

There are two principal means by which we obtain grace: the Sacraments and prayer. The Sacraments are fitly called channels of grace. It is necessary that the divine water which we call grace, having its source in God and in the wounds of the Redeemer, should flow into our souls, and it must have channels to convey it there; these mysterious channels are the Sacraments.

What is a Sacrament? To this question you answer:

A Sacrament is a sensible sign, instituted by Our Lord Jesus Christ, and indicating a special grace which it produces in our soul.

To comprehend this definition we must understand the six different parts which it includes, namely: (1) A Sacrament is a sign; (2) it is a sensible sign; (3) a sign instituted by Our Lord Jesus Christ; (4) a sign which indicates grace; (5) which indicates a special grace; (6) a grace which the Sacramental sign produces in the soul.

1. By a sign we mean a thing indicating or representing something else: thus the Cross indicates the Passion of Our Saviour. Now, a Sacrament is likewise a thing which is indicative of something else: thus Baptism is a washing, which indicates that the soul is cleansed.

2. A sensible sign. We call sensible what is perceptible by the senses: for example, what we see with our eyes, what we hear by our ears. The water poured, the words pronounced in the administration of Baptism, are sensible things; the humble confession and repentance of a penitent in the tribunal of Penance, the absolution given by the priest, are likewise acts which are perceptible by the senses. To what is sensible is opposed what is spiritual. A spiritual thing is what we do not see with the eyes of the body, what we cannot touch with our hands. Such are the secret thoughts of our mind; such also is our soul, which thinks, which wills, which causes our body to move, but which is not visible as the body; such again is the image of God graven in our soul, and sanctifying grace hidden in our soul, when we are in the state of grace.

3. A sign instituted by Our Lord Jesus Christ, that is to say, ordained by the Son of God in virtue of His divine power, to continue until the end of time, without any human power ever having the authority to abolish it. Our Saviour instituted seven Sacraments, namely: Baptism, Confirmation, Holy Eucharist, Penance, Anointing of the Sick, Holy Orders, and Matrimony. Having instituted them He committed them to His Church, charging her to faithfully guard them, to add ceremonies to them, and to administer them to the faithful.

4. A sign which indicates grace. As a bank-note indicates and represents a sum of money, so the Sacramental sign indicates grace, the spiritual wealth of the soul.

5. A special grace. Just as corporal goods are many, and we note among them life, health, beauty, riches; so the spiritual goods of the soul, embodied in grace, vary with the different Sacraments. Each Sacrament confers at once sanctifying grace and particular actual graces.

Let us always consider, my brethren, the Sacraments as channels of grace, and as our principal means of salvation, since it is by the Sacraments the merits of Jesus Christ are communicated to us. Let us not be content with reverencing them as being what is most holy in religion; but, moreover, let us make a holy use of them according to the intentions of Our Saviour, who has given them to us.