

SACRAMENTAL SIGNS: LIVING PROOF OF GRACE

by Eliot Kapitan

My father's words were powerful. Sometimes they were kind, sometimes forceful, sometimes very funny. But they were always clear. "Company is coming. Mom will want to show them the house." My room got cleaned. "The grass is getting pretty high." It was mowed by the end of the day. "Don't ever do that again." I didn't (not anytime soon, at least). "I need you in the grocery store on Saturday." I was there, apron on, 10 minutes ahead of time.

The words were clear. The response was quick, appropriate, and equally clear.

HOW THE CHURCH PRAYS

The sacraments are also pretty clear to faithful people. The sacramental matter (ritual action) and form (ritual words) clearly delineate what both the Church and Christ are up to in the lives of believers. During the Vigil in the holy night of Easter, after processing from light (the new fire) to Light (the Illumined One), after savoring again the great stories of faith proclaimed for our hearing (the Liturgy of the Word) and salvation (by the living Word), we bless water.

**Father,
you give us grace through
sacramental signs,
which tell us of the wonders of your
unseen power....**

Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults, no. 222.

What follows this blessing of water are professing faith, renouncing sin, washing in the saving waters of baptism, and clothing in the garment of Christ. Then confirmation. Then Holy Eucharist.

WHAT THE CHURCH BELIEVES BY PRAYING

What the Church proclaims about baptism on that holy night of Easter is what it believes about every sacrament. Here is the short list.

- **GRACE:** It is gift, it is unearned, and it is from God. We also know from our broader Tradition that "grace" is another way to say "God's life within". That presence of God and Christ is proclaimed in other ways: Emmanuel (God-with-us); incarnation (God taking on our flesh, born like us in all things but sin); as well as sanctifying, sacramental, and actual grace.
- **SACRAMENTAL SIGNS:** They are efficacious and deliver what they promise. We also know from our broader Tradition that all "sacraments" entrusted to the Church begin in Christ and fulfill what is promised because of his action. They are sacraments of faith because they not only presuppose faith but also nourish, strengthen, and express it [*Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy*, no. 59].
- **UNSEEN POWER:** It points to something bigger than any of us and all of us. We also know from our broader Tradition that this is "mystery" rooted in the dead but risen Jesus Christ the Lord. The Church even counts the ways that Christ is present in his Church, especially in the celebration of liturgy – in Mass, in the minister, in the Eucharistic elements, in the sacraments, in his word, and in the praying and singing Church [*Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy*, no. 7].

WHAT THE CHURCH LEARNS BY BELIEVING

Everything spoken calls for response. Everything proclaimed in the word and work of sacred ritual calls for response. Everything proclaimed by the spoken and living Word who is Christ calls for faithful response. The Church blesses things so that holy people are blessed.

- **WATER:** to be new in Christ.
- **OIL:** to be strengthened.
- **BREAD AND WINE:** to be Body and Blood, to be Christ.

RESOURCES FOR FURTHER STUDY

The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* begins the section on the Church's sacraments with this truth: "The whole liturgical life of the Church revolves around the Eucharistic sacrifice and the sacraments" [no. 1113]. It then provides a summary of sacramental theology and the seven sacraments [nos. 1113-1134] and the distinctive nature of each [nos. 1210-1666]. See also the definition of "sacrament" in the glossary.

Father Lawrence Mick has revised his *Understanding Sacraments Today* (Liturgical Press, 2006). In the preface, he lays out eight basic principles for understanding all sacraments beginning "sacraments are human activities" and ending "sacraments form us for mission." These principles expand on the grace-sign-power of which the blessing of water before baptism sings.

Music helps us sing clearly of Christ's presence in our lives and our ever faithful response. Here are two songs that proclaim sacramental presence.

- "Alleluia! Sing to Jesus." Text: Revelation 5:9; William C. Dix, 1837-1898. Tune: HYFRYDOL, 8 7 8 7 D; Rowland H. Prichard, 1811-1887.
- "Christ Is the King!" Text: George K. A. Bell, 1883-1958, alt., © Oxford University Press. Tune: GELOBT SEI GOTT, 888 with alleluias; Melchior Vulpus, c. 1560-1616.

IN SUMMARY

Sacramental signs indeed flood us with grace. These visible sacramental words and actions help us glimpse what is unseen and who is unseen – but ever present, ever active in our lives. May our responses be quick, appropriate, and clear.