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The Theology of Thomas Aquinas, Selected Topics

April 19, 2009

The Minister of the Sacrament

In a Christian sacrament, at least three parties participate in the rite. The first participant is God, the Holy Trinity. The second participant is the minister, which depending on the sacrament is usually a priest, but in some cases a bishop, deacon, or layman. The third participant is the person receiving the sacrament. Since two of the three participants are fallible human beings, what happens if there is sin, lack of faith, or any other problem with one of them? Is the sacrament still any good? In this paper, I intend to focus on how St. Thomas treats the question of the condition of the minister and how that affects the validity or power of the sacrament. This problem dates back at least to the 4th century Donatist schism, which started when the validity of the consecration of the bishop of Carthage was questioned because the consecrating bishop was accused of having given up the sacred books under persecution.¹ Such questions continue today. Should one doubt the validity of his baptism when scandalous news comes out about the priest who performed it?

Foundational to Thomas' analysis of this question is understanding the cause of the sacrament. There are two ways of causing an effect. The first is by being the principle agent. God alone is the principle cause of the sacramental effect for two reasons. The first is that only God can enter the human soul where the work of the sacrament takes place. The second is that the interior sacramental effect is grace, and Thomas has already established that grace only comes from God.² The second way to cause an effect

¹ Chapman, John. "Donatists." *The Catholic Encyclopedia*. Vol. 5. New York: Robert Appleton Company, 1909. 16 Apr. 2009 <<http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/05121a.htm>>.

² I-II, 112, 1

is instrumentally. The minister of a sacrament is an instrument through which God works to give grace to the recipient. So the power comes from God, through the minister.³

Thomas also distinguishes between two kinds of instrumental causes, united and separate. For example, if I poke a fire with a stick, I am the principle cause, my hand is a united instrumental cause, and the stick is a separate instrumental cause. For the sacraments, Christ's humanity is the united instrumental cause, united to his divinity, which is the principle cause. The actual sacrament is a separate instrumental cause of the grace in the recipient's soul.⁴ Christ, in his humanity, works as an instrument of grace in the sacrament in two ways. The first is as an instrument of merit in his passion, and the second is as an efficient cause through which grace reaches us.⁵ This instrumental role that Christ has in his humanity is also communicated to his ministers, who are members of his body, of which he is the head. Christ as the united instrument lends his power to the minister, who is the separate instrument, in the same way that the hand lends its power to the stick. Only Christ's instrumental power is communicated to human ministers, not his authority as the source of the sacrament. Christ's authority comes from his divinity, and it cannot be communicated to a human minister. Therefore the minister is not the source of the sacrament, but only an instrument.⁶

After establishing the instrumental nature of the minister, Thomas uses this as a basis to determine how the condition of the minister affects the power of the sacrament. When dealing with the question of what happens when a sacrament is performed by an evil minister, Thomas goes back to the principle of the minister as an instrument. An instrument does not act by the power of its "form", whether it is good or bad, but by the

³ III, 64, 1 c

⁴ III, 62, 5 c

⁵ III, 64, 3 c

⁶ III, 64, 4 c

power of the one who moves it. The first example of an instrument that Thomas gives in this case is that of a physician, who uses his body as an instrument of his soul in order to provide healing to the patient. The effectiveness of his healing comes from the knowledge of the medical art in the mind of the physician, not from the health of his body. The other example Thomas gives is of a pipe that carries water, which is just as effective whether it is made of silver or lead.⁷

One of the objections that Thomas addresses in the case of an evil minister is that the power of the minister is derived from Christ, but an evil person has no charity, by which we are united to Christ, so he is cut off from Christ. How can such a man minister the sacrament?⁸ Thomas answers that the person without charity is himself cut off from the life of Christ, meaning that he himself is lifeless, but a man can make use of a lifeless instrument that is not in bodily union with him by means of motion. For example, a workman can move an axe, which is a lifeless instrument, or do something with his hands, which are living instruments united to his body. Similarly, God can accomplish the sacramental effect by moving a lifeless instrument, which is the evil minister.⁹

Does it make a difference whether the minister is good or evil? Yes, it does. Although the goodness of the minister is not essential to the validity of the sacrament, it is not fitting for the minister of a sacrament to be evil.¹⁰ Instead, the minister should be like the Lord whom he represents. It is better that God have a living instrument that is united to him instead of the lifeless instrument of an evil minister.

It is a serious sin for an evil man to perform a sacramental rite because of his personal irreverence to God. His irreverence contaminates the holy elements of the sacrament, as far as the minister is concerned, but the holy things are not contaminated

⁷ III, 64, 5 c

⁸ III, 64, 5 ob2

⁹ III, 64, 5 ad2

¹⁰ III, 64, 5 ad3

in themselves, so that they still have their effect in those who receive them.¹¹ The recipient is not contaminated by the sin of the minister because the minister is acting on behalf of the Church, and the recipient is approaching the Church through the minister. However, if the Church has disciplined the minister and does not authorize him to administer the sacraments, it is a sin to receive the sacraments from such a minister.¹²

One of the objections is that it is difficult to avoid sin, so that once a minister falls into sin, it would be an additional sin for him to administer the sacraments, but it would also be a sin for him to neglect his duty.¹³ Thomas responds by saying that the minister can always repent of his sin and be able to minister lawfully. Only a minister who is stubbornly unrepentant sins by continuing to administer the sacraments.

Any person, no matter what their state, can lawfully administer baptism in an emergency. Such a person is not acting as a representative of the Church, but is helping out someone in urgent need.¹⁴

Another question regarding the minister is the case where he does not have faith. What if he is celebrating the Eucharist, but does not believe the bread and wine become the body and blood of Christ; does the transformation still occur? This case is like that of the evil minister. The sacramental effect is based on the power of Christ who uses the minister as an instrument, so the sacrament is not dependent on the faith of the minister.¹⁵

There is an aspect of the minister that does affect the validity of the sacrament, and that has to do with his intent when he performs the rite. This is because the elements used in the sacrament can be used for other things. If intention did not matter, then a person would be performing a baptism every time he gave a child a bath. Therefore, the

¹¹ III, 64, 6 c

¹² III, 64, 6 ad2

¹³ III, 64, 6 ob3

¹⁴ III, 64, 6 ad3

¹⁵ III, 64, 9 c

minister must intend to perform the sacramental ritual, and that intention is expressed in the words of the sacrament, i. e. "I baptize you in the name..."¹⁶ The question arises of how does one know the intention of the minister? How do I know my baptism is valid because it is possible that the person who baptized me secretly did not intend to do so?¹⁷ Thomas says that the best answer to this question is that the minister acts in the person of the whole Church, and the words of the sacrament express the intention of the Church to perform the sacrament. This is sufficient for the validity of the sacrament assuming the minister or the recipient does not say anything to the contrary.¹⁸ Similarly, it is not necessary that the minister keep the intention always in his mind throughout the sacramental rite because human minds are prone to distraction. Therefore, if the minister shows up because he intends to perform the sacrament, such intention is sufficient for validity, even if later in the rite his mind is on other things.¹⁹

This requirement for right intention only applies to the actual conferring of the sacrament, and is distinguished from any intention regarding something that occurs after the sacrament. That is, if the minister intends to confer the sacrament in order that something evil might follow the sacrament, that intention does not invalidate the sacrament. Examples that Thomas gives are a priest intending to baptize a woman in order to abuse her afterwards, or intending to consecrate a host in order to use it for sorcery afterwards. Such evil intentions do not change the fact that there is intent to perform the sacrament, so the sacrament is still valid.²⁰

The last thing to consider regarding the minister is the priestly character that he receives through ordination. The details of this character cannot be elaborated here, but

¹⁶ III, 64, 8 c

¹⁷ III, 64, 8 obj2

¹⁸ III, 64, 8 ad2

¹⁹ III, 64, 8 ad3

²⁰ III, 64, 10 c

in summary, it is an instrumental spiritual power for the purpose of Divine worship,²¹ which in the case of a priest, is given to him by the sacrament of Holy Orders, authorizing and empowering him to celebrate the Eucharist.²² This character comes from Christ and is a participation in Christ's priestly character.²³ It is important for us to note that this character cannot be blotted from the soul, no matter what the person does. He will continue to have this character throughout eternity, whether he is saved or not.²⁴

St. Thomas provides a logical, consistent rationale for what turns out to be a very practical matter. After having established the necessity of the sacraments for salvation, it is important that an individual have a way to know if he is receiving valid sacraments. A human minister is required for the sacrament, but he works as an instrumental cause. The power and validity of the sacrament is rooted in Christ. All that is required for the minister is that he possess the priestly character and have right intent. Because the priestly character is indelible, it is guaranteed in the case of valid ordination, which can be verified through records of apostolic succession. Intent can also be verified objectively through the words the minister uses.

Therefore, we can trust in the power in the sacraments on the basis of the cross of Christ, and although they come to us through fallible human ministers, we do not have to worry. Whether the pipe is made of silver or lead, we know that we are receiving the water of life from Christ himself.

²¹ III, 63, 2 c

²² III, 63, 6 c

²³ III, 63, 3 c

²⁴ III, 63, 5 c