

Sacramental Causality: *Da capo!*

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IN 1956, the Irish Jesuit Bernard Leeming (1893–1971) published an article entitled “Recent Trends in Sacramental Theology.”¹ This publication put into print a talk that the author earlier had given at a meeting of theologians in Devon, England. Those who cherish the memory of another Jesuit, the Canadian Bernard Lonergan, recall that Father “Lonergan always attributed his basic intellectual conversion to the course he took in the Catholic doctrine on Christ in the fall and spring of 1935–1936 with . . . Bernard Leeming.”² Twenty years later, Leeming’s 1956 article “Recent Trends” alerts us to another kind of intellectual conversion: the turning away from a centuries-long tradition of scholastic reflection on the proper mode of sacramental efficacy. Specifically, Leeming announces an evolution in the treatment of sacramental causality, an evolution that owed its direction to certain Catholic theologians who were active prior to the opening in 1962 of the Second Vatican Council. “The intransigent disputes,” Leeming wrote, “about ‘moral,’ ‘physical’ and ‘intentional’ causality have far less prominence and the effort [in the mid-50s] is rather to incorporate into synthesis the differing elements stressed by different theologians.”³ The author dubs this trend toward synthesis “inclusive.”

This “inclusive” project—again, the description comes from Leeming—has continued to unfold for more than half a century within Catholic

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¹ Bernard Leeming, S.J., “Recent Trends in Sacramental Theology,” *Irish Theological Quarterly* 23 (1956): 195–217.

² Richard Liddy, *Transforming Light*, Accessed lonergan.org/online_books/Liddy/chapter_seven_lonergan.htm (5 May 2012).

³ Leeming, “Trends,” 204.

theological circles. Today, however, not only have the varieties of causal explanations been left behind, but the very notion that the sacraments do something within the order of grace receives scant attention, even though the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* plainly sets forth this Catholic doctrine.⁴ Of course, a few Catholic theologians may make their own the verse of the Psalm: “*Similis factus sum pellicano solitudinis, factus sum sicut nycticorax in domicilio*” (Ps 101:7).⁵ Still, since the mid-twentieth century, Catholic theologians by and large have forgotten about the topic of sacramental causality. No better confirmation for this judgment can be found than that given by Cardinal Godfried Danneels, now emeritus of Mechelen-Brussels, who, in 1999, opined at the Catholic University Leuven that the classical views of causality are “extremely difficult to uphold today” and that it remains a task to investigate “what is the specific causality of the sacrament, and how does it function.”⁶ What the Flemish Cardinal announced holds good as we observe the fiftieth anniversary of the Second Vatican Council. Thus the title of my brief conference, “Sacramental Causality. *Da capo!*” Take it from the top! What, one may inquire, has become of the work of those who, on Leeming’s account, had begun to build a theological irenicism among the disputants in Catholic sacramental theology? Before trying to answer this question, it may be useful to mention Bernard Leeming’s appreciation for what he called the “‘inclusive’ trend,” that is, the trend toward synthesis. It is genial, wrote the Irishman in 1956, “but sometimes results in a lack of clearness and a blunt facing of the problems.”⁷ Fifty-seven years later, the very least that one might observe is that the obscurity remains. Further, the decline in sacramental administration and reception—statistically shocking for the sacraments of healing and at the service of communion—has coincided with an effervescence of the problems. In other words, theologians today occupy themselves with matters other than sacramental causality. The few Catholic theologians who make an effort to incorporate references to the sacraments in their writings produce what I would consider an apologetic for participation in the sacramental life of the Church.

⁴ For example, see CCC, no. 1225, emphasis added: “In his Passover Christ opened to all men the fountain of Baptism. . . . The blood and water that flowed from the pierced side of the crucified Jesus are types of Baptism and the Eucharist, the sacraments of new life (see Jn 19:34). *From then on*, it is possible ‘to be born of water and the Spirit’ (see Jn 3:5) in order to enter the Kingdom of God.”

⁵ From the Sixto-Clementine edition of the Vulgate.

⁶ Cardinal Godfried Danneels, “Current Challenges for Sacramental Theology,” *Antiphon* 5, no. 2 (2000): 44–45.

⁷ Leeming, “Trends,” 204.

Given this long duration of Catholic theology's failure to attend adequately to the nature of sacramental causality, not a few Catholics probably require a refresher course on those "intransigent debates" that especially occupied theologians from the late sixteenth century until the mid-1950s. For those who would find Albert Michel's 159 columns in the *Dictionnaire de Théologie Catholique* off-putting,⁸ I am happy to report that Reginald Lynch, O.P., has recently completed at the Dominican House of Studies a thesis for the ecclesiastical degree, the Licentiate of Sacred Theology (S.T.L.). His work succinctly recalls the principal moments and issues in the history of scholastic exchanges about how the sacraments communicate divine grace to their privileged recipients.⁹ The spectrum of the classical mainline opinions runs from the Nominalists' theory of occasional causality to the Thomist teaching on physical causality. Moral causality and dispositive or intentional causality fall somewhere in between the weak occasionalist account and the strong physicalist account of how the sacraments of the new dispensation instrumentally and efficaciously bring about the new creation.¹⁰ We further learn from Lynch's research that Bernard Leeming held the view that the Council of Trent, in order to avoid endorsing a particular theological theory as a truth of divine faith, adopted the word "confer" (*conferre*) instead of "cause" to describe the bestowal of divine grace that the sacraments effect.¹¹ If Leeming's conjecture is accurate, we easily can imagine why, during the period after the Council of Trent (1545–63), the debate about sacramental causality first grew "intransigent" and then, after the Second Vatican Council, practically disappeared. Of the twenty-four occurrences of the word "cause" in the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, only one refers even broadly to the sacraments: "The Eucharist is the efficacious sign and sublime cause of that communion in the divine life and that unity of the People of God by which the Church is kept in being."¹² At the same time, there are about twenty-five instances of the Tridentine verb "to

⁸ "Sacraments," in *Dictionnaire de Théologie Catholique*, vol. 14.1 (Paris, 1938), 485–644.

⁹ Reginald M. Lynch, O.P., "The Sacraments as Perfective Instrumental Causes of Grace," S.T.L. diss., Pontifical Faculty of the Immaculate Conception (Washington, DC, 2012).

¹⁰ See CCC, no. 1127; "Celebrated worthily in faith, the sacraments confer the grace that they signify [Cf. Council of Trent (1547): DS 1605; DS 1606]. They are *efficacious* because in them Christ himself is at work: it is he who baptizes, he who acts in his sacraments in order to communicate the grace that each sacrament signifies."

¹¹ See Bernard Leeming, *Principles of Sacramental Theology* (Westminster, MD: The Newman Press, 1963), 10–12.

¹² *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, no. 1325.

confer” used with respect to sacramental actions.¹³ Most Catholics of our period, however, find the notion of the conferral of grace as incomprehensible as the classical views that attempt to explain how the sacraments causally supply divine grace to the rightly disposed person who receives them. This is all the more true when one reflects that the use of the word “confer” suggests a schema of “causal” thought that owes its origin to a particular school of natural philosophy. Unless one finds it satisfactory to explain the sacraments by appeal to the crudest of mechanical explanations—for example, sacraments may be thought of as so many full pitchers of water that a person pours into empty glasses on a table—the language of both Aquinas and Trent return us to a framework of potency and act. In other words, the common language of the tradition requires causality in order to capture what the sacraments do in a person’s life. Today’s Catholics, on the other hand, are wont to think more in terms of act than of potency. Indeed, many Catholics and other Christians have been tutored and encouraged to think of themselves as actualized, whether by God, Uncreated Grace, the Resurrection, the Holy Spirit, or, what is most frequent, their own gifts and talents, albeit generously assisted by one or several or all of the foregoing divine helps. When one thinks of himself as preemptively replete with divine gifts, there is no reason to seek out a cause that would explain and strengthen the life of grace. When people think of themselves as irrevocably caught up in the rhythms of divine grace, they do not pay attention to the causal means that are able to restore them to this state after they have fallen away from it. One of the indices bishops use to determine parish closings is called the sacramental index. Dioceses count the sacramental administrations that take place in a parish in order to determine its viability. In some places in the United States, at least, the statistics suggest a sharp decline in the number of people who seek out the sacraments of the Church.¹⁴

Other explanatory reasons may be cited. From the middle of the sixteenth century to the middle of the twentieth, factors other than the intransigency among Nominalists, Jesuits, Dominicans, and (occasionally) other clerics influenced the eclipse of sacramental causality. Explanations of sacramental causality that depend on robust accounts of instrumental causality underwent the most complete eclipse. Consider a few of the well-known contributors to the eclipse of Everyman thinking causally

¹³ Seventh Session, Canon 6, DS 1606: “aut gratiam ipsam non poentibus obicem non conferre . . .”

¹⁴ For example, see the 2012 pastoral letter on evangelization by Saint Louis Archbishop Robert Carlson, “Go and Announce the Gospel of the Lord,” p. 5 at arch-stl.org/files/Pastoral_Letter.pdf

about anything: (1) Philosophical interest in efficient causality succumbed to popular enthusiasm for modern methods of scientific explanation. William A. Wallace devoted his long and respected career to studying this evolution. In 1972, he wrote:

Causality was never completely relinquished as a source of scientific explanation from the seventeenth to the mid-nineteenth century, although many were dissatisfied with the causes that had been proposed by their predecessors and in their place sought to expound “true causes” of physical phenomena. Each successive formulation seems to have introduced a slight change in the meaning of causality, however, until finally the notion of causal explanation was rather completely linked with determinism and predictability along quite mechanistic lines.¹⁵

As a result of this progression, Everyman regards causality, if he or she regards it at all, negatively. (2) As the supervision of sacramental causality shifted from theologians to canonists, the sacraments began to be treated as if they were predominantly juridical realities. Prior to the Second Vatican Council, professors who taught sacramental theology customarily trained in canon law. Everyman came to view Catholics as bound to unreasonable ritual practices, such as not brushing one’s teeth before the taking of Holy Communion, or to intricate regulations that put strains on human relationships, such as the observance of the laws concerning marriage. (3) Other contexts of explanation, such as liturgiology and the social and philosophical studies of religion, drew academic attention away from the classical treatment of sacramental causality.¹⁶ A complete examination of this factor would require access to the as-yet-unwritten book on how the Liturgical Renewal of the twentieth century has influenced contemporary Catholic dogmatic theology. In any event, one thing is sure. Everyman subsumes sacraments under Liturgy. (4) The introduction of a new species of causality, namely, symbolic causality, dovetailed with certain currents in modern philosophy. Everyman measures sacraments intentionally.

¹⁵ William A. Wallace, *Causality and Scientific Explanation*, Medieval and Early Classical Science, vol. 1 (Ann Arbor, MI: The University of Michigan Press, 1972), 23. Also see Brad S. Gregory, *The Unintended Reformation: How a Religious Revolution Secularized Society* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 2012), 384: “Most of those who unknowingly conflate their metaphysical assumptions with the findings of the natural sciences regard the relationship between science and religion as a competitive, zero-sum game.”

¹⁶ See my “The Sacraments of the Church” in *Vatican II: Renewal within Tradition*, ed. Matthew L. Lamb and Matthew Levering (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 129–46.

These four developments and other determinants—for example, the fact that disputes among proponents of moral causation and physical causation track closely the disputes on divine grace and human freedom—resulted in a large-scale displacement of the classical categories that facilitated prior discussions concerning sacramental causality. Little wonder that Cardinal Danneels animadverted that the classical views on causality are extremely difficult to uphold today.¹⁷ Asking a contemporary Catholic to articulate the causality of the sacraments is a little bit like asking a software developer to create an iPad app that could untangle the lines of argumentation mounted during the “Congregatio de Auxiliis”!

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It pleases me to recall the witness of the theologian who was instrumental in my own intellectual conversion. The Irish Dominican Eugene Colman O’Neill, late professor of theology at the University of Fribourg, is one of the few sacramental theologians who maintained his identity as a sacramental theologian during the period that witnessed a massive retooling of the sacramental theologian into that new breed of professional called the liturgical theologian. Toward the end of his career, when treatment for the cancer that would eventually take his life forced him to spend sabbatical time in the United States, Father O’Neill composed the book that, in my view, provides the bridge from the alleged intransigency generated by the disputes of post-Tridentine scholasticism to the restoration of interest in the questions associated with sacramental causality.¹⁸ Originally published in 1983, O’Neill’s *Sacramental Realism* affords a good example of what I understand as *Ressourcement Thomism*. That is, O’Neill reads closely and judiciously Aquinas and his commentators in order to guide his theological thinking and to keep it, well, Catholic. One may fairly observe that Father O’Neill enacted Pope Benedict’s XVI’s hermeneutics of reform *ante nomen*.

To illustrate what I mean, allow me to quote an especially rich excerpt from O’Neill’s chapters. He is talking about alternative accounts of sacramental causality advanced by mainly European theologians—those, as O’Neill says, whose spiritual homeland is Paris:

The medievals, had they wanted to say of the sacraments “they cause because, and to the degree that, they are symbols,” had sufficient command of Latin to say it clearly, and clarity was a tool of their trade. In fact, they used the word “cause” in their sacramentology because that

¹⁷ Danneels, “Challenges,” 44.

¹⁸ Colman E. O’Neill, O.P., *Sacramental Realism: A General Theory of the Sacraments* (Chicago: Midwest Theological Forum, 1998). The essay was originally published in 1983 by Michael Glazier, Inc.

was the term they used to speak of God's creating the world; a St. Thomas used it because he considered that it could be extended to signify as well the active intervention of Christ in the symbolic act of the sacrament; and he then went to the trouble of explaining that he was choosing this word so as to make it clear that an exclusively symbolic account of the sacraments does not measure up to the tradition of the Fathers (*Summa theol.*, III, q. 62, a. 1; ib., ad 1).¹⁹

"You Don't Have to Be Jewish to Love Levy's!"²⁰ And you don't have to be Thomist to take an interest in sacramental causality. Whatever pertains to the well-being of Catholic theology at the service of the Church must interest the Catholic theologian. Many recent developments point to the urgency of restoring interest in sacramental causality. A proper understanding of how the sacraments accomplish what they are said to accomplish affects directly the everyday life of Catholics. Recently Pope Benedict XVI told a group of specialists in questions pertaining to the internal forum: "The New Evangelization . . . begins in the confessional."²¹ Still, how many Catholic theologians would understand adequately the points that Father O'Neill makes in the above-cited two—yes, two—sentences. As I have remarked, O'Neill exhibits some of the best of Ressourcement Thomism.²² At the same time, the Catholic Church commits us to Truth, not to a specific theological theory, even though she does commend some theologians more than others. For example, Blessed Pope John Paul II, in his Encyclical Letter *Fides et Ratio*, makes his own the words of Pope Paul VI in the Apostolic Letter *Lumen Ecclesiae*, and he refers to Saint Thomas as the "Doctor of Truth." Overall, Pope John Paul II clearly associated himself with a long tradition of papal support for the doctrine of the Angelic Doctor.²³

¹⁹ O'Neill, *Realism*, 127.

²⁰ Henry S. Levy and Sons, popularly known as Levy's, was a bakery based in Brooklyn and most famous for their rye bread. They are best known for their advertising campaign "You Don't Have to Be Jewish to Love Levy's," which columnist Walter Winchell referred to as "the commercial with a sensayuma" (sense of humor).

²¹ Address of His Holiness Benedict XVI to the Participants in the Annual Course on the Internal Forum Organized by the Apostolic Penitentiary, Paul VI Hall, Friday, 9 March 2011: "The New Evangelization, therefore, also begins in the confessional!"

²² For an introduction, see *Ressourcement Thomism: Sacra Doctrina, the Sacraments, and the Moral Life*, ed. Reinhard Hüter and Matthew Levering (Washington, DC: The Catholic University of America Press, 2010).

²³ See Pope John Paul II, 1995 Encyclical Letter, *Fides et Ratio*, no. 44, which cites Pope Paul VI, 1974 Apostolic Letter *Lumen Ecclesiae*, no. 10: "Tale autem studium quaerendi veritatem eique totis viribus inserviendi—quod S. Thomas censuit munus totius suae vitae proprium idemque docendo scribendoque egregie

Generalizations about the state of Catholic theology and practice easily leave those who make them open to *sed contras*. So let me express my ardent hope that pulpits and catechetical sessions brim over with sound sacramental instruction. Still, a large body of evidence intimates that catechists and preachers do not expound the Catholic doctrine of the sacraments, especially about the nature of their causality. Other thought forms have intervened along the line. What makes statements such as those that follow so parlous arises from the fact that many persons can easily understand them. What Arius did to the Incarnation, certain modern theologians have done to the sacraments. In a word, we encounter easy-to-understand rationalizations that seduce the populace.

Here are a few samples of topic sentences from lessons given within the Church about the sacraments: “Sacraments are not just ritual acts that give grace but opportunities for people already in God’s grace to celebrate that fact through symbolic activity.” Or, “Sacraments are special moments that can heighten our awareness of God’s grace meeting us everywhere, changing us.” One last one: “In sacraments, we gather to celebrate our belief in God and God’s care in liturgical ritual, and to live out or affirm Jesus’s values, and to encounter Jesus and through Him, God.” No need to analyze the errors. All one needs to know is that these sentences have been copied from a handout for an adult RCIA program. So some aspiring Catholics were misinformed about the seven sacraments of salvation. What provokes a certain melancholy is the suspicion that those who are taught to think of the sacraments, for example, as expressions of communitarian symbolic activity, are the high-end consumers of popularized post-conciliar theology. As a result of this kind of catechesis and preaching, for most Catholics today, the sacraments remain cultural features of a fading bourgeois religion. The question of what supernatural change they effect in the person who receives them is as irrelevant to the Catholic faithful (and some priests) as the disputes that Bernard Leeming described as having reached a state of intransigency in 1956.²⁴

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It is not difficult to translate the technical language of sacramental causality into user-friendly language. For example, one may say that each of the seven sacraments changes us. The kind of change differs according to the sacrament. Baptism makes us justified. Confirmation makes us witnesses. The Eucharist makes us lovers. Marriage makes a man and a woman

explevit—efficit, ut ipse merito appellari possit «apostolus veritatis» et omnibus in exemplum proponi, qui docendi munere funguntur.”

²⁴ Some Catholics criticize the efficacy of the sacraments, however; for example, see Garry Wills, *Why Priests? A Failed Tradition* (New York: Viking Adult, 2013).

husband and wife. Holy Orders makes a man a priest. Penance makes a sinner effectively penitent. Holy Anointing makes a dying person ready to see God. Cardinal Cajetan offers a hint on how to reignite interest in sacramental causality. We find it in his commentary on the *tertia pars* of the *Summa theologiae*. In question 62, article 6, Aquinas asks, “[D]id the sacraments of the Old Law cause grace?” To which Cardinal Cajetan appends his summary, and his advice!²⁵

The title is clear. There are two negative conclusions in the body of the article. The first is: *The sacraments of the old law did not confer grace by their own power*. This is proved by the authority of the Apostle.

The other conclusion is: *The sacraments of the old law did not confer grace by a power residing in them from the passion of Christ*. This is proved by the common difference of the conjunction of any cause to the thing to be caused [causandum] either through the use of exterior things, or through an act of the soul. The first is of an efficient cause, and because of this is prior in existence. The second, however, is of a final cause, and because of this it is able to be posterior in existence. Underneath this common difference is taken up the specific difference between conjunction to the passion of Christ through the sacraments, and [conjunction to the passion of Christ] through faith. Conjunction [to the passion of

²⁵ Titulus clarus. In corpore sunt duae conclusiones negativae. Prima est: *Sacramenta veteris legis non conferebant gratiam virtute propria*. Probatur auctoritate Apostoli.

Altera est: *Sacramenta veteris legis non conferebant gratiam virtute in eis habita a passione Christi*. Probatur ex communi differentia coniunctionis alicuius causae ad causandum vel per usum exteriorum rerum, vel per actum animae: quia prima est causae effectivae, ac per hoc prioris secundum esse; secunda autem est causae finalis, ac per hoc potest esse posterioris secundum esse. Sub hac enim differentia communi subsumitur in speciali differentia inter passionem Christi coniungi per sacramenta, vel per fidem: ita quod per sacramenta coniunctio continetur sub coniunctione per usum exteriorum rerum; et coniunctio per fidem continetur sub coniunctione per actum animae. Et sub hoc procedendo descenditur, et quod passio Christi est prior secundum esse sacramentis nostris et posterior sacramentis veteris legis, ac per hoc nostris quidem sacramentis passio Christi coniungi potest ut causa activa operans per illa, priscis autem non potest coniungi ut causa activa operans per illa, quod est intentum conclusionis: et quod passio Christi ut finalis causa coniungitur per fidem tam nobis quam antiquis. Et propterea utrique salvamur per fidem passionis Christi: sed non utrique per sacramenta virtuosa ex passione Christi. Non tamen superstitiosus erat usus illorum sacramentorum: quia adhibebantur, etsi non ut virtuosae, tamen ut signa fidei virtuosae.

Sta igitur, Lector, in formali differentia inter coniunctionem per fidem seu actum animae ut sic, et per sacramenta seu usum exteriorum rerum ut sic: et videbis differentiam in littera subtiliter positam inferre sacramenta nostra esse virtuosa, et antiqua non. Et memento, Novitie, quod de coniunctione causali, seu causae ut sic, est sermo: ut non fallaris ab importunitate digredientium ad ea quae sunt per accidens.

Christ] through the sacraments [i.e. sacramental conjunction] is contained within conjunction through the use of exterior things. Conjunction [to the passion of Christ] through faith is contained within the conjunction through the act of the soul. And by proceeding from this [difference] one discovers, that the passion of Christ is both prior in existence to our sacraments, and posterior to the sacraments of the old law; and because of this the passion of Christ is able to be conjoined to our sacraments as an active cause operating through them. However, [the passion of Christ] is not able to be conjoined to the [sacraments] of old as an active cause operating through them. This is the intent of [Saint Thomas's] conclusion: the passion of Christ as final cause is conjoined both to us and to those of old through faith. And furthermore, we are saved in both cases through faith in the passion of Christ, but not in both cases through the sacramental power of the passion of Christ. Nevertheless, the use of those former sacraments was not superstitious, because they were useful even if not as [intrinsically] powerful at least as signs of a virtuous faith.

Therefore, [dear] reader, maintain the formal difference between conjunction [to the passion of Christ] through faith or an act of the soul as such, and [conjunction to the passion of Christ] through the sacraments or the use of exterior things as such. [If you maintain this formal difference in your mind] you will perceive this difference in the article—subtly posited—and infer that our sacraments are [intrinsically] powerful and that the old [sacraments] are not. And remember, [dear] novice, that [Saint Thomas] is speaking about causal conjunction or of a cause as such, so that you are not tricked by the importunity of digressing into those things that are *per accidens*.²⁶

May I respectfully suggest that Cardinal Cajetan's advice to the novices may serve well Catholic theologians of the new evangelization. To adapt a phrase of the late Richard John Neuhaus, we may find ourselves at the threshold of the Ressourcement Thomist—the R.T.—Moment. N V

²⁶ I acknowledge my indebtedness to Brother Cajetan Cuddy, O.P., who graciously provided me not only the text but also the translation.