Evolution of the Sacraments
by Joseph Martos

In the first two centuries of Christianity, theology was based on experience. Words that were taken later to refer to things outside of the realm of experience were originally attempts to talk about things that the followers of Jesus were experiencing. For example, when Paul wrote about justification by faith, he was not talking about getting right with God by believing in Christ, but by getting your life straightened out by trusting that what Jesus taught was true. When the Book of Acts talks about being saved through baptism, it does not mean washing away sin by going through a ritual, but by being rescued from selfishness by being immersed in a caring community.

Scholars who study other early documents like, “The Teaching of the Twelve Apostles,” often called The Didache for short, from the Greek word for teaching, are finding that these writings were also attempts to spell out what the followers of Jesus were experiencing in their lives. But in the third century, things began to change.

Over time, the experience behind the early writings was forgotten. The writings were recognized as precious, called sacred Scriptures. Even the Didache appeared in some early lists of sacred Scriptures. Christian intellectuals in the third century, sometimes called apologists, tried to explain their faith to people in the wider pagan world who suspected that the followers of Jesus were members of a dangerous cult. One apologist, Justin, compared the Christian community meal to a temple sacrifice, where pagans shared their food in the presence of their god, to show that Christians were religious, even though they did not worship in temples. But other apologists began to talk about their faith as a set of beliefs rather than as a way of living. The words were becoming disconnected from the experience.

In the fourth century, Constantine wanted to unify the Roman Empire with a simple religion, so he legalized and promoted Christianity. When Christians began to travel freely throughout the empire, they discovered that people in different regions had different theologies. Instead of uniting Constantine’s empire, Christians argued and divided it even further.

Constantine ordered all the bishops to his villa in Nicea, and forced them to stay until they produced a document they could all agree on. They came up with the Nicene Creed, a statement of belief that said nothing about living like Jesus, but only about God and the Church. The first removal of theology from the experience of Christian living was complete.
The Middle Ages

The attempt of the emperors to preserve the empire failed, and in the fifth century, the western half fell to barbarian invaders from the north. The so-called Dark Ages lasted until the tenth century. Theological thinking came to a halt while people struggled to survive. Church life, on the contrary, evolved and flourished. The elaborate eucharistic liturgy got pared down to a mass that could be said by missionaries who carried the faith to the tribes that were settling on the continent, and it was called a sacrifice, even though no one remembered why.

Baptism became a short rite performed on babies in a church or adult converts in a river. Confirmation could be given by a bishop on horseback to children who were held up to him to touch. Private confession was introduced by monks for people who needed assurance of God’s forgiveness. Weddings became Church ceremonies to be a public record of marriages. Ordination became a series of rites for apprentices who were learning how to be clerics as they ascended through a series of holy orders. Anointing of the sick began as a ministry to people who were ill, but in the absence of modern medicine, it became a last anointing called extreme unction.

By the eleventh century, the chaos had subsided. The weather got warmer, farming flourished, commerce expanded, towns grew into cities, cathedrals were built, and schools were founded. Monks turned their attention from copying ancient manuscripts to studying them. Philosophy and theology were reborn. Among other things, the schoolmen turned their attention to religious ritual, especially to sacraments. How did bread and wine turn into the body and blood of Christ? Why could baptism and confirmation be received only once? How did the sacraments of penance and extreme unction work? What were the different powers of priests and bishops? Why was the bond of marriage indissoluble?

The schoolmen did not realize, however, that much of their theological language was already somewhat removed from life. They thought that salvation meant going to heaven, that the gifts of the Holy Spirit were not experienced, that sins were remitted even if they were committed again, that the bond of marriage was indissoluble, that priestly powers were unrelated to priestly ministry, and that extreme unction could be received by someone who was unconscious. They saw nothing amiss in a mass that was performed by a priest using words that people could not hear, much less understand, and who paid attention only when a bell was rung.

In many ways, the sacramental ministry devolved into sacramental magic in the late Middle Ages, but the Church’s leadership rejected repeated calls for reform until the sixteenth century, by which time half of Europe had converted to Protestantism.
The Council of Trent reformed the sacramental system, eliminating the most superstitious practices, insisting that bishops be true shepherds of their flocks, and that priests be trained in seminaries. From the sixteenth to the mid twentieth century, Catholic sacramental practice and Catholic sacramental theology mirrored one another.

The baptismal and priestly characters explained why Catholics never left the church and why priests never left the ministry. The Eucharist was elevated at mass and ensconced in a monstrance for exposition of the Blessed Sacrament, and was received only rarely, usually after a sincere confession of sins to a priest. The indissoluble bond of marriage explained why Catholics never divorced. Confirmation and extreme unction did not have visible effects, but Catholics trusted that the former was good to receive in adolescence and the latter was good to receive before dying. The Catholic Church remained medieval in form and thought well into the twentieth century.

**Vatican II and after**

At the Second Vatican Council, the world’s Catholic bishops called for an updating of the Church’s sacramental practices. Historians and liturgists retrieved earlier forms of the mass and other rites that had gotten lost during the Dark Ages – things like praying in the language of the people, receiving communion in the forms of both bread and wine, rethinking the relation between sin and confession, and returning anointing to the context of ministry to the sick. Unexpectedly, the unity of practice and theology began to dissolve. People stopped going to confession regularly. Priests began leaving the priesthood and the number of seminarians dwindled. Married Catholics started divorcing in greater numbers and even remarrying without waiting for an annulment. The primary effect of confirmation seemed to be dropping out of Church. Even baptism was no guarantee that people would remain Catholics or even Christians, as those who left the Church sometimes became agnostics or atheists, Jews or Moslems.

Alarmed by this apparent defection, popes John Paul II and Benedict XVI insisted on strict adherence to ecclesiastical rules, affirming traditional doctrines, stifling dissent, and denying any further developments in sacramental practice, such as allowing deacons to anoint the sick or allowing priests to marry. But the traditional doctrines no longer matched Catholics’ contemporary experience of Church membership, marriage, not to mention their sense of sin and their experience of illness. Even Catholics worship feels different from the way it did in the days of the Latin mass and Gregorian chant, and the previously strong sense of Christ’s presence in the Eucharist is hard to recapture.

As happened in the third century, there is a growing gap between theology and experience, only this time the theology is twice removed from life.
Official teachings about the mass and sacraments are not only disconnected from people’s everyday lives, but they are also often disconnected from people’s experience of worship. For many people, the liturgy is not the main source of their spiritual nourishment, nor the high point of their week.

Around the time of Vatican II, Catholic thinkers like Edward Schillebeeckx, Karl Rahner, Bernard Cooke and Louis Marie Chauvet tried to reinterpret the sacraments in more contemporary ways. Fifty years later, however, their work is not given much attention because it suffered from a fatal flaw. Instead of reflecting on the experience of ritual worship, they reflected on the Church’s sacramental doctrines and tried to translate them into thought categories derived from existentialism and phenomenology, the psychology and sociology of religion, and even postmodern philosophy.

By being tied to medieval doctrines, however, these theologians had to explain why baptism is permanent, how confirmation gives spiritual strength, why confession is needed, how anointing benefits the sick, why marriage is indissoluble, and why the priesthood is forever. But these ideas no longer correspond to the world inhabited by most Catholics, so contemporary theologies are just as removed from real life as the scholastic theology they had hoped to replace.

Is there a way out of the current confusion? There is, but it is neither a dogmatic reassertion of the past nor a freefall into cultural relativism. We need to rediscover what is essential to the Christian way of life, reinvent ways to ritualize that, and reformulate what those rituals mean in terms that are faithful to the teachings of Jesus and the experience of living in accordance with them.

1/ Joseph Martos is the author of many books and articles on the sacraments. This article appeared in The National Catholic Reported on February 12, 2016 and is based on research published in Deconstructing Sacramental Theology and Reconstructing Catholic Ritual.