

# White Robed Monks of St. Benedict



## ***Sacraments and the Sacrament of Marriage: An Overview***

(from "Catholicism," Richard P. McBrien; San Francisco: Harper Collins, 1994)

### Sacramentality

In its classical Augustinian meaning a sacrament is a visible sign of an invisible grace (namely, the divine presence). In his opening address before the second session of the Second Vatican Council in 1962, Pope Paul VI provided a more contemporary definition: "a reality imbued with the hidden presence of God." A sacramental perspective is one that "sees" the divine in the human, the infinite in the finite, the spiritual in the material, transcendent in the immanent, the eternal in the historical. For Catholicism, therefore, all reality is sacred. ....

The Catholic sacramental vision "sees" God in all things (St. Ignatius Loyola): other people, communities, movements, events, places, objects, the environment, the world at large, the whole cosmos. The visible, the tangible, the finite, the historical — all these are actual or potential carriers of the divine presence. Indeed, for Catholicism it is only in and through these material realities that we can encounter the invisible God. The great sacrament of our encounter with God, and of God's encounter with us, is Jesus Christ. The Church, in turn, is the fundamental sacrament of our encounter with Christ, and of Christ with us. And the sacraments, in turn, are the signs and instruments by which the ecclesial encounter with Christ is expressed, celebrated, and made effective for the glory of God and the salvation of all. (pp 9-10)

### The Sacraments in General

Of course, the sacraments and sacramental theology are at the same time closely connected with Christology, with which they have usually been linked in the past. It is Christ who is encountered in the sacraments. It is Christ who acts in the sacraments. It is Christ's worship of the Father that is expressed in the sacraments. Indeed, the seven sacraments find their fullest expression and even definition only in him: He is the baptized and the confirmed one; he is the really present one; he is the priest; he is the

lover; he is the healer. Thus, it is not as if Jesus Christ is another sacrament alongside the seven sacraments. He is the sacrament; the seven sacraments are manifestations of his presence and saving activity on our behalf. (p. 789)

#### The Sacraments of Vocation and Commitment: Matrimony and Holy Order (Vatican II)

As happened with so many other theological and pastoral questions, the Catholic Church's perspective on marriage was significantly modified by the Second Vatican Council. In contrast with previous official pronouncements and conventional theological and canonical insights, the council adopts a remarkably personalistic standpoint. It no longer uses the traditional term contract to describe the marriage bond. Instead, the council speaks of the "marriage covenant" which is sealed by an "irrevocable personal consent" (Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World, n. 48).

Second, neither does the council continue to employ the old distinction between primary and secondary ends in which the begetting of children is always more important than the mutual love of (two people). "Hence, while not making the other ends of marriage of less value, the true practice of conjugal love, and the whole nature of family life resulting from it, tend to dispose the spouses to cooperate courageously with the love of the creator and Savior who through them day by day expands and enriches His own family" (n. 50, italics McBrien's).

Third, the sacrament of marriage is not something added to the marriage union established through mutual human love. "Authentic married love is taken up into divine love and is ruled and enriched by the redemptive power of Christ and the salvific action of the Church ..." (n. 48). This new emphasis in the theology of marriage is consistent with the claims of contemporary sociology that this is the first age in which people marry and remain in marriage because they love each other. And so there is this stress on the mutual exchange of love constituting the sacrament of marriage, on married love as the source of the institution of marriage, on the need for growth in this love to bring the sacrament to its full realization, and on the need for the Church constantly to bring forth the witness value of this sacrament to the whole community of faith. As (two people) are called to be faithful, generous, and gracious to each other in fulfillment of their marriage covenant, so is the whole Church called to be faithful to its covenant with God in Christ. ...

Fourth, the council emphasizes the necessity of a faith commitment for the sacrament of marriage (see Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy, n. 59). Marriage is not just a ceremony by which two people are legally bound together. As a sacrament, it is an act of worship, and expression of faith, a sign of the Church's unity, a mode of Christ's presence. ....

Fifth, the full consummation of marriage is more than a biological act. The old theology and the old canon law asserted that a marriage between two baptized Christians, once performed according to the rite of the Church (*ratum*) and once consummated by a single act of physical union (*consummatum*), can never be dissolved, not even by the pope. But according to the council, the expression of the mutual love which is at the heart of the sacrament consists of more than biological union. "It involves the good of

the whole person. Therefore it can enrich the expressions of body and mind with a unique dignity, ennobling these expressions as special ingredients and signs of friendship distinctive of marriage.... Such love pervades the whole of (the spouses') lives" (n. 49...)

Finally, the broader ecclesial dimension of the sacrament is maintained. "Christian spouses, in virtue of the sacrament of matrimony, signify and share in the mystery of that union and fruitful love which exists between Christ and the Church (see Ephesians 5:32)" (Dogmatic Constitution on the Church, n. 11). (pp. 856-858)

Hence, in summary:

1. For Catholicism, therefore, all reality is sacred.
2. For Catholicism it is only in and through material realities that we can encounter the invisible God.
3. The sacraments are the signs and instruments by which the ecclesial encounter with Christ is expressed, celebrated, and made effective for the glory of God and the salvation of all.
4. It is Christ's worship of the Father that is expressed in the sacraments.
5. In the sacrament of Marriage, Christ is the lover.
6. The "marriage covenant" is sealed by an "irrevocable personal consent."
7. The elemental practice of marriage is the true practice of conjugal love.
8. The mutual exchange of love constitutes the sacrament of marriage, married love being the source of the institution of marriage.
9. The expression of the mutual love which is at the heart of the sacrament consists of more than biological union. "It involves the good of the whole person. Therefore it can enrich the expressions of body and mind with a unique dignity, ennobling these expressions as special ingredients and signs of friendship distinctive of marriage.... Such love pervades the whole of (the spouses') lives."