

Introduction

WELCOME to *Sacraments: A NEW Understanding for a NEW Generation*. This book is about the multi-dimensional symbolic actions that Christians everywhere have come to call sacraments. It is an attempt to unpack in simple terms what Christians across the board, Catholic, Protestant, Orthodox, and Anglican, have generally meant by sacraments and what happens when sacramentality takes place.

Catholics are the Christian communion traditionally seen as most involved with sacraments, although the Orthodox would certainly run a close match. For some Christians it would be hard to imagine anything more Catholic than the sacraments. Often in the past it was said that “Protestants read the Bible but Catholics do sacraments.” That attitude has changed considerably.

One fine development from the Second Vatican Council (1962-65) is that Catholics worldwide have come to see the Scriptures and the sacraments as partners; liturgy is Word and sacrament. The Sunday service comprises the liturgy of the Word, strongly proclaimed and powerfully preached, and the liturgy of the Eucharist, humbly celebrated with deep respect. Many Protestant and Anglican Christians in turn have begun to celebrate the Eucharist more frequently. They recognize more readily the working of the Holy Spirit when Word and sacrament are celebrated together.

Some of the best theological experts in Europe helped the 2500 Catholic bishops at Vatican II in the 1960s realize the need for a

complete revision of the traditional Catholic sacraments and to see sacramentality in a much broader context than just seven church rituals. Literally thousands of books and articles have been written since Vatican II trying to do just that. And the revision that Vatican II had called for was already completed before the 1980s were over.

Today we look back on the result of that revision process and the outpouring of so much writing on the sacraments and wonder if maybe that was only the beginning. A new generation of believers is already wondering about the sacraments. Why can't they be more meaningful? Why don't they have more impact on people? Is this all there is?

This book will attempt to speak to most of those questions. It is meant for young adults like those I've had in theology courses at the University of San Francisco over the past ten years. It is meant as a help for those preparing for diaconate ministry and for men and women in diocesan and parish adult education programs, and for those in the process of Christian initiation. What you find here is a report on sacraments past, present, and possibly future, and a brief unfolding of sacramental developments over the past 40 years that are still continuing today.

To introduce you to some of the key scholars who have contributed to this development I have, with the kind permission of numerous publishers and individual copyright holders, scanned onto the CD-ROM disc in the back cover of this book a series of articles and passages by some of the recognized theologians who have played a major role in reflecting on sacramental theology in our age, Schillebeeckx, Dulles, Fink, Lawler, Cooke, and Osborne, to mention but a few.

College and university teachers will know how to make use of the text and disc together in terms of assignments. Each chapter is self-contained and includes questions both for chapter review and for further discussion, suggestions for projects and for further reading. Each chapter has a glossary of key terms.

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