

*A Guide to the Sacraments*, by John Macquarrie

reviewed by [Thomas D. Parker](#) in the [November 3, 1999](#) issue

John Macquarrie's small book on the sacraments offers everything those who know his work have come to expect. Despite some puzzling exceptions (Luther is not indexed, for example), it exhibits the breadth of the Anglican "middle way." Macquarrie primarily relies on patristic, orthodox Roman Catholic and Anglican doctrinal traditions as they inform today's official ecumenical discussions, rather than on the evangelical traditions of the Reformation. He seems mainly to be addressing the conversation between Canterbury and Rome, not the wider ecumenical discussions that now also include the Pentecostals.

In setting out the boundaries of his subject matter, Macquarrie appeals to recent philosophy. He frames his discussion with a consideration of the "sacramental universe" (William Temple)—a universe in which finite things, words and gestures point beyond themselves to the mystery of the sacred. While all things manifest the presence of God, they do not do so equally. Sacramental realities offer a clearing in which the inexpressible may show itself. Sacraments are sensible signs that reveal divine grace and thus become "doors to the sacred."

Christians focus on a specific historical configuration of sacraments rather than on the general sacramentality of all things. As Edward Schillebeeckx has said, Jesus is the "primordial sacrament," the *res* or spiritual matter of the sacraments. Christ is both their subject and their source. The validity of the sacraments depends on Christ, who is exhibited in them for the faithful. The traditions out of which Macquarrie works have developed patterns of authorization to safeguard the sacraments—that is, to ensure this central meaning.

Macquarrie discusses each of the "seven commonly recognized" sacraments, illuminating their meaning by considering disputes about them in the light of recent biblical, historical and traditional studies. His interpretation of the sacraments sums up ecumenical discussions of them and uses the Anglican tradition to illustrate how they embody the central meaning of Christ.

I was puzzled by Macquarrie's extended treatment of the sacrament of ordination and of the authority and validity of ministry in relation to a "universal bishop." His

arguments for a basically Latin form of episcopacy seem to have more to do with church politics and authority systems than with ministry or baptism. Perhaps we need to consider anew the issue of how church embodies Christ through the sacraments.