

Tract 17: “Go and Sin No More”: Theological and Sacramental Principles for a Eucharistic Revival in the Church

Religion and Revival: The Call and Search for Coherence

In November of 2021, the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops (USCCB) promulgated a document with the title “The Mystery of the Eucharist in the Life of the Church.”¹ In this document, the bishops collectively declare: “Let us ask the Lord to call us into a time of Eucharistic renewal, a time of prayer and reflection, of acts of charity and sincere repentance” (§58). This expressed desire for renewal has initiated a multiyear period dedicated to Eucharistic revival in the Church in America.

In the lead-up to the approval and promulgation of “The Mystery of the Eucharist in the Life of the Church,” many public discussions by, among, and between the bishops in the United States were had around the question of “Eucharistic coherence.”² This question pertains, essentially, to the

¹ This document can be accessed at [usccb.org](https://www.usccb.org).

² For example, Bishop Thomas Olmstead of Phoenix issued a pastoral letter on Holy Thursday of 2021 in which he offers the following definition: “Eucharistic coherence means that our ‘Amen’ at Holy Communion includes not only the recognition of the Real Presence but also a communion bound together by embracing and living Christ’s entire teaching handed down to us through the Church” (dphx.org/veneremur-cernui/). On April 14, 2021, Bishop Samuel Aquila of Denver published an article in *America Magazine* that he entitled “For the Church to Live in Eucharistic Coherence, We Must Be Willing to Challenge Catholics Persisting in Grave Sin” (americamagazine.org/faith/2021/04/14/aquila-denver-eucharist-politicians-teaching-240396). Four days later, in *Catholic World Report*, Bishop Aquila published a follow-up to the article in *America* in which he related, among other things: “The responses I have received to my article has been overwhelmingly positive. However, one bishop expressed a concern. He thought that my article gave the impression that the grace available in

expectations that the worthy reception of Holy Communion place on the lives of the faithful. These discussions by bishops have likewise continued since the release of the document.³ (It is interesting, as an aside, to note how

the sacraments, particularly in the Eucharist, is dependent on the worthiness of the minister or the worthiness of the recipient" (catholicworldreport.com/2021/04/18/eucharistic-coherence/). In August of 2021, Bishop Thomas Paprocki of Springfield published an article in *First Things* titled simply "Eucharistic Coherence," in which he offers ongoing support of a 2004 statement of a pastor in the diocese who indicated that he would be "reticent" to distribute communion to a well-known politician living in the parish whose public actions on life issues were at odds with the teaching of the Church. Bishop Paprocki concludes this article with the following assessment: "In seeking Eucharistic coherence in an incoherent era, we must remember that our goal is conversion and readmission to Communion, not exclusion and permanent expulsion from the community of faith. Even when a difficult decision must be made not to admit someone to Holy Communion until there has been repentance and reconciliation, such discipline does not contradict the love by which it is motivated" (firstthings.com/article/2021/08/eucharistic-coherence).

- ³ For example, on January 24, 2023, Cardinal Robert E. McElroy published an essay in *America* magazine titled "Cardinal McElroy on 'Radical Inclusion' for L.G.B.T. People, Women and Others in the Catholic Church." In this essay, Cardinal McElroy argues: "The effect of the tradition that all sexual acts outside of marriage constitute objectively grave sin has been to focus the Christian moral life disproportionately upon sexual activity. The heart of Christian discipleship is a relationship with God the Father, Son and Spirit rooted in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. The church has a hierarchy of truths that flow from this fundamental kerygma. Sexual activity, while profound, does not lie at the heart of this hierarchy. Yet in pastoral practice we have placed it at the very center of our structures of exclusion from the Eucharist. This should change." And, "It is a demonic mystery of the human soul why so many men and women have a profound and visceral animus toward members of the L.G.B.T. communities. The church's primary witness in the face of this bigotry must be one of embrace rather than distance or condemnation. The distinction between orientation and activity cannot be the principal focus for such a pastoral embrace because it inevitably suggests dividing the L.G.B.T. community into those who refrain from sexual activity and those who do not. Rather, the dignity of every person as a child of God struggling in this world, and the loving outreach of God, must be the heart, soul, face and substance of the church's stance and pastoral action" (americamagazine.org/faith/2023/01/24/mcelroy-synodality-inclusion-244587). In his column titled "A Church Called to Love Perfectly," published on February 15, 2023, Cardinal Blaise Cupich cites passages from Popes Benedict XVI and Francis on the immensity of God's love before drawing the following conclusion: "Unfortunately, some in the church struggle to understand the insights of these magisterial teachings. There are voices that insist the church must exclude sinners from fuller participation in the life of the church until they have reformed, out of respect for God's justice. Yet, Pope Benedict would remind them that God's love is so great and mysterious that it turns God against himself and turns his love against his justice" (chicagocatholic.com/cardinal-blaise-j-cupich/-/article/2023/02/15/a-church-called-to-love-perfectly). Subsequent to

infrequently the content and teaching of “The Mystery of the Eucharist in the Life of the Church” is referenced by the bishops themselves in these ongoing discussions.)

As Catholics in America participate in this period dedicated to Eucharistic revival, it is worth asking, briefly, what a revival or renewal is, and what a Eucharistic revival might initiate within the life of the Church. One can think of many possible answers. To “re-vive” something means, quite literally, to restore it to life. As a concrete example, Thomas Aquinas uses the Latin word *reviver* in his theology to indicate how “deadened works are revived [brought back to life] by Penance.”⁴ Tentatively, then, we might hold that a Eucharistic revival would result in the restoration of the Eucharist to its proper life-giving and grace-giving place in the Church and the lives of the faithful. In fact, the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* speaks of the Eucharist in just such revivalist language: “As bodily nourishment restores lost strength, so the Eucharist strengthens our charity, which tends to be weakened in daily life; and this living charity *wipes away venial sins*. By giving himself to us Christ revives our love and enables us to break our disordered attachments to creatures and root ourselves in him” (§1384).

Times of revival, therefore, call for reflection. To be strengthened, restored, or brought back to life by the Eucharist, Catholics need to come to understand where and in what ways the Eucharist has become dislocated from its proper place in the life of the Church and the lives of the faithful.

As a historical point of reference, Catholics today might look to the period of Eucharistic revival that commenced following the Fourth Lateran Council in 1215.⁵ Lateran IV included the word “transubstantiated” in its profession of faith to accentuate the profundity of the gift of the Real Presence brought about by the priestly words of consecration over the bread and wine.⁶

As a Council of reform in the Church, the profession of transubstantiation

the publications by Cardinals McElroy and Cupich, on February 28, 2023, Bishop Thomas Paprocki published an article in *First Things* entitled “Imagining a Heretical Cardinal” ([firstthings.com/web-exclusives/2023/02/imagining-a-heretical-cardinal](https://www.firstthings.com/web-exclusives/2023/02/imagining-a-heretical-cardinal)).

⁴ Thomas Aquinas, *Summa theologiae* [ST] III, q. 89, a. 5; quoted from *Summa theologiae*, vol. 20, ed. John Mortensen and Enrique Alarcón, trans. Laurence Shapcote, O.P. (Lander, WY: Aquinas Institute for the Study of Sacred Doctrine, 2012), 422.

⁵ Devotion to the Eucharist and a special commemorative feast of the Christ’s Body (Corpus Christi) sprung up in the Church in the years following Lateran IV. St. Juliana of Mont Cornillon (†1258) advocated for a special feast, local observances of Corpus Christi flowered after the Council, and in 1264 Urban IV established Corpus Christi as a Church-wide liturgical celebration with the promulgation of his bull *Transiturus*.

⁶ Denziger-Hünemann (DH; 2012 Ignatius ed.), no. 802.

by the fathers of Lateran IV was by no means an expression of doctrinal decadence. Rather, it was a reminder to all members of the Church, especially the clergy, of the reverence and gratitude due to the Lord as a result of the exalted nature of the gift of the Eucharist. As evidence of this, a line from St. Francis of Assisi's "Letter to the Clergy" shortly after Lateran IV serves as a case in point: "Let all who minister such holy mysteries," St. Francis pleads, "especially those who administer them carelessly—consider the sad state of the chalices, corporals, and altar-linens upon which the Body and Blood of our Lord are sacrificed. And [the Body and Blood of the Lord] is left by many in dirty places, and carried about in a miserable manner, *received unworthily, and administered to others without discretion.*"⁷ It might be surprising for us to find the charismatic *Il Poverello* haranguing the clergy of his day about corporals, altar linens, and the indiscrete distribution of the Sacrament, but the fact that he did just that tells us something important about the nature of authentic Eucharistic revivals in the Church. Namely, that Catholics cannot be strengthened and revived by the Eucharist without the proper ecclesial culture of gratitude, humility, and reverence that acknowledges the grandeur of the gift, our unworthiness to receive it, and our responsibility to be good custodians of the Lord's own Body and Blood.

A brief look at a literary example from an unlikely herald of contrition might prove helpful in underscoring this point. In 1895, English novelist, poet, and playwright Oscar Wilde was convicted of acts violating the "gross indecency" laws of the Victorian period for a homosexual liaison with the son of a nobleman. He was sentenced to two years in prison. The trial and Wilde's subsequent incarceration resulted in public humiliation for him, his wife, and his children, and the demise of his reputation. He died destitute and in exile in France in 1900. Wilde spent the last portion of his sentence in a prison or "goal" in the town of Reading outside of London. Shortly after his release in 1897, Wilde published a poem titled *The Ballad of Reading Gaol*, which includes the following lines:

Ah! happy day they whose hearts can break
 And peace of pardon win!
 How else may man make straight his plan
 And cleanse his soul from Sin?
 How else but through a broken heart

⁷ "The Letter to the Clergy," in *Francis and Clare: The Complete Works*, trans. Regis J. Armstrong and Ignatius C. Brady, Classics of Western Spirituality (New York: Paulist Press, 1982), 50 (emphasis added). In his various letter to "custodians," Pope Francis makes many similar remarks.

May Lord Christ enter in?⁸

With insight expressible only by poetic intuition, Wilde's haunting lines pinpoint an important aspect of the Christian life that is in need of recovery today: namely, that the Lord—including the Eucharistic Lord—enters human life through the humility of a broken, contrite heart. This intuition sheds light on a foundational but perhaps eclipsed aspect of Christian theology that merits consideration during this period of Eucharistic revival.

The "Mystery of the Eucharist in the Life of the Church" invites reflection on the topic of sin and the Eucharist without using the all-too-common word couplet "Eucharistic coherence." In a concise section, §§44–50, the bishops ground their teaching on the importance that ongoing conversion away from sin in the Christian life has to our communion with the Lord, especially in the Blessed Sacrament. This section begins by connecting the inaugural words of the Lord's public ministry—"Repent, and believe in the gospel" (Mark 1:15; cf. Matt 4:17)—to the penitential rite at the start of the Eucharistic liturgy: "It is thus fitting," the bishops teach that,

at the beginning of every Mass, we are invited to acknowledge our sins in order to prepare ourselves to celebrate the sacred mysteries. We confess that we have sinned, and we implore the Lord's mercy. This is necessary since we are all sinners and sometimes fail to live up to our vocation as disciples of Jesus and to the promises of our Baptism. We need continually to heed Christ's call to conversion.

In a sequence on the Church's teaching on mortal and venial sin, the document does use the single word "incoherence" to explain the following: "The person who, by his or her own action, has broken communion with Christ and his Church but receives the Blessed Sacrament, acts incoherently, both claiming and rejecting communion at the same time. It is thus a countersign, a lie—it expresses a communion that in fact has been broken" (§47).

This passage invokes reflection on communion and the faithful's broader relationship with the Lord. This relationship is described by the word "religion" in the Catholic tradition. In the first article of question 81 in *secunda secundae* of the *Summa theologiae* (*ST*), where he treats religion *secundum se*, Thomas Aquinas ties all of the various etymological threads of the word *religio* into the following summation: religion, he says, "implies a relationship

⁸ Oscar Wilde, "The Ballad of Reading Gaol," stanza 5 (poetryfoundation.org/poems/45495/the-ballad-of-reading-gaol).

to God. For we ought to be bound to God as to our unfailing principle, we must unceasingly choose him as our last end, and if we lose him through the heedlessness of sin, we ought to recover him by believing and professing our faith.”⁹ In other words, St. Thomas would not have recognized the possibility of enjoying the communion with God known as religion—at least with coherence—without an effort to avoid sin or repent of it once committed.

The connection between conversion and coherence in the life of religion is worthy of consideration and development during this period of Eucharistic revival in the United States. Taking the bishops’ emphasis on conversion and the Eucharist as my point of departure, in the remainder of this essay, I connect this teaching with some general theological and sacramental principles—often with the aid of Thomas Aquinas—that further demonstrate the importance of conversion from sin—repentance—as an essential characteristic of Christian life vis-à-vis fruitful reception of the Holy Eucharist. These principles provide broader theological intelligibility to the teaching set forth by the bishops and also underscore certain threads that illumine the intelligibility of Church life and practice. It is my hope this patrimony of principles will assist us during the period of Eucharistic revival—and hopefully beyond—in better understanding and addressing some of the issues that have complicated the discussion.

Redemption in Christ

Salvation in Christ, broadly construed, is not merely a private good enjoyed by individuals. Nor is the salvation offered to humanity in Christ merely the rectification of structural injustices. The salvation offered to humanity by God in Christ constitutes an all-encompassing order. The Lord’s words to the woman caught in adultery in John 8—“Go, and sin no more”—offer (perhaps more than we realize) a pathway toward this reviving order. In his commentary on the Lord’s words to the woman, Thomas Aquinas explains Christ’s attitude toward sin and sinners:

There were two things in the woman: her nature and her sin. Our Lord could have condemned both. For example, he could have condemned her nature if he had ordered them to stone her, and he could have condemned her sin if he had not forgiven her. He was also able to absolve each. For example, if he had given her license to sin, saying:

⁹ ST II-II, q. 81, a. 1, from *Summa theologiae*, vol. 39, *Religion and Worship*, trans. and ed. Kevin O’Rourke, O.P. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 13–15.

“Go, live as you wish, and put your hope in my freeing you. No matter how much you sin, I will free you even from Gehenna and from the tortures of hell.” But our Lord does not love sin, and does not favor wrongdoing, and so he condemned her sin but not her nature, saying, *Go, and do not sin again*. We see here how kind our Lord is because of his gentleness, and how just he is because of his truth.¹⁰

It is important to observe that Aquinas is aware of an attitude—even a theology—toward sin that does not require conversion on the part of the sinner by reposing exclusively in the presumption of the Lord’s power of absolution. Nevertheless, he rejects this attitude because it runs contrary to the Lord’s own words and actions in his encounter with the woman and her accusers.

Aware of the full scope of the order of justice in the Christian life, the great twentieth-century Swiss theologian Charles Journet begins his work on the Eucharist with the following declaration: “It is divinely certain that we live not in a universe of nature, but in a universe of redemption.” And a few pages later, he adds: “We do not live existentially in a universe of nature: we live existentially in a universe of redemption.”¹¹ What difference does this apparently glib point make for the life of Christians and the culture of the Church? The world that we live in is a fallen world. Nevertheless, the fallen world that we live in is not hopelessly lost or abandoned by its Creator—hence the word “redemption.”

Repentance and Conversion: The Essential Disposition of the Redeemed

In Acts 17, Paul explains to the people of Athens that the one true God, the creator of everything, can be found and known, but not in idols or fabricated representations. Because of this, Paul teaches, the time of invincible ignorance about God is over, and in his words to the Gentiles at the Areopagus, “he commands all men everywhere to repent, because he has fixed a day on which he will judge the world in righteousness by a man whom he has appointed, and of this he has given assurance to all men by raising him from the dead” (Acts 17: 30–31). Commenting on this passage,

¹⁰ St. Thomas Aquinas, *Super Ioan* 8, lec. 1, no. 1139, in *Commentary on the Gospel of John, Chapters 6–12*, trans. Fabian Larcher and James Weisheipl (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 2010), 105.

¹¹ Charles Journet, *The Mass: The Presence of the Sacrifice of the Cross*, trans. Victor Szcurek, O. Praem (South Bend, IN: St. Augustine’s Press, 2008), 1, 7.

Guy Mansini observes that the very possibility of knowing God as he has revealed himself in Christ to the fallen world is bound up with the need for repentance. “The repentance commanded” by Paul in Acts 17, Mansini comments, “is a change of heart and a radical redirection of life according to the moral law in the hope that the past no longer controls me before God for eternity. . . . Christian repentance indicates a God who changes hearts and forgives sin because he creates the heart and so can recreate it.”¹² Eucharistic coherence is bound up with the Christian truth that we reach God as our last end in this world of redemption only by ongoing conversion, repentance: “The answer to our moral fragility,” Mansini explains, is “contained in the command to repentance before a God who judges us and can forgive.”¹³

It is not that theories about God’s love and desire to deify all of creation are unable to teach truth about the divine plan. Rather, if we are to recognize how we stand before God in light of Christ’s mission to raise the human race to divine union, then the reality of the effects of sin must be duly considered. “After sin,” Aquinas recognizes, “no man can be made holy save through Christ.”¹⁴ The gift by which Christ makes people holy is his grace. St. Thomas identifies five effects of grace, which follow an order of redemption from sin to healing to eternal glory: “The first is, to heal the soul; the second, to desire good; the third, to carry into effect the good proposed; the fourth, to persevere in good; the fifth, to reach glory.”¹⁵ Before glory can be attained in this fallen order, healing from sin and confirmation in the good is required. Coherent reception of Christ in the Sacrament is not something that can be simply asserted or claimed by the faithful, it is effected in Christians by the working of grace.

Thomas points out that, when a relationship is wounded by an offense, the wound is healed or satisfied when the offending party “offers something which the offended one loves equally, or even more than he detested the offense.” The relationship that Christians have to God in Christ, he explains, is established because, “by suffering out of love and obedience, Christ gave more to God than was required to compensate for the offense of the whole human race. . . . And therefore Christ’s Passion was not only a sufficient but a superabundant satisfaction for the sins of the human race; according to 1

¹² Guy Mansini, O.S.B., “Acts 17 and the Integral Structure of Christian Hope,” in *Hope and Death: Christian Responses*, ed. Michael A. Dauphinais and Roger W. Nutt (Steubenville, OH: Emmaus Academic, 2022), 12.

¹³ Mansini, “Acts 17,” 4.

¹⁴ *ST* III, q. 61, a. 3 (Mortensen and Alarcón ed., 20:18).

¹⁵ *ST* I-II, q. 111, a. 3 (Mortensen and Alarcón ed., 16:517).

John 2:2: ‘He is the propitiation for our sins: and not for ours only, but also for those of the whole world.’”¹⁶

This point clarifies that the communion that Christians can share with God through the sacraments is the fruit of Christ’s self-offering—his work of redeeming the human race—and not an expression of our conscious awareness or longing for communion, in the words of Matthew Levering, that “simply ratifies what already is.”¹⁷ In other words, coherence is not merely a transcendental form of awareness in each individual; it is effected—caused—in the world and in the human heart by the redemptive work of the Cross.

Following Christ in Sacrifice Is the Only Path to Communion in the World of Redemption

In his 2003 encyclical *Ecclesia de Eucharistia*, Pope John Paul II repeatedly re-affirms the position of the Church on the sacrificial nature of Eucharist: “By virtue of its close relationship to the sacrifice of Golgotha, the Eucharist is a sacrifice in the strict sense, and not only in a general way, as if it were simply a matter of Christ’s offering himself to the faithful as their spiritual food” (§13).

Why has the sacrificial nature of the Eucharist been such a prominent teaching in the Eucharistic doctrine of the Church? Why not accent communion over sacrifice, as a kind of soft landing, especially for people today?¹⁸ The answer to these questions lies in the manner in which Christ lived his own mission. The sinner attains communion with God through redemptive sacrifice—the ordering of the one to the other is extremely important. In fact, when explaining Christ’s uniquely salvific exercise of the priestly office, St. Thomas says that precisely as both priest and victim Christ realizes the three effects for which sacrifice is offered: the removal of sin which keeps us separated from God, the continuation in grace once sin has been removed, and union with God. “Now these effects were conferred on us by the humanity of Christ,” Thomas explains:

¹⁶ ST III, q. 48, a. 2 (Mortensen and Alarcón ed., 19:517).

¹⁷ See Matthew Levering, *Sacrifice and Community: Jewish Offering and Christian Eucharist* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2005), 23. In this section, Levering is engaging especially the sacramental theology of Karl Rahner and Edward Schillebeeckx to demonstrate that “mainstream academic twentieth-century Catholic Eucharistic theology distanced itself from the Jewish (and Catholic) mode of communion in and through sacrifice” (25).

¹⁸ For a deep and theologically astute engagement with this line of reasoning see Levering, *Sacrifice and Community*, esp. 1–28.

For, in the first place, our sins were blotted out, according to Romans 4:25: “Who was delivered up for our sins.” Secondly, through Him we received the grace of salvation, according to Hebrews 5:9: “He became to all that obey Him the cause of eternal salvation.” Thirdly, through Him we have acquired the perfection of glory, according to Hebrews 10:19: “We have [Vulgate: “Having”] a confidence in the entering into the Holies” (i.e., the heavenly glory) “through His Blood.” Therefore, Christ Himself, as man, was not only priest, but also a perfect victim, being at the same time victim for sin, victim for a peace-offering, and a holocaust.¹⁹

Christ unites humanity to God by his death on the Cross because his interior perfection as the one offering sacrifice perfectly matched the external perfection of his unblemished sacrificial offering. We might say that Christ was “religious” in the most perfect way: he loved God perfectly, and also wished to destroy sin and its deleterious effects in the world. St. Thomas sees in Christ the fulfillment of the tension in the Old Testament between the sacrifices offered and a lack of adequate contrition on the part of those making the offering to effect satisfaction for sin and reconciliation with God.

“Because exterior acts of religion are directed to interior acts,” Thomas explains,

the exterior sacrifice signifies an interior sacrifice by which the soul offers itself to God, for as the Psalmist says, *My sacrifice, O God, is a contrite spirit*. The soul offers itself to God in sacrifice, however, in so far as God is the principle of its creation and the goal of its happiness. According to the true faith, only God is the creator of our souls, and in him alone our soul’s happiness is found, as shown earlier. Hence, just as we ought to offer spiritual sacrifice to God alone, so we ought to offer external sacrifice to him alone; or as Augustine says, *in our prayers and praises we offer significant words to him to whom in our hearts we offer the things signified*.²⁰

For Christ’s followers, therefore, interior contrition for sin is a necessary condition for the proper participation in the Eucharistic life of the Church which perpetuates Christ’s perfect sacrifice in sacramental form.

¹⁹ ST III, q. 22, a. 2 (Mortensen and Alarcón ed., 19:245–46).

²⁰ ST II-II, q. 85, a. 2 (O’Rourke ed., 39:117).

Sacrifice Orders Believers to God—and Nature

There is, in fact, a longstanding Christian tradition that identifies the very *ratio* of sacrifice with the willful subjugation of the lower to the higher—of human beings to God. Those who seek to share in the benefits of Christ's sacrifice without subordinating themselves to the precepts of the Church not only are failing as Christians to be taught and guided by the Church, but are also failing to live up to basic precepts of the natural law. "Natural reason tells man that he is subject to some superior being," St. Thomas teaches,

because he perceives defects in himself and realizes his need to be helped and directed by a superior being. Whatever this superior being might be, all know it by the name "God." Moreover, just as in natural things the inferior are naturally subject to the superior, so man, by a dictate of natural reason, is naturally inclined to tender honor and submission, in a mode fitting to him, to that which is above him. For man, sensible things are the fitting mode of expression, because man derives his knowledge through sensible things. Therefore, natural reason dictates that man use sensible signs, offering them to God as a sign of due subjection and honor, just as men offer something to sovereigns in recognition of their authority. But this is what we mean by sacrifice, and therefore the offering of sacrifice pertains to the natural law.²¹

The faithful whose lives are not subject to Church teaching and practice but receive Holy Communion nonetheless thus find themselves living at odds with both the obedience of faith and the natural order. Claiming the Eucharist without the requisite contrition for sin by humble submission to God's authority working through the Church is a failure to recognize one's station within both the created order and the plan of redemption.

The Sacraments Invite Conversion through Sacrifice

The sacraments by their very nature are gifts from Christ given to the Church so that his followers can properly cling to him as penitents seeking ongoing conversion. In his institution of the sacraments as visible signs comprised of matter and form, the Lord gives the very divine assistance that brings healing to the fallen state of the human race. From a certain standpoint, it could

²¹ *ST* II-II, q. 85, a. 1 (O'Rourke ed., 39:115).

seem like corporeal sacraments are contrary to the “spirit and truth” essence of the Christian religion. St. Thomas, however, is quick to point out that:

The first [reason that the sacraments are necessary for salvation] is taken from the condition of human nature which is such that it has to be led by things corporeal and sensible to things spiritual and intelligible. Now it belongs to Divine providence to provide for each one according as its condition requires. Divine wisdom, therefore, fittingly provides man with means of salvation, in the shape of corporeal and sensible signs that are called sacraments.²²

Aquinas adds to this that the matter and form of the sacramental liturgy established by the Lord further the work of redemption due to the fact that fallen humanity is quick to cling to material objects in a sinful manner. “Now the healing remedy should be given to a man so as to reach the part affected by disease,” he explains. “Consequently it was fitting that God should provide man with a spiritual medicine by means of certain corporeal signs; for if man were offered spiritual things without a veil, his mind being taken up with the material world would be unable to apply itself to them.”²³

And, further, the disorders of fallen human nature lead human beings to easily displace God with created objects. Given that it would be “too hard for man to be drawn away entirely from bodily actions,” St. Thomas explains, “bodily exercise was offered to him in the sacraments, by which he might be trained to avoid superstitious practices, consisting in the worship of demons, and all manner of harmful action, consisting in sinful deeds.”²⁴

As gifts from the Lord that address our proclivity to disordered attachment to creation, humanity “is humbled, through confessing that he is subject to corporeal things, seeing that he receives assistance through them: and he is even preserved from bodily hurt, by the healthy exercise of the sacraments.”²⁵

The sacramental liturgy of the Church is an antidote to the many vices that come so easily in the fallen world. By their very nature, the sacraments in their matter and form invite human beings to recognize their proclivity to sin and to seek redemption in the Lord by humble submission to the signs of faith that he established to maintain ongoing union with his followers.

²² *ST III*, q. 61, a. 1 (Mortensen and Alarcón ed., 20:15–16).

²³ *ST III*, q. 61, a. 1 (Mortensen and Alarcón ed., 20:16).

²⁴ *ST III*, q. 61, a. 1 (Mortensen and Alarcón ed., 20:16).

²⁵ *ST III*, q. 61, a. 1 (Mortensen and Alarcón ed., 20:16).

Sacramental Character, Christ's Priesthood, and the Consecration of the Christian Faithful

Have you ever wondered why a baptized eight-year-old can receive Communion, go to Confession, receive Confirmation and other sacraments when appropriate, but an unbaptized adult with manifest well-formed faith cannot participate in the post-baptismal sacramental life of the Church? The theology of sacramental character is rooted in the truth that the baptized are called to serve God by means of the form of worship that Christ himself established. Unlike the unbaptized, who must first be initiated as Christians before they can participate in the sacramental worship of Church, the baptized are, to use Thomas's term, "deputed" or deputized to participate in Lord's own priestly activity.

For Thomas, the characters conferred by Baptism, Confirmation, and Holy Orders are not merely static marks on the soul. Christians, he says, are "deputed to receive, or to bestow on others, things pertaining to the worship of God. And this, properly speaking, is the purpose of the sacramental character."²⁶ Thomas identifies the sacramental character in the souls of Christians with Christ's priestly office. "The whole rite of the Christian religion," he argues, "is derived from Christ's priesthood. Consequently, it is clear that the sacramental character is specially the character of Christ, to Whose [priesthood] the faithful are likened by reason of the sacramental characters, which are nothing else than certain participations of Christ's Priesthood, flowing from Christ Himself."²⁷

The faithful, therefore, even in receiving the Eucharist, are participating in an act of worship derived from Christ's priesthood—in Christ's relationship, as man, with God. From this perspective, Thomas understands character to set the faithful apart for special service to God: "In a special way some sacraments," he argues, "which imprint a character, bestow on man a certain consecration, thus deputing him to the Divine worship: just as inanimate things are said to be consecrated forasmuch as they are deputed to Divine worship."²⁸ As a result, the participation of the faithful in the sacramental life of the Church is not only horizontal or by way of the gathering of the assembly, but the result of the powers of their souls being conformed to the higher reality of the Lord's priesthood, for the sake of offering true worship to God.

²⁶ *ST* III, q. 63, a. 3 (Mortensen and Alarcón ed., 20:37).

²⁷ *ST* III, q. 63, a. 3 (Mortensen and Alarcón ed., 20:37).

²⁸ *ST* III, q. 63, a. 6, ad 2 (Mortensen and Alarcón ed., 20:41).

It is the conformity of the soul's powers to Christ that links the worship of the Church to his priesthood. To participate in the liturgy—even at the common level vis-à-vis the characters of Baptism and Confirmation—without the perfection of grace is to misuse what Christ has joined to himself for a sacred purpose. When the faithful participate in the Eucharistic liturgy, they come forward not as individuals keeping a social custom or satisfying their own desires, but as deputed members of the Church configured to Christ's own priesthood for the sake of sharing in his redemptive, sacrificial worship.

The Priesthood of Christ and the Sin of Sacrilege

This line of theological reasoning provides some important context to a noteworthy teaching in §47 of “The Mystery of the Eucharist in the Life of the Church.” Here, the bishops state the following: “As the Church has consistently taught, a person who receives Holy Communion while in a state of mortal sin not only does not receive the grace that the sacrament conveys; he or she commits the sin of sacrilege by failing to show the reverence due to the sacred Body and Blood of Christ.” There is no citation to this passage in the document, but there is a text in the *Summa theologiae* on the reception of Holy Communion that seems to be the backdrop to this teaching. “Whoever receives this sacrament,” Aquinas explains,

expresses thereby that he is made one with Christ, and incorporated in His members; and this is done by living faith, which no one has who is in mortal sin. And therefore it is manifest that whoever receives this sacrament while in mortal sin, *is guilty of lying to this sacrament, and consequently of sacrilege*, because he profanes the sacrament: and therefore he sins mortally.²⁹

Aquinas is very clear that unworthy reception is, indeed, an act of sacrilege. The unworthy reception of the Blessed Sacrament is not only an objective sacrilege, in the sense of treating the host in an unworthy manner; it is also a sacrilege precisely because of the incoherent agency of the recipient. The recipient sins subjectively in receiving the host—“lies,” to use Aquinas's word—because the recipient acts as if they are in communion with the Lord and his body when in fact they are not.

This confronts an extremely important pastoral consideration. The

²⁹ ST III, q. 80, a. 4 (Mortensen and Alarcón ed., 20:287; emphasis added).

debates around Eucharistic coherence are not abstractions. They pertain concretely to who should or should not receive Holy Communion, and why.

Moral Coherence and Fruitful Reception

In addition to the sin of sacrilege, there are further reasons why allowing those not properly disposed to receive Communion could be harmful and misleading. As sources of grace for sinners leading lives of conversion, the sacraments are medicinal. Some health conditions, however, render some forms of treatment not only unfruitful, but even harmful. No matter how effective acetaminophen is in relieving pain for most people, an allergy can impede it from bearing fruit in some, and even render it injurious.

The monastic wisdom of the Greek patrimony of the Church has long recognized this point. In his work *The Ladder of Divine Ascent*, John Climacus (†649) includes an awareness of which spiritual medicine is most suitable for souls in different states of progress in the rung of his ladder that discusses discernment. Failure to apply the correct medicine to the correct ailment, Climacus recognizes, can lead the fragile to despair or the proud to true contrition:

One man's medicine can be another man's poison, and something can be a medicine to the same man at one time and a poison at another. So I have seen [the] incompetent physician who by inflicting dishonor on a sick but contrite man produced despair in him, and I have seen a skillful physician who cut through an arrogant heart with knife of dishonor and thereby drained it of all its foul-smelling pus. I have seen a sick man striving to cleanse his impurity by drinking the medicine of obedience, by moving, walking, staying awake. That same man when the eye of his soul was sick did not move, made no noise, and was silent. Therefore, "he who has ears to hear, let him hear" (Luke 14:35).³⁰

St. Thomas Aquinas develops this same general point in relation to the medicinal spiritual goods offered in the sacraments. When it comes to the reception of Holy Communion, for example, the principle that "one man's medicine can be another man's poison" is apt, and something that is taken up in Eucharistic theology and pastoral practice.

³⁰ John Climacus, *The Ladder of Divine Ascent*, Classics of Western Spirituality (New York: Paulist Press, 1982), 233–34.

“Every medicine does not suit every stage of sickness,” Aquinas teaches with great pastoral sensitivity in relation to the sacraments,

because the tonic given to those who are recovering from fever would be hurtful to them if given while yet in their feverish condition. So likewise[,] Baptism and Penance are as purgative medicines, given to take away the fever of sin; whereas this sacrament [the Eucharist] is a medicine given to strengthen, and it ought not to be given except to them who are quit of sin.³¹

As a medicine in the order of redemption, the very point of the Eucharist is to strengthen those seeking divine assistance in turning away from—not clinging to—sinful activity.

In the context of the contemporary discussions around Eucharistic coherence, this pastoral point highlights the further danger beyond the sin of sacrilege in permitting those in the state of mortal sin to receive Communion. Namely, they could be led to think that, by their objective reception of the Sacrament, they are subjectively making spiritual progress—being healed. However, what the analogy of the health condition to the appropriate medicine clarifies is that not every objectively effective treatment is able to bear fruit in each subject. A retrieval of St. Thomas’s teaching on the difference between what he calls mere sacramental eating (reception), on the one hand, and spiritual consumption of the Eucharist on the other (fruitful reception) is a helpful principle in this context.

“There are two things to be considered in the receiving of this sacrament,” Thomas notes,

the sacrament itself, and its fruits. . . . The perfect way, then, of receiving this sacrament is when one takes it so as to partake of its effect. . . . It sometimes happens that a man is hindered from receiving the effect of this sacrament; and such receiving of this sacrament is an imperfect one. Therefore, as the perfect is divided against the imperfect, so sacramental eating, whereby the sacrament only is received without its effect, is divided against spiritual eating, by which one receives the effect of this sacrament, whereby a man is spiritually united with Christ through faith and charity.³²

³¹ *ST* III, q. 80, a. 4, ad 2 (Mortensen and Alarcón ed., 20:288).

³² *ST* III, q. 80, a. 1 (Mortensen and Alarcón ed., 20:282).

In other words, those who receive the Sacrament fruitfully enjoy both forms of eating, but those who “eat” the Sacrament while impeding its fruits do not.³³ This is precisely why the sacraments do not work as vending machines, despite their *ex opere operato* efficacy. In some instances, more spiritual progress can be made when the faithful persevere with their hearts open to God’s assistance in the midst of difficulty than when receiving the Blessed Sacrament unfruitfully.³⁴

Good Moral Intentions and the Reception of the Eucharist

One can imagine, of course, many situations in which faithful whose lives are not coherent with the Church’s teaching might wish to receive the Eucharist for good reasons, such as out of spiritual longing. There are, to be sure, some people who think their incoherence with certain teachings of the Church is even the correct conscientious position. It is worth recalling John Paul II’s engagement with this attitude in §78 of his 1993 *Veritatis splendor*, citing Aquinas:

Saint Thomas observes that “it often happens that man acts with a good intention, but without spiritual gain, because he lacks a good will. Let us say that someone robs in order to feed the poor: in this case, even though the intention is good, the uprightness of the will is lacking. Consequently, no evil done with a good intention can be excused. ‘There are those who say: And why not do evil that good may come? Their condemnation is just’ (Rom 3:8).”

The reason why a good intention is not itself sufficient, but a correct choice of actions is also needed, is that the human act depends on its object, whether that object is *capable or not of being ordered* to God, to the One who “alone is good,” and thus brings about the perfection of the person.

Even if one has a good intention in approaching the Blessed Sacrament—a spiritual hunger for it—their incoherence with Church doctrine leaves them in an objectively disordered state. Here again, John Paul II sees the

³³ ST III, q. 80, ad 2: “That sacramental eating which is also a spiritual eating is not divided in contrast with spiritual eating, but is included under it; but that sacramental eating which does not secure the effect, is divided in contrast with spiritual eating” (Mortensen and Alarcón ed., 20:282).

³⁴ Paul Jerome Keller, O.P., “Is Spiritual Communion for Everyone,” *Nova et Vetera* (English) 12, no. 3 (2014): 631–55.

connection between the sacrificial nature of the Eucharist and the renunciation of sin in the life of each member of the Church:

Because the Eucharist makes present the redeeming sacrifice of the Cross, perpetuating it sacramentally, it naturally gives rise to a continuous need for conversion, for a personal response to the appeal made by Saint Paul to the Christians of Corinth: "We beseech you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God" (2 Cor 5:20). If a Christian's conscience is burdened by serious sin, then the path of penance through the sacrament of Reconciliation becomes necessary for full participation in the Eucharistic Sacrifice." (*Ecclesia de Eucharistia* §37)

There can thus be no true Eucharistic revival in individual lives and in the Church that does not presuppose that the faithful join in the liturgy according to the order of redemption. Within this order, it is not the role of the Church to confirm the faithful in their desires or longings, but to shepherd them so that their desires and longings conform to the gift of Christ's redeeming forgiveness by means of ongoing conversion. This form of shepherding disposes the faithful to more than the mere reception of communion; rather, it guides them to a fruitful reception.

The Order of All Seven Sacraments to the Eucharist— Especially Penance

A final general principle to contemplate in light of the bishops' teaching on the link between the Eucharist and conversion is the important unity and complementarity between Holy Communion and the other Sacraments of the Church, especially Penance. When considering the Eucharist as the "greatest" sacrament, Aquinas notes that all other sacraments appear to be ordained to the Eucharist as their end. The Sacrament of Holy Orders, he explains, "is ordained to the consecration of the Eucharist," Baptism makes "reception of the Eucharist" possible, Confirmation urges us "not to fear to abstain from this sacrament," whereas Confession and Anointing of the Sick make it possible "to receive the Body of Christ worthily" and Marriage, he teaches, "touches this sacrament; in so far as it signifies the union of Christ with the Church, of which union the Eucharist is a figure."³⁵

The entire sacramental system revolves around the Eucharist, which Thomas teaches, strengthens "against the soul's proneness to sin," while

³⁵ ST III, q. 65, a. 3 (Mortensen and Alarcón ed., 20:65).

the other sacraments lead to Holy Communion or assist in restoring us to communion when we fall. In St. Thomas's understanding of the unity of the sacramental system, there is no contemplation of participation in the Eucharist that is not integrated with the entire sacramental life of the Church. In fact, in his commentary on the "daily bread" petition in the Lord's Prayer, St. Thomas states that "all the other sacraments are contained" in the Eucharist.³⁶ The dying to the life of sin that is begun in Baptism is lived out in different ways in all of the other sacraments, which are supported and sustained by the fruitful reception of Holy Communion. To put it another way, there is no practice in the Christian tradition for the Eucharist to be received in isolation from the other sacraments which are all ordered to deepening fruitful reception of the Eucharist or returning to it in a worthy manner.

Conclusion: Sin No More

In his well-known 1958 address "The New Pagans and the Church," given now sixty-six years ago, Fr. Joseph Ratzinger raised concerns about the drift of Christians in Europe away from a cultural patrimony animated by the truth of the faith. The Church, Ratzinger observed, is no longer "a Church composed of pagans who have become Christians, but a Church of pagans, who still call themselves Christians, but actually have become pagans."³⁷ What Ratzinger means by this statement is that in a culture that has Christian roots but whose members are no longer guided by the faith of the Church, we can "assume with some certainty" when we meet someone "that he has a baptismal certificate, but not that he has a Christian frame of mind."³⁸ This leaves the Church in dangerous territory, Ratzinger recognized, in the area of sacramental practice. In such a situation, "it must, once again, become clear," Ratzinger cautioned, anticipating the coherence debates, "that Sacraments without faith are meaningless, and the Church here will have to abandon gradually and with great care, a type of activity, which ultimately includes a form of self-deception and deception of others."³⁹ It would be difficult to argue that the situation has improved in Europe or elsewhere in the West in the sixty-five years since Fr. Ratzinger made these observations.

³⁶ *ST II-II*, q. 83, a. 9 (O'Rourke ed., 39:73).

³⁷ Ratzinger, "New Pagans and the Church," trans. Fr. Kenneth Baker, January 30, 2017, online edition of *Homiletic and Pastoral Review*, hprweb.com/2017/01/the-new-pagans-and-the-church/.

³⁸ Ratzinger, "New Pagans and the Church."

³⁹ Ratzinger, "New Pagans and the Church."

The Church must, especially in its sacramental practice, avoid the possible deception that Ratzinger foresees when the faith of the Church is no longer the animating principle of the outlook of most Catholics. “All of human life,” the Second Vatican Council’s pastoral constitution *Gaudium et Spes* teaches, “whether individual or collective, shows itself to be a dramatic struggle between good and evil, between light and darkness” (§13). This struggle confronts all human beings with only two options: to cling to God or to be drawn away from him by sinful attachments and practices. “Now man is placed between the things of this world,” St. Thomas reminds,

and spiritual goods wherein eternal happiness consists: so that the more he cleaves to the one, the more he withdraws from the other, and conversely. Wherefore he that cleaves wholly to the things of this world, so as to make them his end, and to look upon them as the reason and rule of all he does, falls away altogether from spiritual goods.⁴⁰

In light of all of this, we might add that one pagan tendency in the Church today is a failure to recognize that each person must necessarily live the struggle between sin and grace within themselves, which is the very process of redemption for which Our Lord suffered. This struggle is essential to the Gospel doctrine on the justification of the sinner. Thomas Aquinas saw in the Gospel the following truth: “Now to withdraw from sin and to draw near to justice, in an act of free-will, means detestation and desire. . . . Hence in the justification of the ungodly there must be two acts of the free-will—one, whereby it tends to God’s justice; the other whereby it hates sin.”⁴¹

The bishops of the United States have asked the Lord to call us into a period of Eucharistic revival. In the words of John Paul II, Christ’s admonition to the woman caught in adultery, “go and sin no more,” is “encouraging and friendly”—words “celebrating” the reconciliation of the sinner to the Father. May all the Catholic faithful respond to this invitation by embracing the truth that Christian revival through fruitful reception of the Eucharist is effected only by ongoing conversion to the Lord *and* away from sin.⁴² **NCV**

⁴⁰ ST I-II, q. 108, a. 4 (Mortensen and Alarcón ed., 16:434–35).

⁴¹ ST I-II, q. 113, a. 5 (Mortensen and Alarcón ed., 16:488).

⁴² See John Paul II, “Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation: Reconciliation and Penance” (1984), §29.