



**Hahn, Scott.**

*Swear to God: The Promise and Power of the Sacraments*

New York: Doubleday, 2004. Pp. 232. Hardcover. \$23.00. ISBN 978038550931.

Nick Norelli

Rightly Dividing the Word of Truth

New Jersey

More than a primer on sacramental theology, Scott Hahn's *Swear to God*, is an eminently readable treatise on biblical covenants and the signs associated with them. This should come as no surprise to anyone who has read Hahn's work as he's been studying covenant for decades. In fact, he says that "there is no idea more important to Scripture—and no idea more important to your life—than the idea of *covenant*" (60). He continues by saying that "the covenant cannot be understood apart from its divinely appointed signs" (60).

And that's how the sacraments are to be understood; as the signs that mark God's covenant with his people. Hahn tells us that they are symbolic, but more than just symbols; memorials, but more than just reminders; rites of passage, but more than just rituals. He describes them as "divine actions on the order of the creation of the universe" (7). He tells us that they "marked moments in history—world history, salvation history, and personal history—when God was making a new start with his people" (7).

Hahn also tells us that the sacraments "give grace, which is a share in God's life" (13). "All seven sacraments are actions of Jesus Christ. In Christ, heaven and earth meet, time and eternity unite most fruitfully. . . . In Christ, and in His sacraments, there is a marital bond between God and man, between the invisible and the visible" (28-29). And Hahn unpacks these statements in systematic order with a summary of what the sacraments are and where they can be found in Scripture.

Hahn describes the Eucharist as “the sacrament of sacraments” and “the source and summit of all Christian life” while acknowledging that “Baptism is the doorway to all the other sacraments” (154) and yet he spends about three chapters (12-14) emphasizing marriage! And why not? The Church is the Bride of Christ awaiting the day when we partake in the great wedding feast of the Lamb! But one thing that Hahn does a great job of, especially as the book progresses, is showing how the sacraments are all intertwined.

Hahn began the book with an anecdote from his time in seminary when he found the sacraments to be boring. Of course he was a Protestant back then and only believed in two sacraments, which he thought of as being largely symbolic. But the more he studied covenant the more he realized the importance of the sacraments and his conversion to Catholicism would help him to realize their ultimate significance. But what for the Protestant who reads this book? Do they need to make the move to Roman Catholicism to embrace the importance of sacramental theology?

A Catholic might say yes. I'd disagree. I think that Hahn's book is the antidote to boredom with the sacraments among Catholics, but it's also a stimulus to Protestants who haven't really appreciated them to begin with. And appreciating them and partaking in them hinges, largely I think, on one's understanding of priesthood. Of course for Hahn only those validly ordained priests in the Catholic Church can administer many of the sacraments (marriage [which is only witnessed by a priest] and baptism are exceptions); but even he acknowledges a time when all men were priests.

The priesthood was passed down from father to son before Israel's idolatry in the wilderness. I'd argue that in Christ the priesthood has been restored to all believers and as brothers of Christ and sons of God we're all valid ministers of the sacraments. I wouldn't expect a Catholic or Orthodox believer to agree, of course, but then again if they did they'd be Protestant! This does raise some interesting issues for how Protestants would appreciate and practice the sacrament of Holy Orders. I'd love to see a multiple views book dedicated to just this topic!

I think the major strength of *Swear to God* is Hahn's ability to communicate in simple language without being simplistic. He's able to draw from the Church Fathers, Thomas Aquinas, and the Catechism of the Catholic Church (along with reference to some Jewish rabbis) without overwhelming the reader. This is the kind of book that will help readers coming from any perspective to appreciate that there's probably more going on with the sacraments than they had originally thought, and wherever we fall on these issues, a deeper appreciation is always a good thing!