
Eucharist and Meal: Christian Sacraments as the Fulfillment of Human Experience

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ABSTRACT

Are Christian sacraments merely particular rites of the Church, or do they also have an anthropological basis in human life? Is there a relationship between the most mysterious Catholic sacrament—the Eucharist—and the experience of an everyday meal? Following Joseph Ratzinger’s essay “The Sacramental Foundation of Christian Existence,” this article aims to show the profound relationship between the sacraments and human experience. Human life presents a sacramental structure, an encounter of spirit and matter, expressed with signs, symbols, and rites. In all cultures, the most important or recurring events of human life, such as birth, entry into adult life, having a meal, sexual relations, suffering, and death, are often expressed by specific rites that underline their sacred and mysterious nature. Christian sacraments are the fulfillment of a common anthropological ground, to the extent that through them, according to the Church’s belief, God himself shares in his people’s lives, notably within their most significant moments and situations. Through the partaking of bread and wine, the Eucharist expresses the most intimate form of communion between God and humankind, introduced by the Incarnation and fulfilled in Christ’s passion, death, and resurrection.

KEYWORDS Eucharist, Joseph Ratzinger/Pope Benedict XVI, meal, sacraments, sacrifice

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Introduction

The sacraments are, without doubt, one of the most distinctive features of the Catholic Church. They are present from the very beginning of its history: the subjects of Baptism, the Eucharist, the forgiving of sins, and the gift of the Spirit are recounted in the four Gospels, in the Acts of the Apostles, and in the Epistles, as well as in the earliest documents of the apostolic, post-apostolic, and patristic ages.¹

Historically, a critical matter of discussion and division between the Roman Church and the Reformed Churches was the understanding and reception of the sacraments. Whereas the former recognized seven sacraments (Baptism, Confirmation or Chrismation, Eucharist, Penance, Anointing of the Sick, Holy Orders, and Matrimony) as “efficacious signs of grace, instituted by Christ and entrusted to the Church” (*Catechism* 1131), the latter usually identified only two sacraments as instituted by Christ, the Baptism and the Supper of the Lord. However, a Protestant understanding is often very different from a Catholic one.²

In the Catholic Church, access to the sacraments is reserved only for its members. Baptism, the first sacrament, is like a door allowing people to receive the other sacraments. Moreover, the baptism’s reception itself, as for the other sacraments, is strictly related to the faith.³ To share the whole community’s belief is the first requirement for the reception of a sacrament. Consequently, regarding the Eucharist, Catholics have to believe that the white wafer—the Host—received during the Mass is the body of Jesus Christ and that the consecrated wine is his blood.⁴

Hence, it seems that the sacraments, the most distinguishing praxis of Catholicism, are too mysterious a concept for an outside observer because they are strictly related to those initiates alone that can understand and receive them.⁵

¹ Here we are not affirming that in the New Testament or the early Church the sacraments were already shaped as they are in their current form. However, the basis for further developing a liturgical tradition and comprehension of the sacraments was already present from the Church’s beginning.

² The Protestant Churches and communities are so various that it is impossible to give an exhaustive perspective. Regarding the Orthodox Churches, in this aspect, they are very close to the Roman Church. Except for some liturgical differences, they share the same seven sacraments with the Catholic Church. Regarding some ecumenical implications of a Catholic Eucharistic theology, see, for instance, Kereszty 240-45.

³ According to the praxis of the Catholic Church, an adult who wants to receive baptism has to pass a period called “catechumenate,” in which he or she receives the basic teachings about the Christian faith. Only after the profession of faith can people be baptized. Regarding the baptism of infants, it is required that the parents (or at least one of them), as well as one or two godparents, profess their faith. Faith, in the Catholic understanding, is always an ecclesial act.

⁴ This is the content of the traditional doctrine of transubstantiation.

⁵ Incidentally, we can notice that “*sacramentum*” is the Latin word chosen by the Fathers of the early church

However, nowadays, among Catholics too, there is a serious lack of understanding of the sacraments and, consequently, a radical diminishing of their fruition: attendance at Sunday Mass is, in many areas of the world, in sharp decline; many priests do not seem to believe in the power of Confession to forgive sins; Catholic families do not baptize their children; baptized people do not celebrate a Catholic marriage; and priestly vocations are dramatically in decline. The Chrismation is also wryly called “the farewell sacrament” because young people often leave the Church straight after receiving it. Many Catholics will set foot in a church again only for other people’s funerals or, at the very least, for their own!⁶

Facing the distance between the sacraments and people’s lives, inside and outside the Church, this article aims to show the anthropological basis upon which the sacraments were founded in order to stress their relevance even in current times. We will show that sacraments are deeply related to human life, especially in their symbolic structure. People of all cultures and religions associate crucial experiences and events of life with specific rites that underline their mysterious nature: birth, entry into adult life, a shared community meal, sexual relations, suffering, and death. As we will see, human nature is naturally drawn to a sacramental or symbolic structure, which is an indivisible expression of spirit and matter.

Christian sacraments are the fulfillment of such anthropological grounds, to the extent that through them God himself shares human life. We agree with Bernard J. Cooke, who affirms “that ‘sacrament’ is not something limited to certain formally religious actions. ‘Sacrament’ includes much more than liturgical rituals; as a matter of fact, it touches everything in our life that is distinctively human” (2).⁷

Among all the sacraments, the Eucharist especially shows God’s sacrifice of love. In Christ’s passion and death, God offers his body and sheds his blood for the redemption of humankind. Through the partaking of bread and wine, the

and New Testament translators to render the Greek *mysterion*” (Browning and Reed 28). Indeed, the sacraments are ineffable realities, mysteries in many aspects. In Orthodoxy, the sacraments are still called mysteries.

⁶ We can quote Bernard J. Cooke’s *Sacraments and Sacramentality* as a summary of our preliminary reflections: “‘Sacrament’ is certainly one of the most basic notions in Christianity. It is taken for granted by millions. It is rejected or at least is suspect by other millions. For the most part it is understood very inadequately. Yet, what is involved in sacrament is what is most basic to our very being as humans; and it is tragic that this aspect of sacraments has been largely overlooked” (4).

⁷ Cooke also underlines that “for centuries, there has been a recognition, often quite vaguely formulated, that sacraments have some special relationship to the fundamental process of human being human” (7). This calls to mind the traditional Latin expression *sacramenta propter homines*, which translates as “sacraments are for humans.”

Eucharist expresses the most intimate form of communion between God and humankind.

A Symbolic-Anthropological Foundation of the Sacraments

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The Crisis of the Sacramental Idea in Modern Consciousness

The German theologian Joseph Ratzinger (the future Pope Benedict XVI) approached the sacraments in a symbolic and anthropological way. His essay “The Sacramental Foundation of Christian Existence”⁸ begins by presenting a paradox of the Church in the twentieth century: “On the one hand, our age has been called the century of the Church; it could just as well be called the century of the liturgical and sacramental movement” (153). However, such a liturgical renaissance is only one side of the coin. The other side shows that the twentieth century “is experiencing at the same time a crisis of sacramentality, an alienation from the reality of the sacrament that can scarcely have existed with such severity and intensity within Christianity before” (153). Facing the current prominence of secularism and radical laicism even in traditionally Christian societies, we can add that we can no longer speak about the Church’s centrality in these first two decades of the twenty-first century. Instead of a structured and communitarian faith, we may instead describe the contemporary religious mainstream as practicing a subjective spiritual preference.

Moreover, in the present times, the crisis of sacramentality has become sharper. Ratzinger identifies the cause of such a decline in a widespread mentality, a particular conception of the world, reality, and human beings. We live in an age in which “we have grown accustomed to seeing the substance of the things [as] nothing but the material for human labor” (“The Sacramental” 153). The richness of reality has been reduced to a mere instrument of human manipulation.⁹ According to such a vision, “the world is regarded as matter and matter as material” (153). As a result, “there is no room left for that symbolic transparency of reality, toward the eternal on which the sacramental principle is based” (153-54). A functionalist understanding of the world took the place of a symbolic vision:

⁸ As reported in the Editorial Notes in the 11th Volume of Joseph Ratzinger’s *Collected Works*, the essay “The Sacramental Foundation of Christian Existence” (original German title “Die sakramentale Begründung christlicher Existenz”) “is an excerpt prepared by the author himself from a four-hour lecture that Joseph Ratzinger gave during the *Salzburger Hochschulwochen* [College Conference in Salzburg] in 1965. It first appeared in “*blätter*” [sic]: *Zeitschrift für Studierende* (Vienna) and then was published as a separate brochure by Kyrios Verlag in Freising. The slim volume attracted much attention well into the 1970s and went through three more editions” (“Editorial Notes” 607).

⁹ On this theme, see also Ratzinger’s reflection throughout his masterwork *Introduction to Christianity*.

“given such a starting point, it is no longer possible to understand how a ‘thing’ can become a ‘sacrament’” (154).

According to Ratzinger, the cause of this crisis is more an incomprehension of the world’s symbolic aspect than a lack of interest in God or Jesus Christ. People see the sacraments as “something altogether too religious . . . , all too bound up with a past stage of faith” (“The Sacramental” 154). Pouring a little water on a baby’s head, imposing the hands, or anointing a sick person with a bit of consecrated oil, how can these rites affect people’s lives? How can they signify something more than a mere symbol? How can young people understand that, through a ceremony, a person will be bound for life to another person—Matrimony—or to God’s service in a celibate life—Priesthood? Cooke raises similar questions: “How can participation in sacramental liturgies have any real effect on a person? What real difference do sacraments make in people’s lives?” (7). More radically, Ratzinger’s philosophical question is: “Can what is spiritual be mediated or even bound by ritual and material means?” (“The Sacramental” 155). Is it not a kind of magic inherited from a remote past? He faces this problem by answering a double question: “What is a sacrament? And: What is human life?” (155). By analyzing the first question, Ratzinger aims to answer the second question, too.

The Sacramental Idea in Human History

What, then, is a sacrament? One can tackle this question in two different ways: a theological one subdivided into two aspects, historical and dogmatic; or an anthropological approach to religious history. Ratzinger goes along the latter path. He affirms that considering human history, “there is in it something like primeval sacraments. . . . One could call them creation sacraments, which develop at the important junctures of human existence . . . such as birth and death, a meal, and sexual relations” (“The Sacramental” 156).¹⁰ Cooke calls them “key experiences” since “not all experiences are equally meaningful” (19).¹¹ Long before considering human spiritual faculties, such as reason or free will, it is in these biological experiences, common to all sentient beings, where there already emerges the specificity of human experience. These are natural activities, but for human beings (as

¹⁰ See also Ratzinger’s *God and the World*, in which the author shows each Christian sacrament’s specificity related to a human being’s meaningful life steps.

¹¹ Following psychologists and educators, Cooke divides the key experiences into two kinds, “the striking, out-of-the-ordinary, one-time occurrences,” like a car accident, and “more ordinary but basically important experiences that we all share . . . whose meaning affects the meaning of everything else” (19). In this article we want to relate sacraments especially to the second kind of experiences.

opposed to animals), they show the possibility of opening to transcendence. Ratzinger affirms that, in their biological life, people are constantly realized and renewed in the taking of nourishment and in sexual relations, but in birth and death they mysteriously experience the limits of life, its contact with what is uncontrollable, greater, and other, out of which it perpetually rises but which also seems to swallow it up again immediately (“The Sacramental” 156).

In human history, such key experiences often took the shape of rites. Browning and Reed affirm that

to be human is to find rites and ceremonies which celebrate our perception of the meaning and purpose of life. Our rituals start at birth . . . and continue throughout the stages of our lives to the rituals which celebrate the pains and joy of life and the ultimate meaning we proclaim our lives have had and will have eternally. (83)

Therefore, considering how people face their lives’ main events, we can affirm that having a human structure creates the possibility for a higher and even mysterious level of experience. In such a dynamic, the starting point—the matter—is not denied; instead, it finds a new depth. To give an example, all animals need to eat: “Eating is vital, for without food we perish. In one way or another, all living organisms need to eat or ingest a substance for their growth and survival” (Méndez-Montoya 1). Nevertheless, only for human beings does the act of eating involve an inner and irresistible force that pushes them beyond the surface level of those acts toward a deeper dimension. Referring to Schleiermacher’s expression, Ratzinger calls these experiences “the fissures through which the eternal looks into the uniformity of the human routine” (“The Sacramental” 156). He concludes: “What is biological in man, as an entity that exists spiritually, acquires a new meaning and a new depth” (156).

Hence, to be human is to be aware of the meaning of things. In answering the question “What does ‘human’ mean?” Cooke stresses this spiritual aspect, which means the unique human capacity of awareness which distinguishes him from animals:

One thing that is absolutely basic to being human is our ability to be conscious, to be aware of what is going on within us and around us. This human awareness is more than a perception of what touches us from outside—many levels of animal life possess this. Humans are aware that we as self-identifiable knowers have this perception of “the world.” (9)

The Human Dimensions of a Meal: Gift and Communion

Ratzinger goes on with his reflection upon the primeval sacraments by exemplifying some of them. He starts with the act of eating. For humans, it is radically “different from the food intake of an animal: eating attains its human dimension by becoming a meal” (“The Sacramental” 156). What is then the specific meaning of a human meal? “Having a meal . . . means experiencing the delightfulness of those things whereby men are supplied with the gift of the earth’s fertility” (156). Thus, the first characteristic of a meal is the experience of a relationship between us and the earth. More basically, the same way of eating, that is, the ingestion of food into our bodies, shows the closeness of this relationship, as pointed out by Angel F. Méndez-Montoya:

Eating is . . . an experience of extreme nearness, even intimacy. . . . When we eat, we are literally ‘intimate’ with food by physically bringing it near the body, lips, and mouth. The ingested substance breaks the conventional boundaries of inside and outside, oneself and alterity. (1)

Furthermore, a meal is something in which men receive nature’s products, provided through the cooperation of human effort: from hunting and fishing to more complex forms of work such as cultivation or industrial production. We may notice that animals hunt or dive for food too, but the difference is that we are aware of our vital relationship with nature. Animals are simply part of nature; men are aware of it. Hence, nature, with its fruits, is received by men as a gift. A meal can become an experience of gratitude.¹²

This consideration anticipates the second main characteristic of a meal, deeply related to the first one—the earth’s gift. Ratzinger indicates it by the words *company* and *community*: “A meal creates community, eating is complete only when it happens in company, and human coexistence achieves its fullness in the community of nourishment that unites everyone in the common interest of receiving the gifts of this earth” (“The Sacramental” 157). Carole Counihan and Penny Van Esterik underline the importance of food’s social aspect: “Commensality, or food-sharing, has been a dominant concern of social scientists for decades. . . . Food events encode and regulate key social relations. . . . Food-sharing is the medium for creating and maintaining social relations both

¹² This is, for instance, the case of the American holiday Thanksgiving Day, on which—traditionally—people expressed their gratitude for the preceding year and made sacrifices for the blessing of the future harvest. Nowadays, people typically have a sumptuous meal together with their relatives during Thanksgiving Day’s celebration.

within and beyond the household” (2-3). Mary Douglas regards food as a fundamental linguistic code, where the “message it encodes will be found in the pattern of social relations being expressed. . . . Like sex, the taking of food has a social component, as well as a biological one. Food categories therefore encode social events” (36).¹³

Ratzinger sees in the two above-mentioned characteristics of the meal (gift and communion) an indication of what human existence is. In the first aspect, man

discovers that he is not the founder of his own being but lives his existence in receptivity. He experiences himself as someone who has been endowed, who lives in the unmerited gift of fruitfulness that seems always to be waiting for him, as it were. (“The Sacramental” 157)

As for the second aspect,

he experiences the fact that his existence . . . is grounded in communion with . . . the world, in whose stream of life he is immersed, and that it is founded on communion with men, without which his humanity would lose the ground under its feet. (157)

This is a decisive point of Ratzinger’s anthropological vision. Using a very German play on words, Ratzinger affirms that our “being-there” (*Dasein*) is, from its origin and, therefore, by nature, a “being-with” (*Mitsein*). Hence, from the experience of the meal, we can deepen what human existence is: “Man is not founded in himself; rather, he is founded through a twofold ‘with’: communion with things, communion with people; man can exist only in the plural, so to speak” (“The Sacramental” 157). Regarding this communal dimension, Anna Meigs employs the image of the chain:

All organisms are linked in chains of mutual influence; borders between bodies are permeable. . . . Implicit in this understanding is a notion of self and other as involved in a continuous and dynamic process of participation. The self is blended in and through the surrounding world and, conversely, that world is blended in and through the self. Through his or her continual acts of food

¹³ Affirms Anna Meigs: “Prominent among anthropological works on food are those of Mary Douglas, who has consistently argued for greater attention to the social (as opposed to the nutritive and psychological) aspects of food and eating” (95).

exchange, both as producer and as consumer, the individual is constituted as part of a physically commingled and communal whole. (104)

From a theological perspective, Méndez-Montoya envisions creation itself as “a cosmic banquet—an interdependent network of edible signs—that participates in God’s nurturing sharing” (3).

Eucharist and Meal

Nevertheless, according to Ratzinger, in human existence, there is also a third “with”:

His [man’s] mind is only by communion with the body, just as, of course, his body too, his biological being, consists only of being in terms of his rational dimension. The communion of mind and body, however, includes being immersed into the unity of the cosmic stream of life and thus expresses a fundamental interconnectedness of all those beings who are privileged to be called human. (“The Sacramental” 157)

What does it mean? It means that the relationship between humans and the world is not at the same level with the relationship among humans. In the latter, humans can identify themselves in others. In every relationship, there is similarity and otherness. In the people-world relationship, by contrast, there is less similarity—and, consequently, the otherness is more significant—than in the person-to-person relationship. It is not only a matter of extrinsic similarity; it derives instead from the structure of the human being. Human beings are not only creatures in which spirit and matter coexist or cooperate. They cannot fully express themselves outside the unity of matter and spirit. Each person is a spiritual-material being. Therefore, the similarity—or communion—that humans experience is also ontological.

Following the same perspective, Cooke relates humanity’s spiritual aspect of consciousness to the communion with all humans:

By far the most important part of our “going out” to the world around us is our reaching out to people . . . who share with us this capacity for consciousness. . . . We are able to form human community with them. We are able, that is, to love. (9-10)

Employing the concise expression of the American food writer M. F. K. Fisher, we can affirm: “There is a communion of more than our bodies when bread is broken and wine drunk” (vii).

However, the communion between men is not yet perfect: “No one of us loves with complete maturity” (Cooke 10). There is a distance due to the material aspect.¹⁴ Ratzinger affirms:

In the connection to one another that is produced by a common biological life, there is still at the same time the reason for a deep-seated separation of men from one another that ultimately keeps them from being of one mind and from finding their way to full community. (“The Sacramental” 157)

People find in themselves a struggle for communion with the world and, on a deeper level, with other people. Despite the struggle, this communion is always experienced as incomplete, for what unites people—matter and spirit—also divides them. This is the paradox of the human condition.

Meal and Sacrament

Let us come back to the meaning of the meal. This “primeval sacrament” is related to human existence and its sacramental structure. Human nature’s paradoxical character also reflects the twofold structure—matter and spirit—of a sacrament. In the biological experience of a meal, this double aspect is particularly evident: “Eating that has become a meal already bears sacramental traits in and of itself” (Ratzinger, “The Sacramental” 158). In the experience of the meal, a person “performs this biological act rationally, spiritually” (158). As stated by Méndez-Montoya, for humans,

eating not only brings about physiological or biological change; it is also a means of psychological, affective, and even spiritual transformation. . . . A dish or a beverage can bring memories of family, home, a country, or a particular experience from the past. In some communities there are foods for celebrating special occasions. (2)

Food’s spiritual aspect is also evident if we consider, for example, the variety of culinary expressions in human culture, in all times and latitudes, as stressed by Counihan and Van Esterik: “Food presents a rich symbolic alphabet through its diversity of color, texture, smell, and taste; its ability to be elaborated and combined in infinite ways; and its immersion in norms of manners and cuisines” (2).

¹⁴ From a Christian point of view, this distance is also a consequence of the original sin, as stated by Cooke: “The very essence of human sin . . . is the deliberate refusal to love” (10). The theme of sin also introduces that of freedom and free will: “Linked to our ability to know and to love is our human freedom” (10).

As a matter of fact, symbols can only be found in human language. Animals employ specific signals in order to communicate (such as calls, colors, smells, dances, etc.), but not symbols, which require an interpretation according to the specific cultural context in which they are employed.¹⁵ Therefore, the symbolic aspect of food underlines its spiritual dimension. In her essay about the Hua people of Papua New Guinea, Anna Meigs goes into the category of the spiritual by employing the term “mystical”:

To eat a food . . . is not only an economic, social, and nutritive event but also an emotional and mystical one. In the act of eating one is connecting oneself with the world, opening one’s body and one’s self to the dynamic influence of properties, vital essence, and emotions of other organisms. (104)

Nevertheless, we have to notice again that matter and spirit are not only two different components or functions of men; they not only cooperate in human life like two forces or energies; they, in their unity, *are* the human, constitutive of its nature. For human beings are indivisible creatures. Ratzinger speaks about transparency and interpenetration of matter and spirit. He writes: “The man, therefore, who considers what is biological to be human also—this man experiences in a meal the transparency of the sensible toward the spiritual; he experiences that interpenetration of *bios* and spirit which is his inmost essence” (“The Sacramental” 158).

The sacramental structure that characterizes human existence is also present in the world’s structure: “He [the man] discovers that things are more than things: that they are signs whose meaning extends beyond their immediate sensorial power” (158). We can point out that, according to Ratzinger, the words *sacramental* and *symbolic* are practically synonymous. He speaks about signs, but these signs—or symbols—are not understood in a merely semantic or cognitive way. Instead, Ratzinger gives these terms a substantial meaning. In other words, signs or symbols do more than *express* the structure of reality; they *are* its structure. The symbolic structure of reality is this transparency or interpenetration of matter and spirit. This fundamental structure is expressed, at its greatest level, in human existence.

¹⁵ As an example, a specific dance or cry of a bird can be a signal to another bird indicating its readiness to mate. In a gesture with a similar appearance, an Italian guy could give a bunch of red roses to a pretty girl as a symbol of his loving passion for her. But this act has its meaning due to the symbolism assigned to red roses within Italian culture. In contrast, the same bunch of red roses might have a totally different meaning in another country. As shown in this example, symbols are culturally mediated expressions rather than instinctively understood signals.

Consequently, regarding the human experience of the meal, Ratzinger affirms:

When he [a man] experiences the foundation of his existence in a meal, then he knows that things give him more than they themselves have and are. In this way, however, the meal becomes for him a sign of the divine and the eternal that supports him and all things and men and is the real foundation of his existence. (“The Sacramental” 158)

In conclusion, through the experience of a meal, we discover the innermost structure of reality and human nature that emerges in this concrete experience: “In this way the meal becomes a penetrating interpretation of what it means to be a man, of human existence, for which we wanted to be on the lookout along with the question about the sacraments” (157). As for this aspect, that is to deepen the meaning of human life through the experience of food, Ratzinger’s perspective is similar to that of Counihan and Van Esterik, who affirm: “Food is life, and life can be studied and understood through food. . . . Food is both a scholarly concern and a real-life concern” (1).¹⁶

In the following section, we will deepen the meaning of the Christian sacraments, particularly the Eucharist, as it directly relates to the meal experience.

The Christian Sacraments

The Primeval or Creation Sacraments

As we have already seen, humans are by nature a unity of body and spirit. Ratzinger explains this radical unity by saying, “He himself is spirit only as body and body only from spirit” (“The Sacramental” 158). This statement implies that the material dimension must mediate a human’s spiritual experience. There is no human experience of the spirit—or, of the divine—outside the cooperation of his material body. Humans are not angels, nor are they animals: the “divine element can meet [man] in no other way than in the sphere in which he has his humanity, namely, through the medium of common humanity and corporeality, without which he would necessarily cease to be a man” (158).

¹⁶ Meigs expresses the same concept affirming that the “understanding of food and eating is . . . an understanding about identity and the boundaries of self. . . . As output of one person and as input into another, food is a particularly apt vehicle for symbolizing and expressing ideas about the relationship of self and other” (104-05).

Now it is easier to understand what sacraments are, starting from the “primeval sacraments” or “creation sacraments” present in the history of religions. A sacrament is

at first simply the expression of the experience that God encounters man in a human way: in the signs of common humanity and in the change of the merely biological into the human, which when accomplished in the context of religion undergoes a transformation into a third dimension—the authentication of the divine in the human. (158)

It is worthwhile to note that this concept of a sacrament is more anthropological or philosophical than theological. It is primarily related to the human experience. Therefore, in the primeval form, sacraments are not the ritual expression of some religious groups; on the contrary, they emerge from men’s everyday experiences, like the meal, as we have already seen.

Given these preliminary remarks, we have to look at the following questions: “What is distinctive about Christianity? What is special about it in a world that at one time was influenced everywhere by the sacramental idea?” (160).

The Christian Novelty

In the recent history of theology, various currents of thought disagree on the place of Christianity vis-à-vis world religions. One current stresses the absolute discontinuity between them. It underlines the strong contraposition between religion and faith. Religion is seen as a human movement toward the Absolute whereas faith is deemed specific to the Christian revelation, which brings a radical novelty. Christianity is not a religion among others; it is instead a faith, the true faith. The opposing current, by contrast, sees a complete continuity between Christianity and the history of religions.

As we have seen in the previous pages, Ratzinger is not a supporter of the discontinuity theory. He sees a strict continuity between the history of religions and the Christian revelation. Christianity enters into human history, including its religious history. At the same time, he distinguishes the Christian faith from the historical expressions of religion, thereby taking his distance from a radical theory of continuity.

Let us follow Ratzinger’s reasoning. He begins the analysis of the concept of Christian sacraments with an excursus on the utilization of the term “sacrament” in the early Church:¹⁷

¹⁷ Ratzinger deepened this theme in his 1979 essay titled “On the Concept of Sacrament.”

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Sacraments were understood to include historical events, words of Holy Scripture, realities of Christian worship that have a transparency to the salvific act of Jesus Christ and, thus, make the eternal shine through the temporal, indeed, cause it to become present as the truly fundamental reality. (“The Sacramental” 160)

He takes some examples from the Church Fathers: according to their understanding, a sacrament could include the great deluge described in the *Book of Genesis*, to the extent that it is a prefiguration of Christ’s death and resurrection. These sacraments present “various similarities with the general ‘anthropological’ idea of the sacrament, but we can also clearly recognize already traces of what is distinctively Christian” (161). What is then specific to Christianity? According to Ratzinger, it is

the clarification of the concept of God: who God is no longer remains in dark secrecy; no more does he appear as the unfathomable mystery of the cosmos in general, but, instead, he appears as the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob;¹⁸ more precisely, as the God of Jesus Christ.¹⁹ (“The Sacramental” 161)

The eternal God became a God of history. In the definitive self-revelation in Christ that accomplishes all previous revelations, especially that of the Old Testament, God

is here for men and is defined precisely by his being with people. In a word: he appears as the personal God who is knowledge and love and who therefore is word and love with respect to us. Word that calls us, and the love that unites us. (161)

Here, Ratzinger concisely summarizes the core of the Biblical revelation: by affirming that God “is word and love” he points out the specificity of the Christian divinity revealed in Jesus Christ. Such a God, on the one hand, is not an impersonal entity, like a cosmic energy: he is word and knowledge, for there is a real communication between God and people. On the other hand, the historical entry of God into the world explicitly showed his plan of love for humankind. As we will see in discussing the Eucharist, love is the core concept of Christian revelation. Here lies the discontinuity—or, better, the radical novelty—of the

¹⁸ See Ratzinger, “The Spirit of the Liturgy” 12-19.

¹⁹ See also Ratzinger, *The God of Jesus Christ*.

Christian faith compared with other world religions.

Furthermore, we can find Christ's permanence in the history of the Church founded by him, in which the sacraments are specific acts that perpetuate the mission of Christ among humankind: forgiving sins, healing the sick, driving out demons, sharing his life with people, and sacrificing it for their salvation, as recounted in the New Testament. Cooke summarizes this concept very well: "Sacraments are specially significant realities that are meant to transform the reality of 'the human' by somehow bringing persons into closer contact with the saving action of Jesus Christ" (8).

Christian sacraments, therefore, are not only a particular expression of the world's sacramental aspect, as is claimed in some theories of continuity.²⁰ On the contrary, through the sacraments people can participate in the Creator's immersion in history. In this world, the Creator always uses various means to speak; nevertheless, in Jesus Christ, he has spoken uniquely.

Sacraments as the World's and Man's Interpretation

Here we come back, enriched by these developments, to our starting point, which concerns a particular mindset derived from a sacramental vision: the

Christian concept of sacrament [includes] an interpretation of the world, of man, and of God that is convinced of the fact that things are not just things and material for our labor; rather, they are at the same time signs pointing beyond themselves of that divine love toward which they become transparent for someone who has sight. (Ratzinger, "The Sacramental" 161)

Regarding the interpretation of the world, Ratzinger gives the example of water. The formula H₂O describes the chemical structure of this compound. However, water presents many other meanings: for thirsty people in the desert, it represents a source of life; in the mighty waves of a river brightened by the sun, one can experience the glory and the might of God as creator; and in the majesty of the sea as it glimmers, there is something of the mystery designated by the word *eternity*. According to a symbolic vision, these meanings are not *given* by the subject to reality. On the contrary, they belong to the reality in itself, which, interacting with a particular subject, *reveals* its features. It is God himself who

²⁰ This is, in our opinion, a problem in Browning and Reed's position. Statements like "sanctifying grace and divine life are present everywhere" and "the sacraments are symbolic manifestations of the liturgy of the world" (11) reveal a sacramental vision tending toward an overly radical theory of continuity which risks denying the particularity of the Christian revelation.

speaks *through* and *in* the things. The material component of things is only a part of their definition: “Things are more than things” (Ratzinger, “The Sacramental” 161). The chemical and physical properties do not exhaust the meaning of a thing, “because then another whole dimension of their reality still eludes one: their transparency toward the creative power of the God from which they come and toward which they try to lead” (161-62). According to the symbolic vision, “the dimension of the eternal . . . is perceptible and present in the midst of the temporal” (162).

Man’s conception is related to such a worldview:

Just as things are not merely things, material for human labor, so man is not merely a functionary who manipulates things; rather, [he is] someone called by God and to God. Only the call of the eternal constitutes man as man. (162)

Ratzinger, then, links his discourse to the classical terminology, according to which a person is *capax Dei*, capable of knowing God (*Catechism* 31-35). A person, by nature, can get in touch with the eternal: “What theology tries to designate with the term ‘soul’ is of course nothing other than the fact that the man is known and loved by God in another way than all the other beings below him” (Ratzinger, “The Sacramental” 162). This unique relationship with the eternal offers an unlimited perspective on a person’s existence: “This sort of staying in God’s memory is what makes man live forever—for God’s memory never ends” (162). And again: the “sacramental communication with the eternal establishes man himself” (162).

Sacraments as the Historical Fulfillment of Humanity’s Existence

We can now understand the connection between the anthropological discourse and the specificity of the Christian understanding of sacraments. If, as we have seen, it is the particular communication with the eternal that distinguishes human nature, then the sacraments are the main road through which this communication takes shape. Compared with the creation sacraments, Christian sacraments belong to the natural level and the historical one: “The Christian sacraments mean not only insertion into the God-permeated cosmos . . . [;] they mean at the same time insertion into the history that originates in Christ” (Ratzinger, “The Sacramental” 162).

We can consider the Christian sacraments’ twofoldness: continuity or similarity with the natural level and, at the same time, discontinuity or novelty. As we have already dealt with the first aspect, let us deepen the second. We have said that the element of novelty of the Christian sacraments is a historical one.

According to Ratzinger, this “historical dimension represents the distinctively Christian transformation of the sacramental idea” (162). Furthermore, the Christian historical comprehension of the embodied mystery is

the real stumbling block for contemporary man, who at any event is still ready to attribute some divine mystery to the cosmos but is not quite capable of seeing how the fortuitousness of a series of historical events could possibly contain the decisive factor of his human destiny. (163)

Connecting this concept to the sacraments, we can observe that mystery and history are so deeply interlaced in man that “it is precisely his *essence* to be *historical*. . . . What is seemingly fortuitous in history is the essential thing for man” (163). As Ratzinger stated at the beginning of his essay, “God encounters man in a human way” (158), which can be reformulated as “God encounters man in a historical way,” for human and historical are synonymous. This is the meaning of the Christian sacraments, which are “none other than the insertion of man into the historical context that comes from Christ” (163), creating in the faith a unity with God “that is his eternal future” (163). Therefore, history ceases to be an obstacle to people’s relationship with the eternal and the spiritual. On the contrary, through God’s Incarnation, history became the concrete place where a person can encounter the Absolute, the Mystery.

Ratzinger deepens these two dimensions of the Christian sacraments related to human existence: “First of all, they express the vertical dimension of human existence. . . . But they also point beyond that to the horizontal dimension of the history” (163-64). Vertical and horizontal, spiritual and material, eternal and temporal, God and humankind find, in the Christian sacraments, the highest degree of intimacy. The insertion of God into history sets people free from the slavery of matter but, at the same time, respects his nature as a finite and historical being. It is the marvelous mystery of the Incarnation expressed by the sacraments:

God’s eternal love . . . has fit himself into this horizontal dimension and thereby has broken into his prison: the chain of the horizontal that binds man has become in Christ the guide rope that pulls us to the shore of God’s eternity. (164)

Eucharist: Sacrifice and Meal

Given these anthropological and theological contexts of the sacraments, we can better understand the relationship between meal and Eucharist.

As recounted in the New Testament (Mt. 26.26-29; Mk. 14.22-25; Lk. 22.15-20; 1 Cor. 11.23-25), Jesus instituted this sacrament just before his passion and death during the Last Supper eaten with his twelve apostles. The context of this supper was that of the celebration of the Jewish Passover, an annual memorial of their ancestors' liberation from Egypt by God and the establishment of the Covenant at Mount Sinai with the gift of the Law, as described in the Book of Exodus. During the Last Supper, Jesus instituted a New Covenant with his disciples, who represented Israel's newly redeemed people.²¹

Jesus utilized the unleavened bread and the wine as instruments of that covenant's renewal. The first was directly related to the Jewish unleavened bread traditionally used during the Passover vigil. The Feast of Unleavened Bread is celebrated annually just before the Feast of Passover. Nevertheless, according to Jesus's "Bread of Life" discourse, as recounted in the Gospel of John (6.26-59),²² it was also related to the biblical manna, a kind of bread provided by God to the people of Israel during its journey of forty years in the desert before reaching the Promised Land (Ex. 16.14-18). According to John, Jesus related God's gift of manna to his coming sacrifice for the people.²³ The new gift now is the body, the flesh of Jesus himself. In this discourse, Jesus employed the verb *to eat* many times, and did not use it in a merely symbolic way. On the contrary, his insistence on this action's literal meaning scandalized those listening and provoked their leaving.²⁴

Jesus's gift of his flesh is the gift of his person. Here lies the relationship between bread and wine in the Eucharist. Both are related to Jesus's sacrifice on the Cross. Whereas the first represents Jesus's body, the latter represents his blood. The blood, in the context of the Jewish Passover, is that of the sacrificial lamb. As recounted in Exodus (12.1-13), people had to put some lamb's blood on their household's main door as a sign of the special bond between God and his people. During the Passover celebration, the Hebrews had to eat the meat of the sacrificial lamb.²⁵ Regarding the sacrificial Lamb's eucharistic meaning, Roch Kereszty affirms:

²¹ On the institution accounts of the Eucharist in the New Testament, see, for instance, Kereszty (19-37).

²² For a clear exposition of the Eucharistic theology in John's Gospel, see Kereszty 51-63. The author affirms: "The Gospel of John does not directly speak about the bread and wine of the eucharistic celebration, let alone their transformation. Instead, it stresses that Jesus himself is the Bread of Life; his flesh and blood, that is, his sacrificed and glorified humanity, are true food and drink for us" (61).

²³ On manna, Eucharist, and theology of food, see Méndez-Montoya 122-42.

²⁴ The Gospel of John concludes the "Bread of Life" discourse with the following remark: "As a result of this many of His disciples left, and would no longer walk with Him" (6.66).

²⁵ On the sacrifice in the Old Testament, see, for instance, Kereszty 8-14. See also Cooke 104-09.

The Passover highlights the Eucharist as liberation from sin through the sacrifice of the true Passover Lamb, the innocent Servant, who takes upon himself the guilt of us all. In his own blood the beloved Son and Servant fulfills the Sinai Covenant and thereby concludes a new and eternal covenant with humankind, creating a new and unbreakable intimacy of life. Yet from the Old Testament perspective this ultimate depth of the Eucharist remains hidden. (13)

As we have seen in this succinct exposition, the Eucharist is closely related to Christ's passion and death. "This is my body; this is my blood": such expressions represent at first the sacrificial dimension of the sacrament of the Eucharist. The effect of Jesus's sacrifice is the redemption of the sinners, and, for this reason, it belongs to the biblical category of vicarious or substitutionary atonement: Jesus died not only for others but instead of others, as a substitute. The others—sinful humankind—were guilty; Jesus was innocent, but he paid for the others' sins.

Moreover, because Christ made his vicarious sacrifice voluntarily and consciously, it belongs to the love category. Hence, love is the key word that relates sacrifice and meal in the sacrament of the Eucharist (also called the sacrament of love). Méndez-Montoya writes:

Following from the logic of God's self-emptying love or kenotic sharing, the Incarnation [and we can add the Cross] can be seen as a material continuation of . . . [the] cosmic, eucharistic banquet. That is, God initiates a radical self-giving by becoming food itself, incorporating—and thus transfiguring—humanity into Christ's body. And further, through this self-giving, humanity is brought into the divine, Trinitarian community. (3)

This sacrifice of love is the most profound sign of God's friendship, communion, and spousal union with us, which finds an eminently fitting expression in eating and drinking.²⁶

²⁶ Cooke links the Eucharist's symbolism not only to the bridal union, but also to the parental act of feeding children: "He [Jesus] took the giving of the food, which is the most basic action of how parents (beginning with a mother nursing her baby) manifest their concern for their children, and he united its symbolism with that of the gift of the body in marital intercourse" (95). Méndez-Montoya also draws a parallel between the act of eating the Eucharist, which brings life and union with God, with eating the forbidden fruit of Eden by Adam and Eve, which brought death and separation from God: "Through eating in the Eucharist, unity with God is restored, and a promise of resurrected life is opened up. . . . In the eucharistic feast, death is therefore not the end of the eater, but a promise of reintegration into the resurrected life of Christ" (109).

Deepening this perspective, we may note that Jesus often utilized the banquet metaphor—and particularly the wedding feast—to describe the eternal communion with his disciples in heaven. Images of the eschatological banquet and the God-people marital relationship are present in many books of the Bible, especially in the Prophets, all the way to the Apocalypse. The human experience of a feast seems to be the most emblematic image of communion and joy in paradise as it appears in the Bible. This is the eschatological aspect of the Eucharist, as an anticipation of the eternal supper. During the Last Supper and just after the institution of the Eucharist, Jesus said to his disciples: “I say to you, I will not drink of this fruit of the vine from now on until that day when I drink it new with you in my Father’s kingdom” (Mt. 26.29). The perfect unity between God, humankind, and the world, at last, will be finally reached.

We may incidentally remark that such an eschatological tension, instead of projecting all expectations unto a distant future, brings joy and strength into the present life, as noticed by Kereszty:

The joy of the eucharistic meal derives primarily not from the good feeling of human fellowship, but from the anticipation of the eschatological meal. It is a joy that may coexist with a bad mood and personal frustrations because it is a joy that springs from our sharing in the Cross of Christ. (238-39)

Méndez-Montoya also underlines joy and gratitude, linking the etymological Greek meaning of *Eucharist* to the reception of the sacrament:

The divine gift . . . allows the transformation of the recipient. In fact, the recipient becomes fully himself or herself in this act of reception. For this reason, reception is also an expression of gratitude (*eucharistos*) for this divine gift. . . . The partaker becomes eucharistic. The self is a joyful expression of thanksgiving for becoming the recipient of such a divine gift. (145-46)

In summary, the Eucharist presents a twofold meaning: that of sacrifice and that of communion—both well expressed through the form of the meal. Both are a sign of God’s bridal union with the people that reach its highest level in his self-donation: “God becomes food and drink, so that God can be a part of the partaker’s body, and, even more, so that humanity can become part of God’s own body” (Méndez-Montoya 109).

Conclusion

As we saw throughout the present article, human existence contains two components: historical-horizontal and transcendental-vertical. Both are essential. The misunderstanding of the Christian sacraments nowadays is the fruit, according to Ratzinger, of a “twofold anthropological error” (“The Sacramental” 165).

Firstly, the idealistic error underlines only the second aspect, in favor of an “idealistic misreading of the human nature” (165). The philosophical idealism is at odds with the symbolic-sacramental conception of reality because it does not conceive of a communion between spirit and matter. It is affected by a radical dualism that leads to denying the matter in order to emphasize the spirit. Such a worldview confines God to a dimension inaccessible to the people. Ratzinger writes:

His [man’s] relationship to God, if it is to be a human relationship to God, must be just as man is: corporeal, fraternal, and historical. Or there is no such thing. The error of the anti-sacramental idealism consists in the fact that it wants to make man into a pure spirit in God’s sight. Instead of a man, the only thing remaining is a ghost that does not exist. (“The Sacramental” 166)

The dualistic mindset of the idealistic position is also present in the second error, that of materialism. Referring to Heidegger’s critique, Ratzinger explains that materialism consists “not really in the fact that it interprets all being as matter but, rather in the fact that it classifies all matter as mere material for human labor” (166). All is material for human labor, and man is reduced to a *homo faber*, a manipulator of things,

who does not deal with things in themselves but considers them only as functions of work, whose functionary he himself has become. With that, the symbolic perspective and man’s ability to see the eternal fall by the wayside; he is now imprisoned in his world of work. (166)

There is no place for transcendence in such a vision. Human life, too, has no other horizon than working without a more in-depth perspective.

Only a symbolic or sacramental view fully considers the twofold dimensions of human nature. We are both spirit and matter, or, better, we consist of the mutual interdependence of spirit and matter. On the one hand, the spirit needs matter to express itself, just like the thought needs a voice; on the other hand, the matter

needs the spirit to find a meaning that transcends itself. Therefore, human experience is always a cooperation of spirit and matter.

According to such a perspective, a meal, for example, is radically different from the animal act of ingesting food. Even though the exterior action may appear similar, the former belongs to another order because it is a human action. Throughout human history, food has become a meal, in its various forms adopted by world cultures.

Following this logic, we can affirm that Christian sacraments are the highest point of the cooperation between the divine and the material in human history. Because of the Incarnation of God in Jesus Christ, the God-man, they are not a kind of magic, nor a “naïve notion that the omnipresent God would dwell only in this precise place that is designated by the tabernacle in the church” (Ratzinger, “The Sacramental” 166-67). The specific feature of a sacrament “is not the presence of God in general but rather the presence of the man Jesus Christ, which points to the horizontal, historically-bound character of man’s encounter with God” (167). We can infer that God is greater than a single sacrament; however, he is present in each of them. The sacraments are necessary for us because of our nature. God does not need to express himself through material forms, but we need to be reached by him and through them. Therefore, God employs material ways to speak with us. Using Ratzinger’s words, a person “can encounter God only in a human way; but in a human way means: in the form of fraternal solidarity, corporeality, and historicity” (167).

In a sacramental vision of human existence, the Eucharist represents the most profound expression of God’s spousal love for us. The human experiences of meal and sacrifice²⁷ converge in Christ’s Cross. As Méndez-Montoya notes, “From a Christian—and mainly Catholic—perspective, food matters, so much so that God becomes food, our daily bread” (3). The Eucharist’s mysterious realism shows us how the divine can be concrete, historical, and material. At the same time, it shows us how all materiality and history can be sanctified, that is, according to the Latin etymology, *sacrificed*, made holy. Affirms Méndez-Montoya:

The kenosis of the eucharistic gift is a self-immersion of Christ with the Holy Spirit into finite humanity and materiality. In the Eucharist, divinity takes the risk of becoming food because of a desire to indwell (or abide) in the beloved, just as food becomes a part of the eater. But in this kenotic giving there is not

²⁷ For an essential exposition of sacrifice in the history of religions, see, for instance, Kereszty 2-7. He maintains that “the Eucharist responds to a widespread religious awareness . . . [and] that human beings should return to the Divine symbols of their lives” (6).

only a self-immersion of the supernatural in the natural. . . . [It] allows the elevation of the human condition to the supernatural: a tendency or forward direction toward a deeper reality or intimacy with God as in the beatific vision and the final destination and eschaton. (144)

In conclusion, sacramental life is an invitation for humankind to cultivate and accomplish a living and historical relationship with God, a God who showed himself to us in the person of Jesus Christ. Affirms Ratzinger:

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This is the purpose of our going to the church at all: so that I in an orderly fashion may take my place in God's history with men—the only setting in which I as a man have my true human existence and which alone therefore also opens up for me the true space of my encounter with God's eternal love. (“The Sacramental” 168)

Kereszty also underlines such pastoral implications: “After all, *it is in the eucharistic celebration that . . . our encounter with the word of God leads naturally to a full, personal, bodily communion with him in the Eucharist*” (237). Hence, participating in the sacraments is not a question of respecting ecclesiastical rules; instead, it is a way to fulfill a Christian life, in all its aspects, through the gift of God's friendship. We can conclude by affirming that in the sacraments, finally, “the open question of being human arrives at its goal and comes to its fulfillment” (Ratzinger, “The Sacramental” 168), for “humanness is transformed in sacrament” (Cooke 11-12).

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