
THE SACRAMENT OF SACRED SCRIPTURE

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The sacraments exist to make contact between men and the Word of God at the point when that Word is pronounced for our salvation: in the man Jesus and in his action redeeming us. Their name, “sacraments,” means “mysteries,” because by them the mystery of the redemption that is in Christ Jesus is accessible to mankind.

Holy Scripture, too, is a kind of sacrament—not one of the seven, of course, yet comparable to them because intended like them to link us with the Word of salvation in the redeeming Christ. That once-spoken Word came from the Father, and with it have come many words to us—like circles spreading out from the Word falling into the sea of mankind, spreading to the beginnings of centuries and the ends. These words are at work for God’s designs, intended to lead men to the center from which they grow, the mystery of salvation which is in Christ. One may say that Scripture is also, in its own way, a sacrament to incorporate us into the redeeming Christ.

From patristic times, theology has seen a real analogy between the two mysteries of Scripture and the incarnation. As Bossuet said: “He [the Word] took a kind of second body, I mean, the Word of his gospel.” Through the action of the Holy Spirit in the Virgin Mary, God’s own thought—his Word—was clothed in human nature, with its imperfections, and dwelt among us. Through another action of the Holy Spirit, in the sacred writers, in the womb of their intellect, God’s thought was introduced into humanity, taking the form of human thought, and again dwelt among us. The Word has put off its glory, taken the form of a servant, and come to dwell among us.

In the office for the Blessed Sacrament, the Church sings her happiness at possessing the incarnate Word in her midst in the Eucharist: “Neither is there, nor has there been, any other nation so great, that hath gods so nigh them, as our God is present to all our petitions.” The words are taken from Deuteronomy, and were used by the Jews to express the pride they felt in having a God who spoke to them, and whose thought and will for them they possessed in the sacred scrolls they carried with them (Deut. 4:7-8). This praise, which we now sing of the incarnation and the Eucharist, was first uttered to glorify Scripture, which was a sort of first incarnation of God’s thought.

The Book of Life

Having sung at length the divine origins of Wisdom and its eternal prerogatives, Sirach concludes: "All these things are the book of life and the [book of the] covenant of the Most High . . . who filleth up Wisdom as the waters of Phison, and as the Tigris in the days of the new fruits" (Sir. 24:3, 9, 22-23). In Scripture God's Wisdom is already incarnate, flowing in the sacred book like a river between its banks. Israel made that divine presence an object of worship. The tables of the Law were placed in the Ark; in the synagogues, the Bible, contained in a cupboard facing the people, was the only object of worship. No one touched it till he had washed his hands, and then with much reverence.

Similarly, there is an intense presence of God in the books of the New Testament, but closer and more evident. Before becoming human in the thoughts and words of men, God's Wisdom, which wrote the New Testament, took human flesh, and it is that incarnate Wisdom—Christ in his glory—who dwells among us in the books of the New Testament. For it is he who is the author of the New Testament. Augustine said: "The members [the apostles] wrote what the Head inspired them to. Christ dictated to them, as to his hands, which of his words and actions he wanted us to know about."

One text in St. John shows us that the opened side of Christ in glory is the source whence the books of the New Testament flow:

If any man thirst, let him come to me, and let him that believeth in me drink. As the Scripture saith: *Out of his belly shall flow rivers of living water.*

From Christ's belly the rivers will flow—we should translate this Hebrew phrase by saying they will flow from Christ's heart. And "this he said of the Spirit which they should receive who believed in him" (John 7:37-39). He said it of the Holy Spirit whose tremendous outpouring in the last days had been spoken of by the prophets. From Christ's sacred Body where the soldier's lance struck him, as from the rock of Sinai, would flow the rivers of the New Testament, all the graces of the kingdom, and also those of Scripture—the graces by which Scripture would be inspired, by which it would be read and understood, by which it would give life to the world. All these rivers will flow from that open side on the day of his redeeming glory. The evangelists came, and each drank from that spring. "He drank the rivers of the gospel from the sacred fount of the Lord's heart," we say of the apostle John in the office for his feast.

Refuge and Communion

The New Testament is not Christ's book because it tells his story. It is his book because it is born out of the wound in his heart, born like a child. Every word of Scripture is a grace of the Spirit of Jesus, a thought of everlasting life which flowed from his heart along with his blood.

With their sure instincts, the saints felt this redeeming presence in the New Testament. St. Ignatius of Antioch wrote: "I take refuge in the gospel as in the flesh of Jesus Christ." St. Ignatius sought his refuge in the gospel, in the revelation of the Christian mystery, for that gospel was like a sacrament of the redeeming Christ—like a field in which, as St. Jerome said, the treasure was hidden, the treasure of Christ himself.

In Christian worship Holy Scripture is forever linked with that supreme sacrament of Christ's body and the redemption, the Eucharist. The same name is used for both: "This chalice," our Lord said, "is the New Testament." This book also we call the New Testament. Chalice and book, each in its own way, contain the new covenant, the mystery of our redemption in Christ. The analogy is tremendous: "I think myself that Christ's Body is [also] his gospel," says St. Jerome, "the bread of Christ and his flesh is the divine Word and heavenly doctrine." The early Church, struck by the resemblance between these two sacraments of Christ's presence, placed together, as on "two tables" side by side, the bread of Christ and the Book, inviting the faithful to sit equally at both, to feed upon their Savior and upon the salvation that was in him.

For, in every form, Christ's presence among men has that same purpose—to create a communion of salvation with men. Scripture too establishes a communion, different from the Eucharist but real nonetheless, a communion of thought between two people who love each other and talk together, one of whom is Christ.

Whenever we read his Scriptures with faith, Christ speaks. It was long ago that he inspired his apostles, and centuries have passed since. But though the human writing of the Book was something that happened in the past, the inspired words still live in the moment when they are spoken by Christ. Augustine says: "This was written for us, and preserved for us; it is recited for us and will also be recited for our descendants, right up to the end of time."

The redeeming action of Christ in glory knows no succession of time. He speaks to the heart of the Church in eternity. The thoughts formulated by the apostles and put into writing at a given moment of history are addressed to the Church of all the ages in an eternal present. Men are coming into existence now, are now reading Christ's word with faith, are hearing Christ speaking to them now.

Because Scripture is an everlasting word, always being said, the epistle to the Hebrews introduces all its quotations from Scripture by saying, “The Holy Spirit saith” or “The Holy Spirit doth testify” (Heb. 3:7; 10:15)—all in the present tense.

Christ speaks to us at this moment, but not like a friend far away communicating by letter (see Acts 17:27; Eph. 3:17). We sit at his feet and listen to him: “The gospel is the very mouth of Christ,” Augustine says, a sacrament of his words to us. There is no human intermediary between his word and our mind; the sound we hear is actually his voice. According to St. Thomas, God has two far from equal ways of teaching us: he speaks through an intermediary in human books of religious instruction, but “he speaks directly to our minds in sacred Scripture.”

This communion with Christ in thought is even closer than that between two people speaking together. When we look for the truth hidden in the text of Scripture, Christ can communicate the meaning of his words directly to our minds. When we hear the words of Scripture, “the Master is in our hearts” and communicates the same understanding of the truths they express that he himself has. He arouses in us his own sentiments: “Let the word of Christ dwell in our hearts in all its riches” (Col. 3:16). It is a wonderful communion of mind and heart—the communion of Mary of Bethany, of the disciples on the road to Emmaus.

‘A Substantial Bread’

This communion, too, is effective, giving eternal life. Of Scripture as of the Eucharist it can be said, *Pinguis est panis*—it is a substantial bread. For Christ lives now only in his redemptive act, given to God for mankind, immortal in his death for them, and forever an instrument of God’s action in raising up to eternal life. Every presence and every action of Christ works redemption. When he appeared in the evening of Easter day, he sent the apostles out to forgive sins. In the same way he made them write the pages of the New Testament—for the remission of sins and the salvation of men.

Scripture bestows a Spirit of life on those who read it with faith: “Was our heart not burning within us, whilst he spoke?” (Luke 24:32); “The Word of God is living and effectual” (Heb. 4:12), the “sword of the Spirit” (Eph. 6:17). If ordinary human words, noble or degraded, can transform a man by their psychological dynamism, how much more must the Word of God penetrate and pierce to the very depths of the soul (see Heb. 4:12).

It is not merely that God’s Word contains the thoughts of Christ, lofty and profound, which can stir up man’s heart. But it is spoken *for me* and *for my salvation*. It is spoken by my Savior, in the grace of the Holy Spirit who flows from his pierced side. The gospel is a sacrament of salvation, in which “the Holy Spirit works in efficacious words.”

The Fathers seem to have been unable to find images strong enough to describe the banquet of redemption offered on the table of Scripture. The gospel, according to St. Jerome, is true food and true drink. Scripture is an ocean of fullness, says St. Ambrose, a cup from which we drink Christ, a cup that is a river whose waves delight the city of God. It is the cure for all our ills: "Take and drink; all sickness of soul finds its remedy in Scripture." The Eucharist, says St. John Chrysostom, makes us as fierce lions in face of the devil. Scripture also, says St. Athanasius, puts our adversary to flight, for "in Scripture the Lord is present, and the demons, who cannot bear his presence, cry: 'I beg you, do not torment us before our time.' They burn simply from seeing the Lord present."

Thus the banquet of Scripture feeds and strengthens just as does the eucharistic banquet of Christ's immolated flesh; and like it, it has its joys, that great comfort which made the Maccabees say, "We needed none of these things, nor any one, having for our comfort the holy books that are in our hands" (1 Macc. 12:9). Scripture and the Eucharist are the life-force and the joy of the Church, because they are for her a communion in the Body given and Blood shed for us. Other than that banquet there exists only what this life can offer us: "We have in this world only this one good thing: to feed upon his flesh and drink his blood, not only in the [eucharistic] sacrament, but in the reading of Scripture."

Despite its own efficaciousness, Scripture does not enter into any kind of competition in our souls with that other sacrament of presence and communion, the Eucharist; it does not supplant it, or make it unnecessary. The central point of Christian worship is the incarnate Word in his eternal sacrifice. It is by the Eucharist that Christ is present to us in the reality of his body, in the reality of his immolation and his glory. So Scripture must collaborate with the sacrament to unite believers with the redeeming Christ.

In the Mass, the Splendor of Scripture

In the Mass, the splendor of Scripture comes to surround the sacred Body of Christ on all sides, as the royal purple of the incarnate Word in his immolation, as the veil of the Holy of Holies in which the eternal sacrifice is offered—a veil which is not there to hide but to reveal the way into the sanctuary. It was in this way, through the veil of the Scriptures, that the world of the Old Testament was brought to Christ.

Many non-Catholic Christians read Scripture more assiduously than many Catholics, but do not feed on the Eucharist. Among a lot of them there is a profound tendency not to accept the incarnation of the Word in its ultimate reality, but to prefer what seems to be a worship of God's transcendence—to prefer at least in practice, the spoken Word to

the personal Word, to remain in the Old Testament, on the threshold of the fullness of the incarnation. Many Catholics have a tremendous devotion to the Eucharist, but neglect Scripture. Many of them, perhaps, do not therefore know the personal Word as well as they might, and are not in the best possible dispositions to receive him in the Eucharist. For the secret of opening one's heart to that one Word is contained most fully in Scripture.