

General Principles of Sacramental Theology by Roger W. Nutt
(Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 2017), viii + 206 pp.

TRUE TO ITS TITLE, Roger Nutt's book is about the general principles of sacramental theology. While delving into significant pastoral, historical, and ecumenical issues concerning individual sacraments when doing so is an aid to the overall exposition, the book focuses on an understanding of the seven sacraments as a whole. The book is solidly Catholic, rooted in biblical Christology, Thomistic, and engaged with modern scholarship both critically and favorably. But *General Principles of Sacramental Theology* is not simply a reflection on magisterial teachings, a gloss on Aquinas, or a response to current claims. It is well-informed, faithful, sapiential theology. Moreover, it is timely in that it closes up a major gap in contemporary Catholic academics.

Nutt's pedagogy seems to be that he is intent on his reader actually understanding his points. His explanations are sometimes accompanied by analogies and concrete examples that sustain the flow and development of thought. He gives reasons for his positions that go back to the fundamentals of Christian ecclesial life and common experience, as well as theological sources. Nutt explains sacramental principles without always entering into the myriad of debated points surrounding them, though his footnotes are rich in resources for anyone inclined to further research.

General Principles of Sacramental Theology does not engage in cheap polemics. It avoids distortion of the traditional understanding of the sacraments that could occur by an unbalanced reaction to reductionist views or by correcting errors without a holistic account. It is decidedly not a book of false dichotomies, such as sacraments being either signs or causes, either metaphysical or personal, either binding God or optional for us, either instituted by Christ in every detail or not instituted by him at all, and so on. But the book does fill in a vacuum left by a naturalistic understanding of the sacraments. It corrects prejudices against causality, personal agency, supernaturality, and non-empirical spiritual realities. It sees through the rationalistic denial of sacramental character and grace, or any denial of real, supernatural, ontological effects of Christ's action within a rite of the Church. With true open-mindedness, Nutt embraces the revealed tradition of the Church with respect to those things that are not directly perceptible.

The chapters in *General Principles of Sacramental Theology* are not isolated treatments. There is some account of the interconnection

between the various sacramental truths. But more prominently, Christ comes through consistently as the unifying key to understanding the sacraments, whether as first principle or as final end: the living instrumentality of Christ's humanity is the principle of the dynamic instrumentality of the sacraments, which are an application of Christ's saving work; Christ's intentional institution of the sacraments gives them definition and causative sign value; sacramental character is conformity to Christ's priesthood; and friendship with Christ is consistently put forward as the reason for the sacramental system.

Someone with exclusively sacramental interests may be tempted to skim the first two chapters, which lay out the theological and methodological backdrop for the rest of the work. Those chapters, though, are integral to the book in that they give the reasons for a relative lack of sacramental theology done today, and moreover, why it is so necessary that the lack be remedied if one is to have a complete theological picture of God and his saving works. Nutt shows that the sacraments are a vital part of God's wise plan for his creation and that a radical misunderstanding of creation jeopardizes an understanding of the sacraments. Nowhere is the axiom that grace presupposes nature more pronounced than in sacramental theology, and these first two chapters show how that is so.

The topics that make up the bulk of the work, chapters 3–11, are sacraments as signs, matter and form, intention, the necessity of the sacraments, sacramental causality, sacramental grace and character, and the institution and authority of the sacraments. Nutt roots the consideration of sacraments as signs in the biblical notion of mystery. He makes it clear that sacraments, while employing natural signs, cannot be mere natural signs on a horizontal level because they were providentially instituted to confer holiness. Nutt deals with matter, form, and intention as conveying the sacramental sign, not only of the conferral of grace but also of Christ's Paschal mystery and our future beatitude. He explains matter, form, and intention in a commonsensical way as firmly underpinning sacramental validity, but without entering the casuistic morass.

On the necessity of the sacraments, Nutt is particularly Christological. He is guided by *Dominus Iesus*, conscientiously avoiding hypothetical assertions about salvation and limits to God's power. Sacramental causality, a sort of lynchpin for current debate, is the longest chapter, with the most appeals to magisterial teaching and the most detailed argumentation against contrary positions. Nutt dispels the idea that causality equals the mechanical, which equals the

non-personal. In so doing, he does not merely dismiss his interlocutor's concerns. He shows that, far from sacramental causality being some cold thing that separates us from a relationship with Christ, friendship with Christ comes about by sacramental causality.

The Trinity and the missions of the Son and of the Holy Spirit form the basis of the chapter on sacramental grace, which explains sanctifying grace and its specific application by the different sacraments for growth in holiness and healing. The way sacraments cause grace is a crucial way in which the New Law fulfills the Old. The sacramental dimension of worship, specifically how sacramental character is a conformity to Christ's high priesthood such that the Church can worship truly, provides a complement to the understanding of character as a seal. The explanation of sacramental character leads into an explanation of the classical division of *sacramentum tantum*, *res et sacramentum*, and *res tantum*. These categories, which could pose difficulty, are clearly explained and put in their Patristic and perennial context of how to approach the question of sacraments that are unworthily but validly celebrated. The final chapter treats of the key teaching that Christ instituted the sacraments and acknowledges differences in rites with regard to non-essential sacramental elements that fall under ecclesial authority.

The conclusion of the book explores principles of sacramental spirituality, a theme that consistently runs through the background. Nutt lays out the classic doctrine of the seven sacraments corresponding to different times of life. There is also an explanation of the unique importance of each sacrament, with some deference to the Eucharist as the center of the Christian life, as well as an explanation of the sacramental dimension of liturgy and a life of prayer.

General Principles of Sacramental Theology is an excellent text for use in any sacraments course. It is brief enough to be accompanied by biblical or primary sources, a work on liturgical theology, or a work on individual sacraments. The book would also be of help as a resource to anyone teaching a general theology course or leading an advanced catechetical class that includes a section on the sacraments. Finally, anyone with serious religious interests who wants a reliable and systematic account of sacramental theology will find this book accessible and enlightening. N&V

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