

The Efficacy Of God's Sacramental Presence

STEVEN A. LONG
Ave Maria University
Ave Maria, Florida

THE EFFICACY of God's presence to us in the sacraments is traditionally understood in the lines *ex opere operato*. That is to say that the sacrament is efficacious of itself. For example, the real presence of our Lord is genuinely confectioned in every valid consecration of the bread and wine whereby these become the body, blood, and divinity of Christ. This presence, which transcends in its mode and in its effect the dignity of any merely finite terrestrial causality, is assured through the sacramental action of the priest for so long as the intent of the priest is sacramental, that is, the priest intends by his action what the Church thereby infallibly intends.

What is startling is that this sacramental efficacy pertains to each sacrament, proportionate to the nature of each, inasmuch as a sacrament is in St. Thomas's words (*Summa theologiae* III, q. 60, a. 2) the "sign of a holy thing so far as it makes men holy" and (*ST* III, q. 60, a. 3) "which is ordained to signify our sanctification." For as St. Thomas puts it (*ST* III, q. 62, a. 1) "we have it on the authority of many saints that the sacraments of the New Law not only signify, but also cause grace" so that in the same article (*ST* III, q. 62, a. 1) he affirms a sacrament to be an instrumental efficient cause that

works not by the power of its form, but only by the motion whereby it is moved by the principal agent: so that the effect is not likened to the instrument but to the principal agent: for instance, the couch is not like the axe, but like the art which is in the craftsman's mind. And it is thus that the sacraments of the New Law cause grace: for they are instituted by God to be employed for the purpose of conferring grace.

In this the sacraments and the light of glory—that light which specially emends the limits of human nature and renders it proximate to

the reception of the beatific vision—are similar. As Thomas writes about the *lumen gloriae* (*Summa contra Gentiles* III, c. 54) “this light raises the created intellect to the vision of God, not on account of its affinity to the divine substance, but on account of the power which it receives from God to produce such an effect.” And likewise the sacraments are instrumental efficient causes of holiness, which make holy because of the principal causality of God.

The principal causality of God acting through the instrumental sacramental cause is efficacious. It behooves the theologian to consider the nature and implications of this divine efficient causality. Within the doctrine of St. Thomas, the understanding of the efficacy of the sacraments reposes upon the treatise on grace, while this treatise on grace presupposes the doctrine of the divine transcendence articulated in the treatises on the one God and on the creation. And all this presupposes the articulation of a prior doctrine of causality within philosophy of nature and metaphysics.

Sacramental Efficacy and the Divine Transcendence

Sacramental efficacy most immediately draws us to the consideration of God as creator. Let us consider the ontological distance between the substance of bread and wine, and the divine substance. This is objectively an infinite distance, not a distance of course in space and time, but rather an infinite distinction obtaining between finite, and infinite, nature. Yet, by way of certain instrumental finite dispositions God brings about the real presence of the Incarnate Word. Let us likewise consider the distance between the state of mortal sin and the state of grace. Mortal sin involves a double distancing from God, and from the divine order, because it involves both a disordering with respect to what is proportionate to human nature, and also a disorder with respect to the ultimate and transcendent supernatural end of beatific union with God. Hence mortal sin merits both temporal and eternal punishment. Yet, through certain finite dispositions of finite agents, Our Lord *absolves* penitents of sin, applying the merit of the sacrifice on the Cross so as to remove wholly the eternal punishment merited by mortal sin and at times even the temporal punishment, restoring the supernatural life of sanctifying grace and charity in the soul.

Even considered in abstraction from the dependence on grace necessary in order that human persons *actually come to possess the right dispositions* to receive the sacrament, clearly the distinction or ontological distance between *the state of grace ordered toward eternal life* and *mortal sin ordered toward eternal damnation* is an infinite distinction. Yet, through certain created sacramental instrumentalities, God absolves from mortal sin. Given the

requisite sacramental dispositions, *no agency in the universe* whatsoever can impede or prevent the sacramental effect from being realized.

It might be thought that this description is a redundancy: after all, in any instance of efficient causality, *given* the presence and actuation of the causes, the *effect* then ensues: this is after all why they are called efficient causes. But there is this difference: that whereas even given the actuation of all the appropriate causes, these can in other cases be effectually *impeded* by other finite causalities; in this instance that is not true owing to the instantaneity of the sacramental effect. Of course naturally speaking when a subject is disposed successively to some form, there is nonetheless an instantaneity characteristic of the subject that follows upon its ultimate disposition for receiving a new form, at which moment the new form is received suddenly. But here we speak additionally of the instantaneity effectable by the infinite power of God—noting in addition of course that there may, as in the Eucharist, be no subject to be successively disposed to the reception of form.

If the sacramental effect is bestowed and rightly received, no other agent is subsequently capable of deflecting the proper effect for the sake of which it is bestowed: and that effect is to signify our sanctification in a manner that brings it about. Later failings and defects may impede the life of grace, just as a later push may move someone into a pool who is first saved from falling; but the sacramental effect being bestowed upon one apt to receive it, no other agent can directly impede the instantaneous sacramental effect in the recipient. This is of course but one instance both of the transcendence and infinite power of the divine causality and also of the instantaneity with which God can effectuate his will in creatures.

This transcendent efficacy of the sacraments must not only enter into our understanding of the nature of the sacraments, but should also be contemplated for what it tells us regarding the efficacy of the divine causality as such. That is to say, that within the concrete mystery of the suffering Christ is also to be found the very divine omnipotence; that in the Church suffering is to be found the germ of the Church triumphant, which is holy charity and sanctifying grace; that the most primordial judgment of our natural theology, that God is the author of being, identifies God already as the one who brings forth something from nothing, which implies the infinite efficacy of the divine will. The sacraments are divine acts, for only God can bring something from nothing, can bring holiness from sin, can make himself present in space and time where otherwise would be only the finite substance and the divine immensity. This fundamental truth regarding God, pertinent to all of the sacraments, also pertains to the very end of our lives and to the divine gift of final perseverance in the good.

The Sacraments and Grace

The Council of Trent teaches us that “our merits are God’s gifts.”¹ But if grace is the principle of merit, one cannot, absolutely speaking, but only in a secondary sense, merit grace. The fixity of the will in the divine good athwart any created impediment is also marked by this stark character of being an effect of the transcendent and indeed infinite efficacy of the divine will. As St. Thomas will write in the *Summa contra Gentiles*, in arguing that perseverance in good requires divine aid, “everything that is changeable of itself, needs the aid of an immovable mover, in order to stand fast to one thing.”² The principle of all merit is a *gift*. In the sacraments we see the most tangible and profound character of this gift, for it is through the sacraments that we receive the graces that God willed to endow upon man through his Church and that are necessary to the Christian life. As St. Thomas puts it (*ST* III, q. 62, a. 2, ad 1), “as regards certain special effects which are necessary in a Christian life, sacramental grace is needed.”

Hence the principal key to the right appreciation of the sacraments is the recognition of the priority to be accorded to the divine initiative, as articulated in the Gospel of John 15:16: “You did not choose me, but I chose you and appointed you that you should go and bare fruit and that your fruit should abide.” In the sacraments we find the efficacious aid necessary to lead lives that rise beyond the terrestrial impediments and temptations which would otherwise predictably and ineluctably wear down and corrode from within the most lofty intentions and resolutions, and which enables us to undergo suffering with Christ in such a way as to be meritorious of Heaven and even to lend spiritual aid to others. The sacraments fortify us in the possession of all the virtues and in the gifts of the Holy Spirit.

Of course, this means that no sacrament is a merely human confection, and that simple human goods of solidarity and community are not the purpose of the sacraments. Confidence in divine causality combined with theological faith, which discriminates the supernatural purpose of the Christian life in general and of the sacraments in particular, is necessary for appreciating the sacraments. There exists a certain tendency of some contemporaries to think that the sacraments must be “made relevant” to the lives of Christians by assimilating the effects of these sacraments to other natural goods whose character is widely appreciated. But the lacuna of instruction in the nature of the sacraments cannot be made good by

¹ Council of Trent 1545–1563, Denzinger 810.

² From *ScG* III, c. 155, titled “Quod homo indiget auxilio gratiae ad perseverandum in bono”: “Omne enim quod de se est variabile, ad hoc quod figatur in uno, indiget auxilio alicuius moventis immobilis.”

replacing this instruction with naturalistic communitarian preoccupations. For example, one might think that if all the Eucharist were, were a sign of solidarity in natural community, then the dying—who are leaving such natural community—might no longer be expected to need it. Yet they need it more than ever, not only to avoid the final temptations, and to fortify them in their Christian faith, hope, and love, which are supernatural acts vivified by the sacraments, but for the sake of their solidarity in the mystical body of Christ, which transcends all merely natural community.

Yet it is possible to think that the sacraments change nothing. For example, there is a human being both before, and after, a valid baptism. What is different? The difference is not in God, who is in no real dependence upon the creature. Nor is the difference one of natural *species*—the baptized person is human both before and after receiving the sacrament. Yet there is a difference both *in the creature* and in the creature's *relation* to God. The baptized person is freed of original sin, any actual sin, and all debt of punishment; the baptized person becomes a son of God; his will is supernaturally directed toward God—and toward the Church, for it is an effect of the sacrament to build up the unity of the Church. The baptized comes to possess infused faith, hope, and charity, and the gifts of the Holy Spirit. From being in a state of enmity toward God, the baptized comes to share in the supernatural life.

These are real differences effected by God in the soul, however remote from simple human inspection they may be. Indeed, universally speaking, there truly is a *qualitative* difference between the soul alive in the divine friendship and the soul averse to and alienated from God. But the sacraments confer a gift even beyond common grace, the gifts of the Holy Spirit, and the virtues. Thus St. Thomas writes concerning the sacraments (*ST* III, q. 62, a. 2):

Now the sacraments are ordained unto certain special effects which are necessary in the Christian life: thus Baptism is ordained unto a certain spiritual regeneration, by which man dies to vice and becomes a member of Christ, which effect is something special in addition to the actions of the soul's powers. And the same holds true of the other sacraments. Consequently just as the virtues and gifts confer, in addition to grace commonly so called, a certain special perfection ordained to the powers' proper actions, so does sacramental grace confer, over and above grace commonly so called, and in addition to the virtues and gifts, a certain Divine assistance in obtaining the end of the sacrament. It is thus that sacramental grace confers something in addition to the grace of the virtues and gifts.

These gifts conferred are real—"a certain Divine assistance in obtaining the end of the sacrament"—they are not God, and they characterize the recipient. As earlier noted, (*ST* III, q. 62, a. 2, ad 1), "as regards certain special effects which are necessary in a Christian life, sacramental grace is needed." These are real effects in the recipients of the sacraments, created participations of the supernatural life. This is simply to say that the effect of the sacrament is not merely an extrinsic alteration of juridic status in relation to God, but the communication by God to the soul of real aids to the living of the supernatural life.

This is in accordance with the nature of grace itself, whose principal is the Uncreated Grace or divine predilection, mercy and love, but whose *effect* in the creature is real. Hence St. Thomas argues in *ST* I-II, q. 110, a. 2 that

there is understood to be an effect of God's gratuitous will in whoever is said to have God's grace. Now it was stated (q. 109, a. 1) that man is aided by God's gratuitous will in two ways: first, inasmuch as man's soul is moved by God to know or will or do something, and in this way the gratuitous effect in man is not a quality, but a movement of the soul; for "motion is the act of the mover in the moved." Secondly, man is helped by God's gratuitous will, inasmuch as a habitual gift is infused by God into the soul; and for this reason, it is not fitting that God should provide less for those He loves, that they may acquire supernatural good, than for creatures, whom He loves that they may acquire natural good. Now He so provides for natural creatures, that not merely does He move them to their natural acts, but He bestows upon them certain forms and powers, which are the principles of acts, in order that they may of themselves be inclined to these movements, and thus the movements whereby they are moved by God become natural and easy to creatures, according to Wisdom 8:1: "she . . . ordereth all things sweetly." Much more therefore does He infuse into such as He moves towards the acquisition of supernatural good, certain forms or supernatural qualities, whereby they may be moved by Him sweetly and promptly to acquire eternal good; and thus the gift of grace is a quality.

There must then be a divinely bestowed principle in man which is proportionate to acts ordered toward eternal good and which makes him to be able to perform supernatural acts: a quasi-entitative *habitus* of the soul, sanctifying grace. This ordering of the will to God as our supernatural beatitude is a gift which only God can give. The divine life of sanctifying grace is an active potency or fixed disposition of the will with respect to the last supernatural end, and so it is a *habitus* which is the principle of all the particular acts to be performed which flow from and further activate this potency.

Likewise, acts of faith, hope, and charity are performed *by* the creature, yet they are acts specified by a formally supernatural *object* and so they are themselves supernatural acts which can only proceed from man insofar as he is given the *capacity* for such action by God. Likewise aid with respect to the actual performance of all the many actions required by the Christian life is provided through grace and particularly through the sacramental graces, which give specific aid toward the fixed distinctive ends of Christian life.

If I at one point do not make acts of faith, hope, and charity, and at another time I *do* make acts of faith, hope, and charity, then the source for these latter acts is not only in God but is also secondarily yet proximately *in* me. And since I possess human nature whether I enjoy the blessing of these active dispositions toward the supernatural life or not, these blessings are in their mode of being, speaking ontologically, accidents. Yet despite the datum that the *mode of being* of such grace as an accident is inferior to the *mode of being* of the recipient of grace as a person who is a subsisting subject, nonetheless the *nature* of such grace is—as a created participation in the divine life analogically sharing in the dignity of the beatific end—objectively of higher nobility than the nature of man. This idea of created grace highlights the fashion in which God bestows upon the person genuinely supernatural dispositions and motions—dispositions and motions which even here below manifest the sublimity of our final union with God.

Hence my observations sum up to this: that our understanding of the sacraments implicates our understanding of grace, and that our understanding of grace necessarily presupposes and depends upon a prior doctrine of God, and a prior insight into material, formal, efficient, and final causality, articulated in philosophy of nature, metaphysics, and natural theology.

The supernatural life is understood in relation to the doctrine of God as Creator. As the ontological distance between nonbeing and being is infinite, and requires infinite power to cross, it is this selfsame dependence of every finite being upon God that manifests the efficacy of the divine will. If something is, it depends upon God; if it is not, then God does not here and now will it to be but permits it not to be. Likewise in the order of grace, the initiative belongs wholly to God. This is the reason why dependence upon the sacraments is of the highest importance: because the sacraments are the divinely instituted means for the conforming of our souls to Christ in all the ways requisite to the fullness of the body of Christ. God's action through the sacraments causes in us those fundamental dispositions and motions which each of us requires to live out the

Christian vocation, and his presence to us through the sacraments is thus at the font of Christian identity. This is of course maximally manifest in our Lord's sacramental presence in the Eucharist, the sacrament which both symbolizes and effectuates the sacrifice of Christ and our nourishment by the Lord himself, body, blood, soul, and divinity.

As a corollary conclusion it follows that error with respect to the sacred liturgy of the Eucharist, and with respect to all the other sacraments, will derive from failure to understand that the sacraments are defined by this efficacy of the divine action upon our souls. That is to say, that the sacraments are not mere matter awaiting some further transformation by the agent or the agent's meditative powers in order to achieve their effects. Granted that it is part of the divine plan and the expressed will of God that we both achieve a deep awareness of the nature of the sacraments—which understanding is itself a gift—and also that action flow from the supernatural dispositions planted in the soul, the fact is that sacramental efficacy is no more dependent upon such understanding and upon the consequent actions than the Incarnation of the Eternal Word is dependent upon the human race's sinlessness. Rather, God causes Mary to be upheld in perfect virtue, grace, and charity through the application of the foreseen merits of Christ to her soul, and assumes human nature in Christ. And God is the first author of all free acts, including the free assent, the *fiat*, of Mary. Thus the crucial importance of the proposition that closeness to God through the sacraments is the chief means ordained by God whereby we may grow in holiness, and that God's presence to us in the sacraments is infallibly efficacious. The contemplative, and the receptive, attitude toward the divine gift in the sacraments is accordingly what befits the reality of the sacraments as signs both signifying and causing sanctity. N·V