

Christ's eternal fidelity ensures Church's sacramental nature

FAITH SHARING

DAVID DAULT

The subject of this column, the Church as a sacrament, might strike the reader as odd. After all, the Church is not one of the seven sacraments that we normally encounter. These seven – Eucharist, baptism, confirmation, holy orders, anointing of the sick, marriage and reconciliation – all take place within the Church, of course. None of them, however, seem to be interchangeable with the Church itself. Not at first glance, at least.

Our Protestant friends, as well, might politely shake their heads in confusion at the phrase “the Church as sacrament.” Many of our Protestant friends simply do not understand how we could place such value on what, to them, appears to be an earthly and human-made institution.

The Catholic understanding of the sacramental nature of the Church, however, is both biblically based and Christ-centered.

To understand the Church's sacramental nature, we must explore what it means to be “the body of Christ,” and how Christ is present to the Church even to this very day.

In the Gospels, Jesus is asked by the various religious leaders of the day why he and his followers refused to fast. In his reply, Jesus invokes the language of marriage: “Can the wedding guests fast while the bridegroom is with them? As long as they have the bridegroom with them they cannot fast” (Mark 2:19).

By Jesus calling himself the bridegroom, the question naturally follows, who is the bride? Since Jesus had no earthly wife, at least in the usual sense, the question does not have a literal answer.

However, the question of who is Christ's bride does have an answer, and the history of Christian interpretation has firmly held that the bride to whom Jesus referred is understood actually to be the Church itself.

Once we see the Church as Jesus' earthly bride, it is clear from what we have just seen in Scripture that the members of the Church participate in Christ and with Christ in a unique and special relationship, a relationship as unique as that between bride and bridegroom.

As members of the bride of Christ by being members of the Church, we are ourselves transformed by Christ.

How can this be so? Again, the Gospel of Mark offers us Christ's own explanation. Jesus explains there in the Gospel that, in marriage, “a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh” (Mark 10:8). This joining is as much a physical as a mystical union, and, Jesus goes on to say, it is indissoluble. According to Jesus, therefore, the husband and wife are seen, from the standpoint of God, to be one flesh and one body.

The power of Christ's body is a healing power, for both flesh and spirit alike. Think, for example, of another story from Mark's Gospel, the woman who suffered an issue of blood for 12 years (Mark 5:25-34). In this story, the woman is afraid to reveal herself publicly, but instead tries to touch Jesus in secret, by reaching out to brush his garment hem as he passes by. Contact with Jesus, even the briefest touch, carries with it the power and the healing we find in this story. Like he did with the woman, Jesus offers us peace and freedom from our afflictions, through our coming close to his presence.

The Catholic Church has traditionally understood these parts I have outlined above to be one complete whole: “Forming ‘as it were, one mystical person’ with Christ the head, the Church acts in the sacraments as ‘an organically structured priestly community’” (Catechism of the Catholic Church 1119). This community is called by Christ and is formed by Christ, indeed the very Christ who is the heart of all the Church's sacraments.

Thus, as the Catechism goes on to state, “the sacraments are ‘of the Church’ in the double sense that they are ‘by her’ and ‘for her.’ They are ‘by the Church,’ for she is the sacrament of Christ's action at work in her through the mission of the Holy Spirit. They are ‘for the Church’ in the sense that ‘the sacraments make the Church,’ since they manifest and communicate to (people), above all in the Eucharist, the mystery of communion with God who is love, One in three persons” (CCC 1118).

It was Christ himself who established this connection with the Church here on earth, proclaiming

The Tennessee Register is publishing Faith Sharing, a series of articles exploring various elements of our faith. The article, many of them written by faculty and staff at Aquinas College, will follow the general curriculum of the Why Catholic? small faith community and adult formation program. This year, the second of the Why Catholic? program, the articles will examine the Sacraments.

this connection as unique and unbreakable as the marriage bond itself. By joining with Christ as his bride, the Church shares in the one flesh of Christ, and in his healing power.

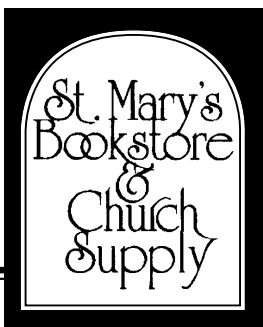
Thus, when we refer to the Church as a sacrament, we cannot help but point to the one true sacrament, the source of all sacramental power: Christ.

One of the most wonderful aspects of participation in the sacramental life of the Church is that we participate with our whole bodies. Speaking the prayers, smelling the incense, tasting the Eucharist and feeling the pressure of the kneelers all form part of the experience of our worship.

Moreover, we proclaim each time we worship, as well, Christ's bodily presence with us in the elements of the Eucharist. Our bodies become one with Christ's body in the body of the Church. This sacramental interaction is embodied in the Church as much as it is embodied in Christ and in us. In our worship, these distinctions both remain and are transcended.

“The body of Christ” is no mere phrase we invoke to bless an ordinary human institution. Instead, by proclaiming the Church to be “the body of Christ,” we echo the blessing Christ gave to his bride on Earth. The Church never possesses this blessing on her own; it is always the gracious gift of our Lord. Christ's eternal fidelity ensures the sacramental nature of the Church, and secures the blessings of his presence for us all.

David Dault is a theologian and professional writer, and is currently Visiting Assistant Professor of Religion at Christian Brothers University in Memphis. ☩



Saintly Celebrations and Holy Holidays



Ideas for Catholic Family Traditions

1909 West End Avenue
Nashville, TN 37203
Call Toll Free 1-800-233-3604
615-329-1835
www.stmarysbookstore.com



*“Keep to the Right”
Bridge to East Nashville*

Historic Nashville Photographs

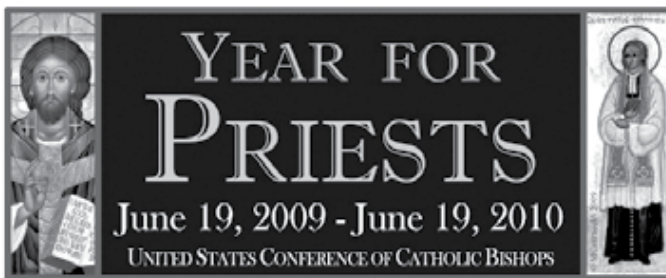
For Office, Home, or Gifts
Photographs available from
The Joe Horton Studio
Historic Nashville Collection

jhortonhistoric@aol.com
joehortonstudio@aol.com

370-4584

Yvonne H. Hobbs
Rebecca A. Horton
by appointment only

Serving Nashville
for over 40 years.



‘A good shepherd, a pastor after God's heart, is the greatest treasure which the good Lord can grant to a parish, and one of the most precious gifts of divine mercy.’

— St. John Vianney