

## Sacraments

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Aquinas had to choose where to place the sacraments in the pedagogical order of the *Summa*. By placing his questions on the sacraments in the third part of the *Summa*, he not only fulfilled his poetic and educational programme, he also made an important theological decision.<sup>1</sup> He assumed a more christological, than anthropological, view of sacraments. This is in accordance with his overall project of sacred doctrine, which treats of 'things', 'signs', 'the works of salvation,' only 'insofar as they have reference to God.'<sup>2</sup> More precisely, coming right after his study of the metaphysics and life of Christ, sacraments are placed in both a christological and an ontological light. Without any break of continuity, the reader moves from the mysteries of Christ to the sacraments of the Church 'which derive their efficacy from the Word incarnate himself.'<sup>3</sup>

Aquinas divides the matter in two: first the main features shared by all sacraments, then each separately. Questions 60–64 deal with several general issues raised by all the sacraments: what they are (q60); why they were instituted and are necessary (q61); what their effects are (qq62–63); how they come into being: who their author is and who may minister them (q64); finally, Aquinas ponders ways of conceiving the organization of the seven rituals (q65). Thereafter, questions 66–90 examine every sacrament in particular. This essay will focus on questions 60–65, and use the questions on baptism (qq66–71), confirmation (qq72), eucharist (qq73–83), and penance (qq84–90) to illustrate several points.

Aquinas' followers have sometimes reduced his theological analyses to rules aimed at defining the valid rituals, thus turning what were heuristic proposals into metaphysical statements, playing down their functioning as signs and overplaying the account of sacraments as causes. Thus, it might be helpful to synthesize Aquinas' main insights

<sup>1</sup> Many thanks to Gregory Tatum OP and Avital Wohlman for kind assistance.

<sup>2</sup> I.1.7corp.

<sup>3</sup> III.60prol.

on sacraments in the *Summa* in three parts following the main three sources of light shed on them by their place in the structure of the *Summa*. Sacraments are (1) actions of *God* which flow (2) *from Christ* himself, for the benefit of (3) *human beings*, whom they empower to express their worship of God.

#### ACTS OF GOD FOR THE SANCTIFICATION OF HUMAN BEINGS

Even when he emphasizes the human need for sacraments, Aquinas cannot help adding a parenthesis admiring the wisdom of a benevolent God who devised sacraments as his main ploy to lead his bodily-spiritual creatures back to him: 'it is characteristic of divine providence that it provides for each being in a manner corresponding to its own particular way of functioning. Hence it is appropriate that in bestowing certain aids to salvation upon man the divine wisdom should make use of certain physical and sensible signs.'<sup>4</sup>

As we shall see, the category of sign, though necessary (since sacraments are for rational, interpreting animals), falls short of encapsulating what faith holds about the divine action in sacraments: it must be complemented with the category of cause, equally necessary and non-sufficient (since it could suggest automatic effects ignoring man's dispositions).

#### Sacraments as signs

The classification of sacraments as signs is a methodological choice made by Aquinas among other possibilities: causes, secrets or mysteries, oaths are other possible categories.<sup>5</sup> 'Sign' is a convenient analogical way to think about the seven sacraments. According to the Augustinian definition often quoted by Aquinas, 'a sign is that which, over and above the form which it impresses upon the senses, makes something else enter into our cognition.'<sup>6</sup> Classifying sacraments as signs enables one to think of two in one – the same with its other, the created and the Uncreated, humanity and God – without mixing categories, without diminishing the transcendence of God in any way whatsoever.

Moreover, talking of sacraments as signs allows Thomas to think of sacraments as a divine language. Minimally, sacraments imply the use

<sup>4</sup> III.61.1corp.

<sup>5</sup> Cf. III.60.1.1–3 and corp.

<sup>6</sup> Augustine, *De Doctrina Christiana* XI.1 quoted, for example, in III.60.4corp.

of language. Words are required in the celebration of sacraments.<sup>7</sup> But sacraments may also be compared with words ontologically. Aquinas likes to quote Augustine: 'The word is conjoined to the material element, and the sacrament is constituted.'<sup>8</sup> 'What else are all these physical sacraments, except, so to say, so many visual words?' Aquinas wonders: 'The sensible elements of the sacraments are called words by way of a certain likeness, in so far as they partake of a certain power of signification, which resides principally in the very words' used in their celebration.<sup>9</sup>

Sacraments may also be compared to language in their functioning, analogous to a grammar: they are adapted to each stage of salvation history just as a verb is declined in tenses according to the time to be expressed.<sup>10</sup> Even deeper, the spiritual power of instrumental power is in the concrete sacrament as the meaning is in the pronounced word.<sup>11</sup>

Now, the end of the sacraments is to sanctify, that is to give grace, or divine life,<sup>12</sup> or the Holy Spirit – and only God can do this.<sup>13</sup> 'God alone enters into the soul in which the sacramental effect takes place; and no agent can operate immediately where it is not: [...] grace, which is the interior effect of the sacrament, is from God alone.'<sup>14</sup> For this reason, only God can determine how His life may be communicated, and decide what things may be used for the sanctification of humans.<sup>15</sup> The stress laid on the divine institution of the sacraments derives from an acute sense of the transcendence of God.

Thomas applies the same dynamic to the sacraments which he applies to scripture: only God knows God, and graciously pours His knowledge and grace on those he wishes. The fixity of sacraments is comparable to that of Scripture: they are signs chosen by God just as the words and symbols in Scripture are chosen by the Holy Spirit.<sup>16</sup> Therefore, whenever possible, Aquinas analyzes the sacramental words by means of the words pronounced by Christ in the Scriptures.<sup>17</sup> Moreover, the

<sup>7</sup> III.60.6*ad*1.

<sup>8</sup> Augustine, *Tract. in Joan.*, xxx, quoted in III.60.4*sed contra*; III.60.6*sed contra*; III.78.5*corp*; and *passim*.

<sup>9</sup> III.60.6, 1 and *ad*1.

<sup>10</sup> Cf. III.60.5*ad*3; III.61.4*corp*; III.68.1*ad*1.

<sup>11</sup> III.62.4*ad*1.

<sup>12</sup> I-II.110.3 and 4.

<sup>13</sup> III.64.2*corp*; III.62.1*corp*.

<sup>14</sup> III.64.1*corp*. Cf. I-II.112.1.

<sup>15</sup> III.60.5*corp*.

<sup>16</sup> III.60.5, 1 and *ad*1; III.60.8, 1 and *ad*1.

<sup>17</sup> Cf. III.84.3*corp*, *ad*1, *ad*3, where Thomas uses Matt. 18:18f to defend the indicative, rather than begging, formula of absolution.

sacramental signs consist in sensible things just as in scripture spiritual things are set before us under the guise of things sensible.<sup>18</sup> The theology of sacraments turns out to rest on the same symbolic vision of reality as the theory of the senses of the Holy Scripture devised by Aquinas.<sup>19</sup> Any created thing can become a visible sign of the invisible, sanctifying reality. Both doctrines rest on the analogy of being.

But ultimately the category of sign is insufficiently precise to think through Christian sacraments, for two reasons. The first one is cosmological: Aquinas' world is a semiotic one – a medieval universe in which every creature is a sign of the creator God. In a universe made up of signs of the sacred, the study of the seven sacraments requires further precision.<sup>20</sup>

The second is historical-theological: in the *Summa*, Aquinas situates the seven sacraments in the broad economy of salvation. Throughout history God's salvation has been communicated in signs, and so Aquinas talks of the Jewish sacred signs as sacraments. In talking of Christian sacraments he needs more precision and thus talks of them as real, efficient causes of grace. Causality adds precision to signification.

### **Sacraments as efficient causes**

The efficacy of sacraments is not a matter of proof or demonstration but of the faith of the Church: 'we have it on the authority of many saints that the sacraments of the New Law not merely signify, but actually cause grace.'<sup>21</sup> Indeed, sacraments are traditionally believed to commemorate and communicate the virtue of Christ's Passion, and their use of exterior and material things does convey the notion of some efficacy. Aquinas does not oppose sign to cause, but balances an Augustinian view of sacraments as signs, and an Aristotelian conception of sacraments as causes, to assert that the sacraments of the New Law effect what they signify.<sup>22</sup>

For Aquinas sacraments are made up of words and ritual elements: words help to make the signification of rites more precise, but the rites are not reducible to the signification of the words. The two interact: the ritual elements, polysemic by nature, prevent the theologian from reducing sacramental signs to univocal signals.

<sup>18</sup> III.60.4corp.

<sup>19</sup> I.1.10corp and ad1.

<sup>20</sup> Cf. III.60.2.

<sup>21</sup> III.62.1corp.

<sup>22</sup> III.62.1ad1.

This is underlined by looking at the relations between the two pairs: words/elements and form/matter. The need to pin down the meaning of an overly polysemic sacramental sign with words is only the third argument (by fittingness) for using words in sacraments mentioned by Aquinas.<sup>23</sup> The pair form/matter appears only in passing, as an analogy.<sup>24</sup> The elements and the words form a united whole, that may be compared to that of matter and form. Aquinas does not suggest that elements and actions used in the sacraments would be mere passive matter which words would *a posteriori* inform as an active power. Both convey the meaning of the sacraments. The elements are integral parts of a sacrament inasmuch as it is a mystery (*mysterion*). Sometimes words themselves may even function as (part of) the matter of the sacrament. For example, in the sacrament of penance, the sins confessed are the 'remote matter,' the confession of sins is the 'proximate matter.'<sup>25</sup>

The reversal of form and matter prevents the theologian from reducing the sacrament to clear ideas derived from the sacramental words alone. Just as forms are not merely superimposed on matter, but result from its potentialities without exhausting them, so words are only the summit of a pyramid of signs built up by the meanings of all elements and actions comprised in the sacrament.

So much for any reduction of sacrament to sign: these are discrete notions. A mere sign can be a cause only by cognitively and morally influencing its recipient. At most, it would be a formal or final cause: no efficient causality is implied. The functioning of the sacrament as sign and the functioning of the sacrament as cause are not identifiable.

Aquinas links the efficacy of sacraments to the reality which they signify, rather than a particular understanding of signification. Sacraments are signs, but signs of God which cause remission of sins, granting grace, and bestowing holiness. As signs, sacraments perform a pedagogical role similar to any human teaching. Only God can 'touch' the spirit directly from inside: embodied creatures can only influence others from outside to produce the right concepts, by using material signs addressed to the senses, imagination and desire.<sup>26</sup> Thomas notices a possible delay between the performance of the rite and the actual welcoming of the gift of grace.<sup>27</sup> How is the sacrament as signification linked to the sacrament as efficient cause? These two aspects cannot be merely juxtaposed. For

<sup>23</sup> III.60.6corp.

<sup>24</sup> III.60.6ad2.

<sup>25</sup> III.84.2corp; III.84.3corp. Cf. also III.86.6corp.

<sup>26</sup> III.69.5ad2.

<sup>27</sup> Cf. III.69.4ad 2; III.69.10sed contra.

Aquinas this is not just concomitance. Sacraments are not only opportunities for God to grant grace, but they *cause* grace.

Good Aristotelian that he is, Aquinas locates the key to sacramental causality in the concept of instrumentality. For Aquinas, God is primary cause, but one which creates many secondary causes. The distinction between first, uncreated cause, and secondary causes proves crucial for understanding how the accidents of bread and wine remain after their Eucharistic transubstantiation.<sup>28</sup>

Among secondary causes, instrumental causes do not act by the power of their own forms, but their proper effect is taken over by the power of whatever main cause is making use of them, in order to produce an effect proportionate to its form. And for Aquinas sacraments take on this structure: instrumental mediations of God's power.<sup>29</sup> An instrument is an intermediary between cause and effect.<sup>30</sup> Whereas a main cause does not itself signify (rather it is signified by its effects, like fire by smoke), an instrumental cause may signify the main cause using it and the proper effect of that main cause, as any effect may do, without ceasing to be an actual cause causing its proper effects. For example, the pouring of water or the immersion of the baptism, while causing its proper effect of cleansing, signifies God's purifying action on the soul, and points to filial adoption as the proper effect of this purification from sin.

Were sacraments mere signs, one could think that they are conceptually graspable, understandable in every respect. Were they mere causes, one could assume that they are technically controllable, as if a human creature could produce grace. By defining them as both signs *and* causes without reducing one to the other,<sup>31</sup> Aquinas preserves the mysteries or sacraments from any epistemological or metaphysical reduction. As instrumental causes, sacraments appear as signs of a hidden, transcendent cause, sharing in the production of hidden effects.<sup>32</sup> The divine efficacy of the sacraments does not fit any ready-made category. Instrumental causality enables the theologian to firmly maintain God's transcendence while describing God's action in the sacraments: *both* the transcendence of the uncreated primary cause vis-à-vis its effects in creatures, *and* the immanence of its action in the creature God sanctifies, are maintained.

<sup>28</sup> Cf. III.77.1corp *in fine*.

<sup>29</sup> III.62.1corp; III.62.4corp.

<sup>30</sup> III.62.1corp.

<sup>31</sup> Cf. III.61.1ad1: The use of the sacrament 'is spiritual in virtue of the power inherent in the sacraments to convey meaning *and* produce effects.'

<sup>32</sup> III.62.1, 1 and ad1.

### Sacramental characters

Baptism, Confirmation, and Holy Orders are believed to mark Christians once for all with spiritual, indelible seals or 'characters', deputing Christians 'to spiritual service pertaining to the worship of God.'<sup>33</sup> The existence of sacramental 'characters' is a traditional *datum* rooted in Scripture and in the ancient patristic metaphor of Christian life as military service and Christians as soldiers marked out for it.<sup>34</sup> The original literary and intra-ecclesial polemical circumstances surrounding the idea of sacramental characters led Reformers and anti-metaphysical theologians to suspect it to be mere speculation on a dispensable metaphysical chimera. Indeed, it is not very intuitive; but as we shall see, it comes as a necessary consequence of traditional beliefs in divine involvement in Christian sacraments,<sup>35</sup> if one grants metaphysical analysis of the human being.

The existence of the sacramental character is hardly obvious. It is uncovered through its causes and its effects. The definition of 'character' as a 'spiritual sign'<sup>36</sup> is a logical deduction from the fact that it is known as the effect of a sensible rite.<sup>37</sup> Being sensible is the main feature of the sign;<sup>38</sup> but a spiritual sign is counter-intuitive: is it more than an analogy? The classification of character as a kind of power (neither a passion nor a habit) is also the result of a logical reduction based upon an *a priori* definition by Aristotle,<sup>39</sup> not upon any experienced evidence.<sup>40</sup> Its 'localisation' in the powers (not the essence) of the soul,<sup>41</sup> namely the practical intellect,<sup>42</sup> is also a logical-metaphysical deduction.<sup>43</sup> In brief, the 'character does not belong to any given genus or species'; as divine,<sup>44</sup> it is an essentially analogical reality, in between rite and grace, like all other elements of the sacramental reality.

Sacraments' divine causality complicates any account of their structure as mere signs. They involve a level beyond any natural signification, granted by God's mercy, resulting in a threefold structure which does

<sup>33</sup> Ibid.

<sup>34</sup> III.63.1corp.

<sup>35</sup> III.62.2corp.

<sup>36</sup> Cf. III.60.4ad1.

<sup>37</sup> III.63.1ad2.

<sup>38</sup> III.60.4ad1.

<sup>39</sup> Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, II.5.

<sup>40</sup> III.63.2sed contra.

<sup>41</sup> III.63.4corp.

<sup>42</sup> III.63.4ad3.

<sup>43</sup> III.63.4corp.

<sup>44</sup> III.63.2corp. Cf. III.63.a3corp.

not coincide with the signifier/signified/referent pattern of linguistics. Patristic theologians distinguished: the sacramental ritual (*sacramentum tantum*); the grace given by God to those receiving the sacrament (*res tantum*), and, in between, the 'character' or marking of those receiving the sacrament (*res et sacramentum*). This character is both indelible and extrinsic – 'a certain kind of spiritual power introduced into [the soul] from without,'<sup>45</sup> superadded and activated by God.<sup>46</sup>

There are metaphysical reasons for sacramental character. Sacramental graces are supernatural gifts, which nothing natural can receive or transmit by itself. Reading Denys' teaching on the communication of divine life<sup>47</sup> in the light of Aristotelian metaphysical principles,<sup>48</sup> Thomas associates the need for a sacramental character as a potency, to the need for creatures to be able to become the subject (or the object) of acts of a kind superior to those of one's own nature. Only sacramental character provides the metaphysical possibility of an interaction without confusion of God and mankind, faith and reason, and grace and nature.

The main arguments are soteriological. God wants to save as many human beings as possible through sacraments communicating grace; sacraments must be conduits of God's will even if the humans who celebrate them are sinners. Aquinas illuminates this point with his theory of instrumentality. The 'minister has the same significance as an instrument, in the sense that the action of both is applied from without, yet achieves the interior effect from the power of the principal agent which is God.'<sup>49</sup> By being marked as an instrument of God's grace 'the ministers of the Church can confer the sacraments' – very good things indeed – 'even when they [themselves] are evil.'<sup>50</sup> The theory of sacramental character helps us understand how grace is infallibly offered by God though not infallibly received in the celebration of sacraments.

#### SACRAMENTS OF CHRIST

Aquinas' deployment of instrumental causality does not only result from metaphysical analysis of sacraments. Thomas was put on this track by the Greek Fathers, from whom he borrowed the idea of the human

<sup>45</sup> III.63.4*ad*2.

<sup>46</sup> III.63.5*ad*2.

<sup>47</sup> III.63.2*corp*.

<sup>48</sup> III.63.2*corp*.

<sup>49</sup> III.64.1*corp*.

<sup>50</sup> III.64.5*corp*.



nature being the instrument (*organon*) of the divine person in Christ.<sup>51</sup> Only God can achieve humanity's salvation, but this work was accomplished by His son through his human actions. Christ is the sanctifying holiness at work in and through the signs making up sacraments: it is he who makes of the sacraments – which are already (cognitive) signs – (efficient) causes. Thus, Christ is the source and model of sacramental instrumentality. He is the 'united instrument' and sacraments are the 'separated instruments' of God's causality.<sup>52</sup>

As early as in the prologue of the *Tertia Pars*, Aquinas presents the sacraments as benefits bestowed by Christ on the human race and means by which the latter attains the salvation that Christ achieved. The participation of sacraments in Christ's being and action is worked out throughout the questions on sacraments.

### **Sacraments, like Christ, derive from the mercy of God**

'God did not cause his power to be restricted to the sacraments in such a way that he could not bestow the effect of the sacrament without the sacraments themselves',<sup>53</sup> so sacraments are needed just insofar as Christ is needed. Sensible signs of sanctification are needed for the same reason that the appearance of Christ is needed: a God-man to reorient embodied spirits, oriented towards material and sensible beings, quick to make idols and adore false divinities.<sup>54</sup> The Incarnation is an expression of the divine goodness communicating itself to humanity;<sup>55</sup> but considered from the side of fallen humanity, it appears first and foremost as a reparation ordained to glory, as the most fitting way of healing our misery.<sup>56</sup> Hence in the *Summa*, Thomas underlines the twofold nature of the sacraments, as both *elevans*, elevating humanity to the fullness of spiritual life, and *sanans*, healing sin and its consequences.

Aquinas fittingly attributes these to the two aspects of the Paschal mystery: Christ's Passion effected salvation, properly speaking, by removing evils; but the Resurrection did so as the beginning and exemplar of all good things.<sup>57</sup> Like other ancient authors, dealing with 'the Passion' Aquinas intends what we now call 'the paschal mystery' as

<sup>51</sup> See III.7.2ad3; III.8.1ad1 and the quotation of John Damascene, *De Fide Orthodoxa*, III.15, in III.2.6, 4 and ad4; III.7.1, 3.

<sup>52</sup> III.62.5corp.

<sup>53</sup> III.64.7corp.

<sup>54</sup> III.61.3–4.

<sup>55</sup> III.1.1ad2.

<sup>56</sup> III.1.2sed contra.

<sup>57</sup> III.53.1ad3; cf. also III.56.2ad4.

a whole. Both the Passion and the Resurrection together cause our justification.<sup>58</sup>

### **Sacraments share in the ontology of Christ**

The ontology of sacraments is that of signs-instruments dispensing the causality of the first cause. They are isomorphic to Christ: the word is joined to the sensible sign, just as in the mystery of Incarnation the Word of God is united to sensible flesh.<sup>59</sup>

Moreover, as images and symbols of the reality of Christ's redemptive acts, sacraments participate in the realities they represent. This theme is particularly developed for the Eucharist.<sup>60</sup> Participation through representation (following common neoplatonist construals of the relation of images to their exemplar or archetype) is supernaturally accomplished by sacraments' institution by Christ himself, which is necessary for theological reasons, as mentioned earlier. Thomas does not define precisely what institution is.<sup>61</sup> But basically, he envisages the bestowing by Christ of a certain meaning and power to certain rituals, either by displaying it in his own actions during his life on earth (Eucharist), or by promising it for a later date (after his resurrection: Confirmation).<sup>62</sup>

His metaphysical understanding of sacraments enables Aquinas to endorse the literal meaning of the Scriptures dealing with sacraments.<sup>63</sup> It explains why they empower their receivers to share in Christ's mysteries: they are not mere 'technical tools' devised by God to spread the redeeming merits of the Passion to mankind; they are actual means to incorporate human beings into the body of Christ. The sacramental rituals insert believers into the historical saving action of Christ and unite them to Him severally: as the efficient causes of holiness (through His passion), as formal causes (He is *the* Icon of the Godhead), and as final causes (all returns to God through Him).<sup>64</sup>

### **Sacraments draw their efficacy from the power of Christ**

Thomas links the efficacy of sacraments to the Incarnate Word from the very first question of his treatment of sacraments.<sup>65</sup> In patristic and poetic key, he uses the liquid metaphor of *effluence* – an image traditionally

<sup>58</sup> III.62.5*ad*3.

<sup>59</sup> III.60.6*corp*.

<sup>60</sup> Cf. III.73.4*ad*3; III.79.1*corp*; III.73.7*corp*; III.83.1*corp* and *ad*2.

<sup>61</sup> III.64.2.

<sup>62</sup> III.72.1*corp*.

<sup>63</sup> For example Gal 3:27 quoted in III.62.1*corp*; Rom. 6:3 quoted in III.61.1*ad*3.

<sup>64</sup> III.60.3*corp*.

<sup>65</sup> III.60*prol*.

used to speak about grace – to do this.<sup>66</sup> He also uses this imagery of the presence of a spiritual force within matter during baptism. Thomas says that water, refined by Christ's physical contact and blessing,<sup>67</sup> is able to reach even the most remote and subtle corners of soul.<sup>68</sup> The metaphorical continuity between material and spiritual strikingly suggested here by the liquid nature of water underlines the fact that only Christ can mediate between material and spiritual, natural and supernatural. The source of the effluence metaphor may be found in the piercing of Jesus' heart on the Cross, whence come blood (symbol of the Eucharist) and water (symbol of Baptism).<sup>69</sup>

The historical coming of the Word in flesh was necessary to transform the sacraments into causes. Before Christ, the sacred signs displayed in Judaism, rightly named sacraments,<sup>70</sup> were representative of the salvation to come, and acted in believers' lives through moral anticipation.<sup>71</sup> Christ's Passion had a certain final causality on them, but only through the spiritual acts of the faithful, expecting a Savior to come.<sup>72</sup> But an efficient cause cannot produce its effects in advance as a final cause can: Christ's Passion could only become an efficient cause in the signs commemorating it once it had happened. After the actual saving actions of Christ, sacraments representing them become efficacious providers of the redemption he achieved.

Sacraments participate in Christ's historical humanity. Grace is not a thing like a tangible gift: rather it is a share in the life of Christ, a participation in His death and resurrection. Christ did not deliver mankind from sin automatically, just by virtue of being God Incarnate, but voluntarily and intentionally, by choosing to atone for sins, by handing himself over to death.<sup>73</sup> Thus sacraments must be studied in connection with the mysteries lived by Jesus, the *acta et passa Christi* which Aquinas examines in the immediately preceding questions 27 to 59. Christ exerts his same unique priestly mediation in words and deeds before his glorification as in sacraments afterwards.

Indeed, the whole Christ is at work in the sacraments: past (memorial of the Passion), present (bestowing of sanctifying grace), future

<sup>66</sup> III.60.6ad3. Cf. already I-II.103.2corp.

<sup>67</sup> III.62.4ad3.

<sup>68</sup> III.62.4ad3.

<sup>69</sup> III.62.5corp.

<sup>70</sup> III.60.2ad2.

<sup>71</sup> I-II.107.2corp.

<sup>72</sup> III.60.6corp.

<sup>73</sup> III.62.5corp. citing Eph 5:2; cf. III.19.4corp.

(foretelling of future glory).<sup>74</sup> Aquinas insists that Christ's causality in sacraments is not just efficient (our sanctification through the voluntary offering in his Passion), but also formal (Christ himself is the plenitude of grace and virtues, the very form of our holiness) and final (the return of all things to God culminates in Him).

Christ's causality in the sacraments is both divine and human.<sup>75</sup> As man, He acts as the perfect instrument mediating the plenitude of grace which he suffuses in the sacraments as God. Interestingly enough, Aquinas teaches that Jesus could have shared this causality with other human beings (for example his apostles, who would then have had the power to devise new sacraments), but only to state that in fact He did not. The power and the authority of the Church over the sacraments is thus limited. Aquinas puts it in a way the Reformers could have agreed with: 'The Apostles and their successors are the vicars of God. [...] Hence just as it is not lawful for them to constitute any other Church so too it is not lawful to them either to hand down any other faith or to institute any other sacrament.'<sup>76</sup>

### **Sacraments imprint the character of Christ**

As stated above, to confect and to receive sacraments, which are acts of God, humans need to be endowed with a special power, a character. Aquinas links sacramental characters with Christ first by means of Hebrews 1:3 which depicts Christ as 'the character of the Father's substance.'<sup>77</sup> He then explains that the sacramental characters are nothing but participations in Christ's priesthood, flowing from Christ Himself.<sup>78</sup> In the Eucharist, the minister marked by Christ's priestly character through ordination, is empowered to act in union with Him: *in persona Christi*, in the person of Christ.<sup>79</sup>

Christ uses sacramental characters to exert continually His priesthood by sacramentalising the worship of the believers in the Church. His power over them as *instruments* explains the paradox that they are both transitory (as any instrumental entity) and indelible (by virtue of its primary cause).<sup>80</sup>

<sup>74</sup> III.60.3corp.

<sup>75</sup> Cf. III.64.3 and 4

<sup>76</sup> III.64.2ad3.

<sup>77</sup> III.63.3sed contra.

<sup>78</sup> III.63.3corp.

<sup>79</sup> III.82.1corp.

<sup>80</sup> III.63.5ad1 and ad2.

Nevertheless, sacraments are also related to the full Trinity: by continuing the worship initiated by the incarnate Son, believers receive His character and make use of it, while they are granted grace by the Father, grace which is the gift of Holy Spirit.<sup>81</sup> Sensible sacraments (and sacramental characters) are more connected to Christ, the embodied Word, while their ultimate, eschatological effect is more closely attributed to the Holy Spirit.<sup>82</sup>

### **The order of the sacraments depends on their proximity to Christ**

Although Thomas knows other ways of ordering sacraments (according to their necessity<sup>83</sup> or fittingness<sup>84</sup> for salvation), he prioritizes the criterion of 'greatness', which he understands following Denys the Areopagite as a degree in the ontological hierarchy.<sup>85</sup> The Eucharist is 'the greatest' insofar as Christ himself is present, and not just an action of Christ as in other sacraments. Whereas baptismal water or the oil of confirmation are transitory instruments of grace by participation, the Eucharistic bread and wine are miraculously deprived of their own substance, to become the signs of Christ's substantial presence. Thus the Eucharist is not one act of worship among others, but the fullness of adoration: Christ himself in the act of offering himself. The receiver of the Eucharist enters not only a *functional* relation to Christ like in the other sacraments, but an *essential* one. Christ is present substantially, as the very sacramental reality of the Eucharist.<sup>86</sup>

### **SACRAMENTS OF MANKIND: EMPOWERING AND EXPRESSING HUMAN WORSHIP OF GOD**

God has no need of sacraments to save humanity: He could have saved humanity in many other ways than Incarnation.<sup>87</sup> But 'there was no more fitting way of healing our misery.'<sup>88</sup> Indeed, sacraments convey God's salvation to the human persons at all levels: ontologically (they fit as straddling the spiritual and material), biologically (they structure

<sup>81</sup> Cf. III.63.3, 1 and *ad*1 and III.8.1, 3 and *ad*3.

<sup>82</sup> Cf. III.63.3, 1 and *ad*1; 2Cor 1: 21 cited in III.63.1*sed contra*.

<sup>83</sup> III.65.3*corp*.

<sup>84</sup> III.65.4.

<sup>85</sup> III.65.3*corp* citing Dionysius, *De Eccl. Hier.* 3.

<sup>86</sup> III.73.1*ad*3.

<sup>87</sup> III.1.2.

<sup>88</sup> Augustine, *De Trinitate* XII.10, quoted in III.1.2*corp*.

human life from birth to death), and theologically (they are adapted to sinners called to grace and glory).

One of the most frequent images of human life Aquinas uses in the *Summa* is that of a journey from God to God. At the end of the exit-return structure of the whole work, he deals with the sacraments graciously given to mankind by its Redeemer. Since he has already treated them as ritual actions,<sup>89</sup> Aquinas here construes them as the divine means for perfecting the human life which he described in the anthropological questions of the *Prima Pars*; which he analyzed in the ethical, spiritual, and social teachings of the *Secunda Pars*; and which he depicted as redeemed by Jesus Christ in the *Tertia Pars*.

### **Sacraments as fitting the human condition**

The first argument Thomas gives for the fittingness of sacraments for human salvation is ontological: they embrace both the material and immaterial sides of human life.<sup>90</sup> As signs, they are intended for humans.<sup>91</sup> The duality constituting signs mirrors the dualities of humanity (soul/body, interior/exterior, intellect/sense). Their hylomorphic structure mirrors that of human beings. For the Aristotelian Thomas, the senses provide the first, indispensable, step to human knowing, and for the Platonist Thomas, images received through the body mirror the spiritual reality accessed sacramentally. Rather than inviting a crude transactional view of sacramental grace, the form-matter language used by Aquinas provides a firm theoretical basis for any ritual, poetic, and artistic development of sacraments.

Sacraments convey salvation in all its dimensions, not only moral, but also epistemological. 'Signs are given to men, to whom it is proper to discover the unknown by means of the known.'<sup>92</sup> They fit the human need to attain intelligible or spiritual realities only through the mediation of sensible or material things.<sup>93</sup> The sacramental remedy is structured for its human recipient, 'for the visible materials in it touch the body, while the word in it is accepted in faith by the soul.'<sup>94</sup> Sacraments teach as signs, enabling humans to grow in knowledge of God. Aquinas certainly does not reduce their causality to efficient causality: sacraments empower the soul to reach God as its perfect *form*

<sup>89</sup> Cf. II-II.81.

<sup>90</sup> III.61.1corp.

<sup>91</sup> III.60.2corp.

<sup>92</sup> III.60.2corp.

<sup>93</sup> III.60.4corp.

<sup>94</sup> III.60.6corp.

or *end*.<sup>95</sup> Aquinas underlines the symbolic richness of the sacramental rites, whose pedagogical and mystagogical value he expounds.<sup>96</sup> Neither the post-Tridentine reduction of analogy to canonical regulation, nor the post-Vatican II impoverishment of symbols and ritual fit Aquinas' vision of sacraments.

In particular, sacraments are fitted to human biological condition. The structure of the seven sacraments is tailored to the ages and states of life. He conceives the fittingness of the seven sacraments in relation to human life in all its natural dimensions, both individual (birth: Baptism; growth: Confirmation, Penance, Eucharist; death: Anointing of the Sick) and social (marriage: Matrimony; priesthood: Ordination).

In typically medieval manner, Aquinas stresses the communal dimension of human life. For example, the sacraments of holy orders and matrimony achieve the perfection of man in relation to the community as a spiritual and physical whole.<sup>97</sup> More generally, by marking with a sign those who receive them, those sacraments conferring a character build up a community of persons bearing the mark of their designation for worship of God,<sup>98</sup> sometimes as agents (holy orders), sometimes as recipients (baptism). Although the mark must be spiritual, it is imprinted and known only through sensible means, such as the rituals themselves, or the parochial registers.<sup>99</sup> Characters have an ecclesiological dimension: they enable humans to build the pilgrim church. The Eucharist, which is the heart of the church, does not confer any character, but sacramental characters are required to celebrate it: the sacerdotal to give it, the baptismal to receive it.

### **Sacraments are adapted to the frailty of mankind**

Although Aquinas stresses the instrumentality of ministers' actions, he is far from reducing them to machines. Ministers are a special kind of instrument since they are rational. They are not only moved by the primary cause; they also have to move themselves to produce the intended effect. Thus the truth and validity of sacramental rites depend not only on the authority Christ bestows on the elements or words, but also on the right intention and performance of their performers.<sup>100</sup>

<sup>95</sup> III.62.2*corp*.

<sup>96</sup> For example, III.66.10*corp*.

<sup>97</sup> III.65.1*corp*.

<sup>98</sup> III.63.1*corp*.

<sup>99</sup> III.63.1*ad2*.

<sup>100</sup> See the discussion about the form of baptism: III.66.5*ad1*.

Neither the words nor the elements signify or cause anything by themselves, but only when they are used by humans in the ways instituted by Christ.<sup>101</sup> For example, since a sacrament is like a sign, its truth depends on its signification, and on the right utterance of the instituted words: incorrect expression can invalidate the sacrament.<sup>102</sup> While signifiers are not efficacious by themselves, nevertheless appropriate use of words displaying the right meaning is required to perform a sacrament. Since that meaning is the one faith gives to words, some variations are possible, but the core meaning instituted by Christ must remain. This leads Aquinas to determine the elements and words which constitute the substance of the sacramental form for each sacrament.<sup>103</sup>

Even though the famous formula '*ex opere operato*' captures the essentials of Aquinas' teaching on sacramental efficacy, it never occurs in the *Summa*. For a sacrament to exist, at least the intention 'to do what Christ and the Church do' is required.<sup>104</sup> In this respect, Aquinas proposes that pronouncing the words required by the Church suffices to do this.

This teaching gave rise to two different interpretations in theology and in canon law. Theologians would hold that the correct internal intention of the minister is necessary for the validity of the rite, as an obvious deduction from their status as animated instruments. Canon lawyers, on the other hand, wanting to define the validity of the rite, are satisfied with the 'external intention' manifested by the observance of the rites defined by the Church. They stress the fact that, by entailing the gift of characters, the dependence of sacramental grace on the minister's holiness is limited. Sacraments are designed for the benefit of all, so they must not be limited by the sinfulness of the ministers: their divine efficacy takes into account the fact that all ministers are not saints, and may even be sinners. It enables them to give even what they do not possess themselves.

This debate is interesting insofar as both parties face the objection of courting sacramental occasionalism. The theologians disconnect the causality of the primary cause from the instrumental cause, whereas the canon lawyers, in order to avoid a constant uncertainty as to the validity of sacraments (since the mental intention in the minister is unverifiable), must stress the freedom of a God unbound by His own institutions making good their defects.

<sup>101</sup> Cf. III.66.1 (about baptism).

<sup>102</sup> III.60.7, 3 and *ad*3.

<sup>103</sup> III.60.8*corp.*

<sup>104</sup> III.64.8*ad*1.



'He Who created you without you will not justify you without you.'<sup>105</sup> The efficacy of sacraments is partly dependent on the recipient's faith. For Aquinas, faith *and* the sacraments are two modes of uniting (*copulatio, continuatio*)<sup>106</sup> the self to the power (*virtus*) of the Passion of Christ: the former is invisible and interior, the latter visible, performed as exterior bodily acts.<sup>107</sup> Sacraments draw their efficacy from faith in Christ's passion.<sup>108</sup> Hence, instruction for those receiving the sacraments is required.<sup>109</sup> The faith and devotion of those receiving a sacrament can even make good a defect of intention in the minister, and obtain justification from sins.<sup>110</sup>

### Sacraments meet the needs of fallen human beings

Sacraments sanctify as practical signs, starting from what we enjoy the most, namely bodily actions, thereby moderating humans' attraction to material things.<sup>111</sup> Aquinas combines a 'positive' conception of sacraments as perfecting humans,<sup>112</sup> with a 'negative' conception of sacraments as remedies against ignorance, weakness, and other consequences of sin. Sacramental grace entails both healing (the purification from sins) and exaltation (the perfecting of the soul with gifts pertaining to divine worship).<sup>113</sup>

Although Thomas aligns Baptism, Confirmation and the Eucharist with exaltation, and Penance and Extreme Unction with healing the consequences of sin,<sup>114</sup> nevertheless, in the same article Aquinas says all sacraments heal the defects caused by sin.<sup>115</sup> In any case, 'all sacraments are necessary for salvation in some manner,'<sup>116</sup> some for salvation only, and others for its perfection.

It might be argued that, by choosing to study sacraments firstly as signs, Aquinas was bound to consider them primarily as healing. Before sin humanity had no epistemological impairment, and senses and reason were harmoniously ordered, so signs were superfluous<sup>117</sup> for

<sup>105</sup> Augustine, *Sermo* 179, cited in III.68.4*sed contra*.

<sup>106</sup> III.62.5*ad2*.

<sup>107</sup> III.62.6*corp*.

<sup>108</sup> III.60.6*corp*.

<sup>109</sup> III.67.7*corp*.

<sup>110</sup> III.64.8*ad2*.

<sup>111</sup> III.61.1*corp*.

<sup>112</sup> Cf. III.65.2*corp*.

<sup>113</sup> III.62.5*corp*.

<sup>114</sup> III.65.1*corp*.

<sup>115</sup> III.65.1*corp*.

<sup>116</sup> III.72.1*ad3*

<sup>117</sup> Cf. *De Veritate* 18.2, *in fine*.

knowing and loving God, whose intelligible effects radiating throughout creation humans perceived intuitively.<sup>118</sup> No sacraments were needed.<sup>119</sup> Only after the Fall, once the sensitive and intelligible faculties were disordered, does the mediation of sensible signs such as the sacraments become necessary to cure ignorance and sin.<sup>120</sup> Thus, like signs, sacraments are not necessary to humanity *per se*, but they are indispensable to *fallen* human beings.

Sacraments fit the theological-historical condition of humanity. Having already studied at length the main features of life with grace in his treatise on the New Law,<sup>121</sup> in the *Tertia Pars*, Aquinas deals with the historical bestowing of such a gift through the Incarnation of the Word continued by the celebration of sacraments.

Aquinas' stress on the necessity of divine institution does not result from theological speculation ignoring the variations of the rites throughout history: it rather enhances the contingencies of history. Indeed, he agrees that the institution of the sacraments is known not only from Scriptures, but also 'from the family tradition of the Apostles.'<sup>122</sup> Hence his proposals leave room for further historical liturgical investigation exploring the preexisting Jewish rites transfigured in Christian sacraments in the beginnings of the Church, or their subsequent ritual and devotional developments.

Throughout time sacraments effect God's will to save all. The sacraments of the Old Law were different from those we know now: there is no abstract nature of sacraments, since they are mostly means of the divine mercy, pedagogically redeeming mankind step by step in history.<sup>123</sup> Since the sacraments of the New Law depend entirely on the historical incarnation of God, their forms and matters are more particular than those of the Old Law, and thus could be considered more exclusive.<sup>124</sup> Yet the most necessary ones, Baptism and the Eucharist, require elements (water and bread) 'such as people generally have in their possession or such as it costs little trouble to obtain.'<sup>125</sup>

Sacraments also prepare humans for eternal life with God. This eschatological aspect is much stressed at the end of these questions, when Aquinas identifies the Eucharist as the 'greatest' sacrament,

<sup>118</sup> I.94.1corp.

<sup>119</sup> III.61.2corp.

<sup>120</sup> III.61.3ad2.

<sup>121</sup> I-II.106.

<sup>122</sup> III.64.2ad1.

<sup>123</sup> III.61.3ad4.

<sup>124</sup> III.60.5corp.

<sup>125</sup> III.60.5ad3. Cf. III.67.3corp.

insofar as it 'contains' the substance of Christ himself, which is both the common spiritual good of the whole Church<sup>126</sup> and the foreshadowing of 'that enjoyment of God which will be ours in heaven.'<sup>127</sup>

## CONCLUSION

Aquinas studies sacraments as mysteries of the faith: they escape any prior foundation. Scriptural proof is not available to justify them all.<sup>128</sup> In order to understand them, one must trust in the Church's tradition.<sup>129</sup>

Aquinas stopped writing the *Summa* while dealing with Penance.<sup>130</sup> While studying this sacrament whose 'confecting' (*facere*) entails 'acting' (*agere*), Aquinas could see the synergy of human effort and divine grace. This was a turning point for Thomas, who in his spiritual life was overwhelmed by God's empowering of humans to collaborate in his salvation out of pure friendship.<sup>131</sup>

From God to humanity, the sacraments continue the mediating mission of Christ as an endless overflowing of divine mercy. From mankind to God, by enabling human beings to minister and receive the grace of God, they build up a communal network of interactions welcoming God's grace. Ultimately, although God is not bound by the sacraments,<sup>132</sup> the elect are always saved by Christ in the Church, his mystical body.

<sup>126</sup> III.65.1ad1.

<sup>127</sup> III.73.4corp.

<sup>128</sup> III.72.4ad1.

<sup>129</sup> III.64.2, 1 and ad1, citing 1 Cor. 11:34.

<sup>130</sup> III.90.4.

<sup>131</sup> III.80.2corp. evokes a *reconciliatio amicitiae*.

<sup>132</sup> III.66.6corp; III.67.5ad2; III.68.2corp; III.72.6.

