

The Post-Christendom Sacramental Crisis: The Wisdom of Thomas Aquinas

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THIS ARTICLE argues that, given the collapse of a societal consensus that is supportive of the Judaeo-Christian moral tradition, the Church is facing a sacramental crisis. The crisis consists in fewer and fewer baptized Catholics participating in the post-baptismal sacraments and fewer and fewer of the Catholics who do participate in further sacraments effectively realizing the fruits of these sacraments. Part of the solution to this crisis is to consider carefully the wisdom of St. Thomas Aquinas on how to identify (and remove) obstacles to sacramental fruitfulness.

A Post-Christendom Culture

Ever since Christianity became the state religion of the Roman Empire in the fourth century—even with all the ambiguity that accompanied its new status—the laws, customs, art, architecture, literature, intellectual life, and general culture of the Western countries have been marked by an acknowledgment of God and the moral law. Along with this weaving of the biblical worldview and morality into the culture, there was oftentimes a concomitant respect for the Church enshrined not only in the fabric of culture but also in law. With the intellectual currents of the Enlightenment, the subsequent anti-religion rebellion of the French Revolution, and the profound intellectual rejection of the Christian worldview symbolized by Marx, Nietzsche, and Freud, forces were unleashed in Western culture that eventually led to not only a repudiation of the church-state relationships that had evolved over many centuries but a repudiation of religion itself as a legitimate shaper of culture. The etiology of this disintegration has been well documented and analyzed. The

sadly uncritical acceptance of this ideology on the part of the universities, and the cultural elites formed by the universities, has unleashed in the West anti-religious forces that work consciously to strip from culture the vestiges of respect for the Judaeo-Christian tradition still enshrined in it, now oftentimes, in little more than a nostalgic, symbolic way. Well-financed and carefully strategized campaigns to completely remove respect for the law of God from the culture continue apace, most notably now in the campaign to force the culture to accept the active practice of homosexuality as a protected and respected good, and to force into silence—with the definition of new laws protecting it—the churches and synagogues that still hold to Scripture and tradition on this issue.

The collapse of Christian culture, as weak and ambiguous as it was in some ways, has profoundly affected the beliefs and actions of baptized Catholics. Whether it be the decline in Mass attendance, the radical drop in vocations, the widespread breakup of Catholic marriages, the increasing frequency of co-habitation by Catholics before or instead of marriage, the shrinking of family size and the concomitant practice of contraception, the statistics are widely known but nevertheless quite shocking.¹

What these statistics indicate, among other things, is that there is something like an institutional collapse going on, evidenced by the vast numbers of schools closing, parishes merging, clustering and closing and the multiple assignments that many young priests now are asked to manage. Besides the institutional collapse, there is evidence of a widespread repudiation of the teaching of Christ and the Church by vast numbers of Catholics. Even those who attend Mass regularly often embody a set of beliefs that are closer to the beliefs of the secular elites than to the teaching of Christ. Despite many positive signs, the trends are not encouraging. The radical collapse of the Church in some of the traditionally most Catholic parts of the country—the northeast, the midwest, et cetera—is masked by the large Hispanic immigration that has kept the statistics reported on the total Catholic population relatively stable. But the same secularizing forces are at work among the traditionally Catholic immigrants, and the lack of sufficient numbers of Spanish-speaking priests doesn't bode well for the future.² The challenge of evangelical and Pentecostal churches that embody

¹ The Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate (CARA) provides exhaustive statistics, continually updated, on many Catholic metrics. Their home page (cara.georgetown.edu) contains a section titled "Church Statistics" that opens to this information.

² See Jim Graves, "Where are the Priests?" in *National Catholic Register*, July 17–30, 2011, p. 1ff. While Hispanics now constitute nearly 40 percent of the total U.S. Catholic population (and more than 50 percent of the Catholic youth population),

more values of the Hispanic culture than the typical Catholic Anglo parish does is also a significant factor.³

A Sacramental Crisis

We are now faced with what I think warrants to be called a “sacramental crisis.” One aspect of the crisis is the radical drop in the numbers of those who still bother to approach the sacraments. The statistics reported below track this drop in a large midwestern diocese, but statistics that I’ve seen from other dioceses are very similar and are typical of the Catholic heartland.⁴

Last Ten Years: Midwestern Diocese			
	2000	2010	
Infant Baptisms	16,294	9,544	42.4% decrease
Adult Baptisms	1,442	704	51.2% decrease
Full Communion with the Church	1,713	960	43.6% decrease
Catholic Marriages	3,641	1,649	45.3% decrease
Interfaith Marriages	1,657	783	52.7% decrease
Funerals	10,461	9,496	9.2% decrease
Parishes	313	273	12.8% decrease
Annual Appeal Households	317,805	270,451	14.9% decrease

The fact that this radical drop has occurred in only a space of ten years is particularly disturbing. Another aspect of the crisis is the apparent lack of sacramental fruitfulness in the lives of many who still partake of the

only 10 to 15 percent of the priests ordained each year are Hispanic. Only 9 percent of the bishops are Hispanic. In heavily Hispanic dioceses like Los Angeles and Phoenix, ordinations of any kind are shockingly rare. In Los Angeles, the largest archdiocese in the U.S., only 3 men were ordained in 2010, and only 6 in 2011. In Phoenix only 3 were ordained in 2010 and none in 2011.

³ While there has been growth in the west, southwest and south, a growth that is largely due to Hispanic immigration, not to growth through evangelization, the statistics about the outflow from the Catholic Church in second and third generation Hispanic Catholic immigrants are not encouraging. See Edwin Hernández, with Rebecca Burwell and Jeffrey Smith, “A Study of Hispanic Catholics: Why Are They Leaving the Catholic Church? Implications for the New Evangelization,” in *The New Evangelization: Overcoming the Obstacles*, ed. Steven Boguslawski and Ralph Martin (New York: Paulist Press, 2008), 109–41.

⁴ For example, in another diocese, while the Catholic population of the ten counties of the diocese declined by 3.25 percent, the drop in Mass attendance was five

sacraments. One of the most dramatic indicators of this is the experience of many parishes when it comes to the sacrament of confirmation. As I've spoken to youth ministers, religious education directors, and pastors in many parts of North America, and in my classroom at the seminary, the most common difficulty that I've heard expressed when discussion turns to confirmation is that the majority of youth confirmed are seldom seen in church again. The sacrament that is supposed to express and effect deeper, conscious commitment to being witnesses to the faith seems in many cases to result in directly the opposite. For many youth and their parents, confirmation seems to be a "ritual" that completes the list of what "good Catholics" are supposed to do, and therefore no further religious education or even Church attendance seems necessary. If this is the "green" wood what is the "dry" wood like?

This virtually unanimous anecdotal evidence is verified in the various studies that have been done on what "youth" believe today.

One of the most cited of the contemporary youth researchers is Christian Smith. In a comprehensive survey of American youth, he and his team pointed out that Catholic youth are in some ways in the greatest difficulty of any religiously affiliated youth as regards orthodox belief.

For example, 57 percent of teenage Catholics stated that they maybe or definitely believed in reincarnation. The authors conclude that even though the "shell" or "form" of traditional religion is there, it has been colonized by an alien spirit which they describe as "Moralistic Therapeutic Deism."⁵

Of course, it would not be accurate to leave the impression that the "secular culture" is to blame for all of this. Years of silence about those aspects of the gospel which the contemporary culture is hostile to—the truths about sin, about heaven and hell, about the need for repentance, about the real meaning of discipleship, about the supreme value of knowing Christ—have contributed to the metamorphosis of Catholicism in the minds of many into a comforting religious ritual of indeterminate meaning. When the American bishops a few years ago commissioned an evaluation of catechetical text books in use over the previous twenty-five

times greater—a 16.37 percent decline since the year 2000. There has been an even more precipitous decline in that period in baptisms (–32.81 percent), in marriages (–44.38 percent), and in RCIA participation (–57.7 percent). The diocese notes that the reported decline is not confined to one area of the diocese or clustered in a small number of urban parishes but is widespread.

⁵ For a recent comprehensive study of the religious beliefs of American youth, see Christian Smith with Melinda Lundquist Denton, *Soul Searching: The Religious and Spiritual Lives of American Teenagers* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 166.

years, they found a vast majority of them were “defective” in their presentation of one or more key doctrines of the Church, despite having imprimaturs or official approval by bishops for use in their dioceses.

When the eternal consequences that flow from what we choose to believe and how we choose to act are not spoken of for long periods of time, the silence on these dimensions of the gospel is often taken to mean that they are no longer important, true, or relevant. As one Australian commentator has pointed out, when the eternal consequences of believing and obeying, or not believing and obeying, are left fuzzy, “the essential faith of Catholics will then amount to no more than a vague theism with little specific moral content; just what it is for a large proportion of Catholics today.”⁶

The collapse of doctrinal clarity is certainly a major contributor to the general indifference to the call to evangelization which has so insistently come from the Magisterium since Vatican II. Cardinal Ratzinger called it a “catastrophic collapse” of catechetics.

The new evangelization we need so urgently today is not to be attained with cleverly thought out ideas, however cunningly these are elaborated: the catastrophic failure of modern catechesis is all too obvious. It is only the interaction of a truth conclusive in itself with its proof in the life of this truth that can enable that particular evidence of the faith to be illuminated that the human heart awaits: it is only through this door that the Holy Spirit enters the world.⁷

Avery Dulles, in a foreword to a recent book on evangelization,⁸ cites unsettling statistics:⁹

Asked whether spreading the faith was a high priority of their parishes, 75 percent of conservative Protestant congregations and 57 percent of African American congregations responded affirmatively, whereas only 6 percent of Catholic parishes did the same. Asked whether they sponsored local evangelistic activities, 39 percent of conservative Protestant

⁶ John Lamont, “What Was Wrong with Vatican II,” *New Blackfriars* 99, no. 1013 (January 2007): 92–93. See also John Lamont “Why the Second Vatican Council Was a Good Thing and Is More Important Than Ever,” *New Oxford Review* (July/August 2005): 32–36, in which he identifies the positive aspects of Vatican II.

⁷ Joseph Ratzinger, *The Yes of Jesus Christ*, trans. Robert Nowell (New York: Crossroad, 1991) 35.

⁸ Timothy E. Byerley, *The Great Commission: Models of Evangelization in American Catholicism* (New York: Paulist Press, 2008), ix.

⁹ Drawn from a book by Nancy T. Ammerman, *Pillars of Faith* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005), 117, 134.

congregations and 16 percent of African American congregations responded positively as compared with only 3 percent of Catholic parishes. Converts to Catholicism often report that on their spiritual journey they received little or no encouragement from Catholic clergy whom they consulted.

The Catherine of Siena Institute in Colorado Springs, Colorado, has interviewed tens of thousands of Catholics and their pastors and makes the point that even among the minority of Catholics who come to Church somewhat regularly fewer than 10 percent could be considered “intentional disciples” who have consciously made Christ the center of their lives.¹⁰

Cardinal Ratzinger remarked on a strange phenomenon he observed in conjunction with the collapse of the Church in the Netherlands after Vatican II. He pointed out that by every statistical measure the Church in the Netherlands was collapsing and yet, strangely, at the same time an atmosphere of “general optimism” was prevalent that seemed blind to the actual situation.

I thought to myself: what would one say of a businessman whose accounts were completely in the red but who, instead of recognizing this evil, finding out its reasons, and courageously taking steps against it, wanted to commend himself to his creditors solely through optimism? What should one’s attitude be to an optimism that was quite simply opposed to reality?¹¹

In the United States, “official optimism” has been quite strong in the midst of radical decline. When the American bishops greeted Pope Benedict XVI on his pastoral visit, they spoke of our “vibrant” Church. Shortly before Pope Benedict XVI’s visit to the United States, Russell Shaw, a respected author and former spokesman for the American bishops, urged the American bishops to stop pretending everything was fine.¹²

But of course the “catastrophic failure” of catechesis in conjunction with doctrinal confusion and outright infidelity, along with the power of a secularizing culture, are not alone in the “witches brew” of disintegrating forces at work in the life of baptized Catholics. The shock of the ongoing revelation of gravely evil sex abuse, gross financial mismanagement, and other infidelities on the part of the ordained and the widespread cover-up or minimally effective responses on the part of higher

¹⁰ See www.siena.org

¹¹ Ratzinger, *The Yes of Jesus Christ*, 39–40.

¹² Russell Shaw, “Please Look Behind the Bishops’ Potemkin Village,” *The Catholic World Report* (February 2008): 19–22.

authorities have contributed to the confusion and disillusionment of many. As great as the disillusionment has been in the U.S., the shock in Ireland has been even greater. The problem in the Catholic Church is truly global, but in less developed countries with fewer “deep pockets” to sue and less aggressive media interest, the cases are not as well known.

While the crisis we have identified as a sacramental crisis is admittedly broader than the effective administration of the sacraments, one key element in a solution is consideration of what is needed in order for the reception of the sacraments to be effectively fruitful in the lives of those who receive them. This means recognizing that we can no longer presume that those coming for the sacraments still understand what it means to be a Catholic or are even committed to such. Nor can we presume that they even know who Christ is and have made a commitment to him as savior and Lord. Nor can we presume that what they are seeking when they come for the sacraments is what indeed the sacraments are intended to effect. The General (GDC) and National Catechetical Directories (NCD) were prescient when they insisted that catechesis now needs to be seen within the framework of evangelization. We will cite only a few of the important insights contained in these foundational documents.

Catechesis, situated in the context of the Church’s mission of evangelization and seen as an essential moment of that mission, receives from evangelization a missionary dynamic which deeply enriches it and defines its own identity. The ministry of catechesis appears, then, as a fundamental ecclesial service for the realization of the missionary mandate of Jesus. (GDC 59)

The Christian faith is above all, conversion to Jesus Christ, full and sincere adherence to his person and the decision to walk in his footsteps. Faith is a personal encounter with Jesus Christ, making of oneself a disciple of him. This demands a permanent commitment to think like him, to judge like him and to live as he lived. (GDC 53)

Frequently, many who present themselves for catechesis truly require genuine conversion. Because of this the Church usually desires that the first stage in the catechetical process be dedicated to ensuring conversion. . . . Only by starting with conversion, and therefore by making allowance for the interior disposition of “whoever believes,” can catechesis strictly speaking, fulfill its proper task of education in the faith. . . . Catechetical renewal should be based thus on prior missionary evangelization. (GDC 62)

This conversion is the acceptance of a personal relationship with Christ, a sincere adherence to him and a willingness to conform one’s life to his. Conversion to Christ involves making a genuine commitment to him

and a personal decision to follow him as his disciple. Through this discipleship the believer is united to the community of disciples and appropriates the faith of the Church. (NDC 17)

These directories make clear that conversion can't be presumed among those who approach the sacraments but must be called forth. They further make clear that sacramental preparation can't simply be a matter of providing "information" but must involve "formation." Formation involves a conforming of one's life to the truth which one is hearing and to the person who is the foundation of these truths and to the community of those who live these truths. It requires from the catechists lives of discipleship into which they are leading those whom they catechize. It is not just "religious education" but an invitation to conversion and a life of discipleship. These documents also make clear that the baptismal catechumenate is a model for all catechesis, as it involves in its essence not just information but formation.

The model for all catechesis is the baptismal catechumenate when, by specific formation, an adult converted to belief is brought to explicit profession of baptismal faith during the Paschal Vigil. This catechumenal formation should inspire the other forms of catechesis in both their objectives and in their dynamism. (GDC 59)

There is an acute awareness that catechesis must have a catechumenal style, as of integral formation rather than mere information; it must act in reality as a means of arousing true conversion (GDC 29)

Based on the example of catechesis in the patristic era, it needs to form the personality of the believer and therefore be a true and proper school of Christian pedagogy. (GDC 33)

Our sacramental theology is truly rich, but the state of Christian life among those who receive the sacraments oftentimes does not display the characteristics of conversion and discipleship that our theology and official documents indicate should be the case. Where can we go for some wisdom about factors that determine sacramental fruitfulness? One source is the sacramental theology of Thomas Aquinas, whose insights into the obstacles that block sacramental fruitfulness are remarkably relevant to our contemporary crisis.

The Fruitfulness of the Sacraments and Preparation for the Sacraments

The reaction to the theology of the Protestant reformers produced in the Catholic Church what could be regarded as an overemphasis on the *ex opere*

operato (by the fact of the action being performed) aspect of the sacraments working, to the neglect of the practical importance of the *ex opere operantis* (from the action of the doer) aspect. The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* affirms the importance of both aspects:

From the moment that a sacrament is celebrated in accordance with the intention of the Church, the power of Christ and his Spirit acts in and through it, independently of the personal holiness of the minister. Nevertheless, the fruits of the sacraments also depend on the disposition of the one who receives them. (CCC 1128)

In the very heart of our theological tradition resides a great wisdom—that of St. Thomas Aquinas—about the importance of preparation and subjective disposition on the part of those receiving the sacraments in order for them to actually bear fruit in the lives of their recipients.

The Baptism of Adults: The Teaching of St. Thomas Aquinas

In the third part of the *Summa theologiae*, where Thomas deals with issues concerning the sacraments, he has some very useful things to say that are relevant to the concerns we have identified. We will only consider here his teaching as it pertains to the baptism of adults and show how this teaching has important application to the sacramental crisis we are experiencing today. He identifies a number of factors that need to be present in order for the reception of the sacrament to be fruitful, as well as factors that block the sacrament's fruitfulness or effectiveness in the lives of their recipients. He makes the point that a sacrament can be validly given and received but still not be fruitful—an outcome that seems unfortunately widespread today.

Repentance

Thomas unambiguously teaches that those who are not willing to repent of sin should not be baptized. Quoting Scripture and Augustine to support this point, he states:

Now so long as a man wills to sin, he cannot be united to Christ. . . . Secondly, because there should be nothing useless in the works of Christ and of the Church. Now that is useless which does not reach the end to which it is ordained; and on the other hand, no one having the will to sin can, at the same time, be cleansed from sin, which is the purpose of Baptism; for this would be to combine two contradictory things. Thirdly, because there should be no falsehood in the sacramental signs. (ST III, q. 68, a. 4)

Thomas clearly teaches that the kind of repentance necessary before Baptism does not necessitate making use of the sacrament of reconciliation (that is for post-baptismal sin) but rather an “inward confession of sins to God is required before Baptism but not the sacrament of Reconciliation” (*ST III*, q. 68, a. 6).

In contemporary sacramental practice when someone physically presents oneself to receive a sacrament, proper disposition is often assumed. Thomas teaches the contrary.

A man is said to be insincere who makes a show of willing what he wills not. Now, whoever approaches Baptism, by that very fact makes a show of having right faith in Christ, of veneration for this sacrament, and of wishing to conform to the Church, and to renounce sin. Consequently, to whatever sin a man wishes to cleave, if he approach Baptism, he approaches insincerely, which is the same as to approach without devotion. (*ST III*, q. 69, a. 9, ad 3)

On the other hand, when a lack of sincerity, such as lack of true repentance or lack of faith or lack of intention to receive and live the unique grace of the sacrament, blocks the fruitfulness of a validly received sacrament, subsequent repentance and recourse to the sacrament of reconciliation can release the fruitfulness of the sacrament.

In like manner, when a man is baptized, he receives the character, which is like a form: and he receives in consequence its proper effect, which is grace whereby all his sins are remitted. But this effect is sometimes hindered by insincerity. Wherefore, when this obstacle is removed by Penance, Baptism forthwith produces its effect. (*ST III*, q. 69, a. 10.)

The points that Thomas makes in connection with adult baptism, regarding the necessity of repentance and the sincere intention to receive the graces of the sacrament, have application to other sacraments as well. If one does not will to conduct one's life in harmony with the purpose of the sacrament, one will not receive it fruitfully. For there to be no “falsehood in the sacramental sign,” the recipient of the sacrament must intend what the sacrament intends. This, of course, raises serious questions about the widespread practice regarding the sacrament of confirmation today, wherein the great majority of those receiving it, rather than becoming more committed witnesses to their faith, drift away from it. There appears to be a widespread “falsehood” in the sacramental sign. The same can be said in many cases of sacramental marriage.

Faith

Thomas clearly teaches that the sacraments aren't "magic" but require faith on the part of their adult recipients in order to bear fruit.

Therefore the sacrament of Baptism is not to be conferred save on those in whom there appears some sign of their interior conversion. . . . Baptism is the sacrament of faith. Now dead faith does not suffice for salvation. (*ST III*, q. 68, a. 4, ad 2, 3) Right faith is necessary for Baptism, because as it appears from Rom. 3: 22 "the justice of God is by faith of Jesus Christ." (*ST III*, q. 68, a. 8) Just as the sacrament of Baptism is not to be conferred on a man who is unwilling to give up his other sins, so neither should it be given to one who is unwilling to renounce his unbelief. Yet each receives the sacrament if it be conferred on him, though not unto salvation. (*ST III*, q. 58, a. 8, ad 4)

It would seem that by "right faith" Thomas is not meaning "perfect faith" but at least a general faith and intention to receive the sacrament as it is understood by the Church (see *ST III*, q. 68, ad 3).

An important point to note here is that in this case—the absence of adequate faith—Thomas considers that the sacrament is validly conferred but the person so baptized is not justified, is not saved! Less radically, once whatever was blocking the fruitfulness of a validly conferred sacrament is removed, the grace of the sacrament is released.

Thomas, though, envisions that there can be such a defect of willing the intention of receiving the sacrament that, not only can it be the case that the sacrament is validly conferred but remains unfruitful until the defect is removed—whether the lack be of repentance or of faith—but in some cases the sacrament has not even been validly conferred; in that situation, the person needs to be "rebaptized." Not only is repentance of sins necessary but also the recipient of the sacrament must "of his own will, intend to lead a new life . . . it is necessary for him to have the will or intention of receiving the sacrament." St. Thomas cites Romans 6:4, which states that we are buried with Christ "so we may walk in newness of life" (*ST III*, q. 68, a. 7). "If an adult lack the intention of receiving the sacrament, he must be rebaptized" (*ST III*, q. 68, a. 7, ad. 2).

It is written (Wisdom 1:5): "The Holy Spirit of discipline will flee from the deceitful." *But the effect of Baptism is from the Holy Spirit. Therefore insincerity hinders the effect of Baptism . . . consequently in order that a man be justified by Baptism, his will must needs embrace both Baptism and the Baptismal effect.* Now, a man is said to be insincere by reason of his will being in contradiction with either Baptism or its effect. (*ST III*, q. 69, a. 9)

In contemporary sacramental practice, one often hears that even though there appear to be serious defects of intention and preparation in someone who is approaching a sacrament, “the sacrament will take care of it.” Thomas does not agree. Thomas teaches that the reception of the sacrament should not be counted on to remove obstacles of lack of repentance, unbelief, and other forms of “insincerity.” The removal of these obstacles needs to precede the reception of the sacrament.¹³

When God changes man’s will from evil to good, man does not approach with insincerity. But God does not always do this. Nor is this the purpose of the sacrament, that an insincere man be made sincere: but that he who comes in sincerity, be justified. (*ST III*, q. 69, a. 9, ad 2)

Could there be some—many, even—who are being confirmed or married in the Church, who lack the intention of receiving the sacrament as it is defined by Thomas—lacking the intention to lead the new life that each of the sacraments uniquely signifies, lacking the intention of the sacramental effect? If so, if they come to a subsequent Christian awakening, do they need to be “reconfirmed” or “remarried” (to use the language that Thomas uses in connection with Baptism)?

Preparation and Devotion

Thomas is aware that the “fruitfulness” of the sacraments can be understood as spanning a continuum in which there are varying degrees of fruitfulness. In any case, he teaches clearly that the degree of fruitfulness in the recipient of a particular sacrament is closely tied to the quality of the preparation that is given before receiving the sacrament and the subjective disposition of “devotion” that has been elicited in the recipient.

Adults, who approach Baptism in their own faith, are not equally disposed to Baptism; for some approach thereto with greater, some with less, devotion. And therefore some receive a greater, some a smaller share of the grace of newness; just as from the same fire, he receives more heat who approaches nearest to it, although the fire, as far as it is concerned, sends forth its heat equally to all. (*ST III*, q. 69, a. 8)

In the text just cited, Thomas stresses that the varying receptivity on the part of the recipients accounts for the varying fruitfulness in the recipients’ lives. In another text he indicates that while the grace received by similarly disposed recipients may be similar at the beginning, considerable

¹³ See Colman O’Neill, *Meeting Christ in the Sacraments*, rev. ed., Romanus Cessario (New York: Society of St. Paul, 1991), 38 and 126ff.

divergences can develop over time if one recipient is more attentive to the grace and its growth than another.

That greater or lesser grace appears in the baptized may occur in two ways. First, because one receives greater grace in Baptism than another, on account of his greater devotion, as stated above. Secondly, because, though they receive equal grace, they do not make an equal use of it, but one applies himself more to advance therein, while another by his negligence baffles grace. (*ST III*, q. 69, a. 8, ad 2)

The initial fruitfulness of the sacraments is tied to the quality of the preparation and the “devotion” of the recipients. Preparation is needed. The fundamental principle of grace building on nature—that both reason and faith have their important contributions—is insisted upon by Thomas in his sacramental teaching. St. Thomas cites Romans 10:¹⁴ concerning how faith comes through hearing/preaching (*ST III*, q. 71, a. 1) and he says that “the life of grace into which a man is regenerated presupposes the life of the rational nature, in which man is capable of receiving instruction” (*ST III*, q. 71, a. 1, ad 1).

The ongoing fruitfulness of a sacrament is tied to the quality of the “follow-up” or the environment of faith in which one lives, and the ongoing receptivity to the work of the Holy Spirit in the particular grace of the sacrament. Thomas acknowledges—even in his time—that the clergy are too busy to undertake this responsibility solely by themselves but must involve the lay faithful in the task of follow-up.

The spiritual regeneration which takes place in Baptism, is in a certain manner likened to carnal generation; wherefore it is written (1 Pet. 2:2): “As new-born babes, endowed with reason, desire milk without guile.” Now, in carnal generation the new-born child needs nourishment and guidance: wherefore in spiritual generation also, someone is needed to undertake the office of nurse and tutor by forming and instructing one who is yet a novice in the Faith, concerning things pertaining to Christian faith and mode of life, which the clergy have not the leisure to do through being busy with watching over the people generally: because little children and novices need more than ordinary care. Consequently someone is needed to receive the baptized from the sacred font as though for the purpose of instructing and guiding them. Also: Dionysius in Ecclesiastical Hierarchies speaks of this “that the parents should hand it [the child] over to some instructor versed in holy things, who would henceforth take charge of the child and be to it a spiritual father and a guide in the road of salvation.” (*ST III*, q. 67, a. 7)

¹⁴ See also *ST III*, q. 66, a. 11, 12; q. 68, a. 2; q. 69, a. 5, ad 1, 2.

His comments on godparents contain an interesting implication about the social environment in which the recipient of a sacrament is being enfolded.

Augustine says in a sermon for Easter (#168): In the first place I admonish you, both men and women, who have raised children in Baptism, that you stand before God as sureties for those whom you have been seen to raise from the sacred font. . . . Godparents take upon themselves the duties of a tutor. Consequently, they are bound to watch over their godchildren when there is need for them to do so: for instance, when and where children are brought up among unbelievers. But if they are brought up among Catholic Christians, the godparents may well be excused from this responsibility, since it may be presumed that the children will be carefully instructed by their parents. If, however, they perceive in any way that the contrary is the case, they would be bound, as far as they are able, to see to the spiritual welfare of their godchildren. (ST III, q. 67, a. 8)

In response to objection 1, that since “uneducated and ill-instructed” people are “allowed to raise people from the sacred font” there is no need for godparents to instruct their godchildren, Thomas answers:

Where the danger is imminent, the godparent, as Dionysius says . . . should be someone *versed in holy things*. But where the danger is not imminent, by reason of the children being brought up among Catholics, anyone is admitted to this position because the things pertaining to the Christian rule of life and faith are known openly by all. Nevertheless an unbaptized person cannot be a godparent, as was decreed in the Council of Mainz. (ST III, q. 67, a. 8, ad 1)

Interestingly, when it comes to choosing godparents Thomas holds that it is not so important who they are if the baptized will be raised among “Catholic Christians” or will be “carefully instructed by their parents” or will be “handed over” to those who will instruct and guide them or will live in a society where “the things pertaining to the Christian rule of life and faith are known openly by all.” When this will not be the case, Thomas indicates that the godparents will then have a serious responsibility and should be “versed in holy things.”

Adults Must Be Tested: Don't Rush

Thomas advises that children should be baptized without delay, “because we do not look for better instruction or fuller conversion. Secondly, because of the danger of death, for no other remedy is available for them

besides the sacrament of Baptism.” Adults, though, should be properly instructed and “tested” before they are baptized, since “adults have a remedy in the mere desire for Baptism. . . . And therefore Baptism should not be conferred on adults as soon as they are converted, but it should be deferred until some fixed time” (*ST III*, q. 68, a. 3).

The remedy for the original sin of children is the sacrament of Baptism, but since adults have a remedy in the “baptism of desire” present in those preparing to receive the sacrament there is no need to rush. It is interesting to note that *Lumen Gentium* restricts its use of the effectiveness of “desire” precisely to the situation of Catechumens.

Catechumens who, moved by the Holy Spirit, desire with an explicit intention to be incorporated into the Church, are by that very intention joined to her. With love and solicitude mother Church already embraces them as her own. (*LG 14*)

In the case of adults preparing for Baptism, Thomas considers it of great importance that the motivation, sincerity, and readiness of those seeking to be baptized be carefully discerned. This is the case, first of all, “as a safeguard to the Church, lest she be deceived through baptizing those who come to her under false pretenses, according to 1 John 4:1 *Believe not every spirit, but try the spirits, if they be of God*. And those who approach Baptism are put to this test, when their faith and morals are subjected to proof for a space of time” (*ST III*, q. 68, a. 3).

Oftentimes the parables of Jesus are misinterpreted to welcome everyone into the “big tent of Catholicism,” without regard to the actual condition of those entering, either the Church or a particular sacrament. While inevitably there will be “weeds and wheat” growing in the field of the Church, the goal is not to assure a good supply of weeds by lack of adequate instruction, formation, and discernment in administering the sacraments of Christian initiation or other sacraments.

Another reason given by Thomas for the careful screening of candidates for adult Baptism is that growth in understanding and the conforming of one’s life to the truth of Christ and life in the Church requires time. He also suggests that administering Baptism in a solemn way in connection with major feasts such as Easter or Pentecost more properly conveys the significance of the sacrament than administering it in more informal ways in ordinary times (*ST III*, q. 68, a. 3). Thomas therefore ends up fundamentally agreeing with the Council of Agde (can. 34) in recommending an eight-month period of catechumenate before admission to Baptism (*ST III*, q. 68, a. 3, obj. 2).

With Thomas's support for an eight-month catechumenate, he again anticipates the decision of Vatican II to restore the adult catechumenate in the Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults. Though the RCIA has greatly improved the initiation process in many ways, it is oftentimes conducted as providing information rather than formation. Frequently there is no significant discernment about the readiness of candidates for baptism, in their intention to live a new way of life and in their desire for the graces and obligations of the sacraments. Nowhere is this more obvious than in the de-emphasis of the reality of the catechumenal exorcisms; Thomas warns against attaching little importance to them.

The Importance of Exorcisms

Thomas, in his fidelity to the teaching of the Apostles and the Fathers, takes very seriously the reality of the devil and the need to remove his influence from the lives of candidates for Baptism. One reason for the lack of proper fruitfulness in the reception of sacraments is that the power of the devil is not dealt with. "The power of the devil is restrained by prayers, blessings, and the like, from hindering the sacramental effect" (ST III, q 66, a. 10).

We may note that the objections against the pre-Baptismal exorcisms that Thomas cites have a very contemporary ring. Minimizing the reality of the effects of original sin—and the opening to demonic influence that accompanies it—and the claimed innocence of infants are, in Thomas's understanding, not warranted by the witness of Scripture and tradition. Against the objections against the necessity of the exorcisms before Baptism, St. Thomas cites Pope Celestine (Letter to the Episcopate of Gaul): *Whether children or young people approach the sacrament of regeneration they should not come to the fount of life before the unclean spirit has been expelled from them by the exorcisms and breathings of the clerics . . .* Whoever purposes to do a work wisely, first removes the obstacles to his work; hence it is written (Jerem. 4:3): *Break up anew your fallow ground and sow not upon thorns . . .* Now the devil is the enemy of man's salvation, which man acquires by Baptism; and he has a certain power over man from the very fact that the latter is subject to original or even actual sin. Consequently it is fitting that before Baptism the demons should be cast out by exorcisms, lest they impede man's salvation" (ST III, q. 71, a. 2).

Another objection that Thomas responds to claims that, since not everyone is "possessed" by the devil, the exorcisms are not needed in many cases. To this objection St. Thomas replies: "The energumens [the possessed] are so-called from *laboring inwardly* under the outward operation of the devil. And though not all that approach Baptism are troubled by him in their bodies, yet all who are not baptized are subject to the

power of the demons, at least on account of the guilt of original sin" (ST III, q. 71, a. 2, ad 1). Here St. Thomas is making the distinction between those more severely troubled by the devil (including the "possessed") and those less troubled but still in need of exorcism.

This of course remains the teaching of the Church; nonetheless, in many cases references to the devil and the exorcisms that precede and accompany baptism are treated as primitive "symbols" of negative "energies." But in fact, even in Thomas's time, there was skepticism about the actual existence of the demonic, to the extent that Thomas felt the need to directly address it.

Are the exorcisms mere signs or do they really have an effect?

It's startling to read in the objection stated below and in Thomas's response a temptation to "demythologize" at the height of "medieval" Catholicism.

Augustine says (De symbol I): *Little children are breathed upon and exorcized, in order to expel from them the devil's hostile power, which deceived man. But the Church does nothing in vain. Therefore the effect of these breathings is that the power of the devils is expelled. . . . Some say that the things done in the exorcism have no effect, but are mere signs. But this is clearly false; since in exorcizing, the Church uses words of command to cast out the devil's power. . . . Therefore we must say that they have some effect, but, other than that of Baptism. . . . Those things that are done in the exorcism remove the twofold impediment against the reception of saving grace. Of these, one is the outward impediment; so far as the demons strive to hinder man's salvation . . . as to the devil not placing obstacles against the reception of the sacrament. . . . The other impediment is within, forasmuch as, from having contracted original sin, man's sense is closed to the perception of the mysteries of salvation. Hence Rabanus says (De Instit. Cleric. i) that by means of the typifying spittle and the touch of the priest, the Divine wisdom and power brings salvation to the catechumen, that his nostrils being opened he may perceive the odor of the knowledge of God, that his ears be opened to hear the commandments of God, that his senses be opened in his inmost heart to respond.* (ST III, q. 71, a. 3)

But won't Baptism take care of the demons?

Just as Thomas cautioned against expecting the reception of the sacrament to do the work that was supposed to prepare for it in the matter of repentance from sin and unbelief, and other forms of "insincerity," he makes the same caution in relation to the necessity of the preparatory exorcisms. To the objection that the sacrament itself will take care of any need for exorcisms, St. Thomas replies:

The power of the devil in so far as he hinders man from obtaining glory, is expelled from man by the Baptismal ablution; but in so far as he hinders man from receiving the sacrament, his power is cast out by the exorcisms. (*ST III*, q. 71, a. 2, ad 2)

Thomas makes clear that the preparatory exorcisms do not need to be repeated, but if they have been skipped, they should be performed when their absence is recognized.

Nor are they supplied to no purpose after Baptism: because just as the effect of Baptism may be hindered before it is received, so can it be hindered after it has been received. (*ST III*, q. 71, a. 3, ad 3)

A growing contemporary Catholic literature is beginning to address the question of why and how post-baptismal “minor exorcisms”—but not in the case of the “possessed,” for these are reserved to the official diocesan exorcist, when such have been appointed—can bring significant freedom, even to Catholics attempting to live a life of great devotion and discipline but who are being hindered by various obstacles.¹⁵ Thomas, again considering the workload of priests, envisions “Readers and Exorcists” assisting the priest in the task of catechizing and exorcisms (*ST III*, q. 71, a. 4, ad 2).

¹⁵ There is a growing literature which attempts to address the pastoral needs of those praying for others for deliverance from the influence of the demonic. Three that are written by Catholics that many find of help are: Fr. Michael Scanlan, T.O.R. and Randall Cirner, *Deliverance from Evil Spirits: A Weapon for Spiritual Warfare* (Ann Arbor, MI: Servant Books, 1980); Francis MacNutt, *Deliverance from Evil Spirits: A Practical Manual* (Grand Rapids, MI: Chosen Books, 1995); Neal Lozano, *Unbound: A Practical Guide to Deliverance* (Grand Rapids, MI: Chosen Books, 2003). A more theological/pastoral treatment of the area is provided by Cardinal Leon-Joseph Suenens in his *Renewal and the Powers of Darkness*, foreword by Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger (Ann Arbor: Servant Books, 1983). A study on the power of the Spiritual Exercises of St. Ignatius of Loyola to bring about significant inner healing and transformation, which includes “case studies,” is John Horn, S.J., *Mystical Healing: The Psychological and Spiritual Power of the Ignatian Spiritual Exercises* (New York: Crossroad Publishing Company, 1996). See also, by Ralph Martin, “The Authority of the Good Shepherd: Overcoming Evil,” in *Good Shepherd: Living Christ’s Own Pastoral Authority*, Fifth Annual Symposium on the Spirituality and Identity of the Diocesan Priest, Co-sponsored by: The Institute for Priestly Formation and University of St. Mary of the Lake, Mundelein Seminary, March 16–19, 2006: 69–81.

See also the seriousness with which the tradition regards the work of the demonic in the life of Christians; for example: John Cassian, *The Conferences*, VII and VIII; *The Institutes* V–XII; Teresa of Avila, *Interior Castle*, I:2, 16–17; II:1, 2–6; III: 1; IV:7–9; Francis de Sales, *Introduction to the Devout Life*, IV; Bernard of Clairvaux, *On the Song of Songs*, Sermons 15:6; 19:7; 33:10–11; 63:6; 64:4.

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Many of the problems being encountered in the Church today concerning the lack of fruitfulness in the lives of those receiving the sacraments could be resolved or greatly mitigated by applying the wisdom of St. Thomas concerning sacramental fruitfulness.

N.V

