



Participants of Notre Dame Vision attend Mass at Keenan-Stanford Chapel (University of Notre Dame).

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THE MORAL LIFE

BY DEACON JAMES KEATING

# THE ACTIONS OF CHRIST



Stratford Caldecott had a pithy way of describing the Church as the community that preserves the sacraments, the very actions of Christ. This is helpful shorthand for today as many ask, “Where can Christ be found? Where can He be encountered?” Even now, we can receive, among other blessings, the movements of Christ’s own healing power (anointing), self-donative love (Eucharist), missioning (Holy Orders), and incorporation (Baptism) because He is *still* acting today within the sacraments. This truth, in its simplicity, reassures and consoles us as we live within a world of complexification, doublespeak, political correctness, fear, and distraction. Today, we can be taken up into *the very actions of Christ* at our local parish church. Christ did not leave us orphaned (Jn 14:18); he remains (Jn 15:4). In truth, we can approach the sacraments, and we will be with him, in him; and he will affect us in salvific ways.

For the contemporary Catholic, however, this continuing action of Christ in the sacraments is not eagerly embraced with passion, as it appears to some to be too sober an expression of Christ, too “mechanical,” too scripted. This disposition remains a barrier to receiving the joy of Christ and is not new to the Church. We have often known disappointment in our “celebration” of the sacraments, so much so that some priests or deacons have felt the need to intrude in the celebration with their personality, wit, or charisma; others have tried to lessen the embarrassment of the sobriety of the sacraments by intemperate indulgence in flowers, music, lace, layers of needlepointed vestments, and candle-amassed altars. To trust in the simple gestures and words of Christ within each of his sacraments takes only one ingredient: faith. It is not necessary to pare down our sacraments to Quaker levels of encircled inner peace or, when presiding at them, to disguise our personalities with vacant façades; but we do need always *to allow Christ to do the acting*.

And because Christ desires to reach all the poor, all of us, the Church welcomes the diversity of expressions in devotion and spirituality (Carmelite, Dominican, secular movements, etc.), but within the preservation of Christ’s central acts, the sacraments, the Church endeavors to unify. In so doing, it becomes focused upon the essence of Christ’s approach to the broken human condition, his compassionate response to our call. One reason that the sacraments are sober is so our hearts can receive the truth of our own poverty, receive within our consciousness the reality of our need for Christ and then, in possession of this truth, cry out and be vulnerable to his coming. Sobriety which facilitates this consciousness as truth is gently received within a context that cradles it rather than exposes it.

Such a cradle is further supported by the familiarity we have with the created goods mediating Christ’s actions: water, bread, wine, touch, voice—these do not stir to extreme emotion but deepen receptivity within the heart. The sobriety of our sacraments serves us; it is reflective of God’s empathic “bedside” manner. He knows how to approach (1 Kgs 19:12). In the sobriety of the sacramental actions, we are freed to participate in them more actively as we give the Holy Spirit free reign over our minds and bodies within a composed and restrained environment. In the sacraments, human freedom is given its fullest liberty to surrender the self to Christ’s own actions and words (Gal 5:1).

Such saving paradox is the reason for sacramental sobriety. Von Hildebrand noted decades ago that one must worship “awake”; one must receive God by way of an inner readiness, a readiness secured by the sober environment of sacramental living. The ordinary is the norm, and to embrace such, even in worship, is to let oneself be taken deeper into reality, deeper into the communion one is called to have with God. The Church preserves the actions of Christ, actions to be contemplated, as von Balthasar noted; but even better, we are invited to be taken up into them as Ratzinger emphasized (we have moved from simply being in the presence of God [Old Testament] to being in communion with Him *in Christ*). These actions of Christ are not imaginary; they are not trapped in a history long past; they are firing up *all around us* and *for us*, deep within the fabric of the ordinariness of ecclesial life. The sacraments mediate God through common goods: water, wine, oil, hands, words, and bread. And so the very thing, sobriety, that makes some persons question the “relevance” of Catholic worship is the linchpin for its relative stability in each generation, immune from extreme experimentation and the myopia of how any one culture judges events to be attractive. Christ’s actions are attractive *because they remain his*.

These acts of love and healing transmit God's approach to us in ways that do not frighten or demand gnostic light. He comes to us through our home the earth. And as our spiritual and affective life deepens we grow in ever greater gratitude that we have a God who loves us so much as to remain with us, reach us, and purify us through such peaceful and ordinary acts.



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