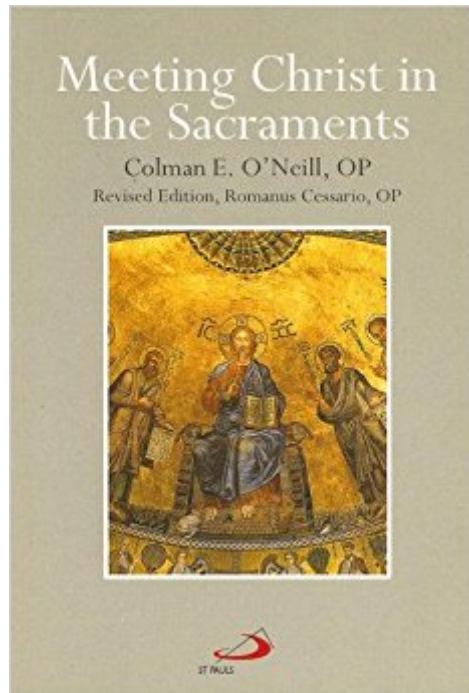




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# Meeting Christ In The Sacraments



## Synopsis

Fundamentals of sacramental theology. A classic.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

Great for deeper appreciation and knowledge of the sacraments.

Book was recommended on Catholic Answers Live. Good for parish, catechetical teachers, but not parish students. Go to catholic.com for more information on the sacraments.

thank you

What do all the sacraments share in common? What do they do, and how do they do it? In clear logical and solidly Catholic depth, O'Neill illustrates these things. That Christ is the center and source of the sacraments, and the implications for this in the Liturgical as well as daily life of the Church is made clear in the treatments of each. Some Sacraments, especially those of initiation, create a character, allowing the Christian to participate in the body of Christ, that is the Church. This is very nicely illustrated in the thorough discussion of the Eucharist, where the differences between the ministerial priesthood, and the common priesthood of all the baptized is explained. Grace is provided to humanity sacramentally, as we are human with physical bodies, senses, etc. Christ assumed our humanity that His Divinity might work through it to redeem it. Christ continues this

work from eternity through the sacraments, the culmination of which and the source through which we as a Church are sacrament to the world, is through the Eucharist. There is a somewhat strange section on the part of our Lady in the mass. There is obvious devotion and respect here. It seems there was a contemporary movement to which O'Neill was addressing. The section seemed out of place. Material for further study, meditation and contemplation is provided, but I felt a better job could have been done here. An older term is used very frequently, which can become annoying. Rather than "covenant", he uses the term "alliance". I think this also is an indicator of his contemporary circles of reference.

This would be to me one of the worst theological books that I have ever read. The content is fine, but the abstraction of the idea makes the reader want to go to sleep. It is so difficult to pay attention due to the long phrases, the terrible "plasticity" of the ideas. There is very little concrete and too much for the normal mind to grasp. The author could help by using analogies and concrete examples to explain. Very unsatisfied.

Intervene *Intervene* is a word to note from Colman O'Neill's *Meeting Christ in the Sacraments* (New York: St. Paul Press, 1991). According to O'Neill, this is what Christ must do in order to be efficaciously present in the sacraments and so to draw the men and women of the Church into his redeeming exodus unto the Father: he must intervene. This is noteworthy, especially if we consider it in light of the coinciding work of the Second Vatican Council, whose ecclesiology and liturgiology assert rather that Christ is already present in the liturgical assembly, such that a sacramental intervention on His part would appear rather awkward. One does not often intervene into one's own actions. Nevertheless, we find this term confidently and repeatedly employed by Fr. O'Neill throughout his treatment of the sacraments. A sacrament, for O'Neill, is precisely an intervention on the part of Christ into the context of liturgical worship, which would otherwise amount to a mere expression of the Church's faith in the work of redemption (see pp. 29-42). It is in this way that the individual Christian is united to the saving Pasch of Christ and thereby ushered into the heavenly sanctuary, where Christ eternally offers the tokens of his sacrifice to the Father. The fruits of that sacrifice are applied to the Christian according to the various aspects respectively signified in the sacramental celebration. Thus Baptism conforms

the person to Christ such that he can cooperate in receiving other sacramental grace, Confirmation such that he can witness to grace, Eucharist such that he can commune with Christ and enter into His sacrifice, etc. In each of these diverse modes, however, the master pattern is always that of Christ's passion, death and resurrection, by which act of obedience the human will is fully rendered in submission to the Father, the alienation of sin is overcome, and the Sabbath communion for which man was created is re-established. The sacraments thus initiate man into the path of moral rejuvenation of death to sin and new life in imitation of Christ whereby man's access to the Father is re-opened. Christ Himself opened this path through the mysteries of His earthly life, and now stands before the Father so that His glorified humanity can be the instrument of our renewal through the medium of the sacraments. O'Neill thus works out his theology of the sacraments from the basis of his soteriology. In his opening chapter, he outlines the basic structure of Christ's saving work from a Thomistic perspective, and then proceeds in the succeeding chapters to position the sacraments as the privileged means by which the merits of that sacrifice are applied to individuals. Only in a second step – perhaps an afterthought – does the notion of the Church-as-sacrament enter upon the scene, just before the sacraments are considered individually. There is certainly much to be commended in those considerations: in particular, O'Neill's treatment of the liturgical implications of the baptismal character offers fruitful insight into the foundations of the *actuosa participatio* of the lay faithful, and his very positive exposition of matrimony anticipates in many respects elements of John Paul II's Theology of the Body. But while the ecclesiological import of the fourth and thirteenth chapters provide a welcome refreshment, this comes too late to sufficiently affect the general presentation. The overarching logic of the book is marked rather by an individualism that is augmented by a rationalistic overconfidence in the absolute validity of human categories. These influences combine to lead O'Neill to lightly dismiss Odo Casel's thesis that the mysteries of Christ's earthly life are rendered present to the faithful in the liturgy in such a way that they can participate in them: "That we should be baptized into the actual death of Christ and into his act of resurrection does sound very impressive; but what can it possibly mean?" (67) O'Neill considers such a theory to obviously contradict the conditions of created, temporal reality. But in this he fails to consider deeply the implications of the faith, both in terms of the mystery of the Incarnation, and in terms of the Church as the Body of Christ, animated by the Holy Spirit. These mysteries might well provide an intelligible means for discussing the real connection between earthly Christian life and

the earthly mysteries of the Redeemer. But O'Neill burns both bridges, reducing the Incarnation to a matter of mere instrumentality (63), and the Church as Body of Christ to a mere metaphor for the moral union of the members of the Church with Christ (51-53). This forces the author nearly to bend over backwards in contorted reasoning in his attempts to forge a tenuous connection between the individual believer and the paschal event. In one particularly obtuse section, O'Neill matter-of-factly asserts that Christ, by virtue of his beatific vision on the Cross, both consciously knew and intentionally willed every individual sacramental application of his sacrifice throughout all of history as he was dying, which conscious intentions were preserved in Christ's ascension to the Father, so that now, before the Father, they can be applied in history through the sacramental interventions of the risen Christ (55-58). We are sure that this schema follows quite logically from some unavoidable principles, but nevertheless the brutality of this technical mastery over the mysteries of the faith somehow causes us to cringe. In the end, this is the impression I am left with by O'Neill's book: some very laudable elements, some impressive displays of logic, but all mixed up with something that makes me cringe—a grotesque combination of the last gasps of a confident twentieth century neo-scholasticism, an early Rahnerianism that tends already toward the reduction of grace to the ethical and of liturgy to a mere expression, and a faint recognition that perhaps some new insights are afoot that have been missed and so need to be waved at. He waves at ecclesiology and liturgiology, but fails to listen deeply. This failure is tied perhaps to an ultimate discomfort with the mystery of the Incarnation, whose logic O'Neill occasionally attempts to transcend, as when he claims that "the mystery of Christ has no necessary place in this scheme [of grace]" (75). In abstract theory, perhaps not; but once the theologian begins to speculate about what God might or might not have done, he has stepped outside the sphere of the historical form of revelation, and into that of rationalism. It leaves a sour taste. Among other things, it prevents one from fully grasping the import of Christ's incarnational presence as it is continued in the Church. And so Christ needs to intervene, as it were, much more radically in O'Neill's sacramental theology, to which He often seems accidental, and this is its failure.

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