

“YEAR OF THE EUCHARIST”—RECEIVING GRACE & BEARING FRUIT—BY FR. STEVE LAPE

During my 5 years at St. Augustine’s Seminary in Toronto (1994-99), my priestly studies introduced me to many different words and expressions pertaining to life in the Church, especially regarding the 7 Sacraments (which, as a quick review, include: Baptism, Eucharist, Confirmation, Reconciliation, Anointing of the Sick, Marriage, & Holy Orders). One of the terms I learned, regarding the celebration of the Sacraments, was a Latin expression, “ex opere operato,” which means “from the work worked.” What that suggests is that when the Sacraments are validly celebrated, the power of God’s grace offered through the Sacrament comes from Jesus Christ Himself and does not necessarily depend on the worthiness of the minister offering it or the person receiving it. For example, even if a validly ordained priest or bishop leads a rather unholy life, but still performs all the Church’s Mass requirements (saying the proper words, doing the proper actions), the power of Christ’s Spirit still comes through. As the Catechism of the Catholic Church states: “...by virtue of the saving work of Christ....It follows that the ‘sacrament is not wrought by the righteousness of either the celebrant or the recipient, but by the power of God.’” (#1128)

This is a very important understanding that surfaced during the 4th & 5th centuries, due to the early Church heresy known as donatism. According to this belief, clergy had to be totally faultless in their ministry work in order for the sacraments that they celebrated to be effective and valid. Donatism got its name from a bishop named Donatus Magnus who led this movement, leading his followers into schism, away from the rest of the Church, and promoting themselves as the true adherents to what Christ intended the Church to be. Because some clergy had given in to the pressures of Christian persecution under Roman Emperor Diocletian in the early years of the 4th century (with some clergy deciding to offer acts of worship to Roman gods and to turn over certain church books and property to Roman authorities, instead of enduring torture

or martyrdom), Donatus Magnus declared such clergy to be unworthy to resume their roles after the persecutions ceased, and even re-baptized a number of them. St. Miltiades, who served as Pope from 311 to 314 (during which time the Roman Emperor Constantine legalized Christianity throughout the Roman Empire), condemned the actions of Donatus, especially for causing a schism in the Church over what he was teaching. Later councils would declare donatism as heretical, although the donatist movement lasted for several more centuries.

With this background, we should also realize that in order to “bear fruit” from the grace we receive from Christ through the Sacraments, it’s important for the minister and the recipients to have a strong desire and sincere openness to God’s power in their lives, so that the grace received may not be given in vain, but to become apparent through the works and words of love and faith which they offer to others. This includes obedience to the teachings of Christ’s Church and striving to lead holy lives, so that others may



more greatly sense, through them, the wondrous love and the joyful, saving hope that Jesus presents to the whole world through His dying & rising. The Latin term to describe this is “ex opere operantis,” which means “from the work of the worker/doer.” This suggests that the grace we receive from our Lord

through the Sacraments is not magic—they don’t automatically make someone lead holy lives. There has to be a faithful response to (and conscious cooperation with) God’s gift within our lives. Thus, whenever we come to the Lord’s table in the Eucharist, we should do so with proper reverence and strong intent to do the will of Christ, being properly disposed to receive the Sacrament (that is, be properly prepared in realizing what we’re celebrating and without the stain of serious sin on our souls.) That should be one of our ongoing challenges in our Catholic faith journey: What are we doing to prepare to be in the proper mindset for each Mass we attend? What are we doing to make the most of what God wants to gift us with?