

The Sacraments: A Call to Holiness

The “real” reality is always behind the visible and tangible reality. Our current scientific mindset of reality posits that we acknowledge as real only those things that can be measured quantitatively. Science rejects the claim that there might be spiritual forces inhabiting the universe. Yet, the fascination young people – as well as the not so young – with Harry Potter books suggests that we prefer our stories to move beyond the physical. One of the main reasons we prefer stories with healthy doses of struggle between the forces of good and evil is because deep down we know we live in such a universe.

When the Greeks spoke of good moral action, they spoke of a “beautiful” act – much like Mother Theresa spoke of “doing something beautiful for God.” Indeed, who more beautiful, more fascinating, than the small, aged wrinkled nun, Mother Theresa? Only in fiction is evil fascinating: in real life it is banal, terrifying and disgusting. Most of the evil in our own lives and in the lives of those around us makes us want to avert our eyes. We turn in shame and as we progress in the spiritual life, fear, form our own irritability, impatience, greed, laziness, lust and anger. We feel small and inadequate to the challenges of life – and we feel embarrassed for those who do the same. The evil villain might look attractive on the big screen but in real life he appears ugly and violent – not the kind of guy you would invite over to meet your mother.

The Greeks were certainly aware of good and evil operating in the universe but saw human good and evil and divine good and evil as generally operating on two different planes. For Greek philosophers such as Aristotle, friendship between the gods and human beings was an impossibility. Man could not count on the gods for help in this life. Moral goodness was the result of hard work, developing good habits – virtues. For Aristotle and his fellow Greek philosophers there was no grace.

In his brilliant essay entitled “The Impact of Christianity on Moral Philosophy”, Jacques Maritain, the famous French Thomist, noted that Greek philosophy had called for a demanding moral athleticism that would enable man to ascend in some slight way to the supernatural. Whatever happiness Man attains, he gets through his own persevering efforts.

There is obviously some degree of truth in this perception of moral growth. With what Maritain describes as the “irruption” of Christianity into human history, things changed radically. Man is not only in pursuit of the divine but a personal God is even in greater pursuit of us; He descended from heaven to meet us, He showers us with graces, He heals us from our sinful ways, He becomes our friend, even walking among us, and He prepares us for eternal union with Him in heaven. Aristotle and the Greeks could not imagine such a God, such a Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Jesus made and continues to make through the sacraments, divine goodness visible.

Nor could Aristotle and the Greeks understand Mother Theresa: An unmarried woman living in a strange land, ceaselessly caring for the weak, sick, dirty and rejected of humanity, without any private possessions of her own. To the Greek mindset, Mother

Theresa would be the epitome of unhappiness. There is no way that such a woman could be happy. Yet happy she was, peace was exuded in her eyes, joy in her smile. Mother Theresa explanation of her motives would have caused Aristotle and his friends to shake their heads:

I am in love with my friend, Jesus, the Son of God, who is really here in the Eucharist. The grace of baptism restored order to my soul, and permits me to receive more graces; the grace of the sacrament of reconciliation frees me from slavery to my own sins; the grace of the sacrament of confirmation strengthens my power to endure in seeking and defending what is good; the Eucharist fills my soul with an ineffable intimate union with the divine.

The sacraments are the chief instruments of grace in this world – they are God’s chosen means for continuing to deliver to us the graces of Christ’s Passion and death. The sacraments enable us to accomplish tasks and grow to a level of holiness, indeed, happiness, that is unimaginable without grace. Not to make regular use of them is to deny a gift from the One who loves us the most.