

THE CATHOLIC WORLD REPORT

Words matter: On Christ, clerics, and the sacraments

We clerics must use the matter and form given to us by Christ and handed down to us from the Apostles. If we fail to do this, we will not have a complete picture of God's plan of salvation and will be unable to help Christ finish what he started.

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My wife loves puzzles. She has been working on a thousand-piece puzzle since last December and is determined to complete it by herself. As she nears the end, I noticed that several pieces of the puzzle are missing (most likely due to our cat, Harriet, who has a tendency to recline directly on top of the game). Without those pieces, she does not have a complete picture and will be unable to finish what she started.

Our Lord Jesus Christ has equipped his Bride, the Church, with everything she needs for salvation. He gave us a complete and perfect picture to which nothing need be added or taken away. This is particularly true of the sacraments that are sensible signs instituted by Christ that confer grace, and by the action of Christ and the power of the Holy Spirit, they convey what they signify and transmit what they contain.

Therefore, as clerics (bishops, priests and deacons)—to whom the authority to administer the sacraments has been entrusted—we must use the matter and form given to us by Christ and handed down to us from the Apostles. If we fail to do this, we will not have a complete picture of God's plan of salvation and will be unable to help Christ finish what he started.

In his letter to the Colossians, St. Paul does not deny the reality of Christ's complete and perfect sacrifice as the sole means of salvation, but acknowledges that clerics are called to participate in the continuing work of Christ in his Church on earth:

Now I rejoice in my sufferings for your sake, and in my flesh I complete what is lacking in Christ's afflictions for the sake of his body, that is, the church, of which I became a minister

according to the divine office, which was given to me for you, to make the word of God fully known. (Col 1:24-25)

We see a foreshadowing of this participation through the action of Christ himself when he raised the twelve-year-old girl from the dead (“Taking her by the hand he said to her, ‘Talitha cumi’, which means, ‘Little girl, I say to you, arise.’ And immediately the girl got up and ... [he] *told them to give her something to eat*” [Mk 5:41-43, my emphasis]), and when he raised Lazarus from the dead (“The dead man came out, his hands and feet bound with bandages, and his face wrapped with a cloth. Jesus said to them, ‘*Unbind him, and let him go*’ [Jn 11:44, my emphasis]).

In both cases, Christ did the primary work of bringing the dead back to life, but he left—and continues to leave—work for us to do.

Bishops, priests, and deacons are ordinary ministers of the sacrament of baptism. Deacons receive the faculty to baptize solemnly, and are tasked to “assist the bishop and the priest during liturgical actions in all things” (*Sacrum Diaconatus Ordinem*, 21.1). The Acts of the Apostles chronicles two occasions where the deacon Philip baptizes those to whom he preached the Gospel:

... when they believed Philip as he preached good news about the kingdom of God and the name of Jesus Christ, they were baptized, both men and women. (Acts 8:12)

Then Philip opened his mouth and ... told him the good news of Jesus. [...] And he commanded the chariot to stop, and they both went down into the water, Philip and the eunuch, and he baptized him. (Acts 8:35, 38)

Through Jesus Christ, all of us who are baptized are welcomed into God’s family as His adopted children. “Holy Baptism is the basis of the whole Christian life, the gateway to life in the Spirit, and the door which gives access to the other sacraments. Through Baptism we are freed from sin and reborn as sons and daughters of God; we become members of Christ and His Church, and participate fully in her mission of sharing the Good News of God’s love by our words, actions, and witness” (*Catechism of the Catholic Church*, no.1213).

In order for sacramental grace of baptism to be efficacious, all of the pieces—the constitutive elements of the sacraments—must come together. “By [Christ’s] power He is present in the sacraments, *so that when a man baptizes it is really Christ Himself who baptizes*” and, because this is true, “no other person, even if he be a priest, may add, remove, or change anything in the liturgy on his own authority” (*Sacrosanctum Concilium*, nos.7, 22.3, my emphasis).

This means, in accord with the command of Christ and the authority of his Church, clerics must use the correct matter and form in order for the sacraments to be valid. If the priest does not use the words of Christ in the institution narrative (“This is my body ... this is my blood”) there is no Eucharist. If the priest does not use the words “I absolve you” in the Sacrament of Reconciliation, the sins are not forgiven. If

the cleric does not use the words “I baptize you in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit” there is no baptism. Words matter.

The aberrations that have occurred in the last few years regarding the misuse of the baptismal formula most likely stem from a significant misunderstanding of the four-fold presence of Christ in the liturgy. As articulated by the Second Vatican Council, Christ is present in the Word proclaimed, in the assembly of the faithful, in the person of the priest, and in the sacraments, most especially in the Most Blessed Sacrament of the Eucharist (see *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, no.7).

Although Christ is truly present in the liturgy, he is not *equally* present in all aspects. Jesus is not present in the Scriptures at Mass in the same way he is present in the priest, and Christ is not present in the worshipping community in the same way he is present in the Eucharist. By creating a false equanimity among Christ’s presence in the Church’s liturgy (whether innocently or deliberately), clerics create a dichotomy between the action of Christ and his Church in order to “level the playing field”.

In other words, by their actions, these clerics are saying, “I recognize the priesthood of all believers as being equal to my ordination. Therefore, since I’m not greater than the worshipping community, we all should be allowed to participate in the sacraments. After all, we are the Church.” This distorted ideology and complete failure to appreciate the vital yet distinct roles of clerics and laity in the Church has led, either directly or indirectly, to the negligence we have seen in the administration of baptism.

Through baptism, Jesus shows us that “God is rich in mercy. Because of His great love for us, God brought us to life with Christ when we were dead in sin, raised us up with Him, and seated us with Him in the heavens” (Eph 2:4-6). Jesus’ baptism is a foreshadowing of His perfect and complete act of self-giving, self-emptying love on the Cross. The same Holy Spirit who had hovered over the waters of the first creation descended on Christ as a prelude of the new creation brought about by his death and resurrection. The Word became flesh because, in the work of salvation, he wanted to touch us with his own hands and love us with his own heart. Through the sacraments, the cleric represents this reality on behalf of Christ.

If we are to be truly Church, truly the Body of Christ, we must not be afraid to follow Jesus, to truly live our baptismal call to holiness wherever we are on our life’s journey. As clerics, we *must* allow the flood waters of baptism to destroy our own selfishness, egotism, and sinfulness which prevent us from fulfilling our obligation to administer the sacraments in accord with the heart and mind of the Church. We must open our hearts to the Holy Spirit so that, like Christ, we may not do our own will, but the will of God the Father.

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