

### **Christ's Seven Sacraments, Channels of Grace**

Many months ago we started looking at the Holy See's 1998 *Doctrinal Commentary*, with its overview of doctrines that all Catholics must believe. Returning to that, we next come to its examples of dogmas on the sacraments, which it draws from the Council of Trent (1545-63), the 19<sup>th</sup> of the Church's 21 Ecumenical Councils. It was at Trent in northern Italy that the Catholic Church gave her response to the crisis of the Protestant Reformation that had convulsed much of Europe since 1517. The Council laid the massive groundwork for the great resurgence of the Catholic Church that would follow.

Above all, the Bishops at Trent made numerous proclamations of Catholic dogma and doctrine. The headings of the decrees give an idea of their main focus, and of the Protestant positions that were challenging these points of Catholic teaching and practice: Sacred Scripture and Traditions; Original Sin; Justification; the Sacraments in General; Baptism; Confirmation; the Sacrament of the Eucharist; the Sacraments of Penance and Extreme Unction [Anointing]; Communion under Both Species, and the Communion of Young Children; the Sacrifice of the Mass; the Sacrament of Orders; the Sacrament of Marriage; Purgatory; the Invocation, Veneration and Relics of the Saints and on Sacred Images; and finally, Indulgences.

As well as positive expositions of the true doctrine, these documents include some 135 'canons' / 'anathemas', in which specific false opinions are condemned. One finds here infallible declarations either (depending on their subject matter) of divinely revealed dogmas, or of doctrines connected with divine revelation. (cf. F. Sullivan *Creative Fidelity* pp. 49-55, 91, 99)

So if you're looking for infallible Catholic teachings on any of those topics, you'll especially find them in the decrees of Trent. For example, Trent defined the complete list of books accepted as Sacred Scripture (after the Protestant reformers had denied the inspiration of seven books of the Old Testament); and the role of Sacred Tradition in giving us God's word, along with Sacred Scripture. On the key issue of the Reformation, justification – that is, the question of how human beings are 'justified' (made right with God and set on the path to heaven) – Trent gives the most authoritative and extensive single statement of Catholic truth on this matter. This covers things like salvation through Christ; the necessity of God's grace; human free will; faith and good works; the necessity of keeping the commandments; mortal sin; and merit of heavenly reward for good works performed in the grace of Christ.

In the years following the Council, the Popes promulgated further documents in response to the Council's mandate. First, there was the Tridentine Profession of Faith (*Creed of the Council of Trent*) (1564). Then came the *Roman Catechism* (the *Catechism of the Council of Trent*) (1566). Issued by Pope St Pius V, this was addressed especially to parish priests to guide their teaching of the people. It was the only universal catechism in the Catholic Church until the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* was promulgated by Pope St John Paul II in 1992. Finally, the Roman Missal of 1570, also issued by St Pius V, gave the standardised form until Vatican II for the celebration of Mass in the Roman Rite. (Following Vatican II, the reformed Roman Missal was published by Pope St Paul VI (1970), which of course we still use today for the celebration of the Ordinary Form of the Mass.)

Besides doctrinal documents, Trent also decreed many reforms of the Church's life, in view of various corruptions amongst bishops, clergy and religious (such as bishops not residing in their dioceses, or defects in the education or moral lives of priests). One result of the Council was the first establishment of seminaries for priestly training.

So that's an overview of the Council of Trent. Turning back to the 1998 *Doctrinal Commentary* of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, the *Commentary* references teachings of Trent in connection with five examples of teachings of divine faith: 'the doctrine of the institution of the sacraments by Christ'; 'their efficacy with regard to grace'; 'the doctrine of the real and substantial presence of Christ in the Eucharist'; 'the sacrificial nature of the eucharistic celebration', the Mass; and 'the doctrine on the existence of original sin.' Today we'll look at the first two: the institution of the sacraments, and their power to confer divine grace.

On the institution of the sacraments, the *Commentary* cites this condemnation of false doctrine at Trent: 'If anyone says that the sacraments of the New Law were not all instituted by Jesus Christ our Lord; or that there are more or fewer than seven, that is: Baptism, Confirmation, the Eucharist, Penance, Extreme Unction, Orders and Matrimony; or that any one of these seven is not truly and properly a sacrament, let him be anathema.' (DS 1601)

This declaration of an 'anathema' against anyone holding the false doctrines is a standard way infallible teachings have been given across the centuries. The style of Church documents has changed since Trent, and the language of 'anathema', warning that those holding the attached false doctrine were excommunicated, may seem harsh to us. But this usage actually comes from the New Testament, in the original Greek of St Paul's words: 'If anyone is preaching to you a gospel contrary to that which you received, let him be *anathema*', (*Gal* 1:9) that is, let him be accursed. The strength of the language is a pastoral warning by shepherds to the flock that rejecting any point of the Church's faith involves us in gravest danger to our eternal salvation.

So it's a dogma of Catholic faith that there are seven sacraments, as listed; and that Christ himself instituted each one. Theologians explain that this doesn't mean that Christ laid down all the *details* of how each one would be celebrated, for example Confirmation or Matrimony. But the point is, they do all fundamentally come from him. The Church doesn't have the power to institute a sacrament.

The reason is, sacraments have the power of conferring grace. If they were merely of human institution, these physical ceremonies couldn't bring about a spiritual and supernatural result as they do. And that connects with the second dogma of Trent referenced by the 1998 *Doctrinal Commentary*. The fathers at Trent declared, 'If anyone says that the sacraments of the New Law do not contain the grace they signify or that they do not confer grace on those who do not place an obstacle in the way, as if they were only external signs of the grace or justice received through faith...let him be anathema.' (DS 1606)

So: a sacrament isn't *just* a sign or symbol of grace. It's a sign that actually *brings about* what it signifies. A sacrament *contains* grace, and *confers* it – as long as the recipient doesn't place an obstacle in the way (e.g. by refusing to repent of mortal sin). For instance, when the priest in Reconciliation says the words of absolution, he's not merely declaring that God has already forgiven the penitent (as if the sacrament itself actually does nothing). No, the sacrament itself is actually the channel of forgiveness and grace. This goes to the heart of why the seven sacraments are indispensable to Catholic faith and life.