

What Is a Sacrament?

Sacraments: An Overview

“The sacraments are efficacious signs of grace, instituted by Christ and entrusted to the Church, by which divine life is dispensed to us.... They bear fruit in those who receive them with the required dispositions.”

Catechism of the Catholic Church, 1131

What Is a Sacrament?

The understanding of sacraments defined by the comes out of centuries of understanding and Tradition dating back to the writings of the early Church fathers and continuing through the teachings of the Council of Trent in the sixteenth century and most recently the Second Vatican Council in the twentieth century. Roman Catholics believe that the visible signs, symbols, and rituals that constitute a sacrament point to the invisible reality of God’s abiding and salvific presence in his Church, the Body of Christ. Through the celebration of sacraments, we become aware of the mystery of the presence and action of the God we cannot see. In fact, early Church fathers used the Greek word *mysterion*, which means “mystery,” to describe sacraments. While sacraments do not exhaust God’s mystery, they allow us through signs and words to draw near to it and be transformed by it.

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Sacraments and Covenant

In Latin the word for sacrament is *sacramentum*, which means “oath.” In classical antiquity referred to symbolic gestures that committed people to future action. A soldier’s declaration of allegiance was a *sacramentum*. When two persons made an agreement, there was a sum of money set aside and forfeited by

anyone who failed to keep his or her part of the bargain. The Christian description of sacrament took shape in this cultural context, which helps us to understand that sacraments are inextricably linked with faithfulness and covenant. Sacraments are effective signs of God’s fidelity and love, and a pledge of our future inheritance. We call them “the sacraments of the New Covenant” (1091).

Christian Sacraments

The most visible sign of God’s presence in human history is Jesus Christ. Through the welcoming, healing, and forgiving words and actions of his life, especially his death and Resurrection, we see the institution of Christian sacraments. Through the power of the Holy Spirit, sacraments remember and make present his life in the Body of Christ, the Church. They affirm and complete the natural signs of God’s presence in creation and the signs that belonged to God’s people in preceding ages. The sacraments sustain the Church and give her life. In modern times, the Second Vatican Council affirmed the great importance of the sacraments in Christian life.

“The purpose of the sacraments is to sanctify people, to build up the Body of Christ, and, finally, to worship God. Because they are signs they also [instruct]” (*Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy*, 59). The Council went on to say that sacraments “nourish, strengthen, and express” faith, and lead to a life of charity (59).

Sacraments not only reveal the presence and action of God, they are also an effective means by which grace—God’s own life—is given to us to be shared with others. In a certain sense, the Church is also a sacrament, because the Church is a sign of God’s presence and an instrument of grace in the world (CCC, 738, 849).

Seven Sacraments

The Catholic Church teaches that each of the sacraments was instituted by Christ and is rooted in his words and deeds. Naming, enumerating, and defining the sacraments was a gradual process, however. By the thirteenth century the Catholic Church had identified seven sacraments: Baptism, Confirmation, Eucharist,

Penance, Anointing of the Sick, Holy Orders, and Marriage. This list remains unchanged.

The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* groups the seven sacraments into three subcategories. Baptism, Confirmation, and Eucharist are called Sacraments of Initiation. Penance and Anointing of the Sick are identified as Sacraments of Reconciliation and Healing.

Finally, Marriage and Holy Orders are both considered Sacraments in Service to Communion. Such groupings help to illustrate how all the sacraments work together to build up the Body of Christ.

Catholics believe that the sacraments effect what they symbolize, when those who receive them are open to God’s grace. Preparation, catechesis, and the full use of the sacramental symbols help us to achieve that openness and experience the power of the sacraments. Sacraments are the work of God, not simply

a human custom or ceremony. Care in preparing for and celebrating the sacraments opens the way for their fruitful reception.

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For Reflection

- What experiences of sacraments have helped you become more aware of God’s presence?

Baptism

“Holy Baptism is the basis of the whole Christian life...and the door which gives access to the other sacraments.”

Catechism of the Catholic Church, 1213

Introduction

The Sacrament of Baptism confers on us the identity of a Christian and member of the Church, and the mission of Christ and the Holy Spirit (CCC, 738). By water and the Spirit, those who are baptized become children of God. They share in God’s own life, being thus marked in Baptism with a dignity and a sacramental character that can never be taken away.

Symbolism

The essential sign for Baptism is water. The original Greek verb *baptizein* means to plunge or immerse. Baptism plunges or immerses us into Christ’s death and Resurrection. This is most vividly experienced when the sacrament is celebrated by immersion into the waters of baptismal pools or fonts.

In Baptism, we also receive the Light of Christ.

The candle lit from the Paschal candle is given with the exhortation to “walk always as children of the light” (*The Rite of Baptism for Children*, 64). Baptism signifies the enlightenment effected by the grace imparted in this sacrament.

The waters of Baptism also signify cleansing and the purification from all sin. Baptism brings about forgiveness of sins and new birth in the Holy Spirit. Saint Paul taught that the baptized share in Christ’s Paschal mystery and so are “dead to sin, but alive for God”

(*Romans 6:11*). In Jesus’ own baptism the Spirit hovered over him (*Matthew 3:16*), foreshadowing the role of the Holy Spirit in Christian Baptism. The necessity of Baptism is expressed in the words of Jesus: “...no one can enter the kingdom of God without being born of water and the Spirit” (*John 3:5*).

Sacrament of Initiation

Through Baptism (one of three Sacraments of

Initiation) we are adopted into the Church, becoming children of God. Incorporated into the common priesthood of the faithful, we are called to offer our lives to God and reveal to all his kingdom of justice, love, and peace.

Infant Baptism in the Roman Catholic Church is not accompanied by the Sacraments of Confirmation and Eucharist, as it is in the Eastern Catholic Churches. These are normally received at a later age in the Roman Rite, unless the baptized is an older child or an adult.

Regardless, the unity of these three Sacraments of Initiation remains.

Sacrament of Faith

Baptism is a sacrament of faith. For those baptized in infancy, the role of parents and godparents is crucial, as the faith of the Church is passed on by them to the child, for whom they make baptismal promises and accept the responsibility of raising the child in the faith with the help

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The formation process called the catechumenate leads adults and older children to Baptism. Through the religious instruction, prayers, and support of the believing community, the catechumens are led to embrace the Catholic way of life through Baptism and the other Sacraments of Initiation with an enlightened faith and a willing spirit

The Rite

Immersing a catechumen in water, or the pouring of water over the head, is the essential sign of Baptism, along with an invocation of the Trinity. While the ordinary minister of Baptism is a priest or a deacon, anyone can baptize in an emergency. Anointing with sacred chrism, clothing with a new garment, and the giving of a lighted candle all express the transformation being brought about by the sacrament.

For Reflection

- Which of the images of Baptism is most meaningful to you?

Confirmation

“For ‘by the Sacrament of Confirmation, [the baptized] are more perfectly bound to the Church and are enriched with a special strength of the Holy Spirit. Hence they are, as true witnesses of Christ, more strictly obliged to spread and defend the faith by word and deed.’ [LG 11; cf. OC, Introduction 2]”

Catechism of the Catholic Church, 1285

Introduction

The Sacrament of Confirmation celebrates an outpouring of the Holy Spirit and increases his gifts in us. These gifts give us the opportunity to be strong in the profession of our faith. Confirmation completes baptismal grace. The Spirit has already been active in the sacrament of Baptism, bringing to birth a “new creature.” Confirmation strengthens our bonds with the Church and empowers us to witness. Just as the Apostles went forth fearlessly to proclaim the Good News after Pentecost, so those who receive the Holy Spirit’s outpouring in Confirmation become the bearers of glad tidings in word and deed. Pope Paul VI, in his *Apostolic Constitution on the Sacrament of Confirmation*, said that this sacrament “in a certain way perpetuates the grace of Pentecost in the Church.” (*The Rites*, p. 474).

Symbolism and History

The Sacrament of Confirmation was originally a rite that involved the laying on of hands and anointing with fragrant oil, which immediately followed Baptism and “confirmed” it. This anointing was carried out by the bishop. As the young Church grew and communities of Christians became more numerous and far-flung, the bishop was unable to be present at every Baptism. Two responses to this situation developed. In the Roman Rite, the hand-laying and anointing were delayed until a later time when the bishop could carry it out in person. This was the origin of Confirmation as a separate sacramental celebration. In the Eastern Catholic Churches, on the other hand, the priest who baptized would anoint the newly baptized immediately. Because the fragrant oil used for this anointing is consecrated by the bishop, the bishop’s presence is considered implicit in the rite itself.

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In the Roman Rite today, the priest who baptizes adults and older children also confirms them immediately after Baptism. Children who are baptized as infants in the Roman Rite, however, are confirmed at a later date, usually by the bishop. The unity of the three Sacraments of Initiation (Baptism, Confirmation, and Eucharist) is a key element of our Catholic understanding. When Confirmation is celebrated apart from Baptism, therefore, it normally includes both a renewal of baptismal promises and a celebration of the Eucharist.

The essential Rite of Confirmation is the anointing with sacred chrism on the forehead. This gesture is accompanied by the laying on of hands and words that invoke the Holy Spirit. In the Eastern Catholic Churches, the oil is called *myron*, and the sacrament is called *Chrismation*.

Anointed for Mission

Like Baptism, the Sacrament of Confirmation configures us to Christ. It therefore leaves an indelible mark upon the soul and can never be repeated. The title *Christ* (*Christos* in Greek) means “the Anointed One.” Anyone who is baptized and confirmed is anointed, as Jesus was, for the mission of sharing the Gospel in word and action. The ancient gesture of anointing with oil calls to mind all of the great figures of Scripture who were anointed for the special work they were given to do. Every Christian stands in the tradition Jesus himself claimed when he read from the book of the prophet Isaiah: “The Spirit of the LORD is upon me, because he has anointed me...” (*Luke 4:18, Isaiah 61:1*).

For Reflection

- How does seeing yourself as “anointed” by God help you to understand the Christian life?

Eucharist

*“...the Eucharist is the sum and summary of our faith: ‘Our way of thinking is attuned to the Eucharist, and the Eucharist in turn confirms our way of thinking.’ [St. Irenaeus, *Adv. haeres.* 4, 18, 5: PG 7/s11, 1028.]”*

Catechism of the Catholic Church, 1327

Introduction

The word “Eucharist” is derived from the Greek word *eucharistia*, which means thanksgiving. In the Eucharistic Prayer, the Church gives thanks to God the Father for all the goodness of creation. It gives thanks, above all, for the gift of God’s Son, whose Paschal mystery is the wellspring of our salvation. The Eucharist is the solemn memorial of Christ’s death and Resurrection. By keeping this memorial, the Church fulfills the command of Jesus: “Do this in memory of me.” (Luke 22:19). In the Eucharist, the sacrifice of Christ is re-presented, and the faithful share in its abundant fruits.

Source and Summit

The Eucharist stands out as the center and high point of the Church’s whole sacramental life. The Second Vatican Council taught that “the other sacraments, and indeed all ecclesial ministries and works of the apostolate are bound up with the Eucharist and are directed towards it.” (*Decree on the Ministry and Life of Priests*, 5). In the Eucharist, Christian initiation reaches its culmination, and the Eucharist is repeated throughout the Christian life. Indeed, all the way up to the hour of death, when it is offered as viaticum, the Eucharist sustains the faithful on their pilgrim way. It is also a foretaste of the banquet feast of heaven, and so points beyond death to life eternal.

Christ is present in the Eucharist in the gathered assembly as they pray and sing, in the word of Sacred Scripture, in the person of the minister, and above all in the Eucharist. Through the words of consecration and the power of the Holy Spirit, the bread and wine offered to the Father in the Eucharist become the Body and Blood of Jesus. Catholics believe in the Real Presence of Christ under the forms of bread and wine.

Symbolism and Celebration

The Eucharist is a sacred meal, a paschal banquet.

Shared in communion, the sacrament draws the faithful closer to Christ and one another in charity and love. It cleanses and protects them from sin, commits them to the poor whom Christ loved, and gives them spiritual food and drink for the journey of life (CCC, 1391–1397).

The liturgical celebration of the Eucharist is composed of two main parts, which together form one act of worship: the Liturgy of the Word and

the Liturgy of the Eucharist. In the Liturgy of the Word, the great works of God are proclaimed and preached, and the people respond with renewed conversion of heart. In the Eucharist, “thanks is given to God for the whole work of salvation, and the offerings become the Body and Blood of Christ.” (*General Instruction to the Roman Missal*, 72). The ministers and the assembly each have a part to play in the celebration. In the celebration of the Eucharist, the reality of the Church is seen.

Following the Eucharistic celebration, any of the

Blessed Sacrament that is not consumed is stored in the tabernacle, so that he may be brought to the sick and homebound, and to the dying. The reserved Host also receives due worship and adoration from the faithful, because of Christ’s continuous presence. Eucharistic devotions and prayer before the Blessed Sacrament are traditional forms of Catholic piety encouraged by the Church

as part of the Eucharistic mystery in all its fullness (*Holy Communion and Worship of the Eucharist Outside Mass*, 4).

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For Reflection

- Which image of the Eucharist is most meaningful for you?

Reconciliation

“During his public life Jesus not only forgave sins, but also made plain the effect of this forgiveness: he reintegrated forgiven sinners into the community of the People of God from which sin had alienated or even excluded them.”

Catechism of the Catholic Church, 1443

Introduction

Reconciliation means to reunite or to come together. Today we use this term along with the terms penance or confession to name the Sacrament of Healing in which our sins are forgiven and sinners are reunited to God, the Church, their brothers and sisters, and themselves. In this sacrament through the words and actions of an ordained priest, God restores broken and wounded relationships. The fact that we use several words to describe this sacrament points to the varied practices and emphases of the sacrament over the years.

Jesus and Reconciliation

In the beginning God “looked at everything he had made, and he found it very good.” (*Genesis 1:31*) But sin entered the world as a result of the choice of the first humans to disobey God and to follow their own will rather than God’s. That choice, which we call original sin, wounded humanity’s relationship with God and all of creation. It ruptured the original harmony that existed

between God and all of creation. Original sin describes the personal sin of Adam and Eve as well as the fallen state of humans, which we are all born into. However, the Father did not abandon his creation. He reconciled a sinful world to himself in Jesus Christ, his Son. Jesus began his work on earth by preaching repentance “repent and believe in the good news” (*Mark 1:15*). He went beyond preaching to people about repentance and actually welcomed sinners, he ate and drank with them (*Luke 5:33–34*) and he reconciled them with the Father (*Luke 5:17–26*). His death on the cross was the ultimate act of reconciliation.

The Church and Reconciliation

The Church in apostolic times was confident that Baptism began a new life in which grave sin would have no place. However, it is obvious in the Scriptures of the New Testament that forgiveness and confession of sin were an important element

in the life of the community (*James 5:16*). Eventually some of the early Christians did sin gravely, for example, by giving up their faith under persecution, rather than endure martyrdom. Such public betrayal of Christ was deemed unforgivable by many, as were other grave violations of the moral law, such as murder or adultery. Yet many such sinners repented, and wished to return to the relationship with God and Church that they once had cherished. Clearly, some way had to be found for the community to be faithful to the gospel of mercy, yet to maintain its moral standards. It was out of this need that the Sacrament of Reconciliation developed, as a visible and ecclesial ritual to reconcile or reunite and come back to community and the sharing in the Eucharist. Throughout the history of the Church, the sacrament has taken different forms both public and private and individual and communal. However, the basic theology of the sacrament remained intact, even when different aspects of the sacrament were highlighted in different periods of Church history.*

Revision of the Rite of Penance

The Second Vatican Council declared that “the rite and formularies for the Sacrament of Penance are to be revised so that they more clearly express both the nature and the effect of the sacrament.”

The revised Rite of Penance highlights the original purpose of the sacrament, which is reconciliation with God and the Church. It emphasizes the importance of conversion and the need to rearrange our lives according to the holiness and love of God. By providing three different rites: (1) a rite for Reconciliation that is individual (one penitent and one priest), as well as a new rite offering communal rites for the celebration of the sacrament (2) for individuals with the priest and (3)

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for communal celebrations with a priest within an assembly, the revision affirms that the celebration of the sacrament is primarily a liturgical action and corporate act of worship which builds up the Body of Christ. It is not a “private function (s), but ...celebration(s) belonging to the Church” (*Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy*, 26) and “Whenever rites, according to their specific nature, make provision for communal

celebration involving the presence and active participation of the faithful, it is to be stressed that this way of celebrating them is to be preferred, as far as possible, to a celebration that is individual and, so to speak, private” (*Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy*, 27). Interpersonal forgiveness and reconciliation are expectations of this sacrament. As a Church we stress the relation between Divine forgiveness and forgiving our brothers and sisters.

*For further information on the history of Reconciliation, see pp. 40–41.

For Reflection

- What is the relationship of using the term reconciliation for this sacrament and the revision of the Rite to include communal celebrations?

Anointing of the Sick

“Heal the sick!” [Mt 10:8] The Church has received this charge from the Lord and strives to carry it out by taking care of the sick as well as by accompanying them with her prayer of intercession.”

Catechism of the Catholic Church, 1509

Introduction

The Sacrament of the Anointing of the Sick is rooted in Jesus’ compassion and love for those who are sick. During his lifetime on earth, Jesus touched and healed many who were sick, and taught his followers to do the same (*James 5:14–15*). Yet Jesus was more than a wonder-worker. He came to call people into a deeper relationship with God and neighbor, healing their spiritual and moral ills as well as their physical ailments (CCC, 1503). He often praised those who turned to him in need, sometimes amid great obstacles. Indeed, illness can be a formidable trial to the human person, but it can also be an occasion for great faith.

Sign and Rite

The Sacrament of Anointing of the Sick draws upon God’s power to heal and comfort. It supports the person’s faith in the midst of suffering. Finally,

it calls the faithful to an awareness of the gift that the sick person brings to the whole community. Christians are called to share in the Passion of the Lord. Those who unite their suffering with his become a living sign of the Paschal Mystery (*Romans 8:17*).

The sacrament is celebrated with anyone who is seriously or chronically ill, facing surgery, or infirm because of old age. It is not reserved for those near death, but may be celebrated at any time. Anointing

can take place in hospitals, homes, parish churches, or wherever needed. The Christian community takes part, praying for and with those who are sick. The minister of the sacrament is a priest, who anoints the forehead and hands of the

sick person with oil blessed by the bishop. When the sacrament is celebrated with the dying, it is usually accompanied by *viaticum* (communion) and prayers for this unique time.

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For Reflection

- How has illness and/or healing been an occasion of faithfulness for you?

Matrimony

“The consent by which the spouses mutually give and receive one another is sealed by God himself. [cf. Mk 10:9] From their covenant arises ‘an institution, confirmed by the divine law ... even in the eyes of society.’ [GS 48.1]”

Catechism of the Catholic Church, 1639

Introduction

The Sacrament of Matrimony mirrors both the original blessing of God in creation, and the steadfast love of Christ for his Church. When a man and a woman enter into this permanent, lifelong relationship, they vow to be faithful to one another and love one another throughout their lives. Marriage is an “intimate partnership of life and ... love” (*Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World*, 48). It is this community and sacramental union that becomes the heart of the family, which is a source of blessing not only for the family and for the Church, but also for all of society.

however, such as an exchange of rings. The loving support of the community of faith is expressed through active participation in the wedding liturgy.

The Sacrament of Matrimony is more than an agreement or a legal contract. It is a covenant, and must be entered into freely, without coercion, and with sufficient maturity to make such lasting promises. Marriage requires faithful love, and by its nature also requires openness to procreation and the upbringing of children.

Through the grace of marriage, each of the spouses calls the other to growth in faith and holiness. The action of the Holy Spirit working in and through their union beckons them to a life of self-giving and perfection in following the way of Christ who dwells in them, giving them strength in times of trial and a foretaste of eternity in their joys.

Sign and Rite

The priest or deacon who witnesses the marriage vows of a couple does so on behalf of the Church, but the man and the woman are the ministers of the sacrament. The vows that are exchanged are the essential sign and symbol of the sacrament. Additional symbolic actions may be added,

“Marriage requires faithful love, and by its nature also requires openness to procreation and the upbringing of children.”

For Reflection

- Name some marriages in which you have seen signs of God’s presence.

Holy Orders

“This sacrament configures the recipient to Christ by a special grace of the Holy Spirit, so that he may serve as Christ’s instrument for his Church.”

Catechism of the Catholic Church, 1581

Sacrament of Service

Holy Orders, along with the Sacrament of Matrimony, is a Sacrament at the Service of Communion. Through this sacrament, bishops, priests, and deacons are empowered by the Holy Spirit for service to the Church. Sustaining the Church’s unity with God and the unity of the faithful with one another is their constant calling.

Through preaching, teaching, celebrating the sacraments, and governing the community of faith, they exercise this service for which Holy Orders prepares them.

The word communion, *communio* in Latin and *koinonia* in Greek, expresses a New Testament concept of great importance to the Catholic understanding of the Church. Communion is the unity of heart and mind that comes from the Holy Spirit. Communion is experienced first of all in the renewed relationship of love between the human race and God, won by the cross of Christ. It then spills over into a renewed relationship of humans with one another.

Bishops, Priests, Deacons

The Sacrament of Orders exists in three degrees. The episcopate (bishops) has the role of teaching, sanctifying, and governing. The presbyterate (priests) works with the bishop to carry out these ministries, and represents the bishop in local assemblies. The diaconate (deacons) shares in Christ’s mission by assisting bishops and priests, and through various forms of service.

The essential rite of Holy Orders is the imposition of the bishop’s hand on the head of the candidates, with a solemn consecratory prayer to the Holy Spirit. Like Baptism and Confirmation, Holy Orders indelibly marks the candidate, and cannot be repeated or considered temporary. The

ministerial priesthood is different from the priesthood of all the baptized, yet all find their inspiration and model in Jesus Christ.

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For Reflection

- Why is ordination important for the life of the Church?