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# PART I: UNDERSTANDING SACRAMENTS FOR A MODERN AGE

## CHAPTER I. RENEWED SACRAMENTS IN THE DEVELOPMENT OF CHRISTIANITY

Since 1922, the seven sacraments have been celebrated in a renewed form. They stand at the center of the work of The Christian Community, which was founded as a *Movement for Religious Renewal*. Because religious renewal has been a constantly recurring theme in the evolution of the Christian church it may at first appear that The Christian Community belongs in a series of reform movements reaching into the past. Especially toward the end of the Middle Ages the call for reform was growing, as internal and external conditions of the church corresponded less and less to human beings' changing consciousness and the infamous state of ecclesiastical affairs was worsening. With increasing vehemence an internal purification of the church was expected by church and civil authorities while the call for "reform of the church in head and members"<sup>1</sup> grew louder and louder. Thus began the reform councils<sup>2</sup>; through four

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<sup>1</sup> These words were used for the first time at the 1311/12 council of Vienna.

<sup>2</sup> Five councils held in Lateran (1123, 1139, 1179, 1215, 1512–1517), the council at Constance (1414–1418) and the council of Basel/Ferrara/Florence, beginning in 1431.

centuries they repeatedly dealt with the same questions, but with little effect—the necessary breakthrough was not achieved. Eventually, instead of a reform of the church, the Reformation broke out, initiated by the priest-monk Martin Luther (1483–1546). At first, Luther also wanted nothing more than to reform the existing church. For this reason, wherever the Reformation took hold, it was understood that the same church buildings would be used and, at first, the same ordained *Catholic* priests would be speaking at the same altars, albeit with different words. However, to the extent that they were protected by sovereign princes, these priests took the liberty of finally beginning with longed-for reforms. In so doing they freed themselves from the authority of Rome, committing apostasy in the eyes of the Pope, whom they vehemently rejected; in the eyes of Martin Luther, the Pope was the Antichrist residing in Rome.

Thus, a process began that eventually led to unintended consequences. At first, the Reformation's goal was internal and ecclesiastical, but ultimately it nevertheless led to the foundation of another, *second* church. What had been unthinkable in the Middle Ages became a reality; earlier it was impossible to conceive of *Church* in the plural, for there was only *one* Church for all Christians.

It could be objected that the great Schism had already occurred in the eleventh century with the separation between the Eastern Orthodox Church and the Western Roman Catholic Church. Nevertheless, despite all the painful feelings connected with the event, the separation was (and still is) not understood to have created two Churches, but rather a separation within the one Church. The priests in the Eastern Church stand in the same recognized line of

apostolic succession as the priests in the Western Church; their performance of the sacraments is still valid in the eyes of the Roman Catholic Church. The understanding that it is a separation within the one church allows full Communion with Orthodox churches.<sup>1</sup> It is thus only through the Reformation that a second church arose, one in which the foundational facts of the Catholic Church have been nullified.<sup>2</sup> However, entirely in keeping with the consciousness that belongs in the Middle Ages, the Catholic Church's understanding is that a second church cannot even exist. Consequently, Protestants stand outside the one Church, and full Communion with that church is not possible. In any case, the Protestant Baptism *can* be recognized, because *in an emergency* Baptism can be performed without any connection to the ordained priesthood.

As the reformers based everything entirely on the Bible as the *word of God*, sermons acquired unprecedented significance in Christianity, used as both proclamation and edification within a church service. This was completely in keeping with a new state of human consciousness on the threshold of the modern age when people increasingly began to feel the need to form their own judgments, particularly in religious matters. Of course, this conscious awareness of

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<sup>1</sup> According to Catholic church law the possibility exists of a limited sacramental fellowship for the following sacraments: Eucharist (Lord's Supper with Communion), Confession and Anointing of the sick.

<sup>2</sup> The basic change is seen in the fact that there is no longer any ordained, consecrated priesthood. Protestant ministers are not found in the line of apostolic succession. Of the seven sacraments from the church in the Middle Ages Luther retained only Baptism and the Lord's Supper, because he could find grounds for them alone in the Bible. His doctrine of the Eucharist rejects the idea that bread and wine are actually transformed into the body and blood of Christ, the Transubstantiation.

one's own spiritual autonomy is still entirely appropriate for today, but this meant that Protestantism lost the Mass; additionally, most ritual elements have disappeared from church services.<sup>1</sup> Furthermore, the understanding of sacraments prevailing until then in the (Catholic) Church was abandoned.

Given this historical background, we can ask ourselves how The Christian Community sees itself in the stream of Christian development. From the beginning, its stated mission, the renewal of the religious life, was not intended as an internal renewal of any Church (nor as a reform), even though several of its most influential founders were Protestant theologians. Friedrich Rittelmeyer even held a leading position within the Lutheran church. The idea of a "Third Church," (from Schelling<sup>2</sup>) played a certain role for the founders. This Third Church was understood to be a future-oriented synthesis of Catholicism and Protestantism, much like the Johannine church that followed the Petrine and Pauline forms of Christendom.<sup>3</sup> Johannes Werner Klein was the one in whom this ideal first came to life.<sup>4</sup> Yet a

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<sup>1</sup> To be sure, there are several areas of Protestantism in the twentieth century that do again include liturgical elements. See, for example, Walter Birnbaum, *Das Kultusproblem und die liturgischen Bewegungen des 20. Jahrhunderts*; and Wilhelm Stählin, *Berneuchen antwortet*.

<sup>2</sup> Cf. Goebel, *Schelling: Kunder einer neuen Epoche des Christentums*, pp. 118ff.

<sup>3</sup> Eberhard Kurras, *Christus-Erfahrungen: Petrus–Paulus–Johannes*.

<sup>4</sup> Already in 1919, he wrote in a letter: "The ideal that stands before me is the institution of a great, spirit-bearing, Christian Church for all the people. You know my reverence for the Catholic ritual as the protector of true, great mysteries. . . . But as a man I stand before the fact that the Catholic Church has failed, like every other. . . . It rules through authority, enlivened with the power of the mysteries. . . . We demand the achievements of Protestantism for everyone: spiritual freedom and freedom of conscience. . . . A new church can only be

correct understanding of The Christian Community does not confirm this picture: it certainly does not wish to be any kind of Third Church, at least not in the same way as the Catholic and Evangelical Lutheran Church in Germany. For many priests in The Christian Community the word *church* even had a negative connotation for a very long time—they preferred to refer to The Christian Community not as a church, but as a movement (for religious renewal), despite their creed clearly naming the Church as a crucial fact in its eleventh sentence: “Communities whose members feel the Christ within themselves may feel united in a Church to which all belong who are aware of the health-bringing power of the Christ.” These words can illuminate what is meant by the word *church*, for although this new kind of church is something very different from an earthly based medieval church, it nevertheless has no plural. It is *the one Church* that *all true Christians* belong to. Insofar as there are undoubtedly many different congregations and communities “whose members feel Christ within themselves,” The Christian Community recognizes communities—not Churches—that confess Christianity. Furthermore, there could hardly be any reason for The Christian Community to judge other communities with respect to their Christianity, for what makes a community Christian is the actual people who “feel the Christ within themselves.”<sup>5</sup> For this reason,

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built upon anthroposophic ground...” (Gädek, *Die Gründer der Christengemeinschaft*, p. 89.

<sup>5</sup> TRANSLATOR’S NOTE: The German name of The Christian Community is *Die Christengemeinschaft*. As a compound noun its two parts are nouns, not adjectives. The most accurate translation would therefore be *The Community of Christians*. In 1928, when the movement came to the English-speaking world, it was decided that a simpler appellation would be more appropriate. Hence, the word *Christian* became an adjective.

baptisms performed in other faith communities are not generally judged by The Christian Community with respect to their validity, nor in terms of how Christian they might be. At most, such a judgment might be thinkable with regard to individuals—that is, whether or not someone is a *true* Christian—but such a state of soul is so intimate that it falls outside the scope of any external evaluation and would be for God alone to judge.

Ultimately, when it comes to communities that confess Christianity, the question arises: Was the path to a relationship with Christ Jesus cultivated within such communities appropriate for our time? In other words: Is there a concrete relationship to the spiritual world (not just theoretical and abstract) beyond the world of senses, and is there complete freedom of conscience and freedom of thought in the realm of religion? Simply put: Is there a concrete experience of “God in spirit,”<sup>1</sup> and does absolute religious freedom exist? The Christian Community exists only because there are people who seek a path to Christ appropriate for this time in Earth’s history.

When we speak here of *renewed sacraments*, we do not mean that something already existing has been reformed, for it is not the case that the Roman Catholic or Orthodox sacraments have somehow been revised by The Christian Community. It also cannot be said that The Christian Community grew out of or is derived from any existing church. To say it directly and simply, The Christian Community has come forth from the revelation of Christ in our time. Christ’s revelation did not end with his appearance 2,000 years ago, as formulated once again by the Catholic Church

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<sup>1</sup> John 4:23.



in 1965 at the second Vatican Council (1962–1965)<sup>2</sup> but continues from age to age. Patristic age Christianity had a different form from that of the Reformation and reached yet another stage in the twentieth century. Today we call his progressive movement through time the *second coming*. It is the source of true renewal in Christianity, out of which the *one* Christian Church can be established today. It is also the source of ritual forms appropriate for the modern age as well as the origin of the succession of a priesthood at work on the earth. The renewed seven-fold nature of the sacraments also originates from this source. Powerful spiritual assistance was necessary in order for The Christian Community to come into being; namely it required a man who had fully conscious access to this spiritual source, someone perhaps comparable to Moses who received the Levitical rituals from Yahweh on Mount Sinai. In that same way, Rudolf Steiner was the crucial midwife for the birth of The Christian Community.

The essential elements of the rituals of The Christian Community, their words and gestures, were not created by human beings—e.g., by a committee of theologians—but rather they originated from Christ’s revelation, mediated by a human being. With respect to their Christian content, for The Christian Community they have the same order of priority as the New Testament, which also originated through Christ’s revelation. The Christian Community acknowledges no other source of revelation. This statement seems necessary because the assumption, or even sometimes the

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<sup>2</sup> “The Christian dispensation, therefore, as the new and definitive covenant, will never pass away and we now await no further new public revelation before the glorious manifestation of our Lord Jesus Christ.” *Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation*, chap. 1, article 4. Nov. 18, 1965.

assertion, is often expressed (above all by theologians from other Christian streams) that The Christian Community has Anthroposophy as a second and possibly more important source of revelation above and beyond the New Testament. This is not true. Altogether, Anthroposophy is, by its very nature, a (spiritual) science; that means entirely grounded in human reason. Of course, this assumes that the human capacity for knowledge can be expanded beyond the kind of thinking bound to the world of the senses. In this case, Anthroposophy is not simply given as a revelation but rather must be worked for, through thought. It is not what the Brockhaus dictionary defines as *revelation*: "...a revealing, leading back to God, of a previously 'hidden' religious reality, which human beings experience as existentially important for their lives and cannot be understood or established by means of human reason." For this reason also, Rudolf Steiner rejected any doctrinal authority for Anthroposophy: nothing should be "received because of faith in authority."<sup>1</sup> Those who find no access to understanding specific anthroposophic ideas can let the matter rest. This, of course, also applies to priests of The Christian Community. But it must also be said that it is precisely through the anthroposophical worldview that many people are able to find the traditional contents of Christianity (e.g., Trinity, Baptism, Eucharist, Resurrection) to be understandable for the first time. Of course, understanding something does not finalize anything. This is also true for the contents of the New Testament. In this sense, for the vast majority of priests in The Christian Community, Anthroposophy plays a crucial role in carrying

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<sup>1</sup> CW 254 (CW = The Collected Works of Rudolf Steiner), lecture of Oct. 18, 1915. Cf. "Cited Titles from The Collected Works of Rudolf Steiner" in this book.

out their profession. *It is a help in understanding, not a source of revelation.*

However, the text of the rituals presents an entirely different matter. The words in the rituals are indeed given as revelation, just as the New Testament is given. These words have an integral authority within them that is perceptible for those who live with their meaning over time. Whether, or to what extent, they also understand the words is a question of religious maturity as well as actual experience living with the rituals. It is a growth process that never ends. For this reason, the freedom possessed by every priest in The Christian Community to teach the truth as they see fit (especially with respect to Anthroposophy) finds a limit with the words of the rituals. Even the wording of the rituals, which might not be understood by a priest, cannot be challenged without at the same time putting him- or herself into question. An essential step that must be taken during preparation for Ordination in The Christian Community entails attaining certainty that one will never intend to consciously change the words of rituals.

What is not true for Anthroposophy does apply to the rituals of The Christian Community. As a second source of revelation, they are on equal footing with the New Testament. This also means that the relationship between *liturgy and theology is exactly the opposite* of that found in the Catholic Church, where liturgy can only attest to what is certain in faith. For the Catholic Church theology has primacy over liturgy, as is stated in *Munificentissimus Deus*, the Papal Bull of Pope Pius XII from 1950: *Since the liturgy of the church does not create Catholic faith, but rather presupposes it, and religious practices come forth from this*

*faith as fruit from a tree...* (This is the same Bull in which Mary's bodily assumption into heaven also became official dogma.) Here liturgy arises from theological insight. New liturgical forms can result from the decisions arrived at in a Council. Thus, major changes were made in the liturgical realm as a result of the second Vatican Council. These include the creation of an entirely new ritual for the Baptism of children, which replaced the 2,000-year-old custom of using the adult Baptism ritual for children. This change would have been unthinkable in The Christian Community, where the forms and texts of rituals cannot be created—nor even changed—based on theological insights.

Interestingly, the illusion that it is possible to create ritual based on theology played a problematic role in the founding of The Christian Community. After Johannes Werner Klein was the first to ask Rudolf Steiner a question concerning the possibility of religious renewal in February of 1920, he received this answer: *If you carry out what you have in mind here—and the forms for it can be found—then that would signify something monumental for humankind.* Klein was thinking of Schelling's third church, which he had envisioned as going beyond both Catholicism and Protestantism. Steiner's response had been to offer help. However, Klein misunderstood and created a plan for future years: Klein thought he should end his studies at the University, begin a study of all the cults and rituals of humankind, proclaim Anthroposophy, create an organization, create new rituals. At Easter 1921, Klein realized his mistake. The foundation of The Christian Community had thereby been delayed by a year or more. Meanwhile a circle of founders began to form and began collaborating

with Rudolf Steiner, which eventually led to the spiritual revelation of new ritual forms.

The Christian Community did not grow out of Anthroposophy; neither are its rituals simply anthroposophical texts, nor did they come into existence because of one man's philosophy. They arose through the mediation of Rudolf Steiner out of the revelation of Christ. In the words of Rudolf Steiner, they were "provided through Anthroposophy."<sup>1</sup> He wanted to convey that the rituals originated not in his own personal philosophy but in an objective fount of spiritual reality. Fundamental theological insights can be achieved through working with such ritual texts in the life of a congregation. This is the reverse of the Catholic understanding.<sup>2</sup>

This brings us to our starting point: the texts of the rituals themselves. Our method for seeking an understanding of the renewed sacraments will begin with the cultus itself.<sup>3</sup> Additionally, Anthroposophy provides crucial insights and perspectives. Ultimately, we will address the question of exactly where The Christian Community fits into the history of Christianity. Even though its origin is not found in any of the existing churches, nevertheless it belongs in the

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<sup>1</sup> CW 260a, Dornach 1987, p. 397.

<sup>2</sup> It should be noted that within Catholic theology there are other views that see liturgy as a "Factum Ecclesiae" (Pius IX), that is, as a force sufficient to establish dogmas. They refer to a statement by Pope Coelestin I (432): "*Legem credenda statuat lex orandis*" (May the law of prayer determine the law of faith). Pope Pius IX quoted this principle as a precedent when in 1854 he declared the dogma of Mary's immaculate conception. Otherwise this view is not generally accepted in Catholic theology.

<sup>3</sup> The texts of these rituals have been published as part of the complete edition of Rudolf Steiner's works. The theological courses are CW 343, 344, and 345.

ecclesiastical stream of Christianity<sup>1</sup> and builds upon existing sacramental theology. This is especially true for Catholic theology until the Council of Trent (1545–1563). We can disregard what emerges afterward, “for post trentine theology has contributed nothing essential to fructify sacramental theology.”<sup>2</sup> New developments in Catholic theology in the twentieth century are indeed of interest on many issues (e.g., theology of the mysteries) and worth engaging by The<sup>3</sup> Christian Community. However, those developments have not served as foundation blocks in the narrow sense, for the movement has begun its own theological tradition.

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<sup>1</sup> CW 343, Oct. 4, 1921

<sup>2</sup> Finkenzeller, in *Lexikon für Theologie und Kirche*. p. 224.

<sup>3</sup> Council of Trent (*Concilium Tridentinum*) held between 1545 and 1563 in Trent (Trento, in northern Italy) issued 17 dogmatic decrees covering disputed aspects of the Catholic Church.