

THE CHURCH AND THE SACRAMENTS¹

PART I. EXPOSITION

1. *The Church as Prime Sacrament*

Christ is the historical real presence of God's mercy in its definitive victory. As such, he is at once reality and sign: *sacramentum* and *res sacramenti*. The Church is the continuation, the abiding presence of Christ in the world. From Christ the Church has a sacramental structure: historical perceptibility in space and time, in which Christ, and the grace of Christ, are present. Thus the Church is the *prime sacrament* (*Ursakrament*). She cannot be an empty sign, since she is permanently united with Christ.

The sacramental structure of the Church is set forth and perfected in the sacraments strictly so called: they are her essential actions, her full actuation. When the Church, as means of salvation, officially, socially, publicly, explicitly encounters the individual in the final actualization of her being, then we have sacraments in the strict sense. The notion of *prime sacrament*, therefore, is derived from Christology. It affords a principle for the understanding of the sacraments in general.

2. *Opus Operatum*

The current explanation of *opus operatum* leaves two difficulties in distinguishing between *opus operatum* and *opus operantis*. First, the necessity of a disposition in the recipient involves the sacrament in the same uncertainty about grace as in the case of the *opus*

¹ K. Rahner, *Kirche und Sakramente* (Quaestiones Disputatae, 10). Freiburg: Herder, 1961, pp. 104; *The Church and the Sacraments* (Quaestiones Disputatae, 9) translated by W. J. O'Hara. New York: Herder and Herder, 1963, pp. 117. Though I have read the translation and in general find it very good, I have, for the most part, translated Rahner's terminology independently. In particular I have preferred to translate *Ursakrament* as *prime sacrament*. The exposition and discussion given here may be found more fully developed in my article: "Reflections on Karl Rahner's 'Kirche und Sakramente'" in *Gregorianum* 44 (1963) 465-500, also published separately.

operantis. Secondly, God has attached his grace to other realities than the sacraments, e.g., prayer for salvation: in such cases the gift of grace is not due to merit, but to God's promise.

The difference between *opus operatum* and *opus operantis* can be only this. In the case of the *opus operantis*, the sign to which God has attached his grace is itself intrinsically threatened: it can become invalid, robbed of its character as the perceptibility of God's pledge of grace. In the case of the *opus operatum* the sign has an irrevocable, eschatological validity. This difference is illustrated by comparing the sacraments of the Old Testament with those of the New.

Opus operatum means the unequivocal, permanent, historically perceptible pledge of grace to the individual man, a pledge made irrevocably by God, and recognizable as such. This is the positive content of the concept. The expression that there is question of God's production of grace without the subjective merit of the minister or of the recipient is only the negative, and therefore secondary, formulation.

3. *How the Sacraments Cause Grace*

The efficacy of the sacraments is that of signs: by signifying, the sacrament brings with itself the thing signified. This has been neglected in the theories of moral, physical, and intentional causality. The basic error of all these systems is that, tacitly, they are based on the scheme of transitive efficient causality, according to which one of two adequately distinct things produces the other.

There is question here of *symbolic causality* proper to the *essential symbol*. By *essential symbol* (or real inner symbol) is meant here that spatio-temporal, historical appearance and perceptibility, in which a thing, appearing, makes itself known, makes itself present insofar as it forms this appearance really distinct from itself. In essential symbols, the sign as appearance is an inner moment of the thing appearing and fulfilling itself, though it is also really distinct from the thing appearing.

Analogies of this relationship are found in both the intellect and the body in their relation to the soul. The soul constitutes itself as soul insofar as it puts forth the cognitive faculty, distinct from itself.

The body is the symbol of the soul, the appearance of the soul, through which and in which the soul perfects its own being.

The relationship between symbol and symbolized is not one of transitive, efficient causality, nor that of a subsequent notification of something that has already taken place and is in being. Rather, it is an inner and mutual causal relationship: the thing making itself known constitutes itself in its own proper being and existence precisely by showing itself in its appearance, which is distinct from itself. The sign is the cause of the signified, insofar as it is the manner in which the signified realizes itself.

The Church is the inner symbol of God's eschatologically victorious grace. In this spatio-temporal perceptibility, grace renders itself present. The sacraments are self-fulfillments of the Church, actualizations of the Church in relation to the individual man. Their efficacy is that of the inner symbol. This kind of causality suffices; one satisfies the Church's definition that the sacraments are "causes" of grace if one holds fast to this: that on the administration of the sacraments, grace is given "because of" the sacramental sign.

4. *The Institution of the Sacraments by Christ*

Beginning from the Church as prime sacrament, one can see that the existence of real sacraments in the strictest sense of the word does not rest necessarily and in every case on a definite (perceptible or presumed) word, in which the historical Jesus explicitly speaks of a definite sacrament.

In the case of matrimony, priestly ordination, anointing of the sick, and confirmation, one cannot prove their sacramentality, that is their institution by Christ, by appeal to such an explicit word. First, it is not probable historically that Jesus could have said essentially more about these things than we actually know from Scripture. The added explanation would have had to be expressed in a manner of speech to be expected of the historical Jesus, in concepts demonstrable in the milieu, and in Jesus' thought and expression otherwise known to us. Secondly, historically there is not a trace of such express words on the sacramentality of orders and matrimony.

The sacramentality of these rites can be shown from the teaching

on the Church as prime sacrament, from the nature of the *opus operatum*, proper to all the basic self-fulfillments of the Church in relation to the individual in his decisive salvation situations. This theory does not conflict with the theory of the "immediate" institution of all the sacraments by Christ. By the fact that Christ immediately instituted the Church, the sacraments are already instituted immediately by Christ.

We cannot deduce *a priori* all seven sacraments from the essence of the Church. First, we know from experience that the sacraments are the basic essential acts, expressive of the nature of the Church. Then we recognize from the nature of the Church why they must be so.

So the Church herself first experiences her own essence. The ground of that experience is what Christ has said explicitly to her about herself. She recognizes that she has carried out such definite activities spontaneously, in accordance with what she is. She understands that they are essential to her nature without really having to be informed of this again explicitly.

PART II. DISCUSSION

1. *The Church as Prime Sacrament*

This conception of the Church—and of Christ as the absolute prime sacrament—is one of the great achievements in the development of recent theology. It sets both Church and sacraments in their context, the great central mystery of our salvation in and through Christ. It enriches sacramental theology greatly. Rahner's contribution to the elaboration of this conception should find a ready welcome and acceptance.

2. *Opus Operatum*

Rahner's re-thinking of the *opus operatum* has brought out aspects of the sacraments which further enrich theology, but his treatment of the *opus operatum* is not complete, and it involves some oversights or omissions which tend to obscure a rather simple dogmatic truth. What he describes as the "current explanation" is

rather the dogmatic conception itself. Neither in his criticism of this conception, nor in his effort to provide a substitute for it, is he entirely successful.

First, Rahner's argument from uncertainty of the gift of grace is not solid. Though the gift of grace through the sacrament requires the proper disposition in the recipient, and there is always some uncertainty with regard to the actual gift of grace, still there is a considerable difference between the experience of the recipient of a sacrament and that of the man who makes an act of private devotion. In each case there will be some uncertainty concerning the quality of the personal acts involved. A man is never sure that his love or contrition is perfect. But the Catholic knows that even if he approaches the sacrament of penance with only attrition, it is enough to receive grace through the sacrament. He cannot explain the theology of *ex attrito fit contritus, vi ipsius sacramenti*, but his sense of greater security—or if you will, of considerably less uncertainty—is solidly founded in Catholic doctrine on the sacrament of penance. In the case of the *opus operatum*, grace is mediated by the position of the sacramental rite, which has a special objective efficacy. In the case of the *opus operantis*, there is no such mediation or special efficacy of the rite.

Rahner's second argument against the clarity of the classic distinction between *opus operatum* and *opus operantis* has little bearing on the question. Granted that there are other types of "grace events" which differ from both *opus operatum* and *opus operantis*, their existence, and the relative obscurity of their nature, does not imperil either the existence or the intelligibility of the two types which are better known, and which can be distinguished clearly enough.

Rahner's own explanation of the *opus operatum* is excellent as far as it goes, but it is not the essential explanation, and in itself it does not suffice to express fully the difference between *opus operatum* and either the sacraments of the Old Law, or the *opus operantis* today.

First, Rahner's explanation of the uncertainty of the *opus operantis* seems unrealistic. He traces it to man's fear that the *sign* he uses may be empty, may have lost its validity as the perceptibility

of God's grace. It seems, rather, that the doubt concerns not the quality of the sign itself, but the quality of the man's own interior act of prayer, the degree of personal commitment with which he makes his prayer.

Secondly, with regard to the distinction between the sacraments of the Old Law and of the New, Rahner has given a good partial explanation: it is true that those sacraments of the Old Law were in danger of being "emptied" by annulment of the Covenant. But that is only a partial explanation and leaves unmentioned the principal element in the traditional teaching about the difference between the two types of sacraments. Assuming the case in which the sacraments of the Old Law were still in force, and were still valid signs of the Covenant, in the words of the Council of Florence, the sacraments of the Old Law . . . *non causabant gratiam, sed eam solum per passionem Christi dandam esse figurabant; haec vero nostra et continent gratiam, et ipsam digne suscipientibus conferunt* (DS 1310/695).

Beautiful as Rahner's explanation is, it is not the essential explanation. It should be assimilated, integrated into sacramental theology. It cannot replace the central dogmatic truth of the *opus operatum*. It certainly is not what Rahner says it is: the *only* explanation which makes things clear.

3. *How the Sacraments Cause Grace*

I agree with Rahner and others that the efficacy of the sacraments is that of signs. I should say that the fatal defect in Rahner's explanation is his rejection of all "transitive efficient causality." His theory of symbolic causality has not been elaborated here or elsewhere in his writings.²

Supposing that the theory could be worked out, does it promise an adequate explanation of the causality of the sacraments? Let us consider Rahner's scheme:

Church	::	Sacrament
grace		grace announced, given, produced

² Cf. the fuller sketch of the theory in "Zur Theologie des Symbols" in *Schriften zur Theologie*, Bd. IV (Einsiedeln 1961) 275-311.

There is a leap in the fourth term of the proportionality: "grace announced, *given*, *produced*." Rahner's symbolic causality can explain beautifully the presence of grace in the Church, *announced* and *offered* to the individual in the sacrament. But he does not attend to the special problem of the *new grace* in the individual. The whole problem of the causality of the sacraments regards this new effect of grace. There is a problem of efficient causality here, which Rahner's theory of symbolic causality is impotent to explain.

His theory explains beautifully the full significance of the Church and the sacrament as a manifestation of grace, carried up to the point where God's irrevocable offer is made to man. On the other side of the dialogue, the theory can resume its work by explaining the human response of the recipient, whose devotion rises and flowers in the reception of the sacrament, and the correspondence with the grace given. The missing element is the production of the only grace about which the whole classic question turns: the new grace produced by the sacrament, which is not the action of the recipient.

Rahner seems to be aware of this, for he claims merely that his theory "suffices" to satisfy the definition of Trent. The theory of causality in the broad sense of occasion or *conditio sine qua non* was not condemned, and could be held now. But holding it means retreating from the position held by almost all theologians since the Council of Trent. Rahner, of course, has not simply returned to an ancient position. His conception is far more elaborate, far richer.

There remains, however, a problem of real efficient instrumental causality, which I believe can be solved by a theory of the efficacious sign.³

4. *The Institution of the Sacraments by Christ*

a) How do we know that the seven rites of baptism, confirmation . . . matrimony are sacraments of the New Law, instituted by Christ? It is a truth of faith, revealed by God, and defined as such by the

³ I have proposed such a theory in *De Sacramentis in Genere* (Rome 1957; ed. 2, 1960) 306-348. A short account of the explanation is given in "The Resurrection of Christ, Instrumental Cause of Grace" in *Gregorianum* 39 (1958) 271-284.

Council of Trent. The truth expressed in practically the same terms is found explicitly in the common teaching of the Church and theologians since the twelfth century.

Concerning this truth, the theologian has two tasks: (1) to find it in revelation and in its successive manifestations and formulations in the life of the Church, and to give a plausible historical account of the process by which the practice and later teaching of the Church are derived from the data of revelation; (2) to give an intelligible theological explanation of this truth.

I may be wrong, but I think that Father Rahner, in his discussion of the "proof" of the sacramentality of some of the sacraments, does not make clear which of the two theological functions he is performing. He begins his argument with the attempt to "prove" the sacramentality of certain rites, to give an historically plausible account of the way in which Christ instituted them. He ends acknowledging that it does not follow from his argument that one could deduce strictly *a priori* from the essence of the Church all seven sacraments. Prior to the theoretical "deduction" is the concrete life of the Church, the daily unreflected exercise of its functions. Later the intelligibility of these functions is found by reflection on the essence of the Church and its properties. Rahner's demonstration seems to belong to the sphere of theological reflection and explanation.

b) When did the Church begin to perform these seven essential functions? I am not sure how Father Rahner would answer, since there is some obscurity in the manner in which he distinguishes between the Church in its stage of development, and the Church as fully constituted. But from Rahner's own premises one could draw a certain theological conclusion that these functions must have been exercised by the Church from the beginning, in the age of the Apostles, since they pertain to the essential constitution and functioning of the Church with regard to the crucial situations for the salvation of the individual.

c) Why did the Church begin to perform these functions? Because Christ told her to. The essence of the Church, and the essential functions of the Church, are known to her by revelation. It would be a misconception of revelation or of the essence of the

Church, or of both, to suppose that just part of the essential functions of the Church had to be revealed, and that, knowing her own essence, she would just spontaneously perform all of her essential functions, as the tree flowers and puts forth fruit, and man begins to reason. The seven sacraments of the New Law are part of Christ's revelation, and the Apostles had to be given *some* sign, even though obscure, that they were to exercise those functions.

d) What is the minimum required for Christ's institution of a sacrament? He had to indicate a distinct effect of grace to be signified and given; he had to indicate that it was to be signified and given by a suitable rite; he did not have to specify the details of the rite in all cases.

e) What is a plausible historical account of the manner in which Christ instituted those sacraments for which we have no explicit word of institution in Scripture? Theologians commonly point to the Easter period, in which we are told that Christ spoke with the Apostles about the Kingdom of God. They suppose that at that time Jesus gave that minimum indication which we have described. Father Rahner rejects this explanation as historically implausible. I believe that his arguments are weak and that his own explanation is insufficient.

Rahner holds that Jesus could not have said more about these sacraments than we have actually recorded in Scripture; that he could not have expressed the "plus-value" of the actions involved without transcending the conceptual and representational material proper to the milieu and to Jesus himself as he appears in the Scripture. He holds that the case is essentially different for baptism, penance, and the eucharist: mention of these forces the assertion of an effect which is grace. On the contrary, conferment of the power of office, and matrimony, can be spoken of without any talk of communication of grace.

The argument can be turned against Father Rahner rather easily. Baptism, penance, and the eucharist *as described* in Scripture indicate the communication of grace. But not every ritual bath, nor every rite of reconciliation with a religious community, nor every sacrificial meal, has the meaning of these specifically Christian rites.

The very fact that Christ was able to speak of a new baptism, with a unique plus-value, is a striking argument against Father Rahner; and the same holds for penance and the eucharist.

Moreover, Rahner's implicit principle is false. He assumes that a plus-value transcending the order of realities already known cannot be expressed in concepts accessible to men in their milieu. Such a principle would lead to the impossibility of the revelation of mysteries, in the Old Testament or in the New.

As for orders and matrimony, there is no need to postulate a secret discourse in which Jesus would have spoken to the Apostles in the language of thirteenth century theology, or of the Council of Trent, giving "proof-texts" orally, to be handed down unwritten through the centuries. This is a caricature. We are not faced with a choice between Rahner's theory and an absurd, unhistorical, utterly naive postulate.

In biblical concepts and terminology, enough can be said of a special holiness of the Apostles, of a special holiness of matrimony, and of a grace to be signified and given in each case, to satisfy our minimum requirements for the institution of a sacrament. There is no need to postulate "an explicit word about its sacramentality." There is no need to choose between an explicit word about sacramentality, and Rahner's notion of an institution which was implicit in the institution of the Church itself, without any word by which Christ would have ordered his Church to perform this kind of basic act.

Between these two extremes lies the only account which is both historically plausible and theologically sufficient: Christ instituted this sacrament, because Christ ordered his Apostles to exercise this kind of function, to produce this kind of grace. It could be an indeterminate, obscure, implicit word—in comparison with later explicit conceptualization of sacramental teaching. But still it was a word concerning a rite, and not just a word instituting a Church. It was necessary to indicate to the Church that this is one of her basic acts.

Rahner's whole conception of the sacrament as an essential function of the Church suggests a confirming argument for the plausi-

bility of the sort of institution postulated for the Easter discourses: if these are the essential functions of the Church, how could Christ have failed to speak of them? What theme for those talks could be more plausible?

With regard to Father Rahner's own explanation, it is difficult to judge just where he stands. He has not indicated clearly what he has in mind when he talks about explicit words about the Church, in which the institution of the sacraments would have been contained implicitly, and sufficiently to explain their institution by Christ. If he means that it was sufficient for Christ to institute the prime sacrament, which would then perform these particular essential functions without any indication by Christ that it should do so, then his theory cannot be reduced to the theory of the immediate institution *in genere* or *in specie mutabili*, as he seems to think. If, on the other hand, he really admits some such obscure word of Christ as I have postulated, within the conceptual resources of the men of his time, then in fact Father Rahner is not standing alone. He is speaking a different language. He is not saying anything really new or startling. He is battling against the caricature of the postulate of an explicit word about sacramentality.

What is the real merit of this argument of Rahner on the institution of the sacraments? He has *not* given a new plausible historical account of the manner in which Christ instituted some of the sacraments. He *has* contributed greatly to the theological explanation of the seven sacraments: reflection on the nature of the Church sets the sacraments in their intelligible structure as the essential acts of the Church, with a corresponding ecclesial aspect proper to every sacrament.

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