



# ELEPHANTS IN THE LIVING ROOM

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DR. JOSEPH MARTOS  
HOW DID WE GET INTO THIS MESS?  
WHY SACRAMENTS DON'T WORK THE WAY THEY ARE SUPPOSE TO  
ST. ROBERT BALLERMINE  
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## Introduction

Tom Kyle



Good afternoon. As you can see from the slide, I'm not Bishop Gumbleton; I'm not even a bishop. *(laughter)* But my first name is Tom, and I'm wearing this bishop's colored sweater. *(laughter)*

When the Education Committee meets, when we try to select a speaker, we first ask, "What is the topic we want to present?" And when we have settled on a topic, then we start looking for a speaker, and try to find the best speaker we can in the country. And sometimes we go outside the country. Today's speaker was in the country. And then we turn to Bishop Gumbleton and say, "Tom, can you get him for us?" *(laughter)* And nobody says, "No!" to Bishop Gumbleton. *(laughter)* He has a lot of "chips" out there; and so he calls in his "chips."

So, we wanted to have a discussion on the sacraments, what they do and perhaps what they don't do. So, we said, "Who's the best speaker we can get?" And it was Dr. Joseph Martos. He is a speaker who has taught at many Catholic institutions, including the Catholic Theological Union. I just want to refer to some of the books he has written. And he told me that when he started teaching, that the material that was available on the sacraments was somewhat out of date; and he wanted to do some theological research. And the research translated into a number of books; and the first large one was, *Doors to the Sacred*, which was written in part for the students he was teaching. And then he added, a little more deeply into it, another book, *The Sacraments, An Interdisciplinary and Interactive Study*. And more recently, this book of theology, *Deconstructing Sacramental Theology and Reconstructing Catholic Ritual*.

These books are all available in the church hall; and I hope you have a chance to browse over them, and perhaps, maybe, purchase them.

But I think Dr. Martos serves a particular purpose, because he wants to look at how the sacraments operate and what they're supposed to do, perhaps as a basis of Vatican II, which rewrote the sacraments, as you know; but they were based on the theology of the middle ages. And so he would like to bring that up to date, and have a more practical application: not only the sacrament, but the ritual that goes with that.

So, with that, I would like to welcome Dr. Joseph Martos, retired from Catholic Theological Union and from Louisville, Kentucky. *(applause)*

### **How Did We Get into this Mess?**

### **Dr. Joseph Martos**

Thank you, Tom. We were talking about the title that was suggested, *A History of the Sacraments*; and I looked at that and said, "How boring!" *(laughter)* And so I came up with another title, which I thought was more catchy; and I hope that you came partly in response of the new title: "*How Did We get into This Mess: Why Sacraments Don't Work the Way They're Supposed To.*" So, let me begin by thanking Bishop Gumbleton and the organizers of this series of talks that address the elephants in the living room, that is, the issues that everyone recognizes but no one is willing to talk about.



As I started thinking about what to say in this talk, I was reminded of the story about the young monk who was sent by his abbot to search the monastery archives for the oldest documents, the ones that talked about the reason for the founding of the monastery. After spending several weeks in the basement archives, the young monk bounded up the stairs one day and asked to see the abbot right way. "Why all the excitement?" asked the abbot. Holding up a faded piece of parchment, the young man pointed to a sentence in monastery's original rule, and said excitedly, "The word is 'celebrate!'" All along, the monks had thought the word was "celibate." *(laughter)*

Every now and then, I feel like the young monk in that story. In a little while, you'll see why, but for now, let me say that by digging through the historical records, I've discovered that many of the ideas we take for granted are different from the ideas that we find when we dig into the early history of the sacraments.

I never intended to become an expert on sacraments, but when I got my first college teaching job many years ago, I was asked to teach the course on sacraments because no one else wanted to tackle that subject. This was right after Vatican II, when everything in the Catholic Church was in flux, and there were great differences between the traditional Church doctrines and what some of the younger theologians were saying—young theologians like Yves Congar, Hans Kung, and Edward Schillebeeckx; I mean, those of us who were around at the time know that these were the young whippersnappers who were riling things up in Rome. I felt that a safe approach to the course would be an historical approach, because no one could argue with historical facts.

At that time, there were a number of very scholarly treatments on the history of baptism, the history of the mass, the history of penance, and so on. But no one had taken all that information together and collected it into a single book; and since I needed a book to teach the course, I wrote the book that Tom held up before, *Doors to the Sacred: A Historical Introduction to Sacraments in the Catholic Church*.

This is an aside. I have a doctorate; and in order to get a doctorate, you need to write a doctorate dissertation. And I swore after I finished that dissertation, I would never write another thing. (*laughter*) It's the most boring thing I ever did; but it was a need my students had.

But as I got into it, I found all these interesting tidbits. So, as I was writing and going along, I was coming up with all the interesting facts, which if you read that book, you'll find all kinds of interesting information. One of my favorite, well right there in the beginning when talking about baptism, I discovered that nowhere in the Bible does it say that any of the apostles were baptized. So, if baptism is necessary for salvation, we don't know where these guys are. (*laughter*)

And another, it's very clear that at least for the first half of the Christian centuries, Christians – there weren't any Catholics or Protestants then – Christians could get divorced and remarried. But then, in the twelfth century, the Middle Ages kind of settled in, and you had most of the people there, the reason you couldn't get remarried was because you didn't pick your spouse. It was arranged marriages. And so the theology of marriage that arose out of that was you were married for life; and there was this unbreakable bond between husband and wife. But then, you come to the Council of Trent, about five or six centuries later, and they write very clearly, "As the Church has always taught, ..." (*laughter*) The worst is impossible among Catholics. Anyhow, a few pages earlier, you'll see, the worst was possible.

So I kept discovering all these neat little things that made the book a lot more fun to write. So this was right after Vatican II, as I said.



And a year later, I was asked to write an introductory volume for a set of seven books on the sacraments. And so that's not this book that's called *The Sacraments*, but a book I have out on the table there is really based on that as the introduction to an eight volume set on the sacraments. The only people who bought that were libraries. I was asked by the Liturgical Press, "Do you have anything you could write for us?" And I said, "Maybe you could take this and update it," and so on. So that's where *The Sacraments: An Interdisciplinary and Interactive Approach* came along. And there is a website that goes along with that, that has a lot of pictures and questions, and things of that sort, including videos that people take of various sacramental rites. You have images of other people's baptisms, weddings, and so on. So I think that's kind of a fun approach for students.

And I wrote that second book, because I felt, even 30 years ago, that the Catholic Church needed a more up to date approach to sacraments. That book has been revised and expanded, and it is now available as *The Catholic Sacraments: An Interdisciplinary and Interactive Study*. There is a website that goes along with it for the interactive part.

Thomas Aquinas and the scholastic theologians were fine in their day, but we needed a more modern approach for a modern Church. Aquinas used the science of his day, which was Aristotolitarian science. So what I tried in that second book was to use modern science of sociologies, psychologies, spirituality, and so on, history to get a more interdisciplinary perspective on the sacraments.

One clue that I had about why we needed a better way of understanding sacraments is that only Catholics talk about sacraments as being given and received. Protestants don't talk that way, and the Orthodox don't talk that way, even though the Orthodox tradition is as old as the Catholic tradition. Except for when they talk about receiving communion or receiving the Eucharist, none of the other churches use the language of administering and receiving sacraments.

When I was doing the research for *Doors to the Sacred*, I could tell when in early Church history that manner of speaking became rather common. But I could not really tell why it had become common for us Catholics to talk about administering and receiving the

sacraments. The priest or the bishop, of course, is the usual minister, but the other person in the sacramental rite is always referred to as the recipient of the sacrament. We talk about receiving the sacrament of baptism, receiving the sacrament of confirmation, receiving the sacrament of penance, and so on.

When I was doing the research for my latest book, *Deconstructing Sacramental Theology and Reconstructing Catholic Ritual*, I was finally able to figure out where that language had come from. And this is because in the last ten years or so, most of the important ancient and medieval texts have been digitized and stored on CD-ROMs, which are CDs – if you are familiar with CDs – except these CDs have documents on them instead of music. Using these digitized texts, it is now possible to do word searches in the writings of the fathers of the Church—people like Tertullian and Ambrose and Augustine—as well as in the writings of medieval theologians—people like Hugh of St. Victor, Peter Lombard and Thomas Aquinas.

When you do these word searches, and you look up words like baptism, and see how those words are used, baptism, administer, receive, confirmation, penance, ordain, and so on, you can see how, over the course of time, the usage of the word changed. For example, Tertullian, a father of the Church living in the second century, was the first to use the phrase, “sacrament of baptism.” In his understanding, a sacrament is a sacred sign, or a sign of something sacred, as it is for us, but it is clear from the way he used the words, that when he talked about the sacrament of baptism, he was referring to the water. The water that was used in the baptismal ritual was a sign of the spiritual change that was taking place when a person joined the Church and received the Holy Spirit. Some two centuries later, however, St. Augustine wrote about the sacrament of baptism, but what he was referring to was an indelible sign, an indelible sign that was impressed on the soul of the one being baptized when the rite of baptism was validly performed.



In summary, then, when Tertullian wrote about receiving the sacrament of baptism, he was talking about receiving the water, but when Augustine wrote about receiving the sacrament of baptism, he was talking receiving an indelible sign on the soul. St. Augustine was the most widely quoted patristic author during the Middle Ages. The main reason was that the medieval theologians could read Latin but not Greek, so even though many fathers of the church wrote in Greek, the scholastic theologians of the Middle Ages could not use them as sources of information about the sacraments.

Augustine not only wrote in Latin, but he wrote lots of works about lots of different topics; and so he was a great source of theological ideas in the Middle Ages.

St. Thomas Aquinas and the other scholastics accepted Augustine's idea of an indelible sign that was impressed upon the soul at baptism, which made it unnecessary and even impossible to be baptized more than once. Augustine had argued that trying to rebaptize someone would be like trying to put an identical brand on a sheep that had been already branded. The scholastics noted that there were other sacramental rituals that were never repeated, namely, confirmation and holy orders; and so they reasoned that these too must bestow an indelible sign. They called the one received in confirmation the seal of the Holy Spirit, and they called the one received in ordination the priestly character. Since these invisible signs were signs of something sacred, the scholastics called them *sacramenta* or sacraments. And from that day to this, Catholics have talked about receiving the sacraments.

So why did the Catholic theologians believe it was so important that there be an invisible sacrament as well as the visible sacrament? It's because the ritual is something physical—words, gestures, water, oil, so forth—but the grace that the sacraments bestowed was something entirely spiritual. In their way of understanding how things worked, a physical cause could not have a spiritual effect, and so some intermediary was needed, something that was both material and spiritual. The idea of the invisible sign fit the bill, and so they used the idea to understand how the sacraments worked. The sacrament that is received is like something material because it is a sign, and it is like something spiritual because it is not composed of matter. And if you want to read more about that, there's a whole five or ten pages in *Doors to the Sacred* that talks about how the scholastic theologians eventually came up with their idea.

Next, we have to ask, "What were the sacramental rituals in the Middle Ages, and what were their effects?" The sacrament of baptism consisted in pouring water on an infant's head, and the child was made a Christian for the rest of its life. The sacrament of confirmation consisted of a bishop anointing candidates with oil and laying hands on them, as a result of which, they could join a religious order and, if the candidate was a man, he could become a priest.

There is a lot of evidence that the only ones who were confirmed in the Middle Ages were people who were going to become clerics of some sort, or go into a religious order.

The sacrament of holy orders consisted of a bishop laying hands on a man's head, and anointing his hands with oil, as a result of which the man was invested with priestly powers for the rest of his life. The sacrament of matrimony consisted of a man and woman professing marriage vows, as a result of which they were married for life.

The Blessed Sacrament or Eucharist consisted of bread and wine that were consecrated by a priest, as a result of which, people could experience the real presence of Christ when they received communion during the mass or prayed before the Blessed Sacrament in the tabernacle. The sacrament of penance was needed to forgive serious sins, as a result of which the penitent was allowed to receive Holy Communion. The sacrament of extreme unction was needed to remove the remnants of sin from the soul of a dying person, as a result of which he or she could die a happy death.

How did the scholastics know these things? They knew them from their own personal and social experience. They knew from experience that when people were baptized, they were members of the Church for the rest of their lives. They knew from experience that when people were confirmed, they could be more dedicated Christians than the unconfirmed were. They knew from experience that when men were ordained, they remained priests for the rest of their lives. They knew from experience that when people were married, they stayed married until one of them died. They knew from experience that Christ was present in the Eucharist because they felt his real presence when they were attending the mass. We have to remember that the medieval theologians were all priests, and they were required to say mass every day. So, for them, this experience of real presence was something that was, I don't just want to say, very real for them, but was part of their priestly spirituality.) They knew from experience that penance was needed for the forgiveness of sins because without it, people could not receive Holy Communion. They knew from experience that extreme unction was needed to die a happy death because those who received it were less anxious about dying.

The scholastics were teaching in schools of theology for about a century before they hammered out the scholastic theology that the Church takes for granted today. So we can say that the scholastics developed their sacramental theology to explain why the sacramental rituals had the effects that they actually had in the Middle Ages. And they used the concept of the invisible sign, the received sacrament, to explain the effects they perceived in medieval Christian society, as well as the effects that they perceived in their own spiritual lives.

But what's the situation today? What's our experience? Children are baptized, but there's no guarantee that they're gonna remain members of the Church. They could become Protestants, or Jews, or Muslims, or nones – people who when asked to express their religious preference, for instance, they say, "None." Children and adolescents who are confirmed don't seem to be any different than those who are not confirmed. In other words, confirmation doesn't seem to have any effect at all in the Church today.

People who marry in the Church today have a 50 percent chance of being divorced; and so we know from our own experience that marriage is not indissoluble.

Men who are ordained do not necessarily remain priests, even though our medieval theology says they are priests forever. Penance, or the sacrament of reconciliation, is no longer needed to receive communion the way it used to be, and most Catholics no longer see it as necessary at all. The anointing of the sick – what used to be called extreme unction – is no longer used to guarantee a happy death. And one problem with it is that only priests are allowed to perform it.

Well, why is that? It's because the scholastics interpreted a passage in the Epistle of James as referring to priests, but we know today that the epistle was referring not to priests but to elders in the community.



So now we come to the title of this presentation and the answer to the question, "How did we get into this mess? (laughter) How did we get into a situation where our sacraments no longer work the way they are supposed to? Why do the sacraments no longer have the effects that they had in the past?"

The short answer is that the sacramental theory developed by the scholastics was thought to be universally true, that is, true for all places and times, but in fact it was not. The sacramental theory or theology fit Catholic experience for about seven centuries, from the mid-thirteenth century to the mid-twentieth century, so naturally the pope and bishops at the Second Vatican Council thought that it would be as true in the future as it was in the past. What they did not realize was that the combination of changed liturgical experience, which they themselves ordered in the hope of updating the Church, and the changes in culture and society, over which they had no control, would change the experience of Catholics just enough so that the old theory no longer fit the new facts.

Let me give you an analogy from science.

Let's say that a rather naïve earthling landed on Mars and expected his experience on Mars to be just like his experience on Earth. Immediately, he would notice that he felt lighter. This is because Mars is a smaller planet than Earth, and so its gravity is weaker. If he managed to get outside without a space suit, he would find it impossible to breathe. This is because Mars has an atmosphere, but it is a much thinner than the atmosphere on Earth. I could give other examples; but, I hope, you get the picture. Our imaginary space traveler believed that ideas that had served him well on Earth would serve him well in a different physical environment. In a similar way, the bishops at Vatican II – and, in fact, all of the liberal Catholics in the 1960s, myself included - thought that the ideas that had served well in the medieval environment of the pre-Vatican II Church would continue to work well in the post-Vatican II Church. But that didn't happen!

Between the liturgical changes that the bishops authorized and the cultural changes of the 1960s and 70s, both the worship experience of Catholics and the cultural experience of Catholics changed to such an extent that the old ideas simply did not work anymore. The old ideas no longer corresponded to reality as Catholics experienced it. To use a fancy word for this phenomenon, we can say that the old sacramental theology is dysfunctional – dysfunctional means: it just doesn't work any more.

According to the traditional theory, people who are baptized Catholics are supposed to stay Catholics forever, but they don't. According to the theory, Catholics who are confirmed are supposed to be different from Catholics who are not confirmed, but they aren't. According to the theory, Catholics need to go to confession to have their sins forgiven, but they don't go to confession any more.

According to the theory, Catholics who are married are supposed to stay married until one of them dies, but about half of them don't – not to say that half of them don't die, but half of them don't stay married until then. According to the theory, priests are supposed to have spiritual gifts that make them different from laypeople, but the sexual abuse scandals make that hard to believe. According to the theory, only priests can anoint the sick, but because of the declining number of priests, many sick people are not anointed.

One way we can see how dysfunctional our sacramental theology has become would be to put ourselves in the place of the scholastic theologians and ask: "What kind of sacramental theology would we develop today if we did it the same way the medieval theologians did, that is, by reflecting on our own personal and social experience?" Would we say that, "People could be baptized and confirmed only once?" Looking around, we would see other churches practice rebaptism and allow for repeated confirmation.

So, why would we say that? Would we say that only priests can hear confessions and anoint the sick? Unordained hospital chaplains often listen to the confessions of their patients who are dying and some of them develop creative rituals, often through the laying on of hands, for giving spiritual comfort to the sick. Would we say that only priests can preside at the liturgy when we know from history that in the early Church community elders could preside at the Lord's Supper? Would we say that priest have to be men when we know from experience that there are churches with priests who are women? Would we say that Catholics cannot divorce and remarry without the Church's permission when most Catholics divorce and remarry without the Church's permission? Of course not!

If this were just a theoretical matter, we could let the matter rest. But it's not just a theoretical matter. Scholastic sacramental theology that governs Catholic canon law and the Church's laws today are causing real harm to people. Our unrealistic theology of baptism leads Catholic parents to believe that they are giving their children something real when they bring them for baptism but the ritual doesn't give the children anything they don't already have. Our unrealistic theology of confirmation leads Catholic parishes to prepare children for a religious ritual that makes no difference in their lives. Our unrealistic theology of penance and anointing of the sick prevents the development of Church rituals through which people could experience genuine reconciliation and spiritual healing without the intervention of a priest. Our unrealistic theology of marriage, instead of preventing divorce, forces many divorced Catholics to remarry outside the Church. And our unrealistic theology of ordination does not allow the ordination of women and married people, thus depriving us of the pastors and ministers we need to experience Christian living in realistically sized communities of faith.

When you combine parishes, and so on - I mean - even the average large parish today is about the size of a diocese in the Middle Ages. If you remember - it's the story of St. Francis - There was a bishop of Assisi, and the next town over had another bishop. So every small town had its own bishop. About as many people lived in Assisi as would fit in this church.

So, the issue is real; and it is important. It is impacting our own lives either directly or indirectly. Now that we know how we got into this mess, the only question that remains is: How do we get out of it? That's another talk.

Thank you. (applause)

Transcribed by,  
*Tom Kyle*  
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