

## **Sacramental System**

We know by now that there were many errors that developed in the medieval church. We are going to see some of those errors in this lesson. They were errors in doctrine and errors in life. But there was true faith there also. That true faith emerges from time to time, particularly in prayers. The prayer that I am going to use to begin this lesson comes from the 11th century, and it is a prayer that we can pray in confidence that this is properly asking for God's blessing and help. Let us pray.

*“Save me, Lord, King of eternal glory, You who have power to save us all. Grant that I may long for, do, and perfect those things which are pleasing to You and profitable for me. Lord, give me counsel in my anxiety, help in time of trial, solace when persecuted, and strength against every temptation. Grant me pardon, Lord, for my past wrongdoing and afflictions, correction of my present ones, and ordain also to protect me against those in the future. Amen.”*

The main question of the medieval world was the old question of the Philippian jailor: what must I do to be saved? There was no question that was more urgent, more pressing upon medieval people than that question. Their deepest concerns were expressed when they asked that question and tried to discover the answer to it. What I would like to do in this lesson is to imagine a dialogue between a sincere layperson, a man or a woman in the medieval world, in Europe, and a priest or a spiritual advisor. This person is asking his or her priest for help to try and understand how to be saved. This person would say, “Tell me how I can be saved from my sins.” The priest has a ready answer, “The church has the answer. Do not worry.” *Facere quod in ce est* is the answer. It is Latin for “do what lies in you.” Or you could say do your very best. That is what the church is telling you: do your very best, and God will not deny His grace to those who do their best. In plain language it means that God will help those who help themselves. “What do I do to help myself? Please be specific about this because I am really concerned to get the right answer and to know how to be saved from my sins and to go to heaven.” The priest says, “The answer is easy. There is a system in place. It is called the sacramental system. The church offers these sacraments to you, and as you make good use of them you will work your way to heaven eventually.” “What are the sacraments, what are we talking about when you say there are sacraments available for me?” The priest says, “The sacraments are religious activities that the church has approved of. These activities are things that you do, and as you do these God's grace is conferred upon you.”

How many sacraments are there? There used to be a lot of sacraments; Saint Francis talked about 30 or 40. But the great Peter Lombard was able to reduce that list to seven. So the church now views the sacraments as seven. You know them. They are baptism, confirmation, Eucharist, penance, extreme unction, marriage, and ordination. Those are the seven means of grace that the church uses to confer God's grace upon you so that you can go to heaven. Of course, most people are going to experience only five, or, at the most, six of those sacraments. The church views marriage as a sacrament, but not everybody is going to be married. Ordination is also a sacrament, but a priest does not marry. So you cannot have all seven sacraments, but can have at least six of them. You can have five sacraments, whether you are ordained or married or not. As you use these five or six helps, this is going to be the road to heaven for you.

“What do I do first, then? I certainly want to go to heaven. Tell me how to get started on this road.” The priest says, “The first sacrament is not something that you do. It is something that is done for you because the first sacrament is baptism. You were baptized as an infant. Baptism is very important because it is necessary to remove original sin. You were born in this world in a state of sin, and baptism is the sacrament that removes sin. It makes it possible for you to eventually go to heaven if you do some

other things along the way. By the way, the church considers this sacrament so important that it allows anybody to baptize in an emergency. You know, in our world, many babies die at birth. And it is so important for those babies to be baptized because without baptism there is no hope of heaven. Therefore the church says that it is not necessary for a priest to be there to baptize a dying baby. Anyone can do it; even a midwife can do it. The midwife should have clean water available so that if the baby appears to be dying she can actually do the baptism. Normally it is the father and the godparents who will bring the baby to the church when the baby is about six weeks old. The mother does not come because the mother does not attend public worship for a number of weeks until a time has passed. Then the mother comes for a service that is called 'churching.' It is a service of purification. The baptism needs to happen at least by the time the baby is six weeks old, preferably even earlier. That way the baby can be baptized as early as possible. That baptism that you received as a baby put on you an indelible stamp. You are stamped with that baptism. It is never to be repeated." "Does it mean that I am going to heaven? Does it mean that I am guaranteed heaven?" "Not exactly, but without it you would never make it to heaven. With it, you have got a good chance. So thank God for your baptism; you have made a start on the way to heaven."

"What comes next?" "The next sacrament is confirmation." "What is that?" "Confirmation is a sacrament in which the child confirms the vows that were made for the child at baptism. When you were baptized as an infant some vows were taken. You did not know anything about those because you could not understand them. You were just an infant. But as you grow up you begin to understand something of what was involved in your baptism. So there is a time of confirmation in which you are brought into the church, asked some questions, and you take the vows yourself. Now it is you on your own embracing those vows that were made by your father and your godparents." "When should I do this?" "You do it when you are about 3 years old, 6 years old, 9 years old, or maybe even later. But you will probably never go through confirmation. There is a problem here. This is because the Catholic Church teaches that only the bishop can confirm. And the bishop does not come to this little town very often, so most people are never confirmed. It is a sacrament of the church, but it is not very frequently practiced in our time. But do not worry. There are some other sacraments."

"There is the Eucharist. That is the Lord's Supper or Communion." "How does that help me?" The priest says, "As food that you eat strengthens you and enables you to grow physically, so the food that you eat in the Eucharist, the sacramental food of the bread and the wine, strengthens you spiritually." "How often should I do this?" "The Fourth Lateran Council that met in 1215 said you had to do it once a year. Every Catholic, every believer, should partake of the Eucharist once a year." "That sounds rather strange because if it is food, why do I eat it only once a year? I would not do very well if I ate physical food just once a year. I need food more often than that." "Let us not get into that. I am not quite sure how to answer that, in fact. The church says once a year, so once a year it is." This sincere layperson said, "But there is something else that bothers me about the Eucharist. That is, why the bread only? When people receive the Lord's Supper, they never receive the wine. They just receive the bread. It is the priest alone who drinks the wine. The people get the bread only." "You have touched on something very important here. You realize that when the bread and the wine are consecrated, those elements actually become the body and blood of Christ. They still look like bread and wine, but they are not really bread and wine any longer. That is now the body and blood of Christ. It is an awesome thing that has taken place. You can see why the church does not want to pass the cup among laypeople. This is because some of you are rather clumsy and careless. It is possible to drop it or to spill some of it. What you have done then is spill the blood of Christ. That would be an awful thing if that would happen. So you are given the bread. Sometimes it is just put on your tongue. That way you cannot lose even a fleck of it because that is the body of Christ. Do not worry about that either, though. The church has a doctrine called *con cobatens*, which means that if you receive either one of the consecrated elements you receive

them both. If you receive the consecrated bread, in effect, you are receiving both bread and wine. Actually it is enough just to watch all of this taking place. You do not really have to receive the bread or the wine. The church says once a year you should, but it is just enough to see it happen. It is enough to observe the consecrated host, the Lord lifted up. Years ago when the priest would say the words that would make the bread and the wine into the body and blood of Christ, some laypeople would shout out for him to hold it up high so they could see it. That has become part of the Mass now, the priest will elevate the host and hold it up high. You can see it. You can see the real body of Christ there. That is really all that you need to do.” “It does seem strange to think that one could receive any good from just seeing food and not eating it, but I will take your word for it.”

These two friends probably have to take a little break from this intensive theological conversation and have a glass of wine or something at a local tavern. But they later continue discussing these things.

The layperson says, “Tell me, what else is there? We have talked about baptism and the Eucharist as well as confirmation. But there are other sacraments.” “Yes, there are other sacraments. Let us talk now about penance.” “Why do I need penance?” “You need penance because of your sin.” “But I thought my baptism took care of my sin.” “It did; it took care of your original sin and any sin that you had committed up to the point that you were baptized. But that is not the end of sinning. Actually baptism wipes away all those sins before the sacrament, and it does give you some strength to resist future sins. But it does not guarantee that you will not sin again. You have sinned many times since your baptism. Think of your Christian life like this. Think of it as a very dangerous journey on a ship. As soon as you get on that ship, it has a shipwreck. You are thrown into the water, and you are in danger of drowning. That is a picture of how you come into this world as a sinner. You are tossed into this icy, stormy ocean. But there is a plank—baptism—that you can hold on to, and you can be saved from drowning. But the storm is pretty fierce, and the chances are that you are going to fall off of that plank at some time. You need a second plank, as we call it. That is penance. It is a way to get back on when you fall off.” “How does penance work?” “There are a number of parts to it. First, you have to feel sorry for your sin. That is called contrition. You cannot just pretend to be sorry. You really have to feel sorry for your sin and experience contrition. Then you must go and confess to a priest, telling him what you have done. He will pronounce absolution or forgiveness on you. You will be forgiven until the next time you sin, then you will have to do it all over again. But that is not quite the whole story. Even though the priest pronounces absolution on you, which gives you God’s forgiveness, because of your sin you have earned certain temporal punishments. You have to make satisfaction for those. You have to do some things that the priest will tell you to do. As he tells you what to do, then you can make satisfaction, you can make up for those sins. You can remove the threat of punishment, or at least reduce it.”

Then the layperson responds, saying, “I suppose I can understand that. But it is a little hard to put together the idea that God forgives my sins, and yet I have got to do something to make up for those sins. I accept what the church says, so I will do it. What are some of the things that I will be required to do to make satisfaction?” The priest says, “There are a number of things. First you might be required to say some prayers, like the Lord’s Prayer, many times. There are other prayers, too. Those are good things to do, and this will help to balance your account. Or the priest may say that you should fast for a certain number of days. Probably he will say it is necessary for you to give some alms (money) to the church or to the poor. He might possibly say that you should go on a pilgrimage.” “That last one sounds sort of interesting. I always like to travel, so where should I go? What is a pilgrimage?” “Pilgrimages are available to many places. You have to go to a sacred place, to a shrine, to some place where there is the name of a saint, the Virgin Mary, or even Christ Himself connected in some way. The church believes that God answers prayer everywhere, and the saints help us with our prayers. The saints can answer prayer, too, wherever you are. But the prayers of the saints are more effective at their shrines. So if you

want to get greater credit for what you are doing and a better chance of getting your prayers answered, it is necessary to go to the very place where these saints are remembered. The most important places to go are Jerusalem and Rome. You might not want to go to Jerusalem right now because the Crusades are going on, and you know all about those. It is pretty risky. But you might want to go because if you go to Jerusalem, especially with the Crusades going on, you have a chance of getting a lot of blessing and a lot of credit. At least go to Rome. If you cannot go to Rome, there are hundreds and hundreds of shrines much closer where you can go. By visiting one of these places, two ideas are brought together. One is the need for penance for sins, and pilgrimages are penitential acts. They require sacrifice of time and money. So these are acts of penance. But the other good thing about going on a pilgrimage is that you come in contact with the relics of the saints. People want to pray right at the place where the bones of that saint are placed in often a very beautiful and great container. They are made of gold and precious jewels. Sometimes not all the bones of a saint are there, but only one bone is there. After all, everybody wanted relics, and there were not enough skeletons to go around. So these bones were reverently taken apart. One bone would be given to one church, and one bone would be given to another church. Some rather frivolous people have said that as a result there are 13 heads of John the Baptist in different churches in Europe. But do not pay any attention to them. It does not take the entire skeleton of the saint. Just one bone will do to make that a holy place. Even something that is associated with that saint can make it a holy place, like a garment, a piece of the cross that that saint was crucified on, or part of the sword that was used to execute that saint.” The sincere seeker says, “This is all getting pretty complicated and very difficult it seems. Is there not an easier way to get to heaven than to do all of this?” The priest says, “God has not promised to make salvation easy, my friend. The church is doing all it can to make it attainable. But you still must do your part.”

The priest continues, “Have you heard of indulgences?” “Yes, I have heard of indulgences. Everybody is talking about indulgences, but I am still not quite sure what they are talking about. Tell me about the indulgences.” The priest says, “For about 100 years now the church has taught the doctrine of the treasury of merit. Have you heard of that?” “Yes. The treasury of merit.” “In this life, most people do not do enough good works for themselves. Their bad works are greater than their good works, so their spiritual account is always in the arrears. But there are some people in this life who not only do enough good works for themselves, but they do some extra good works.” “That is pretty impressive—extra good works. Who are those people?” “They are the saints, whose relics you observe in various places. They have done extra good works. Especially Mary, think of all the good works of the Virgin Mary. They are far more than are required for her own salvation. Think of the good works of Christ Himself. This produces a huge treasury in heaven. Thanks be to God this heavenly treasury is available to the pope. He can draw on this heavenly bank account. He can take some of those excess good works. Do not worry, there is so much in that heavenly bank account that it will never be exhausted. He can take some of those good works, and he can use them for people like you who do not have enough good works.” “That is good news, indeed, that the pope is willing to do that for me. When is he going to do it?” “He will not do it unless you buy an indulgence. You have to get an indulgence; you buy an indulgence. When you buy this, this will enable the pope to pray that God will give you some of the extra good works of Christ and Mary and the saints. Do not think you are buying forgiveness because you are not. You are really giving alms. Most people I know think that this is buying forgiveness. That is all right if they want to think that. But technically you are giving alms. You are doing the good work of alms-giving when you buy an indulgence.” “That is very interesting. Where does all this money go?” “It goes mainly to Rome. It goes to the pope.” “What does he do with it?” “He builds big churches, and he gets a great artist to decorate those churches. It is expensive to run a church, and we have to get money somehow. This is a good way to bring in money. But do not worry about where the money goes. What you have to worry about is where you are going. We are trying to get you to heaven, so you leave it up to the church as to what it is going to do with all the money it gets. You worry about your own soul’s salvation.”

The sincere layperson says, "That is what I am worried about; that is why I am talking to you. I am trying to get some help on this question. I am still confused, though. How much credit do I really need? How can I know when I have done enough, when I have done enough good works, when I have confessed enough, when I have bought enough indulgences? How can I know that?" "That is not easy to say. It is very complicated. Theologians have worked on this, but you probably would not understand. In fact, I do not really understand myself much of what they have said. Let us just say this: the more the better. It is, of course, better to be safe than sorry. By the way, we have touched on this, but you have a lot of help along the way. Do not ignore it. Think of all the saints. The saints want you to get to heaven and so does Mary. There are hundreds of saints. We have 55 special saints' days in our calendar. We have an All Saints Day on October 31st. Those are important days for you to pray to the saints. There is a saint for almost every problem. There is even Saint Jude, who is the saint of last resort. If you do not know who else to pray to, and you are at the end of your rope, pray to Saint Jude. Saint Jude is used to hearing prayers from people at the end of their ropes. He knows how to help. Do not forget Mary, too, because Mary is kind and compassionate. She will take your prayers directly to God. She is always ready to help you."

"Have we finished yet? We have talked a lot about these things. Is there anything else I need to do?" "No, not really. There is one more sacrament, but it is not something you can do. It is extreme unction. It is your last rights. It will be done for you, just like baptism, when you are dying. Hopefully a priest will be there. He will anoint you with oil and pray for you. It is the one last thing that can be done for your soul." "Then what happens?" "Purgatory takes place." "Purgatory? You mean after all this I am going to end up in purgatory?" "Yes, I am afraid so. Heaven is only for those who have made full and faithful use of the church's sacramental graces. Have you done that?" "No, I guess not." "The wicked and the excommunicated go directly to hell. Most of the rest, most of the baptized, go to purgatory. They will eventually be cleansed of their remaining sins and then enter heaven. But there is some recent good news on this front. The popes have decided that the indulgences assist people not only in this life. In other words, you can buy an indulgence for yourself, and that removes some of your sins. But the popes have said now, quite recently, that you can also buy an indulgence for someone who is dead and in purgatory. Is that not good news? Rich people have, for a long time, endowed continual masses for their souls. Their mass is going on all the time. These are private masses for the souls of people. Money was left to a monastery. That monastery takes that money and provides these masses. The mass is the most powerful form of prayer. That helps those rich people who are in purgatory. But most people, people like you, cannot afford that. This is really good news that after you are dead a friend or a relative can buy an indulgence. Some are cheap, some are not so cheap. Even the cheap ones help some. They can buy this indulgence, and that will reduce your time in purgatory."

Let us imagine that our sincere inquirer has one more question. He asks, "Where is God's grace in all of this? I do not know much about the Bible because I do not have one. I do not hear it read very much, but I have heard something about the Bible. I do not know much about Saint Augustine, but I have heard something about him. Like the apostle Paul, he talks about God's grace." "You are getting into some tough theological questions here. Let me try to help you. Maybe if I would draw a little diagram for you, you could understand this. Actually there are two views on this matter of how God's grace fits in with our works. Different theologians have presented this differently. You have heard of Saint Thomas Aquinas, right? Let me show you how Thomas viewed this. Thomas thought that this whole matter, this process of salvation, begins with grace. We cannot do what is within us until God energizes us by His grace. So God comes first in grace and gives us enough grace to enable us to add to that grace the merit of good works. Consequently God's grace plus our works will bring us to salvation. That is one way to see it. You probably know that some of the theologians around now, like William Avacome, Duns

Scotus, and Gabriel Biel are viewing things a little bit differently. They say that we cannot think that we start with God's grace and do what is within us in a state of grace. We cannot add merit or works to grace to earn salvation. Instead they say we do what is within us in our own natural ability. They say we start with works, and we do what we can. Then God adds His grace. Either way, it is both grace and works. Whether we start with grace, as Thomas said, and add works, or whether we start with works, as the nominalists say, and add grace, it pretty much comes out to the same thing. You are going to be saved by God's grace. None of this is possible without God's grace, but you are going to be saved by adding to God's grace. You add those good works that the church has told you about and that you can do as you seek to do what lies in you."

"I have one last question. Does everybody see it this way? Are there any other people who see it another way?" "Yes, there are some who see it another way, but they are heretics. There are some Waldensians around. They do not quite agree with the church on this matter. Then there is that heretic John Wycliffe in England. His bones have been dug up and burned because of the church's horror at his teaching. His disciple, John Hus of Bohemia, was burned alive at the Council of Constance in 1415, just a few years ago. So, you are going to be better off if you avoid all of that and stick with what is clear and what is sure."

Though most people in the Middle Ages tried to earn God's forgiveness by good works, some others, in addition to these so-called heretics, saw that this was not the message of salvation as given in the Bible. One Carthusian monk wrote, "Salvation cannot be had by one's own natural powers but is by the free gift of God." Of course before too much longer, Luther would be saying that, Calvin, would be saying that, and the Reformers would be saying that. "The grass withers, the flower fades, but the Word of our God will stand forever" (Isaiah 40:8).

Let us talk about marriage and ordination. These were viewed as sacraments, which meant that grace flowed through them. The view was that marriage was an enablement toward heaven. Ordination was also viewed this way. With the church's conception of the sacrament as anything through which God confers grace, the traditional number was set at seven by Peter Lombard. In a way, though, there is no way to limit it to seven. Saint Francis said there could be 30 or 40 sacraments. There are actually many more ways than that which could be avenues through which God confers grace. The Protestants, of course, say that the sacraments have to be defined differently. They have to be established in the Bible as sacraments. They cannot be just anything that we might think God would use to confer grace. But the church's view was that marriage did help toward heaven. It did not mean that the person who was not married was losing out, because grace could be had in other ways too. But marriage and ordination were sacraments that conferred grace.

When I did this imaginary conversation today, I was really trying to keep myself within the medieval world of Catholicism. Perhaps others of you could answer whether or not this sounds like modern Catholicism. Some would say that it does sound the same in many ways. I was just recently looking at some little cards that I have in my folder on indulgences. You would think that the indulgence would have long since disappeared. It is more controlled now and limited than it used to be. Somebody gave me a card in this class a few years ago of a prayer for President John F. Kennedy. You pray for the soul of President Kennedy. I read that prayer this morning. I do not think I prayed for his soul, but I read the prayer. It says at the bottom of the card that if you do that every day for a month, you get 500 days' indulgence. Whether modern-day Catholics do much of this or not, I do not know. But it is still there.