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Theological Principles for Sacramental Catechesis

Aidan Kavanagh

In order to be solidly grounded, sacramental catechesis needs constantly to recall basic theological principles. Dr. Kavanagh outlines five such principles as "reminders" to catechists: (1) not all sacraments are equal; (2) sacraments are coordinated by certain fundamental norms; (3) confirmation is subordinated to baptism and first eucharist; (4) the relationship of catechesis to sacramental causality is crucial; and (5) sacraments constitute an analogical "language system." The article presents the text of Dr. Kavanagh's "professional update" on the sacraments prepared for the Fifteenth Annual East Coast Conference for Religious Education held in Washington, DC, February, 1987.

I organize my remarks around five "reminders" concerning how a sacramental system works. I hope that it will liberate you into that slavery to God in Christ about which our founding documents and the Christian tradition continually speak.

Sacraments Are Not All Equal

The first reminder is that not all sacraments are equal. Some are more fundamental to the whole system, and to the church, than others. The NT is clear that baptism and eucharist are irreducible in Christian consciousness

AIDAN KAVANAGH, OSB, a monk of St. Meinrad Archabbey, is professor of liturgics at the Divinity School, Yale University. Father Kavanagh is author of *On Liturgical Theology* (New York: Pueblo, 1984).

and in Christian life. Without our Lord's baptism by John in the Jordan, the Rabbi from Galilee would never have been known to be the Anointed One, or Messiah, or Christ, of God. From this point he set off on his public messianic ministry, which finally took him to that other baptism about which he spoke, one into calamity unto death. From being baptized by water and Holy Spirit, Jesus the Christ moved inexorably to himself, baptizing the world in his own blood, pouring out upon it the same Holy Spirit he himself had received from his Father. That Holy Spirit, from his baptism by John through Pentecost and to this day, reveals Jesus from Galilee to be the Messiah of God, the Christ who himself reveals his Father to be the lover of humankind who embraces all and sits with us at table as with friends.

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Baptism is the way the eucharist be-
gins (with rebirth and forgiveness of
sins), and the eucharist is the way bap-
tism is sustained in the lives of the
faithful. These two sacraments are thus
fundamental to the whole sacramental
system: the other sacraments make
sense only to the extent that each of
them relates to baptism (in particular
confirmation, penance, and anointing
of the ill) and to eucharist (in particu-
lar ordination and marriage).

This premise means that to ask
questions about confirmation or pen-
ance or anointing of the ill is to ask
questions that are fundamentally bap-
tismal. Without a firm grasp on bap-
tism, and without a robust baptismal
practice to make this grasp accessible
throughout the pastoral level, not only
are there few if any answers to ques-
tions about confirmation, penance, or
anointing of the ill, but these three
subordinate rites (in particular confir-
mation and penance) may come to
control baptism and to subordinate it
to them. For this reason confirmation
in practice often is perceived to be the
"big sacrament" of Christian initia-
tion, in the view of some religious ed-
ucators and bishops, at the same time
that it is functioning more often as a
sacrament of exit from the church
among adolescents. When this hap-
pens, pastoral practice loses intelli-
gibility and sacraments generally get
distrusted; they promise one thing yet
deliver another.

Similarly, when penance displaces
confirmation as the sacramental pre-
lude to first communion for young
children, one feels called on to ask
whether an unexamined theology of

actual sin is not blotting out a theology
of baptismal forgiveness signalled by
the messianic gift of the Holy Spirit—
now delayed, unaccountably, to ado-
lescence and coming only years after
the beginning of the reception of holy
communion. With this situation the
Second Vatican Council's attempt to
reintegrate the sacraments of initiation
and of Christian identity—baptism,
confirmation, and eucharist, in that or-
der—is unraveled. For all practical
purposes the sequence degenerates into
the unintelligibility of baptism, pen-
ance, first communion, religious edu-
cation, and confirmation, a jumble that
is unrecognizable in the tradition, in the
reforms, or in both the 1917 and the
revised 1983 Codes of Canon Law.

The baptismal jumble suggests that
it is *not* the eucharist that is the "seal"
of Christian initiation but confirma-
tion, which comes at the apex of the
process and is done with far greater
manifest pomp and educational prep-
aration than baptism in infancy or even
first communion around the age of dis-
cretion. But it is *not* confirmation that
is the "... summit and source of all
Christian worship and life" to which
all sacraments and apostolic works are
closely related and directed; this is said
only of eucharist (canon 897). Bap-
tism is the "gate to the sacraments"
(canon 849); confirmation does noth-
ing more than "continue the path of
Christian initiation" (canon 879), and
the eucharist seals all this.

To ask questions about ordination
and marriage is to ask questions about
the eucharist and all it "seals." All or-
ders of ministry converge on the eu-
charist of faithful Christians as orders

of service to that act of the washed, reborn, forgiven, and enlightened by the Spirit. Christian marriage is fundamentally nothing more or less than the way the eucharistic seal of Christian life is appropriated into the fertile physical and spiritual communion between man, woman, and offspring. It is for this reason that such a marital communion, eucharistic to its heart, is to be stable and permanent and resistant to manipulation by fads, artifices, chemicals and interventions by politicians, ideologues and surgeons. A Christian marriage is no less a "Blessed Sacrament" than is the consecrated bread and wine of the Christian table.

Council, liturgical tradition and canon law insist without equivocation that the integrated sequence of the sacraments of initiation is both central and pivotal to understanding Christian life lived in a church that sanctifies only because it is first sanctified by faith, grace and an intelligible sacramental order. The intelligibility of this order is not a gift from God that can be blithely presumed. We must work at securing it, and this work presently is not being done adequately to gospel purpose. Sacraments are not equal; baptism and eucharist are more equal than the others.

The RCIA As Norm

The second reminder is that sacramental endeavor is governed by certain norms. These norms precede rubrics and canonical legislation; rubrics and canons are symptoms of the norms, not the origins of the norms. Let me exemplify this important point.

Some recent authors have attempted to maintain that there are presently two sovereignly different norms of Christian initiation, one for adults (the Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults) and one for those, far more numerous, who were baptized in infancy and will eventually own their faith in a mature and public manner by confirmation later rather than earlier. One of these authors argues that the appearance of the Rite for the Baptism of Infants in 1969, about three years *before* the Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults appeared in 1972, proves at least the co-equal status of the two rites if not the precedence of the rite for infants over that for adults. But such a view is untenable in light of the facts.

One such fact is that the initiatory reform after the Council began consciously with adult baptism rather than infant baptism. In 1964 the Concilium charged with implementing the Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy approved the following protocol on this matter:

In the case of adults is most clearly shown: (a) the character of baptism, in that it is a sacrament of faith according to the theology of the sacraments accepted in the Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy (art. 59); (b) the unity of Christian initiation as in article 71 of the Constitution; (c) the coordination of baptism and the paschal celebration, which is mentioned in article 109 of the Constitution. . . . The entire rite of infant baptism, however reformed, *will have its roots in the adult rite from which it will have been derived, and not vice versa.*

The rite for adults had already gone through four drafts by 1966 when the

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rite for infants through nine drafts to the evolving. Similarly, confirmation became a sacrament in 1967. The Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults thus set a sacramental norm for the two rites, even though it came to be published: the rite of infant confirmation in 1972.

The RCIA is a document that traces the practice of the Council's outlook on basic sacraments. It was to restore sacraments that crowded the way of the church. This has been put into legislation in the 1983 Code of Canon Law in canon 842:2, which states that baptism, confirmation, and the Eucharist are the sacraments of initiation. [The RCIA states that full Christians in the sacraments are to be received, furthered with confirmation, baptism as possible vice for adults at a suitable age, or a rite for children baptism followed in both the initiates' first

This is the content of the force of law in the canonical books and to secure the norm by law confirm

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rite for infants, which would go through nine drafts in constant reference to the evolving adult rite, was begun. Similarly, reform of the rite of confirmation began a year later, in 1967. The Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults thus served as the paradigmatic norm for the reform of the other two rites, even though the three rites came to be published in reversed order: the rite of infants in 1969, the rite of confirmation in 1971, and the rite for adults in 1972.

→ The RCIA is thus the normative document that translated into liturgical practice the Council's fundamental outlook on basic initiatory procedure, an outlook the main purpose of which was to restore and integrate those sacraments that crown the whole grace-laden way of coming to faith in a faithful church. This same outlook has now been put into legislative language in the 1983 Code of Canon Law, which states in canon 842:2, "The sacraments of baptism, confirmation, and the most holy Eucharist [so coalesce among themselves] that they are required for full Christian initiation." The three sacraments are to be celebrated and received, furthermore, in that order—with confirmation coming as close to baptism as possible (in the same service for adults and children of catechetical age, or at the age of discretion for children baptized as infants) and followed in both cases immediately by the initiate's first holy communion.

→ This is the conciliar norm now given the force of law in the reformed liturgical books and in the new canons. To secure the norm presbyters may now by law confirm adults and older chil-

dren, whom they baptize in the bishop's absence. Disrupting this sequence of baptism, confirmation and eucharist is allowed only for the most serious reasons, and delaying confirmation to later years (which usually presumes anticipating the eucharist, often for years before confirmation is administered) requires demonstration of serious reason or grave cause. Only an entire episcopal conference, not the individual local bishop, can set such a delay as policy. One does what one must. One may not do merely what one chooses, especially if it risks overturning the tradition, sundering the unity of the paschal mystery, or confusing the trinitarian nature of the grace of ecclesial faith by playing shell games with eucharist, penance and confirmation. It will be incumbent upon episcopal conferences to make the case that such things will not happen if they choose to delay confirmation. One doubts such a case can be made either theologically or pastorally. (That is what we are doing now, and it isn't working.) Moreover, to move formally in this direction would be to unravel the whole initiatory reform by saying, in effect, that there is no compelling internal logic and grammar to the three sacraments of initiation.

But there is such an internal logic and grammar to all the sacraments, in particular those of Christian initiation. That logic and grammar begins in baptism and culminates not in penance or confirmation but in the eucharist as celebrated and received. The Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults gives voice to this and places it as the central norm of the entire sacramental system.

Sacramental endeavor throughout the church flows from here and is governed indeed by certain norms; and the most basic of these norms is that the sacraments of baptism, confirmation, and eucharist function intelligibly only in that order.

Sacramental Catechesis and Religious Education

✠ *The third reminder is that catechesis is intimately and necessarily related to the sacramental causality of the three sacraments of Christian initiation—baptism, confirmation and eucharist. What these three sacraments cause is a degree of communion with God that can only be consequent upon formal entry into communion with Jesus the Christ by the Holy Spirit, that is, in the church, Christ's Body where the Spirit flourishes. Not to know this Jesus as the Christ of God is not to know the Father who sent him; and no one can know this Jesus as the Christ of God unless the Holy Spirit reveals him to be so.*

✠ *This knowledge is saving knowledge, and it is neither easy to come by nor to sustain. It is come by only in the grace of conversion; it is sustained only by a sacrificial life of prayer, fasting and contemplation under grace. This saving knowledge is therefore not merely a set of intellectual notions. It is a demanding way of life lived among others who strive to live the same way. This life is what baptism, confirmation and eucharist cause and sustain; a life of faith, grace, sacrament, right worship (*orthodoxia*), right belief (*orthopistis*) and right teaching (*orthodidascalia*). As Acts 2.42 describes the*

life of the very first Christians, they lived according to " . . . the teaching of the apostles, the community, the breaking of bread, and the prayers."

In this view catechesis is not strictly speaking identifiable with the much larger and more general category of religious education. Religious education is not by any means necessarily related to what the sacraments of Christian initiation cause. At its best, religious education reflects on what these sacraments cause only after the fact and in generally academic fashion. Catechesis, on the other hand, directly and necessarily prepares those coming to faith for sacramental entry into the mystery of ecclesial life, aiding or even precipitating the conversion such life presupposes. Catechesis is conversion therapy rather than education as we understand it today. Catechesis in the tradition is punctuated not by graduations but by exorcisms: catechesis takes on precisely those matters that cannot be handled or taught in classrooms, matters such as the way evil gestates and metastasizes in the human heart, the way in which my eyes go blind to revelation or see it but reject it out of moral sloth, and so forth. Nor does catechesis provide mere "answers" to questions, unless water and oil, bread and wine are answers to questions. What catechesis provides is vaster; it is a whole new way of life in which water and oil, bread and wine are not answers but the questions that continually rake one's life, crack open its shell and keep it a life "of God" rather than merely "about God." Catechesis is therefore intimately and necessarily related to the

sacramental causality of the sacraments of Christianity, confirmation may earn a degradation. But only through exorcism and sacrifice and the power of the sacraments can one qualify the catechetical craft. I enter into my fourth

The Language

Sacramental causality whose "word" whose grammar Aquinas many out that at least might use to describe we call God "Father" for that matter) zation that God "Mother" in a has neither sex God reproduce tures. The closuracy about (noted, is to speak in terms of what not a half truth far as we are concerned is incomprehensible, ineffable, ble. Yet it is as God became a Jesus the Christ from Galilee was prehensible, beyond human limits, cross, hear its voice with words, see thoughts about comes like us things but our s

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sacramental causality of the three sacraments of Christian initiation—baptism, confirmation and eucharist. One may earn a degree in religious education. But only prayer and fasting, exorcism and sacrament, much patience and the power of spiritual discernment qualify the catechist for his or her vertiginous craft. This fact leads directly into my fourth reminder.

The Language of the Sacraments

Sacramentality is a language system whose "words" are analogies and whose grammar is analogical. Thomas Aquinas many centuries ago pointed out that at least half of any word we might use to describe God is wrong. If we call God "Father" (or "Mother," for that matter) we do so in the realization that God is *not* "Father" or "Mother" in any human sense. God has neither sex nor gender, nor does God reproduce in the manner of creatures. The closest we can come to accuracy about God, Aquinas further noted, is to speak in negatives, that is, in terms of what God is not. It is thus not a half truth but the *whole* truth, so far as we are concerned, to say that God is incomprehensible, infinite, deathless, ineffable, invisible, inconceivable. Yet it is *also* the whole truth that God became a male human being in Jesus the Christ and that in this rabbi from Galilee we can know the incomprehensible, discover it bounded by human limits, mourn its death on a cross, hear its words and respond to it with words, see it visibly and conceive thoughts about it. In Christ God becomes like us human creatures in all things but our sin.

It is this astonishing and mysterious paradox that forces us not only out of the austerity of purely negative language but into the vastly dangerous and risky language of created things and gestures, of sacraments and icons. Without the incarnation the danger and risk of this sort of language would be unacceptable; it would be the language of idolatry and graven image pure and simple. But if a created human nature has indeed been taken into the very Person of God, then the whole of nature has been evangelized and transformed by divine initiative. Nature has been filled with God's active presence to save.

Thus we pray over bread and wine and then make bold to say that the *whole* truth about these creatures is that they have become the body of him in whom dwells the fullness of the Godhead bodily. Even more daringly (if that were possible) we then say that, so far from discovering *only* God there, we too to that same extent discover ourselves there as well—locked together with God in the precise same union that God's Christ established between us and his Father by his own death and resurrection, "a union of peace, a sacrifice of praise." When this bread and cup are presented to us at communion time, we say "Amen" to what we by grace have become—one with God in Christ once more. The One whom Christian tradition calls simply The Being has become *my* being; I live now no longer for myself but that One lives in me, and in that reconciliation all things I have sullied are reconciled and all that is is made new. The cosmos is reborn.

← John 10:1-10

This is an even more vertiginous thought than God's radical incomprehensibility. The eucharist tells us that this One has come into our home and sits with us at table as among friends. The problem with it is that it is not fifty percent wrong but that it is far more than 100 percent true, truer than we can bear, providing us with more light than we can see. The banquet is more than an answer to the question, "Where is Jesus?" The banquet is an analogy that gathers into one unbearably intense focal point the whole eternal contour of God's purpose for the universe in Christ. As such, the banquet anchors the whole analogical language system about this eternal contour of grace-filled purpose—a language system that began in Genesis and ends only in Apocalypse, a language system Christians speak in their sacramental system of worship carried out in the presence of the Living God for the life of the world. We are the language we speak; what we speak is analogy; and these analogies are the sacraments. Without these we do not know who we are, nor can we remain a People without them or accomplish our God-given purpose. The sacraments call us always home and hold us there. It is from there that all things issue forth, fresh and clean, reconciled to God in Christ. This is all we have to give, and it is the life of the world. Which leads me to my final reminder. . . .

Of Sacraments and Symphonies

Sacraments, being analogies rather than answers, work by repetition and accumulation. Sacraments are not "bottom lines"; they are grand opera.

Sacraments are not white papers; they are love poems ("How do I love thee? Let me count the ways. . . ."). Sacraments are not single tones; they are symphonies filled with fugues, themes, codas and repeats. Sacraments do not teach; they seduce. Sacraments do not force people into corners at the point of ideological guns; they are keys that open doors and set people free. Sacraments are not exceptional and extraordinary events; they are standard and ordinary—like baths and dinners, kisses and loving touches, hugs and perfume, prayers and celebrations.

None of these things are done only once by normal people. They do them over and over again; and the acts are usually joined together like words in a sentence, the repeated utterance of which makes us who we are. Oppression and injustice and sloth attack the words, mute the sentence, and make it impossible to say who we are. The tyrannous modern state defines us instead—as individuals of no rights, as individuals possessing rights which do not exist, as "units of production," as consumers of a spread of dubious goods and even more dubious "services." The upshot of all this, whether intended or unintended, is to tear apart our ability to commune with others of our kind on what matters to us most deeply; to isolate us from others; to restrict us to ourselves in a bleak world of bottom lines, white papers, single tones, syllabuses, ideological intimidation, and answers to questions that do not matter. In this bemused condition, our faces stuffed with the fast food of unreality, the state moves in to do our thinking and our living for us,

providing approved targets for our object.

The response to a ballot box, which is or the statistical survey, is not read in the state's effective response is to poems, symphonies, doors, runs in meadows, fume, dinners, kisses, prayers, fasting, around—spendid analogies of what it is to be of God, redeemed in Lamb. Even the most states has no defense, cumulation of little re these. Every time I kiss every time I rediscover my shower, every time of wine—every time ordinary things as a mit an act that is subv things are. I free my and my sister. For each acts reiterates something about the eternal purpose for us in Christ is to save us who otherwise perish, to save us as beloved, freely and with Sacraments, being than answers, work accumulation, and it is all we Christians have

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I conclude by repeating these remarks on sacraments given you no recipes answers. But recipe short-lived, and no uses them. A recipe

providing approved therapy when we object.

The response to all this is not the ballot box, which is easily suborned, or the statistical survey, which is easily read in the state's favor. The most effective response is grand opera, love poems, symphonies, seduction, open doors, runs in meadows, baths, perfume, dinners, kisses, hugs, celebrations, prayer, fasting and exorcisms all around—spendid analogies or sacraments of what it is to be human, a child of God, redeemed in the blood of the Lamb. Even the most oppressive of states has no defense against the accumulation of little revolutions such as these. Every time I kiss the holy table, every time I rediscover my baptism in my shower, every time I drink a glass of wine—every time I do any of these ordinary things as a Christian, I commit an act that is subversive of the way things are. I free myself, my brother and my sister. For each of these small acts reiterates something wholly true about the eternal contour of God's purpose for us in Christ. That purpose is to save us who otherwise will surely perish, to save us as a lover saves the beloved, freely and without condition. Sacraments, being analogies rather than answers, work by repetition and accumulation, and that accumulation is all we Christians have to say.

A Question, Not Answers

I conclude by reading back over these remarks on sacraments. I have given you no recipes and precious few answers. But recipes are notoriously short-lived, and no really good cook uses them. A recipe is a good cook's

condescension to the inept, and you do not deserve to be condescended to. Nor have I attempted to give you answers. By now all the important questions have been asked in the tradition; and each question has anywhere from forty-five to three-hundred answers. Furthermore, my experience has been that those with the clearest answers are usually the ones who are least aware of what the questions are. Thus when I am asked at what age we should confirm, I usually answer forty-two. My purpose is to indicate, by such an unusual reply, that the question is both irrelevant and destructive. It is irrelevant because we confirm not at an "age" but whenever it is necessary—and baptism is what makes confirmation, the reception of the Holy Spirit, necessary. The question is destructive because to give an apparently conventional answer to it shuts down thought on the very issue that gives rise to the question; the issue is simply upon what criteria do we base our decisions to initiate a Christian of whatever age. If you ask me at what age we should confirm, I will ask you in return at what age do you baptize and why? I recommend that you ask me something more pointed, such as what is the canonical age for confirmation of those baptized in infancy. There is a clear and thoroughly cogent answer to that: at the age of discretion, around the seventh year or so, when children are ready for first communion, because the eucharist is the seal of Christian initiation.

But I have chosen to update you on sacraments mainly by doing something else, that is, to remind you, gently, as I hope, of five attitudes cen-

tral to thinking sacramentally. The first was that all sacraments are not equal. The second was that sacramental endeavor is governed by certain norms. The third was that catechesis is intimately and necessarily related to the causality of the three sacraments of initiation—baptism, confirmation, and eucharist, in that order. The fourth was that sacraments form a language system whose "words" are analogies and whose grammar is analogical. And the fifth was that sacraments, being analogies rather than answers, work by repetition and accumulation.

✠ All this discussion suggests not only that good pastoral practice does not proceed from bad theology but also that

we need to be very crafty about sacraments rather as a carpenter needs to be very crafty about wood. Sacraments are the material we use under grace to build up a discourse that is of God rather than merely about God, just as the church is a People of God instead of being merely an institution about God. As Jesus the Christ is the Sacrament of God, so the church is the sacrament of Christ; and all its liturgical rites are sacraments of the church. Know the sacraments and we know the church; know the church and we know the Christ without fail; know the Christ and we know God with absolute certainty.

It is this knowledge that saves us and the world to which we are sent.

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