



# Theology Corner

Vol. 20 – November 26th, 2017

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

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## “Why do we need the Sacraments?”

It is easy to get caught up in the repetition of the things we do as Catholics and forget about the utter importance of the Sacraments. To help understand their importance, I think it is necessary to understand what they do. In other words, what is a sacrament? The word sacrament comes from the Latin “*sacramentum*” which means “oath.” In one sense, it is very much like a covenant between us and God. A covenant is much more than a mere contract as some interpret it to be. While a contract is an exchange of goods, a covenant is an exchange of persons. What this means is that when we enter into a covenant with God, God offers himself to us (through His grace) and we offer ourselves to Him in complete obedience. So, through the sacraments, God offers himself by extending out his grace for us to draw closer to him, while we cooperate with his grace by accepting this gift through the sacraments of the Church.

One may ask, “Why is it necessary to receive grace through the sacraments?” The answer is simple. God instituted the sacraments because he knows all. He knows that as human beings, we learn through our senses. The Catechism says that the sacraments are visible signs, but efficacious ones. For example, we cannot physically sense God’s grace without some sort of sign representing it so that we can experience it on our level as humans. Christ always used physical means to signify the work being done whether it be water, bread, mud, spittle, etc. So, the sacraments show us what is happening, but they also bring about the reality they signify – the sacraments do what they say. For anyone in my classes regarding the sacraments, you know that I always like using the example of a stop sign. With a stop sign we see that it is an external sign which represents the concept of stopping. In one sense, this is what the sacraments are for. But the Church tells us that they are efficacious, meaning they do more than represent, but are actually effective in that we receive the graces proper to the sacrament itself. So if the stop sign was a sacrament, it would actually *make* us stop, so to speak. It is then said that they are “outward signs of inward grace.”

The sacraments elevate our nature as we come into contact with the supernatural realities that we wouldn’t otherwise sense without the sacraments. They are a type of covenant by which we are offered God’s grace that he extends to us in love, and that we receive faithfully with the full intention of doing his will. God communicates himself to us through these sacraments that he gave the Church authority to give. But it is important to remember that the grace is not given by the priest or bishop in the sacraments. It is ultimately by the works of Christ “*ex opere operato*” that his grace is made present. However, Christ uses his Church as a means through which the sacraments are given and his grace is then conferred through them as long as they are given under the proper matter and form. To learn more about the sacraments through your own study, I encourage you to read the Catechism in paragraphs 1077-1134. If you have already read the Catechism and want an even deeper understanding, I strongly encourage reading from St. Thomas Aquinas’ *Summa Theologiae* in the Third Part, beginning with Question 60.