

PERSONAL AND SACRAMENTAL PIETY

I. INTRODUCTION TO THE PROBLEM

1. The Question

The question about the particular place which the reception of the sacraments, and especially the sacrament of the altar, should occupy in our daily spiritual life will always go on being discussed. Years ago people argued about the relationship between ‘ontic’ piety and subjective piety. Since that time, everyone has no doubt realized that the reception of the sacraments is not meant to dispense us from the efforts of self-discipline nor, therefore, from personal co-operation when receiving the Holy Eucharist. Consequently, the important question for us in our present discussion will lie in a different direction. What we will ask ourselves is whether a ‘Spiritual Communion’, for example, can be a valid substitute for the actual reception of the Eucharist – without loss of benefits – and whether it is of the same value and has the same effects for salvation. Can examination of conscience and contrition mean the same as a sacramental ‘Confession of devotion’? Have there not been times when the reception of the particular sacrament – be it the Eucharist or Penance – was rather infrequent, without it being possible to assume lightly that there was less piety and less love of God among the pious in those days?

2. Insufficient Answers

To begin with, one cannot simply dismiss this question merely by stating that in fact, since the sacrament is effective *ex opere operato*, a sacrament gives grace of its own power, and that one does not receive this grace without a *sacramental* reception of the sacrament. For *firstly*: A sacrament, even when received worthily, does not simply increase grace with absolute certainty and necessity in arithmetical proportion [110] to the number of times it is received. Even although such a conception is the tacit basis of a fairly widespread popular opinion about the sacraments and their efficacy, this view falls down in face of the clear doctrine that the sacraments increase in efficacy (i.e. in the efficacy peculiar to them) in proportion to the dispositions of the recipient. These dispositions are, according to the Council of Trent (*Denz* 799), the measure (although not the cause) of the sacrament’s factual growth in efficacy. And even these dispositions themselves do not grow simply in proportion to the frequency of the reception of the sacrament. Otherwise it would be impossible to explain ultimately why, for instance, the Church allows the Eucharist to be received only once per day.

And *secondly*: Are there ‘sacramental’ graces which can be received only through the sacrament? There are, of course, *effects* of the sacraments which cannot be received otherwise than through the sacraments, such as our allotted place in the order of the hierarchico-visible Church, given to us by Baptism, Confirmation and Holy Orders, or the sacramental character, and the marriage bond. But our question is not concerned with such matters. The question is rather: is there some *grace* which can be acquired only through a sacrament, be it the grace of the state of justification and sanctification and its growth, or be it (actual) grace to help us to continue in the truly Christian life of oneness with Christ and to

fight against sin, face the trial of death, profess the Faith, fulfil our vocation to the priesthood, matrimony, etc.? This may well be doubted. For when we speak in sacramental theology of the peculiar grace of each individual sacrament, which pertains to the particular sacrament in accordance with the particular characteristics and purpose of the sacrament concerned, nothing more is meant by this than that the sacraments differ from *each other* in this way in their effect and not merely in their outward rite. Such a statement does not, however, imply that the sacraments give a grace which otherwise could not be obtained in any way. In reality, sanctifying grace is increased through the whole Christian life – through prayer, penance, the carrying out of one's duties, the keeping of the Commandments, through sufferings undergone in faith, through a Christian dying. Who is going to doubt that the priest obtains further graces by his prayer and by the faithful exercise of his office to help him in the fulfilment of his priestly task, and similarly also in the case of the partners in a marriage? Who is going to deny that penance, [111] prayer, etc. obtain graces for avoiding further sins and for the removal of the consequences of sin which still remain after guilt has been remitted – graces, in short, which are 'peculiar' to the *sacrament* of Penance?

It is also not sufficient to say that God has de facto instituted the sacraments as the means for grace and that he therefore wants them to be used, so that anyone who culpably neglects these ordinary means of grace may not count on obtaining this grace by some other means. This may well be correct. But the real question is: when does one 'neglect' the sacraments? To judge by the divine or ecclesiastical commandments, the required frequency of reception of the sacraments is not very great. Can someone who takes this frequency as his norm be accused of 'neglect' of the sacraments; could he not expect to receive the necessary helps for a very holy life, merely presupposing (and this must certainly be presupposed) that he uses the other means of grace, such as prayer, penance, etc., most zealously? If one already sees tepidity, and therefore non-disposition for a rich aid of grace, simply in a relatively rare reception of the sacraments itself then one tacitly presupposes precisely what has to be proved. For, in fact, such conduct, simply considered in itself is 'lukewarm' only if the person concerned throws away chances of grace in this way, because he cannot merit them in any other way. But this is just what is in question.

One can, of course, pose the following counter-question: What reason could one have for receiving the sacraments (in which Christ applies the power of his grace to us) less frequently than the nature of the sacraments and the demanding circumstances of life and of its situations permit? One might add that a frequent reception of the sacraments is not detrimental to 'subjective' piety but, on the contrary, encourages it. And so, both frequent reception of the sacraments and subjective asceticism and piety together must at any rate be richer in blessings than if one were to be satisfied with the merely 'subjective' way of perfection of the Christian life. Hence, the fact of a rare reception of the sacraments must after all be due to a certain tepidity, i.e. to an indifference towards the divine assistance of grace. This may in fact often be the case. For it is quite right to say that, at least in general, the Christian who really believes in the Incarnation of the divine Logos with a vital faith, feels the urge to meet God's action on himself in the most tangible and human manner possible – and that means in the sacraments. There will, of course, be an upper (albeit fluid) limit [112] to this frequency for practical and essential reasons. But one would surely not be justified in saying that, prescindendo from border-line and individual cases, this limit is exceeded by the present-day tradition of frequency in receiving the sacraments, as found amongst zealous Christians in the world, as well as amongst the clergy and in the life of the Religious. Such a frequency in the reception of the sacraments need not, therefore, arouse any suspicions of being exaggerated or superfluous. This is true especially because one's spiritual life, if it is genuine and hence also in accord with the mind of the Church, will fit itself quite simply and trustfully into the life of the Church as established in one's day – and, therefore,

nowadays into a life of an increasingly sacramental piety. In this way one can be confident that one lives the sort of life which the Spirit of God, who ultimately disposes sovereignly of men and of the Church, wishes us to lead in his Church at this particular period in time. For after all it is he who in the final analysis brings in the ages of the Church and determines which aspects of the abundance of Christian existence (i.e. of the life of Christ) will be particularly marked here and now. Such accentuations fall under the law of the guidance of the Holy Ghost in the Church, and cannot be entirely deduced from theoretical considerations in theology. But does such an answer say everything that is to be said? What about the question with which we started, viz.: is it possible to receive the effect of a sacrament (the *res sacramenti*) even without receiving the sacrament itself?

II. A POSITIVE ATTEMPT AT A SOLUTION: THE INNER UNITY OF FAITH AND SACRAMENT

It seems that, in order to clarify fully the obscurities which have come to light both in the question itself and in the usual answers, we must inquire somewhat more deeply into the more exact relation obtaining between subjective activity and the sacraments. For, once their inner unity and correlation has become clearer, our original question will answer itself. For if it turns out (as we hope to show) that in the case of subjective activity and sacramental happening it is not at all a question of ‘two ways’ to the same goal (viz. the reception and increase of God’s grace), but merely of two moments or phases of one and the same event, then it no longer makes any sense to ask whether one should take one way *or* the other.

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1. The teaching of current sacramental theology about the ‘two ways’ of justification and of the increase of grace

The whole of the present-day theology of the sacraments is unfortunately directed in its outlook towards encouraging the conception of ‘two ways’ of justification and increase of grace which meet only (but then entirely) in their final result. Various trains of thought have contributed to this outlook.

When one speaks of sacraments in general and – as it were – constructs the formal model of a sacrament, one instinctively envisages infant baptism as one’s example, with the unspoken thought in the back of one’s mind that the pure essence of a sacrament can best be represented *in the case where* man’s personal activity of faith and love is completely out of the question. As far as the other sacraments (e.g. Penance and Extreme Unction) are concerned, one would probably represent the normal case as follows: one supposes a disposition such that the effect of the sacrament (the *res sacramenti*: remission of sin, justification) does not come about without the sacrament. And one then regards this case as typical (merely imperfect contrition as sufficient disposition) and as the one which should, therefore, give us the clearest idea of the nature and effect of that particular sacrament. Hence, in the case of sacraments which demand a greater disposition (viz. the ‘sacraments of the living’), one accordingly regards this disposition merely as a moral demand on the part of God for the *de facto* reception of the *effect* of the sacrament, i.e. as something which remains completely outside the sacramental event as such.

And conversely, when one speaks of the subjective way of justification and increase of grace, one thinks of a purely ‘subjective’ event. One knows, of course, that such an event (understood in this way) is possible only with the support of the grace of Christ. But one does not, in this connection, bring out the christological and ecclesiological aspects of this grace.

There are whole tracts ‘De gratia Christi’ in which for all practical purposes, and seen as a whole, the word ‘*Christus*’ appears only in the title. These tracts simply presuppose as self-evident, or mention only briefly, that this grace is ‘merited’ precisely by Christ himself. The word ‘Church’ just does not appear at all in these treatises. And yet every grace has analogously the same structure as its source, viz. the structure of the Word become *man*, and all grace is grace of the *Church*, i.e. all grace has an ecclesiological structure. The [114] outcome of all this is that in the sacraments, seen now also from the angle of the subjective way of justification, man’s personal action in faith and love is conceived as a disposition which remains external to the sacramental happening as such. And furthermore, the ecclesiological aspect of the personal action of the believer (and with that every *inner* reference to the Church as the sphere of the sacramental happening) is then left completely out of consideration (even although it is not explicitly denied).

Against the background of such trends of thought, there must quite instinctively arise the conception of two different ways and manners of justification, and of two sometimes independent and self-sufficient causes of the same effect. This dualism is only barely bridged by the doctrine (in itself quite correct) that even in the case where the subjective way has been taken (such as baptism of desire or perfect contrition) and has borne fruit, the sacrament is nevertheless of obligation and necessary as a means for salvation, and that therefore the merely subjective manner of justification must include a *votum sacramenti* (which in fact it always does). At the same time this doctrine also underlines expressly in this connection that it is not the ‘*votum*’ but charity which justifies, so that no one may possibly get the impression that these two ways could be allowed to fuse into one.

2. Critique of the doctrine of the ‘two ways of salvation’, by showing the inner unity of faith and sacrament

We naturally do not mean to dispute the correctness of the *starting-points* of this doctrine of the two ways (which doctrine itself is never explicitly expressed, but is all the more effective for that very reason¹): there is an effective infant baptism, there is a sacramental justification of the person who approaches the sacrament only with attrition or imperfect contrition,² there is a justifying *votum baptismi*, etc. But [115] these facts do not at all force us to hold the external dualism which they are intended to justify. This will become clear by the fact that they can be just as easily derived from, or integrated into, a conception of the sacraments which does not contain this dualism. It will now be our task to develop the latter conception and to prove it, in so far as this is possible within the limits of a short article.

It might first of all be said that even on the metaphysical plane it is altogether impossible that *one* effect should have *two formally* different causes in the strict sense. If and when there are, therefore, two *materially* different causes for the same effect (as when one can, for instance, knock a nail into the wall by using either a stone or a hammer), one would at least be obliged to work out the formal identity of the causes as such for this one effect, a unity which must ontologically precede the sameness of the effect. But such very correct metaphysical considerations are not usually very convincing in practice. Nevertheless, they do at least give an indication of methodology: the more a theory of causality succeeds in

¹ This doctrine is not at all explicitly expressed, because each of the two ways is even treated in different scholastic tractates, so that the ‘danger’ of any contact arising between them is avoided from the very start.

² It is, however, also true that present-day theology, frequently in contrast to St Thomas, presupposes too easily, by appealing to a very questionable experience, that the dispositions do *not* change under the influence of the sacramental happening, so that the dispositions sufficient for the reception of the Sacrament and the dispositions sufficient for the reception of the *effect* of the Sacrament are presumed to be one and the same thing.

explaining the same effect by the sameness of its cause, the greater will be its chances of being the right theory. Plurality must be proved, for it, and not unity, is ontologically the more questionable.

Now, in Scripture, justification (and increase of grace, union with Christ, salvation, eternal life, etc.) is sometimes ascribed to a sacrament (baptism, Eucharist), and at other times to faith (and to charity, conversion, etc.). The necessity of *both* sides is stressed. The Scriptures do not reflect on the internal harmony of these two assertions. But they also do not ‘make it easier’ for us to solve this question which they pose for us, i.e. the Scriptures do not reckon with cases in which the subjective action of man (to which they ascribe justification) would not be sufficient and in which the sacrament would then be the sole means of salvation. The Scriptures speak neither of a justification by reason of a merely imperfect contrition, nor do they speak of infant baptism. Of course, these cases are not thereby excluded. And yet theological speculation is thereby given a different direction, if it is to grasp the unity of the subjective and the sacramental sides of justification. Scripture recognizes beyond this also the possibility of a justification by faith in anticipation of the sacramental happening. It thus gives a hint, indeed, that theological speculation must begin with this point of the ‘subjective’ happening in order to arrive from there at the sacramental event. It hints, therefore, that wherever precisely [116] this subjective activity of man leads to justification, it must in the present dispensation of salvation lead to the sacraments (and not only in the case of merely imperfect contrition).

It is not possible here to give a theological history of the conception of the relation between *opus operatum* and *opus operantis*. This would lead us too far afield, and the analyses required would be too far-flung, especially since these conceptions are not completely uniform and many attempts have been made to understand these two facts of revelation in their internal harmony.

This question arose already in Tertullian’s theology of baptism. It found various and varying answers with Augustine in the course of his life. At this stage (and already with St Ambrose) our question poses itself under the heading of the possibility of a baptism by desire, which question itself was not uniformly answered. Our question appears again later on at the end of the patristic period under the guise of the question as to whether a contrite person who dies without being reconciled with the Church will be saved. In the early Middle Ages it becomes absolutely clear that there is a baptism of desire; it is now explicitly recognized that in the normal course of events a sinner, who has been justified by contrition ‘alone’, does reach reconciliation with the Church – indeed it was still taught at that time that this is in itself required of him. The patristic teaching is now developed into the explicit doctrine of ‘Spiritual Communion’. From the twelfth century onwards the question arises as to what happens in the case where someone comes to the sacrament of Penance with a good will indeed, but with a merely supposedly justifying contrition; and it is admitted (although only very gradually and hesitatingly and with various explanations) that the sacrament becomes effective even in such a case. The case of infant baptism is considered. However much one attributed a cleansing from original sin to it (this question had been decided by Augustine’s fight against Pelagianism), one was still very far from understanding clearly whether such a baptism gives also sanctifying grace and the infused virtues. Even the Council of Vienne, in the final analysis, left this question open. It was felt that the question as to where faith is to be found in such a case is a difficulty, for after all according to Scripture faith is absolutely necessary for salvation. The average theology of today probably underestimates the weight of this question.

One can say, in any case, that theology until well into the thirteenth [117] century had a clearer consciousness of the fact that both aspects of the process of justification belong together than theology has today. It is also clear that in those days the case of a sacrament

having a saving effect by reason of merely imperfect contrition was not considered as the classical test case for the study of the real nature of the sacrament.

St Thomas still considered it an important doctrinal part of the teaching about the sacraments, that the sacraments are '*protestationes fidei*' and hence also render the faith of the recipient truly visible in the public forum of the Church. Indeed, in his teaching on the sacrament of Penance he develops a theory about the interlacement and mutual dependence of subjective and sacramental events which is far removed from any theory of two ways of justification. The very contrition with which the penitent approaches the sacrament and which in itself he must contribute *qua* justifying contrition, already comes about in virtue of an ecclesiastico-'sacramental' grace (of the 'power of the keys') before the actual reception of the sacrament. And conversely, the conversion of the sinner, rendering itself truly concrete in and before the Church and her authority by the contrite confession of the penitent, enters as a constitutive part into the sacramental happening as such and becomes, together with the absolution given by the priest, the sacramentally efficacious sign and an intrinsic element of the *opus operatum* itself. Thus there is a dialogue between the contrite human person and the Church in which Christ's saving activity becomes really historically tangible in space and time and in the particular 'Now' of each individual existence. In St Thomas' view, it is precisely this dialogue in its unity which reacts *ex opere operato* on the inner attitude of the penitent and on his personal fulfilment of *metanoia*, and really completes it properly. Indeed, in the exceptional case of someone approaching the sacrament in good faith with merely imperfect contrition, it is only at this very moment that this personal fulfilment receives its *justifying* power. Of course, in the normal case (according to St Thomas) the personal activity of the penitent would already have this justifying power even before this moment, by virtue of *the very* grace which had continued to flow towards him from the Church,³ [118] precisely because (and not although) justification before reception of the sacrament is the normal case. And so, in the case of the sacrament of Penance, the personal supernatural activity of the subject is embodied sacramentally in the visible dimension of the Church, because this activity had itself already been borne along by the grace of the Church. Only in this way does that activity attain the fullness of its existence, which corresponds to the fullness of existence – in the flesh and in the space-time of the empirical world – of Christ the God-Man, the source of this grace, and also to the fullness of existence of the visible-invisible Church, the Proto-Sacrament.

We do not mean to imply by this brief reference to St Thomas' teaching on Penance either that he himself would wish to see the here-developed structure of this sacrament applied to *all* the sacraments in exactly the same way, or that he himself had already thought this theory through to the very last question, or that this theory should or could still be maintained in all its details.⁴ But one thing may undoubtedly be claimed by appealing to the authority of St Thomas: the nature of a sacrament as an *opus operatum* is in no way contradicted by the

³ This conception will not seem strange to anyone who bears in mind that the Sacraments operate as signs of a human kind, and that it cannot, therefore, in itself be reasonably demanded that their constituent factors should be physically or chronologically simultaneous. This is also the way in which one must understand what current theology usually calls the 'reviviscence' of the Sacraments. This is not a question of the reviviscence of a dead Sacrament, but refers to a more extended chronological separation in time of the constituent elements of the Sacrament and the dispositions. In such a conception it will be necessary to dig more deeply than is usual in order to prove the necessity of a disposition being present during (chronologically) the actual positing of the sacramental sign – but it will not be impossible to find a reason for this necessity. To take another example: at the Last Supper, the *consecrated* elements of bread and wine will undoubtedly never have been present at chronologically the same time, although the representation of the Sacrifice of the Cross requires both of them, so that the Sacrifice of the Mass cannot be celebrated under one kind only.

⁴ Thus e.g. someone who *explicitly* acknowledges himself to have merely imperfect contrition, may not be excluded from the reception of the Sacrament.

indicated interlacement between the *opus operantis* and the *opus operatum*, which are immediately mutually and internally related by reason of their very natures and not merely by a *votum sacramenti* on account of a purely positive decree of God.

For the sake of brevity we must here refrain from indicating other elements of the sacramental theology of St Thomas which reinforce and clarify this conception further. The view set forth previously, which on the whole is also the usual view on the relationship between [119] *opus operatum* and *opus operantis* held in current theology, did not originate until after St Thomas' time. This view has the advantage of being easy to handle in a concise and 'clear' manner, but it does not have the same depth, nor does it exhaust and use all the riches and elements of a comprehensive doctrine of the sacraments as given in Tradition. It is not possible here to attest these elements from Tradition by a *positive* theological investigation. We must content ourselves with giving a brief and more synthetic and speculative outline of the basic theory which would arise from these elements. Using such a procedure, it is inevitable that certain questions cannot be explicitly tackled, and hence that certain things will remain obscure. We will simply try to get a rough idea of the relationship between *opus operatum* and *opus operantis* to the extent in which this is required for answering the particular question of this essay as objectively as possible. The particular question of this essay, let us remind ourselves, concerns the mutual relationship of ascetic endeavours and sacramental events in our day to day spiritual life, and whether there are two different ways for the attainment of salvation, simply to be followed for some reason which is not quite clear, or whether these are only two aspects or phases of what is ultimately one and the same process, viz. an always personal – 'sacramental' way of acting which sometimes, and even often (but not always), grows and develops into such an explicit and tangible activity that it is then to be called reception of the sacraments in the strict sense.

3. Theologico-speculative clarification

The supernatural grace of salvation is grace of Christ. It is not merely 'merited' by him, but bears also something of the distinctive trait of him who as *God-Man* has introduced it in a definite manner into the world and has earned it by his act of salvation on the Cross, so that it becomes the legal property of his brethren according to the flesh. This grace, if we may put it this way, has an incarnational tendency. It has not merely a dynamic directed to the inner life of God in which it makes us participate (and this indeed constitutes its nature, but, as it were, its abstract nature which prescinds from the order of Christ). It has also a dynamic directed towards the world, by which it causes the man whom it saves to be comprised within the redeeming and transfiguring descent of the Word of the Father into the world, [120] and in which HE gives this world his Holy Ghost. The grace of Christ is, therefore, also the source of the transfiguration of the body and thence of the transfiguration of the world as a whole. Similarly, it is the basic principle of the slow moral integration of human nature into the theocentric orientation of the sanctified person, i.e. the slow and, in the meantime, piecemeal recovery of the paradisaic grace of man's original state in which the psychophysical 'nature' of man was completely docile to the supernaturalized human personality. Hence this grace should and wants to spread itself according to its proper nature over the *whole* stratified being of man, right down to his corporeal nature itself – forming, transforming and elevating, and sanctifying it. This grace is, therefore, not merely the principle of a merely transcendental 'interiority' of man, uniting him with God. It is meant to be rather the sanctifying formative principle of the whole body-soul life of man, coming right down into his concrete, tangible daily life, where it therefore receives its 'expression' and takes on its corporality.

Now grace – seen ontologically – always becomes externalized in this sense. For, although

ethics may legitimately distinguish from an empirical standpoint between ‘internal’ and ‘external’ human acts, there are no purely internal acts from a metaphysical and theological point of view. For even in the most sublime interiority of his spiritual acts man still acts as *man*, i.e. as a *body-soul* being, so that even the most spiritual acts still have extension in that corporeal nature by which human beings, even as spiritual persons, are in touch with one another in a real material spatio-temporal unity. This is a real unity, no matter how difficult it may be to define it in a category. To put it somewhat crudely: even the most sublime stirring of a most supernatural love for God in the innermost depth of the spiritual person still depends on (and at the same time changes) electro-physical processes in the brain, which belong to the one totality of the material world in which everything depends on everything else and everything helps to determine everything else. It would be to the point to apply even here what was said once by a modern physicist: When a child throws its doll out of the cradle, Sirius itself will shake.

Grace, as the principle of a higher order, i.e. of the absolute divine order, transforms and elevates the moral act *qua* spiritual act; the latter however rests on, and at the same time externalizes itself in, an act in the material world (or rather: in an inner moment of the one whole act which diffuses itself through all the dimensions of human [121] existence). And so grace finds its living expression in every act (just as the body is the act and outward manifestation of the ‘soul’, albeit not adequately), and finds it in the spatio-temporal dimension and hence (still in a general sense) also in history. Every existing supernatural grace has, therefore, its own historical externalization in which (when accepted) it renders itself present and comes to appear. It renders itself present *in* making itself appear: analogously to the way in which the soul ‘becomes’ and ‘is’ by endowing matter with a living form and thus in-forming itself into matter, and hence cannot be thought of as preceding this act of in-forming. Grace, therefore, has of its very nature and from its very source a quasi-sacramental structure in the present incarnational order of Christ and of man.

This grace is essentially the action of God on man and cannot be thought of in any way apart from the free personal mercy of God, by which he gives himself as a gift to man. Hence the quasi-sacramental, spatio-temporal and incarnate nature of this grace is to that extent not only the manifestation in which the spiritual-existential act of the *human* person expresses itself at the very first, but also the ‘outward appearance’ of *God’s* action on man and of *his* redeeming love for man. And so the union and relationship constituting the saving dialogue between God and man (which of itself is spiritual and transcendent), becomes present in the spatio-temporal tangible nature of every supernatural-moral act, i.e. it manifests itself in the dimension of the historical situation and existence of each human individual. One cannot object to this that (at least in general) the *empirico*-moral side of human acts for salvation belongs *only* to the domain of natural morality and that it cannot, therefore, be the ‘outward appearance’ of supernatural grace, since that side is possible even without saving grace. For, prescindendo from everything else which is essential and which we pass over simply for the sake of brevity, even the divine assistance which we require for the factual achievement of natural moral acts is willed by God in the present order of salvation as an integral part of the one single new order which is conceived and willed precisely *as* comprehended in Christ and as projecting (and indeed assumed) in him and through him into the inner life of God. And so, in the last analysis, even this divine help is *gratia Christi* (wherever, at the very least, it finds a response). This is why even the actually achieved moral fulfilment of the natural law is already a manifestation of the divine will of grace *in Christo*, especially when it [122] is transformed and elevated by supernatural divinizing grace and is thus orientated to the goal of direct communion with God in eternal life, and when it is modified by this elevation even in its *per se* natural condition.

Over and above all this, the following should be borne in mind: the grace of Christ is

intended for humanity as a whole; it reaches the individual in so far as he is a member of the one community of damnation and salvation which represents the human race as a unity. And Christ not only wanted to become man in this community, but to be man as a member of the one humanity, 'born of a woman'. Those who are being sanctified and he who sanctifies are of one race. His grace has, therefore, a social structure. Even in the history of personal salvation there is no isolated individual; there are indeed individuals but no individualists. Indeed, the culminating point of the process of becoming a person, which takes place through the grace of a most direct relationship to God, signifies the highest form of the communion of persons who have become in this way most personal in the one eternal kingdom of God – the highest form of the eternal communion of all saints. 'Individual' and 'community' in this sense are not realities which are opposed to each other or compete against each other. On the contrary, they are two sides of the one reality of achieved and redeemed persons which can only increase or decrease together and to the same degree.

But in accordance with the characteristics of human nature, such a communion of persons, who are justified and share in the divine life, is not willed by God merely as an invisible kingdom of inner and transcendent union by grace. Rather, God wills it as a communion which as such creates its own expression for itself in the visible and spatio-temporal dimension of history, or rather receives this expression in its institution by Christ. God's holy people of the redeemed takes on the form of the Body of Christ and of the Church, which is the combined product of the interior mutual union of the redeemed by grace and of the historical, visible form of this transcendent interior union which consists in the united profession of truth and a social union through one hierarchical order and its functions. Just as on the natural plane a people renders itself historically tangible and capable of concerted action by forming a State, so the communion of the redeemed becomes historically tangible in the Church. By the impulse of the ultimate and inmost principle of her unity – the grace of *Christ*, [123] the Holy Ghost – this communion becomes a corporate and socially constituted body. Yet this process must not be thought of as a kind of process of nature. It must not be thought of as a process which bypasses free voluntary decision and historical action. Rather it must be thought of as a process which is accomplished primarily by the will of the divine-human founder of the Church, and then secondarily by the will of the Church herself who by her own institutions renders the communion of grace and salvation (which she is) even more tangible and historically manifest.

In accordance with the nature of man which develops and unfolds itself in time, the tangibility and historical character of the Church, the people of God historically constituted, must not be thought of as something merely static which as such alone would give historical expression to the grace uniting the redeemed even amongst themselves in the closest communion. The Church carries this grace into effect and lets it appear in its *deeds*. Thus grace appears as truth in her continually renewed and progressive teaching which introduces men more and more into the fullness of the truth of Christ according to the particular character of their mental, historical position. This grace appears also as the demand made on man by her pastoral office in her law and commandments – as the sanctification of men in her sacraments – as surrender to God in the Sacrifice which she celebrates daily. There where the Church, in her action on the individual, renders grace historically manifest as the sanctifying principle on the level of her supernatural social life according to the will of her founder, she dispenses her sacraments. *By* giving this sanctifying grace a historically tangible form in such basic social acts, in accordance with the commission given her by Christ, the Church renders this grace really actual and present as well as effective in the here and now of her individual members. The Church effects grace *by* signifying it. The sacrament effects grace *because* it is its sign – a sign, in other words, which, as externalization (*Leibhaftigwerdung*) of grace, renders grace present – in short, a sacrament is a constitutive sign. In other words, it is not

only true that the sacraments are signs of grace because they are its cause, but essentially the converse is just as true: they are causes because they are signs.

This category of causality *per modum signi* must not, however, be forced into other familiar *a priori* categories of natural causality, for otherwise the peculiarity of this particular category would suffer or at [124] least be overlooked. The relation between the outward bodily aspect of a spiritual act and that act itself is probably the closest analogy we can find. The spiritual act posits itself and is caused by taking on an outward bodily form.⁵ The spiritual person, superior in its origin to the corporeal, posits its spiritual act by interpenetrating the corporeal principle formatively from this its superior position; it gains its proper achievement from its opposite, material pole.

It is somewhat similar with the activity of the Church; by positing the material, outward sign and expression of grace in space and time through her ritual action, which is the action of Christ, she obtains a really efficacious mode of presence for the grace thus signified in this historical moment of time. By the fact that Christ acts on man through the Church by giving his grace the form of a constitutive sign, it is *he* who renders his grace inwardly efficacious in man, and not his servant nor the recipient of the sacrament. This is the meaning of the term '*opus operatum*', which has therefore nothing to do with the imagination of any kind of physical effectiveness of a material occurrence which would appertain to this occurrence independently from its nature as a sign, so that this occurrence would only be 'incidentally' 'also' a sign of grace.⁶ The gestures of Christ which he performs through the Church, one might simply say, are gestures meant in earnest; he on his part really effects by them what he expresses by them, simply because he performs them. If these gestures of the Church are understood from the outset (as they must be) as Christ's gestures, as the real physical appearance of his action, then it will be quite easy to understand that there is no sense in asking oneself whether and how they 'act on' the divine (and divine-human) Agent of grace, and that there is no sense in trying to solve the problem of the causality of the sacraments in that direction.

Now, whenever man really receives the grace of a sacrament as its effect, he must provide a disposition, to the extent to which he is capable of a personal act. This disposition is, however, necessarily [125] borne by grace which, as already pointed out, is, on the one hand, grace of Christ and of the Church, and, on the other hand, finds its outward bodily expression in the space and time of history by this activity of man. For after all this disposition is not merely something 'interior'; for man must desire to receive the sacrament visibly and he must manifest this desire – he lets the sacrament be administered to him and this fact of letting it happen to himself is as much a historical act as any other. Thus the sacrament takes place in a historical dialogue between Christ in the Church, on the one hand, and man on the other. And seen from both sides, this dialogue is the constitutive sign of the one grace of Christ and of his Church, which is effective at this moment.⁷ A sacrament takes place, therefore (in the case

⁵ One might think here of Pascal's profound remark to the effect that one must perform external humble acts in order to become humble.

⁶ Hence the intention of the human minister of the Sacrament is also required, since without it the sign would just not be a sign, i.e. a human expression. And conversely: whenever one ascribes a really physical efficacy to the Sacrament, one can no longer explain properly why the intention of the minister is necessary even for the mere existence of the Sacrament.

⁷ This does not necessarily involve a denial of the fact that in general, and especially on account of the case of valid and fruitful administration of the Sacraments to infants, only that part of the dialogue which the Church actively posits can be called 'Sacrament' in the strict sense. But this fact in its turn need not exclude the other fact that the totality of the dialogue is externalization (*Leibhaftwerdung*) of grace. This grace, proceeding from Christ present in the Church, seizes hold of man, becomes 'flesh' in his activity which brings him to the Church (i.e. in the words and gestures of man vis-à-vis the Church) and then receives a further tangible expression (*Leibhaftigkeit*) in the active response of the Church, precisely as tangible response of the Church, and this is an

we are considering), as a dialogic unity of the personal acts of God and of man in the visible sphere of the Church's essential (i.e. given to her directly by Christ himself) sanctifying ministration. The 'incarnation' of grace, and grace's process of becoming tangibly historical, reaches its climax in the sacraments. Grace is not only incarnated in the personal supernaturalized activity of man, but also in the acts of the Church as such: not only in the activity of a member of God's people, but in the essential activity of the *historically constituted* people of God, i.e. in the essential activity of the *Church* in her own public, social sphere. There is, indeed, no saving human act which in its historical spatio-temporal nature does not experience an embodying of grace or which falls outside the fundamental law of incarnation applicable to Christian salvation as such. But this process of embodiment has its own definite variability. This is somewhat similar to what happens in an ordered society, where there are acts, performed by and on the individual, of a [126] more or less official or public nature. Everything a man does is done by him in some degree or other as a member of his people; it has to a greater or lesser extent an effect on this people and is some kind of expression of the life of this people, and hence is an act of this people, no matter how 'private' it may be – this is after all the reason why there is not only a history of States and of wars, but also a history of cultures. But there are acts of the human individual and of the people which take place in a qualified public sphere, in which the act of the people as such manifests itself and the act of the individual has its full validity only when it is done in the properly qualified public forum and is replied to by the act of the people through the action of its public authorities; thus, for instance, a marriage contracted before the registrar, a contract drawn up by a notary, a testament attested before a notary, the confirmation of property-rights by a judge, etc. So also the sanctifying word of Christ to man, which is uttered in the depths of conscience and which in any case becomes outwardly present in the world in the active assent of man, can receive a properly qualified embodiment through the Church in her public forum; it can then become sacramental in the strict sense of the word. And in view of the incarnational structure of Christian salvation and of the ecclesiastical constitution of the people of God, it is easily understandable that the Lord of grace should *wish* and (to various degrees) demand this qualified outward form of his word of grace to man wherever it is a question of the *basic* effecting of the event and acceptance of His grace.

It would lead us too far afield for our present purpose if we were to take a detailed look at the organized body of the seven sacraments in the light of what we have just seen. For the seven sacraments are the seven basic embodiments of the occurrence and appropriation of grace. What is important *in the present context* is simply to note clearly that grace does not occur merely internally and subjectively (as it were outside the visible form of the Church) at certain times, and in the form of sacraments at other times. No, presupposing the corresponding subject, grace always occurs both subjectively *and* in the Church, interiorly *and* outwardly, existentially *and* collectively, although in varying degrees of one or other of these elements.

This variability is in the nature of things: not every occurrence in a community which is brought about by the individual and is also borne at the same time by this community, can have the same degree [127] of explicitness and be of the same official public nature in the social framework of this community. The more basic and significant an act is for the individual and the community, the greater must be the public explicitness demanded of this act. The more humdrum an act is, the less will be demanded of it in the way of public and official outward expression; this is true to such an extent that it becomes practically imperceptible that even in this case the community still helps to condition such an act. The

expression of grace precisely *qua* grace of the Church. And so, in this way the full 'truth' of grace now appears and carries itself into effect.

exact dividing line between these two kinds of act cannot, of course, be simply deduced *a priori*. This is a matter which is determined legally by the authority which has the right to give intentional determination to the constitution and law of the particular constituted community. It can, therefore, also happen that it is left to the free decision of the individual whether he will perform an act in this or that form – take, for instance, the different forms of wills and contracts, or the case of a valid but clandestine contract of marriage, etc. So it is also in the visibly constituted community of the people of God – in the Church. The application of all this does not require any further detailed explanation here.

III. CONCLUSION: ONE WAY OF SALVATION BY FAITH AND THE SACRAMENTS

We can now approach our particular question from what we have seen above. What happens in fact when, for example, a Christian repents of his sins in the quiet of his own little chamber in one case and at other times makes a ‘Confession of devotion’? Does he follow a different way to the same goal in each case, or else what happens? Can one say: take the first way, for the effect is the same and you can spare yourself the second way? Or should one say: in the first case you are merely concerned with yourself and everything is merely ‘subjective’, whereas in the second case the grace of God is having an effect on you...? Or should one merely say: do both, for after all two is better than one . . .? And similarly in the case of Spiritual and Sacramental Communion?

1. The quasi-sacramental visible appearance of the workings of God’s grace in Faith and Love

God’s action on man occurs even in the ‘subjective’ way, and even the ‘subjective’ way occurs in the Church. Here, too, there is a dialogue [128] of grace between God and man, an effective action of God which really and truly fills and transforms the heart of man more and more with his Holy Spirit. Here, too, there occurs not merely a disposition of repentance, but God also gives his word of forgiveness to man. Even in this case there is not merely an intellectual and affective reference of man to Christ, but a true deepening of the real union with Christ in the Holy Spirit. In this case, too, these forces pour forth upon man because he is incorporated into the Body of Christ which is the Church, and because this Church prays, sacrifices and loves for him. Here, too, the life of the one Body of Christ goes on, and everything is embraced and supported by the visible-spiritual unity of the Church, which is not an ideological but a real unity, preceding the individual man’s subjective will for union. And when man acts in this way in the quiet and seclusion of his closet, it is not only his own dispositions which are expressed in his actions (his praying, kneeling, etc.), but God’s grace in him and that through his freedom. When he reflects on his actions and looks at them as it were from the outside, he can say: God acted there, and in this hour of my life he became tangible and visible in the intangible workings of his grace. The life of Jesus, which pervades all spaces and times, has advanced another little step further. His hand has rested upon me and his own word has gone straight to my heart; the life-streams of his Church have risen out of the hidden depths of his Heart, in which the Holy Ghost is poured out, and have risen to the surface of my life where they become accessible to my everyday consciousness.

2. Grace and Love, inspirited and embodied in the visiblens of the Sacraments

Why does such a person nevertheless receive a sacrament even in cases where he is not obliged to do so? Is this merely a help for the weak in faith who would otherwise not comprehend what happens in and to them even without this sacrament, when they simply believe and have faith? Or does the recipient of the sacrament suddenly do something quite different now from what he did before, because this also is blessed? Neither is true. On the contrary, reception of the sacrament continues the life of faith and lets this identical faith grow up into the fullness of its being and thus gather strength. *Ceteris paribus*, i.e. presupposing his 'subjective' act as also accomplished in the sacrament, [129] he does the same now as what he did or let be done to him before in the silent room of his secluded prayer. Only now he does it in a more tangible fashion, and hence more intensely to himself and lets it happen to him in a more tangible and hence more intense manner by his co-operation. Christ's deed and the vitality of the Church take shape in him in a tangible and express manner. Christ's gesture towards man becomes more emphatic: Christ's word of absolution is clearly set off against man's word of contrition (although the latter was never possible other than as a *response* in which Christ's word took effect). And Christ's word is here addressed to him explicitly and powerfully. Christ's body is received as a palpable pledge of the fact that a profounder union is taking place here and now with the living Lord in the Holy Ghost. Explicit expression is given now to the relationship all grace has to the *Church*, by the fact that the Church takes a visible part by her tangible action. In short, what had already been happening previously, now becomes a qualified tangible event and appears *publicly* in the form of a means of grace which had already sustained the previous events and which is the Church. However, this qualified, higher objectivity of the constitutive sign of the grace of Christ, considered as rendering man's action tangible, means (*ceteris paribus*) an intensification of man's own supernatural fulfilment of life (*opus operantis*); and when considered as the tangible aspect of the action of Christ, it means a new actualization of grace (the *opus operatum* in the sacrament). Hence no *new* path is taken. Rather the one way of salvation and of grace is pursued right to the end. The final phase follows from the first phase, and the latter is completed by the former. These two phases of the one process depend on one another; in both of them the same powers are at work: Christ, the Church, and the human person as recipient of grace.

The whole process can be compared to the life shared in common by two lovers. Everything they do is sustained and transformed by this love and is its – very discreet, almost imperceptible – expression, even the insignificant, ordinary things which seem to have quite a different meaning and purpose from love and which would have to be done even if there were no love between these two persons. And yet, sometimes, and even often, they must tell each other their love openly, in words and by gestures which are nothing but the expression of love – of a love which was already finding expression in everything they do. It is as if the hidden law of the whole of their two lives united [130] together must continually bring forth new formal, outward expressions (*Gestaltwerdungen*) of their love, in which this love, which after all is always there, realizes itself ever more fully and in ever new forms. These are only gestures, not love itself – gestures 'which do not really seem to matter' compared with the proving of one's love in deed and in truth; and yet love lives by them. Love would die if it were not for these expressions which are not love itself at all and which those not in love consider superfluous 'formalities'. There is a connection between the proofs of one's love in deed and in life (i.e. of the real, love which really matters) and these gestures; yet in the ultimate analysis this connection cannot be formulated in rules but must always be discovered anew. It is impossible to lay down hard and fast rules for everyone and for each individual, telling him in what rhythm and proportion both of these factors belong to the one life of love and in what way the one love lives by both. But the everyday course of love will always go on concentrating itself in such gestures and love itself will always draw new life from them.

This comparison is merely a – comparison. But it may illustrate the fact that there can be no real competition in the spiritual life between the *opus operatum* and the *opus operantis*. Not only because the *opus operatum* also demands in some small measure the *opus operantis*, if the sacrament is to be in any way fruitful. But because the *opus operantis* reaches its proper climax in the *opus operatum*, i.e. its climax of outward, corporeal expression which corresponds to its proper and always given nature. And the *opus operantis* attains in this way the highest fulfilment of its own inner existential intensity which is in itself possible here and now,⁸ because this intensity itself (other things [131] being equal) does not in fact grow merely through this increased intensity of its expression (by giving rise to the latter), but grows also through the grace of the sacrament itself which comes out to meet it. For the event of this grace does not merely mean an increase of a purely inactive state of grace. It also effects this increase through and by way of an intensification of the personal activity to which it responds. It would be a merely superficial empiricism to try to deny this statement by appealing to a contrary ‘experience’ on the occasion of a pious reception of the sacraments. One would in that case confound certain verifiable feelings of consolation, uplift, etc., which are accessible to direct internal experience, with more profound spiritual-supernatural acts which can become more interior, personal and ‘existential’ without this fact being necessarily verifiable by ordinary internal experience.

3. Consequences of the foregoing for determining the frequency of the reception of the sacraments

The foregoing again does not mean that we may simply lay down the principle that the greater number of times the sacraments are received, the better the recipient’s spiritual life will be. Such a somewhat wild repetition of the reception of the sacraments does not only go beyond the limits of what is possible in practice or according to the law of the Church, but it would be senseless even apart from that. It is simply a fact that, if life is to remain healthy, then those spiritual acts which are done with great explicitness and solemnity must be relatively rarer and more unusual than the more humble and ordinary actions of everyday life. So also in the case of the sacraments. Let us put this more precisely and explain this matter factually, judging it by the finite, spiritual and moral possibilities of a human being which are conditioned by the level of his spiritual development, his personal characteristics, his external circumstances, etc. Now, there can be cases where, seen and judged in this light, it cannot really be [132] expected that a more frequent reception of the sacraments would mean any marked increase in the intensity of the existential accomplishment of the reception of the sacraments (even remembering that this must not be confused with certain very devout sentiments and emotions). In such cases any further increase in the reception of the

⁸ It is important to note the terms ‘in itself’ and ‘possible here and now’. For otherwise this part of the statement would be an exaggeration. To take an example: a martyr for the Faith has received the Sacrament of the Altar with great devotion – before being sentenced to death; now, supposing that – after sentence of death has been passed – he places his life in his hands for whom he sacrifices it, and that he does so out of the freest, believing love. There is no difficulty on theological grounds (on the contrary; remember the patristic teaching about baptism of blood) in assuming that in the second, i.e. the non-sacramental act, the existential acceptance of his sharing in the, fate of the Lord – the ‘*res*’ of the celebration of the death of the Lord – is more intense than in the first act. Nor is there any difficulty on theological grounds in accepting that more happens in the line of the supernatural and of grace in the second act than in the first. The constitutive *sign* of one and the same reality present in both acts (*viz.* the participation in the death of Christ) is greater and has a higher excellence in the first act (i.e. in the reception of the Body of Christ, which is the sign and not the signified thing or effect of the Eucharist); but the ‘*res sacramenti*’ is more intensely and really present in the second act, even though this act takes place without the *sacramentum*.

sacraments will be senseless, even though such further acts of receiving the sacraments would still have to be characterized as ‘fruitful’ *‘in the abstract’*, i.e. purely in accordance with the norms of the general moral theology of the sacraments. In the normal case of the average Christian, there would be no sense, for instance, in his wanting to keep on going to Holy Communion several times successively each day, or in his wanting to get absolution from the priest several times in uninterrupted succession, even if the law of the Church had not placed any limit on this (in the former case). The reason for this is quite simply the fact that it is the ‘dispositions’ which are the measure (not the cause) of the sacramental effect. If, in a particular case, these dispositions cannot actually increase any further to any marked extent either before or through the reception of the sacrament (for reasons which lie beyond the sacrament and the good will of man), then the sacrament, too, cannot achieve any further marked increase of its effect. Two kisses of love – to use the language of our previous illustration – are not always more than one.

This principle in no way permits us to criticize and to combat as exaggerated what, for example, Canon Law (can. 863; 595, 2) as well as the Encyclical *‘Mediator Dei’* (C.T.S., London, no. 127) and the rules and customs of Religious Orders regard as the normal frequency of reception of the sacraments for a devout Christian of today. For one must take it absolutely for granted that in the normal case the dispositions required in present-day practice (before and through the reception of the sacraments) are possible for anyone who has the good will, and that, therefore, the now normal frequency does make sense. But the aforesaid principle, even if it does not permit deduction of any hard and fast numerical rules, can be useful for recognizing in practice that a certain freedom of the children of God is justified in what concerns greater or lesser frequency, and the upper and lower limits of frequency in the reception of the sacraments. We will not, for instance, smile at a Saint (such as Francis Borgia) because he receives the sacrament of Penance daily, nor look on him as a noteworthy oddity on that account. Nor will we immediately have suspicions of tepidity [133] about a mature priest, in whose life examination of conscience and contrition are firmly established (quite apart from the rules of the Order), but who only goes to Confession every four weeks. Seen in this light, it is also absolutely understandable that the most authoritative moralists count with the fact that a priest may on occasion not offer the sacrifice of the Mass and not receive the Holy Eucharist, without thereby missing an opportunity for growth in grace.

4. The inner unity of personal and sacramental piety

One may not, therefore, say that ‘Spiritual Communion’ is ‘just as good’ and as profitable as sacramental Communion, or that the mere examination of conscience and contrition achieve ‘the same thing’ as sacramental Confession. This is so, not because these acts of one’s private spiritual life are so to speak only an ‘as if’, but because, in the incarnational order of Christ and of our flesh and as long as we remain dependent on the shadows and signs of our world even in our relationship to God, these acts of our everyday spiritual life only attain their proper essential climax precisely in the sacraments. Faith (itself) realizes itself most really and intensely, of its very nature,⁹ in the sacrament of faith. The unity and union

⁹ I.e. if faith in its existential profundity were to correspond fully to the unsurpassable dignity of the sign as such. We have already said that this is often quite different in actual fact, even in the providence of God – i.e. that it can happen that the *res sacramenti* is acquired in greater measure outside the Sacrament (cf. note 8 above, pp. 130 sq.). This, however, is no argument against the principle just formulated; for in this principle it is merely a question of the highest degree of acquisition of the *res sacramenti* attainable here and now (i.e. in a case where one can receive a Sacrament, the Sacrament is offered, and its reception has sense according to the principle just formulated). In such a case, to abstain from the Sacrament would also mean renouncing the chance to increase

with Christ, which takes place through love, appears and realizes itself with the greatest intensity in the sacrament of the Body of Christ. The forgiving grace of God reaches its clearest and most efficacious expression in the sacrament of Penance.

one's personal exercise of faith and love. One could imagine a sort of 'case of conflict' only where a sacramental Occurrence and another act of virtue apparently compete simultaneously with one another, as e.g. if one could help Christ in a poor person 'now' and only now during the time of Mass. In such a case one must, of course, choose the act of greater and more selfless love, even if under certain circumstances it were 'only' a spiritual Communion included in the act of love of one's neighbour.