THE DAILY BREAD

The Acts of the Apostles



The Seven Sacraments

A FORMATION BOOK BY

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The Everyday Apostle

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The Mass & the Sacraments

The Seven Sacraments

How God Delivers His Grace

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INTRODUCTION

The Seven Doorways

Grace is not an idea. This is the first thing to understand about the sacraments, and most Catholic men have never quite grasped it. Grace, the life of God himself poured into the soul, is not a concept to be believed in or a mood to be worked up or a reward earned by good behavior. It is a real thing, the most real thing, the very life of God communicated to a human being, and God has chosen specific, concrete, physical ways to deliver it. Those ways are the sacraments. There are seven of them, and together they are the ordinary means by which God pours his own life into the lives of men, from birth to death, at every major hinge of a Catholic life.

Most Catholic men have received several of the sacraments and could not tell you, with any precision, what a sacrament actually is or what any particular one does. They were baptized as infants, made their First Communion as children, were confirmed as teenagers, perhaps married in the Church, and they go to Confession and Mass with varying regularity, and through all of it the sacraments have remained a kind of familiar fog, religious rituals they participate in without understanding what is happening or what they are receiving. This is a tremendous loss, because the sacraments are not empty rituals. They are the places where God acts, really and powerfully, in a man's life, and a man who does not understand them is receiving the greatest gifts God offers without knowing what he holds.

From his fullness we have all received, grace upon grace. — John 1:16

This book is a map of the whole sacramental system, the seven doorways through which God delivers his grace. We will start with what a sacrament actually is, the mechanism by which a physical sign accomplishes a spiritual reality, because grasping this unlocks all seven. Then we will walk through each sacrament in turn, the three of initiation that make a man a Christian, the two of healing that restore and strengthen him, and the two of vocation that consecrate his state in life, understanding for each what it is, what grace it gives, and how to receive it well. Several of these sacraments have their own dedicated books in this library, and we will point to them; this book is the overview that shows how the seven fit together into one coherent system by which God accompanies a man through his entire life with grace.

The aim is that you come to see the sacraments not as a series of disconnected religious ceremonies but as what they are: the seven doorways through which the living God enters your life, and that you learn to walk through each of them knowing what you receive.

There is a particular reason this matters for the modern man, who tends to be instinctively suspicious of ritual. He has seen too much empty ceremony, too much going through the motions, and he has a healthy allergy to religious performance that accomplishes nothing. If the sacraments were merely rituals, symbolic gestures a community performs to mark its milestones, his suspicion would be entirely justified, and he would be right to find them hollow. But the whole Catholic claim about the sacraments is that they are precisely not that. They are not rituals that symbolize a grace received elsewhere; they are the actual means by which the grace is delivered, effective signs that accomplish what they signify. This is either an extraordinary claim or an empty one, and everything depends on which. If it is true, then the sacraments are not ceremony but power, not symbol but substance, the very touch of the living God delivered through water and oil and bread and word. The modern man′s suspicion of empty ritual is well placed; this book asks him to consider that the sacraments are not empty ritual at all, but the opposite, the fullest and most concrete way the living God has chosen to act in a human life.

CHAPTER ONE

What a Sacrament Is

The Physical Sign of a Spiritual Reality

Before the seven, the thing itself: what is a sacrament? The classic definition, learned by generations of Catholic children and forgotten by most of them as men, is worth recovering, because it contains the whole logic of the sacramental system in a single sentence. A sacrament is an outward sign, instituted by Christ, to give grace. Three parts, each essential, and together they explain everything.

An Outward Sign

First, a sacrament is an outward sign, a physical, perceptible thing: water, oil, bread, wine, the laying on of hands, words spoken. This is not incidental. God made us body and soul, and he deals with us accordingly, delivering invisible grace through visible signs suited to the embodied creatures we are. We do not receive grace as pure spirits would, by direct spiritual transmission; we receive it through water poured, bread eaten, oil anointed, words heard, because we are creatures of flesh who come to know and receive

through the senses. The sacraments honor this. They are God meeting us where we are, in the body, delivering his invisible life through visible, tangible signs we can see and touch and taste. The physicality is not a concession or a crudeness; it is a mercy, the infinite God stooping to reach us in the only way embodied creatures can be reached.

The Word became flesh and dwelt among us. — John 1:14

Instituted by Christ

Second, a sacrament is instituted by Christ. The sacraments are not human inventions, rituals the Church devised to mark important moments. They were established by Christ himself, who gave the Church these specific signs and attached to them the promise of grace. This matters enormously, because it means the sacraments do not depend on the holiness of the minister or the fervor of the recipient for their power; their power comes from Christ, who instituted them and who acts through them. When a priest baptizes or absolves or consecrates, it is finally Christ who baptizes, Christ who absolves, Christ who consecrates, acting through the priest. The sacraments are Christ′s own actions, continued in his Church, which is why they are reliable, why they work, why a man can approach them with confidence: their efficacy rests not on the men who administer them or the men who receive them but on Christ himself, who stands behind them and acts in them.

To Give Grace

Third, and most importantly, a sacrament gives grace. This is the crucial point, and it is where the sacraments differ from every other religious sign or symbol. The sacraments do not merely symbolize grace or remind us of grace or express our desire for grace. They actually confer it. They cause what they signify. The water of Baptism does not merely represent the washing away of sin; it actually washes it away. The words of absolution do not merely express God′s forgiveness; they actually forgive. The bread and wine do not merely symbolize Christ′s body and blood; they become them. This is the decisive thing about the sacraments, and the thing most often lost: they are not symbols pointing to a grace received elsewhere, but the very instruments through which the grace is delivered. When you receive a sacrament worthily, you do not merely mark a spiritual reality; you receive it, then and there, really, through the sign. The sacraments are effective. They do what they signify. That is what makes them sacraments and not merely ceremonies.

Flowing From the Side of Christ

Where do the sacraments come from? The tradition has a beautiful answer: they flow from the pierced side of Christ on the cross. When the soldier pierced the side of the

crucified Lord, the Gospel records that blood and water flowed out, and the Fathers of the Church saw in this a sign of the sacraments pouring from the wounded heart of Christ, the water of Baptism and the blood of the Eucharist, the whole sacramental life born from his self-offering on the cross. This is more than a pious image. It expresses a real truth: the sacraments derive all their power from the saving death and resurrection of Christ, and they apply the fruit of that one sacrifice to individual souls across the centuries. Every sacrament is a channel through which the grace won on Calvary reaches a particular man in a particular moment, so that the man baptized today, or absolved today, or fed at the altar today, receives the fruit of what Christ did on the cross two thousand years ago. The sacraments are how the one saving act of Christ, complete and unrepeatable, is delivered to every soul in every age, flowing still from his pierced side into the life of everyone who comes to them.

CHAPTER TWO

How the Sacraments Work

Grace That Does Not Depend on You

A little more must be said about how the sacraments work, because a common misunderstanding drains them of their power in a man's mind and keeps him from receiving them with the confidence they deserve.

They Work by the Work Worked

The Church has a precise teaching about how the sacraments confer grace, expressed in an old phrase that means, roughly, by the very fact of the action being performed. The point of the phrase is this: the sacraments confer grace by their own power, given them by Christ, not by the power or worthiness of the minister who administers them or, in a certain sense, the recipient who receives them. A valid Baptism confers baptismal grace whether the priest who performs it is a saint or a scoundrel, because it is Christ who acts, not the priest. A valid absolution forgives sins whether the confessor is fervent or distracted, because it is Christ who forgives. This is a great mercy and a great security. It means the grace of the sacraments does not hang on the holiness of clergy, which would make it perpetually uncertain, but rests on Christ, which makes it sure. When you receive a sacrament, you are not depending on the man administering it. You are receiving from Christ, reliably, regardless of the human instrument.

He who calls you is faithful; he will surely do it. — 1 Thessalonians 5:24

Disposition Still Matters

But if the grace is conferred by the sacrament's own power and not by the recipient's worthiness, does the recipient's state matter at all? It matters greatly, not for whether the grace is offered but for whether and how fully it is received. Consider an image. The sun shines with the same power on every field, but the field that is plowed and open receives the light fruitfully, while the field that is hard and closed receives it in vain. So with the sacraments: the grace is offered fully and reliably in every valid sacrament, but the fruit a man draws from it depends on his disposition, his faith, his openness, his freedom from the obstacles of unrepented sin. A man who receives Communion with great faith and love draws far more fruit from it than a man who receives it carelessly, though both receive the same Christ. This is why disposition matters: not because it produces the grace, which comes from Christ, but because it determines how fully the grace, freely offered, is actually received and made fruitful in a man's life. The sacraments are not magic that works regardless of the heart; they are Christ's reliable gifts, offered fully, received according to the openness of the one who comes. So a man prepares, disposes himself, opens the field of his soul, that the grace reliably offered may be abundantly received.

What Grace Actually Is

Since the whole point of the sacraments is to give grace, it is worth being clear about what grace actually is, because many men have only the vaguest notion. Grace is not a feeling, not a mood, not divine assistance in the sense of a helpful nudge. Grace, in its deepest form, what the tradition calls sanctifying grace, is nothing less than a participation in the very life of God, God's own life communicated to the soul, making a man truly a child of God and an heir of heaven. When a man is in the state of grace, God himself dwells in him, and the man shares, really, in the divine life. This is a staggering thing, almost too much to take in: that a creature can be lifted up to share in the life of his Creator, made a partaker of the divine nature, as Scripture dares to say. This is what the sacraments deliver. When we say Baptism gives the life of God, or the Eucharist increases grace, or Confession restores grace lost through sin, we mean this: the sacraments communicate to the soul a real participation in God's own life, the most precious thing a man can possess, worth more than everything else in the world combined. A man who grasps what grace actually is understands why the sacraments matter more than anything, for they are the ordinary means by which the life of God himself is poured into his soul.

He has granted to us that we may become partakers of the divine nature. — 2 Peter 1:4

The Character of Some Sacraments

Three of the sacraments, Baptism, Confirmation, and Holy Orders, do something further: they imprint an indelible mark, what the tradition calls a character, on the soul, a permanent configuration to Christ that can never be removed or repeated. This is why these three sacraments are received only once and can never be undone: they mark the soul permanently. A baptized man is baptized forever, even if he abandons the faith; the mark remains. An ordained priest is a priest forever, even if he leaves ministry; the character is indelible. This permanence is part of the seriousness and the gift of these sacraments, and it explains why they are never repeated. The other four sacraments, the Eucharist, Confession, Anointing, and Matrimony, do not imprint this character and can or must be received more than once. Understanding which sacraments mark the soul permanently and which are repeated is part of understanding how the whole system works.

CHAPTER THREE

The Sacraments of Initiation

Baptism, Confirmation, Eucharist

The seven sacraments fall into three natural groups, and the first group is the sacraments of initiation, the three that make a man a full member of the Body of Christ: Baptism, Confirmation, and the Eucharist. Together they bring a person into the Christian life and equip him to live it.

Baptism: The Gateway

Baptism is the first and foundational sacrament, the doorway to all the others, and it accomplishes more than most Catholics realize. Through the water of Baptism, a person is cleansed of original sin and any personal sin, is reborn as a child of God, is filled with sanctifying grace, the very life of God, for the first time, and is incorporated into the Body of Christ, the Church. Baptism does not merely symbolize a spiritual cleansing; it accomplishes it, washing away sin and making a dead soul alive with God's life. It imprints the permanent character we spoke of, marking the soul as Christ's forever. And it opens the way to every other sacrament, none of which can be received without it. This is why the Church baptizes infants, not withholding so great a gift until they can ask for it, but pouring the life of God into them at the start. Most Catholic men were baptized as infants and have no memory of it, but the reality remains: at that moment, they were reborn, made children of God, filled with his life, marked as his forever. To grasp Baptism

is to grasp the foundation of everything else that has happened to a man sacramentally since.

It is worth noticing, with Baptism as the clearest example, that each sacrament has a physical element and defining words that together make it what it is, what the tradition calls the matter and the form. In Baptism, the matter is the water and the form is the words, I baptize you in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Pour the water and say those words over a person with the intention of doing what the Church does, and a true Baptism occurs, every time, because Christ has bound himself to act through that sign. This is why Baptism is so sure and so accessible that in an emergency any person can validly baptize a dying man with water and those words. Each of the seven sacraments has its own matter and form in this way, its own physical sign and defining words given by Christ, and knowing this demystifies them: a sacrament is not a vague spiritual atmosphere but a definite action, a specific sign done with specific words, to which Christ has attached a specific grace. There is a precision and a reliability in this that should reassure a man. The sacraments are not uncertain; they are definite actions of Christ, and when the sign is done as he established it, the grace is given, surely, every time.

Unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God. — John 3:5

Confirmation: The Strengthening

Confirmation completes and strengthens what Baptism began. Through the anointing with sacred chrism and the laying on of hands by the bishop, the baptized person receives the Holy Spirit in a new and fuller way, is strengthened with the gifts of the Spirit, and is equipped and commissioned to live and defend the faith as a mature Christian, a soldier of Christ in the old image. Where Baptism gives the life of God, Confirmation strengthens it for the battle and the mission of adult Christian life. It, too, imprints a permanent character and is received only once. Many Catholic men were confirmed as teenagers with little understanding of what was happening, treating it as a graduation from religious education rather than what it is, the outpouring of the Holy Spirit to equip them for spiritual maturity and mission. A man who understands Confirmation understands that he has already been given the Spirit and his gifts, already been equipped and sent, and that the power he may feel he lacks in living his faith is in fact already his, received at Confirmation, waiting to be stirred into flame. The companion book in this library on the Holy Spirit develops what the Spirit and his gifts, given here, actually do in a man′s life.

Many men carry a quiet puzzlement about Confirmation: they were confirmed, and nothing seemed to happen, no felt outpouring of the Spirit, no evident change, and so they wonder whether it did anything at all. This is worth answering, because it touches how the sacraments work in general. The grace of Confirmation, like the grace of every sacrament, is real whether or not it is felt, and it is given to be drawn upon, not merely experienced in the moment. The Holy Spirit and his gifts were truly given at a man's Confirmation, but grace given is not the same as grace activated; the gifts lie ready in the soul, available to be stirred into flame and put to use, and much depends on whether a man cooperates with them or leaves them dormant. This is why a man confirmed as an indifferent teenager may live for decades without any evident fruit of Confirmation, and then, upon a genuine conversion, find the Spirit and his gifts suddenly powerfully active, not because he was confirmed again, but because he finally began to cooperate with a grace given long ago. The grace was there the whole time, waiting. So the man who felt nothing at his Confirmation was not cheated; he was given a gift to be unwrapped across a lifetime, and it remains his to claim, however long ago it was conferred.

The Eucharist: The Summit

The Eucharist is the third sacrament of initiation and the greatest of all the sacraments, because unlike the others, which confer grace, the Eucharist is not merely a channel of grace but the very Author of grace himself, Christ truly present under the appearance of bread and wine. In the Eucharist a man receives not merely grace but the living God, Christ's own body and blood, soul and divinity, into himself. It is the source and summit of the whole Christian life, the sacrament toward which the others lead and from which they flow. Because it is so central and so misunderstood, this library devotes separate books to it: one on the Real Presence, on what is truly on the altar; one on Entering the Mass, on the liturgy in which the Eucharist is celebrated; and one on Eucharistic Adoration, on being with the Lord present in the Sacrament. Here it is enough to say that the Eucharist completes Christian initiation and then continues throughout a man's life as the regular food of his soul, Christ given to him again and again, the summit to which his whole sacramental life ascends. The initiation sacraments make a man a Christian; the Eucharist, received again and again, sustains him as one.

CHAPTER FOUR

The Sacraments of Healing

Confession and Anointing

The second group is the sacraments of healing, the two by which Christ, the physician of souls and bodies, restores and strengthens a man wounded by sin and suffering: Confession and the Anointing of the Sick. These sacraments meet a man in his brokenness and bring the healing power of Christ to bear on it.

Confession: The Restoration

Confession, also called Penance or Reconciliation, is the sacrament by which sins committed after Baptism are forgiven and the sinner is reconciled to God and the Church. Through the confession of sins to a priest and the words of absolution, spoken by the priest in the person of Christ, a man's sins are truly and really forgiven, the sanctifying grace lost through serious sin is restored, and he is reconciled to God. This is not the priest offering an opinion that God probably forgives; it is Christ, through the priest, actually forgiving, exercising the power he gave his apostles when he breathed on them and said whatever sins you forgive are forgiven. Confession is the sacrament of God's mercy, the ordinary means by which a man who has fallen after Baptism is raised up again, and it can and should be received throughout a man's life, as often as he falls into serious sin and regularly even for lesser faults. Because it is so important and so neglected and feared, this library devotes a whole book to it, on what Confession is, how to make a good one, and how to overcome the fear that keeps so many men away. Here it is enough to say that Confession is the sacrament of return, the doorway through which a man who has wandered comes home, again and again, as often as he needs it, to the mercy that is always waiting.

> *If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins.* — 1 John 1:9

Anointing of the Sick: The Strengthening in Suffering

The Anointing of the Sick is the sacrament by which Christ strengthens, comforts, and sometimes heals those who are seriously ill or in danger of death. Through the anointing with oil and the prayer of the priest, the sick person receives grace to bear suffering, comfort and peace, the forgiveness of sins if he is unable to confess, and sometimes physical healing if it is God's will, and, when death approaches, preparation for the passage into eternal life. This sacrament is widely misunderstood and underused. Many Catholics think of it as last rites, to be received only at the very brink of death, and so a man is often anointed too late or not at all, deprived of a grace that was meant to strengthen him throughout a serious illness, not only at its end. The Church teaches that a man should receive this sacrament whenever he is seriously ill or faces serious surgery, not waiting until he is dying, so that its grace can strengthen him through the trial. A man who understands the Anointing of the Sick will not wait until the deathbed, and will

make sure that those he loves receive it in good time, so that the healing and strengthening grace of Christ meets them in their suffering rather than arriving too late. It is one of the great neglected gifts, and recovering its right use is part of a mature sacramental life.

CHAPTER FIVE

The Sacraments of Vocation

Holy Orders and Matrimony

The third group is the sacraments at the service of communion, the sacraments of vocation, by which a man is consecrated for a particular state of life in service to others: Holy Orders and Matrimony. These two sacraments are directed not primarily toward the personal sanctification of the one who receives them, though they accomplish that too, but toward the building up of the Church and the service of others.

Holy Orders: The Priesthood

Holy Orders is the sacrament by which a man is ordained to serve the Church as bishop, priest, or deacon, configured to Christ in a new way to act in his person for the sake of the whole Body. Through the laying on of hands by the bishop, the ordained man receives the grace and the sacred power to carry out his ministry: to preach, to sanctify, and to shepherd God's people, and, in the case of bishops and priests, to celebrate the Eucharist and to absolve sins, acting in the person of Christ the head. Holy Orders imprints a permanent character; a man ordained is a priest forever. This sacrament is the reason all the others are available, for it is through the ordained priesthood that the Eucharist is confected, sins are absolved, and the sacramental life of the whole Church is sustained. Even the man not called to Holy Orders should understand and honor this sacrament, for his own sacramental life depends on the priests who serve him, and he is called to support them, pray for them, and, if he has sons, to be open to the possibility that God may call one of them to this life. The health of the whole Church depends on men answering this call, and a Catholic man should understand what it is and hold it in the honor it deserves.

You are a priest forever, after the order of Melchizedek. — Psalm 110:4

Matrimony: The Covenant

Matrimony is the sacrament by which a baptized man and woman are joined in a lifelong covenant, consecrated and given the grace to live their marriage as a sign of Christ′s love for the Church and to build up the domestic church of the family. Christian marriage is not merely a natural institution or a legal contract; it is a sacrament, a channel of grace, in which the spouses receive from Christ the grace they need to love each other faithfully, to remain united for life, and to welcome and raise children in the faith. The spouses themselves are the ministers of this sacrament, conferring it on each other through their consent, and Christ seals their union and pledges his grace to it. Because it is a sacrament, marriage between the baptized has a permanence and a dignity beyond any human arrangement: it images the unbreakable bond between Christ and his Church, and it cannot be dissolved. For most men, this is the sacrament of their own vocation, the state of life through which God calls them to holiness, and understanding it as a sacrament transforms how a man approaches his marriage, not as a private arrangement he sustains by his own effort, but as a consecrated covenant in which Christ′s grace is always available to help him love as he has promised. The companion books in this library on leading a family in faith and on the domestic church develop how a man lives out this sacramental vocation in daily life.

A word for the man who has not yet entered either of these states, the younger or unmarried man reading this. The two sacraments of vocation point to a truth that every man must reckon with: that God calls each person to a particular state of life, and that discerning and embracing that call is one of the most important things a man ever does. Whether a man is called to marriage, to the priesthood or religious life, or to a dedicated single life in the world, he is called to something, and the sacraments of vocation exist to consecrate and grace that calling. The man still discerning should take this seriously, should pray to know his vocation, should hold himself open to whatever God asks, including the possibility of a call to the priesthood that our age makes it easy to dismiss without ever considering. The companion book in this library on discernment can help a man who is seeking to know his path. Here it is enough to say that the sacraments of vocation are not only for other people who have already chosen; they stand as a summons to every man to discover the state of life to which God calls him, and to embrace it as the path of his own holiness.

CHAPTER SIX

The Sacraments as a Whole

God’s Grace at Every Hinge of Life

Having walked through all seven, step back and see them whole, because their real beauty appears only when they are seen together, as a single system by which God accompanies a man through the entire arc of his life with grace.

Grace for Every Stage

Notice how the sacraments map onto the whole course of a human life. At birth, or at entry into the faith, Baptism gives the life of God. At the threshold of maturity, Confirmation strengthens it for adult life and mission. Throughout life, the Eucharist feeds the soul again and again, and Confession restores it whenever it falls. At the entry into a state of life, Holy Orders or Matrimony consecrates a man for his vocation and gives him the grace to live it. And in serious illness and at the approach of death, the Anointing of the Sick strengthens and prepares him for the final passage. The sacraments are not scattered rituals but a coherent system covering the whole of a life, so that at every major hinge, birth, maturity, vocation, sin, sickness, death, and in the ongoing daily need for nourishment, God has provided a specific channel of grace suited to that moment. There is a divine thoughtfulness in this, a Father who has arranged that his child will never face any major passage of life without a sacrament to meet him there with grace. From the cradle to the grave, the sacraments accompany a man, and there is no stage of his life that God has left without a specific gift of his own life to sustain it.

> *I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly.* — John 10:10

The Church as the Sacrament of Christ

There is a deeper unity still. The sacraments flow from Christ through the Church, and in a real sense the Church herself is the great sacrament, the visible sign through which the invisible Christ continues to act in the world. Christ, now ascended, is no longer visibly present as he was in Galilee, and yet he continues to act, to teach, to heal, to forgive, to feed, to sanctify, and he does so through his Church and above all through her sacraments. The sacraments are the ongoing actions of Christ in the world, his hands still healing, his voice still forgiving, his body still given as food, carried on through the Church he founded. When a man receives a sacrament, he is touching the risen Christ, who reaches him across the centuries through the visible signs of the Church. This is why the sacraments matter so much and why the Church guards them so carefully: they are the ordinary way the ascended Lord keeps his promise to be with us always, really present and really acting, through these seven doorways, until the end of the age.

Beyond the Seven

The seven sacraments are unique and unrepeatable in their power, instituted by Christ himself to confer grace with certainty, and nothing else in the Church′s life stands on their level. But it is worth knowing that the Church surrounds the sacraments with a whole world of lesser sacred signs, called sacramentals, that flow from them and dispose a man to receive their grace: blessings, holy water, blessed medals and crucifixes, the Sign of the Cross, the various devotions and blessings that fill Catholic life. These do not work with the certainty of the sacraments and do not confer grace by their own power in the same way; rather, they prepare a man to receive grace and sanctify various moments and objects of ordinary life, drawing their power from the prayer of the Church and pointing back toward the sacraments from which they flow. A man need not be confused about the difference: the seven sacraments are the certain, Christ-given channels of grace at the center, and the sacramentals are the wider circle of sacred signs that surround and support them. Both belong to the sacramental vision of Catholic life, in which the physical world is shot through with the sacred and God reaches his people through visible things, but the seven sacraments stand at the center, unmatched in their power, the true doorways of grace.

Not Magic, But Relationship

It is worth guarding against one final misunderstanding: the sacraments are not magic, and receiving them is not a mechanical transaction that works regardless of the heart. They are the actions of a Person, Christ, encountering persons, us, and like everything between persons, they are meant to be received in faith and love, within a living relationship. A man who reduces the sacraments to rituals that automatically produce a result, received without faith, without repentance, without love, has misunderstood them as badly as the man who reduces them to empty symbols. The sacraments are reliable because Christ stands behind them, but they are personal because Christ is a Person, and they bear their full fruit only when received as what they are: encounters with the living Christ, who offers his grace fully and asks only that a man come to him in faith to receive it. Approach the sacraments, then, not as a man working a machine, but as a man coming to meet the Lord, who waits in each of them to give himself.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Receiving Them Well

The Practical Life of Grace

Understanding the sacraments is meant to change how a man lives them, and a mature Catholic life has a definite sacramental rhythm. Here is what receiving the sacraments well looks like in practice.

The Ordinary Rhythm

For the ordinary Catholic man, past the once-received sacraments of initiation and vocation, the sacramental life comes down to a regular rhythm of two: the Eucharist and Confession. The heart of a serious Catholic man's sacramental life is frequent, worthy reception of the Eucharist, at Mass every Sunday without fail and more often if he can, even daily Mass on occasion, so that he is fed regularly with the living God. And alongside it, regular Confession, not only when he has fallen into serious sin but as a regular practice, monthly or so, that keeps his soul clear and growing. These two sacraments, the Eucharist that feeds and the Confession that restores, are the engine of the spiritual life, and a man who establishes a steady rhythm of both has laid the sacramental foundation on which everything else is built. If you take one practical thing from this book, let it be this: build a regular rhythm of frequent Mass and regular Confession, and let it be the fixed sacramental backbone of your life.

Draw near to God, and he will draw near to you. — James 4:8

Preparing to Receive

Because disposition determines how fully the grace is received, a man serious about the sacraments prepares for them. He examines himself before receiving Communion and never receives in a state of serious unconfessed sin. He makes a good examination of conscience before Confession and comes with real contrition. He approaches each sacrament with faith, deliberately recalling what he is about to receive and opening his heart to it, rather than going through the motions on autopilot. This preparation need not be elaborate, but it should be real, a genuine turning of the heart toward the Lord he is about to meet in the sacrament, so that the field of his soul is plowed and open to receive the grace fully. The man who prepares, even briefly, receives far more than the man who does not, not because he earns more grace but because he opens himself more fully to the grace freely given.

Guarding the State of Grace

There is a serious matter that follows from all of this and that a man must understand. Because sanctifying grace is the life of God in the soul, and because serious sin drives it out, the great concern of a man's spiritual life is to live in the state of grace and to return to it quickly whenever he loses it through serious sin. This is why the Church teaches that

a man must not receive the Eucharist while in a state of serious unconfessed sin, for to receive the Lord of life into a soul that has driven out his life by grave sin is to receive him unworthily, which Saint Paul warns is itself a serious matter. The path back is Confession, which restores the grace that grave sin destroyed. So the two central sacraments work together to guard and restore the life of God in a man: Confession returns him to the state of grace when he has fallen from it, and the Eucharist, worthily received, nourishes and increases that life. A man serious about his soul watches over the state of grace as the most precious thing he possesses, returns to Confession promptly whenever he loses it through serious sin, and never receives the Eucharist unworthily. This is not scrupulosity or fear; it is simply taking seriously that the life of God in the soul is real, that it can be lost, and that God has provided the exact means to guard and restore it.

Living From the Grace

Finally, a man is meant to live from the grace the sacraments give, letting it bear fruit in his actual life rather than leaving it inert. The grace of the Eucharist is meant to make him more loving, more Christlike, in his home and his work through the week. The grace of Confession is meant to strengthen him against the sins he confessed, not merely wipe the slate for him to fill again. The grace of his vocation, his marriage or his orders, is meant to be drawn on daily in the actual living of that vocation. The sacraments are not isolated moments of grace disconnected from the rest of life; they are the sources from which a man draws the grace to live the whole of his life well. So receive them, and then live from them, letting the grace received at the altar and in the confessional and in the covenant of your vocation flow out into every corner of your ordinary days, which is exactly what the grace is for.

CONCLUSION

The Life of God, Delivered

Return to where we began, to the truth that grace is not an idea but a real thing, the very life of God, which he has chosen to deliver through specific, concrete, physical means. Those means are the seven sacraments, and this book has tried to show them whole: what a sacrament is, an outward sign instituted by Christ to give grace; how they work, by Christ's own power, reliably, received according to a man's disposition; and what each of the seven is and does, from the Baptism that gives the life of God to the Anointing that

strengthens for the final passage, with the Eucharist as the summit and Confession as the constant return.

Seen whole, the sacraments reveal a God of astonishing thoughtfulness, who has arranged to meet his children with grace at every hinge of their lives, and to feed and restore them continually in between, through visible signs suited to the embodied creatures they are. The sacraments are not empty rituals or mere ceremonies marking religious milestones. They are the doorways through which the living God enters a man's life, the ongoing actions of the risen Christ who reaches across the centuries to touch, heal, forgive, feed, and consecrate the men who come to him through these seven signs. To understand them is to understand how God actually works in a Catholic life, and to receive them well is to open oneself, again and again, to the very life of God delivered through them.

So do not let the sacraments remain a familiar fog. Learn what each of them is, and receive each knowing what you receive. Build the ordinary rhythm of frequent Mass and regular Confession that is the backbone of a serious Catholic life. Prepare for the sacraments, that the grace freely offered may be fully received, and then live from that grace in the ordinary days between. And let the deeper books in this library take you further into the individual sacraments, the Eucharist and Confession above all, so that the doorways through which God delivers his grace become, for you, not a fog but a well-known and well-loved path, walked regularly, through which the life of God flows steadily into your own.

Grace is real. God delivers it through the sacraments. And they are, all seven of them, doorways standing open, through which the living God is always waiting to give himself to the man who will walk through knowing what he receives. Walk through them. That is what they are for.

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