

Reflective Essay: "Church, Sacraments and Ministry: Sacrament as Hermeneutic of Experience"

WAYS IN WHICH THE SACRAMENTS HAVE FUNCTIONED AS A HERMENEUTIC OF  
EXPERIENCE TO TRANSFORM THE MEANING OF MY LIFE EXPERIENCE

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At the tender age of 20, I left the secure comfort of my mother, the Roman Catholic Church, and journeyed out into the wide, confusing Protestant world. I was lured away with untruths about the Catholic faith and returned amid deep-seated hurt and bitterness. This experience of leaving and returning to the Catholic Church made it possible for the seven sacraments of the Church to function as "principles, insights and critical judgments" that have helped me to understand and interpret my experiences "in a more accurate and profound way" (Cooke 33). In this paper, I will explore several areas of understanding this experience touches: salvation, forgiveness of sin and mercy, a person's role in the mystery of life and the purpose of our suffering.

Before I left the Catholic Church, I had no conscious understanding of the concept of salvation. I was neither taught nor thought about it. As a Protestant, salvation was something that happened to one at a specific moment in time. This static concept made me ask when others were *saved* as I related my own experience. For example, "I was saved May 13, 1983." In this view, I was saved, as if joining a club with an eternal membership, impossible to cancel. It was an occurrence in time, never to be repeated, according to this paradigm. One became a member by recognizing personal sins, requesting forgiveness and asking Jesus into one's life. As I considered the message a variety of churches gave, "Except a man be born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God," I wondered how I could be expected to understand what this meant when a ruler of the Jews did not (John 3:3, 1 KJV).<sup>1</sup> This was indicative of my struggles and questions such as these indicate a thought process that returned me to the church and the sacraments, which changed my understanding considerably from what it was as a Protestant. I started again experiencing Eucharist which validated my new understanding

of salvation as a process. From this, a question emerged within my heart: if salvation were a static, one-time event, what would be the point of continuing to receive Eucharist? My understanding deepened as I continued in this. Challenged by a Jesuit to pray for those going up to receive the Lord, saying my thanksgiving after all received, I started noticing the other people around me. I started to be aware of them as God's children who were good, but in need of God and the strength or grace, He gave through this sacrament. I knew many of these people and knew they had problems in life, their own crosses. From this experience, I began to see baptism as the true entrance into the process of salvation. This process for me started when I was a baby, long before I can recall my first childhood memories. I saw that this wiped away the stain of original sin, but did not take away its effects on me. I could see these effects in some of my sinful inclinations, despite the fact that I desired to serve God and live as He commanded. This reminded me that Christ was saving me every time I humbly came to Him to receive what I needed. Penance became another teacher and reminder of this point. I had been away from this sacrament for so long that the first time I returned was quite overwhelming in that I knew the things I had done, yet God was forgiving me through this minister of reconciliation. As I continued to confess my sins and experience the grace of this sacrament, I saw my life gradually changing. With this change came a changed understanding. In hearing the words that indicated I was forgiven, I tasted the mercy of God.

As a Protestant, forgiveness of sin and mercy were not treated as concrete realities many times. Our sins were real, but the way to rid yourself of your sins and restore yourself to God was, at best, an individualized exercise. I found myself wondering if God's forgiveness and mercy were really mine or if they simply existed in my own

imagination. The sacraments concretized both concepts. "I absolve you," make real in a concrete way Jesus' encounter with the woman caught in the act of adultery, yet as I experience what she experienced, I see this woman is a type of person and I am that woman in a reflection on the sacrament of penance and reconciliation (John 8:2-11). I remember the first time I wanted to approach this Blessed Sacrament after I had returned to the Church. It was during a Cursillo I first spoke to a young priest who became a friend of mine. I told him I did not know if I was ready to make a confession, but that I really wanted to. In the long talk that ensued, I felt as if I were being enabled to return to Reconciliation. When I went some months later, I saw and felt God's mercy and forgiveness. I not only intellectually knew I was forgiven, which I also knew as a Protestant, but I felt it when the priest put his hands on my head and pronounced the words of absolution. From this, I understood what baptism did for me, showing forth God's mercy and forgiveness from the outset of my life. I have again found this mercy and forgiveness in marriage. My wife is a gift from God, sent to save me from myself. In His mercy and goodness, God sent me a woman who provides balance to my life, to redeem me through her. These sacraments have changed my understanding of how one receives God's mercy and forgiveness. I have come to see and appreciate the objectivity of the sacraments as something other than self. Instead of treating the self, as a doctor seeks one when sick, I come to the Church to receive the grace to help in my time of need (Hebrews 4:16).

People have a role in the mystery of life. As a Protestant without sacraments as the Catholic Church understands this, my role was to read and study the bible and to actively evangelize, commonly known as *witnessing*, mostly by telling others the

message in the words of the story of my own life. My return to the sacraments has taught me a different perspective. My role in sustaining my life is to receive Jesus in word and sacrament, with an emphasis on the worship and sacrifice of the mass. Mass is central to Catholic spiritual life, especially mine considering from where I have come. I am to treat others as God did me: be merciful, forgiving, loving, accepting, and to show forth God's message through how I live my life and treat others. This is summed up beautifully in this paraphrase of St. Francis of Assisi I remember from my time as a member of the Secular Franciscan Order, "Preach the gospel always, and use words only if necessary." The inner change was dramatic for me. As a Protestant, I would frantically read and study scripture so that I would be able to share the message. This forced me to focus on what I had to say since I was no genius when it came to witnessing. This caused me to listen poorly and to consider my own ideas more important than other people or their ideas. The revelation in the sacraments to me was that I did not have to be so frantic in my studies, as if the salvation of others depended on how well I understood and could convey the message. I was free to listen to people, love them and pray for them, even if they were not perfectly living as I understood it. This lesson from experiencing the sacraments also taught me that people are more important than ideas. It put me at ease with others whereas before we were always in tension as I tried to convert them. Another area in which my thinking changed was that the sacramental approach made me realize that God changes the heart, not me. This is related to the frenzied studying I did because this approach set me up as the savior of others. I knew that Jesus was the one who saves. This can cause many to suffer by putting the focus on and faith in people instead of God.

People suffer. This truth perplexed me as a Protestant. The scriptures speak of Jesus coming to heal the sick and broken hearted, yet when I looked around I saw suffering and pain at every turn (Isaiah 53:2-12 and 1 Peter 2:24).<sup>2</sup> Pain and its associated suffering were bad in my view, akin to the attitudes of Job's so-called friends (Job 4ff). When I returned to the sacraments, I learned some interesting things. The Eucharist taught me that Jesus' sufferings in His life and His death on the cross transformed Him to be more than just an individual human being at a specific space and time. I saw that suffering helps me to grow and become who I am supposed to be. It enlarges me and I noticed that without suffering, there is no growth and very little life. His suffering also is the means by which He became my spiritual food that strengthens me to be able to "live, move and have my being" (Acts 17:28). The suffering I mentioned in the opening paragraph of the hurt and bitterness that was involved in my leaving and returning to the Catholic Church was deep and abiding. It took about fourteen years for the suffering and pain of that experience to heal, mostly. I first understood this experience as a curse, but God through the sacraments and good friends, worked in my life to illuminate what a blessing this pain and suffering had been. I came to see that what I learned through the experience of religion in my life has enabled me to hear the call of God that I would name *the sacramental call of God*, so much clearer. This call has caused me to know myself better which, in turn, led me to end my dreams of becoming a priest in order to marry. My thoughts focused so intently on being a priest because I have made a difference in people's lives, bringing God's mercy, forgiveness, love and peace into lives that may not have ever known any of these gifts. My thoughts followed this train of thought: if I marry, I cannot be a priest in the Roman Catholic Church. This was a source

of suffering for me as I had to die to my expectations I had been very seriously considering. My suffering in this way has led me deeper into myself. Through reflection and prayer, I learned that I can still bring these things to people, albeit in different ways than in the official sacraments of the Church. This suffering was buffered by the love of a good woman and her daughter. Many times my life has not turned out as I planned, it always turns out far better. When this happens and I really take a close look at it, what happened has made me far happier and fulfilled than what my plans held in store for me.

Winters has written that we live in a "sacramental universe" (117). I understand one of the implications of this to mean that since we do live in such a universe, it is natural that the Church has its sacraments in order to ground the faithful in the reality of the faith. In this paper, I have reflected on some ways in which the seven sacraments of the Church have helped me to sharpen my understanding of my experiences and assist me in better interpreting them. This reflection has shown that my experience of leaving and returning to the Church deeply impacted how I understand certain areas important to me as a Protestant and as a Catholic and how I live out the faith I have been given, a thing I treasure as a gracious gift from God. In my exploration of suffering, I have also had a chance to explore how my change in plans from my desires to be a priest to getting married have changed me and how this was difficult in some ways, but upon reflection, I realized what a blessing it is. This course on sacraments has really opened my eyes to what the sacraments not only do for me and others, but how they function to change my reality, enlightening me to see how my thinking was not very sacramental in coming from Protestantism back to my 'safe house' and home of Catholicism. I thank God for this opportunity to realize the power of sacraments in my life and the world.

## Works Cited

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<sup>1</sup> King James Version was the one I first heard this passage quoted from. All scripture references are from the New American Bible except where noted.

<sup>2</sup> I use these passages as representative of the redemptive and healing value of suffering found in scripture and specifically referring to Jesus' sacrifice and its healing power.