

SEMINAR ON CHURCH AND SACRAMENTS: WHY THE SACRAMENTS?

The reading which was suggested for the discussion of this seminar was Karl Rahner's "Considerations on the Active Role of the Person in the Sacramental Event," from his *Theological Investigations*, XIV, 161-84. The seminar began with brief presentations from J. Peter Schineller, S. J. and Wayne L. Fehr, S.J., both of the Jesuit School of Theology in Chicago, who reacted to Rahner's considerations from opposite perspectives. The discussion which began from the article and these two presentations is here summarized in four parts.

INTRODUCTORY REMARKS OF PETER SCHINELLER

I speak in basic agreement with the viewpoint of Rahner on the Copernican revolution in the understanding of the sacraments. Thus I build upon a world view in which the saving will and grace of God is universal, in which non-Christians, non-sacramentalized persons, can be considered anonymous Christians. In this view, the sacraments are seen not as bringing grace to a world that is without grace, but as historical manifestations of the grace which is always and everywhere at work in the world. Sacraments celebrate the love that is offered and given, even before the sacramental event.

The results of this view can be summarized under four headings. First, this is a less messianic view of the sacraments. They are relativized in their function as mediators of grace. They are not absolutely necessary. Second, there is an optimism about not only the possibility but also the actuality of grace in human lives, and hence too, optimism about salvation. Third, rather than pointing to our weakness, sinfulness, distance and separation from God, sacraments reveal and affirm our strength and closeness to God who has offered himself as loving grace in the world. Fourth, sacraments are not viewed primarily as means to grace, but as grateful, graced celebrations of the ever-present, already offered grace of God.

INTRODUCTORY REMARKS OF WAYNE FEHR

Rahner stresses a concept of grace as everywhere operative "at the roots of" all human experience. Hence, sacraments are to be understood as the interpretation of this graced world as graced.

There is a danger in so stressing the universality of grace. Grace can come to be thought of rather abstractly and ahistorically. One can neglect the historically achieved "shape of grace" which was wrought out in time by the transcendent power of God enabling human freedom.

The traditional doctrine of sacraments has stressed the quality of divine initiative, confronting human beings objectively and reliably in the Church's signs. Moreover, in asserting the historical origin of the sacraments from Jesus ("initiated by Christ"), traditional sacramental

theology has derived the divine otherness and reliability of the sacraments from the historical figure who is believed to embody God's loving initiative to all human beings.

From this perspective, what is really at stake in the "Copernican shift" of sacramental theology is the revelatory and salvific character of Jesus. It is the issue of revelation as historically achieved divine initiative, creating the Other of God's self-gift in a human destiny: Jesus as the Christ. The theology of sacraments must arise from Christology and Soteriology, and any interpretation of sacraments will imply some interpretation of the salvific significance of Jesus.

The shift in understanding of sacraments which Rahner presents must, therefore, be judged in terms of Christological questions. In the light of the above-mentioned themes of traditional sacramental theology one can pose two questions. First, in what sense is Jesus the reliable, unsurpassable embodiment of God's offer of self-communication to all human beings? Second, is the unique destiny of Jesus the event by which created freedom responds perfectly to the divine offer and is thus definitively reconciled to the divine will?

Both of these aspects of the mystery of Jesus are reflected and embodied in the Church's sacramental practice. For these sacraments have been understood not merely as human interpretations of the world as graced, but rather as encounters, in which the divine initiative and the human response are inseparable in the symbolic event. To limit the sacraments to human acts of interpretation (i.e., expressions of faith) is to lose the reality of a divine initiative which is historically and socially mediated.

Rahner, of course, wishes to affirm the abiding efficacy of the Christ event for universal grace. But perhaps he under-values the historical, social mediation of this event to all races, tongues and cultures. This is a point of contact for the radical question, "Why Church?" which presently is a matter of heated argument. If humanity is to be "Christified," should one suppose that this is to happen without the historical mediation of the actual, concrete shape of grace which is Jesus? Since sacraments are central to the existence and persistence of Church, relativizing sacraments obviously relativizes Church. But does the relativizing of Church (this historical, social mediation of the Christ event) also inevitably relativize the revelatory and salvific significance of Jesus?

SUMMARY OF THE DISCUSSION

Four headings can be employed to summarize the discussion which began from the Rahner article and the two presentations: the appropriate dichotomy, the analogy of divine and human operation, the definition of the sacraments, and further questions for clarification. In the discussion, the community-centered perspective of George McCauley, which is presented in his *God of the Group*, exerted a major influence. He suggested a second "Copernican revolution" which focuses on the community performing the sacraments rather than the individual receiving them.

The first question is of the appropriate dichotomy. Rahner argues, and the members of the seminar agree, that the worshipping community and the world outside, the sacred and the secular, ought not be set over against one another. The divine saving activity is in the world as well as in the sacraments. A restriction of the divine power to the sacraments would result in an empty moralism in which human beings would be directed rather than assisted in the work of transforming the world. Furthermore, the opposite, demonic force of evil is operative within the sacramental celebration as well as in the world outside the sacral sphere. The celebration of the sacraments can and often does have an oppressive function which actually opposes and inhibits the work of divine grace.

The appropriate dichotomy, therefore, would seem to be between good and evil, divine and demonic. Each element is present in both the world and the worshipping community: in each sphere one finds a conflict between these two forces. A second dichotomy, between the implicit and explicit, might be easily coordinated with the secular-sacred one: it might be more difficult to coordinate with the good-evil dichotomy.

The foundation of Rahner's observations is an analogy of human and divine action which does not set them over against one another in such a way that one excludes the other. Rahner's analysis of apparently secular human activity shows that it mediates a divine initiative and human response which is sanctifying and saving. This correlation between human and divine action can also be applied to the sacramental activity of the Christian community. Attention shifts from the individual receiving a sacrament to the community performing the celebration. The sacramental action is exclusively neither divine nor human: rather the human activity mediates a divine efficacy. Thus this analysis would not recognize a divine activity which is independent of human efficacy in the celebration of the sacraments. It would, however, admit the possibility of a human failure which would impede divine efficacy.

Following this analysis of human and divine causality in the sacraments, one would have to be as concerned about the dispositions of the celebrating community as about those of the individual recipient. Sacramental ministers would have to be regarded as the agents of both God and the community. As Edward Kilmartin asserted in his presentation of the report on women in church and society, the minister represents Christ and the community together. It was noted that Augustine's writings against the Donatists in which the doctrine of sacramental efficacy was developed contains this same bi-polar relation between Christ and the community.

A scale of sacramental efficacy could then be defined in which a minimum would correspond to the traditional "ex opere operato." Fuller efficacy would be appropriately described through categories of group process, language which is appropriate to the influence of a group on individual members in the process of self-constitution. The social communication achieved in sacramental celebration would be viewed as the medium of grace. A failure in the religious life of the community,

therefore, would significantly limit or perhaps even destroy the efficacy of a sacramental celebration.

Such a view of the sacraments makes the descriptive language of group process appropriate for the theological analysis of the efficacy of the sacramental action. Further, it requires that a community cultivate its religious life and ritual expression in order to serve as an effective sacramental agent.

Through this analysis of the role of the community in the sacramental celebration, the significance of Rahner's assertion of the continuity between the sacred and secular is clarified. A community which does not respond to divine grace in the secular sphere cannot be an effective medium of grace in its worship. Moreover, the human action which is efficacious in the sacraments finds a counterpart in the community's grace-bearing efforts in the secular sphere.

If one accepts the analogy of human and divine action in sacramental action, then some means of distinguishing the sacraments from other Christian actions must be developed. The sacraments could be characterized through their explicit reference to the divine sanctifying operation and the personal encounter with God which they mediate. As such the sacraments would be viewed as specific actions, historically grounded in the life of Christ and the Church, through which the divine grace which is universally offered is focused and brought to bear. The transition from simple ritual to effective symbol would be characterized by an eschatological or limit experience, one which would involve a recognition of the divine presence and activity in the community's celebration. Finally, this sacramental action would promote human response and cooperation with God's work in the non-sacramental sphere. Thus the sacramental activity of the community would sensitize its members to the divine operation and form them in responding to it. This sacramental efficacy would be manifest in the increasing unity and self-transcendence of the community itself.

At the term of the three-days' discussion, a number of observations were advanced for future investigation and development. The conditions of impossibility of sacramental celebration by a community should be explored and defined. Descriptive categories necessary for theological reflection of the sacraments should be developed. The relation of the sacramental action of a local community to the contemporary universal Church and to the Christian communities with which it is in historical continuity should be defined. Appropriate means of ritualizing this relationship must be developed. The relation between the sacred-secular, good-evil, and implicit-explicit dichotomies must be specified. Finally, the efficacy of sacramental celebration in the salvation of the world must be explored.

J. PATOUT BURNS, S.J.
Jesuit School of Theology
Chicago, Illinois