

From the desk of Fr. Jim

On the Foundation of the Sacramental Life

Part 3: Creation, Redemption, Word and Sacrament

In the active soil of North Texas, we know what Jesus' parable means about building our house on rock. The "foundational elements" have to be securely protected or the framework will be damaged or lost. So, we need to be sure we understand the relationship of Word and Sacrament.

"Word" is not merely the Bible, and the Sacraments are not merely superficial ceremonials that bring about no change. The "Word" is God's Word, and it is therefore one that involves motion. Specifically, God's Word is creative. It involves bringing about change. It is the work of creation.

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things came to be through him, and without him nothing came to be.

(John 1:1-3)

God's work of creation is not like other works. It continues in the redemption brought about by Jesus Christ. In a very literal sense, the building of the universe, which reaches a crescendo in the creation of man and woman, includes the cross. The sin of Adam and Eve immediately turns the gaze of the universe toward Calvary. Here the wound caused by sin is to be healed by the sacrificial love of God. The Word who made all things, who is Jesus, lays down his life for the salvation of the creation he loves.

All this is to show that the object of the Word of God is not merely to inform. It is to accomplish our salvation. Necessarily however, we could easily be confused about this simply because the spoken or written word seems to be limited to providing information. How can the word do something? We can read a story that moves us, or find essential directions to escape some sort of calamity, or find a hidden treasure! But the action that is required in order to accomplish any of these is ours. This is different with God's Word. It is He who acts.

Here is really the first essential thing that we need to incorporate carefully into all of our thinking about the Sacraments ... and about God's Word. For example, God speaks Words of forgiveness and life. This is, of course not theoretical or merely information about what God is willing to do. Imagine, for example, that as you go visit grandparents for Thanksgiving, all is ready for the family meal. Grandpa comes to announce, "Let's eat!" But, nothing happens. There is no food, perhaps no table. It would be more than a little odd. When God says, "I adopt you as my child." (Baptism), "I forgive you." (Reconciliation), "Do this in remembrance of me." (The Mass) it happens! The Word is made effective in the Sacraments.

Perhaps we can see how dangerous was the result of the Reformation, when Word and Sacrament were divided, or Sacraments thrown out entirely. In response to such violence to the very heart of the Church's life, the Word might have been demeaned as no longer important, with the result that the origin of the power of the sacraments

might have been forgotten. It is not by man's hand that God acts, but through his hands, by the power of the Holy Spirit.

For the sacrament is not perfected by the righteousness of the minister or of the recipient ... but by the power of God.

(St. Thomas Aquinas, Summa, III, 68, 8, 4)

Certainly, the whole Christian Religion is about change. It is about cooperating with God's grace given to us by the Church, moving toward the life of God. So, the Sacraments are necessarily about such a change. We will begin next time seeing how each of the Sacraments assist us in our conversion.