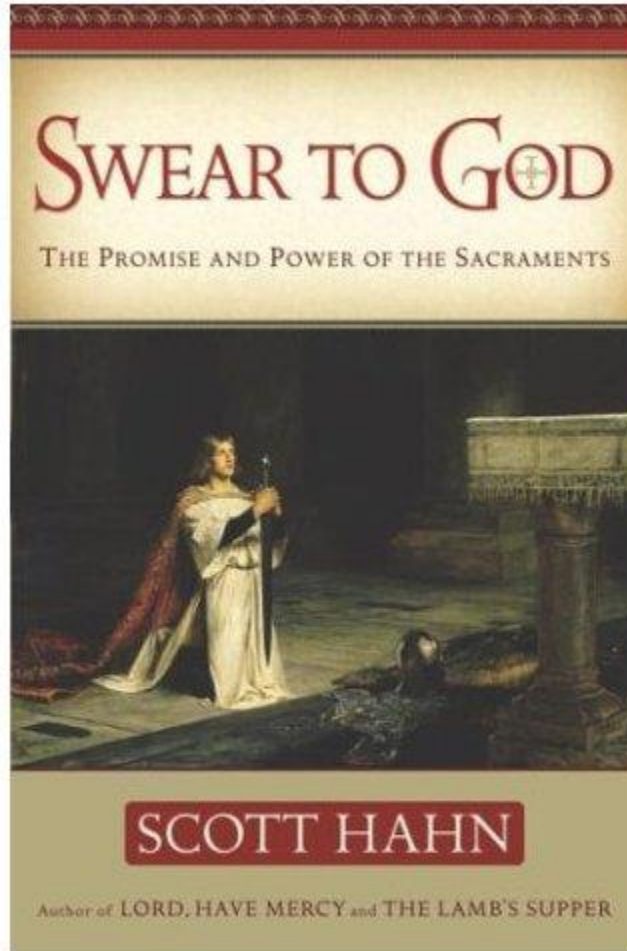


## **A Summary of Swear to God: The Promise and the Power of the Sacraments by Scott Hahn**



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Summary by Vanessa Shepherd, Written Exclusively for The Goldhead Group, Ltd.

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## About the Author

Scott Hahn is a Catholic Theologian and Apologist, with a substantial amount of experience as a Protestant minister before his conversion. He acquired his M.Div. from Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary, after originally graduating from Grove City College, Pennsylvania. After becoming Catholic, Hahn went back to school to get his PhD in systematic theology from Marquette University.

Currently, Hahn is a theology professor at Franciscan University of Steubenville and Saint Vincent College. He has been a host of his own show on EWTN, and is a notable author of many books including, *The Lord's Supper*, *Rome Sweet Home*, *Catholic for a Reason*, *Lord, Have Mercy*, and many more.

## General Overview

In *Swear to God*, Scott Hahn reveals why the Sacraments of the Catholic Church provide salvation and grace to make seemingly impossible hardships, possible. Looking back on his past experience, Hahn takes the reader through his personal journey to discovering the majesty of the Sacraments.

This book, uniquely, does not go chapter to chapter discussing each sacrament individually; rather, Hahn chooses to explain them all in one chapter, and use the rest of the book to describe why such an emphasis is placed on the oaths that we make in the Sacraments. Hahn uses experience, history, Scripture, and the Church Fathers to enlighten readers to the power that Sacraments contain. He then uses certain Sacraments as examples to attest to oaths vowed with God.

Hahn also talks extensively on the history and implications of past covenants and how they differ from contracts and modern day interpretations. Covenants are what establish the family unit here on earth as well as our familial bond with God in heaven. They are serious matters that we often take for granted. *Swear to God* gives the reader a new appreciation for the Sacraments, their history, and their power from an angle that is truly unique and fascinating – definitely not boring!

## “A Bore,” I Swore

Before Hahn converted to Catholicism, he went to graduate school at an evangelical seminary with his wife. One day, Hahn and his wife walked into a friend, George, who always shared good reads with Hahn. Upon trying to suggest the book *Calvin's Doctrine of the Word and Sacraments* by Ronald S. Wallace, Hahn responded “Frankly, George, Sacraments bore me” (3). Hahn's wife, Kimberly, a minister's daughter, knew of the importance of Sacraments and that they do indeed lead us to heaven – a even if they are “boring”. Therefore, Hahn decided to delve into the Sacraments and startled to see “their drama, passion, grandeur, splendor, promise, and power” (5). The book suggested by George soon became one of Hahn's favorite books.

Hahn then noticed that when he read Scripture passages with the Sacraments in mind, he noticed that God always sealed his covenants with a physical sign. In addition to these signs, Jesus said that these Sacraments were essential to salvation! “The Sacraments, then, were anything but boring. They were actions with ultimate consequences” (6). Both the Old and New Testaments showed God's Sacraments in a realistic way, the Sacraments were “divine actions on the order of the creation of the universe” (7).

Hahn also began looking at primary Catholic sources instead of second or third accounts from the opposition. Karl Adams wrote extensively on heart in the Sacraments in the Catholic Church and that Protestants have taken the heart out of what Sacraments they had left. All Sacraments involve an intense passion that is brought about by an oath between God and His people – with this perspective, Sacraments simply cannot be boring!

## Signs and Mysteries

In this chapter, Hahn looks at various Catechism definitions of Sacraments. All explain that they are outward signs, just as when Jesus would heal people for God's glory. When Jesus healed people, He healed not only their physical being – because they did eventually die –, but He also healed them spiritually – He brought them salvation. But why would He use physical means to do so? Simple, sensible acts are what we understand and how we learn. Sacramental rituals are physical means in which we can continue Christ's traditions; for the Church is Christ's living body and still lives out His work today; “we meet Him alive in the Sacraments” (16). “Jesus Himself established the Sacraments as the ordinary means of extending salvation to each and every person” (16).

Hahn defines a sign as, “a visible symbol of something that's invisible at the moment” (16). Yet most signs and the things they symbolize are still two distinct entities. Sacraments, however, “bring about what they signify” (18). Each part of the physical sign still reveals something about the mystery it is representing. Hahn uses Baptism rituals to exemplify this point, but Sacraments are also perfect communication with God and therefore “convey the sacred reality itself” (18).

This communication is brought to reality only through Christ because the credibility of the priest administering the Sacrament is always second to Christ's power. For example, those who are baptized by a murderer are baptized by Christ. Christ gives us the Sacraments because He loves us and knows what we need; therefore, the Church trusts in Christ's requests and ritual traditions and will not change them.

All Sacraments are based on the foundation in Genesis that creation is good – spiritually and physically. Jesus came through our physical human world, the world He created, and He surely did not despise it. “The Church is the extension of Christ's Incarnation, and that extension takes place through the Sacraments” (22). However, when we see Christ fully one day, we will have no need for the signs that try and represent the mystery that is God – for “we will see Him as He is” (1 Jn 3:2).

## Sacraments in the Scriptures

Although Hahn has been studying Scripture for years, it took him a long time to realize that Catholics based their Sacraments in Scripture. St. Paul, for example, viewed the Sacraments as fulfillment of God's promises in the Old Testament. So what is so “new” about the New Testament? Hahn says that it is the fact that “in Christ, and in His Sacraments, there is a marital bond between God and man, between the invisible and the visible” (29). Jesus divinely renewed our intimate relationship with God.

Divine renewal often includes God using ordinary objects to perform extraordinary miracles. For example, Moses' rod, a hazel switch, was used by God to perform miracles to show God's majesty, power, and love. “Creation, then, could serve as a natural sacrament. Nature itself was a sign, but God showed it capable of conveying supernatural power as well” (31).

St. Paul looked beyond natural Sacraments, and more so to those of ancient Israel. Sacraments in the Old Testament were signs of God's love, but they still foreshadowed something even more amazing. Circumcision, for example, showing a child born of Abraham, foreshadowed the baptism that would come through being marked a child of Christ. New Testament Sacraments “did not abolish the Old Testament, but fulfilled it and renewed it in a transformative way” (32).

“Typology” is the biblical discipline that studies such relations between the Old and New Testaments such as biblical foreshadowing. Therefore, the Bible can be read as “the sacred history of the world” with a rhyme scheme (33). Three stages, first noticed by St. Paul, are looked at to decipher this scheme: the age of nature, the age of law, and the age of grace. These stages place the Bible in one narrative that can be read from

beginning to end as a whole. Therefore, Sacraments must have been in God's mind at the beginning if He was to fulfill them by the end. One must bear in mind, however, that God reveals Himself when it is appropriate and He can do so through means we can understand. "It is only when we pass from the age of grace into the eternal age of glory that we'll see divine things as they really are, in heaven, without their earthly sacramental veils" (36). In other words, we will not see the symbols anymore, but we will perfectly see what the symbols tried to capture here on earth.

## As High as Seven

The Catholic Church has seven Sacraments: Baptism, Penance, Eucharist, Confirmation, Matrimony, Holy Orders, and Extreme Unction, all of which have been practiced since the time of the apostles. Throughout this chapter, Hahn introduces each of these Sacraments, or mysteries as they were often called earlier in history, in their familial context. The Church also has various ways to classify these Sacraments, one manner being: Sacraments of Initiation (e.g. baptism, confirmation, Eucharist), Sacraments of Healing (e.g. penance and anointing of the sick), and Sacraments in Service of Communion (e.g. marriage and holy orders).

The first Sacrament that initiates us into God's family is Baptism because without being born, adopted, or created anew, one does not enter into a family covenant – hence why baptism precedes all the other Sacraments. Baptism involves the pouring of water and the spoken words of a priest or deacon – or in an emergency any person – as related in the Gospel of Matthew: "I baptize you in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit." Just like the other Sacraments of Initiation, Baptism can only be validly given once since it is such a permanent life change.

The second – third in some rites – Sacrament typically received is Confirmation. "Through confirmation, God gives us the grace to reach Christian maturity with the family" (45). In this sacrament, Catholics "receive the fullness of the gift of the Holy Spirit" (45) through the anointing of chrism and laying on of hands by a bishop or priest. Anointing someone is also the same as passing on power, just as Jesus passed on the power of the Holy Spirit to the disciples at Pentecost.

The Eucharist is the next step in our sacramental journey, and is often called the "Sacrament of Sacraments" (42) because it is Christ's body physically present to us. "The Mass is our family meal," says Hahn, who encourages us to become one in the Body of Christ (47). The Mass unites heaven and earth as we share in the sacrifice of the lamb, Christ. Bread and wine are the 'matters' used in this Sacrament that, along with a Eucharistic prayer and a priest, become the body and blood of Christ.

Penance is often the first healing sacrament by which Christ absolves us from our sins through a priest. Confessing our sins before communion has always been taught by the Church. In the New Testament, the story of the prodigal son best describes what happens when we go to confession – "sin, repentance, confession, forgiveness, and restoration to the family table" (49). And Jesus gave the keys to heaven to Peter and the power to forgive sins in His name.

Anointing of the sick is namely for those suffering who need strength from Christ. "The sacrament *always* heals in the way Christ intends," which may be physically, emotionally, mentally, or spiritually (50). It is important to remember that we are brought closer to Christ and his passion when we are suffering – it makes us more perfect. Taking care of the sick is also a family affair, so it is only natural that the Church pines to heal each of its members. The sacrament is administered by a priest who anoints the person with oil blessed by the bishop. This, included with the Eucharist and Penance, are collectively called "Last Rites."

Holy Orders is the sacrament by which men are ordained in order to perform sacred duties. It was instituted at the Last Supper along with the Mass. These men become father figures in the Church as they give spiritual life, discipline, and nurturing.

Marriage bonds a baptized man and a baptized woman in a lawful marriage for life and also signifies the relationship between God and His people. The man and woman exchange vows and consummate the marriage through sexual intercourse, making the ministers of the sacrament the husband and wife, while a priest presides over the vows. Marriage also brings them closer to Christ as they receive great graces through the Holy Spirit to carry out their vows.

Overall, Christ is the primary minister of the Sacraments and it is He who brings them to fullness in our souls. They are His gifts to us that God grants to us for the good of the Church family.

## What's the Big Idea? The Meaning of Covenant (and Everything Else)

Covenant today is often thought of as interchangeable with the word contract; however, in the Bible they were two distinct words that could not replace the other. Contracts were more property based whereas covenants were rooted in family bonds. Covenants say, "I am yours, and you are mine," just as God says to us (61). In ancient times, covenants were a part of everyday life in every faction from business to personal life. They would determine your occupation, spouse, and where you lived; they were also stronger than the blood ties amongst family members. Covenants were established through an oath, a sacrifice, and a common meal. Therefore, "Israel's worship was the driving force in history, and so it is carefully and minutely recorded in the sacred books" (64).

When looking at the terms, 'promise,' 'vow,' and 'oath,' it may seem they are interchangeable as well – but they are not. A promise is putting your signature on what you say, thereby putting your own reputation at risk. A vow is giving our word to God in a promise. And finally, an oath makes God a witness to the promise you are making, thereby putting yourself and God's honor on the line. Henceforth, swearing falsely is a grave matter, even in the legal system.

Sacrifice was used in rituals as either to give back to God what is His, as an act of thanksgiving, as a sign of sorrow for one's sins, or to seal a covenant. It conveys that the person offering the sacrifice is willing to undertake the same fate if they are unfaithful.

Finally, sharing a common meal seals a covenant since meals were eaten with family members – so eating a meal together signifies "the purpose and goal of the sacrifice" (71). Most of the Old Testament meals find their fulfillment in the Mass in the New Testament. "Jesus established forever a meal in God's presence – His *Real Presence*. The Eucharist is the "Lord's Supper (1Cor 11:20)" (72). In the Mass we give an oath, sacrifice, and share a meal with God.

## Do You Solemnly Swear? Sacraments as Covenant Oaths

Oaths and Sacraments take place *ex opera operato* "by the very fact of the work's being performed" (77). Vows, such as marriage, take great leaps of faith because no one knows what challenges lie ahead. And when we make these covenants, we are also binding ourselves to a divinely ordered law; for every family to live in peace they need some sort of set order.

Hahn explains that in Rome, *sacramentum* was the gentile equivalent of an oath, and therefore was used by Pliny, a Roman Imperial Official, and Tertullian, a famous Christian attorney, in their writings to describe Christianity. *Sacramentum* is part of the sacramental oaths when we seal their blessing with an "amen."

"Every liturgical event is a juridical event as well," which makes a Church like a courthouse, in a sense (83). In ancient Israel, separation of Church and state would have been absurd since the Church was the basis of every faction of their lives. This is why the Romans tried to get Christians to take new oaths under the emperor, so they could nullify the first one with God. Yet, our oaths in the Sacraments use God's name and His honor,

something not to be taken lightly, and every covenant binds us to a certain law, in this case, God's law. We are part of God's family at this point, so we must follow the rules of His household because we gave our word that we would – with God as our witness.

## When Words are Deeds

It happens often in this society that things and deeds have more emphasis than words do. However, some philosophers say that there are key phrases that by their "mere words" will change lives. Some examples are "I do," "you're fired," "or "we declare war" (92). These all attest to some type of oath that people often take for granted.

Although we take much for granted, the desire for the Sacraments is imbedded deep within us since God put it there, so much so that people invent Sacraments when none are present! But Sacraments are unique in that they are acts of God, not humans, and "only God's word can completely affect what it signifies" (95). God is active in our creation; He does not delegate all His works to angels. It is God's word that carries out a Sacrament, and "we should not be surprised that when God chooses to perform wonders about His people, He does so in ways they might recognize, in ways they have always desired, in ways that really work: through Sacraments" (97).

## The Engine of History

In the beginning of time, God created the world in six days and rested on the seventh; this was not for His sake (i.e. He is all-powerful), but it was for ours. These days signify something about God, especially the seventh day. The seventh day was when creation was complete as God united Himself to His creation – He united the visible and the invisible, which can be called sacramental, but also, conventional. The seventh day was a sign of the covenant between God and His family, which is why we hallow the Sabbath, and is termed in the New Testament as the "Great Oath."

Therefore, throughout the rest of time human oaths have imitated its creator's first "Great Oath;" humans continued to "seven themselves." Seven became the number of perfection, and swearing an oath using seven is as if a person is using God's name in the oath. "To swear in this way is to imitate God, with the power of God as surety" (106).

After the "Great Oath," God made a covenant with Adam, Noah, Abraham, Moses, and King David. God's family kept growing and His promise kept expanding further to all peoples. Yet, only in Jesus Christ did these covenants come to completion and fulfillment to bind us all into the one, holy, Catholic, and apostolic Church.

"The oath is the tide that sweeps history along," claims Hahn, and he supports this notion by going through Old Testament history and the oaths that were sworn, in particular, those of Solomon, Jonathan, and David. Oath's marked changes in history and the actions that took place (113). Because of this honor invested in oaths, they must be taken seriously and to heart since they include divine power. Today, the oaths we make with God are in the Sacraments, and fittingly, there are seven. The Sacraments are the "new creation" that Christ blessed us with – even more so than in the very beginning!

## Trust and Treachery

"Oaths create worlds. Oaths form societies." Oaths shift history to build great nations or tragically destroy them (118). Hahn proves this point by going over four testimonies from literature from around the world: Xenophon, St. Augustine, Thomas Egerton, and George Washington.

If you think about it, the people that take oaths in our society today are people that we have to trust – and every society has groups they need to trust to keep order and security. Along with these people’s responsibilities comes great temptation for corruption. This temptation is why God’s assistance is needed and an oath is required. God then becomes a cosigner to our oath and the promise can be trusted by all.

Because of our human nature, we cannot be trusted, which is why God gave us the Sacraments – so He could help us in our time of temptation and weakness. The Old Testament is a narrative describing human failure and God’s compassion. Jesus then became a cosigner to the Old Covenant so we no longer bear the curses of the Old Covenant. Sacraments bring us closer to God, and give God the chance to bestow more grace in our lives.

## To Tell the Truth

Many biblical passages tell us not to swear by heaven or earth in order that we may not swear falsely; however, Jesus used oaths in His speeches. He is the only one in the Bible to use the word “amen.” Just like today, people in Jesus’ time misused oaths and swore them falsely.

“In oaths, we call upon God’s Holy Name for help in a situation that is beyond our strength,” just as Job did (135). But in order that we do not break our oaths, the Catechism gives many everyday suggestions on how to avoid false oaths – especially in our everyday speech. Oaths need to be set at the highest standard, once again, to make the Sacraments and our honor to God rich and full.

## Sunday Swearing

The Bible uses the terms covenant and oath synonymously, and could be done through words and/or signs. Hahn references a biblical scholar by the name of George Mendenhall to explain how ancients didn’t just observe the Eucharist, but they *swore* it. Mendenhall gives many reasons for this including the realization that the covenant sharing meal is the Eucharist, identification of people involved in the sacrifice; and the term “remembrance” was an ancient form of an oath.

Today, we are unfamiliar with living under such oaths and connecting law and liturgy, but to the ancients it was everyday life. In the book of Revelation, even “angels pray by swearing oaths” (145). History has recorded all kinds of people swearing such oaths, but today, many are completely ignorant of past traditions.

Yet, with blessings comes curses to those who break the covenant. Our God, however, is all loving and just, His “punishments are never vindictive or arbitrary; they are the inevitable consequences of our free choices” (148). Early Christians surely knew of this power, “but they also knew that life was unbearable outside God’s covenant” (149). Hahn even tells a story about a group of Christians in Africa that were martyred because they would have rather died than missed Mass on Sunday.

## Sex, Lies, and Sacraments

This chapter mainly talks about the Sacrament of Marriage and the oaths it includes between the married couple and God. Remember that oaths are the beginning of familial bonds, so naturally a marriage is the beginning of a family between a man and a woman. In both the New and Old Testaments, marriage has always been a metaphor between God and His people.

A marital oath begins with a verbal pledge and is then consummated in sexual union. “Sexual union within marriage, then, is an oath-in-action, a liturgical event” (158). This is why using contraceptives is a lie within love, as noted by John Paul II; a partner is holding back a part of themselves when they should be giving life to

the other person. Marriage is to be an oath in action and an example of divine love. “Human love, with its fruitfulness, vividly manifests God’s own being and inner life” (162). Marriage and sex are Sacraments because the trust and vulnerably levels are so high that one needs to be placed under oath.

## The Sacred Realm of Risk

As one looks through the Scriptures, it is plain to see that all covenants came with risks and tests that humans have failed – just as we still fail to live up to our covenant promise today. We are only human after all – humans in need of divine grace. Hahn says that one of the trials that he and his wife, Kimberly, went through was when he decided to convert to Catholicism. Quitting his job as a professor and moving the family to another state hit Kimberly very hard and was heartbroken to see her husband straying from the religion she was so deeply rooted in. After the birth of their second daughter, Hannah, Kimberly wanted the baby to be baptized Catholic, like her father. Hahn claims that their knowledge of the marriage oath was what held them together the seven years they practiced different religions. “We received the grace when we honored the covenant,” explains Hahn.

God may give us trials, but as Corinthians reminds us, God will never put us through trials we cannot handle. Temptation is what makes us stronger as we press through to choose God rather than evil’s temptations. It is important to remember to call upon the Lord’s name when we need help – He is our family and “His power is made perfect in our weakness” (175).

Hahn next explains that trials and tribulations bring us closer to God because they show what we actually need to be happy. “If we look beyond the gifts to the Giver, we will know everlasting peace, even amid the most terrifying difficulties of life” (177). God is always next to us, helping us, and He gave us the Sacraments so that we may have the grace to bear our obstacles in life.

## Real Presences

However, Hahn also touches on the fact that Kimberly is also a sacramental presence for him because he sees Christ in her. Matrimony is also a mission that can preach without words, so matrimony also links to show something in the Real Presence in the Eucharist. And just like in marriage, we unite our flesh with Christ when we consume the Eucharist. This is just an example of how one sacrament “helps us to understand all others, and all the others help us to understand the one” (188).

## Stretching Toward Infinity

Throughout the past chapters, Hahn emphasizes that life is not easy and many trials will arise, and “Sacraments do not spare us from the trials and the battles, but they give us the only means to come through the trials and battles alive” (193). Hahn sums it up in the phrase, “Sacraments don’t make life easy, but they do make it possible” (193). So since Sacraments ensure our survival, how can they possibly be ‘boring?’

Jesus tells us in the Gospels that we can believe in His name with all our hearts, but we must also walk the walk, and this includes hallowing the Sacraments. St. John reflects this altruism in his Gospel time and time again, which is why the Gospel is coined the “sacramental” Gospel. After all, we are just following in the footsteps that Christ imprinted first. “As goes the leader, so goes the nation,” says Hahn (196). In this way, covenants are made and passed on from generation to generation, so it is fitting that we follow the covenant Christ set forth for our salvation.

St. Paul even goes on to call Christians saints, or those who have been perfected, because Christians are sanctified through the Sacraments. Sainthood is something Christians should live out every day, and it is also



the finest goal we can set for ourselves. And in the end, God will do the seemingly impossible and make our finite lives infinite so we may live with Him in glory. And “May we never forget to call upon the oath God has sworn — May we never forget to call forth the graces of the Sacraments. They are ours by inheritance!” (200).