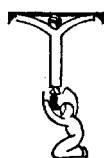


SUPERSTITION VERSUS SACRAMENTS

BY

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O say that sacraments are magic may be no more than vulgar abuse but it may be a scientific attack. In this short article we will suppose it is the latter and try to deal with it accordingly, and it may be worth while to say at the start that most of the reasons why men are tempted to classify Sacraments as magical are due to their being considered as more or less separate and independent elements. Indeed the writer seems to remember a learned lecturer in the Angelico College at Rome some years ago speaking of the danger of treating the Sacraments *nimis avulsa* from the person of Christ. This is a most important aspect of sacramental theology which deserves an article to itself. Here we would take it simply as a starting point for opposing an attack on the sacraments which reveals a danger in the use of them.

Now it seems that every important organ of a physical body has some disease to which it is specially liable. (Indeed one well-known mental specialist maintained that there is a mental affliction to correspond with every physical illness). In the same way it seems that there is a debased form to correspond with most, if not all, of the elements of true religion. Thus, to begin at the lower end, blessed objects misunderstood and misused would be on the way to becoming comparable to fetishes, a belief in the saints might descend into polytheism, and sacraments misunderstood would correspond to magic more than to any other form of falsity. Why so?

We will now point out those characteristics of the sacraments which our opponents lay hold of in order to make their claim, viz., that they partake of the nature of magic. First the effect claimed for a sacrament seems out of all proportion to the visible cause—the exertions of the celebrant. Secondly, the claim that they are infallible in producing their effects (unless we put an obstacle in the way) seems to show that the sacraments have a power of ‘forcing’ the Deity, which is one of the chief properties of magic. Thirdly, sacraments are *sui generis* not exactly prayer, nor worship nor sacrifice, but are signs and so would seem to correspond to sympathetic magic.

These objections may be quite briefly answered. Firstly, that a very small cause is said to produce such a great effect. St Thomas points out that the sacraments cannot of themselves give grace; they are simply instruments in God’s hand. So this difficulty vanishes at once when sacraments are considered (as they should be) in close

relation with their Author. Secondly, the operation of the sacraments seems like forcing the hands of God. But our opponents appear to assume that everything that is certain, regular and completely reliable must belong to the realm of science, so as to leave to religion only what is vague and uncertain. Yet no one seems to find any difficulty about the 'Covenant' about which so much is said in the Old Testament. God can bind himself, and here again the certainty of the operation of a sacrament is due to the promise and will of Christ, so that when we celebrate a sacrament we rely on the fidelity of Christ and at the same time honour that fidelity, and that is as far from magic as it is possible to conceive.

Dr McDougall in his *Social Psychology* (p. 263) writes:

I suggest that the fundamental distinction between religious and magical practices is not that religion conceives the powers it envisages as personal powers while magic conceives them as impersonal, but rather that the religious attitude is always that of submission, the magical attitude that of self-assertion. . . .

Now turning to the *Summa* of St Thomas, we find various reasons for the existence of sacraments:

Secunda ratio sumenda est ex statu hominis, qui peccando se subdidit per affectum corporalibus rebus. Ibi, autem, debet medicinale remedium homine adhiberi ubi patitur morbum. (III. 61. 1.)

So the use of sacraments is an example not of arrogance but rather of contrition, and not of agnosticism but of faith—for St Thomas also says:

Sacramenta (sunt) quaedam signa protestantia fidem quo justificatur homo. (III. 61. 4.)

And thus magic rather suggests someone who has made a 'corner' in knowledge or skill of a queer sort and is using it for more or less anti-social ends; sacraments, on the contrary, are operations connected with great historic events in the past as they recall the work and Passion of Christ. (see *Summa* III. 60. 3) and the teaching of the Church concerning them is open to all men to study.

Nor is it surprising that Old Testament rites and Christian sacraments should have much outwardly in common with pagan practices, seeing that the former were instituted by God to suit human nature, and evolved by man out of the same nature. But the intentions can be very different. This is a point which St Thomas emphasises again and again. To take only one instance at random, he says that worship towards the west was introduced in the law to exclude idolatry, for others turned to the east to worship the sun. St Thomas is constantly pointing out that practices were intended to withdraw the people from false worship by being different in some respect from those of the surrounding nations.

Thus in dealing with the sacraments St Thomas shows that one of their merits is that they help to exclude superstition, for if they did not occupy the strategic points of life, such as birth, growth, marriage, sickness and death, it is certain that some superstitious rites would find a footing. In recent years this has been brought home to us by the action of the Nazis with their life feasts and ceremonies for naming a child and so on (cf. *Blackfriars*, 'Nazi Liturgy', Feb., 1946). Lotz has well expressed this:

Whenever human races have not quite degenerated, we find the birth of a child, his attainment of manhood, marriage, death and burial all distinguished by ceremonies . . . indicating the feeling that in human life nothing takes place rightly and as it should if it merely takes place, if it is not recognised and set in its fitting place in the succession of events by the participation in some ceremony of a community, a society, a family. (*Microcosmos*, I, 598.)

So the sacraments garrison important points and prevent superstitious practices from gaining a footing they otherwise surely would obtain. This is not to say that certain people here and there may not have a more or less superstitious approach to sacraments—the weakness of human nature will account for such. The writer knew of a case (not in a Catholic Church) when after a Baptism in which the child had been named (say) Henry John, the father afterwards gave his name as John Henry, and on being asked why he had reversed the order remarked that he had had bad luck and thought this might help his child to do better.

Nor can any capital be made out of the fact that sacraments are 'signs'. They are signs because they signify in the past the Passion of Christ, in the present the conferring of grace and in the future the hope of glory (cf. *O Sacrum Convivium*), whereas sympathetic magic seems to be based on the principle of the dummy egg. But even here we must be fair and cautious. It may be that much which European observers have taken to be magical symbolism may have been intended as a 'prayer acted out'. As the Rev. M. Briault, C.S.Sp. writes:

Everything in magic need not . . . be wrong. It may preserve beliefs similar to those of religion, but . . . it seeks alliances with perverse elements, it is always more or less mingled with esotericism and mystery. (*Polytheism and Fetishism*, p. 169.)

Sacraments, on the other hand, are in alliance with all that is good, they are open to all men to receive, and in so far as they are mysteries no one can completely comprehend their working, but what can be understood is open for the examination of one and all.