
“Gestis verbisque.” Msgr. Barba: “The sacraments are the Church's greatest treasure, but God never abandons those who yearn for Him”

To protect the sanctity of the sacraments from unbridled arbitrariness and to ensure that the faithful receive the sacraments in the manner established by the Church. Monsignor **Maurizio Barba**, professor at the Pontifical Liturgical Institute in Rome, highlights the central element of the Note ["Gestis Verbis"](#) on the validity of the sacraments published by the Dicastery for the Doctrine of the Faith. **Why was it necessary to reiterate that the form of a sacrament should not be changed?** In addition to promoting the doctrine of faith and morals, the Dicastery for the Doctrine of the Faith is charged with protecting the sanctity of the Sacraments in order to safeguard the gift of salvation that God offers to the faithful in the Church today through visible signs and words. The Sacraments are the greatest treasure which Christ has entrusted to his Church in her journey through history, for the mysteries of Christ's life are at the heart of sacramental life and constitute the foundation of the gifts that Christ bestows in the Sacraments through the ministers of the Church. In recent years, the Dicastery has come across several situations involving the manner of celebrating the Sacraments, with changes to the sacramental formula established by the Church, causing confusion among the faithful and harming some in particular, who had to repeat the Sacrament in its original form. These are specific cases in which failure to respect the integrity of the sacrament has led to its invalidation, and for this reason it has become necessary, at the request of the members of the Dicastery, to intervene so as to reaffirm the Church's traditional teaching on the administration of the sacraments and prevent any divergent interpretations and practices. Thus, while protecting the sanctity of the sacraments from unbridled arbitrariness on the part of those who administer them, the Note also protects the faithful, who have every right to receive the sacraments as established and prescribed by the Church in the liturgical books. By guaranteeing the conditions for their validity from a theological and canonical perspective, it also encourages reflection on the foundation of faith that should underlie the request for the sacraments, together with their pastoral efficacy. **Why is it that the Sacraments are altered by the celebrants?** Full fidelity to the rites prescribed by the Church must be accompanied by a corresponding responsibility on the part of the person called to officiate the sacramental celebration. An erroneous notion of freedom, a distorted use of the scope for adaptation that the liturgy allows, and an undue quest for newness at all costs are the root causes of liturgical abuses. The Note points out that in some cases “there is bona fide intention on the part of the ministers who, inadvertently or motivated by sincere pastoral considerations, modify the basic formulas and rites established by the Church for the celebration of the sacraments, perhaps in order to make them, in their view, more understandable and appropriate. However, the recourse to pastoral motives often conceals, sometimes unknowingly, a subjectivist drift and an intention to manipulate” (n. 3). The dimension of mystery in the liturgy, directly binding the Church and the sacramental celebrations to Christ's salvific event, requires an attitude of fidelity to what is established in the sacramental celebration, and therefore not susceptible to change or variation, and which is a valid norm in the liturgy, the distinctive sign of a celebration recognised as “the liturgy of the Church” and not the private practice of a given priest. **What is meant by sacramental matter and form?** Each sacrament consists of two fundamental elements – matter and form: a set of visible and material actions and words uttered by the minister, a necessary condition for the validity of the sacrament. In one of his sermons on the Ascension, St Leo the Great writes: “what was visible in our Savior has passed over into his sacraments.” This means that the Sacraments are a visible continuation in time of our Saviour who ascended into heaven and thus made himself invisible to humankind.

The Sacraments are, so to speak, the visible actions of the Lord who continues his work in his Church and in the hearts of the faithful.

He makes himself fully present through matter, form and ministry, a classical formula often found in Catholic theology. While it is true that interpersonal communication between persons normally takes place by means of three distinct elements, namely, the person present with his body, the acts he makes and the items he uses to communicate, and the words by which he defines the exact meaning of his actions or the meaning of the objects he communicates with, it is equally true that, in the sacraments, the minister is the one who acts on behalf of Christ in performing sacred functions, the matter consists of the liturgical signs and sacred objects used to communicate the holy grace, and the form consists of the words that define the specific meaning of the sacramental signs and objects involved. Word and matter become one in the sacrament: the word gives form to matter and matter gives concreteness to the word. **What is the difference between lawfulness and validity?** On this point, the terminology involved is clearly of a juridical and moral nature. When we speak of the validity of the sacraments, we are referring to a sacramental celebration performed in full observance of all the necessary constitutive elements, i.e. matter, form and intention of the minister. In the case of lawfulness, it refers to the liturgical rite celebrated in accordance with the prescriptions laid down by the Church in the liturgical corpus. The Magisterium also distinguishes, with regard to the sacraments, between substantial changes, which alter the original meaning of the sacrament and thus invalidate it, and accidental changes, which do not alter its meaning but may invalidate it. In this sense, the Document on the Doctrine of the Faith, in footnote no. 31, points out: "Modifying the form of a sacrament or its matter is always a gravely illicit act. Even on the assumption that a minor alteration does not change the original meaning of a sacrament and therefore does not invalidate it, it remains nevertheless illicit". **What happens if a person has received an invalid sacrament and is unaware of it?** The popular saying "the Lord works in mysterious ways" is not just a slogan for not giving up in the face of life's difficulties, it actually expresses an important truth in the context of the sacramental economy: the works of the Lord are not quite the same as the works of men. In fact, the ways of the Lord are undoubtedly greater than the ways accessible to His Church. Indeed, the Catechism of the Catholic Church states: "The Church affirms that for believers the sacraments of the New Covenant are necessary for salvation". But for the Church this requirement has never meant that God has absolutely bound the gift of his grace to the sacraments. This principle, considered commonplace in medieval theology, reflects the awareness of the early Church that, along with the certainty of the necessity of baptism, there was also the conviction that martyrdom or a life genuinely animated by the pursuit of goodness could offer a way of salvation to those who, for reasons independent of their will, had been unable to receive baptism. Let us also consider the so-called "baptism of desire", received by a person who, after giving an explicit and authentic testimony of faith and desire to receive God's gift of salvation through the Sacrament of Baptism, dies before being able to receive the Sacrament. These examples, taken from the rich Christian tradition, help us understand that while the ordinary way in which we receive the grace of salvation is through the Sacraments, God does not leave those who desire Him without the gift of His salvific presence.

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