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## OUR LADY AND THE SACRAMENTS

The topic, Mary and the Sacraments, raises many interesting questions. At first glance the relationship of these two realities seems quite artificial. As a matter of fact, whether they have formulated it or not, in many people's minds these two aspects of Christian faith and life seem to be in mild opposition. In our day there is unquestionably a shift in the spirituality of the Church, one which is adding emphasis to the role of sacrament in Christian life. To some extent this is a movement away from emphasis on what one might call devotions; and in many people's minds this involves a lessening of attention to the Blessed Virgin.<sup>1</sup>

I think that in all honesty we must admit that there is such a shift and that the shift is a good thing, because it is bringing the Christian consciousness closer to Christ Himself. And to the extent that some Marian devotions have been misplaced or misdirected or dubious in their doctrinal orientation, the shift now taking place toward sacramental spirituality is a very healthy trend. However, to the extent that it is a genuine sacramental emphasis in the Church's life this new movement is in no way a threat to genuine Marian devotion, and obviously no downgrading of Mary herself.

Instead, as the Second Vatican Council has amply demonstrated,<sup>2</sup> the situation of Mary in the very center of the mystery of the Church does not take away from her dignity, but adds rather to the true depth of the mystery which she is.

Any opposition between Mary and the sacraments can only be apparent. Most basically the reason lies in the fact that the Church itself is the greatest sacrament, and the seven ritual

<sup>1</sup> For a balanced approach to this matter of sacramental or devotional sanctity, see nos. 102-111 in Vatican II's *Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy* (Paulist Press edit., pp. 63-66).

<sup>2</sup> Cf. *Constitution on the Church*, nos. 60-65 (NCWC edit., pp. 65-67).

actions which we call Sacraments are only the translation into sensible activity of this fundamental aspect of the Church's own nature<sup>3</sup> Moreover, the relationship between the mystery of Mary and the mystery of the Church is extremely close.<sup>4</sup> This has been remarked from the earliest days of Christian theologizing and has received its most recent formulation in Vatican II's Constitution on the Church. Consequently, no matter what the apparent opposition, in the last analysis, Mary's relationship to the sacraments must be a very profound one.

The history of doctrinal development attests to this relationship. To take but one instance: in the theological and credal disputes which accompanied the upheaval of the Protestant reformation, there was in many circles a simultaneous rejection of the mediatorial role of Mary and of the mediatorial role of sacraments. This was not simple coincidence, rather, it was a questioning of the role in Christianity of any Christian co-operation with Christ Himself in the work of redemption. Both Mary and sacraments are instances of the mediatorial function communicated in the Christian community—a mediatorial function which is totally dependent upon the redeeming action of Christ but which does have its own intrinsic effectiveness and reality. Nor is it entirely accidental that in Protestant circles at the present time there is increasing interest in the role of Mary and in the role of Christian sacraments.

Both the Constitution on the Church and the Constitution on the Liturgy issued by the Second Vatican Council have drawn our attention to the fact that the word "sacrament" should be used, not just of the individual ritual actions, but of the entire living Church.<sup>5</sup> The community of faith in its life, culminating most significantly in the actions of sacraments, is meant to be an effective sign.<sup>6</sup> Theologians of our day, particularly Schille-

<sup>3</sup> *Const. on Liturgy*, nos 5-10 (pp 31-35).

<sup>4</sup> *Const. on Church*, nos 63-65 (pp 66-67).

<sup>5</sup> *Const. on Liturgy*, no 5 (p 32), *Const. on Church*, no 9 (p 11).

<sup>6</sup> *Const. on Church* nos 10-12 (pp 12-14).

beeckx and Rahner, have amplified this notion by pointing out that the Church is a constant sign of the redeeming presence of Christ in our world.<sup>7</sup> It is not just that Christ is somehow where the Church is, because the community of faith is His body. This community is meant to bear constant witness to the fact that Christ's presence is a dynamic one as He works for the reconstitution of mankind.

It is, of course, in the action of the sacraments, particularly the action of the Eucharist, that the Church bears fullest witness to the presence of Christ's redeeming mystery. As St. Paul told the early Corinthians, "as often as you shall eat the bread and drink the cup, you show forth the death of the Lord until He comes"<sup>8</sup> But that which is spoken most fully in sacrament is spoken in the entire living activity of the Christian community. Christians in their life and in their role in the world of their day are meant to bear constant witness to the fact that their vision of life and their values and their motivations are transformed by the fact that Christ is present to them communicating in faith and love a share in the risen way of life which He now enjoys.

There is, however, a drawback in this function of the Church: the Church, as it actually exists, is a Church of sinners. While the work of redemption goes on in the lives of those who form the Christian community, the degree of fulfillment of this redeeming activity is conditioned by the limitations of their free acceptance of redemption. Our sinfulness and reluctance to accept redemption impose limitations on the sanctification which can be achieved in our lives either individually or corporately. To this extent the witness which is meant to be given to mankind is blurred and in some cases almost totally obscured.

Because this is true in the larger context of the Church's life

<sup>7</sup> Cf. E. Schillebeeckx, *Christ the Sacrament of the Encounter with God* (New York, 1963), especially chap. 2, pp. 47-89, K. Rahner, *The Church and the Sacraments* (New York, 1963), especially pp. 11-24.

<sup>8</sup> 1 Cor. 11:26.

and activity, it is also true of the witness it is possible to give in the sacramental actions themselves. In the significance of any given celebration of the Eucharist, for example, the reality of the people celebrating the Eucharist enters as an intrinsic element into the effective significance of the Eucharistic act.<sup>9</sup> The community assembled for the Eucharist speaks the mystery of Christ and it also speaks its own reality as part of that mystery. It speaks the mystery of Christ, not abstractly, but as it is realized in their own lives and their own decisiveness. For this reason there is always an element of inadequacy, if one can call it that, in the celebration of the Eucharist.

It is here, I believe, that an important element of the role of Mary in the Church comes into the picture. She, and she alone, among those who form part of the mystery of the Church, is totally open to the redeeming influence of Christ.<sup>10</sup> Only she who is immaculately conceived and free from sin throughout her total human experience—only she can bear full witness to the redeeming presence of Christ. This, of course, is what we mean when we refer to her as the "exemplar of the Church."<sup>11</sup> Not just in the sense that she is the sinless one who forms the moral ideal for Christian behavior, but more profoundly because she, and she alone, can give adequately that witness to the redeeming presence of Christ which can then sacramentally effect in the world the action of Christ Himself.

In the perfection of her own life of grace, in the totality of her possession by the Spirit, she testifies to the power of Christ's redeeming love to transform the entire personal existence of a human being. What Mary is, the Church is becoming. And to the extent that the Church approximates the ideal given us in the Blessed Virgin, the Church can itself be truly sacramental and an effective sign of Christ's redeeming Passover mystery.

<sup>9</sup> For two recent developments of this idea cf. H. McCabe, *The People of God* (New York, 1964) and C. Davis, *Theology for Today* (New York, 1962), chap. 17, pp. 232-247.

<sup>10</sup> *Const. on Church*, no. 56 (p. 63).

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, nos. 63-65 (pp. 66-67).

In this way nothing could be a more profound liturgical catechesis than to explain to our Christian faithful the dispositions of soul possessed by Mary. To her state of soul we must assimilate ourselves if our liturgical participation is gradually to approximate the fullness which it should have.

In this way, there is no contradiction between a profound Marian spirituality and a sacramental spirituality. As a matter of fact, the greatest tribute which can be paid to Mary by a Christian is that he accept her decisiveness and loving commitment to the mystery of Christ as a model for his own activity. In doing this, he is automatically developing the very core of genuine sacramental spirituality which consists in the choice to commit oneself to the transforming Passover mystery of Christ which the sacramental action celebrates.

There is another aspect of the Church as a sacrament which might appropriately be suggested here. The celebration of sacrament is not effected solely by the Christians who are visibly present in our presently experienced historical context. We know that, somehow, in each celebration of the Eucharist the entire mystery of the Church is involved; and this includes the members of the Christian community who have already passed into full participation in the mystery of Christ's resurrection.<sup>12</sup> When we assemble for the celebration of the Eucharist we are not separated from what one might call the "heavenly liturgy." The proclamation of the Fatherhood of God in union with the mystery of Christ become is something that goes on continuously among those who now enjoy the state of glory. And somehow the effectiveness of their charity and their witness does touch our own celebration of the Eucharist and its redeeming effectiveness.

In this hidden mystery of the Communion of Saints Mary obviously occupies a unique position. Only she can say the word "Father" with total adequacy. Yet since the celebration of the Eucharist is a corporate action, we, joined with her in sacrament,

<sup>12</sup> *Const. on Liturgy*, no. 8 (p. 34)

do have the consolation of knowing that one in our midst is able to witness fully, to sacramentalize adequately, the power of Christ and of the Spirit to transform human life. Scripture tells us that Mary was present with Christ as He began His dispensation signs at Cana. It tells us that she was with Him as He culminated that dispensation of sign in His Passover mystery. And it tells us that she was present with the Church when the Passover mystery found its fulfillment in the manifestation of the Spirit in the Christian community as it began its sacramental existence on Pentecost. Mary, then, is the exemplar of the Church, not as if she stood apart from it, but (as the Constitution on the Church has indicated for us<sup>13</sup>), as an intrinsic element in the community of faith itself. As the greatest of Christians, her faith and love still flow into the work of her Son in human history.

A second aspect of the relationship between Mary and sacraments has to do with the tribute both pay to the dignity and reality of the created material universe. This point bears on one of the most important emphases to be found at the present time in the Church's faith-life and theological development. No documentation is needed to point to the fact that over many centuries there existed in Christian thought, particularly in popular Christian devotion, a tendency toward derogation of the material and the bodily, a certain tendency toward "angelism." This heritage, rooted not in revelation as such, but rather in some of the influences of Greek philosophy, has long been a drawback to the integrity of the Christian vision of faith and the implementation of Christian realism.

It is obvious how a genuine understanding of the sacraments demands a full and positive appreciation of the dignity of created reality. It is always a scandal for any excessively spiritualistic approach to Christian thought to find that the humblest of created elements—water, bread, oil—are utilized in effecting

<sup>13</sup> *Const. on Church*, nos. 63-65 (pp. 66-67)

the sublimest of human perfections in the mystery of grace. To accept sacraments in their full effectiveness demands one's full acceptance of the fact that somehow material reality has the capacity to enter into the speaking of God's own created word. Needless to say, this is an element in sacramental theology which we have scarcely begun to develop, one which gives great promise of clarifying for us the actual process of redemption, one which reaches beyond man to embrace the totality of creation which the book of Genesis has already described as being "good."<sup>14</sup>

Mary's role in the dispensation of Christian redemption is part of this same mystery, a respect for the material and the bodily. Nothing could point more radically to the divine respect for the creation which has been issued from God's creative Word, than the fact that that Word, in becoming incarnate, takes human existing from the ordinary bodily processes of generation, gestation and birth. Mary's maternity represents an insuperable obstacle to any Gnostic tendencies within Christian thought, and guarantees, in profoundly psychological fashion, the integral understanding of the Incarnation.

Together, Sacraments and Mary, as the object of contemporary theological investigation, lead us to a deepening discovery of the true humanity of Jesus of Nazareth. We have never denied that reality in principle, but over the years in the historical dialectic of dogmatic development there has been a tendency to give less than its proper due to the human element in the Incarnation.<sup>15</sup> One of the most exciting aspects of contemporary theology is the awakened interest in the continuing reality of the risen Christ, who in resurrection is not less human, but human in total fulfillment.

Both sacraments in their eschological dimension and Mary in

<sup>14</sup> *Gen.* 1:31.

<sup>15</sup> This deficiency has been tied to complex historical processes which time does not permit us to delineate: the reaction against Arianism, the influence of Platonism, the allegorizing tendency in scriptural interpretation, the decline of liturgy.



the mystery of her Assumption point to the extension of the mystery of Christ—to the fact that, not only is Christ in risen state brought to full human realization, but those who are redeemed by Him are meant to share in the same full realization of man's spirit and body. Thus there results from the conjoined theological interest in Mariology and sacramental theology a heightened respect for creation and an honest acceptance of the role that this creation is meant to play in the fulfillment of man as an incarnated spirit. Were the full reality of Mary's divine maturity to be obscured, there would almost certainly be repercussions in sacramental theology. History teaches us how the integral understanding of the Incarnation is linked to an accurate grasp of Mary's role. And Sacraments deal with an extension of the principle of incarnation: the expression in human created form of the continuing mystery of the risen Christ.

This leads us, then, to our third area of consideration, the link of both Mary and sacrament to the root mystery of the Incarnation. At the basis of all genuine understanding of a sacrament lies the fact that the creator Word, in becoming flesh, manifested Himself, not only didactically, but effectively. Thus, sacramental activity in one manner or other seems to follow inevitably from the basic reality of sacrament.

In the mystery of the Incarnation a divine Person so effectively sought identification with us human beings that He actually became one of us. But Incarnation means more than the single instant in which the Word became flesh. It includes the whole process by which the enfleshed Word finds ever deepening and broadening expression, as the man Jesus, in a totally integral human experience, lives the years of His historical existence, and then continues to affect human history through the mediation of His body, which is the Church.

<sup>16</sup> This link is traced by both Rahner and Schillebeeckx in the books cited above.

Sacraments are not simply the "making present" of the Word-made-flesh; they are in a very profound sense the continuation in the lives of Christians of the life-experience of Christ Himself. There is no opportunity to examine extensively the point in this paper,<sup>17</sup> but suffice it to say that, in living through the years of His earthly sojourn, the Incarnate Word transformed in its significance and in its finality the basic context of human experience from generation through death into new life. Moreover, it is the function of Christian sacraments to repeat in the life of a Christian, each time in unique expression, this same life-experience. Thus, all understanding of and mature participation in sacraments is conditioned by Christian understanding of that life-experience which is Christ's own.

In the early Church the privileged witnesses who explained Christianity to the ancient Church were the Apostles. As we examine the claim which they make to exercise this their proper function, we realize that they could give instruction about the underlying significance of sacramental life precisely because they were the ones who, during the public life and Holy Week, had experienced this same mystery in its non-ritual form.<sup>18</sup> It was because they had been with Christ (not in sacrament, but in their own ordinary life experience) through His baptism and the mysteries of His public life, and above all, in the culminating mysteries of Passover and Pentecost, that they could witness to the significance of these mysteries as continued in Christian sacrament. Because this witness was so precious and unique, the early Church, under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, gathered in written form that apostolic catechesis which as the New Testament literature still guides our understanding of sacramental action.

But if this was true of the Apostles, it was in even more pro-

<sup>17</sup> For a fuller treatment, see my article *The Sacrament as the Continuing Acts of Christ*, pp. 31-52 in C. Sullivan, *Reading in Sacramental Theology* (New York, 1964).

<sup>18</sup> Cf. *Acts* 1:21-22

found and unique manner true of the Blessed Virgin. She as no one else experienced not only the three years of public manifestation, but the entire life span of the Word become man. She alone could experience in its full mystery the fact of the second Person of the Blessed Trinity finding identification with mankind in the mystery of the Incarnation. Only she, in the intimacy of constant daily life with her Son, could testify to the involvement of a divine Person in the processes of human experience. Only she could appreciate how profoundly the human consciousness of Christ was shaped by that same process of experience which molds for all of us our perception of reality and sets the context for our self-identification.

Thus the role of Mary in the sacramental catechesis of the early Church must have been quite marked, and there is more than one indication in New Testament literature itself of her influence in this regard.<sup>19</sup> Mary's introduction into an experience of the Christ-mystery was not sacramental any more than was the initiation of the Apostles. To this extent, her Christianity found a somewhat different form than our own, which is initiated and molded by sacrament. On the other hand, since sacraments are intrinsically a re-living in symbolic form of the initial Christian faith-experience, they necessarily form a continuum with the experience of Mary and the Apostles and are guided and molded by that experience.

Thus again, Mary forms an exemplar for the Church, not just in the sense that she possesses all grace, but also because of her own experience of the Christ-mystery. Here again it would seem that we have before us a theological task of investigating the development of Mary's own faith-life and her growing experience of Christ, for this will guide us in understanding what our own sacramental development should be.

In conclusion, then, we can see that genuine attachment to the mystery of Mary is in no way in opposition to a growing

<sup>19</sup> This is particularly evident in the infancy narrative of Luke's Gospel, which is so notably liturgical in tone.

depth of sacramental life. On the contrary, the more profound and accurate our understanding of Mary, the more we will understand the attitudes and values which we are meant to express in the faith-commitment which is the very heart of our sacramental participation.

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