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The Sacraments: Historical Foundations and Liturgical Theology

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Kevin W. IRWIN. *The Sacraments: Historical Foundations and Liturgical Theology*. New York: Paulist Press, 2016. 388 p.

Review by Angela McCarthy

In his introduction, Irwin places his work in the Catholic intellectual tradition and describes Catholicism as a theological tradition, not a fundamental religion. This provides clarity for the stance that he takes and the way it is anchored in sound theological argument. As he declares, there is no such thing as one book on sacraments. There have to be many as they are such a complex area of our lived tradition that we need to recognise that there has been a long historical development within our Tradition that needs to be constantly aligned with contemporary needs.

Liturgy is defined as “what communities of faith ‘do’ in response to God’s initiative when they celebrate the liturgy”.¹ This is a very useful way to describe liturgy but when Irwin goes on to develop an understanding of the different kinds of liturgies that we celebrate he causes confusion. In the Catechism of the Catholic Church liturgy is described as being one of three kinds: Liturgy of the Hours, Liturgy of the Word and Liturgy of the Eucharist. Liturgy of the Word and Eucharist of course is what we commonly refer to as the Mass, but some of the sacraments (Baptism, Anointing of the Sick, Marriage) can be celebrated in either a Mass or a Liturgy of the Word. Confirmation in extreme need can also be celebrated outside of the Mass, and Reconciliation is usually in a Liturgy of the Word. The important issue is that all sacraments are celebrated within liturgy. The sacramental rites all belong in liturgy from the simplest Liturgy of the Word during the Anointing of the Sick, to the full communal celebration for a parish when children are initiated into Confirmation and Eucharist. In Australia, most marriage rites are celebrated in a Liturgy of the Word and this might well be the experience in other places in the world. I would therefore dispute Irwin’s declaration that “all sacraments are liturgies”.²

Irwin divides his material into three parts: history, method, and theology. *Part One: History*, is a concise and useful history from the Scriptural, and therefore Jewish, foundations to the Second Vatican Council. When speaking of the Eucharist in the Early Medieval Period, he describes the change from the Patristic understanding of the action of the changed bread and wine, and hence the change in the communities that participated in this action, to the development of using a different understanding of symbol. The loss of the Patristic understanding of symbol as something that we do that is the richest and fullest way to participate in the heavenly reality³ meant that there was a struggle to find “adequate terminology to describe the sacrament”.⁴ The important Eucharistic debates are described in a helpful and illuminating way. The concluding section to Part One is on Vatican II. This is a very useful summary for the sacraments and Irwin gives a careful description of the important aspects of the Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy which every student of Liturgy and pastorally active clergy and laity must understand.

¹ Kevin W. Irwin, *The Sacraments: Historical Foundations and Liturgical Theology* (New York: Paulist Press, 2016), 13.

² *Ibid.*, 14.

³ *Ibid.*, 73.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 75.

Part Two: Method opens with the historical precedent upon which liturgical theology is based – that the liturgy is the place where faith is articulated. What we celebrate is what we believe, therefore how we celebrate is critical in forming our belief. This of course arises from the experience of the early Church where it was in the proclamation of the oral tradition of the early community that their understanding of the work of Christ and therefore the work of the Church was developed.

Part Three: Theology binds the previously developed ideas into a useful whole. St Augustine assigned “the term *sacrament* to hundreds of sacred realities”⁵ but in our contemporary understanding we are limited to seven as described by Lombard in the twelfth century and doctrinally bound by the Council of Trent. However, a rich understanding of *sacramentality* is valuable which echoes St Augustine’s understanding of “a sign of a sacred thing”.⁶ “Sacramentality is based on the goodness of creation and the engagement of humans in worship, especially through the primal elements of earth, air, fire, water, and light/darkness”.⁷ Creation can be destructive as well as constructive and this inherent ambiguity is not lost in the symbolic associations made with the things we use, such as water, and the way we celebrate.

Towards the end of *Part Three*, Irwin considers the God of relationships as experienced through the Trinity. This upholds our belief of a personal relationship with God through the way in which we name God and celebrate liturgy in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. We offer the Mass to the Father, through the Son and in the power of the Holy Spirit. This engagement with the Trinitarian relationship that is God, is beautifully exemplified in the Sacrament of Marriage but Irwin has not engaged with this sacrament at all. This is a surprise and a disappointment in an otherwise immensely valuable addition to the contemporary works written about the sacraments. This is a very good summary for introductory studies in this area and therefore a launching place for further development.

⁵ Ibid., 209.

⁶ Ibid., 210.

⁷ Ibid., 211.