

Article

Harmony or Discordance between Sacramental and Liturgical Theology?

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Abstract: This paper aims to show a way of approximating between liturgical studies and sacramental theology, trying to undo a too formal separation between the two sciences. The paramount cause is to be found at the request of *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, starting from the link between the two to achieve a greater and more fruitful participation of those faithful to the sacraments. In the words of Card. Ratzinger, this request has not been fully met. The dichotomy and relationship between the notions of *theoria* and *praxis* in both sciences are presented as the need for a solid foundation or philosophical frame of reference with a metaphysical or realistic background, attending to the problems raised by the International Theological Commission in the document on “The Reciprocity between Faith and Sacraments in the Sacramental Economy” (1999). The pathway is open, some solutions are proposed, and an attempt is made to show the importance of this subject for the understanding of man himself and his Christian life.

Keywords: sacramental theology; liturgical theology; *praxis*; *theoria*; mystery; sacrament; liturgy; rite; metaphysics; ritual *praxis*; symbol



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1. Introduction

Sacramental theology, during the last century, was configured as a step from an immediately “ontological” approach to the sacraments, which configured the manuals of sacramental theology as a kind of theological metaphysics of the sacraments (Bozzolo 2013, p. 9). In this regard, it might seem that sacramental theology would be pure “theory”.

It seems that sacramental theology is a pure reflection on the sacraments, understood in some abstract fashion, while liturgical studies involves the study of the celebration of the sacraments and other Christian practices, as theology would be a reflection but totally directed to the practice or celebration.

On the other hand, liturgical studies have been opening up the field: worship is at the heart of the Christian faith, so it is imperative that it be placed in its rightful place in the life of the Church, and to do so, it needs to be rewritten and reinterpreted (Gerhards and Kranemann 2017). Liturgy could appear as a set of rites, an organized exteriority that can be changed at will, as the *praxis* or execution of what sacramental theology studied reflexively.

2. Problem Statement

At the beginning of this century, Cardinal Ratzinger posed the question succinctly. Following a comment on the Catechism of the Catholic Church ten years after its publication, he summarizes the main aspects and makes a good diagnosis in which we can begin our study (Ratzinger 2002).

The focus of the sacraments is determined by the Second Vatican Council in terms of the History of Salvation, immediately evident in its title: “the celebration of the Christian mystery”, which begins from the paschal mystery. This focus implies that the sacraments are *entirely explained in liturgical terms*.

Medieval theologies, however, created a disconnect between sacraments and liturgical practice. Disregarding the latter, they treated the categories of institution, sign, efficacy, minister, and recipient in such a way that only the sections on the sign made a link with the liturgical celebration. [And the sacrament] was analyzed according to the categories of matter and form. In the same vein, worship and theology became increasingly separated from each other. Dogmatics did not interpret worship, but its abstract theological content, so liturgy had to appear almost as a collection of ceremonies, which covered the specifics—matter and form—and could be replaceable for this reason. In turn, “liturgical science” (insofar as it can be called that) became a teaching of valid liturgical norms, and thus approached a kind of juridical positivism.

According to Ratzinger, the liturgical movement of the 1920s aimed to address the disconnect between sacraments and liturgical practice. It sought to understand the nature of the sacraments by starting from the liturgical form. The movement emphasized that liturgy should not be seen as a mere collection of casual ceremonies but as the expression of the sacrament in the liturgical celebration. The liturgical form and its visible expression or sign were considered inseparable and could not be changed arbitrarily. With this explanation, the late Pope makes an important clarification for our discourse: the liturgical movement deepened the “ritual form” from its internal conforming principle and its visible expression or sign, which are inseparable, and cannot be changed at will: “What is characteristic of the liturgy is that *something happens here*, and this something is the life of the historical Jesus” (Guardini 1992, p. 115).

This sentiment aligns with Casel’s statement:

“If we would learn what the mystery’s place is in the Christian scheme of things, we must first ask, what is the Christian scheme. Christianity is not a ‘religion’ or a confession in the way the last three hundred years would have understood the word: a system of more or less dogmatically certain truths to be accepted and confessed, and of moral commands to be observed or at least accorded recognition. Both elements belong, of course, to Christianity [. . .]; but neither exhausts its essence. Still less is Christianity a matter of religious sentiment, a more or less emotionally toned attitude towards ‘The Divine’, which binds itself to no dogmatic or moral system whatever. St. Paul thinks of Christianity, the good news, as ‘a mystery’; but not merely in the sense of a hidden, mysterious teaching about the things of God, a sense the word already bore in the philosophy of late antiquity. Rather for him *mysterium* means first a *deed of God’s*, the *execution of an everlasting plan* of his through an act which proceeds from his eternity, realized in time and the world, and returning once more to him its goal in eternity”. (Casel 1960, p. 9)

Casel and the whole movement—Guardini, Marsili, etc.—recognized the profound importance of a comprehensive understanding of worship and the sacraments for life, because they are realities that have a significant impact on our actions and on our understanding of ourselves, as presented later. It is not merely a matter of studying and defining speculative or abstract notions. It seems that consideration and study or research lead to a separation from life, and this is not and need not be so: the greater the deepening, the greater the awareness of the transcendence of it, and, therefore, the lesser the separation between what is understood by *theoria*—the contemplative truth—and *praxis*—or practical truth, the action that is performed.

Following this movement, the Second Vatican Council’s Constitution on Liturgy effectively underscored the integration of liturgy and dogmatics, albeit with some limitations. Consequently, it has bestowed upon theology and catechesis the responsibility of comprehending the relationship between the Church and sacramental worship in a novel and more profound manner, rooted in this connection (Ratzinger 2002; ‘Sacrosanctum Concilium’ 1963, nn. 16 and 59).

Regrettably, the prescribed mandate has yet to be fully actualized. There persists a tendency within liturgical studies to detach itself anew from dogmatics, assuming the role of a mere technical approach to liturgical celebrations. Simultaneously, dogmatic theology

has not convincingly embraced the liturgical dimension as of now (Ratzinger 2002). Not only, therefore, has the mandate of the Council not been fulfilled, but the separation has continued, both on the part of liturgical and sacramental theology (Geldhof 2020, p. 11).¹

Then, Card. Ratzinger continues saying that a notable portion of the reformist fervor is misguided, stemming from the perception that the liturgical form is merely a set of ceremonies subject to arbitrary replacement, often resorting to unconventional practices. In this context, the Catechism provides insightful guidance, emphasizing the profound nature of authentic liturgical comprehension. It asserts, “for this reason, no sacramental rite can be altered or manipulated at the discretion of the minister or the community. Even the highest authority of the Church is not permitted to change the liturgy arbitrarily but only in service to faith and with religious reverence for the mystery of the liturgy (n. 1125)” (Ratzinger 2002).

On the other hand, Pope Francis in his recent Apostolic Letter *Desiderio desideravi* insists:

“With this letter I would simply like to invite the whole Church to *rediscover, guard and live the truth and strength of the Christian celebration*. I would not want the beauty of the Christian celebration and its necessary consequences in the life of the Church to be disfigured by a *superficial and reductive understanding of its value* or, even worse, by its instrumentalization in the service of some ideological vision, whatever it may be. The priestly prayer of Jesus at the Last Supper that all may be one (John 17:21), judges all our divisions around the broken Bread, sacrament of piety, sign of unity, bond of charity (Cf. Augustinus, *In Ioannis Evangelium tractatus XXVI*, 13)”. (Francis 2022, n. 16).²

The International Theological Commission identifies three theological philosophical causes of the contemporary crisis in understanding faith and sacraments and their reciprocity, which have direct repercussions on the understanding of liturgical studies. These three causes may well apply to the relationship between sacramental and liturgical studies, whose dissociation is due to several factors:

(a) Denial of the metaphysical capacity: primarily, beyond potential deficiencies in catechesis and certain cultural biases against sacramental thinking, a fundamental philosophical factor undermines sacramental logic. A pervasive line of thought, originating in the Middle Ages (nominalism) and extending into modernity, exhibits a characteristic dissociation of thought from being and categorically rejects any form of representative thought—a sentiment that persists in postmodernity. This perspective dismisses the notion of the Creator’s imprint in creation, negating the idea that creation serves as a mirror (sacramental image) of the Creator’s thought. Consequently, the world ceases to be perceived as a reality explicitly ordained by God but is instead regarded as a chaotic collection of facts that humans, through their concepts, must organize. If human concepts no longer embody something akin to “sacraments” of the divine Logos but are regarded as mere human constructs, a further disconnection emerges between the personal act of faith (*fides qua*) and any shared conceptual representation of its content (*fides quae*). In essence, a crucial aspect emerges: the denial of reason’s capacity to apprehend the truth of being (metaphysics) implies the impossibility of comprehending the truth of God. (International Theological Commission 2019, n. 4).³

(b) Scientism: secondly, the prevailing prestige of scientific and technological knowledge in contemporary society tends to assert itself as the exclusive model across all knowledge domains and for diverse subjects. Its inherent emphasis on empirical and naturalistic certainty not only contradicts metaphysical understanding but also stands in opposition to symbolic knowledge. Despite scientific knowledge showcasing the capabilities of human reason, it falls short of encompassing all dimensions of reason and knowledge, nor does it address the complete cognitive requirements for a fulfilling human existence. Symbolic think-

ing, with its richness and adaptability, not only gathers and reflexively processes the ethical and affective aspects of experience but also engages with and transforms the spiritual and cognitive framework of the individual. Consequently, in alignment with global religious traditions, the transmission of revelation, laden with its cognitive weight, resides in the symbolic realm rather than the empirical and naturalistic one. The sacramental reality of participating in the mystery of grace can only be grasped within the unified framework of this dual dimension of symbolic experience: cognitive and performative. Wherever the scientific paradigm prevails, oblivious to symbolic thinking, the understanding of sacramental thought is impeded. (International Theological Commission 2019, n. 5; Aroztegui Esnaola 2011⁴; Ratzinger 2014, pp. 185–87)

(c) Exaltation of the performative power of images: Thirdly, a significant cultural change is noted in the context of the emerging civilization of the image, a distinctive challenge arises for the theological explication of sacramental faith. While rationalist modernity tended to downplay the cognitive significance of symbols, contemporary postmodernity accentuates the performative potency of images. Thus, there arises a necessity to transcend the rationalist (modern) bias against the cognitive value of the symbolic without succumbing to the opposite (postmodern) extreme, wherein the efficacy of the symbol shifts exclusively towards the emotional impact of representation, devoid of reference. Put differently, Christian intellectuality must safeguard the distinctiveness of the Christian sacrament from the peril of a dual impoverishment. On one hand, the risk of reducing the symbol-sacrament to a mere cognitive sign, merely facilitating the comprehension of doctrinal meanings of faith without effecting any transformation (elimination of the performative or praxical dimension). On the other hand, the potential reduction of the symbol-sacrament to a purely aesthetic suggestion achieved through its ritual enactment, adhering to a logic of mere representation that displaces the inner adherence to the symbolized reality of the mystery (suppression of the cognitive or theoretical dimension). (International Theological Commission 2019, n. 6)

This diagnosis is particularly significant for the problem at hand. We focus especially on the first aspect, the rejection of the metaphysical capacity of our intelligence: if we deny this capacity, it is also impossible to recognize the symbolic and performative aspects that today are recognized in the sacraments. The problem or the question we want to answer is as follows: Is it true that sacramental theology is only *theoria*, and liturgical studies are pure *praxis*? How can we bring the two sciences closer together and give a true response to the mandate of *Sacrosanctum Concilium*? Are *theoria* and *praxis* opposites?

To answer these questions, we study what is *theoria* and what is *praxis*. We see how they are not opposites, but that one is a way in which to reach the other, and that an approach by both *theoria* and *praxis* is necessary in both types of studies, in terms of bringing both sciences closer to life and shedding light on human behavior, especially by showing how both converge in a very special way in the Eucharist.⁵

3. Advances in the Understanding of Liturgical and Sacramental Theology

This approach has been changing in recent years, and—although it can be said that the subject is still open, depending on the school and author who studies this relationship—it is possible to find a line of progress in relation to the problem posed: a better understanding of both liturgy and liturgical theology, as well as the reality of the sacraments and sacramental studies.

Continuing with Casel's approach and most of the authors who followed him, a positive evolution can be observed, which revolves around the "paschal mystery" of Christ understood as the action of God, the realization of the eternal plan in time and space which involves the affirmative and free response of love on the part of man, and ends again in God.

Having established the elements of the problem, it seems to us that there is space for a twofold line of advance or proposal.

On the one hand, there is the deepening of the meaning of the sacrament (Power et al. 1994;⁶ Irwin 2018, pp. 123–86⁷) that—as we mentioned—was centered more on the eminently dogmatic content, as Bozzolo explains, which was especially accentuated in the manuals of sacramental theology⁸ as a kind of *theological metaphysics* of the sacraments, studying the notions of matter, form, cause, effect, instrument, etc., and has recently evolved to another that delves more deeply in the *practical-symbolic aspect*, insofar as the *praxis* character that is hidden in the sacrament has been discovered, showing the inseparable nexus that exists between the *Praxis* of Christ and the free liturgical acting (*praxis*) of man. Here, we find a relevant orientation towards the anthropological aspect of the sacrament, which is intended to be emphasized in this study.

According to Bozzolo, the pivotal point that must be studied regarding the sacraments—the methodological core—is a process that remains largely ongoing, as it harbors several ambiguities that underline the precarious outcomes for the issues at hand. This ambiguity can be traced back to the recurrent tendency of several authors *to assert the recovery of what* is “practical”, not as determining the opportunities for a more adequate reformulation of the ontological [metaphysical-dogmatic] but rather as an alternative instance to it, in the name of a conception of the sacrament with a linguistic and hermeneutical hallmark (Bozzolo 2013, p. 9). It is a matter of recovering the symbolic and practical sphere of the reality hidden in the sacrament, and from there to deepen and reformulate its theoretical nucleus, including the theological value of the rite in which the sacrament operates (*praxis*), but without considering it as an alternative element, where the rite would be without content (without *theoria* to sustain it).

The result of intending to shift the focus of sacramental theology to pure *praxis* is a tendency to reject argumentative rationality within all sacramental theology [hallmark of much of postmodernity, which does not recognize our capacity for metaphysical or beyond-knowledge of matter], on the basis of the unsurpassed heterogeneity between the dynamic nature of the *sacramental event* (belonging to the order of “-urgy” or *praxis*) and the *theoretical abstraction* of the concept (belonging to the order of “-logy” or *theoria*), where the incompatibility with the logic of Christian revelation is affirmed (Bozzolo 2013, p. 10).⁹

For this author, the point is not to solve the problem of the ontology—or, better, metaphysics—of the sacrament in the relevance of ritual *praxis*: along this path, we lose not only the possibility of thinking the *veritativo*¹⁰ content of the sacrament, but also the possibility of understanding the celebrative act in its radical content for the history of the subject and of the community. The instance that comes from the rediscovery of the theological value of the rite postulates rather a reformulation of the problem of the sacrament that identifies *the role that the exercise of human freedom plays in the manifestation of God’s truth* as a central theoretical nucleus. Only in this fashion can the anthropological and the theological be understood in their reciprocal reference and the symbolic structure of their relationship be thought of in the multiple, non-arbitrary change of their historical forms (Bozzolo 2013, p. 10).

As for liturgical studies, it can be said that a process analogous to that of sacramental theology has taken place, partly as a consequence of the aforementioned development: from the assumptions and uncertainties brought about by the approach of many authors of modernity on the sacrament, it has come time to rethink not only some aspects or details, but the whole complex approach that sacramental theology has inherited, by and large, from modernity. This question—“the liturgical question”, as per Guardini’s formula—*is born of a renewed attention to the practical character of the sacrament*, of its being configured as “action” (*praxis*), specifically “ritual action” (Bozzolo 2013, p. 6; Grillo 2003), taking some of the focus away from questions about the concepts of “sign” and “cause”.

In the last century, we can distinguish three moments for liturgy: (1) the liturgic reform (1909–1959); (2) a reform of the renewal itself (1963–1990); and (3) the development of the spiritual liturgy (1990–). It has become the *theologia prima* (Marsili 1974¹¹; Izquierdo 2007,

s. v. Movimiento litúrgico). Today, authors such as Joris Geldhof present the liturgy as a whole, since it contains the mystery of Christ, the ritual moment, and then life. He proposes, methodologically, to start from the mystery of Christ and the Eucharistic reflection; this is followed by the rite and prayer, which is the moment or reality that the liturgy incarnates and realizes; and, thirdly, he proposes to ask more existential questions from doxology and eschatology. For Faberger, liturgical *theologia* is also *theologia prima*, but more in the sense that liturgy is not primarily an object to reflect upon but an encompassing reality to become a part of (Faberger 2004, p. 63).

As can be seen, the interaction or interrelation between sacramental and liturgical theology is at the center of the debate, intertwined through the conception of the very notion of sacrament as *praxis*—in sacramental theology—and through liturgy, whose object of study is celebration—which is also *praxis*—This does not mean that there is not and should not be a *theoria* in both sciences and studies.

Unfortunately, many of the notions revolving around “sacrament” and “liturgy” have become not only analogous but—at least some of them—equivocal, depending on the intellectual environment from which they are studied. And, on the other hand, many “theories” are sometimes preached in practical life that are not applied to life. Therefore, the problem has a double sense: from *theoria* to *praxis*, and from *praxis* to *theoria*.

It seems that an exercise of deepening our understanding of what is meant by several of these terms is necessary: liturgy, sacrament, *praxis*, *theoria*, sign, symbol, mystery, revelation, sacramental revelation, and *performance* (a word or concept recently coined to emphasize how transformative or transforming some terms can and must be, based on the English term that refers to the representation that an actor makes of their character) (International Theological Commission 2019, n. 6.). There is a growing interest in *praxis* and a certain allergy to what is presented as mere *theoria* disconnected from life. The notions sometimes become confused, but in general, what is intended is unity: either liturgy is the center of theology, or sacramental theology is; what is the role of each? They are clearly not identified, since sacramental theology has the sacraments as its proper object and Eucharist as its primary analog, while liturgical theology has the celebration of the mystery as its object of study, most importantly the paschal mystery, whose center is also in the Eucharist. Somehow, the importance of both sciences has been deepening, to the point of presenting them as the core aspect of all theology, as a kind of fundamental theology towards the other theological sciences, since both study the deepest “mystery” around which all life was centered in the first Christian communities. “‘Without liturgy—Cardinal Lustiger has written—Christianity would be ideology.’ Here beats a luminous and accurate intuition since, in a way, liturgy is situated in the most existential area of the *depositum fidei*. Recapitulation of the whole economy of Salvation, liturgy is Heaven on earth; experience, therefore, of God, and the possibility, as overwhelming as it is real, of being inserted into His Mystery” (Arocena 2000, loc. Back cover). In this way, an overly formal distinction between the objects of sacramental and liturgical theology is being overcome.

Now, this question is difficult to study from the point of view of the very notion of *praxis*, since this term has gone from being analogous (as it is in the original Aristotelian thought) to being equivocal (due to the influence especially of such influential authors as Kant, Marx, and a long list of authors and thinkers) (Cassin 2018, s. v. “praxis”).¹² Thus, from understanding *praxis* as practical action and in its most perfect version as *immanent action*, as Aristotle understood it, it has been reduced to “moral action” (Kant), to the “transformation of the world” (Marx), or to the “empirical action” of English or North American authors such as Locke, James, and Hume, until it loses its specific meaning according to hermeneutics or the use of language (Cassin 2018, s. v. “praxis”).

For theological discourse, it is necessary to recover the content of the term in Aristotle—returning to the metaphysical and realistic sense of the terms. *Praxis* is translated as “practical truth”, it consists of *truth in action*, and it is distinct from theoretical truth, but it cannot disengage from it, because it is what gives it its ultimate content of truth. “In the Modern Age there has been an *absolutization of human action*. Action is not what is radical in

man; however, by interpreting it as absolute, these traits are conferred upon it at the cost of destroying its personal character and the integrity of its very active value. . . . The means, in increasing numbers, are stripped of all directions to an end. This is equivalent to saying that the means become ‘denaturalized’, begin to gravitate on themselves and to impose their own functional regime at the margin of the ends (. . .). Exacerbated voluntarism—the empire of the means, of the will and its acts—leads to pragmatism.” (Polo 1996, pp. 181–82; Corazón 2007, p. 127). In classical times, philosophers were asked an almost exclusive question: how should one live? Today, it seems that this question has no answer. At most, one can talk about rules that regulate coexistence—the law—but not by virtue of justice as a virtue, but as an objective rule of action (Spaemann 2003, p. 34; Corazón 2007, pp. 127–28). The modern attitude¹³ to the action is the opposite of the classical one: “murder is considered evil because there is a death. The ancients would have said: there are deaths all the time anyway. What is wrong with murder is not that someone has died because of it, but that someone has made a murderer of himself. This is the meaning of Aristotle’s distinction between *poiesis* and *praxis*, between doing and acting. Classical moral philosophy was more interested in the practical side of life than the poietic: not in what you do in the world but in what you do to yourself when you do something in the world.” (Spaemann 2003, pp. 34–35; Corazón 2007, pp. 128–29). But for Aristotle, ultimately, there is *theoria* as the ultimate knowledge or way of attaining truth, to which the “five ways are ordered (or intellectual virtues) by which the soul attains truth assenting or dissenting: *sophia*, *noûs*, *epistême*, *phrónesis*, *techné* (wisdom, understanding, science, prudence, technique)” (Aristotle 1967, VI, 3, 1139 b 15–17). Therefore, truth is the task of both parts of reason, theoretical reason and practical reason (Aristotle 1967, VI, 3, 1139 a 26–27). If there is, then, such a practical truth, for Aristotle, theoretical truth and practical truth must mutually support each other, because without this mutual support, it would not be possible to extend the concept of truth to life, to *praxis*, to action. But for the Stagirite, the idea of truth is not separated from *praxis*, but—on the contrary—he tries to take advantage—if it can be said so—of the concept of *praxis* for the very theory or selfless search for truth itself. The result of such an endeavor is precisely the practical truth. Its function, then, is to ascertain the states of things and of relations between them, so that—from within *praxis* itself—one becomes capable of knowing moral truths, for instance (Inciarte 1974, pp. 169–72). How does this apply to our topic? In both sciences, there is a theoretical aspect—whose purpose is the contemplation or reflection on the action that is its object—and a practical one—which is the truth that is found in the actions themselves (Mora 2007, p. 4), the mystery. In both sciences, it is possible to say that the practical aspect is the action performed by God in union with the free human response. In the case of liturgy: He is the great liturgist, who performs every liturgy, but requires human participation in the celebration.

Concretely, in liturgical studies, it is not just any “*praxis*” that is of interest, nor human discourse about God, but “the human word to God, the word made possible to man thanks to the Jesus event, the definitive salvific event” (Ubbiali 2008, p. 13). This means that it is first the divine word and action, to which the free human word that is summoned by the divine word must respond (Aquinas 2019, CG IV, c. 55, 29).¹⁴

The theological analysis that includes or refers to the study of *praxis*—the divine action and the human action that corresponds to the former—confirms the full renunciation of any logic a priori, because we are not talking about or studying abstract notions, but sublime realities such as the *action* of Jesus Christ in the Eucharist and the *personal union* of those who are conscious and want to receive this gift, totally gratuitous and unimaginable only with human eyes, which is what dogmatic theology is often criticized for. It thus focuses on the concrete liturgical dynamism, as a first step that does not rely on absolute reason but is open to the available thought or open to reality and to the mystical (Ubbiali 2008, p. 13).

On the other hand, the fundamental problem is the confinement to which much of modernity has led the sacraments, isolating them as a complete fact in themselves and giving them an explanation conditioned by the fragmentary analysis of the singular elements of each sacrament: it is necessary to rethink—a slow and patient journey—the

relationship that exists between liturgical action—an act of faith (and, we would say, of love) par excellence—and the Christological mystery that is expressed and contained in it (Bozzolo 2013, p. 14).

The problem with this sign of modernity is the underlying philosophy that rejects the metaphysical elements, or worse, the metaphysical ability to conceive or reach the mystery that lies hidden within those sensitive signs.

4. Some Requirements

In addition to clarifying that in both theological sciences, it is necessary to distinguish and affirm a theoretical and a practical aspect, due to the type of science involved, it is necessary to expose or make two realities explicit.

The first is to critically clarify the philosophical assumptions behind theological statements, so there is a correlation between reality, thought, and language. It is not the same thing, as the document of the International Theological Commission cited above has shown, to use one or the other philosophy to advance theological approaches: a religious metaphysical language endowed with meaning is necessary, because it is the only way to reach being, like an arrow pointing towards the reality it signifies; this implies a fundamental agreement between human reason and Christian faith (Benedict XVI 2010). And this agreement can be called theological and philosophical “realism”.

Secondly, it is necessary to clarify at least a couple of concepts—it is impossible to go into all of them in depth at this time—that come into play in the debate, and that in some way manifest or express what has been stated in the first point, as well as reflecting what the metaphysical approach called for by the International Theological Commission entails:

(a) The “symbol”. The first line can be drawn from a *rough* distinction on how the “symbol” has been understood throughout the main stages of history:

1. In ancient times, there was no fracture or confrontation: nature was the natural space of man and somehow the cosmos was *an abode* full of objects mutually related and with human destiny (Granados García 2020, pp. 12–15); this way of inhabiting the cosmos and understanding it is called *realism*, where the relationship between things (their symbolism) was known by connaturality, that is, entering into a relationship with them, accepting them cordially as we accept the patriotic language. As for this home—like all homes, it was open to the mystery of the Creator—it could be considered a great temple.
2. With much of today’s understanding of modernity, on the other hand, a separation began to take place, deciding to place oneself in a kind of observatory in order to have things under control, instead of contemplating and accepting them as such. This came about through the scientific and technological revolution, where the laws of mechanics were prefixed, and no conscious and free force intervened in them. Nature, more than a home, now resembled a hieroglyphic and a labyrinth, full of symbols unintelligible to man, where our origin and destiny were difficult to ascertain: it was more about *symbols* from which one keeps distance, and in which one does not put oneself personally at stake.
3. And, lastly, in many of the postmodern authors’ positions, the process is followed:¹⁵ the *labyrinth of symbols* is abandoned in order to get rid of them, looking at them from the outside, dissociating the subject of language from his own body, reducing all *symbols* to those of digital culture, malleable avatars that modify our face at whim (...), symbols are created and recreated at pleasure; absolute liberation is thus achieved,” at least apparently. But it is not so in reality: escaping from the labyrinth leads to the desert, where every symbol is a mirage, a projection of capricious subjectivity (...), where the victory of the inextricable is achieved.

The solution proposed by Granados is to return to reality, but not to that of ancient history, which seems impossible, but through experience, through what we mentioned before as *praxis*. Modernity, understood in its majority as we have said, failed because of its attempt to know reality through the isolated mind—mathematics, which separates from

the real, remaining with the abstract, the measurable—uncontaminated by matter. But it is possible to revisit the *experience* of man in all its breadth, including corporeality and, with it, the familiar relationship between man and the universe: “our incarnated condition offers us a point of view committed to the cosmos, from which it is possible, once again, to discover the internal *symbolism* of things—symbols-dwelling—recovering our place among them” (Marcel 1940, pp. 19–54). And this is precisely the space that the sacraments and liturgy unfold, being the place of the bodily encounter with the Risen Christ: the sacramental gaze takes the perspective of the Body as the first space of presence among things and of relationships among men; here is a way to repair the deficit of habitable space in which we live (Granados García 2020, pp. 14–15).¹⁶

It seems to me that Juan Rego’s analysis of the notion of symbol comes close to this sense. He affirms that this concept grew without critical work in other fields and theology “came later”. Therefore, there is a great dispersion of the literature. It was Guardini who began to find a way after modernity, noting that *matter* is a guarantee of complete humanity, not only its casing (Rego 2012, pp. 40–41, 400; Guardini 1992, p. 33; 2000, n. 902).

The resistance of matter, characteristic of the symbolic form, makes considerably evident the otherness of an “other” that precedes me; language is incarnated thought, and the “flesh” of the symbol does not pass; therefore, it cannot be simply translated: it must be shown, by repeating it. This means that what is referred to—the mystery—is “made present” in the symbolic action. Here is an encounter between God and man mediated through manifestation: it embodies a divine action [sign] to which corresponds a human response [faith and freedom] (Rego 2012, pp. 401–2). Signs and symbols are recognized: in the “intentional signic act”—what I mean—reference is made present through the sign, but once the sign has exercised its function, it ceases to enter the intentional field, so what remains is an “allegory”. In contrast, the “symbol” is another type of intentional act “in which the medium, in addition to its mediating function, is included in the aim of the communicative action. That is to say, the means is willed as both means and end in a single intentional act that we can call a “symbolic intentional act”. We can call its concrete expression a “symbol”. This single intentional act explains the perennial fecundity of “symbolic expression”: the means is part of the end, “the means can never be ‘surpassed’.” And this unity prevents the temptation of the “*cogito*” to set itself up as the absolute principle of the hermeneutic process.

Rego goes on to explain that there are three types of mediation, the symbol, the myth, and the rite,¹⁷ and that the latter is the one that reflects the tradition of Israel, which consists of the act of worship that responds to the commands of a personal God who reveals himself in history, and whose formal characteristic by God’s choice is Incarnation.

The symbol is the “material element or object that used by convention or association is considered representative of an entity, idea or condition.” (Diccionario de la lengua española 2014, s. v. symbol).

(b) The category of “mystery” is another key notion. Properly understood, this notion clearly unites Christology with sacramental theology and liturgy. This category, as has been said, means both the revelation and the performance of the revelation realized by Christ (living Christology) which is extended in the sacraments (where the mystery of Christ is actualized, and the mystery of Christian worship is realized). This is the path initiated by St. Paul, taken up by many Fathers of the Church and great medieval theologians such as St. Thomas (Granados García 2020, pp. 29–104¹⁸) lost in almost all of modernity and recovered with the liturgical renewal initiated by Casel, today followed by various theologians such as Colombo, Bozzolo, and Ubbiali, as has been shown throughout this study.

Regarding the connection between Christology and sacramental theology (a harmony that highlights the biblical category of mystery), the Thomistic distinction between the humanity of Christ as an instrument of the Word united to the divinity, and the sacraments as instruments of the word separated from the divinity (instrumental efficient causality) is of special interest (Aquinas 2019, ST III, q. 64, a. 3, c.).¹⁹ In the other acts of worship, on the other hand, they are not separate instruments insofar as they are not efficient instrumental

causes of the word (they do not cause *ex opere operato*). This can direct reflection on the way in which the mystery of Christ is made present in the sacraments and in other acts of worship.

5. Harmony between Sacramental and Liturgical Studies

If we admit the two previous principles (a and b), we understand that the seven sacraments are those that primarily gather this sense of mystery, as “prolongation of the acts of Christ”, “acts of Christ”, where He is present with all His mysteries (CG IV, c. 57, 3).²⁰ “Christ performs every sacrament: He baptizes, He forgives sins, He is the true Priest who gave Himself on the altar of the Cross, by whose power (*virtute*) His Body is consecrated every day on the altar.” (CG IV, c. 76, 7; [Acedo Moreno 2023](#), pp. 79–81, 152–53).²¹ The mystery and the sacraments are actions, *praxis*, of Jesus Christ in space and time, the realization of God’s eternal plan whose end is the eternal God himself—action united to the act of human conscience that receives it, with its prayer, virtues, culture, and intentional experience of faith. It is therefore a ritual, liturgical *praxis*. From this perspective, there is no opposition between sacramental theology, which has as its object the study of the sacraments—whose *primo analogato* is the Eucharist—and all the elements that make them up, knowing that it is the study (*theoria*) of a double *praxis*, of God, and of ourselves (the personal subject and the Church), within which the participation of human freedom must be included.

Furthermore, liturgical science is science and, therefore, a reflection fundamentally of the celebration of liturgical actions (*praxis*), whose heart is Eucharist. Liturgy itself is pure *praxis* and is pure as the celebration of God, and that is why it is a *locus theologiae*, in the sense that *lex orandi* is *lex credendi*, but liturgical science is not; it is the theological reflection on these actions (*theoria*), how they have evolved, what their origin is, etc. ([Miralles 2022](#), p. 7). The celebration includes the subject, and the Church where the subject is located. The center is the dynamism of the mystery of Christ, which is celebrated liturgically, and which is open to reality and its study.

The mystery of worship is the celebration of that arcane action that Jesus Christ performed, gathering history from creation, and recapitulating all things in Him ([Benedict XVI 2023](#)).²²

The sacrament is not, therefore, an abstract notion, far from it; it is precisely the encounter between the love of God and the love of the creature. I find that *studium bonae voluntatis* is required for the sacrament to be given: that is, the sacrament is not only an action of God, but requires man to respond with his freedom and whole person to its realization. For a gift to exist, it is necessary for the recipient to actually receive it; otherwise, the gift does not exist.²³

If the above is well understood, we can see a great approximation between both sciences, with a very powerful theoretical nucleus that strongly underlines the role of the exercise of freedom (*praxis*) that responds to the divine action that is given to us (divine *Praxis*). This dimension opens a new field or dimension within sacramental and liturgical theology, that of anthropology itself: the question of human confession about God (...) is the place where man *becomes* human, free, because it is where he *becomes human* according to the most singular personal sense. Man *becomes* human to the extent that he decides with respect to himself before whom he remains in any way available. Any pastoral choice—about the response to the sacraments—leads to the vision that outlines what Christianity is (today) and also—as Ubbiali points out—what man himself is ([Ubbiali 2008](#), pp. 8–9).²⁴

It is a reality: the sacrament “is” the expression of God’s love for us, not just the meaning; it is the symbol of the way God wants to unite with us, a symbol in the sense explained above, which accomplishes—if we will—the mystical union.

Therefore, it is necessary, on the one hand,

(a) To study what the *veritativo* content of ritual *praxis* means or offers. This content corresponds to one of the ways considered by Aristotle to reach the truth, but not in a

theoretical way but *by carrying out* an activity; it is what Aristotle calls “practical truth”, which cannot function without the theoretical one.

(b) To think of the sacrament as a rite (ritual *praxis*) intrinsically united to Christ, a space for the “knowledge” of God, where faith represents the key to understanding and resolving the rituality of man (which obviously includes love): only in the Christological event and in that of the faith that recognizes it in its objective consistency is the symbolic structure that defines the human being fully attained (Bozzolo 2013, p. 11). Maybe this is near to the thought of Adain Kavanagh, considered the Founder of liturgical theology in the United States, who considered that by participating in the liturgy, there is a “vital contact” with the mystery of faith (*worshipful knowledge*), a more perfect knowledge of a particular nature, a cultic knowledge brought about by faith and the adaptation of the participants to the divine presence (Kavanagh 1981; Berlanga 2019, n. 76).

“Ritual praxis” is to be understood as an action that includes the story of Jesus with his disciples, so the peculiar truth that Jesus confers on the believing recognition of the act of liturgical memorial can be identified (Colombo 1997, p. 78; Bozzolo 2013, p. 29). This story, with its rite, is based on the paschal ceremony of the Old Testament.

Therefore, it is a reciprocity between the manifestation of God—his truth and action—and the act of the consciousness that appropriates it. It is, then, neither just an idea of an objectified truth nor a subjective pre-understanding of what is human, which implies recourse to history (as distinct from merely conceptual ideas or evidence); Colombo also calls this structure “symbolic”, in the sense noted above, that is, the evidence that recognizes the presence of absolute truth in history in the form of the anticipation offered to the recognition of freedom (Colombo 1995, pp. 10–11, 54–56, 81; Bozzolo 2013, p. 30).

(a) In this sense, the sacrament is an essential moment in the convocation of man to the Christological event. This affirmation is a consequence of what was said above about ritual *praxis*: it emerges in the knowledge of faith as a moment intrinsic to the question of the “uniqueness” of Jesus and therefore of the truth of revelation itself.

(b) In order to explain the above, Bozzolo exposes a horizon perhaps little studied, or at least, little made alive, through *Fides et ratio*, where John Paul II refers to the *ratio sacramentalis* within the panorama of divine revelation: “it belongs originally to the divine self-communication and of which the ecclesial sacraments constitute the coherent prolongation and its full performance” (. . .) “For God does not simply reveal himself ‘face to face’ to man, but introduces him into the very act of his manifestation, the sacrament does not add an extrinsic and instrumental adhesion to the Christological event, but springs from within as a mediation of his universal field of application. In this sense Jesus, by instituting the Eucharist in the context of the Hebrew rite, confirms that the ritual tradition practiced by his own people belongs to the history of God’s revelation; by giving the paschal symbols an unprecedented fulfillment, a whole new space opens up to the way in which human action can embrace the life of God: to participate in what He has done once and for all” (John Paul II 1998, n. 13; Bozzolo 2013).²⁵

A solution to the apparent contradiction between sacramental and liturgical theology can be found here: a *ratio* (logic) of the sacraments that is found in Revelation is necessary: this makes it possible to correct the tendency of modern and postmodern theology to conceive of the sacrament as an instrumental apparatus endowed with a relationship to the salvific event substantially extrinsic, insofar as founded by the institutive act—understood at least in legal terms—with which the divine will would have connected the efficacy of grace to the sacramental sign. It is therefore evident that in this perspective, the manifestative dimension of liturgy in general, and of the sacrament in particular, could only be weak, in the “ornamental” limit, as a didactic instrument or devotional support for a faith that should accept a dogmatic truth of revelation already known in another place and manner than in the form of the sacrament.²⁶

Revelation is a living, mystical event, which is continued by falling back on faith, which involves not only reason but also corporeality and the senses, and hence continues the Eucharist (the eminent way of the giving of the revelation event in the living tradition

of the Church, and therefore the eminent form of the encounter between the freedom of man and the mystery of divine truth) (Bozzolo 2013, p. 759).

It is worth concluding by noting that this approach is also reflected in the more recent Magisterium of Pope Benedict XVI: the theological content and the liturgical form of the sacrament cannot be understood unless it is in its initial unity.²⁷

6. Conclusions

With the above, the intention is to show that there is no opposition; on the contrary—with what the liturgical renewal has come to remind us about and with the appropriate philosophical presuppositions—these sciences, sacramental and liturgical theology, have been coming closer and closer together. They are different, since sacramental theology studies the sacrament, perhaps no longer with the hylomorphic structure of the effective sign, but with the practical form of the liturgical act (although the first approximation is still true), while liturgical science reflects on the celebration of the sacraments and other acts, and has as its main source the liturgical book, its sources (biblical, patristic, and magisterial), history, culture, and sociological elements that make the ritual form different in every time and place. As we have seen, each of these sciences comprises both theoretical and practical components, but in actual fact, both endeavors seek to delve into the “mystical” mystery of the sacrament, mystical because it is a mysterious union between an action (*praxis*) of God and the response-action (also *praxis*) of each human person who wants to respond with faith, praise, and trust²⁸ to the greatest act of love that God offers us in his sacraments and other liturgical actions, in the celebration or ritual *praxis*.

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Notes

- ¹ In this context, Geldhof affirms: “It would take us too long to estimate to what extent this sharp distinction between sacramental theology and liturgical studies still persists today, however it is not an exaggeration to say that its effects have not yet completely ceased to exist”.
- ² The underlining is ours.
- ³ Citing (John Paul II 1998).
- ⁴ Where it is concluded that the problem of sacramental theology is the absence of typology, due to functionalist materialism, on the one hand, and idealism, on the other.
- ⁵ There is a great deal of bibliography on this subject. This study follows the line of Casel and Guardini, followed by Colombo, Bozzolo, and Ubbiali, along the lines of the proposed solution. In any case, other authors are mentioned who are currently studying the subject, especially from the point of view of liturgy and liturgical studies such as Aidan Kavanagh, Faberger, Kevin Irwin, Joris Geldhof, and Andrea Grillo.
- ⁶ This article brings together all the literature on sacramental theology from the years of 1980 and 1993. The survey covers mainly European, North American, and Latin American contributions, with some reference to works from Africa and Asia.
- ⁷ By taking up terminology of the Fathers and Western theologians up to the 14th–15th centuries and to the soteriological and ecclesiological understanding of the rahnerian matrix (the limits of which Ubbiali, among others, mentioned: (Ubbiali 2008, pp. 171–77; Rego 2022, p. 256)).
- ⁸ Let us clarify that these are mainly manuals that tried to summarize the knowledge on the sacraments, with many of them calling themselves Thomistic, and that do not really assume well the spirit of Aquinas. In the effort to teach or facilitate learning, the depth and richness that St Thomas has thanks to his handling of the patristic tradition and the magisterial texts is lost, and his thought is, as it were, “dissected”. It is even important to mention that St. Thomas composed liturgical songs of great elevation to the Holy Eucharist, which today continue to move thousands of people, e.g., the *Adoro te devote* and the Corpus Christi Office commissioned by Pope Urban IV, and which made St. Bonaventure break his own texts when he heard those of Thomas, telling the Holy Father: “Holy Father, when I heard Brother Thomas, it seemed to me that I heard the Holy Spirit. Only He could have inspired such beautiful thoughts. I would be committing sacrilege if I wanted to impose my work on these sublime wonders.

Here is what remains of my work.” And shaking his brown habit, he lets the pieces of his manuscript fall to the ground”: (Sada Fernández 2013, pp. 208–9).

The appropriateness of “-urgy” with praxis and “-logy” with theoria is not the author’s directly, although it seems to us that it does correspond to his approach.

This word does not exist in English: what the author means is the content of truth of a term: “veritativo” in Italian. We leave it this way because it expresses well what we want to show. The word “truthful” would be the best for English.

Follower of Casel, who believes that the liturgy is like a “theology of the cultic action” or principal act of Christ in the Church, without excluding other theologies, but that it cannot be substituted by any of them: it is the theology of the divine economy, of the presence and action of God in the world, in which he wants to be realized as eternal salvation in an anthropological dimension.

Where a long tour is made through the translations that this notion has had.

When we refer to the modern attitude or modern thought, we are referring to a tendency, but this does not mean that all authors of a certain era fall into the same error, and that there are no other authors who accept reality, both in sacramental and liturgical studies, as well as in philosophy itself.

“The flow of salvation from Christ to men does not take place by natural propagation [as happens with the propagation of original sin], but by the *application [studium] of good will, by means of which man is united to Christ*. Thus, what each man obtains from Christ is a ‘personal good’. This text is considered distinctive in that it is not found in the other works of St. Thomas with such clarity the necessity of human freedom for the personal contact between Christ and each person who wants to receive the sacraments” (Acedo Moreno 2023, pp. 108–13).

Again, it is made clear that there are always authors who do not follow this scheme: there are authors of liturgical studies and sacramental theology who are in fact interested in the truth of the celebration and the reality of the sacraments.

Every sacramental celebration is liturgy: “the whole liturgical life of the Church revolves around the Eucharistic Sacrifice and the sacraments” (Catechism of the Catholic Church 1993, n. 1113 et seq.).

We do not pause to explain them; the author does so throughout the book. What is made clear is that what we are looking for is the formal characteristic chosen by God, which is Incarnation (Granados García 2020, p. 403), which implies matter or flesh, as Granados also emphasizes.

Granados follows the study on this story and how the notion of sacrament was concretized from Christ, the Apostles, the Fathers, medieval theology, etc.

“Christ produces the interior effect of the sacraments as God and as man, although in different ways. As God, he does it by his own authority; and as man, meritoriously and effectively, but as an instrument. We have already said (q. 48, a. 1. 6; q. 49, a. 1), indeed, that the passion of Christ suffered by Him in His human nature is a meritorious cause of our justification: not as principal agent or by authority, but in an instrumental way, inasmuch as *humanity is an instrument of divinity*, as has been said above (q. 13, a. 2.3; q. 19, a. 1). However, since he is an *instrument united to the divinity* in his very person, this humanity of Christ has a certain primacy and causality with respect to the *separate instruments*, which are the ministers of the Church and the *sacraments* themselves.” Underlining is ours.

St. Thomas expresses that the sacraments of the New Law unite us to all the mysteries of the life of Christ; they unite us with Christ in our presence, not only in sign, but in the fullness of the mystery of his passion fulfilled, and united to his resurrection (Acedo Moreno 2023, pp. 163–64).

“What [...] was livable in our Savior has passed into his mysteries” (San León Magno, Sermo 74, 2: PL 54, 398; Catechism of the Catholic Church 1993, n. 1116).

This idea is reflected in Benedict XVI’s work on the sacraments. The later Pope breaks down the liturgy of the Easter Vigil throughout his pontificate, showing what the different symbols mean and how in this liturgy we find the story of creation and how Christ brings about a new creation through his paschal mystery. Throughout these homilies, we find the essential elements of salvation history and the foundation of our faith in Jesus Christ, who recapitulates in Him all things, giving meaning to all the Scriptures, and to all the symbols used in the rite—in this case—of the paschal liturgy.

“Every gift, to be such, must have someone willing to receive it” (Francis 2022, n. 3; CG IV, 55, 29).

Italics are ours.

The affirmation must be framed within the horizon of Revelation, of interpersonal communication between God and man, in the preceding paragraph: “This truth, given to man and not demandable by him, is inserted in the context of interpersonal communication and calls upon reason to open itself to it and to accept its profound content” (John Paul II 1998, FR 13). The sign is the bearer, irreducible to what the simple empirical record of the signifier can give us, and that of a communicative intentionality, which cannot be recognized except through the act of a free personal correspondence, thanks to which the *sign* becomes a mediation of an *encounter* [underlining is ours]. . . , therefore, “it is in believing that the person fulfills the most significant act of their own existence; *here, in fact, freedom attains the certainty of truth and decides to live in it*” (*ib.*, Italics in the text) (Bozzolo 2013, pp. 72–73).

- ²⁶ Liturgy would be “a sensitive expression translated into images of dogma and faith”, maintaining that “it is neither instructive in itself nor edifying for the faithful except insofar as it is representative, figurative, expressive of truths already known, practiced and lived” (Navatel 1913, pp. 449–76, 455; Bozzolo 2013, p. 75).
- ²⁷ “The *intellectus fidei* is always originally in relation to the liturgical action of the Church” (Benedict XVI 2007, n. 34).
- ²⁸ Trust because man is not only touched by the action of God, but concretely of the Holy Spirit, who unites us with the word-person who is Jesus Christ. There is an excess of the divine mystery that reveals and acts in fullness of the act by which we attain happiness: the act of worship makes it operable with the Gift (the Holy Spirit), which is the germ of new life that incorporates us into its act. Jesus draws us all to Himself with the power of the “inner instinct” (Sanctifying Spirit), filling the Church with His Spirit; therefore, the ritual action (*praxis*) is the way of the Covenant where we are reached with the Body of the Risen One. Without this trust—the first step in the “human way” of encountering God in Jesus Christ—the Christian ritual space does not unfold (Rego 2012, p. 404).

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