

1958

2. The Means of Grace

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Bloom, Robert L. et al. "2. The Means of Grace. Pt. III: The Medieval Church." Ideas and Institutions of Western Man (Gettysburg College, 1958), 14-21.

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2. The Means of Grace

Abstract

Central to the medieval Church and the ultimate source of its power, both spiritual and temporal, was its possession of the sacraments. The sacraments were based on the belief that what man could not do for himself God could and would do for him. Medieval man believed that there were at least two things that it was impossible for him to do: he could not create himself and he could not save himself. But the same God who had created man stood ready to snatch him from the terrible consequences of his sinfulness. This great favor was accomplished through the sacrament. [*excerpt*]

Keywords

Contemporary Civilization, Middle Ages, Christianity, Church

Disciplines

History of Christianity | History of Religion | Religion

Comments

This is a part of [Section III: The Medieval Church](#). The [Contemporary Civilization](#) page lists all additional sections of *Ideas and Institutions of Western Man*, as well as the [Table of Contents](#) for both volumes.

More About Contemporary Civilization:

From 1947 through 1969, all first-year Gettysburg College students took a two-semester course called Contemporary Civilization. The course was developed at President Henry W.A. Hanson's request with the goal of "introducing the student to the backgrounds of contemporary social problems through the major concepts, ideals, hopes and motivations of western culture since the Middle Ages."

Gettysburg College professors from the history, philosophy, and religion departments developed a textbook for the course. The first edition, published in 1955, was called *An Introduction to Contemporary Civilization and Its Problems*. A second edition, retitled *Ideas and Institutions of Western Man*, was published in 1958 and 1960. It is this second edition that we include here. The copy we digitized is from the Gary T. Hawbaker '66 Collection and the marginalia are his.

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2. The Means of Grace

Central to the medieval Church and the ultimate source of its power, both spiritual and temporal, was its possession of the sacraments. The sacraments were based on the belief that what man could not do for himself God could and would do for him. Medieval man believed that there were at least two things that it was impossible for him to do: he could not create himself and he could not save himself. But the same God who had created man stood ready to snatch him from the terrible consequences of his sinfulness. This great favor was accomplished through the sacraments.

A sacrament is a rite or ceremony. When used in its religious sense, the word refers to an instrument or means through which some inward or spiritual benefit is conveyed. Although sacraments were among the earliest institutional manifestations of the Church, the process of defining their exact meaning and fixing their precise number was long and arduous. The early councils and the creeds -- Nicene and Athanasian -- had little or nothing to say on these subjects. Pope Gregory the Great was among those early medieval writers who declared that the sacraments were necessary means for the achievement of man's salvation. Christ the founder of the Church had entrusted to its exclusive care the administration of the sacraments, the sole means of grace. This emphasis gave new meaning to the assertion made earlier and formalized in the Athanasian Creed that outside the Church there is no salvation. As far as the Middle Ages is concerned, it is not too much to say that its possession of the sacraments gave the Church the most important single reason for its existence.

In the broadest sense of the term many Christian acts, such as preaching, could be regarded as sacramental. In the absence of any authoritative pronouncement from pope or council, Christians at different levels of medieval society proceeded by trial and error toward an understanding of this aspect of their faith. Many of the pagans who were converted during the Dark Ages tended to see in Christianity a more powerful magic than the one they had given up, and tried to tailor their new religion to fit old purposes. It was not farfetched for them to look upon the veneration of a relic as a sacrament, and not one for the purpose of salvation, but rather to cure disease, help win battles, or foretell the future. The outlook of such leaders as Gregory did little to counteract this tendency. The credit for first specifying that there were seven sacraments, no more and no less, and for listing those which gained general acceptance, is usually given to Peter Lombard (c. 1100 - c. 1160), bishop of Paris. His most famous book, the Sentences, was a summary of medieval theology comparable to Gratian's work in codifying canon law. For centuries the Sentences were used in theological schools as a basic textbook. Lombard's listing of the sacraments

church did change.

Included baptism, confirmation, the Eucharist, penance, extreme unction, holy orders (or ordination), and marriage. There was one for each of the most important spiritual events in man's life. The Church did not formally accept this list until the Council of Florence in 1439. In the following century the Protestants rejected all but baptism and the Lord's Supper as sacraments, while the Roman Catholic church reasserted its acceptance of the seven.

Even after general agreement was reached as to the number of sacraments, there were related questions that remained to be answered. Some of these stemmed from discussion of the factors upon which the efficacy of the sacraments depend. Do they depend upon the moral state of the ministrant? This raised once again the issues of the Donatist controversy. The answer given by the Church was similar to the one given earlier. If a sacrament is administered according to the accepted usages of the Church, the worthiness or unworthiness of the ministrant is an irrelevant factor in determining its validity, since that validity depends upon God alone. Nevertheless, this did not prevent Pope Gregory VII, in the midst of his reform program, from decreeing (1074) that the laity should not take the sacraments from the hands of priests involved in simony or refusing to obey his ban on clerical marriage. This decree was soon rescinded. A similar position recurred in late medieval heresy. Another question was whether the moral state of the recipient was a factor in the validity of the sacraments. Was it necessary for a person to be genuinely penitent to benefit spiritually from the Eucharist or from penance? The reply most frequently advanced in the Middle Ages was that, if a person was willing enough to receive a sacrament, no further spirit of repentance was required of him for it to be effective, again since its validity depends upon God.

A more profound issue was raised with the question: Are the sacraments only signs of God's grace or do they in and of themselves effect that grace? An affirmative reply to the first part of the question stresses the symbolic nature of the sacraments. A similar reply to the second part stresses their mechanical and magical nature. The weight of medieval opinion on this issue changed with the passing of time. Augustine had defined a sacrament as a "sacred sign...the sign of a sacred reality." Peter Lombard offered a definition which has since been quoted frequently: a visible sign of an invisible grace. But even by his time there was a strong inclination to add that the sacrament both represents and conveys grace. The way in which a fifteenth century pope answered this controversial question can be studied in the selection which follows.

By common consent baptism was one of the earliest of the sacraments. This was the rite by which a person was cleansed of his sins, both the stain of original sin and the burden of those sins committed before the sacrament was administered. In the early Church there were many persons who postponed baptism

*Ordination was usually not taken by common people.
Sacrament cornerstone of the church.*

as long as possible, to be sure that all the sins they had committed would be forgiven. One of the results of Augustine's emphasizing the doctrine of original sin was to encourage the general practice of infant baptism, so as to eradicate the stain of original sin as soon as possible after birth. The question of how to provide for the forgiveness of those sins that inevitably were committed during the course of one's earthly existence was answered by the later introduction of such sacraments as confirmation, penance, and extreme unction.

The Eucharist was the second of the earliest accepted sacraments. It was even more central to the Christian faith than baptism, since by the doctrine of transubstantiation (formally accepted in the early thirteenth century) the Church taught that bread and wine were changed (transubstantiated) into the body and blood of Christ and the sacrifice of Christ on the cross was repeated each time this sacrament was celebrated. During the history of the Church the Eucharist has been identified by many names, each indicating one or another of its important aspects. It was often called simply The Sacrament, or The Blessed Sacrament, thus emphasizing its preeminence. Eucharist, from the Greek word for thanksgiving, stressed the true recipient's thanks for God's gift of salvation. The Lord's Supper refers to the manner in which the rite was instituted. Communion calls attention to the aspect of fellowship with Christ and one's fellow believers. In the Eastern Church it was called The Mystery, which suggest its exclusiveness, its availability only to initiates. By identifying it as the Sacrifice, the sufferings of Christ for all men were stressed. Around this central sacrament the Roman Church built its central and most elaborate ceremony, the Mass. The priest or priests who celebrated the Mass wore special vestments and followed special rituals. For use in the Mass the Church developed a music which has been one of the important threads in the growth of modern music.

The sacrament of penance was offered for the forgiveness of sins. The Church taught that it included three necessary parts. The first was repentance or contrition of heart. The second was oral confession of sins to a priest. The third was satisfaction, which can be regarded as a token of one's repentance. Satisfaction might take the form of fasting or almsgiving and was usually referred to as "doing penance." What might be regarded as a fourth part of penance was absolution, which took place when the priest, convinced that the satisfaction was adequate, formally absolved the penitent sinner. The Church did not teach that it could absolve man of the eternal consequences of his sin: only God was able to do that. Moreover, it taught that it could not be certain the satisfaction which it prescribed was always sufficient to erase completely the temporal consequences of sin. In the event that such satisfaction was not enough or there had been no penance at all, a soul would be required to spend a period of time between ordinary temporal life and immortality in a state called purgatory. Here that soul would suffer until it was purified

sufficiently to enter into heaven. The Church held that souls in purgatory could be helped by the good works of the living and by special masses for the dead.)

(Medieval discussion of the sacraments proceeded at two quite different levels. For the educated, medieval theologians fitted the sacraments into a whole religious philosophy and showed how they were to be understood in terms of accepted and established beliefs. For the uneducated the medium of allegory was often used. One story explained how a lady who doubted the wisdom of receiving the sacraments from the hands of unworthy priests found herself, in a dream, suffering from a terrible thirst which was relieved only when a leper drew up pure and sparkling water from a well and offered it to the multitude about him. Both of these approaches were needed by a Church which claimed to be universal and which asserted that it held the keys to the kingdom of heaven.)

The following selection is an excerpt from the bull Exultate Deo¹, which was issued in 1438 by Pope Eugenius IV (1431-1447). At this time a church council was in session (it was the one which formally endorsed Peter Lombard's listing of the sacraments) and the pope entertained the hope that one of its accomplishments would be the reunion of the Eastern and Western Churches. The bull was directed specifically to the Christians in Armenia, whose leaders were favorably disposed at the moment to affiliation with the Roman Church. The reunion which did occur proved ephemeral, but this does not detract from the value of the papal bull as an exposition of the sacraments.

We have drawn up in the briefest form a statement of the truth concerning the seven sacraments, so that the Armenians, now and in future generations, may more easily be instructed therein.

There are seven sacraments under the new law: that is to say, baptism, confirmation, the mass, penance, extreme unction, ordination, and matrimony. These differ essentially from the sacraments of the old law; for the latter do not confer grace, but only typify that grace which can be given by the passion of Christ alone. [But these our sacraments both contain grace and confer it upon all who receive them worthily.]

The first five sacraments are intended to secure the spiritual perfection of every man individually; the two last are ordained for the governance and increase of the Church. For through baptism we are born again of the spirit; through confirmation we grow in grace and are strengthened in the faith; and when we have been born again and strengthened we are fed by the divine food of the mass; but if, through sin, we bring sickness upon our souls, we are made spiritually whole by penance; and by extreme unction we are healed, both spiritually and corporeally, according as our souls have need; by ordination the Church is governed and multiplied spiritually; by

¹ - A bull is a letter containing a papal decree. "Exultate Deo" means rejoice in God.

matrimony it is materially increased.

To effect these sacraments three things are necessary: the things, that is, the "material"; the words, that is, the "form"; and the person of the "ministrant," who administers the sacrament with the intention of carrying out what the Church effects through him. If any of these things be lacking, the sacrament is not accomplished.

Three of these sacraments -- baptism, confirmation, and ordination -- impress indelibly upon the soul a character, a certain spiritual sign, distinct from all others; so they are not repeated for the same person. The other four do not imprint a character upon the soul, and admit of repetition.

Holy baptism holds the first place among all the sacraments because it is the gate of spiritual life; for by it we are made members of Christ and of the body of the Church. Since through the first man death entered into the world, unless we are born again of water, and of the spirit, we cannot, so saith Truth, enter into the kingdom of heaven. The material of this sacrament is water, real and natural -- it matters nothing whether it be cold or warm. Now the form is: "I baptize thee in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost."...

The ministrant of this sacrament is the priest, for baptism belongs to his office. But in case of necessity not only a priest or deacon may baptize, but a layman or a woman -- nay, even a pagan or a heretic, provided he use the form of the Church and intend to do what the Church effects. The efficacy of this sacrament is the remission of all sin, original sin and actual, and of all penalties incurred through this guilt. Therefore no satisfaction for past sin should be imposed on those who are baptized; but if they die before they commit any sin, they shall straightway attain the kingdom of heaven and the sight of God.

The second sacrament is confirmation. The material is the chrism made from oil, which signifies purity of conscience, and from balsam, which signifies the odor of fair fame; and it must be blessed by the bishop. The form is: "I sign thee with the sign of the cross and confirm thee with the chrism of salvation, in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost." The proper ministrant of this sacrament is the bishop. While a simple priest avails to perform the other anointings, this one none can confer save the bishop only; for it is written of the apostles alone that by the laying on of hands they gave the Holy Ghost, and the bishops hold the office of the apostles. We read in the Acts of the Apostles, when the apostles who were at Jerusalem heard how Samaria had received the word of God, they sent to them Peter and John; who, when they were come, prayed that they might receive the Holy Ghost; for as yet it was fallen upon none of them, -- they were only baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus. Then they laid hands upon them and they received the Holy Ghost. Now, in place of this laying on of hands, confirmation is given in the

Church. Yet we read that sometimes, for reasonable and urgent cause, by dispensation from the Holy See, a simple priest has been permitted to administer confirmation with a chrism prepared by a bishop.

In this sacrament the Holy Ghost is given to strengthen us, as it was given to the apostles on the day of Pentecost, that the Christian may confess boldly the name of Christ. And therefore he is confirmed upon the brow, the seat of shame, that he may never blush to confess the name of Christ and especially his cross, which is a stumbling-block to the Jews and foolishness to the Gentiles, according to the apostle. Therefore he is signed with the sign of the cross.

The third sacrament is the eucharist. The material is wheaten bread and wine of the grape, which before consecration should be mixed very sparingly with water; because, according to the testimony of the holy fathers and doctors of the Church set forth in former times in disputation, it is believed that the Lord himself instituted this sacrament with wine mixed with water, and also because this corresponds with the accounts of our Lord's passion. For the holy Pope Alexander, fifth from the blessed Peter, says, "In the offerings of sacred things made to God during the solemnization of the mass, only bread and wine mixed with water are offered up. Neither wine alone nor water alone may be offered up in the cup of the Lord, but both mixed, since it is written that both blood and water flowed from Christ's side."

Moreover the mixing of water with the wine fitly signifies the efficacy of this sacrament, namely, the union of Christian people with Christ, for water signifies "people," according to the passage in the Apocalypse which says, "many waters, many people." And Julius, second pope after the blessed Sylvester, says: "According to the provisions of the canons the cup of the Lord should be offered filled with wine mixed with water, because a people is signified by the water, and in the wine is manifested the blood of Christ. Therefore when the wine and water are mixed in the cup the people are joined to Christ, and the host of the faithful is united with him in whom they believe."

Since, therefore, the holy Roman Church, instructed by the most blessed apostles Peter and Paul, together with all the other churches of the Greeks and Latins in which glowed the light of sanctity and of doctrine, has from the beginning of the nascent Church observed this custom and still observes it, it is quite unseemly that any region whatever should depart from this universal and rational observance. We decree, therefore, that the Armenians likewise shall conform themselves with the whole Christian world, and that their priests shall mix a little water with the wine in the cup of oblation.

The form of this sacrament is furnished by the words of the Saviour when he instituted it, and the priest, speaking in the person of Christ, consummates this

sacrament. By virtue of these words, the substance of the bread is turned into the body of Christ and the substance of the wine into his blood. This is accomplished in such wise that the whole Christ is altogether present under the semblance of the bread and altogether under the semblance of the wine. Moreover, after the consecrated host and the consecrated wine have been divided, the whole Christ is present in any part of them. The benefit effected by this sacrament in the souls of those who receive it worthily is the union of man with Christ. And since, through grace, man is made one body with Christ and united in his members, it follows that through this sacrament grace is increased in those who partake of it worthily. Every effect of material food and drink upon the physical life, in nourishment, growth, and pleasure, is wrought by this sacrament for the spiritual life. By it we recall the beloved memory of our Saviour; by it we are withheld from evil, and strengthened in good, and go forward to renewed growth in virtues and graces.

The fourth sacrament is penance. The material, as we may say, consists in the acts of penitence, which are divided into three parts. The first of these is contrition of the heart, wherein the sinner must grieve for the sins he has committed, with the resolve to commit no further sins. Second comes confession with the mouth, to which it pertains that the sinner should make confession to his priest of all the sins he holds in his memory. The third is satisfaction for sins according to the judgment of the priest, and this is made chiefly by prayer, fasting, and almsgiving. The form of this sacrament consists in the words of absolution which the priest speaks when he says, "I absolve thee," etc.; and the minister of this sacrament is the priest, who has authority to absolve either regularly or by the commission of a superior. The benefit of this sacrament is absolution from sins.

The fifth sacrament is extreme unction, and the material is oil of the olive, blessed by a bishop. This sacrament shall not be given to any except the sick who are in fear of death. They shall be anointed in the following places: the eyes on account of the sight, the ears on account of the hearing, the nostrils on account of smell, the mouth on account of taste and speech, the hands on account of touch, the feet on account of walking, and the loins as the seat of pleasure. The form of this sacrament is as follows: "Through this holy unction and his most tender compassion, the Lord grants thee forgiveness for whatever sins thou hast committed by the sight," -- and in the same way for the other members. The minister of this sacrament is a priest. The benefit is even the healing of the mind and, so far as is expedient, of the body also. Of this sacrament the blessed apostle James says: "Is any sick among you? Let him call for the elders of the church and let them pray over him, anointing him with oil in the name of the Lord: and the prayer of faith shall save the sick, and the Lord shall raise him up; and if he have committed sins,

they shall be forgiven him."

The sixth sacrament is ordination. The material for the priesthood is the cup with the wine and the paten with the bread; for the diaconate, the books of the Gospel; for the subdiaconate, an empty cup placed upon an empty paten; and in like manner, other offices are conferred by giving to the candidates those things which pertain to their secular ministrations. The form for priests is this: "Receive the power to offer sacrifice in the Church for the living and the ~~dead~~, in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost." And so for each order the proper form shall be used, as fully stated in the Roman pontifical. The regular minister of this sacrament is a bishop; the benefit, growth in grace, to the end that whosoever is ordained may be a worthy minister.

The seventh sacrament is matrimony, the type of the union of Christ and the Church, according to the apostle, who saith, "This is a great mystery; but I speak concerning Christ and the Church." The efficient cause of marriage is regularly the mutual consent uttered aloud on the spot. These advantages are to be ascribed to marriage: first, the begetting of children and their bringing up in the worship of the Lord; secondly, the fidelity that husband and wife should each maintain toward the other; thirdly, the indissoluble character of marriage, for this typifies the indissoluble union of Christ and the Church. Although for the cause of adultery separation is permissible, for no other cause may marriage be infringed, since the bond of marriage once legitimately contracted is perpetual. *
