

EDITORIAL

THE Sacraments, according to St Thomas, follow in the supernatural life the order of the natural life. Birth to the supernatural life is found in the sacrament of baptism, growth in confirmation, daily sustenance in the Eucharist and so on. The comparison is, of course, only a parallel or analogy. Yet some of the sacraments are in fact interwoven with their counterparts in the natural life of man. The most obvious example is that of matrimony in which the sacrament is conferred at the time of actual marriage in the life of a man and woman, and continues throughout their married life. Again, baptism is conferred as soon as possible after the physical birth of a child.

But in some cases the connection between the natural and supernatural has been either lost or applied in too rigid a manner. It has been lost sight of to a large extent in confirming young children, while the parallel of the sacrament of confirmation in the natural life of man lies in the period of adolescence when the child develops the powers of an adult. Certainly this sacrament is a permanent one, giving as it does a sacramental character, so that the supernatural powers bestowed on the child of seven remain grounded in his soul to be called on as he grows up to become a Christian adult. But many have pointed out in recent years that if the sacrament of Christian maturity was conferred at the time of adolescence it would find fewer obstacles to its sanctifying work. The youth who begins to realize the effect of his natural powers just flowering in their fulness, needs special help to master these powers and direct them towards their fulfilment in the Christian life. It has been suggested that many of the lapses from the faith really occur at this age when the child is still at school rather than after they have left school. The child is already confirmed, but if he was prepared at the beginning of his adolescent stage to receive the sacrament of Christian adulthood, he would be able to appreciate the meaning of this special vehicle of grace and call upon the newly acquired strength of the Spirit to meet the new temptations of a maturing mind and body. To use an hackneyed and easily misunderstood phrase, it would be 'sound psychology' to confer confirmation at a time when the psycho-

logical needs of the youth were requiring the graces of this sacrament urgently.

On the other hand there has been too close an association of the anointing of the sick with the hour of death. This sacrament has come to be called ominously one of the 'Last Sacraments' administered when the Christian is about to die. In modern times, when men seem to be more sensitive to and apprehensive of death, this association with death has impaired the efficacy of the sacrament. Doctors and nurses warn the priest not to disturb the patient or give him any cause for fear or anxiety; the patient on the other hand has been brought up to regard 'extreme unction' almost as sealing a sick man for death, and is consequently often very disturbed at the suggestion that he should be anointed.

In the March issue of *Integrity* (New York; 25 cents) concerned with Death, Fr George Tavad, A.A., writes on 'the Sacrament of the Sick' and points out how the emphasis of this sacrament has changed throughout the centuries. Originally its use was regulated by the passage in St James which refers to it. 'Is any man sick among you? Let him bring in the priests of the Church, and let them pray over him, anointing him with oil in the name of the Lord.' St James did not ask, 'Is any man dying among you?' Until the eleventh century therefore, as Fr Tavad says, any sickness was regarded as a legitimate occasion for receiving the sacrament of the sick. 'Until that time the unction that we now administer to the dying was commonly received for any disease. A good woman who had hurt her finger cutting wood could well go to the priest and ask for a little of the "oil for the sick" . . . The sacrament of the sick was for the living, not for the dying.' St James's words suggest this for he goes on to say, 'And the prayer of faith shall save the sick man; and the Lord shall raise him up; and if he be in sins, they shall be forgiven him.'

When the sick person is anointed he should have been taught to realize that the sacrament gives him a strength of spirit which may well affect his physical and psychological make-up in such a way as to achieve a cure. True, if God so wills and the Christian's illness is destined to be fatal, then the Spirit strengthens him to meet the final struggle and the onslaught of the devil. But the symbolism of the oil is that of strength and life, not of sinking and death. Fr Tavad writes: 'If sickness is to be accounted for by natural causes, it retains, like everything created, a supernatural dimen-

sion. It occasions an encounter with the Lord, a participation in his suffering, an anticipation of the dissolution of all things that will prelude their renovation. As such, sickness is the fitting framework for the reception of a special sacrament that brings us the reality of which the present world and its frailty are only a shadow.'

Perhaps, as we live in an age of liturgical reform, when all the outward ceremonies of the Church are being made more realistic, in closer touch with the life of the ordinary man, it may be that the manner of administering these two sacraments will also be restored to something of their early significance. Then confirmation might play a greater part in preventing the leakage of our youth, and the sacrament of the sick be more of a health-giving and comforting act for the suffering. In this way the Christian life of men today would be strengthened and the life of the Spirit given greater opportunity to grow and overcome the special difficulties which now confront it.



CHRIST'S ACTIVE PRESENCE IN HISTORY¹

H.-M. FERET, O.P.

THE Revelation of Jesus Christ.' Those are the first words of John's message to the persecuted Churches. He wished to give them a teaching that would enlighten and comfort them. Although not new, it would be more developed on the person and role of Jesus, 'the faithful witness, First-born among the dead, Prince of the kings of the earth' (1, 5). To give them confidence in the midst of trials, he would make manifest the active presence and entire mastery in temporal history of the risen Lord. The very first doxology already declares this dominant position of Christ in the vision that the exiled apostle will soon unfold:

To him who loves us, and who has washed us from our sins in his blood—and he has made us a kingdom and priests to his God and Father—to him the glory and the power for ages of ages. Amen. (1, 5, 6.)

The first vision (1, 12 *et seq*) further strengthens this impression

¹ Translated from Chapter III of *L'Apocalypse de Saint Jean: Vision Chrétienne de L'Histoire*.