



# Theology Corner

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*Theological Reflections by Paul Chutikorn - Director of Faith Formation*

## “What is a Sacrament?”

There are many articles explaining what the seven sacraments of the Catholic Church are, but it is less common to see an article on what a sacrament *is*. Although, the Catechism is always a great tool to better understand this! This week, I wanted to try and simplify both what a sacrament is and what sacraments are for. Looking at sacraments in general helps to put everything into proper perspective whenever we begin to talk about each of the seven sacraments, individually. To start off, the Catechism defines a sacrament as: “Efficacious signs of grace, instituted by Christ and entrusted to the Church, by which divine life is dispensed to us.” (CCC, 1131) This sounds pretty fancy, but what exactly does it mean? Well, a thing that is efficacious is something that produces an intended effect. For example, medicine is efficacious inasmuch as it produces health. As we have seen, the Catechism calls a sacrament an efficacious *sign of grace*. This means that it actually causes the grace that it signifies. To illustrate this point, think of a stop sign. A stop sign is a sign because it signifies or represents some desired effect, namely, for you to stop. But the stop sign does not actually *cause* you to stop, it only gestures for you to do so. A sacrament, on the other hand, actually *causes* what it signifies because God acts through these signs. Think about the Sacrament of Baptism and the signs used in it. The *matter* of the sacrament being “water” and the *form* being “I baptize you in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.” The water is a sign of cleansing and giving life, but it is not merely a *sign* of cleansing and giving life since baptism actually accomplishes these things! The act of washing with water with the intention to baptize and doing so “in the name of the Father, and the Son, and of the Holy Spirit” truly **cleanses** the baptized person of Original Sin and gives them **new life** as a new creature who is reborn in Christ Jesus.

How exactly is grace conferred through a sacrament? The Catechism teaches that grace is conferred *ex opere operato*, which literally means, “by the work worked” or “by the fact of the action being performed.” (CCC, 1128). What this means is that as long as the minister of the sacrament uses the proper words and actions and intends to do what the Church intends, then the sacrament causes the supernatural effect (i.e., whatever grace is proper to that sacrament). This is very important to understand because in the early Church there was a heresy known as Donatism which taught that grace is conferred *ex opere operantis* which means, “by the work of the worker.” The Donatists thought that if a priest was in a state of mortal sin, then the sacrament that they are administering would be invalid. However, the Church rejected this as a heretical teaching at the Council of Arles in 314 AD. The reason why the Donatists were wrong is because the minister only acts as the instrument through which Christ acts. An evil doctor prescribing medicine to the sick is still effective because the healing power does not come by way of the doctor himself who is the instrument administering medication to the sick. Instead, the healing power comes about from the medication itself. Likewise, an evil minister can administer a sacrament that is still efficacious since the healing power does not come from the minister, but from the divine medication itself -- i.e., the grace of Christ through the Holy Spirit. (As a side note, keep in mind that this doctor analogy applies quite well to an understanding of proper ministers of a sacrament since a doctor has the legal authority from the *state* to prescribe medication just as a priest has the authority to administer a sacrament in virtue of his authority from the *Church* to act in the person of Christ.)

In terms of what a sacrament is *for*, in short, it is for the sanctification of men. Every sacrament is ordered toward some aspect of the spiritual life. The grace of Baptism is for the *giving* of the spiritual life, the grace of Confirmation is for the *strengthening* of the spiritual life, the grace of Confession is for the *restoration* of the spiritual life, the grace of the Eucharist is for the *nourishment* of the spiritual life, the grace of Marriage and Holy Orders are for the *vocational focusing* of the spiritual life, and the grace of the Anointing of the Sick is for the *union of our sufferings with Christ* in the spiritual life. We should all receive the sacraments regularly so that we may be conformed to Christ here on earth and live in joyful hope in being united in glory with him in heaven.