

“THE SPACE BETWEEN THE FINGERS”: TRENT AND THE SEVEN SACRAMENTS

One of the more interesting definitions of a sacrament that I have ever encountered, was as simple as it was illustrative. Visualize **Michelangelo’s** fresco of Creation— God the Father reaching out to **touch the hand** of Adam. The masterpiece **captures the moment** right before the act of creation in which God imparts the spark of human life (the soul), yearning to see the crown jewel of His creation. Someone once described a sacrament as the space between the fingers of God and Adam, the **spark of grace** that brings us into union with our loving God. The council of Trent’s teaching on the **seven sacraments** may well represent the crown jewel of its teaching. Arguably, no aspect of Catholic doctrine came under greater **fire** during the reformation than the sacraments. As “heady” as was the debate about the specifics of justification (February 6 bulletin), this teaching **touched** everyone. The sacraments are a **primary means** by which we grow in the spiritual life; they are the bread and butter of our everyday lives as Catholics.



The seventh session (3 March 1547) wasted little time in getting to the core: CANON I-If any one says that the sacraments of the New Law were not all **instituted by Jesus Christ**, our Lord; or, that they are more, or less, than **seven**, to wit, Baptism, Confirmation, the Eucharist, Penance, Extreme Unction, Order, and Matrimony; or even that any one of these seven is not **truly and properly** a sacrament; let him be anathema.” Now, one can surely employ theological research to discuss the exact development of the seven sacraments—after all, they did not drop out of **thin air** in finalized liturgical form in the first century. They developed, each in its own way. Trent was merely teaching that they are all **of divine origin**, against those who claimed they were inventions of the Church. It clarified that they “contain the grace which they signify,” and that grace is “conferred through the act performed” and not “by faith alone.”

Thus, the **efficacy** of a sacrament is not dependent upon the faith of the recipient. Yes, if I were to lack faith in the Real Presence, my reception of it would produce little or even no discernible effect on my soul. But that is different than denying that the Eucharist is the Body, Blood, Soul and Divinity of Christ. One’s **lack of faith** does not alter the Eucharist itself. Trent taught that the minister performing the sacrament must have “the intention at least of doing what the Church does” when celebrating them (Canon XI). Sacraments are **not magic**— the one performing must intend to do what the Church does and to use the proper form of the sacraments (words) when administering them. Canon IX taught that three sacraments (Baptism, Confirmation and Holy Orders) imprint upon “the soul a character, that is, a certain spiritual and **indelible** sign, on account of which they cannot be repeated...” Once baptized, always baptized!

When administered properly, even by someone not in union with the Church, Trent taught that Baptism is done so **validly** if the **intention** exists to baptize according to the mind of the Church, with the **proper words**. For example, nurses in hospitals can (and have!) baptized infants in of danger of death when no priest was available. That baptism is valid. Conversely, I recently read a story about a Phoenix priest who for **twenty years** used an improper baptismal formula (**We** baptize,” instead of “I baptize...”). He is now assiduously working to contact those affected and rectify the situation. Nit-picking? Absolutely not! His diocese explained: “It is **not** the **community** that baptizes a person and incorporates them into the Church of Christ; rather, it is Christ, and Christ alone, who presides at all sacraments.” Read more [here](#).

After the initial canons on the sacraments in general, Session VII of Trent spoke about Baptism and Confirmation, laying out the basics. Thus, the sacrament of Baptism is **necessary for salvation**, albeit that teaching is later clarified and refined indicating several types of Baptism (water, blood and desire). In 2019, a column of mine **touched upon** the thorny question of infants who die before Baptism. Trent rejects outrightly any sense in which Baptism is to be repeated, as the Anabaptists effectively denied the effect of infant Baptism. Earlier, the **Council of Carthage** (418 A.D.) condemned “whoever says that newborn infants should not be baptized.” The Ecumenical Council of Florence rebuked those who delayed baptism, declaring infants should be baptized “as soon as is convenient.” Sometimes old heresies resurface in a new form. Regarding

Confirmation, the Council of Trent clarified that the bishop is the ordinary minister.

Session VII closed with a commitment **to reform** questionable Church practices. Recall, some objections of the reformers highlighted **real abuses** that needed the attention of the universal church. I feel compelled to comment on the first clarification that reads as follows: “No one shall be assumed unto the government of Cathedral churches, but one that is born of **lawful wedlock**, is of **mature** age, and endowed with gravity of **manners**, and skill in **letters**, agreeably to the constitution of Alexander III, which begins, *Cum in cunctis*, promulgated in the Council of Lateran.” Would I have **passed muster** as a rector candidate in 1547? a.) My parents were sacramentally married at St. Luke’s in 1956-✓ b.) I can order off the 55+ menu at Perkins-✓ c.) At dinner, I **try** not to speak with my mouth full-✓ d.) While admittedly my penmanship is atrocious, I scrupulously attempt to avoid ending my sentences with a preposition, unless I want to. ☺ ✓

- Did you see the **Winter Olympic** event known as the **Skeleton**? Oh, my! If you thought bobsled was scary, imagine sliding **face first** on an uncovered sled at up to **80 mph** absent any mechanism to steer or vehicle walls to protect you! Crazy!
- The 2022 **Catholic Services Appeal** kicks off this weekend. Please read today’s bulletin insert, as it explains the various ministries supported by your CSAF donations. Each year I am **humbled** by your **generosity**, as we strive to reach our goal, supporting ministries beyond our parish. I will ask for your prayerful consideration to pledge a gift next Sunday.
- Catholic Schools have seen a nationwide increase of enrollment since the onset of the pandemic. The NCEA reports that Catholic school enrollment of 1,626,291 for the 2021 school year represented a nearly **4% nationwide increase** from 2020. It is expected to jump again this year by 62,000 students, a 3.8 % increase.
- Erratum! Last week, I incorrectly listed the odds of receiving a dealt hand containing all 13 cards of a single suit. Rather than roughly 169 million to 1, it’s really **158 billion to 1**! A retired professor of Mathematics gently pointed this out after Mass! No gold star for me! However, I **was correct** about the probability (**378** to 1) of being dealt **all four aces**. And guess what? While teaming with my mother on Super Bowl Sunday, she was dealt just that!

Sincerely in Christ,

Fr. John L. Ubel,
Rector