

Why Sacred Mysteries: The Sacraments and Why We Practice Them

Week One Handout

I. Sacraments—What are they?

A. Latin word Sacraments “to consecrate”, “to make holy”; Greek word: mystery “early 14c., in a theological sense, "religious truth via divine revelation, hidden spiritual significance, mystical truth," from Anglo-Fr. **misterie* (O.Fr. *mistere*), from L. *mysterium*, from Gk. *mysterion* (usually in pl. *mysteria*) "secret rite or doctrine," from *mystes* "one who has been initiated," from *myein* "to close, shut," perhaps referring to the lips (in secrecy) or to the eyes (only initiates were allowed to see the sacred rites). The Greek word was used in Septuagint for "secret counsel of God," translated in Vulgate as *sacramentum*. Non-theological use in English, "a hidden or secret thing," is from late 14c. In reference to the ancient rites of Greece, Egypt, etc. it is attested from 1640s. Meaning "detective story" first recorded in English 1908.

Mystery—the saving work of God in general (1 Timothy 3:16), Luther: in Scripture the one sacrament is Christ. Romans 16:25-27, Ephesians 5:32, Colossians 1:24-27

B. Tertullian (early 3rd century): first Latin writer to use the word *sacramentum* to translate the Greek mystery; also uses it in the plural

C. Augustine (early 5th century): "visible forms of invisible grace"; relations between signs and the signified, the sacraments as signs that point to God. A sacrament is a sign "Signs, when applied to divine things, are called sacraments". Relationship between sign and signified; the sacraments evoke or enable what they signify, that is, grace, rather than just signifying grace.

D. Medieval development:

1. Four components: Hugh of St. Victor (1096-1141)

- a. a physical or material element
- b. a "likeness" to the thing represented
- c. authorization (by God or Christ) to represented the thing signified
- d. they are efficacious. "the sacraments of the Old Covenant signified spiritual realities, while the sacraments of the New Covenant actualized them."; a sacrament is not a mere sign.

2. Peter the Lombard (1096-1160) omitted the physical or material element, enabling the definition to fit the seven sacraments of the Catholic church. "Sacraments were instituted for the sake of sanctifying as well as of signifying. . . Those things which were instituted for the purpose of signifying alone are nothing more than signs, and are not sacraments"

3. The Fourth Lateran Council (1215): Finalizing the seven sacramental system in the West

E. Martin Luther: a sacrament has three things: 1) a physical sign, 2) the divine promise, and 3) authorized and instituted by Jesus Christ. "Baptism is not simple water only, but water included in God's command and connected with God's Word.

F. Zwingli, Calvin, and other Protestant denominations: these are only ordinances or signs, they do not convey grace or are efficacious