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WHAT IS A SACRAMENT?

A sacrament, to put it simply, is a practice instituted by Jesus Christ. However, we need a more thorough definition if we are to understand the sacraments. A classic definition of a sacrament was offered by Augustine of Hippo (354–430): a sacrament is a visible sign of God’s grace.⁸ Sacraments are visible because they are physical objects. But not every physical thing is a sacrament; sacraments are physical things that are signs. What, then, is a sign?

Some signs are arbitrary. Somebody, years ago, decided that stop signs should be a certain shape. In America stop signs have eight sides. But they would function just as well with a different shape or with fewer sides. The shape says nothing about the message of the sign. It’s an entirely arbitrary shape. The only reason this particular shape signifies stopping is that in our society we’ve all agreed it should have that meaning. Similarly, think of the symbols we use in arithmetic (+, -, x, and so on). These symbols don’t really bear any likeness to ideas such as addition and subtraction. We recognize them as symbols only because we’ve all agreed to use them for this purpose. If we wanted, we could come up with different symbols to express the

same ideas. This is what it means to say that such symbols are arbitrary.

Other signs and symbols, however, are not arbitrary. An advertisement, for instance, signifies by showing us what's on sale—cars, fruit, or whatever. Here there is a likeness between the symbol (the photos in the ad) and what it symbolizes (the things on sale at the store). Or think about the phrase “free as a bird.” Here we think of birds as symbolizing freedom because, unlike us, they can fly. Birds (for us) signify freedom because there is a likeness between their ability to fly wherever they want and our idea of freedom.

So, many signs and symbols are arbitrary; others bear a likeness to what they symbolize.

Sacraments are symbols of God's grace; however, they are not arbitrary symbols. They are likenesses. In what sense are they likenesses? Take baptism, for instance. Baptism, an act of physical washing, is a likeness of grace cleansing the soul. Communion, an act of physical eating, is a likeness of grace nourishing the soul. The physical aspect of each sacrament both symbolizes its spiritual effect and resembles that effect.

The fact that sacraments are signs (or symbols) creates a problem. In today's culture we often have a low regard for symbols. We may have the idea that symbols are less important than what they symbolize. We want the “real thing,” not the symbol. As a result, we often undervalue the sacraments, regarding them as merely symbolic. But symbols are quite important. Few people would think a wedding ring unimportant because it's “only” a symbol. A wedding ring not only symbolizes the marriage but also confirms the marriage. Similarly, a gift may be only a token of love, but that doesn't make

the gift unimportant or unneeded. On the contrary, it is through exchanging gifts that love is strengthened and confirmed. In the same way, sacraments symbolize the effects of grace but also strengthen and confirm those effects.

Sacraments, then, are visible signs or symbols of grace. It's important to emphasize that they are signs of *grace*. They symbolize and are likenesses of God's activity, presence, and revelation. That is why it is an utter disaster to define sacraments as an outward sign of an inward *experience*.⁹ This way of thinking about sacraments gets everything wrong by putting the emphasis on us and on individualistic experience. The critical thing in the sacraments is not what we do or feel but what God does in the context of the church. In the sacraments God comes to us with grace and healing. A piece of art or music does not point to our experience; it points to the artist and what the artist is doing in and through the work. As with art, we do have to experientially receive the sacraments; however, as signs they point to what God is doing, just as the work of art points to what the artist is doing.

The sacraments, then, are acts of God. The church has insisted on this point ever since the fourth century during what is called the Donatist controversy.¹⁰ One issue of the controversy was whether baptism is invalid if the priest administering the baptism is morally corrupt. Does the spiritual character of the priest affect the validity of the sacrament? Augustine expressed the view that even an unworthy priest can perform a valid baptism because baptism is actually God's act performed through the priest. The priest may be an unworthy instrument, but God is capable of using even

unworthy instruments. The church adopted Augustine's view.

As signs of God's grace, the sacraments are closely connected to divine promises of salvation. They are, in a sense, God's way of enacting or performing the proclamation of salvation. Baptism is thus about the forgiveness of sin and the gift of the Holy Spirit (Acts 2:38). Communion then is about sharing in Christ's body and blood (1 Cor. 10:16). The connection to divine promises tells us why, as Martin Luther (1483–1546) insisted, sacraments should always be accompanied by Scripture. In fact, it's best to see sacraments and Scripture as simply two ways in which God's promises are declared to us. In Scripture we receive them verbally; in the sacraments we receive them in visible signs.