

A THIRD LOOK AT THE SACRAMENTS USING THE LENSE OF POSMODERNITY

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Introduction

The Jesuit Carlos H. Abesamis once wrote that there are three looks at Jesus. A third look is needed because somehow the second look has fixated us. In a way, it is a deviation from the first look; thus, a need to move on and look at Jesus for the third time.¹

This paper is in no way intended to expound Abesamis' Christology because this is mainly a reflection on the sacraments. The idea, however, of looking at something for the third time is of valuable use here. Given the development of age wherein time and culture conditioned ideological frameworks seem insufficient in attaining the truth.² Perhaps we have arrived at the moment of having to look at the sacraments for a third time. Although it is more accurate to say that the Church has *glanced* at it more than three times (certainly), the fact remains that the sacraments have looked with eyes that can freeze.³ In other words, from the lenses of men who were conditioned by a particular epistemic method, the sacraments have gone a long period of hibernation. And it seems that people of different cultures who now belong to the universal Church of Christ cannot directly relate anymore to what these things mean.

The First and Second Looks

Perhaps, it would help us appreciate the need for a third look if we begin with a brief survey on the first two looks. The first was the look of St. Augustine. A Platonist by method, Augustine was responsible for a lot of theologies on the sacraments. From the still official explanation of original sin to the concept of indelible character in baptism, he gave the world the first major look on the sacraments. Just as Plato was the first big-shot thinker in the west, so was Augustine in the Christian world, who was greatly influenced by his mentor's thoughts.

Among the many points of his theology of the sacraments, three among those (according to Martos) stand out as the most significant. First is the idea that the effects are properties of the sacramental ritual and not the minister. It is from this premising that principle *ex opere operato* developed.⁴ Second is the distinction of those sacraments that are administered from those that are to be received.⁵ Third is the distinction between sacraments and their faithfulness.⁶ That the validity of the sacrament is different from the recipient's feeling of having received grace or not. For several centuries, Augustine was the authority of the Church on the sacraments, and within such period, people looked at the sacraments from his lenses.

Then came the second look. It was a critique, a response and partly a corrective look of the first one. It arose when questions were hurled against the framework

grounded on Augustine's theology. It was St. Thomas Aquinas who mainly represented the second wave of the theology of the sacraments.⁷ Just like any other thinker, he was limited by his generation's way of looking at things. It would be anachronistic, however, to charge him of things he is entitled to be ignorant of. What he gave to the Church was his best, and that we should be thankful of.

Thomas based his explanation on Aristotle's philosophy. Apparently, it can be inferred from such simple observation that he differed in several respects from Augustine. The Platonist Augustine certainly failed to get the complete support of the Aristotelian Thomas precisely because their ideological umbilical chords are separately connected to two different sources, which disagreed with each other on several philosophical points.

Building his theology on Aristotelian philosophy, Thomas gave birth to the emphasis on the importance of matter and form in the celebration of the sacraments. With this, he ably and logically explained how possible it is for the bread and wine to remain the same in size, shape, color and odor, and at the same time change into the body and blood of Christ. Hence, the highfalutin term transubstantiation.⁸

The system of thought of the Angelic Doctor served as the theological legs of the later development of Canon Law.⁹ It eventually led to a mechanistic attitude towards the sacraments, which were then unconsciously viewed as dispensers of grace. Particularly with the development of the ecclesiastical affirmation "*ex opere operato*", grace was viewed as something which simply flows from the sacraments simply by performing the ritual as prescribed.¹⁰

It was also with him that the notion of "the necessity of the sacraments for salvation" came into the picture. Such sacred signs he argued are channels of divine grace. It is through them that God in Christ saves his people.

Although there were many later developments and reactions to Thomas's theology of the sacraments (i.e. Lombard, Scotus, Bonaventure, and Ockham) they cannot be considered as absolutely free from the bias of the one they reacted to or refuted. The fact that their thoughts were reactions and refutations to Thomas, it is but reasonable to say that though they viewed the matter from different sides, they just viewed it differently from one window. Thus, all of them still belong to the second look.

For several centuries, the second look dominated Christendom. In fact, it is still considered by the Church as part and parcel of its official teaching on the sacraments. For some indubitable proofs, one can just take a simple look without necessary reading the present Catechism of the Catholic Church (section on the sacraments). The heavily footnoted catechism is still based on the theology of St. Thomas Aquinas and the other scholastics. Again, there is nothing wrong with this, because to an extent it served its purpose.

To say however that it served the purpose is not and cannot be equated to being the only final explanation. Things change and so does explanations. Nietzsche reflectively said that “we don’t have the truth – only interpretation of it”. There are some things that were well explained from the vantage view of the second look, which however cannot be sufficiently explained by the people of this age.

So are sacraments just signs? Are they just channels? What is the relevance of the sacraments for the modern man living in an age of technology, wherein the meaning of things change from time to time? *The age where we live is in itself a provocation and a call to look at the sacraments for the third time.* Not from the lenses of Augustine or Aquinas, but from those whose language allows what were never spoken to speak – from men who believe that beyond structures and concepts are more profound realities with which we can still anchor our hope on.

A Third Look

The modern age and way back have been so preoccupied with what is present (metaphysics of presence). Hence, the attitude of basing even our religious convictions only on what is and what can be perceived.

The age after the modern era (post-modern age) challenges us to reflect and rethink what we’ve been believing, and holding dearly in our hearts. New thoughts ask us to recall our still wanting methods and consider what may have been forgotten, what is not yet at hand and the need to allow receptiveness instead of conceptual thinking.¹¹

Martin Heidegger who championed on the search for the meaning of Being provides a solid foundation for this philosophical framework.¹² Heidegger asked, “what about the nothing?” His point was the inclusion of what may not be present, as it is the only way for *thinking to be holistic*. He believes that our preoccupation with what is present leads us to a limited understanding or authentic *eksistenz* . . . our gaze is only on beings and not on Being.¹³ The nothing is our path to a thinking of Being, because it is in the nothing that we find what is missing; hence a moment for us to start anew. Nothing then is necessary for the reclamation of the meaning of Being.

But why Being? Because it is that which will give us the fuller meaning of our *eksistenz*, not beings. He said, “Being is not a rock, a beast or a star...not even God”¹⁴, rather these are beings that find their meaning only under the horizon of Being. It is Being that will provide fresh meaning to our faith in God. As he said (in The Letter on Humanism): “Only from the truth of Being can the essence of the holy be thought. Only from the essence of the holy is the essence of divinity to be thought. Only in the light of the essence of divinity can it be thought or said what the word ‘God’ is to signify.”¹⁵

Louis-Marie Chauvet who builds his conceptual framework on Heidegger’s philosophy elaborates well a new way of looking at the sacraments. He deviates from the traditional understanding of the sacraments as sacred signs (just channels or instruments).

For him, sacraments are symbols and not just signs, as such it leads us not just to any other meaning but to a distinctive cultural realm of faith.¹⁶

The sacraments then are not just signs that point to something, rather they constitute the larger symbolic order of Christian faith. This faith is not just the affirmation of what is, but also of what is not. In fact, it started with a realization of what is absent – thus the presence in the light of what is no longer. Just like the faith of the disciples after the resurrection which is configured not because of a physical evidence but on the absence of Christ, so too should our faith be every time we celebrate the sacred mysteries: sacraments.¹⁷

Chauvet explains that sacraments are to be understood within the whole network of faith, that is, it is mediated to us through the scriptures and it must be made alive in our communitarian ethos – return gifts as he calls it.¹⁸ All these are under the horizon of a faith that is not just based on what is present, but one that allows the communication of what is not yet to come. The third look on the sacraments is not just any other shallow mysticism or esotericism. It is a look that allows God to speak through the whole network of the symbolic order. The God who is and is not!

Conclusion

The postmodern age, as they say, is the most challenging one for thinkers who want to offer explanations of things and realities, especially those involving religious language. Certainly, it is the most challenging age because people are not contented holding on to old explanations that no longer suit to the events and realities around them. Is water still the universal means of salvation when it is very scarce in some places and even for sale in most parts of the world? How can Christ be a food, when food is closely associated with the properties of the privileged few? Is Christ a fast food? What kind or brand of fast food if at all He is? How will Augustine and Aquinas answer these questions? Heidegger and Chauvet just perhaps sit and wonder how the two doctors of the Church would have answered aforementioned questions if they were alive today. Apparently, for the two contemporary thinkers, there is a new window that may lead us to look at our treasured sacraments for the third time - search for the grace of God in his absence and celebrate the sacred mysteries.

ENDNOTES

¹ Carlos H. Abesamis, S.J., *A Third Look at Jesus*, Quezon City: Claretian Publications, 1999.

² Tilman Kuchler, *Post-Modern Gaming: Heidegger, Duchamp, Derrida*. New York: PeterLang Publishing, 1994, 1. The author describes the post-modern age as the “end of modernity” referring to the “overall decline of universalist discourses.

³ *Catechism of the Catholic Church*. Manila: ECCCE and Word & Life Publications, 1994, par. 1114-1117. Henceforth, this work shall be cited as CCC.

⁴ Joseph Martos, *Doors to the Sacred: A Historical Introduction to the Sacraments in the Catholic Church*. Missouri: Liguori, 2001, 41. Henceforth, *Doors to the Sacred*.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 42.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 42.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 60 – 65.

⁸ Discussed in length in CCC 1373 –1377.

⁹ Martos, *Doors to the Sacred*, 73.

¹⁰ CCC 1128. Also, St. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica III*, 68.8.

¹¹ Heinz Kuluke, SVD “*Preparing for the XXIst Century – Heidegger’s Concern*,” PHAVISMINDA Journal, no. 1 (1996): 20-21.

¹² Martin Heidegger, “What is Metaphysics?,” *Pathmarks* ed. William McNeill. Melbourne: Cambridge University Press, 1998, 84.

¹³ Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans. Joan Stambaugh. New York: State of New York Press, 1996, xix. In his very own words in *Being and Time*: “Do we in our time have an answer to the question of what we really mean by the word ‘being’?”

¹⁴ Martin Heidegger, “Letter on Humanism,” *Martin Heidegger: Basic Writings*, ed. David Farrell Krell. New York: Harper and Row, 1977, 234.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 253.

¹⁶ Louis-Marie Chauvet, “Symbol and Sacrament.” Minnesota: The Liturgical Press, 1995, 110, 152.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 162-171.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 278.