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The Sacramental Principle.[1]

By the Rev. A. R. WHATELY, D.D.

THE idea of the solidarity of religions is one to which we are becoming to-day more and more accustomed. And therefore it does not in the least surprise us, or cause us misgiving, when we find that our Christian Sacraments have their counterparts in the religious practices of non-Christian peoples. We are satisfied that these strong analogies in doctrine and practice in no way militate against the claim of Christianity to be the absolute religion.

But wherein, precisely, does this absoluteness consist? Not only in the fact that all the various partial and obscured truths converge towards a central Truth, recognized by our souls as the final answer to their deepest appeal. Our acceptance of Christianity as *our* religion means that we accept its *specific* affirmations. The truth we recognize in other religions is not, for us, particularized. The incarnations of Vishnu do not, as specific events, belong to our creed; while yet we may see in this belief some little inkling of a truth realized in Christ. That is the essential difference between the justice we do to other faiths and our acceptance of one faith as *ours*.

1. Here, then, we have the first of the elements into which I would endeavour to analyse the Sacramental Principle—namely, *Particularization*. We appreciate the significance of the eating of the dough image, wherein the worshippers of some cereal goddess seek to participate in her life and essence. But those who eat the image, eat it not because of its general significance, but because of its particular significance. And so with our corresponding Sacrament. (We will keep this Sacrament chiefly in view throughout, as the more conveniently representative.) The Lord's Supper is for us, under right conditions, the

[1] The substance of an address delivered at a meeting of the Society for the Study of English Church Doctrine, at Cambridge, January 30, 1911.

partaking of the redemptive grace of Jesus Christ. It links us historically with Him. In the mystic experience of communion, history contracts itself till the past touches the present. We rise in spirit above the particular celebration, to join, as it were, the one continuous rite binding up the centuries around the Cross.

Dorner thinks that the first disciples were outside the need of baptism because their association with Christ in the flesh answered to baptism and rendered it superfluous. I think this is true, and that it helps us to understand the significance of the Sacraments. They preserve for us that necessary *visible focus* which our Lord Himself supplied in His own Person before His Ascension. This leads to our second point.

2. Consider how dependent we are upon our senses, even when our thoughts have risen to the most spiritual, or to the most abstract, regions. Not, of course, always upon their immediate use, but upon the memory-images in which their impressions are preserved. We are all, I suppose, more or less conscious that when we think of classes of objects we vaguely envisage a representative member of each class; and not only so, but that, underlying all our thinking, there is a ground-work of very vague and elusive material symbolism—far more, no doubt, than we should at first suppose, for it so escapes us when we turn our reflection upon it.

Now, the Sacraments mean *Symbolism*, a symbolism whereby we lay hold of the spiritual Reality. It is true that as symbolic *representations* they do but faintly picture for us the facts that lie behind them. But that does not matter. The importance of the material symbol lies not in how it depicts but in what it means—what it stands for. There is a whole theology behind our Sacraments, and presupposed in our use of them: that theology is not so expressed in them that we could learn it from them alone; but, none the less, given the requisite knowledge, they present to us the "inward and spiritual grace" as an object for our direct appropriation. After all, even in the case of Christ, "the glory as of the only-begotten of the

Father," which men beheld, was not presented merely in what anyone could see and hear of Him. Some spiritual attainment was required, and certainly some spiritual knowledge. But, once accepted, He became the centre and focus for the little group that was the nucleus of His Church.

So the Sacraments provide a material *point d'appui* for the spiritual man whereby he may "touch and handle things unseen"—a visible representation which he recognizes as coming to him, not from his own subjectivity, but from without and above.

This idea of objects which shall present to our senses a practical representation of spiritual blessing, may become clearer to us when we approach the matter from the other side, the side of God. We believe in the Divine omnipresence—not spatial and localized, but of such a character that the whole material universe is the expression of God's active presence. That special material objects should be selected, by an authority we accept as Divine, for a special use, and with a special meaning attached to them, is so direct an application of this broad truth, that we rightly regard the Sacrament as a consecration of all matter and all life.

But, if we call in Transubstantiation or Consubstantiation, a "miracle of Nature" (Martensen), or even some explanations which are not based on these doctrines, this significance of the Sacraments is lost. A miracle of Nature in the Eucharist not only stultifies, but contradicts, this significance. For the consecration of Nature in the Sacrament means that natural objects, without being supernaturalized for the purpose, can, by Divine selection and ordinance, serve as instruments in the economy of grace. The Sacramental Principle, therefore, fails to get its due from extreme Sacramentalism. It is curious to note that Zwingli, who, though he did not, I think—at least through the whole of his career—teach the bare negative doctrine with which his name is associated—was at any rate no Sacramentalist, was decidedly sacramental in his theistic conceptions, and that, in fact, it was just his strong sense of the active omnipresence

of God in material Nature that made him unwilling to specialize the Presence of God in connection with particular objects.

But we may avoid both pitfalls by explaining the Sacraments on the principle of a Divine selection, which in itself lifts the material objects into the sphere of grace, and endows them with a symbolic character of such a sort that they present the reality symbolized for our direct appropriation through a specific act.

I think that a scrutiny of our Lord's words of institution, in the case of the Holy Communion, when taken in connection with their interpretation by the mind of the Church, indicates this purpose—namely, selection for representative efficacy. "This is My Body" means more than "This typifies My Body." Dr. Illingworth remarks that when we compare it with such an expression as "I am the true Vine," the representative object is commonly regarded as the subject in the one case and the predicate in the other; but that the real analogy would require that "This" correspond to "I," and "the true Vine" to "My Body." If so, our Lord did not say, in effect, "I am like the true Vine," but "I, in the sphere of grace, stand for what the vine is in the sphere of Nature." And so "This is My Body" would mean, not "This is like My Body," but "This stands for, or represents effectually, My Body." The next two points may be touched on briefly.

3. We have, in effect, contrasted the Sacramental principle with the abstract spirituality that would dispense with sensuous presentation. But now, approaching it from a rather different side, we may contrast it with what I may call a merely psychological culture of the spiritual life. The Sacraments point to a *mystical* assimilation of the Divine life—not that mysticism which is the crown of a long process of self-discipline, but the formation and cementing of a mystical union transcending the mere play of our feelings, not to be measured by the emotion which attends it, not evolving from within, but drawing from the infinite Source. Deeply rooted in the heart of man is the sense of this need, the need of *objectivity*. God is objective, but our ideas of Him are subjective, and even His self-revelation

in our hearts needs to be maintained by a continuous appropriation of the Reality that transcends it. And, with all the material provision for our Christian life, it is easy to see that without the Sacraments we should miss just that objective presentation of the object of faith which meets that peculiar need.

4. The Sacraments are *social*. They are the main pillar of corporate Christian life. This is easily seen in the fact that their elements are common objects and that the use of these elements is a public rite.

But there remains, in dealing with the Sacramental Principle, one great question which cannot be passed over, that is the question of the *opus operatum*. It will be well to understand clearly what this doctrine is as taught in the Roman Church; though of course it is taught widely outside that Church. The actual Body and Blood of Christ are necessarily, through Transubstantiation, received by all who receive the elements, but the grace they convey requires conditions, not merely for its ultimate efficacy, but for its actual reception at the time. These conditions are thus explained by Bellarmine:[1] "Voluntas, fides, et pœnitentia in suscipiente adulto necessario requiruntur ut dispositiones ex parte subjecti, non ut causæ activæ, non enim fides et pœnitentia efficiunt gratiam sacramentalem neque dant efficaciam sacramenti, sed solum tollunt obstacula, quæ impedirent, ne sacramenta suam efficaciam exercere possent, unde in pueris, ubi non requiritur dispositio, sine his rebus fit justificatio." Certain conditions are thus required—faith and sincerity, in fact—as passive conditions without which grace could not communicate itself. But let it be noted that faith means simply the acceptance of doctrines, and has not that deep and spiritual signification which we are accustomed to attach to it. And it is merely a *conditio sine qua non*, not an active principle answering, in the spiritual sphere, to the physical acts whereby we avail ourselves of the physical nutriment.

The teaching of the reformed Confessions may be best gathered from the Calvinistic and the Anglican. In the former

[1] See Winer's "Confessions of Christendom," p. 244.

we find emphasis laid on the exhibitive and promissory function of the signs, though how the sign is united with the thing signified, cannot be definitely gathered. In more than one confession, however, the gift is said to be *directly* given in conjunction with the signs ("Vere et efficaciter donare," *Confessio Gallica*).[1] I think it is of some importance to clear our minds on this point. The metaphors of sealing and legal conveyance are only faint and imperfect analogies drawn from human intercourse, and too much has been built upon them in some modern teaching about the Sacraments. To refer here only to the Eucharist, surely the idea of mystical symbols which directly focus, for spiritual reception, the objects of our faith, is a more fruitful one, and does far more justice to our Sacramental experience than these analogies. If the visible and the spiritual sides of the whole transaction are merely parallel, and not, so to speak, interlocked, it is difficult to understand how the rite can be, at the last analysis, anything more than an appeal to the imagination and the emotions.

The statement in our eighteenth Article that "the means whereby the Body of Christ is received and eaten in the Supper is Faith" should not be merely treasured as a polemic against the *opus operatum;* on its positive side it brings out the truth that faith is—in the Sacrament as out of it—a spiritual activity. And here we are in view of one great feature of the reformed Sacramentalism, as against the *opus operatum.* I have suggested that extreme sacramental doctrine does less, not more, than justice to the sacramental conception of life: here we see that, even in respect of the Divine ordinances themselves, it sacrifices a positive feature of great value. That positive feature is the recognition of a spiritual function whereby we can so use material objects as, by means of them, to lay hold directly of the realities they represent. It means the rejection of the fatal distinction between the *res sacramenti* and the *virtus sacramenti.* To receive the *res* is to receive the *virtus,* and just for that very reason it guarantees the *virtus.* Now

[1] Winer, "Confessions of Christendom," pp. 236-237.

the doctrine of the *opus operatum* requires this distinction in order to avoid the most preposterous consequences. But therewith is lost the value of the Sacrament as presenting a gift that not merely is objective, but includes also, in its very definition, subjective renewal. To drive a wedge between the *res* and the *virtus* is to mar the significance of the Sacrament as an entrance of the objective into the innermost circle of subjective religion.

Whatever the reformed doctrine has missed, it has not cut us off from that. And I think it will disclose its fullest resources, if, renouncing the Roman idea of objectivity on the one hand, and all reliance upon mere legal analogies on the other, we listen rather to the witness of our own spiritual instincts and capacities which the Sacrament evokes. It is none the less objective, because, in the long run, it vindicates its reality by the new and specific experiences which it brings to expression in its reception. This is no dependence on emotion: it is simply to use our spiritual faculties, and, in the using of them, to be conscious of them and of the Object upon which they lay hold. The Sacraments do not supersede mysticism, or even merely supplement it: they give it a wider scope and a firmer hold. And, as in all our relations with God, the Reality presented to us is—in a supreme paradox of the Christian life—known as that which passes knowledge, felt as that which transcends feeling, found as that which, in our very finding, has already found and made us its own.