

# The Power of Sacramentals

by Karen Edmisten

Catholics today are often tempted to think of sacramentals merely as "things we've had blessed by a priest." As such, these things are treated with care and remind us of God. Rosaries, crucifixes, blessed palms or a favorite St. Therese medal are outward, visible signs of what we believe, so they serve to strengthen our faith. But is there something more to sacramentals? Is it superstitious, a kind of "magical thinking," as some would claim, to believe that their function is anything more than symbolic? *The Catechism of the Catholic Church* explains that sacramentals "are sacred signs that bear a sacred resemblance to the sacraments. They signify effects, particularly of a spiritual nature, which are obtained through the intercession of the Church. By them men are disposed to receive the chief effect of the sacraments, and various occasions in life are rendered holy" (no. 1667).

Sacramentals become "sacred signs" not because of any inherent worthiness of the object blessed, but because of the blessings given through the Church's intercession. They symbolize holiness (being set apart for and dedicated to God), but they also become holy. The premier example: words. Blessings themselves are sacramentals. "Every blessing praises God and prays for His gifts" (CCC, no. 1671). When blessings are invoked in the name of Jesus, God sanctifies, or "sacramentalizes," the words. He sets them apart for his purpose, illustrating the profound theology behind sacramentals: Symbols are transformed and subsequently can have a transforming effect on one who makes use of them. In addition to the blessings themselves, blessed objects become holy. Water, the sign of the cross, oil, vessels and vestments, salt, a rosary, scapulars and medals, prayer books and crucifixes – all are examples of symbols that become sacred through blessings. This is why a sacramental should never be discarded in a cavalier way. We must not throw a blessed but broken rosary in the trash or toss aside a torn prayer book. Proper disposal is burial or burning. The objects, by virtue of their blessing in Jesus Christ's name, have become sacred and should be treated accordingly.

While it's not at all the case that sacramentals replace sacraments, they "resemble" them insofar as they point us toward them. For example, receiving a sprinkling with holy water at an Easter liturgy doesn't replace baptism. But it does remind us of our baptism and helps us see beyond the sprinkling that's immediately in front of us so we can keep "our eyes fixed on Jesus" (Heb 12:2). Sacramentals "do not confer the grace of the Holy Spirit in the way that the sacraments do, but by the Church's prayer, they prepare us to receive grace and dispose us to cooperate with it" (CCC, no. 1670). One of the important results of that grace, as the old *Baltimore Catechism* notes, is the remission of venial sins (see no. 292). Sacraments are one of the many ways in which God reaches out to us through the material goods He has provided for us.

## Igniting Faith

Sacramentals, then, not only symbolize our faith; they also ignite it. While physically visual, audible and tangible, sacramentals are spiritually dynamic as well. Prayers, blessings and objects help us to see, hear, smell, taste and feel God's work in our lives, not simply by reminding us of Him but by actually grazing us with His touch. "Sacramentals are instituted for the sanctification of certain ministries of the Church, certain states of life, a great variety of circumstances in Christian life, and the use of many things helpful to man" (CCC, no. 1668). When we pray with a blessed rosary before assisting at the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass or cross ourselves using holy water before entering the confessional, we may not be armed with magic amulets, but we are armed in a different kind. Sacramentals open a door and invite God's grace to come in. If their use disposes us to receive the Eucharist with deeper reverence or to confess our sins with greater contrition, that is a very real power. We can't effect this power on our own, but we can participate in it. It is "by the Church's prayer" that sacramentals have spiritual power, and the Church, given authority by Christ (see Mt 16:18), calls all baptized people "to be a blessing and to bless." Thus, at baptism, lay people are commissioned to sanctify, or bless, certain things and situations.

Grace before a meal is one example of a simple "lay blessing." By asking God to bless our food, we elevate the mere intake of calories to something more momentous: a meal becomes an opportunity to praise God, to ask for His grace, and to thank Him for His providential care. Most sacramental blessings, however, and especially those most closely associated with liturgy, must be given by a bishop, priest or deacon. These include the blessings of homes and religious objects, dedication of churches and monasteries, and the consecration of individuals to God. It is through simple actions, then – saying grace before a meal, clutching a rosary in time of despair – that "various occasions in life are rendered holy" (CCC, no. 1667). This is not because we have faith in some "magical" power of

food, water or beads in themselves, but because we have faith in the One who gives us such good gifts in answer to the prayer of the Church.

### **Channels of Power**

Most dramatically, the catechism speaks of a sacramental that, while foreign to most of us, is also quite real: the sacramental of exorcism. "When the Church asks publicly and authoritatively in the name of Jesus Christ that a person or object be protected against the power of the Evil One and withdrawn from his dominion, it is called exorcism. Jesus performed exorcisms and from Him the Church has received the power and office of exorcizing" (no. 1673, emphasis in original). The one being exorcised may not be in a position to desire a greater disposition to grace, or to use a symbol to strengthen his faith. But even if he is helpless, he can be acted upon by an ordained minister of Christ with a sacramental. Were sacramentals mere symbols that give us an attitude boost, the prayers invoked in an exorcism could not be efficacious.

The implications of this reality for our everyday use of rosaries, prayer books and crucifixes are staggering. As the Catechism notes, "the liturgy of the sacraments and sacramentals sanctifies almost every event of [the Faithful's] lives with the Divine grace which flows from the Paschal Mystery of the Passion, Death and Resurrection of Christ. From this source all sacraments and sacramentals draw their power" (no. 1670). Mere symbolic "reminders" could not draw "power" from the Paschal Mystery. Sacramentals do. They are strong medicine indeed. God knows we need this medicine. We need symbols, and He has provided them: the concrete things we grasp, the words we say. But it's vital to remember that the symbols He provides are not only reminders to cling to Him; they provide occasions of grace to help us do so. Through the prayer of the Church, "those things we had blessed by a priest" put us in touch with the power of God. Through them the Divine is at work in the world so that "various occasions in life are rendered holy" (no. 1667). Is that Divine activity "magical"? No, but it is supernatural and powerful. And to the faithful, that's a whole lot better than magic.

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