

Catholics, Sacraments and Magic

Fr. Dwight Longenecker

As Halloween approaches it brings to mind witches and wizards, magic and mystery, and recent events and experiences in the Catholic Church cause me to ponder the attitude so many of my fellow Catholics seem to have about the sacraments and sacramentals. Too many treat them like magic and the priests like magicians.

I don't suggest that they do this consciously. The fact that it is unconscious makes the problem even more difficult to assess and address. I can explain what I mean by some examples.

1. **Blessed candles and the three days of darkness. The prophecies about the three days of darkness are highly suspect private revelations.** If you want to learn more check out Jimmy Akin's podcast on the subject [here](#). **Even if there is to be three days of darkness during which no man made light sources will work how will you light your blessed candles?** Don't get me wrong, blessed candles are just fine, but they're not magic. They are **candles which are blessed for a particular purpose—to function as devotional images. They don't have magic powers.**
2. **The Brown Scapular. I appreciate the desire to wear a special token of one's devotion to the Blessed Virgin** and to wear a visible sign of witness and reminder, but it's not a talisman or magic lucky charm. Sure, **if you live the life of faith of which the scapular is a sign and symbol you will be delivered from damnation,**

but the scapular itself is not some kind of Catholic lucky rabbit's foot.

3. ***Undue veneration of the clergy:*** *Yes we are in persona Christi* –yes, the priest has been called and set apart for a special ministry and yes he has a special charism and power. However, **he is also a man with ordinary desires, flaws and faults.** He's not a magician or a wizard. Love him and see Christ in him, but also see him and know him for what he is. **If he's a good priest he will thank you for your realism and compassion. If he's a bad priest he will remain on the pedestal on which you have placed him**—and that will be partially your fault.
4. **Grandma's bathtub baptism:** I'm sorry to throw the baby out with the bathwater, but well meaning Grandmothers who, (after their children have not followed through and had grand-baby baptized) surreptitiously baptize the baby during bath time should know that this is not magic. Yes, I know anyone may baptize in cases of emergency and yes, I know **if it is done with the proper formula the baptism is valid**, but this practice indicates what I'm criticizing—a magical view of the sacraments. **Baptism should take place within the context of the family of faith with the proper ordinary minister and with the parents and godparents being present and consenting.**
5. **The blessing of people or practices that God does not bless. A priest cannot bless the re-marriage of divorced people nor can he bless a same sex union. A blessing is not magic. It does not magically transform something God condemns into something he accepts.**

This leads to a necessary distinction between sacraments and magic. Put simply, **a sacrament or sacramental is the church's co-operation with God to pour His blessings and graces into our lives through physical means. A sacrament changes us it doesn't change God. Magic, on the other hand, is some sort of rite, ritual or belief that uses physical means to manipulate God or God's truth. Through the sacraments we are always saying to God "Thy will be done." Through magic we are saying to God, "My will be done and you do it."**

This attitude of making God do our bidding is often present among very devout and otherwise faithful Catholics. Sometimes it shows itself not through the mis-use of sacraments, sacramentals and blessings, but through undue self criticism and scrupulosity. **"If I am only good enough, pure enough, prayerful enough God will love me and save me."**

Of course I am in favor of people being good, pure and prayerful, but I am also in favor of the Divine Mercy—the belief and trust that God is at work in my life and he is aiding me by his grace to become the saint he has destined me to be—and that I don't need magic to get me there.