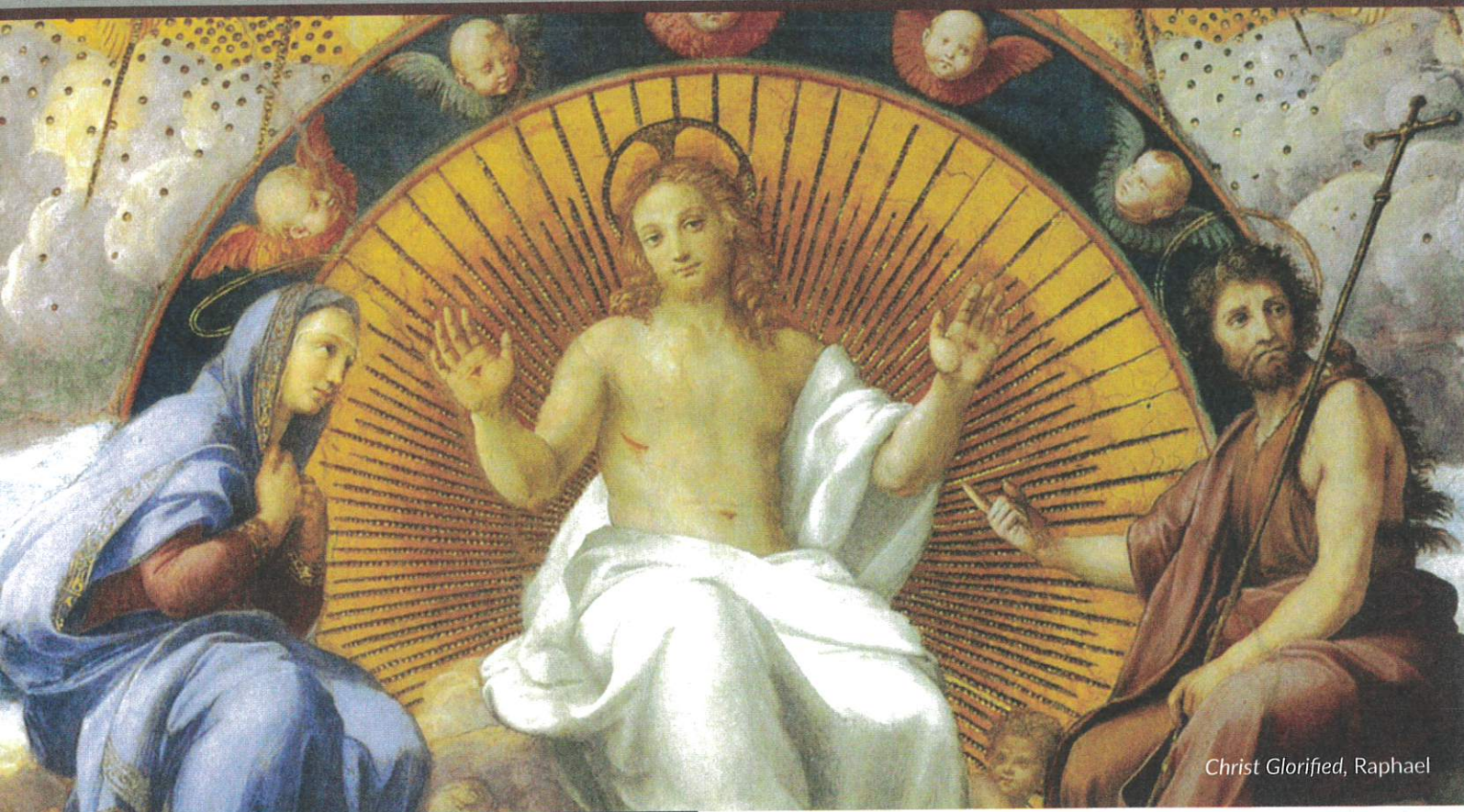




SESSION 10

The Sacraments



Christ Glorified, Raphael

STEP 1: Begin

OPENING PRAYER

You are the Giver of all heavenly gifts;
Animate me, I beseech you, with your grace;
Sanctify me with your charity;
Enlighten me with your wisdom;
Adopt me by your goodness as your child.
And save me in your infinite mercy;
So that I may ever bless you, praise you, and love you;
First during this life on earth,
And then in heaven for all eternity.
Amen.

— From a Prayer by Saint Alphonsus Liguori

INTRODUCTION

“Seated at the right hand of the Father” and pouring out the Holy Spirit on his Body which is the Church, Christ now acts through the sacraments he instituted to communicate his grace. The sacraments are perceptible signs (words and actions) accessible to our human nature. By the action of Christ and the power of the Holy Spirit they make present efficaciously the grace that they signify. (CCC 1084)

In the Gospel, a woman suffering from “a flow of blood for twelve years” approaches Jesus; she is desperate, having “spent all her living upon physicians,” to no avail (Luke 8:43). And then, when she touches the fringe of Jesus’ garment, power comes forth from Jesus to heal her. But it isn’t only Jesus’ garment that heals her. Jesus tells her, “Daughter, your faith has made you well” (Luke 8:48). A humble touch, lofty faith, and merciful love come together in this poignant scene.

So why does the *Catechism* highlight this scene in its teaching on the sacraments (CCC 1116, citing Luke 5:17, 6:19, 8:46)? What is the connection between Christ’s work back then—his healing and above all his Paschal Mystery—and the Church’s sacraments today?

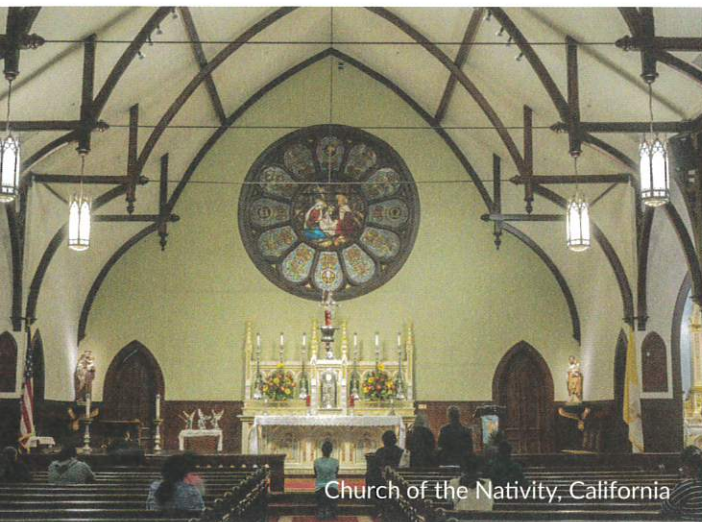
The *Catechism* passage quoted above provides the key to understanding. After his Resurrection and Ascension into Heaven, “Christ now acts through the sacraments he instituted to communicate his grace” (CCC 1084). The power that came forth from him to heal the sick then continues to come forth to us now in the sacraments. Christ lives on and his work of salvation continues in his body, the Church. He continues to draw people to himself through his grace, given to us in the sacraments.

In this session, we consider the sacraments. What are they? What is their connection to Christ’s saving work in the Paschal Mystery? What is their place in God’s plan of salvation? And why do they use humble, material means to bring about a spiritual effect? In the sacraments, we come to see God’s wisdom and the continuity of his plan to save us. He never stops reaching down level to be near us and to draw us nearer to him. And in our current chapter of salvation history, he does this primarily in the sacraments of the Church.

STEP 2: Learn

SETTING THE STAGE

Menlo Park, California, lies at the heart of Silicon Valley. The fast-paced and high-tech city’s roots are traced back to humbler origins; railroad and logging were two major industries in the second half of the nineteenth century, after the town’s founding. The city’s Church of the Nativity was built during this time to meet the spiritual needs of ordinary, local workers, many of whom were immigrants. What they and their families needed most was Jesus Christ, so this ordinary parish, built by local workers from local redwood trees, fulfilled the Church’s extraordinary mission: bringing our Lord to the nearby community in Word and sacrament.



The Spirit of Christ knocks at the door of my heart, moves me from within. However since the new humanity must be a true body, since the Spirit must gather us together and really create a community ...this Spirit of Christ uses two elements visibly aggregated: the Word of the proclamation and the sacraments, Baptism and the Eucharist in particular.

— Pope Benedict XVI, General Audience, December 10, 2008

I. Christ continues his salvific work in and through the Church, specifically in the sacraments

II. Salvation History: God draws all things, all people, to himself

- A. How do we enter into God's plan, into the story of salvation?
 - 1. We repent and enter into a New Covenant with God through the sacraments
 - 2. In the Old Testament, God brought his people into his covenant family through rituals like circumcision and sacrifice
 - 3. In the New Testament, he brings people into his New Covenant family through the Sacraments of Baptism, Confirmation, and the Eucharist
- B. The Old Testament Passover and priesthood point ahead to the New Testament realities of the Eucharist and Holy Orders
 - 1. The line of priesthood going back to Christ is called Apostolic Succession
 - 2. All the sacraments trace back to Christ and connect us with him, bringing us into the story of salvation

III. Pilgrimage: An ordinary parish, caring for its flock—the Church of the Nativity in Menlo Park, California

- A. The church was built from local redwood to serve ordinary workers, mostly immigrants
- B. Today, the parish offers many services, but the sacraments remain primary
- C. Each sacrament reveals God's love for us at different stages of life

IV. Catechesis: Christ continues his work of redemption in the sacraments

- A. God comes down to meet us where we are
 - 1. The material elements of the sacraments correspond to our bodily nature
 - 2. The sacraments also align with important stages of life
- B. The sacraments infuse and strengthen the divine life within us
 - 1. For us, the sacraments are necessary for salvation
 - 2. God is not bound by the sacraments; he can work in ways known only to himself

V. *Lectio divina*: Psalm 23

- A. A prayer of great comfort and consolation, this psalm is also an image of the sacraments
- B. God leads us to the waters of Baptism, admits us to the banquet of the Eucharist, and anoints us in the Sacraments of Healing and Service

WORD MEANING:

Sacrament

An efficacious sign of grace, instituted by Christ and entrusted to the Church, by which divine life is dispensed to us (see CCC 1131).

Man is not pure spirit. We need sensible, visible signs to signify divine realities which are beyond the reach of our senses. Considered in this light, Christ is truly the sacrament of God, a wonderful and infinite sign of his love for us; the Church is the sacrament of Christ always present and active in the world; the sacraments are the last link of that sacramentality that characterizes the whole mystery of our relations with God.

– Father Gabriel of St. Mary Magdalen, O.C.D., *Divine Intimacy*, 202

STEP 3: Engage

- 1) When we consider the wisdom and continuity of God's plan, it isn't surprising that he foreshadows the sacraments in the Old Testament through typology (that is, scenes and realities in the Old Testament that point ahead to the New Testament). For example, the crossing of the Red Sea is traditionally seen as a type of Baptism. What can this Old Testament moment teach us about the New Testament reality of Baptism? Can you identify other examples of typology in the Old Testament that point to Baptism or another sacrament?

- 2) What are some common perceptions—whether your own or something you've come across—about the role of the parish in Catholic life? What are some local parish ministries you might be familiar with? What place do the sacraments have in all of this?

- 3) The sacraments accompany us on the journey of life, tracing life's major stages and strengthening us at each point along the way. Baptism, Eucharist, and Confirmation initiate us fully into the life of the Church, her worship, and her mission. The Sacrament of Penance and Reconciliation heals and strengthens us when we sin. Marriage and Holy Orders specify a vocation of service and empower its successful fulfillment. And Anointing of the Sick brings healing and strength, typically preparing us when gravely ill or at the end of life for the final journey. When we consider how the sacraments align with human life, what might they teach us about ourselves, about God, and about the Christian life?

STEP 4: Conclude

In Luke 8, the woman healed by Jesus reached out in faith to touch just the fringe of his garment and in a moment, twelve years of suffering came to end. But more important than the miracle was the encounter with Christ that gave rise to a new beginning: "Daughter, your faith has made you well; go in peace" (Luke 8:48). The sacraments give us the opportunity to relive this scene in our own lives: to approach Christ in faith, to sense his power at work, and to be healed and transformed by that encounter. The same power that went forth from Christ to the woman continues to touch the lives of so many today. As Christ works through the ministry of his Church, he speaks to each of us the same words he spoke to the woman long ago: "Go in peace."



Detail from the *Last Supper*,
Netherlandish 16th Century

CLOSING PRAYER

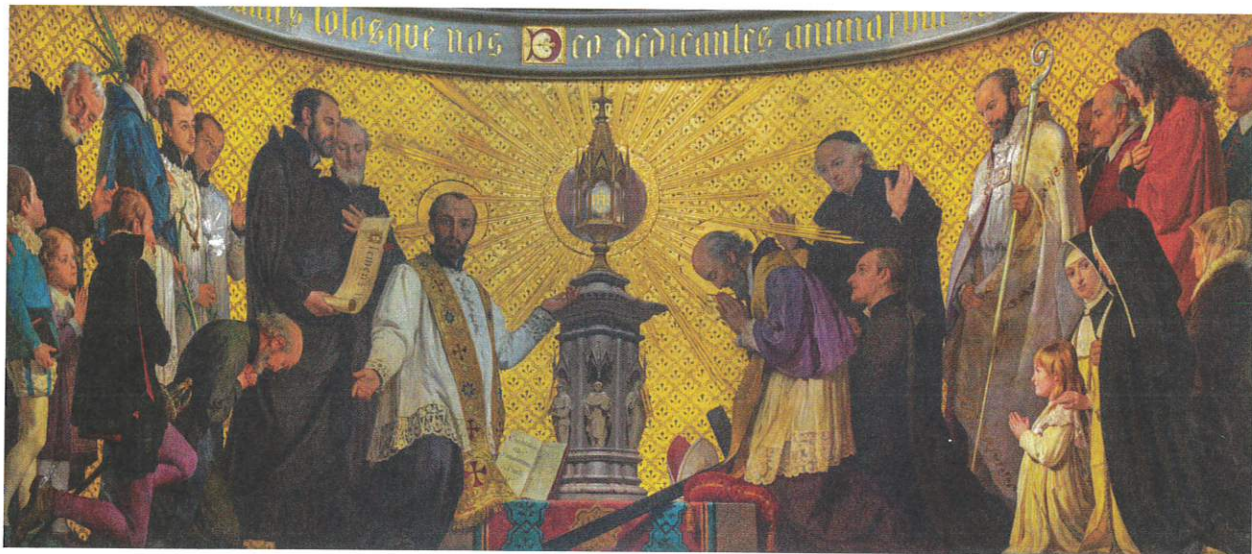
Father, you give us grace through sacramental signs,
which tell us of the wonders of your unseen power.
You created man in your own likeness:
cleanse him from sin in a new birth to innocence
by water and the Spirit.
Amen.

— *Prayer from the Rite of Baptism*

MEMORY VERSE

Let us draw near with a true heart in full assurance
of faith, with our hearts sprinkled clean from an evil
conscience and our bodies washed with pure water.

—HEBREWS 10:22



Saints Adoring the Eucharist, Enrico Reffo

CALL TO CONVERSION

We speak of the sacraments as dispensing the divine life to us (see CCC 1131), and as giving us a participation in the life of God (see CCC 1129). It's worth pausing to reflect on this tremendous truth and to ask how we can live more in tune with it.

Jesus came into the world to save us from sin and to restore our communion with God. That communion or friendship with God doesn't take just any form. No, it takes the form of *filial adoption*, that is, God making us his children by filling our hearts with his grace and his life. To be saved in this way isn't something that God just declares and acknowledges; God brings about this salvation in us, transforming us from sinners into sons and daughters, who have the very life of the Father filling our souls and animating our actions. What God declares—"you are my beloved son; you are my beloved daughter"—he makes it to be so, just as when he said, "Let there be light," and there was light.

This is why we say that the sacraments dispense the divine life to us and make us partakers of the divine nature. The life of God courses through our veins, and we are no longer merely human creatures. We remain human, but we also share in Christ's divine life, so much so that this same life will blossom and fully flower into eternal life with God, if only we let it.

If the sacraments enable this encounter with God that gives us his divine life and strengthens it within us, we ought to ask ourselves how we can live in accord with this remarkable truth and put the sacraments at the center of our life. There are two main sacraments we can receive regularly—the Eucharist and Penance—so prioritizing these comes first. How can you prepare yourself to receive these more wholeheartedly? In what ways might you better appreciate these sacraments as incredible gifts? How might God be asking you to commit, or recommit, to placing these sacraments at the center of your Christian life? And how might such a commitment strengthen your prayer life?

DIGGING DEEPER

In the sacraments, the humble material elements—water, oil, words, etc.—sometimes seem ill-suited to the spiritual reality conveyed: God's grace. Why are the sacraments constituted in this way? Is this really the most fitting way to go about them? Many of us are at least mildly bothered by the earthy dimension of the sacraments; if it were up to us, we'd opt for a more spiritual solution.

If it were up to us—what a remarkable way of thinking! Often a kind of pride hides behind this distaste for the sacraments' material elements: if I were God, almighty and spiritual, I'd just bypass matter and zap grace into everyone's hearts! But we're not God, and God evidently doesn't think this way, as we learn from what he has revealed to us in the broad strokes of salvation history.

First of all, God thought it good to create material things. Second, God thought it good to create humans to straddle the material and spiritual realms. And finally, God thought it good to take on flesh himself, sending his Son to live and to walk among us. Given all of this, we shouldn't be surprised that God's plan continues to make use of material realities after his Son ascends into Heaven.

Another worry nags us: Why does God mediate his saving work through the sacraments? We tend to be uncomfortable with mediation because it seems to diminish God. Why couldn't he save us directly, without the sacraments to mediate?



The Crucifixion, German School, 15th Century

Of course, God could do so, but what we fail to grasp is that mediation is a sign of God's strength, not weakness. It takes infinite power to ennoble something humble—matter, human agents, and angels—to participate in God's work of giving his life and grace to creatures.

God's ways are not our ways. We tend to want to be more spiritual than God himself. But when we consider what God has revealed and taught to us, we learn that, within the visible creation, God's ways have always included matter, and his love has never hesitated to stoop to our level, by making use of humble and material means to reach us and transform us.

FOR FURTHER READING

Exodus 14, John 3, and Romans 6

Catechism of the Catholic Church, nos. 1166–1130 and 1213–1274

Scott Hahn, *Swear to God: The Promise and Power of the Sacraments*

Frank Sheed, *Theology and Sanity*, chaps. 20–21