

# BIOETHICS MATTERS ENJEUX BIOÉTHIQUES

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## **Sacramental Principle**

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God is all perfect, by definition. God created all things. So in some way everything that is, is an image of God. Therefore, everything points to God, gives us an idea of God, however imperfect. Everything is a sign of God. The heavens proclaim the glory of God. All things do.

The signifying of one thing by another is something well-known to us. We don't always interpret the signs correctly, of course, but mostly we do. A face signifies a particular person, a genuine smile signifies friendship in some way, a false smile points to treachery. An older couple holding hands as they come to church, a mother pacifying a crying child, teenagers' bored body language, a young woman in silent prayer....

Sometimes our signs bring about what they signify. In our parish recently, the Catholic Women's League put together a "meet and greet" event after all the weekend Masses. They had many reasons for this, but one of them was to encourage a community spirit. Sadly, few people took the time after Mass to go downstairs to greet newcomers or to put names on people they see every Sunday, or to introduce themselves. Here there is a sign that people don't want to act as a community, to welcome people into our midst. But more, since other people understood that significance, the non-participants were,

through their non-participation, acting against the purpose of the meeting, creating further barriers to community, in fact. There are endless examples of this efficacious sacramentality in ordinary life, where the sign brings about what it signifies. A gift, which is a sign of friendship, deepens the friendship; a hug which is a sign of togetherness, brings about togetherness.

Often, when we consider the sacramental principle within the context of the Catholic Church, we think of it as a totally unique experience, quite unlike anything in our ordinary lives. In fact, the sacramental principle is the warp and woof of our lives.

The old catechism definition of a sacrament (the seven sacraments) was an outward sign of inward grace ordained by Jesus Christ. Apart from the unnecessary "outward" and "inner," the definition does capture something true. What is missing is an adjective telling us that the sign does what it signifies. It is an efficacious sign. These sacraments, our seven sacraments, bring about unique effects. The sacraments achieve what they signify.

Each sacrament is an encounter with Jesus Christ. This meeting with the Lord deepens our relationship with Him, leads to a deeper sharing in His life. In earlier times, we knew this as sanctifying grace, which is a created participation in the very life of God. God is

love, so our participation is in the love that exists between the Persons of the Trinity.

The sacraments, in addition, bring us what we once knew as actual grace. This means that each sacrament, as well as bringing the gift of divine love, enables the person receiving the sacrament to preserve that love in particular circumstances. For example, the sacrament of the sick strengthens the person who is ill so that illness does not lead to despair or depression or egocentricity, but rather becomes an opportunity to deepen one's love for God and people. Sometimes, to achieve this, the sacrament brings healing. At other times, it brings peace, at others courage.

Granted that we are properly disposed to receive a sacrament, each of the seven sacraments brings divine life and helps to preserve and further this life in the different circumstances of our lives.

The whole Church exists as a sacrament, the sacrament of Christ. The Church is both a divine and human reality. In its humanity, it fails often and sometimes grievously indeed. As a divine reality, it is the spotless bride of Christ. In its totality, it reveals Christ Jesus and makes Him present by the power of the Holy Spirit. In our day, the sins and faults of the humanity of the Church have overwhelmed the belief and trust of many Catholics that they should have in the Church as bride of Christ. And so much is lost. The New Evangelization demands that the whole Church submit to the Holy Spirit in order to cleanse and renew itself, and then spread the good news of the Gospel so that people may be brought to Christ.

So far I have presented the doctrinal teaching of the Church along with traditional theological explanations of things. Now let me turn to a theology which is much more personal to me. Take it for what it's worth. It concerns God's Word to us in Scripture.

St. Ignatius of Loyola taught his followers a particular way of praying, which he called meditation. He asked them to imagine that they were present in various scenes in the Gospel, to think of themselves as one of those present. What I'm suggesting here may seem somewhat like that, but is quite different in reality.

Let me begin by discussing Mass. The Church tells us that through the sacramental principle, we are present with Christ in His sacrifice on Calvary, not just in imagination, but in reality. Stop to take this in. We are with Christ Jesus and in Him as He offers Himself to the Father for all human beings who existed before this day, were alive on this day and who will live till the end of our human race. The homily may be irrelevant, the lectors poor, the singing less than uplifting. But how can anyone be bored with Mass itself if we truly understand what it happening?

In line with this sacramental principle, it seems to me that when mothers take their small children to a Christmas crib, they truly are present to the Infant Christ. When our people make the Stations of the Cross, the same is true. They speak in the present tense to Jesus in His sufferings.

Now to the hub of this article. What I am proposing is that through the Word of Scripture we are present in reality in the

Gospel scenes. We could take any Gospel scene as an example.

Look at Martha, Mary and Lazarus. Of course, we are going to use our imagination here, but we are present not only in imagination, but in reality. The scene is historical, in that it happened one day some two thousand years ago. But, through the sacramental principle, it is also trans-historical, so that we are there truly in the scene. And we will be present each in his or her own way. The following no doubt has general patterns, but it is my way. We also approach the scene with knowledge that Martha and Mary wouldn't have had at this time. We know that Jesus is the Son of God as well as Son of Mary. We know His power, strength and compassion. Here we experience it.

Let's be with Jesus as Martha and Mary send word of the illness of Lazarus, his friend in Bethany, a small town about two miles from Jerusalem where Jesus is. He takes the news calmly, and doesn't seem too concerned. Strange. He loves these people, Lazarus and his sisters. Just how little we know of Jesus, really. Two days, and nothing; business as usual, with his friend at death's door. This illness does not lead to death, rather it is for God's glory, so that the Son of God may be glorified through it. We're on edge. What's going on here? Even John, the beloved disciple, doesn't dare ask the question. It was never about His glory before, He who was born in a stable, the son of Mary and Joseph of modest means.

“Our friend Lazarus has fallen asleep, but I am going there to awaken him.” Good, we think, sleep is a good thing. But then He tells

us, “Lazarus is dead. For your sake I am glad that I was not there, so that you may believe. But let us go to him.” We trust Him, but we can't understand.

He makes for the home of Martha and Mary, who are mourning the death of their brother, Lazarus.

Jesus is calm, but subdued, as he walks to the home of His friends. We don't interrupt His mood. We come near the home. Martha has heard that He is there and comes out to meet him. She is very distressed. Her words are bit strange. “If you had been here, my brother would not have died.”

Was this an accusation, in a sense? Or just the words of a sister speaking from her sorrow? Or did she think that Jesus just couldn't have been there, or He would have? Then a faith assertion, “Even now, God will do whatever You ask of Him.” Without thinking of the raising of her brother, though. “Your brother will rise again.” “I know that he will rise again in the resurrection on the last day.” “I am the resurrection and the life. Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live, and everyone who lives and believes in me will never die. Do you believe this?” “Yes Lord, I believe that you are the Messiah, the Son of God, the One coming into the world.”

Mary comes to meet him, and repeats the words of her sister. They've been talking. “If you had been here, my brother would not have died.” Jesus walks with her to the tomb, along with the others, Mary weeping. He stops, then he weeps. He is sobbing as we do in the face of the death of a loved one. With a few wracking breaths, He stops. Then He

shocks everyone by asking that the stone at the entrance of the tomb be removed. Martha tries to stop this. Her brother's body will be well into decomposition by this time. But Jesus reminds her, "Did I not tell you that if you believed, you would see the glory of God?" So they take away the stone. "Father, I thank you for having heard me. I knew that you always hear me, but I have said this for the sake of the crowd standing here, so that they may believe that you sent me."

"Lazarus, come out." And Lazarus comes from the tomb, still bound by the death linens. "Unbind him and let him go."

It's all too much. We're standing close and He puts his arm around our shoulder. He knows that we love Him, but can't understand everything that's gone on. We have many questions that we will have to struggle with. But those can wait. Our mysterious Friend will show us the way eventually.

I once asked the moralist whom I most admire among moralists when I was giving a retreat whether he understood what I was getting at. "Yes," he said, "but the real question is, is it true?" My being resonates with its truth, and it is wonderful for prayer. ■

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