

Reviews

CHRIST THE SACRAMENT, by E. Schillebeeckx; Sheed and Ward, 15s.

It is impossible to understand the seven sacraments in anything of their depth of meaning and actuality unless we see them as personal effective gestures of Christ the sacrament in and through his sacrament-Church. Yet it cannot be said that this way of looking on the sacraments has been usual in the recent life of the Church, in her catechetical teaching, her preaching, her liturgical practice. The 'Penny Catechism', symptom and cause of this impoverishment of our understanding of our faith, and therefore of the quality of our life of faith, has a single page on the sacraments in general, that does not even mention the Church. It is stated that the sacraments were instituted ('ordained') by Jesus Christ, and that they have power of giving grace from the merits of Christ's precious blood, but no suggestion that, as Augustine and Aquinas said, it is always Christ who baptizes, Christ who forgives sins, Christ who ordains. The three pages on the eucharist are an improvement in this respect since they do say that we receive Christ whole and entire in the sacrament, and that it is Christ who offers himself in an unbloody manner on the altar, through the ministry of his priests; but there is no mention of the Church, no suggestion that the eucharist is the sacrament of unity since the Church is that which she receives, the body of Christ, an explicit central theme of the theology of the eucharist from the time of St Paul onwards. After that one is not surprised to find the catechism silent on the ecclesial symbolism of marriage, and indeed ignorant of the ecclesial dimension of all the sacraments, save for the recognition that baptism makes us members of the Church. No wonder that the six sacraments are not, in day to day fact, events that engage the whole parish community, and that the right and need of the people of God to hear the Word of God proclaimed and broken, the right and duty of the kingly priesthood, which is the holy people, to offer the sacrifice of the eucharist have been largely obscured in our liturgical practice.

The second Vatican Council has undertaken a fundamental renewal and reform of the life of the Church, which is to begin from, and be caught back up into, a renewed and reformed liturgy. The Constitution on the liturgy states that: 'In the restoration and promotion of the sacred liturgy, this full and active participation by all the people is the aim to be considered before all else . . .' and therefore calls for a reformed liturgical instruction of both priests and people. In his *Motu Proprio* inaugurating the putting of the Constitution into effect, Pope Paul urges 'local ordinaries to lose no time in working together with the body of their clergy, "the stewards of God's mysteries" (1 Cor. 4. 1) in a concerted effort to instil into their flocks a deep understanding of the significance of the liturgy and help them to take full part in it'. Naturally the Constitution itself will be the starting-point of study and instruction, and precisely because a reform of words

and gestures will be worthless unless it expresses a reformed understanding and a reformed participation, the Constitution begins with a theological statement of what the liturgy is, that attempts to gather up the most valuable insights of recent theological work on the sacraments. But in the nature of things, this theological introduction is very brief, and some study of recent sacramental theology will certainly be necessary on the part of both priests and people.

Here the new translation of Fr Schillebeeckx' book: *Christ the sacrament of our encounter with God* comes very opportunely to give us some of the basic orientations we need. This book is a particularly successful example of a renewed theology: renewed through going back to the primary sources (the plural seems more natural, though no two-source theory is implied) of the Bible, the Fathers, the early liturgies, the continuing life of the Church; renewed through a re-reading of St Thomas and a critique of his commentators; rethought in the light of contemporary philosophical discoveries concerning the quality and meaning of personal existence, of bodily presence to the world, of meeting and dialogue with other persons.

This last element is perhaps the most distinctive in the book, and is indeed emphasized by Fr Schillebeeckx himself from the opening sentence onwards: 'One cannot help but remark that the theology of the manuals does not always make a careful distinction between that unique manner of existence which is peculiar to man, and the mode of being, mere objective "being there", which is proper to the things of nature'. Central to this unique manner of existence is the possibility of life in community with other men: it is only through meeting (or *encounter* in Fr Schillebeeckx' favourite technical term, borrowed from existentialist philosophy) and the sharing of our experiences with other people that we come to the full stature of our humanity. Central again to human existence is the possibility of, and the summons to, the highest possible form of meeting between persons: the meeting with the personal God. It is in Christ that we are given the possibility of actually meeting God: 'Personally to be approached by the man Jesus was, for his contemporaries, an invitation to a personal encounter with the life-giving God, because personally that man was the Son of God. Human encounter with Jesus is therefore the sacrament of the encounter with God . . .' For those who come after Christ, this sacramental meeting is mediated through the sacrament Church, which is the permanent, physical, and earthly sign, in the form of a redeemed human community, of the risen and glorified Christ. It is in the visible community of the Church, and in and through her scriptures and seven sacraments, which are first the Word and sacraments of Christ, that we actually meet Christ.

It is at this point that the theological exploration of the mystery of Christ in terms of 'encounter' leads on, by an inner necessity, to a re-examination of the sources of faith and theology: the scriptures in which Christ speaks to us both as the man Jesus of Nazareth and as the glorified Christ of Easter and Ascension, and in which we find Christ living on, and actively working, in the community of the Church of the Apostles; the Fathers who belong not to the time of the

origin and formation of the Church but to her first flowering in contact with the society and culture of the greco-roman empire; the liturgical forms of the sacramental life of the Church from apostolic times down to our own; the teaching of Popes, Councils, and theologians down the ages. I do not mean that Fr Schillebeeckx would not, as a theologian, have found a return to the sources necessary if it had not been dictated by his philosophical-theological approach to sacramentality through the existentialist theme of encounter; but merely underline the inner relationship that exists in fact. The book is successful, and engenders an intellectual excitement and enlightenment, because of the power of intellectual unification in the idea of 'encounter' developed by a truly original theological mind.

This is not to say that Fr Schillebeeckx is always successful as a biblical theologian, or in his use of the history of dogma. A fair portion of the more properly biblical examination is given over to a mistaken attempt to harmonize the Lucan and Johannine traditions concerning the time of the sending of the Spirit that leads to an odd theory that the Resurrection is merely the answer of divine mercy to the sacrifice of love, the destruction of the power of sin, while it is in the Ascension that we are to find the glorification of Christ and his investiture as Lord and King. The Resurrection and the Ascension are surely two stages in the glorification of Christ, a glorification often alluded to in the New Testament simply in terms of the Resurrection. There is also a rather involved piece of argumentation about what Christ and the Apostles did or did not determine for the future Church in the constitution of the sacraments that contains the curious statement: 'It must be noted that this (a shift in ecclesial appreciation of the essential rite—my brackets) is possible only if the apostolic determination of the essential rite is not an invariable norm for the Church (in which case it would be an historical fact that the essential rite has changed)'. It is rather, surely, the (hypothetical) change between what was the substance of the rite at one time and what becomes the substance of the rite at another (historical facts) that enables the theologian to say that this was not determined for all time from the beginning. A deduction of facts from theories is just what should be avoided in the realm of history. Fr Schillebeeckx would surely be the first to denounce this as the besetting sin of a certain school of writers of theological manuals.

These are particular failings. The strength of the book proceeds from the genuine confrontation, in a mind thoroughly grounded and formed in scholastic theology, of the Word of God and the thought-world of contemporary philosophical man.

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THE NEW CREATION, by Herbert McCabe; Sheed and Ward, 10s. 6d.

This sensible little book, collecting together articles that originally appeared in this journal, begins exceeding well: 'Christ is present to us in so far as we are present to each other', says Fr McCabe, echoing a remark of Fr Bouyer about