

Catholic Perspectives on Sacramentality

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Ask a Catholic what he or she understands by the word ‘sacrament’ and the answer would probably be that a sacrament is an outward sign of inward grace and that there are seven of them. *The Catechism of the Council of Trent* (1566) quoted St Bernard in defining a sacrament as ‘a visible sign of an invisible grace, instituted for our justification,’² and, indeed, the first canon of the Council of Trent’s Decree on the Sacraments (1547), after condemning anyone who said that ‘the sacraments of the New Law were not all instituted by Jesus Christ our Lord,’ also condemned anyone who said that they numbered ‘more or less than seven: namely baptism, confirmation, Eucharist, penance, extreme unction, order and matrimony.’³ The first theologian to enumerate seven sacraments appears to have been Peter Lombard (c.1100-1160), who, in the fourth and last of his *Sententiarum libri quatuor* (1155-58) taught that the sacraments of the New Law were baptism, confirmation, Eucharist (*panis benedictio, id est Eucharistia*), penance, extreme unction, order and matrimony (*conjugium*).⁴

The twentieth century, however, saw a major development in Catholic theology, influenced no doubt by the biblical and patristic movements, to get behind the number seven, especially with its anti-Protestant polemical twist at Trent (‘neither more nor less than seven’), and seek the primary and foundational meaning of the concept ‘sacrament.’ One of the pioneers in this development was Henri de Lubac, who in his first book, *Catholicism* (1938), stated: ‘If Christ is the sacrament of God, the Church is for us the sacrament of Christ; she represents him in the full and ancient meaning of the term; she really makes him present.’⁵ Fifteen years later, in his *Méditation sur l’Eglise*

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² *The Catechism of the Council of Trent* (Rockford, Illinois: Tan Books, 1982), p.143; cf St Bernard, *Serm. De Coen. Dom.*, c.2.

³ Heinrich Denzinger, *Enchiridion Symbolorum definitionum et declarationum de rebus fidei et morum*, a cura di Peter Hünermann (Bologna: Edizioni Dehoniane Bologna, 2001), hereafter DH, n.1601. In this numbering, Trent followed Lyons II, which in 1274 was the first council to enumerate seven sacraments. ‘The holy Roman Church holds and teaches that there are seven ecclesiastical sacraments,’ which Lyons listed as baptism, confirmation, penance, Eucharist, order, matrimony, and extreme unction (DH 860).

⁴ Peter Lombard, *Sententiarum libri quatuor, lib.IV, dist., II*.

⁵ Henri de Lubac, *Catholicism* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1988), p.76. De Lubac continued: ‘The highly developed exterior organisation ... is but an expression, in accordance with the needs of this present life, of the interior unity of a living entity, so that the Catholic is not only subject to a power but is a member of a body as well, and his legal dependence on this power is to the end

(1953), he expressed this idea more fully:

The Church is a mystery; that is to say that she is also a sacrament. She is “the total *locus* of the Christian sacraments”, and she is herself the great sacrament which contains and vitalises all the others. In this world she is the sacrament of Christ, as Christ Himself, in His humanity, is for us the sacrament of God.⁶

The seven sacraments are doubly contextualised here, set within the context of two prior realities. The primary reality is the incarnate Christ, who is the sacrament of God. De Lubac quotes the scriptures: Christ is ‘the image of the invisible God’ (Col 1:15), and he said to Philip ‘He who has seen me has seen the Father’ (Jn 14:9).⁷ Joseph Ratzinger likewise quotes St Augustine: ‘The sacrament [*mysterium*] of God is nothing and no one but Christ.’⁸ Then comes the Church, the sacrament of Christ, which ‘contains and vitalises’ the individual sacraments. The fundamental reality from which all sacramentality ultimately derives is therefore the incarnate Son of God, as Francis Sullivan neatly expresses.

When God chose to accomplish our redemption through the man Jesus, he chose an economy of salvation in which something created, of our finite nature, namely the humanity of Jesus, was going to play an essential role in the working out of his plan. When Jesus, in his turn, chose a group of men as his disciples, and prepared them to carry the good news of redemption to the world, and especially when, before he died, he took bread and wine and gave it to them, telling them that this was his body and blood that they were to eat and drink, and to do this in memory of him - in all this he showed that the economy of salvation was going to continue to be ‘sacramental’. God was going to keep on making use of creatures to accomplish his plan. Ordinary men and women, and ordinary things like bread and wine, were going to be signs and instruments of divine grace. And if we think of all the men

that he may have part in the life of that body... It is his duty not merely to obey her orders or show deference to her counsels, but to share in a life, to enjoy a spiritual union’ (p.76) It might therefore be presumed that de Lubac would have endorsed the saying attributed to Alexander Schmemmann: the Church is not an institution which has sacraments; it is a sacrament which has institutions.

⁶ English translation: Henri de Lubac, *The Splendour of the Church* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1986), p.203. De Lubac footnotes his statement about the Church vitalising all the sacraments with a reference to the Decree for the Jacobites (1441-42) of the Council of Florence, which taught: ‘so great is the importance of the unity of the ecclesiastical body that only for those who remain in it are the ecclesiastical sacraments fruitful for salvation (*ad salutem ... proficiant*)’ (DH 1351). There are clear echoes here of patristic sacramental doctrine.

⁷ Cf *The Splendour of the Church*, p.204. The quotations are rendered here in accordance with the Revised Standard Version of the Bible, which is used throughout this paper.

⁸ Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger, *Principles of Catholic Theology* (San Francisco: Ignatius, 1987), p.47; cf Augustine, *Ep.* 187, ch.11, § 34 (PL 33, 845): *Non est aliud Dei mysterium nisi Christus.*

and women, and all the things, that God has specially chosen as signs and instruments of grace, what we have is the church. That is why we call the church the sacrament of salvation; it is the continuation of the sacramental economy that God instituted with the incarnation of his Son.⁹

The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (1994)¹⁰ focuses on the culmination of Christ's life in the Paschal mystery as it describes the sacramental economy. Like Sullivan it relates the sacramental economy primarily to the Church, but now with a pronounced liturgical emphasis.

The Church was made manifest to the world on the day of Pentecost by the outpouring of the Holy Spirit. The gift of the Spirit ushers in a new era in the 'dispensation of the mystery' - the age of the Church, during which Christ manifests, makes present and communicates his work of salvation through the liturgy of his Church, 'until he comes'. In this age of the Church Christ now lives and acts in and with his Church, in a new way appropriate to this new age. He acts through the sacraments in what the common Tradition of the East and the West calls 'the sacramental economy'; this is the communication (or 'dispensation') of the fruits of Christ's Paschal mystery in the celebration of the Church's 'sacramental' liturgy. (CCC 1076)

The sacraments are 'of the Church' in the double sense that they are 'by her' and 'for her'. They are 'by the Church', for she is the sacrament of Christ's action at work in her through the mission of the Holy Spirit. They are 'for the Church' in the sense that 'the sacraments make the Church', since they manifest and communicate to men, above all in the Eucharist, the mystery of communion with God who is love, One in three persons. (CCC 1118)

The teaching of the *Catechism* at this point, highlighting the role of liturgy, reflects the presentation of the idea of the Church as sacrament made several years earlier by Joseph Ratzinger. Ratzinger quotes Origen: 'We discover the spiritual meaning of a *mysterium*, of a *holy* sign, only when we live the mystery', and living the mystery requires *conversion*, which 'has as its point of reference God's plan for mankind and means directing one's life in conformity with that plan.'¹¹ But God's plan is for an 'all-embracing unity', that is, union between human beings and God and their own union with one another. Ratzinger strongly embraces the thesis of de Lubac's *Catholicism*, with its implications

⁹ Francis A. Sullivan, *The Church We Believe In* (Dublin: Gill and Macmillan, 1988), p.122.

¹⁰ *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (Washington DC: United States Catholic Conference & Citta del Vaticano: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1994, 1997), hereafter CCC.

¹¹ *Principles of Catholic Theology*, p.48.

for an understanding of the notion of sacrament, when he says: “The concept of sacraments as the means of grace that I receive like a supernatural medicine in order, as it were, to ensure only my own private eternal health is *the* supreme misunderstanding of what a sacrament truly is.”¹²

A holy sign ... requires liturgical action, and liturgical action requires a community in which to exist and which embodies the fulness of power for such liturgical action.... We can say, then, that the seven sacraments are unthinkable and impossible without the one sacrament that is the Church; they are understandable at all only as practical realisations of what the Church is as such and as a whole. The Church is the sacrament in the sacraments; sacraments are the means by which the sacramentality of the Church is realised. Church and sacraments explain each other.¹³

The Second Vatican Council, which, in Ratzinger’s judgement, ‘in all its comments about the Church, was moving precisely in the direction of de Lubac’s thought’,¹⁴ spoke of the Church as a ‘sacrament’ in three of its four constitutions, on the liturgy, *Sacrosanctum Concilium* (SC, 1963, n.26), on the Church, *Lumen Gentium* (LG, 1964, nn.1, 9, 48), and on the Church in the modern world, *Gaudium et Spes* (GS, 1965, nn.42, 45).¹⁵ De Lubac’s *Méditation* in many ways foreshadowed *Lumen Gentium*. In particular, the book’s opening chapter on ‘The Church as Mystery’ anticipated *Lumen Gentium*’s first chapter entitled ‘The Mystery of the Church’, the very first paragraph of which introduced the idea of the Church as sacrament (LG 1). LG 11 duly set all of the seven sacraments within the context of the Church, as de Lubac advocated. However, the fact that the Council taught about the Church and the sacraments in this way does not, of course, mean that that is now how all Catholics think and speak. In 1986, Ratzinger said: ‘it becomes clear how far the Council is still ahead of us: the idea of the Church as sacrament has hardly entered people’s awareness.’¹⁶

New Testament

We shall examine the Council’s teaching in more detail later, but for now let us focus on the word ‘mystery’ which takes us into the heart of what the

¹² *Principles of Catholic Theology*, p.49.

¹³ *Principles of Catholic Theology*, p.48.

¹⁴ *Principles of Catholic Theology*, p.50.

¹⁵ Of the sixteen documents produced by the Second Vatican Council (1962-65), four were designated as ‘constitutions’, the remaining one being on divine revelation, *Dei Verbum* (1965). Quotations from Vatican II are taken from Austin Flannery (ed.), *Vatican Council II. The Conciliar and Post Conciliar Documents* (Dublin: Dominican Publications, 1975).

¹⁶ Joseph Ratzinger, *Church, Ecumenism and Politics* (Slough: St Paul Publications, 1988), chapter one on ‘The Ecclesiology of the Second Vatican Council’ (paper originally published in 1986), pp.3-20, here at p.19. Cf also, *Principles of Catholic Theology*, p.45.

scriptures teach us about sacramentality. De Lubac shows the equivalence of the words when he says, 'The Church is a mystery; that is to say that she is also a sacrament'.¹⁷ The Latin word *sacramentum* is not, of course, to be found in the New Testament, but the Greek word that it translates, namely *mysterion*, is indeed found there and is particularly prominent in the teaching of St Paul. De Lubac teaches that the Church is a mystery, the sacrament of Christ, and points us to the primordial reality that Christ himself is the sacrament of God. It is Paul who teaches us to apply the word *mystery* first of all to Christ himself. The grounding statement for the whole of sacramental theology may be regarded as being located in Paul's first letter to Timothy: 'Great indeed, we confess, is the mystery (μυστήριον) of our religion: He (lit. 'who', ὅς) was manifested in the flesh, vindicated in the Spirit, seen by angels, preached among the nations, believed on in the world, taken up in glory' (1Tim 3:16). It follows that, for Christians, 'mystery' is not primarily 'what' but 'who', and is ultimately given a personal interpretation by Paul: the mystery is Christ.

There are a few occasions when the New Testament speaks of 'mysteries' in the plural. To the disciples, Jesus says: 'To you it has been given to know the secrets (μυστήρια) of the kingdom of heaven' (Mt 13:11; cf Mk 4:11; Lk 8:12). Here there is a notable sense of revelation; knowledge of the secrets has been given by God and a relationship has been initiated. St Paul also occasionally uses the word in the plural (1Cor 4:1; 13:2; 14:2). Mostly, however, the word is used in the singular, and found in the Pauline letters.¹⁸ It refers to God's will, his providential plan of salvation, a plan long kept secret but now revealed, centred on and culminating in Christ (cf Eph 1:9; 3:3-4; 3:9; Col 1:26-27; 2:2; 4:3; Rom 11:25; 16:25). The 'mystery' of God's will is 'to unite all things in him [Christ], things in heaven and things on earth' (Eph 1:10). The 'mystery' is 'Christ in you, the hope of glory' (Col 1:27). In short, the mystery is the incarnate Christ, now taken up in glory, Christ in his disciples as the hope of glory, and the final unity of all things in Christ.

The predominant message from the New Testament, and especially from Paul, is that 'mystery' is singular and personal. 'Christ is the mystery in person'.¹⁹ This biblical fact should act as a corrective to the tendency instantly to speak of *sacraments*, in the plural, and to view them as things.

We should note two other pieces of New Testament data linked to the above. Paul discovered the mystery of Christ-in-his-followers on the road to Damascus, when the voice from heaven said: 'Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?' (Acts 9: 4); 'I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting' (Acts 9: 5). The identification between Christ and his followers was such that Jesus identified himself as the one being persecuted. This is the mystery that the baptised Paul

¹⁷ See the quotation above at note 5, also Ratzinger/Augustine at note 7.

¹⁸ There are several uses in the book of Revelation also (cf Rev 1:20; 10:7; 17:5; 17:7).

¹⁹ Michael Schmaus, *The Church as Sacrament* (London: Sheed and Ward, 1975), p.21.

subsequently experienced for himself: 'it is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me' (Gal 2:20). 'Christ is all, and in all' (Col 3:11); 'you are all one in Christ Jesus' (Gal 3:28). It is the mystery that Paul came to describe as the body of Christ (cf 1Cor 12: 12-27).

In the gospels, Jesus already spoke of the way in which he would be encountered in his followers, and he identified moreover the one ultimately being encountered at such times. To the twelve, as he sent them out, he said: 'He who receives you receives me, and he who receives me receives him who sent me' (Mt 10:40). De Lubac's threefold scheme clearly echoes this verse: the Church is the sacrament of Christ, and Christ is the sacrament of God. It is interesting to note the parallel texts. In Luke's gospel, it is to the seventy-two being sent out that Jesus says: 'He who hears you hears me, and he who rejects you rejects me, and he who rejects me rejects him who sent me' (Lk 10:16). In John's gospel, Jesus says to those at supper with him: 'he who receives any one whom I send receives me; and he who receives me receives him who sent me' (Jn 13:20). Then in Mark's gospel it is not of his followers at all but of a child that Jesus says: 'Whoever receives one such child in my name received me; and whoever receives me, receives not me but him who sent me' (Mk 9:37). The ripples seem to go out in ever wider circles here: Jesus identifies himself with the twelve, with the seventy-two, with anyone whom he sends, and ultimately with a child. In the reception given to all of them he himself will be accepted or rejected, and in accepting or rejecting him it is God himself whom people will be accepting or rejecting. These gospel passages would indicate, therefore, that 'the Church' which is the sacrament of Christ in de Lubac's phrase is more than just the twelve and their successors; it is all of those sent by Christ, all of the baptised, as is abundantly clear from the Pauline passages above.

We must, however, recognise a still wider scope of Jesus' teaching here, represented by the reference to the child in whom Jesus may be encountered and received (Mk 9:37). In this regard, the account of the last judgement in Matthew's gospel comes also to mind, in which Jesus says not that in their encounter with his followers but that in their encounter with the hungry, the thirsty, the stranger, the naked, the sick and the prisoner people will be encountering him, and either tending him or neglecting him (cf Mt 25: 31-46).

Henri de Lubac and Karl Rahner

It seems, therefore, that not only is the Church the sacrament of Christ, but that in some way the needy are also sacraments of Christ, persons in whom Christ can be found. We may wonder whether the whole of humanity does not, in fact, somehow bear the presence of Christ. Such a view, which may seem a stretch for our modern minds, is in fact profoundly biblical and patristic. In the scriptures and the fathers, humanity is understood in solidarity as a unified

whole. The most notable scriptural example is probably 1Cor 15:22: 'as in Adam all die, so even in Christ shall all be made alive.' Paul teaches the mutuality that pertains within the members of the body of Christ: 'we, though many, are one body in Christ, and individually members one of another' (Rom 12:5; cf Eph 4:25). 'If one member suffers, all suffer together; if one member is honoured, all rejoice together' (1Cor 12:26). This mutuality or solidarity between members of the body of Christ is but an intensification of the solidarity that naturally pertains between members of the human race.

De Lubac richly commented on this theme in *Catholicism*:

[T]he unity of the Mystical Body of Christ, a supernatural unity, supposes a previous natural unity, the unity of the human race. So the Fathers of the Church, in their treatment of grace and salvation, kept constantly before them this Body of Christ, and in dealing with the creation were not content only to mention the formation of individuals, the first man and the first woman, but delighted to contemplate God creating humanity as a whole.... For Irenaeus ... as indeed for Origen, Gregory Nazianzen, Gregory of Nyssa, for Cyril of Alexandria, Maximus, Hilary and others, the lost sheep of the Gospel that the Good Shepherd brings back to the fold is no other than the whole of human nature....

With the first sin it was this being, whole and entire, which fell away, which was driven out of Paradise and sentenced to a bitter exile until the time of its redemption. And when Christ at last appeared, coming as the 'one bridegroom', his bride, once again, was the 'whole human race'.²⁰

Karl Rahner read de Lubac's book and was gripped by these bold perspectives. In a review, he wrote:

In this volume of de Lubac, one sees clearly that according to the most intimate essence of the Christian faith humanity is not simply an exterior, artificial, sum of single individuals, each of whom is working out his own salvation. Instead, humanity, in the original plan of salvation, in the fall of original sin, in the redemption by the work of Christ, and in the entire history of salvation from Adam through to the end of the world and even in eternal salvation, is one holy unity in Christ and in the Church.²¹

Rahner himself subsequently elaborated the broad dimensions of salvation with great imaginative power, influenced not only by de Lubac but particularly by the Greek fathers who inspired de Lubac also.

²⁰ *Catholicism*, pp.25-27.

²¹ Karl Rahner, review of *Catholicisme* (1938) in *Zeitschrift für Katholische Theologie* 63(1939), p.443f., quoted in Rudolf Voderholzer, *Incontro con Henri de Lubac* (Lugano: EUPRESS SA, 2004), p.35.

What is meant by the people of God? The eternal word of the Father, born of the virgin Mary one of the daughters of Eve, has become of one race and family with us (Heb 2:11), not merely of the same nature in the abstract as it were. He belongs to the one human race which is not merely the logical sum of the multitude of individual human beings, but an actually real unity by the will of God. However difficult it may be to find categories to define it, this unity is manifested in the monogenetic descent of all men from the one Adam, is raised above nature by the call of all mankind in that one Adam to a supernatural destiny, and unfolds in original sin and the one history of the human race in salvation and perdition. That unity is confirmed, increased and made definitive by the incarnation of the Logos. Since he is man, a human nature is divinised, thanks to the hypostatic union, through the sanctifying grace that necessarily ensues from that union, and shares in the immediate presence of God by direct vision and love. But because this man Jesus is a member of the one human race, this itself is called to a supernatural destiny in and through him.... God maintains this vocation of all humanity, despite sin, on account of Christ, who by what he is and by what he does, the sacrificial death on the cross, is a member of this single human race. God sees all human beings as brothers and sisters of his incarnate Son 'in the midst of the Church' (Heb 2:10-11), as the people of God with whom he has concluded that new and eternal covenant by that union between God and creature which we call the hypostatic union. By the gracious coming of the Logos in the flesh, in the unity of the race, in the one history of humanity, mankind as a whole has become a consecrated humanity, in fact the people of God.²²

We do not normally think of the whole of humanity as the people of God; that is a title generally reserved for the Church. However, it is important to understand that Rahner is not here proposing to dissolve the Church into humanity at large, rather he is emphatically wanting to anchor the Church in the reality of a consecrated humanity, as the ongoing public presence in the midst of humanity that calls humanity to recognise the head and saviour it already has. Rahner was writing shortly before *Lumen Gentium* and *Gaudium et Spes* were promulgated, and though *Lumen Gentium* spoke only of the Church, and not of humanity as a whole, as the people of God, Rahner's (and de Lubac's) wider perspectives found strong expression in *Gaudium et Spes*, particularly in GS 22, where the Council taught that human nature 'by the very fact that it was assumed, not absorbed, in him, has been raised in us also to a dignity beyond compare,' that 'by his incarnation, he, the son of God, has in a certain way [*quodammodo*] united himself with every human being,' and that all are called 'to one and the same destiny, which is divine.'

²² Karl Rahner, *The Church and the Sacraments* (London: Burns & Oates, 1974), pp.12-13. The original German text, *Kirche und Sakramente*, was published in 1963.

The accent, thus, in GS 22 is on the saving power of the incarnation itself, something that Rahner elaborated specifically from the Greek fathers. By the incarnation, he said, God took the world 'fundamentally and once and for all into his mercy.' 'Through the incarnation the whole of redemption was already pre-formed, even if it still had to be carried out in the suffering of death.' Christ is then, from his very incarnation, 'the historically real and actual presence of the eschatologically victorious mercy of God';²³ and that means that his presence is sacramental.

It is possible to point to a visible, historically manifest fact, located in space and time, and say, because that is there, God is reconciled to the world. There the grace of God appears in our world of time and space. There is the spatio-temporal sign that effects what it points to. Christ in his historical existence is both reality and sign, *sacramentum* and *res sacramenti*, of the redemptive grace of God, which through him no longer, as it did before his coming, rules high over the world as the as yet hidden will of the remote, transcendent God, but in him is given and established in the world, and manifested there....

Christ is the primal sacramental word of God, uttered in the one history of mankind, in which God made known his irrevocable mercy that cannot be annulled by God or man, and did this by effecting it in Christ, and effected it by making it known.²⁴

By the very logic of the incarnation, that public presence must continue.

Now the Church is the continuance, the contemporary presence, of that real, eschatologically triumphant and irrevocably established presence in the world, of Christ, of God's salvific will. The Church is the abiding presence of that primal sacramental word of definitive grace, which Christ is in the world, effecting what is uttered by uttering it in sign. By the very fact of being in that way the enduring presence of Christ in the world, the Church is truly the fundamental sacrament, the well-spring of the sacraments in the strict sense. From Christ the Church has an intrinsically sacramental structure....

Viewed in relation to Christ, the Church is the abiding promulgation of his grace-giving presence in the world. Viewed in relation to the sacraments, the Church is the primal and fundamental sacrament.²⁵

²³ *The Church and the Sacraments*, p.14.

²⁴ *The Church and the Sacraments*, pp.15-16, 18.

²⁵ *The Church and the Sacraments*, pp.18-19.

Vatican II

To understand the Church as sacrament is, then, to understand it as a presence in the world for the world. Perhaps the two most important promises of the Lord in this perspective are: 'lo, I am with you always, to the close of the age' (Mt 28: 20), said precisely as he sent his followers out into the world to teach and baptise; and his promise to them, at the last supper, of the Holy Spirit who will 'take what is mine and declare it to you' and will 'guide you into all the truth' (Jn 16:13-15). As we saw earlier, it was specifically in those who were *sent* in his name that Jesus said people would encounter him, and in encountering him encounter also his Father (cf Mt 10:40; Lk 10:16; Jn 13:20).

It is appropriate, therefore, that Vatican II's most strong and comprehensive statement about the sacramentality of the Church occurs in its pastoral constitution on the Church in the modern world, *Gaudium et Spes*. After stressing again its missionary vision of the Church by stating: 'the Church has but one sole purpose - that the kingdom of God may come and the salvation of the human race may be accomplished',²⁶ the Council declared: 'Every benefit that the people of God can confer on mankind during its earthly pilgrimage is rooted in the Church's being "the universal sacrament of salvation", at once manifesting and actualising the mystery of God's love for men' (GS 45).²⁷ Notably, the idea of a sacrament being an outward sign of inward grace is here fully respected, in that the Church is described as both manifesting (cf outward sign) and actualising (cf inward grace) the mystery of God's love, that mystery, we might appropriately say, being ultimately none other than the person of Christ himself.

The boldness of this conciliar statement contrasts with the slightly tentative nature of the statement in the opening paragraph of *Lumen Gentium*: 'the Church, in Christ, is in the nature of sacrament [*veluti sacramentum*] - a sign and instrument, that is, of communion with God and of unity among all people' (LG 1). It is worth recalling that the opening words of the text, *Lumen gentium cum sit Christus...* [Since Christ is the light of humanity...], at once show both the focus of this ecclesial text on the person of Christ himself, and also its missionary outlook, since it is Christ as light of the world who is invoked, with the desire that his light may shine forth from the Church into the world.²⁸ The

²⁶ Cf Vatican II, Decree on the Church's Missionary Activity, *Ad Gentes*: 'The Church on earth is by its very nature missionary since, according to the plan of the Father, it has its origin in the mission of the Son and the Holy Spirit' (n.2); also the link between the Church's mission and its nature as a sacrament made in GS 42.

²⁷ Ratzinger closely links the conciliar ideas of the Church as the people of God and the Church as sacrament: 'the council intended the two expressions to be mutually complementary and explanatory; only against the background provided by the concept "sacrament" can the concept "people of God" become meaningful'. He therefore considers it very regrettable that, while the former title has flourished, the latter has been so neglected, cf *Principles of Catholic Theology*, pp.45, 54-55.

²⁸ Cf also the statement in LG 1 that the Church intended to set forth in that very text 'her own nature and universal mission'.

link of sacrament and communion made in this paragraph was consolidated in 1985 when the Extraordinary Assembly of the Synod of Bishops, gathered to celebrate the twentieth anniversary of the close of the Council, stated: ‘The Church as communion is a sacrament for the salvation of the world.’²⁹

Lumen Gentium itself became more confident in using the idea of the Church as sacrament as the text continued. In its chapter on the people of God, it stated: ‘All those who in faith look towards Jesus, the author of salvation and the principle of unity and peace, God has gathered together and established as the Church, that it may be for each and everyone the visible sacrament of this saving unity’ (LG 9). There is a footnote reference to Cyprian at this point, recalling his reference to the Church as ‘inseparabile unitatis sacramentum.’³⁰ The Council had already drawn on Cyprian for its statement in *Sacrosanctum Concilium* that ‘Liturgical services are not private functions but are celebrations of the Church which is “the sacrament of unity”, namely, “the holy people united and arranged under their bishops”’ (SC 26).³¹ Finally, *Lumen Gentium* related the Church as sacrament to the idea of the Church as Body of Christ, as we did above with reference to Paul, in a powerful portrayal of Christ in glory:

Christ lifted up from the earth, has drawn all men to himself (cf Jn 12:32). Rising from the dead (cf Rom 6:9) he sent his life-giving Spirit upon his disciples and through him set up his Body which is the Church as the universal sacrament of salvation. Sitting at the right hand of the Father he is continually active in the world in order to lead men to the Church and, through it, join them more closely to himself; and, by nourishing them with his own Body and Blood, make them partakers of his glorious life! (LG 48)

Sacramentality

We saw earlier that, in scriptural terms, the fundamental *mystery* or *sacrament* is the plan of God centred on and summed up in the person of Christ himself, the incarnate Son of God, to have seen whom is to have seen the Father (cf Jn 14:9). By his incarnation, Christ is bound to all human beings and they to him. Already in his earthly life that bond was made visible in the actual gathering of his followers who, to varying degrees, recognised who he was, loved him and pledged themselves to him. As the Council teaches, the outpouring of the Holy Spirit has now firmly established the bond between Christ and his followers and constituted them as his body, the Church. Just as there is no way to come to the Father other than in and through Jesus, ‘the Way, the Truth and the Life’ (Jn 14:6), so also there is ultimately no other way to come to Jesus except in and through some kind of relationship to the Church.

²⁹ Final ‘Relatio’, II, D, 1.

³⁰ Cyprian, *Epist.* 69, 6 (PL 3, 1142B).

³¹ With footnote reference to Cyprian, *On the Unity of the Catholic Church* 7, cf *Letter* 66, n.8,3.

Put another way, there is no possibility for a purely private relationship with Jesus. Jesus has taken the Church to himself as his body (cf Eph 5: 26-30), and the only way by which anyone can enter into relationship with him is as a member of his body, within that matrix of brothers and sisters. The Church is thus not an intermediary between each one and Christ but it is 'mediatory', to invoke an important distinction made by de Lubac. In other words, it is the necessary context for any relationship with Christ.

It is worth reflecting on the careful way in which de Lubac expounds this dimension of sacramentality, essentially characteristic of the way in which Christ is sacrament of the Father and the Church is sacrament of Christ.

That which is sacramental - 'the sensible bond between two worlds' - has a two-fold characteristic. Since on the one hand, it is the sign of something else, it must be passed through, and this not in part but wholly. Signs are not things to be stopped at, for they are, in themselves, valueless; by definition a sign is something translucent which dissolves from before the face of what it manifests³² - like words, which would be nothing if they did not lead straight on to ideas. Under this aspect it is not something intermediate, but something mediatory; it does not isolate, one from another, the two terms which it is meant to link. It does not put a distance between them; on the contrary, it unites them by making present that which it evokes.

On the other hand, sacramental reality is not just any sign, which is provisional and can be changed at will. It is essentially related to our present condition, which is not one embodied in the epoch of figures pure and simple, nor yet one which includes the full possession of the 'truth'. The second aspect of its two-fold characteristic, which is not to be dissociated from the first, thus consists in this: that it can never be discarded as something which has outlived its usefulness. We never come to the end of passing through this translucent medium, which we must, nevertheless, always pass through and that completely. It is always through it that we reach what it signifies; it can never be superseded, and its bounds cannot be broken.³³

Fundamental to Catholic doctrine, and in fact already implicit in the very idea of sacramentality, is the belief that the Church as sacrament of Christ is *visible*. *Lumen Gentium* stresses this point with a very careful analogy between the Church and the incarnate Christ, which makes it plain that although two senses of the word 'Church' can and should be distinguished, one earthly and historical, the other heavenly and ultimately we may say eschatological, these are not to be separated.

³² Cf the reference to 'the light of Christ which shines out visibly from the Church' in LG 1. We note again the affinity between LG and de Lubac's *Méditation*.

³³ *The Splendour of the Church*, pp.203-204.

The one mediator, Christ, established and ever sustains here on earth his holy Church, the community of faith, hope and charity, as a visible organisation through which he communicates truth and grace to all men. But, the society structured with hierarchical organs and the mystical body of Christ, the visible society and the spiritual community, the earthly Church and the Church endowed with heavenly riches, are not to be thought of as two realities. On the contrary, they form one complex reality which comes together from a human and a divine element. For this reason the Church is compared, not without significance, to the mystery of the incarnate Word.' (LG 8)

Moreover, this one Church was entrusted to Peter's pastoral care by Christ after his resurrection, and, 'constituted and organised as a society in the present world'; it 'subsists in the Catholic Church, which is governed by the successor of Peter and by the bishops in communion with him' (LG 8).³⁴

Sacrament and Sacraments

Thus far, we have explored an understanding of Christ as the sacrament of God and the Church as the sacrament of Christ that has been personal and inter-personal throughout. We have seen how modern Catholic theology and Vatican II have renewed a biblical understanding of the Church itself as the people of God and the body of Christ, a community whose whole life manifests and actualises the mystery of God's love in the world (cf GS 45), and through which Christ ministers truth and grace to all people (cf LG 8). The life of such a community will be rich with encounters with the risen Christ and manifold in the ways in which it works for good in the world, aware that it exists in the world but that its citizenship is in heaven (cf Phil 3:20).

In this vision, the sacraments are principal ways in which the risen and glorified Christ sustains here on earth such a community. They are facets of the life of the Church which itself is a sacrament, and it follows that the theology of the sacraments will be healthy and balanced when the Church itself is living a healthy and balanced life as sacrament in the world. History shows that the move to define seven sacraments and then the disputes which followed within a few centuries regarding the number of sacraments correlate with times of fracture in the Church and also with institutional reforms³⁵ which progressively gave the Western Church a juridical structure rather than a communal one.³⁶ That this may not be a chance correlation was suggested at the time of Vatican

³⁴ See also Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, 'Responses to Some Questions Regarding Certain Aspects of the Doctrine on the Church', 29 June 2007.

³⁵ In particular the Gregorian reform, named after Pope Gregory VII (1073-85).

³⁶ See e.g. Avery Dulles, 'The Church as Communion', in Bradley Nassif, *New Perspectives in Historical Theology. Essays in Memory of John Meyendorff* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 1996), pp.125-39, particularly 129-30.

II by the Calvinist theologian Jean-Jacques von Allmen, who noted that the early Church used the term *sacrament* 'much more freely and generously' than was the case after 1274, when Lyons II defined the number of sacraments for the first time. Von Allmen commented: 'the more a Church is faithful to her holiness and therefore appreciates herself as distinct from the world, the less the *sacrament* ... needs to take refuge in *sacraments*: for the Church as a whole is then a sacrament.'³⁷ He added:

Before the present age rushed into the Church, the borders of the Church as such were those of the sacrament. The slow profanation of the Church by the world and the incomplete conversion of the world by the Church have had the consequence, little by little, of reducing the sacrament to sacraments, with a resulting and increasingly marked imbalance [*déséquilibre*] between the Word and the eucharist, between laypeople and clergy, etc. We may anticipate that the more the distinction between the Church and the world is recovered the more preaching will again become an eschatological event, just like the eucharist, and also the more laypeople and clergy will stop mistrusting one another. Such is the welcome opportunity afforded by our "dechristianised" West, which has once again become mission territory.³⁸

Von Allmen's telling implication is that the sacraments have served as fixed points to fall back upon when the life of the Church as a whole has been defective in its sacramentality and mission - holy moments for reassurance, we might say, when overall holiness was lacking - and the disequilibria he mentions are so serious still that his thesis deserves attention. Though he was advocating a clear distinction between the Church and the world, his ideas are not necessarily at odds with *Gaudium et Spes* which in 1965 promoted engagement between the Church and the world. Distinction does not necessarily imply separation. On the contrary, clarity about the Church's corporate identity and purpose in the world, which is precisely what *Lumen Gentium* and *Gaudium et Spes* sought to give, can and should promote more effective engagement with it - that was surely the aspiration of Pope John XXIII in summoning Vatican II.

We might further note that attempts to give an account of the individual sacraments in themselves, particularly to justify the 'institution' of each of them by Christ himself, in the absence of an encompassing and contextualising theology of the sacramentality of the Church, are of their very nature destined

³⁷ Jean-Jacques von Allmen, *Prophétisme sacramentel* (Neuchâtel: Delachaux et Niestlé, 1964), pp.11,35. Von Allmen described the fundamental truths of sacramentality as follows: 'Jesus Christ is the sacrament *par excellence*, because in him the Kingdom of God has come among us (Mt 12:28). Sacrament is thus not a "thing" but a "situation", one in which our world is visited, or rather occupied and transformed, by the presence of the future age. In other words, sacrament is where the sacrament *par excellence*, the incarnate Christ, re-presents himself [*se re-présente*]' (p.13).

³⁸ *Prophétisme sacramentel*, p.36.

to fail, or at least to prove highly contentious, as the sad dispute between Catholics and Protestants over the number of the sacraments instituted by Christ, and the tension between Christian West and East over numbering sacraments at all, amply shows. As suggested earlier, the promises of Christ to be with his Church always (cf Mt 28:20) and to send the Spirit to lead his followers into all truth (Jn 16:13) can themselves ground a trust that the full complement of sacraments willed by Christ and needed by the Church will gradually become known to the Church on its journey through history if it is faithful to its own sacramental and missionary mandate.

It follows that disagreement between Catholics and Protestants over the number of sacraments can be solved only by (re-)establishing a consensus between Christian communions about the Church itself as sacrament, within which the sacraments might then be rehabilitated. Both Rahner and the Lutheran theologian Robert W. Jenson, have advocated this way forward.

Perhaps ... dialogue with Protestant theologians about controverted points of theology in regard to the number of the sacraments might be carried on with better chance of agreement if the number seven were not put at the beginning, as is commonly done in our dogmatic treatises, but was considered as a relatively subordinate consequence, which is only arrived at [at] the end, after a calm consideration in the light of Scripture of all the individual events and activities there are in the Church, as Scripture testifies, and the nature of which can be grasped before they are subsumed under the generic concept of sacrament, the number seven being reached at that point.³⁹

Most broadly and, one may perhaps suggest, most appropriately, 'sacrament' may denote any embodiment *in and for the church* of that Christ whose embodiment *for God and the world* the church herself is. At least when the church is lively, such events occur in unpredictable profusion. If we then speak of the sacraments or a sacrament, the article selects from this profusion identifiable rites that are repeated through time, embodiments of Christ's presence that can be repeatedly recognised....

Philip Melancthon got it right in the *Apology of the Augsburg Confession*; theologians and churches should not be eager to argue about the number of 'the' sacraments. What is important is that we know what things God wants done in the church; that we know what blessing he in each case intends; and that we obey. Afterwards we may sort out the terminology. And if we look at it that way, there is in fact notable ecumenical agreement: eucharist and baptism (the latter including 'confirmation') are necessary for all, and the remaining rites on the Tridentine list are

³⁹ Rahner, *The Church and the Sacraments*, p.80, note 2.

surely necessary for some.⁴⁰

Jenson notes that Vatican II's teaching on the sacramentality of the Church 'has become a centre not merely of Catholic ecclesiology but of ecumenical discussion',⁴¹ and he specifically relates it, as we did above, to Paul's doctrine of the church as the body of Christ. It treats the idea of being the body of Christ with 'ontological seriousness', he says, while avoiding the potentially triumphalistic identification between the Church and Christ that the idea has promoted in the past.⁴² It is therefore a helpful re-casting of Paul's doctrine and a real ecumenical opening.⁴³ To refer to the Church as the body of Christ, or as Vatican II said 'the universal sacrament of salvation' (LG 48), means that 'the church is the object as which the risen Christ is available to be found, to be responded to, to be grasped'. 'The world can find Christ as the assembly of his faithful around his sacraments. The church is the body as which Christ confronts the world.' Again as we did above, Jenson interprets this teaching of Vatican II as essentially 'a *missionary* teaching'.⁴⁴

It is striking that the listing that Vatican II gives of the seven sacraments not only places each of them firmly within the context of the Church, but also, precisely because the Church for Vatican II is missionary, the universal sacrament of salvation, indicates the missionary implications of each of them. Because the Church is missionary, each sacrament is not only ecclesial but by that very fact also a commissioning for mission; both a gift and a charge. In the quotation below, I have italicised the ecclesial reference for each sacrament (identified in bold) and underlined the mission reference.

*The sacred nature and organic structure of the priestly community is brought into operation through the sacraments and the exercise of virtues. Incorporated into the Church by **Baptism**, the faithful are appointed by their baptismal character to Christian religious worship; reborn as sons of God, they must profess before men the faith that they have received from God through the Church. By the sacrament of **Confirmation** they are *more perfectly bound to the Church* and are endowed with the special strength of the Holy Spirit. Hence they are, as true witnesses of Christ, more strictly obliged to spread the faith by word and deed. Taking part in the **eucharistic sacrifice**, the source and summit of the Christian life, they offer the divine victim to God and themselves along with it.*

⁴⁰ Robert W. Jenson, 'The church and the sacraments', in Colin E. Gunton (ed.), *Cambridge Companion to Christian Doctrine* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), pp.207-225, here at p.214.

⁴¹ 'The church and the sacraments', p.207.

⁴² Cf Joseph Ratzinger, *Church, Ecumenism and Politics. New Essays in Ecclesiology* (Slough: St Paul Publications, 1988), p.16.

⁴³ Cf 'The church and the sacraments', p.212.

⁴⁴ Cf 'The church and the sacraments', p.210 (emphasis in original).

And so it is that, both in the offering and in Holy Communion, each in his own way ... has his own part to play in the liturgical action. Then, strengthened by the body of Christ in the eucharistic communion, they manifest in a concrete way that unity of the People of God which this holy sacrament aptly signifies and admirably realises.

Those who approach the sacrament of **Penance** obtain pardon from God's mercy for the offence committed against him, and are, at the same time, *reconciled with the Church....*⁴⁵ By the sacred **anointing of the sick** and the prayer of the priests *the whole Church* commends those who are ill to the suffering and glorified Lord that he may raise them up and save them.... And indeed she exhorts them to contribute to the good of the People of God by freely uniting themselves to the passion and death of Christ.... Those among the faithful who have received **Holy Orders** are appointed to nourish the Church with the word and grace of God in the name of Christ. Finally in virtue of the **sacrament of Matrimony** by which they signify and share ... the mystery of the unity and faithful love between Christ *and the Church*, Christian married couples help one another to attain holiness in their married life and in the rearing of their children.... From the marriage of Christians there comes the family in which new citizens of human society are born and, by the grace of the Holy Spirit in Baptism, these are made children of God so that the People of God may be perpetuated throughout the centuries. In what might be regarded as *the domestic church*, the parents are the first heralds of the faith with regard to their children. They must foster the vocation which is proper to each child, and this with special care if it be to religion. (LG 11)

Vatican II thus does what Michael Schmaus notes the early Church gradually began to do, namely 'to describe the great rites of salvation within the total sacramentality of the Church', and to apply to them the word 'mystery' or 'the synonymous *sacramentum*'.⁴⁶ We saw earlier that 'mystery' in the New Testament primarily refers to God's plan of salvation, summed up and personified in Christ himself, though whom and for whom all things were made (cf Col 1:16), God's plan for the fulness of time being 'to unite all things in him' (Eph 1:10). Mystery/sacrament having essentially that singular, overarching sense in the New Testament, it seems that the word then gradually began to be used by the early Church in the plural form to refer to what might be called 'refractions' of that primary sense in space and time, i.e. to refer to the occasions when God's plan of salvation in Christ particularly impacted on the life of the community or on the lives of individuals in the community, e.g. when they accepted the plan and were initiated into it in Baptism, or when their corporate participation in the plan was celebrated and the covenant renewed

⁴⁵ Curiously, the sacrament of Penance is the only one for which a consequent missionary responsibility is not mentioned. The scriptures readily indicate one, e.g. in 2Cor 5:18-20.

⁴⁶ *The Church as Sacrament*, p.22.

in Eucharist. Justin seems to have been the first to extend use of the word in this way. These extensions, however, must always be seen in the context of the original meaning and be held in unity by it. One overarching plan is at work in all sacramental celebrations: Christ the Lord is building up the Church as his body for the praise of God and the salvation of the world, human beings are being drawn from sin and isolation into the grace and unity of God's kingdom, the plan for the fulness of time is at work, faith in the victory of Christ is being celebrated and hope for a share in the final fulness of his glory is being strengthened. Our world is visited and transformed 'by the presence of the future age',⁴⁷ namely Christ and all things in Christ.

As already noted, the *Catechism* focuses on the Paschal mystery of Christ as the overarching and unifying factor in the sacramental economy (cf CCC 1076).

[Christ's] Paschal mystery is a real event that occurred in our history, but is unique: all other historical events happen once, and then they pass away, swallowed up in the past. The Paschal mystery of Christ, by contrast, cannot remain only in the past, because by his death he destroyed death, and all that Christ is - all that he did and suffered for all men - participates in the divine eternity, and so transcends all times while being made present in them all. The event of the Cross and Resurrection *abides* and draws everything toward life. (CCC 1085)

Schmaus describes the appropriateness of the seven particular sacraments within the overall sacramentality of the Church.

Although those seven sacred signs which, after various divergences, came to be known from the middle of the twelfth century as 'sacraments' in the strict sense are concretisations and concentrations of the Church's total sacramentality and are only to be understood within this perspective, they are nevertheless not arbitrary manifestations of the Church's sacramentality but ones which correspond to the living situation of the individual and of the Church community. It is clear that the community needs a rite in which it constantly realises itself (the eucharist); it needs a rite of acceptance for new members (baptism); it needs constant self-reflection and self-renewal (penance); it must deal with the problem of illness and death (the last anointing); it needs an inner structure (the ordination of bishops and priests); it must deal with the question of how the individual Christian lives his Christian faith in his daily life in the face of temptation (confirmation); and the union of the believing man and woman in marriage in the community formed by Christ is a natural expression of the Church's sacramentality (matrimony). Thus the manifestations of the life of the Church as a total sacrament lead to

⁴⁷ Cf von Allmen, *Prophétisme sacramental*, p.13 (above, note 36).

seven particular sacraments, each with a special place in the life of the Church.⁴⁸

The *Catechism* states that, over the centuries, the Church has discerned among its liturgical celebrations seven that are strictly 'sacraments instituted by the Lord' (CCC 1117), and it gives structure to the seven by grouping baptism, confirmation and Eucharist as 'The Sacraments of Christian Initiation' (CCC 1212-1419), penance/reconciliation and the anointing of the sick as 'The Sacraments of Healing' (CCC 1420-1532), and holy orders and matrimony as 'The Sacraments at the Service of Communion' (CCC 1533-1666).

The Sacramentality of Ordination

It is appropriate to close these reflections with some consideration of the sacramentality of ordination, which has been a topic of controversy among Christians in the West. If the Church is 'the official presence of the grace of Christ in the public history of the one human race',⁴⁹ and if sacraments are 'the means by which the sacramentality of the Church is realised',⁵⁰ the appointment of the Church's leaders who will preach the gospel and minister the sacraments can hardly be a matter of indifference. 'The ministerial priesthood is a *means* by which Christ unceasingly builds up and leads his Church. For this reason it is transmitted by its own sacrament, the sacrament of Holy Orders.' (CCC 1547)

The ordained priesthood guarantees that it really is Christ who acts in the sacraments through the Holy Spirit for the Church. The saving mission entrusted by the Father to his incarnate Son was committed to the apostles and through them to their successors: they receive the Spirit of Jesus to act in his name and in his person. The ordained minister is the sacramental bond that ties the liturgical actions to what the apostles said and did and, through them, to the words and actions of Christ, the source and foundation of the sacraments. (CCC 1120)

The word 'guarantees' in the above quotation needs careful explanation, particularly in an ecumenical context. The ultimate *guarantor* of all that the Church does is God himself, faithful to his promises. As said above, Christ's promise to be with his Church always (Mt 28:20) and the promise of the Spirit

⁴⁸ *The Church as Sacrament*, pp.22-23. Jacques Dournes particularly explores the symbolism of seven in 'Why Are There Seven Sacraments?', in E.Schillebeeckx & B.Willens, *The Sacraments in General. A New Perspective* (Concilium, Dogma, vol.31; New York: Paulist Press, 1968), pp.67-86. With regard to the title of the book, Dournes comments: 'There is no such thing as a sacrament in general; there is one capital sacrament, the new sacrament, Christ, and there are modes in which his powers are applied' (p.77).

⁴⁹ Rahner, *The Church and the Sacraments*, p.19, cf also the quotation above at note 24.

⁵⁰ Ratzinger, *Principles of Catholic Theology*, p.48.

who would lead the Church into all truth (Jn 16:13), ground the Church's unshakeable confidence and certain hope that Christ himself is present in the power of the Spirit in the acts decisive for the life of the Church and the salvation of its members that are called *sacraments*. The Church knows that Christ wants these acts to be celebrated, and trusts that it therefore has been empowered to organise itself to that end, by choosing people upon whom it will invoke the gift of the Holy Spirit with confidence that that gift will be given for the good of the community. 'Catholics believe that when the Church ordains those who will officially act in the name of Christ in the midst of his people, those acts of ordination are of such decisive importance that they, too, are sacraments, moments of prayer and of absolute confidence in the active presence of Christ himself, faithful to his promise.'⁵¹

Of course, the ordained are sinners, like the rest of the community, but just as the sins of the Church's members do not prevent us from professing faith in the one, *holy*, catholic and apostolic Church, confident that the sins of the members will never extinguish the flame of Christ's victory over sin by which he has won salvation for the world and taken the Church to himself as his spotless bride (cf Eph 5:25-27), so Catholics believe that the sins of the ordained ministers can never extinguish the objective presence of the risen Christ in the sacraments,⁵² nor, more specifically, the objective call of Christ to the ordained to configure themselves to him by a grace unfailingly offered to them in the act of ordination itself and ever thereafter.⁵³ Hence, Catholics believe that ordination is a sacrament. It is undeniable that the practical fruitfulness of the preaching of the gospel and the celebration of the sacraments is affected by the holiness of the Church's ministers, and it is reasonable to conclude therefore that, as a matter of principle, Christ wills to sanctify those appointed to lead, teach and sanctify in his Church, and, so willing, has instituted a specific means of grace for them: the sacrament of ordination. The extent to which each ordained person accepts the offer, embraces the grace, and therefore practically realises the holiness that both Christ and the Church will for them surely varies from person to person and ultimately is known only to God. Nevertheless, the offer

⁵¹ International Commission for Dialogue Between the Roman Catholic Church and the World Methodist Council, *The Grace Given You in Christ* (Seoul Report, 2006), n.132.

⁵² As Rahner says, if 'an actual official action of an individual minister' depended on his personal holiness, 'the Church as represented in the acts of her minister would not be the invincible manifestation of redemptive grace, if such an act could be invalidated by an individual's guilt,' *The Church and the Sacraments*, p.99. Cf *The Grace Given You in Christ*, n.134: 'Whatever the weakness and sinfulness of the minister, God's salvific action in Christ, through the power of the Holy Spirit, is never thereby brought to nothing. When Christ says to his followers, "I am with you always", he is giving a guarantee on which we can rely. We must be vigilant and never complacent, but vigilance must not compromise our hope, confidence and trust.'

⁵³ The *objective* aspect of the sacraments, of the objective presence and call of Christ mentioned here with regard to ordination, is what is intended by the phrase *ex opere operato* in Catholic sacramental theology. In its objective reality, a sacrament is an *opus operatum*.

of grace is made and Christ unfailingly sustains the offer, by his presence in and through the sacrament of ordination.

In a sacramental Church, which displays and enacts that which it understands itself to be, and which trusts that the one saviour, Jesus the Lord, is present and active in its ordained ministers, it will be important to make evident the fact that the Lord himself is *one* and that his actions are *one* across space and time. The time-honoured way in which this has been done in the Church is by the visible succession of the ordained through history and the visible bonds that unite the ordained across the world at a given point in history. Thus is the *communio* of the Church across space and time both expressed and secured, again only by the grace of the Holy Spirit, whose gift is *koinonia* (cf 2Cor 13:13). The historical dimension of this communion is expressed in the above passage from the *Catechism* (CCC 1120) with its reference to the succession of ordained ministers and with its strong description of ordained ministers themselves as *sacramental bonds* visibly linking liturgical actions today with those in the Church through history, going back to the apostles and to Christ himself. They could equally be referred to as sacramental bonds linking liturgical actions in different places today together as one. The prime ministers of Christ in the Church are the bishops, whom Vatican II describes as high priests (cf SC 41), ‘vicars and legates of Christ’ (LG 27), to whom primarily is entrusted the celebration of the Eucharist in the Church (cf LG 26); and the prime manifestations of their communion in time and space are their apostolic succession and their collegiality, respectively. Bishops presiding at the Eucharist name the pope, the head of the college of bishops (cf LG 22), in the Eucharistic Prayer, and a priest presiding at the Eucharist in the bishop’s name (cf SC 42, LG 28) additionally names the local bishop. The bonds of communion, woven by the Holy Spirit, are thus sacramentally expressed by the naming of persons, who themselves are renewed in their own identity as bonds of communion precisely in and by the Eucharist.

St Thomas Aquinas stated a perennial principle of Catholic theology when he wrote: ‘the sacrament of order is directed to the sacrament of the Eucharist.’⁵⁴ Though his account of the sacrament of order as sevenfold and culminating in the priesthood, which has ‘the power to consecrate the body and blood of Christ,’⁵⁵ reflects the preoccupation with the real presence of Christ in the eucharistic elements that dominated scholastic eucharistic theology to the detriment of an appreciation of the ecclesial effect of the Eucharist,⁵⁶ his principle still admirably summarises Vatican II’s understanding of the sacrament of order, culminating

⁵⁴ St Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, suppl., q.37, art.2, resp.

⁵⁵ *Summa Theologiae*, suppl., q.37, art.2, resp.

⁵⁶ Cf Joseph Ratzinger, ‘The Pastoral Implications of Episcopal Collegiality’, *Concilium* vol.1, no.1 (1965), pp.20-43: ‘the separation of the doctrine of the Eucharist and ecclesiology, which can be noted from the eleventh and twelfth centuries onwards, represents one of the most unfortunate pages of medieval theology’ (p.28).

in the episcopate (cf LG 21). For Aquinas, being raised to the episcopate was not an ordination to minister the Eucharist but a consecration to exercise power over 'Christ's mystical body', the Church.⁵⁷ For Vatican II, however, it is precisely because of his responsibility to shepherd the Church that the bishop is the principal presider at the Eucharist, because the eucharistic sacrifice is now once again understood as 'the source and summit of the Christian life', the sacrament which 'aptly signifies and admirably realises' the unity of the people of God (LG 11). Priests/presbyters and deacons are the two sets of co-workers who assist the bishop in the task of the ordained ministry which is to enable the people of God to live a truly eucharistic life of praise, service and mission in the world, as 'the universal sacrament of salvation' (cf LG 48).

Conclusion

In conclusion, I would simply highlight the thread of hope/confidence/trust in the power and promise of God that weaves together the above account of sacramentality, and gives to the Church's sacramental life a pronounced eschatological character as we await the final accomplishment of God's plan of salvation: 'hope does not disappoint us, because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit which has been given to us' (Rom 5:5). The Church as sacrament is nothing in itself but everything in Christ, 'the same yesterday and today and forever' (Heb 13:8), who himself is the true *lumen gentium* (cf LG 1).

⁵⁷ Cf *Summa Theologiae*, suppl., q.38, art.2, resp.2.