the serpent that bit the people; but though it seemed to be the same, it was actually without any poison. Our Blessed Lord now says that He is like that brazen serpent. He, too, would be lifted up on the crotch of a tree, a Cross. He would look as if He Himself was filled with the poison of sin, for His Body would bear the marks, and the stings, and the piercing of sin; and yet as the brass serpent was without poison, so He would be without sin. As those who looked upon that brass serpent in the desert in faith were healed of the bite of the serpent, so all who would look upon Him on His Cross bearing the sins and poisons of the world would also be healed of the poison of the serpent, Satan.

The word "sacrament" in Greek means "mystery," and Christ has been called by Saint Paul "the mystery hidden from the ages." In Him is something divine, something human; something eternal, something temporal; something invisible, something visible. The mystery of Bethlehem was the Son of God taking upon Himself a human nature to unite human nature and divine nature in one Person. He Who, in the language of Scripture, could stop the turning about of the Arcturus star (Job 38:31, some commentators believe the reference is to Orion), had the prophecy of His birthplace determined, however unconsciously, by a Caesar ordering an imperial census. He Who clothed the fields with grass, Himself was clothed with swaddling bands. He from Whose hands came planets and worlds had tiny arms that were not quite long enough to touch the huge heads of the cattle. He Who trod the everlasting hills was too weak to walk. The Eternal Word was dumb. The Bird that built the nest of the world was hatched therein.

The human nature of Our Blessed Lord had no power to sanctify of and by itself; that is to say, apart from its union with divinity. But because of that union, the humanity of Christ became the efficient cause of our justification and sanctification and will be until the end of the world. Herein is hidden a hint of the sacraments. The humanity of Christ was the bearer of divine life and the means of making men holy; the sacraments were also to become the effective signs of the sanctification purchased by His death. As Our Blessed Lord was the sensible sign of God, so the sacraments were to become the sensible signs of the grace which Our Lord had won for us.

If men were angels or pure spirits, there would have been no need of Christ using human natures or material things for the communication of the divine; but because man is composed of matter and spirit, body and soul, man functions best when he sees the material as the revealer of the spiritual. From the very beginning of man's life, his mother's fondling is not merely to leave an impress upon his infant body, but rather to communicate the sublimely beautiful and invisible love of the mother. It is not the material thing, which a man values, but rather what is signified by the material thing.

As Thomas a Kempis said, "regard not so much the gift of the lover as the love of the giver." We tear price tags from gifts so that there will be no material relationship existing between the love that

gave the thing and the thing itself. If man had no soul or spiritual destiny, then communism would satisfy. If man were only a biological organism, then he would be content to eat and to sleep and to die like a cow.

What the Sacraments Bring to Man.

The sacraments bring divine life or grace. Christ's reason for taking upon Himself a human nature was to pay for sin by death on the cross and to bring us a higher life: "I have come so that they may have life, and have it more abundantly" (John 10:10). But, it may be said, that man already has life. Indeed he does; he has a biological, physiological life. He once had a higher divine life, which he lost. Christ came to bring that life back to man. This higher life which is divine, distinct from the human, is called grace, because it is gratis or a free gift of God.

Two tadpoles at the bottom of a pond were one day discussing the problem of existence. One said to the other, "I think I will stick my head out to see if there is anything else in the world." The other tadpole said, "Don't be silly, do you think there is anything else in this world besides water?" So those who live the natural life ignore the beauty of the higher life of grace.

Man may live at three different levels: the sensate, the intellectual, and the divine. These may be likened to a three-storey house. The sensate level, or the first floor, represents those who deny any other reality except the pleasures that come from the flesh. Their house is rather poorly furnished and is capable of giving intermittent thrills, which quickly dry up. The occupant of this first floor is not interested in being told of higher levels of existence; in fact, he may even deny their existence.

On the second floor, there is the intellectual level of existence, that of the scientist, the historian, the journalist, the humanist; the man who has brought to a peak all of the powers of human reason and human will. This is a much more comfortable kind of existence, and far more satisfying to the human spirit. Those on the second floor may think their floor is "a closed universe," regarding as superstitious those who desire a higher form of life.

But there is actually a third floor which is the floor of grace by which the human heart is illumined by truths which reason cannot know; by which the will is strengthened by a power quite beyond all psychological aids, and the heart is entranced with the love which never fails; which gives a peace that cannot be found on the two lower levels.

There is light outside the window, but it is up to man to open the blinds. The opening of the blinds does not constitute light; it is rather the condition of its entrance. When God made us, He gave us ourselves. When He gives us grace, He gives us Himself. When He created us, He gave Himself to us in a way that makes us one with Him.

One often sees signs painted on roadways, "Jesus Saves." Now this indeed is true, but the important question is how does He save? What relation have we in the twentieth [and twenty-first] century to Christ in the first? Do we establish contact with Him only by reading about Him? If that be all, our relationship is not much closer than that which we can have with Plato. If Christ is only a memory of someone who lived centuries ago, then it is rather difficult to see that His influence will be any different than that of Socrates or Buddha.

The answer to the question of how Christ saves is to be found in the sacraments. The divine life of Christ is communicated through His Church or His Mystical Body in exactly the same way that His divine life was communicated when He walked on earth. As He then used His human nature as the instrument of divinity, and used material things as signs and symbols of the conferring of His

pardon, so He now uses other human natures and material things as the instruments for the communication of that same divine life.

In the earthly life of Our Lord, we read that there were two kinds of contact. There was the visible contact with humanity by which His power was communicated to the palsied man and to the blind, both of whom He touched. But there was also the invisible contact, in which Our Blessed Lord showed His power by working miracles at a distance, such as the curing of the servant of the centurion of when Christ was at Capharnaum (Matthew 8:5-13), or the earlier cure of the ruler's son while Christ was at Cana, on His way through Nazareth to Capharnaum (John 4:46-54). The second kind of contact is an anticipation of the way that Christ, Who is now in heaven, extends and communicates His power through the sacraments.

Seven Conditions of Life.

The physical or the natural life requires seven conditions, five of which refer to the person as an individual, and the other two as a member of society. The five conditions of leading an individual life are: (1) In order to live, one must obviously be born; (2) He must nourish himself, for he who does not eat shall not live; (3) He must grow to maturity, throwing away the things of the child, and assume the responsibilities of adult life; (4) In case he is wounded, he must have his wounds bound and healed; and (5) In case he has disease (for a disease is very different from a wound), the traces of the disease must be driven out. As a member of society, two further conditions are required: (1) He must live under government and justice in human relationships, and (2) He is called, in general, to propagate the human species, though not every single human is so called.

Over and above this human life, there is the divine Christ-life. The seven conditions of leading a personal Christ-life are the following:

(1) We must be spiritually born to it, and that is the Sacrament of Baptism; (2) We must nourish the divine life in the soul, which is the Eucharist; (3) We must grow to spiritual maturity and assume full responsibilities as members of the spiritual army of the Church, which is Confirmation; (4) We must heal the wounds of sin, which is Penance; (5) We must drive out the traces of the diseases of sin, which is the Anointing of the Sick; (6) We must live under the spiritual government of the Church, which is Holy Orders; (7) We must prolong and propagate the Kingdom of God on earth. In general, this is most commonly done by the Sacrament which is Matrimony.

Every sacrament has an outward or visible sign; for example, in Baptism it is water, in the Eucharist it is bread and wine. But the sacrament also has a form or formula, or words of spiritual significance given to the matter when it is conferred. Three things then are absolutely required for a sacrament: (1) Its institution by Christ; (2) An outward sign; and (3) The power of conferring the grace or divine life purchased for us by the Passion, Death, and Resurrection of Christ.

The Power and Efficacy of the Sacraments.

The sacraments derive their power and efficacy from the Passion, Death, and Resurrection of Our Lord. Why was a blood sacrifice required to bring us the seven-fold sanctification? For several reasons: Life is in the blood, but so also is sin. The sins of the alcoholic, the libertine, and the pervert are often written on their faces; their excesses are recorded in every cell of their body and every drop of their blood. If, therefore, sin is to be done away with, there should be some shedding of blood, as if to symbolize the emptying of sin. It is often the death of soldiers that brings freedom to a nation; it is the giving of one's blood to another which heals him of anemia. The blood bank

from which others may draw healing is hint of another blood bank from which souls may be healed of the ravages of sin.

Furthermore, blood is the best symbol of sacrifice, because blood is the life of man: when man gives up his blood, he gives up his life.

Hence, Saint Peter writes:

“What was the ransom that freed you from the vain observances of ancestral tradition? You know well enough that it was not paid in earthly currency, silver or gold; it was paid in the precious Blood of Christ; no lamb was ever so pure, so spotless a victim.” (1 Peter 1:18-19)

The blood of Christ had infinite value because He is a divine person. The life of a lamb is more precious than that of a fly, and the life of a man is more precious than the life of a beast, and the life of the God-Man is more precious than the life of any human being.

Our mind, our will and our conscience become completely sanctified through the application of the merits of Christ:

“Shall not the Blood of Christ, Who offered Himself, through the Holy Spirit, as a victim unblemished in God’s sight, purify our consciences, and set them free from lifeless observances, to serve the Living God?” (Hebrews 9:14)

The Application to the Sacraments.

Calvary is like a reservoir of divine life or grace. From it, there flow seven different kinds of sanctification for man in different stages of his spiritual existence. Each of these seven channels is a sacrament by which the power of the Risen Christ is bestowed on souls by a spiritual and effective contact. This divine life pours into the soul when we receive the sacraments, unless we put an obstacle in the way, just as water will not flow out of a faucet if we put our hand in front of the faucet. But a faucet in a house has no power to quench thirst unless there is a reservoir and a pipeline. So the sacraments do not confer grace as magical signs; they communicate it only because they are in contact with the Risen Christ.

What makes the difference between the sacraments is how each is applied to us. The Christ-life affects us in a different way when we are born than when we are about to die; in a different way when we reach the age of responsibility than when we enter into marriage; in a different way when we wound ourselves than when we exercise government. The sunlight is the same whether it shines on mud to harden it or on wax to soften it. It shines on some flowers and makes them grow; it shines on a wound and heals it. So too, the blood of Christ applied at different moments of life results in a different kind of power.

A principle of philosophy states: “Whatever is received is received according to the mode of the one receiving it.” If you pour water into a blue glass, it looks blue; if you pour it into a red glass, it looks red. If you pour water into the parched earth, it is quite different from water poured onto a carpet or into oil. So too, when the blood of Christ and its merits flood in upon the soul, it depends upon the one receiving it. Does the soul come for strengthening? For nourishment? For healing? For a long journey? For induction into the spiritual army? The effects will differ as to whether a person is spiritually dead or spiritually living. If a member of the Church is spiritually dead, then it will revive him, as does the Sacrament of Penance, or the Sacrament of Baptism.
