

## **Saint Paul and the Sacramental Life**

The epistles of Saint Paul contain a rich sacramental theology that is the basis of our Catholic faith. This divine revelation, given to us by Saint Paul, and developed over the centuries, has deep significance for us as we read and meditate upon his words. Because it is so ancient we might miss the connections found within them and relevance they have for us today.

The rite of baptism is of no insignificance in the writings of Saint Paul. It is through this immersion in the death of the Lord and rising with Him out of the waters that we become “new creatures.” Not merely forgiven or kept from judgment--but literally transformed. From his experience of being someone in need of God’s merciful help, a persecutor of Christians, stalking them and bringing them to prison and even death for being blasphemers, he knows the power of the Sacrament of Baptism. His famous conversion recorded in the Acts of the Apostles and in his Epistle to the Galatians gives us an understanding of what it means to be converted to the Lord, to be literally thrown down, blinded by heavenly light and turned around to go in another direction. From this dramatic encounter, Saint Paul goes to Ananais to be instructed, formed and prepared for the sacramental cleansing and empowering in Baptism.

Saint Paul will emphasize over and over the importance of baptism and its meaning in the context of what the Church is throughout his writings. Baptism brings about “incorporation”, literally to be made one body with, and is a graphic description of the way that we are in union with Christ Himself and in union with one another in the Mystical Body. It is through the grace of Baptism that we receive the divine indwelling and this makes us a member of the Body of the Church. Saint Paul uses the imagery of a human body to describe the way all the parts work together. This is no human effort, however. This is the result of God claiming each of us, giving us special gifts and charisms for the good of all and assigning us a place in the unity of His Body the Church just as each of our organs and vital functions work together for the unified working of each of our bodies.

The Sacrament of the Holy Eucharist is the means by which we are helped to grow in this unity with Christ and His Church. We literally, as one author has written, “become blood relations of Jesus and of one another,” by receiving His Body and Blood in Holy Communion. The Holy Eucharist is for Saint Paul, “a communion in the Body and Blood of the Lord,” which effects a deeper communion in the Church, His Body. This reality was understood very clearly in the early Church. The Holy Sacrament and the Mystical Body of Christ, the Church, were closely identified; it was from the Eucharistic Sacrifice that the Church was born, as the Servant of God, Pope John Paul II, of recent memory made so clear to us in his encyclical of 2005. In our own day we have returned to this understanding but we need to continue to meditate upon it. Eucharistic communion is not only a personal and private encounter with the Lord. It must always send us out in mission to others. It must always deepen our communion with the Church and with one another. This recovery of the ancient understanding of Eucharistic theology owes its basis to Saint Paul’s understanding of the Holy Eucharist.

In his account of the Institution of the Eucharist Saint Paul makes it clear that the vital union between believer and the Lord must be a living reality in order to receive the sacramental Body and Blood of the Lord, lest we receive unto condemnation. This is the perennial teaching of the Church that anyone conscious of deliberate mortal sin must receive sacramental absolution before approaching the Sacrament. Anyone who says otherwise is in error and is denying one of the important theological and disciplinary teachings that comes straight from the Apostle Paul himself. Someone who is spiritually dead cannot receive nourishment. Only those who are alive can eat and drink and assimilate nourishment. This very basic analogy is not lost on Saint Paul. To be one with the Lord we must be in communion with Him, no mortal sin. To be one with one another we must be “in the Lord.”

There is another aspect of Saint Paul’s teaching on the Holy Eucharist that might not be obvious at first glance. In the twelfth chapter of the Epistle to the Romans, Saint Paul writes:

*I beseech you therefore, brethren, by the mercy of God, that you present your bodies a living sacrifice, holy, pleasing unto God, your reasonable service. And be not conformed to this world: but be reformed in the newness of your mind, that you may prove what is the good, and the acceptable, and the perfect will of God.*

A clear and definite connection between this passage of Sacred Scripture and the Roman Canon of the Mass is discernable with this particular translation of the Epistle, the Douay Rheims. Here we find the term “reasonable service” which in the Roman Canon is “oblato rationabilis”. At this point in the Extraordinary Form of the Roman Rite, the oblata, or gifts of bread and wine are blessed five times. This is just before the Consecration. The priest prays: “Humbly we pray Thee, O God, be pleased to make this same offering wholly blessed, to consecrate it and approve it, making it reasonable and acceptable, so that it may become for us the Body and Blood of Thy dearly beloved Son, our Lord, Jesus Christ.” According to Pope Benedict XVI in a series of talks on the Holy Eucharist before he was elected to the Chair of Peter, this term is untranslatable in Greek, “Reasonable-logical worship” but signifies a deep interior reality. It is the sacrifice of the Logos. In the traditional theological understanding, Logos is not just Word or mind, but the very basis of existence for all creation and the meaning of its existence. Logos is made flesh in Christ Jesus, our Lord. Pope Benedict said:

We pray for transformation of the gifts and yet not only for this...we ask that the “logos”, Christ, who is the true sacrifice, assume us as well into his offering, ‘makes logos’ of us, renders us...truly reasonable so that his sacrifice may become ours and be accepted by God as our own, may be imputed to us. We pray that His presence takes us unto itself, so that we may become with Him “one body and one spirit”...We pray rather that we may ourselves become Eucharist with Christ and thus pleasing to God.”

This transformation is a Pauline theme. Only in the Eucharistic Sacrifice and Communion with Christ are we able to become His image. This is what the Pope means about becoming Eucharist. This is not some trendy way of speaking; he is going back to an ancient understanding of the very basis of the Eucharist, which is to make the one

receiving become what He receives. From this encounter and transformation, he sacrifices his life in imitation of His Lord. This is what becoming Eucharist means in a biblical, Patristic and Catholic sense. It is not that we do nice things or even good things from our own human powers. It means that we are transformed in the Eucharistic self-offering of the Lord in order to be His presence and action in the midst of the world.

This is what Pope Benedict calls the “mysticism of identity.” And this, also is Pauline mysticism. He said: “The Logos, who is the Son, renders us sons in the lived sacramental communion. Our transformation from the scheme of this world, from a sharing in what everyone else thinks, says, does to a new existence in the will of God...The transformation of the gifts is a transformation that must be extended to ourselves.”

From this passage of Romans Saint Paul elaborates on the analogy of the Body of Christ with the human body, of which I mentioned. This integral and organic identity: the Holy Eucharist and the Church, requires our continued attention and meditation.

The other great Sacrament receiving much attention from the Apostle is Christian marriage. It is important for us to realize how revolutionary the early Church’s practice and theology of Marriage was for its surroundings, both the Jewish and Gentile worlds. We read in the Gospels themselves that divorce had been allowed in certain circumstances. Jesus’ teaching, however, on the Sermon on the Mount, makes clear that no valid marriage could be dissolved. The Gentile world saw marriage more in a legal or political light. The love between husband and wife was not necessary. It was a civic and social institution that provided stability and power. The intimate self-giving of spouses was optional. There could be numerous kinds of arrangements within the marriage for romance and love that included others. Children were to be considered as heirs but were also expendable, as seen in the Roman’s killing of newborn infants or selling children into slavery.

For Saint Paul, marriage is a “great mystery.” Pope John Paul II, in his Wednesday audiences on the Theology of the Body, goes into great detail about this section of the Epistle to the Ephesians when he speaks of Christian marriage. “Mystery” is the Greek term for the Latin word, “sacramentum”, or Sacrament. Although there has been a development over the centuries of the meaning of these words and how they are used, John Paul II makes it clear that from the beginning of creation the original sacrament which is marriage became the sacrament proper through Christ’s teaching and mandate.

Saint Paul develops the theology of marriage along these lines. A husband is to love his wife as Christ loves the Church. The wife is to love her husband as the Church loves Christ. The indissolubility of marriage is inherent in this image; Christ will never be unfaithful to Her Spouse. And the Church, meaning the communion of saints, those in heaven and those in the state of grace on earth, because she is given a divine gift from Her Spouse will never be unfaithful to Her Bridegroom. Thus, the sacramental union between the man and woman in marriage finds its origin and inspiration in the love shown by Christ for the Church and its reciprocal return of love by the Church for Christ.

We will go into this further when we reflect upon Saint Paul and the states in life. But for now, it is enough to see that the Catholic teaching on marriage and its sacramentality is deeply rooted in this Pauline teaching, which comes from the Lord Himself.

Reflecting upon Saint Paul's sacramental teaching must also include his emphasis upon Christian death. While not a sacrament, the death of a Christian is an encounter of which the whole life of the believer is directed. For Saint Paul, to die as a Christian is "to be with Christ". In dealing with the questions of Christ's imminent return and the status of those who die before this event, Saint Paul is clear that "them that have slept through Jesus, will God bring with him." He exhorts those who want to stop living and just wait for Christ's return that they must be vigilant so that whether we "watch or sleep, we may live together with him." This attitude of vigilance is another trademark of Pauline spirituality. He himself, in speaking of whether he prefers to live or to die says, "My desire is to depart and be with Christ..." (Phil 1,21-5); yet his spiritual children need him and so he will remain, in love for Christ. Saint Paul teaches us that we live with Christ in this life through our prayer, our way of life that imitates Him, our love for one another, our adherence to the truth of His revelation; we die with Him first in Baptism, we die to self in our conversion, we mystically die and rise with Him in the Holy Sacrifice and in our encounter with Him in Holy Communion; we wait for Him and see Him as He is at our death, and to be with Him forever. This is the faith of Saint Paul. This is the faith of the Church.