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Sacraments in the Orthodox Understanding

The concept of a sacrament has a long history in the Eastern Orthodox Church. In modern Orthodox linguistic usage, *sacrament* is the term for a sacred rite in which the grace of the Holy Spirit is bestowed upon a believer.

In the so-called symbolic books of the Orthodox Church, and in Greek and Russian textbooks on dogmatic theology from the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the teaching on the sacraments was presented in the terms of Latin scholastic theology. It was asserted that there were seven sacraments in the Church, neither more or less: baptism, chrismation, communion, penance, holy orders, matrimony, and unction.[1] The reason for there being seven sacraments "is concealed in the will of the Institutor of the sacraments, the Lord Jesus." Furthermore, there are seven because they "supply all the needs of a person's Christian life and the needs of the Church itself."[2]

To perform any sacrament three things are required, writes the author of one seventeenth-century textbook: (1) "a visible thing presented to be sanctified, which we call matter or substance"; (2) "certain words by which we invoke the Holy Spirit to sanctify the things presented: this we call the form"; and (3) "a clergyman or person lawfully appointed by a bishop for this ministry."[3]

This conceptualization has been the cause of many strained interpretations. Firstly, the sevenfold number of sacraments artificially emphasized seven church rites, while passing over numerous others of no less importance and categorizing them as "rituals." Why, for example, is matrimony a sacrament, while the monastic tonsure is a rite? To this the textbooks could provide no clear answer.

Hieromartyr Dionysius the Areopagite. Fresco. Church of the Great Martyr George. Staro Nagoričane, Macedonia. 14th c.

Secondly, it was necessary to prove the divine origin of each sacrament, something that could not always be done convincingly. In particular, while it was clear that baptism and the Eucharist were divinely instituted, in the case of certain other sacraments—such as chrismation or unction—this was not clear at all. And so the divine origin of the sacrament of chrismation was demonstrated by citing the promise of the Holy Spirit that Jesus gave to his disciples (cf. Jn 7.37–39).[4] The sacrament of unction was declared to have existed in the apostolic era (cf. Jas 5.14–15), and since the apostles preached nothing of themselves, but taught only what Jesus had commanded them, it followed that this sacrament was of divine origin.[5] Regarding the sacrament of matrimony it was said that Christ established it either while present at the marriage in Cana of Galilee (cf. Jn 2.1–11), or when he said to the Pharisees, "What therefore God hath joined together, let not man put asunder" (Mt 19.6); or at some other point unknown to us.[6]

Thirdly, it was not easy to define the "matter" for three of the seven sacraments. Obviously, in the Eucharist the matter is bread and wine; in baptism, water; in chrismation, chrism; and in unction, oil. But what matter is present in the sacraments of matrimony, holy orders, and penance?

Finally, the necessity of defining the verbal formula by which the sacrament is performed for each sacrament led to particular words, deemed the "consecratory words," being artificially emphasized in the sacramental service orders. In the sacrament of penance the consecratory formula came to be the prayer of absolution (which is absent in the Greek order of the sacrament, and which appeared in the Russian practice no earlier than the seventeenth century). In the sacrament of matrimony the most important words came to be the following: "The servant of God *N.* is crowned unto the handmaiden of God *N.*; the handmaiden of God *N.* is crowned unto the servant of God *N.*," and the brief prayer "O Lord our God, crown them with glory and honor."

The foregoing teaching on the seven sacraments was borrowed from medieval Latin theology, and has no counterpart in the works of the Eastern fathers of the Church from the first millennium. In the West it was formulated by the twelfth century and was made dogma at the Council of Lyons in 1274 and the Council of Florence in 1439 (it should be noted that at both councils unions were established between the Orthodox and the Latins). On March 3, 1547, the Council of Trent (by Catholic reckoning the Nineteenth Ecumenical Council) decreed that whoever held that the sacraments were not established by our Lord Jesus Christ, or that they were greater or fewer than seven in number, was to be excommunicated from the Church.[7]

In the Orthodox East the first attempt at systematization (and schematization) of the church sacraments was a treatise by Dionysius the Areopagite titled *The Ecclesiastical Hierarchy*. In this work the two threefold hierarchies of the clerical ranks correspond to the two threefold hierarchies of the sacraments: (1) illumination (baptism, including chrismation); (2) synaxis ("assembly," i.e., the Eucharist); (3) the consecration of chrism; (4) the ordination of clergy; (5) monastic initiation (the tonsure); and (6) sacred rites for the departed (the funeral). The venerable Theodore the Studite lists the sacraments in this same order, citing "the all-wise Dionysius."[8]

The teaching of seven sacraments first appears in the Orthodox East in the third quarter of the thirteenth century, and is in fact an attempt at adapting Orthodox teaching to that of the Catholics. In 1267 the emperor Michael Palaiologos sent Pope Clement IV of Rome a "Confession of Faith," the objective of which was a union with the Latins: this "Confession" included the teaching of the seven sacraments, along with other Catholic dogmas, particularly concerning purgatory and the filioque.

In this same period the seven sacraments were mentioned in a letter by the Byzantine monk Job (†1270): "Seven are the mysteries of the Holy Church of God: (1. firstly, baptism, (2) secondly, chrism, (3) thirdly, communion, (4) fourthly, priesthood, (5) fifthly, honorable marriage, (6) sixthly, monastic habit, and (7) seventhly, anointing, i.e., penance."[9] Thus, the monastic tonsure was numbered with the seven sacraments, while unction was combined with penance into a single sacrament.

In the fourteenth century Gregory Palamas and Nicholas Cabasilas mention the sacraments in their writings, but neither gives a list of seven sacraments. Only in the fifteenth century does a list of this sort appear, written by Symeon of Thessalonica, who mentions the following sacraments: baptism, chrismation, the Eucharist, penance, holy orders, matrimony, and unction. However, in the section on penance he includes a complete description of the monastic tonsure.[10]

Only in the seventeenth century did the teaching of seven sacraments become generally accepted in the Orthodox East, finding its way first into the "symbolic books," then into seminary textbooks on theology. And only in the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries, along with a resurging interest in the works of the church fathers, did Orthodox theology begin to free itself from the artificial and schematic concept of the sacraments characteristic of the medieval Latin Church. "Scholastic theology"[11] gave way to a theological school that tended toward a patristic synthesis, and the teaching of the sacraments was rethought in order to redirect it back into patristic channels. Contributing to this rethinking were theologians of the "Parisian school," such as Archimandrite Cyprian (Kern), Protopresbyter Alexander Schmemann, and Protopresbyter John Meyendorff.

As the latter notes, "Byzantine theology ignores the Western distinction between 'sacraments' and 'sacramentals,' and never formally committed itself to any strict limitation of the number of sacraments." The very term *sacrament,* or *mystery* (μυστήριον/*mystērion*),[12] is used by the holy fathers not so much to signify a sacred rite as to refer to the "mystery of salvation" in the broader sense.[13] In a similar vein, Gregory of Nyssa speaks of the "mystery which Christians cherish,"[14] meaning the whole body of Christian tradition. In John Chrysostom's instructions to catechumens the term *mystery* is variously used to refer to baptism and the Eucharist as a single entity, to refer to one of these two sacraments, and to refer to all the divine services of the baptismal cycle.[15]

Events from Christ's life and from church feasts were also called sacraments.[16] *Feast* and *sacrament* could be perceived as synonyms: every feast was mystical and mysterious in nature, and every sacrament, particularly baptism, was perceived as a feast. To this Gregory the Theologian refers in one of his sermons: "Again my Jesus, and again a mystery, a mystery not deceitful or disorderly, nor belonging to the disorder and drunkenness of the [pagan] Greeks . . . will—but a mystery exalted and divine and bringing the radiance from above."[17] Here the "mystery," or sacrament, is the feast of Theophany, the topic of the sermon.

If we speak of the sacraments as sacred rites, the sacraments as we have seen included the monastic tonsure and the order for the burial of the departed. Other sacred rites, categorized today as rituals, such as the great blessing of water on the feast of Theophany, are also sacramental in nature. The prayers of this rite have vivid "eucharistic" overtones: the priest asks God to send down the Holy Spirit upon the water, after which it is changed into the "great agiasma"—something sacred that is reverently consumed, with which the faithful are anointed and sprinkled. The order for the consecration of a church is also sacramental in nature.

The majority of church sacraments are genetically linked to the Eucharist, from which as a rule they were not separated during the Byzantine period. The orders of baptism and chrismation concluded with the Eucharist; ordinations to all the holy orders took place (as they still do) during the Eucharist; the sacrament of matrimony likewise grew out of a blessing that the bishop would bestow upon the bride and groom during the Eucharist. Not a single one of these sacraments was perceived as a "private" service, a "service of need," that could be served in isolation from the eucharistic community.

Subsequently, certain sacraments (such as matrimony) were separated from the Eucharist, but they retained traces of their connection with it. The concept of the sacrament as a "conciliar" action was also retained, even if performed outside the Eucharist and outside the church building, as in the case of the sacrament of unction, which may be served in the home. In the latter instance, represented by the seven priests by whom, according to the Typicon, this sacrament is to be performed, the Church itself comes into the home of the sick person who is unable to come to church.

All the sacraments are performed within the Church; they are inseparable from the Church. The Latin teaching that a sacrament is valid *ex opera operato* ("by virtue of the action having been performed") is foreign to Orthodox consciousness. According to this teaching, the validity of the seven sacraments is ensured by their proper performance, with the sacraments viewed as instruments of grace over which the Church has no power, which act on their own, independent of the Church.[18] For Orthodox theology, posing the matter in such terms is unacceptable, since for it the concept of a sacrament outside the Church, apart from the Church, or contrary to the will of the Church does not exist.

The significance of each sacrament may be expressed by the term *transformation* (μετάληψις/*metalēpsis*), used with respect to the holy gifts at the Eucharist. In the liturgy of Basil the Great, this term, which literally means "change," refers to what happens to the bread and the wine when they become the body and blood of Christ. The form of bread and wine remains, but the reality changes: the bread and the wine cease to be such, and they become the body and blood of Christ. Through communing a person undergoes an analogous change: his physical qualities do not change, but he receives God into himself and, by uniting with him, is spiritually transfigured. A person undergoes a similar change in the sacrament of baptism: he descends into the font an old man, but emerges a man new and reborn.

The sacraments give a person a glimpse of otherworldly reality and facilitate his spiritual rebirth. Of this Nicholas Cabasilas writes, "Through these sacred Mysteries as through windows the Sun of Righteousness

enters this dark world. He puts to death the life which accords with this world, but raises up that which is above the world."[19] A believer is made able to be united with Christ "by being initiated into the Mysteries, being washed and anointed and partaking of the holy table. When we do these things, Christ comes to us and dwells in us, He is united to us and grows into one with us. He stifles sin in us and infuses into us His own life and merit and makes us to share in His victory."[20] The sacraments reveal to a person the path to deification:

> That which belongs to the Head[21] becomes ours as well. Now, then, we depart from this water without sin. Because of the chrism we partake of His graces, and because of the banquet we live with the same life He does. In the world to come we shall be gods with God, fellow-heirs with Him of the same riches, reigning with Him in the same kingdom—that is, unless we of our own free will blind ourselves in this life and rend asunder the royal garment. This alone we contribute to this life—that we submit to His gifts, retain His graces, and do not reject the crown which God by many toils and labours has prepared for us. This is the life in Christ which the Mysteries confer.[22]

In uniting a person with God, at the same time the sacraments of the Church help the person to achieve his own "humanness," his potential for freedom, his vocation of life in the Holy Spirit:

> A sacrament is not an imaginary abstraction. It is an experience where man is not involved alone, but where he acts in communion with God. In a sacrament, humanity participates in the higher reality of the Spirit, without, however, ceasing to be fully humanity. Actually, as we have said above, it becomes more authentically human and fulfills its original destiny. A sacrament is a "passage" to true life; it is man's salvation. It is an open door into true, unadulterated humanity. A sacrament, therefore, is not magic. The Holy Spirit does not suppress human freedom but, rather, liberates man from the limitations of sinfulness. In the new life, the impossible becomes truly possible, if only man freely accepts what God gives.[23]

Hierarchal succession in the imparting of the sacraments of the Church may be traced from the apostolic era to our own time. The same sacraments imparted by the apostles are imparted today by the bishops and priests, as Symeon the New Theologian emphasizes:

> Since these sacraments are administered today not by the holy apostles, nor by their holy successors, our forefathers who have passed away, but by men who exist now and are alive and living amongst us, it is very clear that these provide us now with what those who then were in the world imparted to believers, and that these are also their equals. How so? As those baptized in water and the divine Spirit, so too do these now; those imparted the body and blood of Christ, and these impart the same to us, and there was no extra allotted to those recipients then, nor for us, to whom the sacrament is imparted now, is there anything lacking; those taught faith in Christ and in the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, the indivisible Trinity, three Persons equal in honour, while our fathers teach us the same.[24]

As has already been said, modern linguistic usage differentiates between sacraments and rituals. The latter include sacred rites that resemble sacraments in every aspect, yet which are not numbered among the seven sacraments. The division between sacraments and rituals is just as arbitrary as emphasizing seven sacraments out of all the sacred rites of the Church. Certain modern theologians call rituals "lesser mysteries," thereby emphasizing their sacramental, mystical nature.[25] The number of church rituals in existence is past counting. Some rituals existed in ancient times but have fallen into disuse, while others are being established even as we speak.

In this section we will not attempt to examine all the sacraments and rituals in the arsenal of the Church. We will discuss the most significant of these: (1) baptism, chrismation, and consecration of chrism; (2) the Eucharist; (3) penance (confession); (4) ordination to holy orders (the ranks of bishop, priest, and deacon), as well as elevation to minor orders (the ranks of reader and subdeacon); (5) unction (anointing of the sick); (6) matrimony; (7) the monastic tonsure; (8) burial (the funeral); (9) the consecration of a church; (10) the blessing of water; and (11) molebens (services of supplication) for various occasions.

The service orders for most sacraments and rituals may be found in a book called the Book of Needs—in Slavonic, the *Trebnik* (from the Slavonic word *treba*, meaning a service performed for a particular need). There is no universal version of the Book of Needs, and the book's contents vary depending on the time and place of publication. The complete version of the Book of Needs is called the Great Book of Needs and consists of two parts. The first part contains the service orders for baptism, chrismation, matrimony, unction, penance, burial, the blessing of water, and the monastic tonsure. The second part contains the service orders for the blessings of buildings, objects, and foodstuffs, molebens for various circumstances, and several liturgical service orders of more recent origin, such as the rite of the washing of the feet on Great Thursday. The Small Book of Needs is an abbreviated version of the Great Book of Needs and is the version most widely used.[26]

Notes

[1] Archim. Makary, *Dogmaticheskoe bogoslovie* [Dogmatic Theology], vol. 2 (Moscow: 1786), 314, 512.

[2] Ibid., 512–513.

[3] Ibid., 179.

[4] Makary (Bulgakov), *Dogmaticheskoe bogoslovie* [Dogmatic Theology], vol. 2, 346.

[5] Ibid., 465.

[6] Ibid., 479.

[7] Council of Trent, first canon regarding the sacraments. Cf. *Khristianskoe verouchenie* [Christian Doctrine], 375.

[8] Theodore the Studite, *Letters* 2.165 (PG 99:1524AB).

[9] Translation in Christiaan Kappes, "A New Narrative for the Reception of Seven Sacraments into Orthodoxy," *Nova et Vetera*, 15.2 (2017): 465–501, at 472.

[10] Cf. Symeon of Thessalonica, *On the Sacraments*, 265–275, from the section "On Repentance" (PG 155:489A–504B).

[11] The term scholastic theology was used by the hieromartyr Hilarion (Troitsky) in his historical article "*Bogoslovie I svoboda Tserkvi: o zadachakh osvoboditel'noi voiny v oblasti russkogo bogosloviya*" [Theology and Freedom of the Church: On the Goals of the War of Liberation in the Sphere of Russian Theology], in his *Collected Works,* vol. 2, 259. Later the term was widely used by theologians of the Russian immigration to designate a theological school strongly influenced by Latin scholasticism.

[12] Throughout this section it should be born in mind that the terms *sacrament* and *mystery* are the same word in Russian and Greek (*tainstvo* and *mystērion*, respectively). Hence, whereas in English *sacrament* is always a church service through which God's grace is bestowed, in Russian and Greek the word can also simply mean "mystery."—*Trans.*

[13] John Meyendorff, *Byzantine Theology*, 2nd ed., rev. (New York: Fordham University Press, 1983), 191.

[14] Gregory of Nyssa, *Against Eunomius* 11.5 (*NPNF*^{2} 5:236–239).

[15] Irina Prolygina, "*Katekhizatsiya i chin kreshcheniya v Antiokhii*" [Catechesis and the Rite of Baptism in Antioch], in *Svyatitel' Ioann Zlatoust. Oglasitel'nye gomilii* [St John Chrysostom. Catechetical Homilies], D.E. Afinogenov, literary advisor, Irina Prolygina, trans. (Tver: Germenevtika, 2006), 56.

[16] Cf. G.W.H. Lampe, *A Patristic Greek Lexicon* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991), 891–893.

[17] Gregory of Nazianzus, *Orations* 39.1. *Festal Orations: St Gregory of Nazianzus*, Popular Patristics Series 36, Nonna Verna Harrison, trans. (Crestwood, NY: St Vladimir's Seminary Press, 2008), 79

[18] Cf. Benedetto Testa, *Tainstva v Katolicheskoi Tserkvi* [Sacraments in the Catholic Church] (Moscow: Khristianskaya Rossiya, 2000), 69–75. [Translated from Italian.—*Trans.*]

[19] Nicholas Cabasilas, *The Life in Christ* 1.6, Carmino J. DeCatanzaro, trans. (Crestwood, NY: St Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1974), 50.

[20] Ibid., 1.11, 60.

[21] To Christ.

[22] Cabasilas, *The Life in Christ* 1.11, 63.

[23] John Meyendorff, *Marriage: An Orthodox Perspective,* 3rd ed. (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 2000), 20.

[24] Symeon the New Theologian, *The Epistles of St Symeon the New Theologian,* H.J.M. Turner, trans., Henry Chadwick, ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), 121–123.

[25] Cf., for example, John Anthony McGuckin, *The Orthodox Church* (West Sussex: Wiley-Blackwell, 2011), 277.

[26] Both of these works are published in English by St Tikhon's Monastery Press (*The Great Book of Needs* in five volumes, and *A Small Book of Needs* in one volume). —*Ed.*