My Emmaus

Formation Program

Catholic Sacraments Module

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Leadership Formation for
Teachers, Catechists, and Parish Ministers

Guide to Catholic Sacraments

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A Sacramental People

Catholicism has always been noted for its symbols and rituals. Catholic services are known for "smells and bells," incense symbolizing worship and bells calling attention to the key moments of worship. Catholics are comfortable with pictures and statues of Jesus and the saints (even of God in Michelangelo's paintings), with wearing crosses and medals, and with elaborate rituals and processions. Recent visits to vast crowds of pilgrims at Lourdes and the shrine to Our Lady of Czestochowa in Poland reinforced this awareness for me.

One bone of contention for Protestants, especially Reformers like Ulrich Zwingli (d. 1531), was the Catholic appreciation for stained-glass windows depicting biblical scenes, statues, and rituals like the Mass. I once visited Zwingli's church in Zurich and was amazed at how bare and empty it was, featuring only the Bible on a stand. For the most part Protestants settle for just two sacraments instead of the traditional seven, and even shave these back to the bare necessities.

The Sacramental Principle

Catholics, as well as people from other religions like Hinduism and many American Indian traditions, subscribe to the sacramental principle, that is, that the power of God can be experienced in the visible: in nature, people, material things, and rituals. I have often taken my students to worship at a nearby Hindu temple, and we are always amazed at the many wonderful and exotic statues of ornate and well-dressed gods and goddesses.

One of my friends, who is part Hopi, tells me that his people experience the power of the Great Spirit in the sun, the source of all life. For the Hopi, animals are part of the creative process: a chipmunk planted the seeds that became trees, and a coyote painted the colors in nature. The famous mystic Black Elk, of the Oglala Sioux, prayed to the Great Spirit: "Day in, day out, forevermore, you are the life of things." The Algonquins prayed: "The Great Spirit is in all things, is in the air we breathe. The Great Spirit is our Father, but the Earth is our Mother. She nourishes us; that which we put into the ground, She returns to us."

Other religions like Judaism and Islam prefer God to remain in mystery and though they can experience God in the inspired word and in rituals, they don't allow images or sacraments. When I take my students to worship at a synagogue, we notice that everything is centered on the Torah, which many Jews view as an inspired letter from their Father-God. And when we attend the Muslim mosque, we find only elaborate designs, and the worship service is centered on the Quran and prayers to Allah.

Symbols

Catholics are strong in their belief that the power of Christ can be experienced through symbols. Symbols are an integral part of life. Humans are likely the only creatures capable of making symbols, and we shape them to convey meaning. My granddaughter Marie is three and already she draws a house and stick figures to represent her "mommy, daddy," herself, and her baby sisters, Natalie and Lauren. These symbols show where Marie finds her security and happiness.

Symbols have a power all their own. Language uses words as symbols to convey meaning. Once you have learned a language you know how to use these symbols to convey what you want to say. For instance, the words "I love you" can generate powerful feelings. But if we don't know Spanish and someone says: "*Te amo*," the meaning escapes me. Phrases like "I promise you" or "I forgive you" or "Get out of my life!" can reach deep into our hearts and feelings. And then there are some mysteries of

life that are beyond everyday speech and we try to express them in the highly symbolic language of poetry.

Gestures are also symbols. A kiss can just say “hello” or perhaps be an invitation to intimacy. A hug can express a greeting, whereas a long embrace can express a more serious relationship. A pat on the back or a high five can make us feel proud of our achievements. And, of course, people can be symbolic. A medic arriving at an accident is a powerful symbol of rescue; a firefighter pulling up to a burning home symbolizes safety. A friend who shows up when we are in the hospital symbolizes love and concern.

Symbols have the power to draw us into the mysteries of life and reality. At one time the World Trade Center stood for the power of business and commerce in the United States. Then it was attacked on 9-11 in 2001 and for some time it stood for terror, vulnerability, and human loss. Now the open space where it once stood draws many into memories of loved ones lost, questions about why some people hate us so much, and fears that other catastrophes lie ahead.

On a recent trip to Poland, I observed piles of rubble that drew me into the horrors of the Holocaust. These were the ruins of the crematoria and gas chambers in Auschwitz, which were blown up by the German Nazis in an attempt to cover up their atrocities. They were just piles of bricks, but extremely powerful symbols of the mystery of evil and human cruelty. They are symbols of the hatred that drove human beings to destroy millions of innocent lives with industrial efficiency. In a room there, one sees countless shoes of the victims, taken off just before they entered the gas chambers. Among these are many baby shoes and shoes of toddlers, as well as artificial limbs and canes! The meaning of all this, I must say, was beyond my comprehension, and to this day I am haunted by the experience of these symbols of death and destruction.

Sounds are also used as symbols to draw us into mystery. Recently I attended the burial of a marine killed in Iraq, the fiancée of one of my students. When *Taps* was played, I was drawn into the mystery of a life cut short, the grief of a lovely undergraduate, and experienced feelings of loss, patriotism, heroism, and the futility of war. I will never forget a similar ceremony when *Taps* was played at the cemetery near the beaches of Normandy. There were ten thousand white markers on the graves of those who died in the 1945 invasion, which ended World War II. I was overwhelmed at the sight of the loss of so many young Americans and yet was inspired by their heroism and self-sacrifice. I can remember another sound, that of a siren, as we rushed a friend of mine off to a hospital for emergency surgery. Often when I hear a siren now, I am brought back to that experience and reminded of the anxiety, compassion for my friend, and fear that he wouldn’t make it.

And we have our symbolic rituals. A dance can be a celebration of joy at a wedding or intimacy on an evening out. Thanksgiving dinner is a symbolic meal that can draw a family closer and provide a special time to share memories, greetings of “what’s going on,” and to welcome new young members with hugs.

We surround ourselves with powerful symbols, engagement and wedding rings, flags, photos, souvenirs, songs, all of which can have the power to conjure memories and put us in touch with deep feelings. How many of us wear something around our necks or on our fingers that are treasured symbols of loved ones past and present. The song laments, “You don’t bring me flowers anymore.” The symbols of love are gone and so seems to be the love itself.

It is interesting to note that the word *symbol* comes from the Greek word *syn-ballien*, which means “to put together.” It comes from the ancient Greek practice of making contract or covenant. Each person in the agreement was given a piece of the same object. At any given time they could reconvene and match their pieces to show that each was a part of the original deal. The same applies to our use of symbols today. For a symbol to be effective, there has to be an agreed-upon meaning shared by the participants. Picture a couple celebrating their fiftieth anniversary together at their favorite restaurant.

They hold hands across the table and the husband gently fingers his wife's diamond wedding ring. The symbolic ring puts them in touch with the mysteries of their lives together: the love, the struggles, the child raising. The ring has the power to draw them into fifty years of sharing in the covenant they began so many years ago and also gives them hope for more years ahead.

Sacraments, as we shall see, are similar: they are powerful and yet unique symbols that link us with the power of God and with our covenant with others. Sacraments are about communication with God and others. Sacraments are about community with God and others. And these profound and powerful symbols are concerned with propelling us into a way of life and action for others.

Religious Symbols

It has been said that we humans are religious by nature, that is, that religion has always been part of human culture. Studies in anthropology seem to bear this out. The root in the word *religion* is *religare*, which means "to be tied into." Humans have always been tied into the mysteries of the sacred, into the ultimate, in many cases into relationship with divine beings, or if you will, gods.

As far as we know, people have always used symbols as a way to connect with the divine, to enter into the power of the gods. High in the Swiss Alps, altars and animal remains that date back to 180,000 BCE have been found in caves, suggesting that sacrifices were made in thanksgiving to the god of the hunt. Similarly there are thirty-thousand-year-old drawings in caves in France that suggest rites were performed to the "master of animals" to ensure animal fertility and hunting success. The Masai, an ancient tribe that still dwells in East Africa, perform dances and processions to their god, whom they believe is manifested in the rain, the lush grasslands, and the lion. They make long pilgrimages, fasting along the way, to commune with the red god that they believe dwells in a volcano called Oldongo L'Engai. Today mosques, temples, churches, and shrines abound around the world, and countless religious symbols, including the crescent, the Star of David, and crosses, are used by a broad diversity of religions.

Jewish Symbols

Jesus, as we know, was Jewish, and his movement began as a reform of Judaism, so Jewish symbols are a part of the Christian system of symbols. For instance, the Jewish menorah, the candelabrum symbolizing that Israel is to be "the light unto nations," finds its counterpart in Christianity in the altar candles symbolizing that Jesus is the "the light of the world." Shabbat, the Jewish day of rest and worship, is parallel to the Christian Sunday. The Passover Seder supper commemorating the saving of the Jewish people from slavery in Egypt finds its counterpart in the Mass in memory of the saving power of the cross. One of the oldest images of Jesus is that of the good shepherd, which ties his gospel image to that of the shepherd who became King David.

There are many symbols in the Hebrew Bible that are significant to Christians: the garden of Paradise, the tree of knowledge, the eating of the forbidden fruit, the snake; Noah's ark, the flood, the dove and the rainbow; the burning bush, the commandment tablets, the manna in the desert, the pillar of smoke; the temple with its altar, tabernacle, and the scroll containing the inspired Word of God. These were all Jewish symbols that drew the chosen people into the mysteries of their covenant with their god, into the mysteries of the creator and savior. These symbols eventually became part and parcel of the community that followed Jesus and were used to experience the power of the risen Jesus in their midst.

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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.

> "Through the celebration of sacraments, we become aware of the mystery of the presence and action of the God we cannot see."

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, the 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."

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.

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*).

> "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 or raising the child in the faith with the help of the believing community."

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

of the believing community.

The formation process called the catechumenate leads adults and older children to Baptism. Through the religious instruction, prayers, and support of the believing commuity, 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).

"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."

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.

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.

> "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."

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).

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) 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.

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*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.

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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.

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.

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, 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.

> "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.

"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."

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 deaconate (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.

For Reflection

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

Sacraments of Baptism and Confirmation

Dr. Maura Thompson Hagarty

Called to the Waters of Baptism

"Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit" (Matthew 28: 19). This is Jesus' command recounted at the end of the Gospel according to Matthew. For two millennia the Catholic Church has been baptizing people of all ages—newborns, older folks, and everyone in between. Participation in the body of Christ and the mission of the Church knows no age restrictions.

All are called to the waters of Baptism. The ritual actions and prayers that we use to initiate vary somewhat according to age and circumstance, but the central symbolic action always involves water.

Water of Life, Water of Death

Water is a necessity of life. Without hydration we face certain death. Water is also a source of pleasure. It refreshes and renews us and gives us wonderful recreational opportunities. Just think of the fun times you may have had swimming or running through the sprinkler on a hot summer day, or sledding or skating on wintry days. Water is also important because it cleanses. Animal and plant life also depend on water, so we depend on it for our food. When we use water in the Sacrament of Baptism, all these images that associate water with life tell us something about what it means to be Christian.

Water, however, evokes images of danger and death too. When water is out of our control it can be harmful and destructive. Think of the tsunami which devastated so many coastal areas in Asia at Christmastime in 2004, or even an unattended wading pool, hazardous for inquisitive toddlers. Severe weather systems can produce torrential rains and dangerous snow storms. The very same rivers, lakes, and oceans that can be such a source of fun and refreshment can also prove dangerous.

What does it mean to be immersed in something that evokes images of both life and death? What is this ambiguous symbol telling us about being Christian? The prayer the Church uses to bless the water for Baptism sheds light on these questions. It alludes to three significant Old Testament stories in which water plays a central role—creation, the great flood, and the exodus.

The Genesis account of Creation tells of God bringing order to a chaotic, watery, and dark abyss. Once the waters are ordered, dry land appears and the earth is able to sustain life (See

Genesis 1:1-19). The flood story tells of Noah and his family making a safe passage through raging flood waters, which devastated the earth and destroyed every living thing except for the people and animals in Noah's ark (See Genesis 7:1 – 8:19). The account of the Exodus tells of the Israelites escaping from the Egyptians through the parted waters of the Red Sea (See Exodus 14).

These three stories each depict a similar pattern. The waters associated with death give way to waters that sustain life. The Exodus and flood stories describe people being led by God on a journey through waters of death and destruction to new life and a new relationship with God.

The Blessing of the Water in the Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults (RCIA) makes clear that the waters of Baptism have something in common with the waters in the Old Testament stories. In Baptism the action of being immersed in water symbolizes a passage through death to a new life in Christ. The design of baptismal fonts built by Christians during the early centuries of the Church accentuates this meaning. The fonts resembled tombs. Those being initiated took three steps down into a dark pool and, then after being immersed three times, climbed up three steps on the other side. The descent into the dark waters was a dying with Christ; the assent, a rising and the beginning of a new life.

Many parishes today do not have Baptismal pools that allow for immersion, so the central symbolic action involves infusion or the pouring of water over the forehead. This action is also meant to evoke the idea of passing from death to new life.

In the Blessing of the Water, the community prays to God on behalf of those being baptized: "may all who are buried with Christ in the death of Baptism rise also with him to newness of life" (RCIA, 222). We also pray that they "may be cleansed from sin and rise to a new birth." Our prayer expresses faith that through the power of the Holy Spirit all those being initiated will be joined to Christ's Paschal Mystery—that they too will pass through the death of sin and alienation to new life of love lived in communion with God and the community. By being associated with death and life, water is well-suited to evoke these deep meanings underlying the Christian practices of Baptism.

The Baptism of Young Children

The majority of Catholics are baptized as very young children, long before they are capable of expressing faith. Since they are unable to speak for themselves or grasp the meaning of the ritual, the celebration of Baptism focuses more attention on the parents, godparents, and the local community, and the responsibility of all of these people to foster the child's faith in the years to come and help prepare them for First Eucharist and Confirmation when they are older.

The role the parents play is the most important because of their unique relationship with their child. They have the most potential and therefore the greatest responsibility to pass on the faith of the Church to the child. The Sacrament of Baptism begins with the reception of the

child, which puts the spotlight on the parents. The presider questions the parents: "What name do you give your child?" (*Rite of Baptism for Children*, 37). In response, they state the name. This seemingly simple exchange carries deep meaning. If you have you ever named something, think about the nature of your relationship with that which you named. In all likelihood your reflection points to this insight: we are responsible for what we name.

The dialogue between the presider and the parents includes a subsequent question that spells out their duty: "You have asked to have your children baptized. In doing so you are accepting the responsibility of training them in the practice of the faith. It will be your duty to bring them up to keep God's commandments as Christ taught us, by loving God and our neighbor. Do you clearly understand what you are undertaking?" (*Rite of Baptism for Children*, 39). This is so important that if the parents are not in a position to respond with an authentic "I do" or "we do," pastoral leaders may encourage the parents to delay the Baptism.

The presider also queries the godparents about their role: "Are you ready to help these parents in their duty as Christian mothers and fathers?" (*Rite of Baptism for Children*, 40). After they respond affirmatively, the presider tells the child, "I claim you for Christ" (*Rite of Baptism for Children*, 41). Then he traces the sign of the cross on the child's forehead and invites the parents and godparents to do the same. This signing ritual expresses the child's new identity as a Christian as well as the parents and godparents acceptance of their roles.

The water ritual, carried out either through immersion or pouring, takes place after the liturgy of the word. This is the heart of the sacrament. The presider says "I baptize you in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit" (*Rite of Baptism*, 60). The child is incorporated in the Body of Christ and takes on a new identity. Several additional ritual elements follow the immersion in or pouring of water including an optional an optional blessing of the ears and mouth. These are called explanatory rites because they help to explain the meaning of the central symbolic action.

In addition to water, there are several other important symbols used to celebrate the Sacrament of Baptism.

> **Chrism**. Signifying the gift of the Holy Spirit, this perfumed oil, consecrated by the bishop, is rubbed onto the head of the person being baptized. Chrism is also used in the sacraments of Confirmation, Holy Orders, and Anointing of the Sick.
>
> **White garment**. The person baptized is clothed in a white garment as a sign of Christian dignity, and all pray that he or she will bring that dignity unstained into the everlasting life of heaven. White also symbolized purity and hope.
>
> **Lighted candle**. Representing the light of Christ, the newly baptized—or the parents and godparents of the young child—are entrusted to keep this light burning brightly. They are also challenged to keep the flame of faith alive in all our hearts by their example of love and charity.

Full initiation into the Catholic Church includes the celebration of Eucharist and Confirmation. These are delayed until the child is old enough to express his or her own faith in God and commitment to the Church. The whole community, including the parents and godparents, share responsibility for nurturing the child's faith during his or her years of growing and maturing. In time the newly initiated come to understand that by virtue of their Baptism, they have a responsibility to participate in the Church's mission.

Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults

When adults who are not Christian seek membership in the Catholic Church, they are invited into a process called the Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults (RCIA) or the catechumenate. *RCIA* refers to the whole process of preparation and initiation, as well as to the book that guides the process and provides the texts for all the rituals that are part of the process.

Unbaptized children who have reached the age of reason, commonly understood to be the age of seven, usually participate in a similar process that has been adapted to their age level. Since they are old enough to express faith and to speak for themselves, the Rite of Baptism with its focus on the parents' faith is not well-suited to the initiation of these older children.

The catechumenate is a gradual process of initiation that is punctuated by a series of liturgical celebrations. It is a flexible process that responds to the individual's experience of Christian conversion and the pace of his or her faith development.

The first celebration is the rite of acceptance into the order of the catechumenate. This ritual is similar to the rite of reception at the beginning of a young child's Baptism, except that the focus is on the one being initiated rather than the parents. This rite marks the beginning of a period of preparation called the catechumenate.

At the beginning of Lent the catechumens who are ready for full initiation celebrate the rite of election. This marks the beginning of a period of more intense preparation called the period of purification and enlightenment. The high point of the entire process is the celebration of Baptism, Confirmation, and Eucharist at the Easter Vigil.

Easter is not the end, however. It is followed by a period called mystagogy, during which the newly initiated reflect on the meaning of their initiation. Mystagogy is often thought of as period of relatively short duration such as a few weeks or months.

The term has a broader meaning as well. Since we are called to live out the meaning of Baptism every day of our lives, the whole of Christian life is enhanced if it has a mystagogical dimension. This entails a routine of periodically thinking about the meanings embodied in our initiation rituals so that we may live more authentic Christian lives. This reflection can take many forms.

Promises, Promises

One way to deepen the significance of Baptism for our lives is to renew our Baptismal promises. Several times during the year when we are gathered for liturgy, the Church invites us to do this. We publicly re-state our commitment to the Church's beliefs and to Christian living by renouncing sin and making a profession of faith.

Together with the entire assembly we respond "I do" to the following series of questions:

Do you reject sin so as to live in the freedom of God's children?
Do you reject the glamour of evil, and refuse to be mastered by sin?
Do you reject Satan, father of sin and prince of darkness?
Do you believe in God, the Father almighty, creator of heaven and earth?
Do you believe in Jesus Christ, his only Son, our Lord,
who was born of the Virgin Mary,
was crucified, died, and was buried,
rose from the dead,
and is now seated at the right hand of the Father?
Do you believe in the Holy Spirit,
the holy catholic Church, the communion of saints,
the forgiveness of sins, the resurrection of the body,
and life everlasting? (RCIA 224-225; RBC 57-58; RC 23)

The parents of young Baptismal candidates make these promises initially for their children when they are baptized. As the children learn to talk they begin to say the "I do" along with everyone else. Eventually they grow into an understanding of the meaning of what they are saying. Those baptized as older children or in adulthood make these promises for themselves.

The community as a whole renews these promises every year at the Easter Vigil and at other times. This practice serves to unite everyone who is already initiated with the newly initiated who are making these promises for the first time. Over time, the practice of repetitive promise-making strengthens everyone's Christian identity and their commitment to the Church's mission.

The promises we make during the course of our lives are usually concerned with things that are challenging for us. We don't often think to make promises about things that come easily to us. Promise-making is a positive force in our lives when it focuses our attention on our goals and gives us the extra strength and inspiration that propels us toward achieving them.

It is customary for us to repeat some of our most important promises periodically, especially those that involve commitments to others. Married couples repeat their vows. Members of organizations such as scouts repeat their oaths together. Citizens of the U.S. pledge allegiance to their flag and country. And we repeat our baptismal promises regularly. The repetition of a

promise serves to remind us of the relationships that define our identity and to root us more deeply in our vision of how we want to live our lives.

Confirmed in the Spirit

The full process of initiation into the Catholic Church includes the Sacrament of Confirmation—it also includes the Sacrament of Eucharist. Those who are baptized as infants and receive first Eucharist around the age of reason are usually invited to celebrate the Sacrament of Confirmation sometime in later childhood or adolescence. The age varies from diocese to diocese in the United States and in Canada since current practice calls for each bishop to establish a minimum age for his diocese.

In a small number of dioceses, parishes invite children to celebrate the Sacraments of Initiation in the same order as the early Christians—Baptism, Confirmation, and then eucharist. This typically involves Baptism in infancy and then the celebration of Confirmation and Eucharist at the same liturgy around the age of seven or eight.

Catechumens—unbaptized adults and older children—celebrate Confirmation along with Baptism and Eucharist at the Easter Vigil. Many parishes and campus ministry programs also celebrate the Sacrament of Confirmation with baptized adults who have been participating in Eucharist for years but were never confirmed.

That's a lot of variety in the Church's practice of Confirmation. Perhaps you see many of these different ways of celebrating in your own community.

Regardless of circumstance, however, the central symbolic action is an anointing with blessed and perfumed olive oil, which is called chrism. The bishop or priest who presides extends his hands over the candidates for Confirmation and leads a special prayer that asks God to send the Spirit upon them. Then, in the central action, he anoints each candidate on the forehead by making the Sign of the Cross with chrism while saying his or her name and then "be sealed with the gift of the Holy Spirit" (*Rite of Confirmation* 27).

When the newly confirmed respond "Amen" they affirm their Christian identity, their place in the Body of Christ, and their commitment to using their God-given gifts to serve others. For some this is a first-time commitment to the work of continuing the ministry of Jesus in the world. For others it is a re-affirmation of a commitment to the Church's mission that they embraced earlier in life.

When the celebration of Confirmation is separated from Baptism, as is often the case, it is important to maintain a clear sense of the Holy Spirit's role in human life. The meaning of the Sacrament of Confirmation becomes distorted if people get the impression that the Holy Spirit is being given to the candidates for the very first time in Confirmation. The prayers that ask for

the gifts of the Holy Spirit and the presider's words that accompany the anointing, can unintentionally fuel this confusion.

Here are two ideas that help maintain clarity. First, any suggestion that the Holy Spirit has not been active and present during the growing up years of an adolescent or adult confirmand is contrary to Catholic belief. Second, Catholics pray for the Spirit's presence and action over and over again. In every sacramental celebration, at the beginning of every Mass, we do this, not just Confirmation.

For example, in the water blessing prayer at Baptism, we ask God to send the Spirit upon the waters in the font. In the Eucharistic Prayer at Mass we pray that the Holy Spirit come upon the bread and wine and transform them into the Body and Blood of Christ and upon all of us so that we may be united as members of the Body of Christ.

Our prayers of invocation are not meant to suggest that we think the Holy Spirit is absent. Quite the contrary. They express our belief in the presence of the Holy Spirit and the transforming power the Spirit can wield in our lives. The giving of the Spirit in Confirmation "conforms believers more fully to Christ and strengthens them so that they may bear witness to Christ for the building up of his Body in faith and love," (*Rite of Confirmation*, 2).

The Holy Spirit has already had an effect on the lives of candidates, but now, they are more closely connected to the Christian community and strengthened in their desire and readiness to witness a Christian way of life through their words and actions. Confirmed Christians take on their heightened role in the Church with the confidence that the Spirit will never leave them alone.

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Sacrament of Eucharist

Dr. Maura Thompson Hagarty

Elements of a Memorable Meal

The Sacrament of the Eucharist is at the heart of the Catholic Church. The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* calls it the "source and summit of Christian life" (CCC 1324). It is the apex or highest point of life. One of our challenges as Catholics is to give the Eucharist a central place in our own personal lives, week in and week out. Otherwise, the importance of Eucharist remains simply an idea in our minds and we miss out on the fullness of life in Christ.

One way to meet this challenge is to do some preparation that helps us more fully engage in the actions that comprise our Eucharistic celebrations. The more fully engaged we can become the more open we will be to the transforming effects of the sacrament. Since the Eucharist involves a ritualized eating and drinking, we can enhance our participation by reflecting on the meaning and significance of meal sharing in our own lives, in Scripture, and in the Eucharist.

Our best meal experiences can be a source of insight about our celebrations of Eucharist. Think about memorable meals you've experienced. They may have been connected with family holiday gatherings, or milestones such as graduations, baptisms, birthdays, or anniversaries. They may also have been ordinary meals with family or friends that turned into something extraordinary.

Our meals, especially when they involve celebrating special occasions with family and friends, usually follow a four part pattern.

1. We gather and greet one another. If we have been in conflict with someone who is present, ideally, we are able to reconcile.
2. Our time together typically involves the telling of stories. We may speak of things that have happened since our last gathering. Families often talk about ancestors and other relatives, while other groups may tell stories about the people or events that brought them together.
3. After making the necessary preparations, we eat and drink together. The more festive the occasion, typically, the more plentiful and special are the food and drink.
4. We wish each other well and take our leave.

This pattern holds true for what we do when we gather for Eucharist. Our celebration follows the four part structure of a festive meal

We Gather: Introductory Rites. We gather in response to God's call. After greeting one another and singing an opening hymn, we pray together. These prayers include the Penitential Rite in

which we confess our sins, the ancient hymn of praise called the Gloria, and the opening prayer voiced by the presider. The elements of the introductory rites draw us together as a community and prepare us for the two most important parts of the Eucharist, the Liturgy of the Word and the Liturgy of the Eucharist.

We share stories: Liturgy of the Word. During this part of the Mass the Word of God is proclaimed. On Sundays, we hear several readings including one from the Gospel according to Matthew, Mark, Luke, or John. The Gospel reading is the highpoint of the Liturgy of the Word. We believe that God is speaking to us in the present moment through the proclamation. In the homily that follows, the presider reflects on the meaning of the readings for us today. Ideally, the Liturgy of the Word inspires us to "be doers of the word, and not merely hearers" (James 1:22) and prepares us to be active participants in the Eucharist.

We give thanks and then eat and drink together: Liturgy of the Eucharist. Representatives of the community present gifts of bread and wine over which we pray a special prayer of thanksgiving and blessing called the Eucharistic Prayer. This prayer, led by the presider, is the "heart and summit of the celebration" (*CCC* 1352). The Liturgy of the Eucharist concludes with the eating and drinking of the consecrated Bread and Wine during the part of the Mass called the Communion Rite.

We are sent forth: Blessing and Dismissal. The presider blesses and dismisses us using words like "Go now in peace to love and serve the Lord," which challenge us to go forth and live the meaning of the celebration. This challenges us to continue Jesus' mission in the world.

The insight we can gain about Eucharist from our everyday meal experiences goes beyond the parts and structure of the celebration, however. After all, even the meals we wish we could forget may follow the same pattern. Recall some other characteristics of your best meals. What makes them stand out? The food? The people? Did your relationships with the people you shared your best meals with change in any way? Did you notice some sort of change in yourself? Did you leave the meal with a new attitude about an aspect of your life?

Great food can certainly be memorable, but chances are your best meals stand out because they nourished your spirit, not just your body. This sort of nourishment has more to do with who we eat *with* than *what* we eat. "A meal is not so much about food as it is about people. In all meals it is the guest list not the menu that matters" (Eugene LaVerdiere, *Dining in the Kingdom of God*, p. vii). If you think of your more memorable meal experiences, you may recognize the truth of this in your own life.

Jesus' Meals

The New Testament tells many stories about Jesus sharing meals with others. These stories shed light on the meaning of the Eucharist for us today. Consider one rather striking feature of Jesus' table fellowship—his meal companions. "Why do you eat and drink with tax collectors

and sinners?" (Luke 5:30) complained the Pharisees after Jesus dined at the home of Levi, a tax collector. When Jesus went to eat with another tax collector named Zacchaeus the people who saw this grumbled saying "he has gone to be the guest of one who is a sinner" (Luke 19: 7).

Jesus' dining practices received a lot of attention because in ancient Mediterranean culture the gesture of sharing a meal was a sign of closeness. Those who complained couldn't understand why Jesus was choosing to spend time with and share himself with people they found undesirable.

Jesus gave some startling advice about sharing meals while dining at the home of a leader of the Pharisees: "When you give a luncheon or a dinner, do not invite your friends or your brothers or your relatives or rich neighbors . . . when you give a banquet, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind" (Luke 14:13). This admonition implies the challenge to share oneself and one's care and concern—even love—with the people most in need in our communities.

Jesus' sharing of meals with the sinners and outcasts was an invitation to them to enter into relationship with him. It was intended to change them. The Gospel according to Luke portrays Jesus seeking out Levi and Zacchaeus—the lost—in order to save them. Levi, also known as Matthew, became one of Jesus' disciples. Zacchaeus responded to Jesus' initiative with a life-changing promise. "Look, half of my possessions, Lord, I will give to the poor; and if I have defrauded anyone of anything, I will pay back four times as much" (Luke 19:8).

The focal point of Jesus' meals with sinners was forgiveness and conversion rather than physical sustenance. This doesn't mean that working to meet the immediate needs of those without food is not important. Quite the contrary. Consider how Jesus describes those destined for eternal life. "For I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me" (Matthew 25: 35-36).

The hungry and the suffering in our local communities and across the globe are very much our concern. Scripture, however, distinguish between the food and drink that keep us physically alive and the "bread of life" and "living water" that keeps us spiritually alive. In doing so they make clear that there is more to human existence than the material world.

In the Gospel according to John, Jesus says, "I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never be hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty. . . I am the living bread . . . whoever eats of this bread will live forever" (John 6:35,51). He tells the Samaritan woman he meets at the well "Everyone who drinks of this water will be thirsty again, but those who drink of the water that I will give them will never be thirsty. The water that I will give will become in them a spring of water gushing up to eternal life" (John 4:13-14).

Jesus' metaphorical language is well-chosen because satisfying hunger and thirst is the most fundamental of all human needs. In ancient Mediterranean culture, bread and water were primary means of satisfying these physical needs. When we say we 'hunger' and 'thirst' for

thing—such as companionship, meaning in our lives, or love—we are emphasizing how much we need and desire them. We are saying that we can't live without them.

The Good News Jesus spread tells us to live fully human lives and to live eternally we absolutely need what God makes possible through the Holy Spirit—love, forgiveness, and union with God and one another. The language of metaphor emphasizes that these things are as important to our spiritual lives as food and drink are to our physical lives. "What material food produces in our bodily life, Holy Communion wonderfully achieves in our spiritual life" (*CCC* 1392).

The Last Supper

The last meal Jesus shared with the disciples before his death is likely the one most familiar to Catholics, since we hear an account of it at every Mass during the Eucharistic Prayer. At this meal, often referred to as the Last Supper, Jesus identified his own self with bread that is broken and wine that is poured out for the sake of others. Luke tells us that Jesus:

> . . . took a loaf of bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it and gave it to them, saying, 'This is my body, which is given for you. Do this in remembrance of me.' And he did the same with the cup after supper, saying, 'This cup that is poured out for you is the new covenant in my blood (Luke 22:19-20).

Jesus' words and actions announce that he is a source of life-giving sustenance more vital than the food and drink that keep our bodies going.

The disciples would have been accustomed to the religious ritual of taking, blessing, breaking or pouring, and then sharing wine and bread. These gestures were a usual part of the Jewish Passover meal. This was an annual celebration of thanksgiving for God's freeing the Israelites from captivity in Egypt and promising them a future as a chosen people. At the Passover meal, bread was blessed by the host and shared before the main course. At the end of the meal the host would take a cup of wine, say a longer prayer of thanksgiving. Then all the people would share a sip of wine from the one cup.

Jesus followed the usual custom, but he added an unexpected element when he said "Do this in remembrance of me." The deep meaning and significance of this is apparent only in light of subsequent events: the death and resurrection of Jesus.

The Paschal Mystery

Jesus' death shortly after the Last Supper left his disciples shaken and afraid. Soon, however, they discovered that the crucifixion was not the end for their beloved friend. The Scriptures tell many stories about Jesus revealing that he was still alive.

- John tells of Jesus appearing to Mary Magdalene after she goes to his tomb (see John 20:17).
- The two disciples who met a stranger while on the road to Emmaus realized the man they encountered was Jesus when the three broke bread together at the end of the day (see Luke 24:13-35; Mark 16:12-13).
- A number of disciples encountered Jesus at the beach after a night of fishing and ate breakfast with him. They recognized Jesus after he told them where to drop their fishing nets (see John 21:1-14).
- Jesus also appeared to the disciples while they were huddled together, full of fear, in a locked room in Jerusalem (see Luke 24: 36-43; John 20:19-20).

When Jesus revealed that he was full of life after having been put to death, the disciples' fear and uncertainty turned to joy. From then on, when they broke bread together in remembrance of Jesus, they celebrated not only the life that came to an end on the cross but also his ongoing and loving presence and his union with God the Father.

Jesus life, death, and resurrection is often referred to as the "Paschal Mystery." Paschal comes from a Greek word for passing over. When we use the phrase *Paschal mystery* we are referring to the mystery of passing from life, through death, to new life. As with the earliest Christians, every time we gather to celebrate Eucharist in remembrance of Jesus, as he commanded, we celebrate this mystery.

Our sacramental eating and drinking with one another is meant to satisfy our spiritual hunger and thirst. It is meant to bring us into unity with one another and with God. In short, it is meant to change us. The change in not necessarily drastic or dramatic, but over time, the practice of celebrating the Eucharist shapes us more and more into what we are called to be—the Body of Christ in the world.

Remembering the Past, Present, and Future

In order to grasp the significance of our Eucharistic celebrations, it is helpful to think about what it means to remember. The term *remember* is commonly used in the sense of bringing to mind an image or idea from the past. In Eucharist, we bring to mind events from long ago, using, for example, stories about the Israelites and about things Jesus did during his earthly ministry.

Our remembrance in liturgy, however, has present and future dimensions as well. We are not simply remembering a person who is long gone and events thousands of years removed from our lives. We are remembering someone who is in our midst now and events taking place now.

When we remember Jesus' Resurrection and the revelation of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost, we open our minds and hearts to the reality that God is present and active in our lives today. When we celebrate the Eucharist we are celebrating the Paschal mystery as a present reality. Its roots

in the past—in Jesus' earthly life—are essential for understanding this mystery, yet our celebration's focus is primarily on what God is doing now and the implications for the future.

We strive to remember the true character of our lives , graced by the love of God and the promised future of eternal life in God's embrace. We also strive to remember that these realities have implications for the way we live. Our focus is not on remembering past events for their own sake. It is on God's action today and our efforts to respond with faith.

Full, Active Participation

To follow Jesus' command to "remember" in Eucharist is to fully participate in the action. This goes beyond external participation, that is, the things we do that are observable. We make the sign of the cross, listen attentively, sing the hymns and responses, exchange the sign of peace, go to Communion, and perform many other ritual actions. We might even serve in a ministry—greeting, reading, cantoring, ushering, or distributing communion.

While this external participation is very important; full, active participation entails something more. It requires internal participation. This refers to what is going inside our hearts and minds. It is the spiritual dimension of our participation. Without it, we are just going through the motions and our ritual expressions are empty.

When we participate fully, we are attentive to all the ways Christ is present in our midst: in the people who are assembled, in the Word that is proclaimed, in the presider who leads us, and in the bread and wine, blessed and shared. Our eyes are open to God's invitation and our hearts are ready to respond in faith.

When we participate in communion our external action is to proceed to the altar together and then to eat and drink. Internally and spiritually, we are joining ourselves to the Body of Christ. We are joining ourselves to Jesus' sacrifice and to his paschal mystery. We embrace the promise that if we die with Jesus we will also rise with him. When we say *Amen* we agree to give our own selves for the sake of others. We pledge to be bread broken and wine poured out so that others may have the fullness of life.

St. Augustine, a bishop who lived in the fifth century, captured the essence of Eucharist in a phrase that is often quoted today: "Be what you see, and receive what you are." He was talking about the Body of Christ. Augustine was reminding Christians of their identity and encouraging them to fully live out what it means to be the body of Christ. He explained: "To that which you are you respond 'Amen' ("yes, it is true!") and by responding to it you assent to it. For you hear the words, 'the Body of Christ' and respond 'Amen.' Be then a member of the Body of Christ that your Amen may be true" (*CCC* 1396).

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A Walk through the Mass

An Encounter with the Risen Christ

The story of the disciples on the road to Emmaus in the Gospel of Luke (see 24:13–35) provides a great backdrop to an understanding of the Mass. In this beloved story, Jesus appears to two disheartened disciples walking out of Jerusalem on the evening of the first Easter. While walking with them, Jesus explains the Scriptures for them and how the stories and prophesies are related to the Messiah of God. Then, as they share the meal, Jesus takes the bread, blesses it, breaks it, and gives it to them, at which point they recognize him as the Risen Lord, only for him to vanish from their sight. As the story ends, the two disciples run back to Jerusalem and proclaim to the others the Good News of the Resurrection. Their hearts were on fire as Jesus spoke to them about the Scriptures along the road to Emmaus. Their eyes were opened to his risen presence in the breaking of the bread.

The experience of the two disciples on the road to Emmaus is what happens during the celebration of the Eucharist, also known as the Mass. During the celebration of the Eucharist, it is Christ who is truly present in the gathered assembly. It is Christ, the Word Made Flesh, who speaks the Scriptures to his Church, and it is Christ who is present in the bread and wine, blessed, broken, and shared. It is the Good News of the Risen Christ that we, his disciples today, are sent to proclaim to the world.

The celebration of the Eucharist is not so much an event; rather, it is an encounter with the living Christ. Each element of the celebration draws the believer more and more into the Paschal Mystery—the life, death, and Resurrection of Christ. It is helpful, now and then, to focus on this encounter in order to better understand and appreciate how each element of the liturgy leads us into ever closer relationship with the Risen Christ.

The Eucharist in the Life of the Church

The Second Vatican Council called liturgy “the source and summit of Christian life.” (*Dogmatic Constitution on the Church, [Lumen Gentium, 1964],* 11). It is the fountain, or source of the Church, from which grace pours out, and it is at the same time the goal, or summit, towards all of its activities are directed, and it is in liturgy where the work of redemption is accomplished (see *Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy [Sacrosanctum Concilium, 1963]* 2, 10) The liturgy, then, is the heart of the Church’s life and activity. It is through the gathering of the Church to hear the Scriptures and to share in the feast of life that its members are nourished and fed by Christ himself. Liturgy is the sharing in the very life of God; it is our encounter with the Holy One who created us, the Holy One who redeems us, and the Holy One who sustains us on our pilgrim journey through life. It is precisely because liturgy is the special place of encounter with God that it is so central to the life of the Church.

Toward the end of the first century, the evangelist Luke described in the Acts of the Apostles the importance of the gathering for the Eucharist (see 2:42). Luke tells us that the communal life of the first Christians was sustained by the teachings of the Apostles and in the breaking of the bread. Very early on, the sharing of Eucharist, in obedience to the Lord’s command at the Last Supper to “do this in memory of me,” was already developing a formalized structure. Around the year AD 150, an early Christian leader, Justin Martyr, provided a vivid picture of the liturgy of his community. Writing to the pagan Roman emperor, Justin describes the weekly gathering of the community:

> On the day named after the sun, people who live in the cities and in the country gather for a celebration. Then the writings that the apostles have left or the writings of the prophets are

> read, as long as time allows. After the reader finishes his task, the presider gives an address in which he urgently admonishes the people to follow these excellent teachings in their lives. Then we all stand up together and offer prayers. After the end of the prayers . . . bread, wine, and water are brought and the president offers up prayers and thanksgiving—as much as he is able. The people assent by speaking "Amen." Then the things over which thanks has been said are distributed to all who are present, and the deacons take some to those who are absent. In addition, those who are well-to-do give whatever they wish. Whatever is collected is kept by the president, who uses it to help widows and orphans.
>
> (*First Apology*, 67)

Surprisingly, this description from the second century is essentially the order and structure of the Mass today. Though the Mass has changed and evolved through the centuries, with the addition of various elements, repetitions, prayers, and elaborate ceremonials, the essential structure has remained the tradition of the Church. The constitutive elements of the Mass outlined by Justin Martyr include (1) gathering of the people together, (2) proclamation of the Scriptures and exhortation, (3) prayer of the community, (4) gifts of bread and wine, (5) prayer of thanksgiving and people's assent, (6) sharing of Communion, and (7) sending out to those who are sick or in need. After the renewal of the liturgy by the Second Vatican Council, which included a return from Latin to the languages of the people and a simplification of the rituals, these main elements have once again regained their prominence. In the life of the Church, this essential order of the Mass has provided the opportunity for the People of God to enter into closer communion with Christ.

The Gathering of the Church

Justin Martyr described a Eucharistic celebration on what he calls the "day named after the sun," which is Sunday. Sunday holds an important place for the Church, and it is on this day that the Church gathers to worship. Sunday is the first day of creation, the day when, according to Genesis, light was created out of darkness. More important for Christians, Sunday is the day of the Resurrection of Christ—each Sunday is a "little" Easter. Thus Sunday is the primary day of worship. All other Masses, which incorporate the same structure and outline, flow from the Sunday celebration and lead people to it.

As a human activity, the Mass uses elements of ritual—signs, symbols, movement, and gestures that nourish, strengthen and express faith (see *General Instruction to the Roman Missal,* 20). From the building where the Church gathers to the images that surround the worshippers, from the vestments of the priest to the sacred vessels, from the words proclaimed to the meal shared, these gestures, symbols, and objects play important roles in ritual and are intended to engage the senses in the worship of the God we cannot see. This engagement is meant to foster the true, full, and active participation of all the people gathered in worship (*Sacred Liturgy,* 14). Their active participation during the Mass provides them a deep encounter with the Risen Christ.

The celebration of the Mass begins with several rites that prepare those gathered together to listen to the Word of God and to share the Eucharist. The word *church* comes from the Greek word *ekklesia,* meaning "those called together." The opening procession that begins the Mass is the symbolic representation of the gathering of people who have been called together by God.

When time has come to begin the Mass, the assembly stands and usually a chants or sings as the procession begins and the priest and ministers take their place. The entrance procession and the singing

that accompanies it are meant to unify the hearts and minds of the participants so they are prepared for prayer.

When he reaches the altar, the priest (along with any concelebrants and deacons) reverences the altar with a bow and a kiss. On more solemn occasions, the priest may incense the altar. These acts of veneration remind us that the altar is the symbol of Christ. It is from this altar that Christ, the true host of the banquet and the true sacrificed lamb, feeds his People.

The assembly, the assisting ministers, and the priest begin by making the Sign of the Cross. Through this gesture, the Church gathers in the name of the Holy Trinity. The ritual words of greeting that follow the Sign of the Cross recognize the presence of Christ in the gathering. The text of the greeting is taken from the letters of Paul to the churches (see 2 Corinthians 13:13, Romans 1:7, Ephesians 1:2). On Sundays, especially during the Easter Season, the rite of blessing and sprinkling of holy water may take place to remind the assembly of their baptismal dignity as the sons and daughters of God. At other times the Penitential Rite follows the Sign of the Cross and greeting.

Through the Penitential Rite, the assembly recognizes their need to come before God with honest and repentant hearts and to seek God's mercy and strength. One way to recognize our sinfulness is to say together the *Confiteor* ("I confess to almighty God . . ."). Another is to pray a litany praising Christ ("Lord, have mercy" or in Greek *"Kyrie eleison"*). The litany is usually sung, chanted, or recited together by the assembly.

On Sundays, major holy days, and feasts (except during Advent and Lent) the *Gloria* is sung after the Penitential Rite. This ancient song of praise begins with the words of the angels' announcing to the shepherds the birth of Christ: "Glory to God in the highest / and on earth peace to those on whom his favor rests" (Luke 2:14). This song of praise proclaims the glory, goodness, and majesty of the Trinity.

After the *Gloria* the priest invites the assembly to pray briefly in silence. The Opening Prayer that follows, also known as the "Collect" because it collects all the prayers of the assembly into one, expresses the special character or focus of that particular Mass. The Opening Prayer may allude to the readings of the Mass or to the feast day. The people respond "Amen" as a way of joining their prayers into one. After this all are seated. The Collect brings to a close the introductory rites and begins the first of the two major parts of the Mass, the Liturgy of the Word.

Formed by the Word of God

With hearts and minds prepared for the celebration, the assembly sits and listens to the Word of God. Justin Martyr tells us that the writings of the Apostles and the prophets are read during the celebration of the Eucharist. These writings in time became known as the Gospels, the epistles of New Testament, and the stories of the Old Testament. The Liturgy of the Word has its roots in the synagogue tradition where the Scriptures were proclaimed and commented on. This Jewish ritual practice was adopted by the early Church.

During the Liturgy of the Word, Jesus Christ the Word of God Made Flesh, feeds and nourishes his Church. Through the Scriptures proclaimed, Christ teaches, admonishes, comforts, challenges, and sanctifies the People of God, opening them up to the mystery of salvation. In the words of the Scriptures, in the chants and songs between them, through the homily and the prayers of the people, Christ and his People come together.

There are typically four Scripture passages proclaimed during the Mass. The first reading is taken from the Old Testament. This reading is usually from one of the prophetic books or the stories of our Israelite ancestors in faith. Another selection is taken from the Book of Psalms. This Scripture passage

from the Psalms is usually chanted or sung responsorially—that is, sung between the cantor and the assembly.

After these two selections from the Old Testament, there is a reading from the New Testament, primarily from the epistles of Saint Paul or the other letters. After a few moments of silence, the assembly rises and sings an acclamation to greet the presence of Christ in the proclamation of the Gospel. This chant or song is the Alleluia, taken from the Hebrew word meaning "praise God." (During Lent another acclamation of praise is sung in place of the Alleluia.) The singing of the Alleluia accompanies the procession of the Book of the Gospels to the ambo, or pulpit. On more solemn occasions, this procession may include the use of candles and incense. After the Gospel proclamation, the people sit once again and the priest delivers a homily, which exhorts and encourages the assembly to follow the teachings of the Scriptures in today's world.

On Sundays, Solemnities, and other major occasions the assembly stands and recites the Creed, or the profession of faith, after the homily. The Nicene Creed, or the shorter Apostles' Creed, is recited by all as a symbolic act of belief in, as well as a response to, the mysteries proclaimed in the Scriptures. After the recitation of the Creed, the Assembly raises its voice in prayer to God for the needs of the world and the Church. Through these Prayers of the Faithful, also known as the general intercessions, the assembly exercises its baptismal priesthood by offering up prayers to God. These prayers are typically general, although a few may be specific to the needs of the particular community. Prayers for the Church, the world, those in need, those burdened by difficulties, the sick, and the deceased are offered to God. The prayers are introduced by the priest, read by the reader, and the people respond in one voice with a common response, usually by saying, "Lord, hear our prayer." Having listened to the Word of God and having been exhorted to follow their example, the Prayers of the Faithful conclude the first part of the Mass with prayers for all, placing our trust and confidence in the love of God, who provides for all our needs.

Preparing the Table of the Lord

The Liturgy of the Eucharist begins with the preparation of the Altar and the presentation of the gifts. Following an ancient tradition going back to Justin Martyr's time, members of the assembly bring forward bread and wine to be used for Eucharist. Along with these gifts, money and offerings for the poor and needy, as well as for the work of the Church, are also collected and presented. On more solemn celebrations, these gifts along with the priest, ministers, and the assembly are incensed. The use of incense here an in other parts of the liturgy is an ancient ritual of offering. As the smoke rises, the prayers of the people also rise up to God (see Psalm 141).

The use of bread and wine at the Mass also has roots in the Jewish rituals adopted and adapted by the early Christians. At the Last Supper, Jesus took bread and wine, the main elements used for the Passover ritual meal. It was during this supper that Jesus proclaimed the bread as his Body and the wine as his Blood, the Blood of the new and everlasting Covenant. During the weekly celebration of the Jewish Sabbath, loaves of bread and cups of wine were blessed and shared. In the Emmaus story, it is through the breaking of the bread that the disciple recognized the Risen Christ. The phrase "Breaking of the Bread" used by the early Christians becomes one of the earliest titles for the celebration of Eucharist.

The gifts of bread and wine are prepared on the altar. The priest then mixes a small amount of water with the wine, symbolizing the dual nature of Christ, who by the sharing of our humanity gives us a share in his divinity. When the gifts are ready, the priest washes his hands as a sign of interior preparation to come before the Lord with a purified heart. When these preparatory rites are concluded, the priest and assembly ready themselves for the central act of the liturgy, the Eucharistic Prayer.

The Great Prayer of Thanksgiving

The term *eucharist* comes from the Greek word for *thanksgiving.* The Eucharistic Prayer is the great prayer of thanksgiving of the Church to God for the death and Resurrection of Christ, which is called the Paschal Mystery. This prayer, given voice by the priest in the name of the Church, gives thanks and praise to God for Christ. It is during the prayer that, by the power of the Holy Spirit, the gifts of bread and wine truly become the Body and Blood of Christ. The Eucharistic Prayer also comes from Jewish ritual prayers of thanksgiving and blessing used in the home and in the synagogue.

The Eucharistic Prayer begins with a dialogue between the priest and assembly, asking them to lift up their hearts in thanks and praise to the Lord. Then the great prayer continues and recalls the wonders God has done for humanity and through all of creation. This first section of the Eucharistic Prayer concludes with an acclamation of the priest and assembly joining the song of the angels and saints in praise of God (Holy, Holy, Holy).

The second section of the great prayer includes the invocation of the Holy Spirit upon the gifts of bread and wine to transform them into the Body and Blood of Christ. The Greek term *epiclesis* describes this act of invocation of the Holy Spirit over the gifts of bread and wine. Then as the Eucharistic Prayer continues, the sacred words and actions of Jesus at the Last Supper are recalled: “Take this all of you and eat it. This is my body. . . . Take this all of you and drink from it. This is the cup of my blood. . . . Do this in memory of me.” By doing what the Lord commands and by the power of the Holy Spirit, the bread and wine become the Body and Blood of Christ, the true and living presence of Christ for the life of the world. This great mystery of salvation is acclaimed by the assembly as all sing or say one of the memorial acclamations: “Lord by your cross and Resurrection you have set us free, you are the savior of the world” or “Christ has died, Christ is risen, Christ will come again.”

The Eucharistic Prayer continues by remembering Christ’s Passion, his Resurrection, and his Ascension into glory as the Church awaits his return. Remembering these mysteries, the great prayer continues so that through this Eucharist, all may be made one in Christ. Then the prayer turns to the needs of the Church throughout all times and places, for the Pope, the bishops, and ministers of the Gospel, and then particularly that those who have died may share eternal life with Mary, the Mother of God, the saints, and all God’s faithful People.

The Eucharistic Prayer concludes with a doxology, or statement of praise, that gives honor and glory to God through Christ and in the Holy Spirit. After this doxology the people give their assent to the great prayer by singing “Amen,” which seals and affirms the prayer.

During the Eucharistic Prayer, the Church does precisely what Jesus did on the night of the Last Supper and what he did for the disciples on the road to Emmaus. Through this great prayer, Jesus himself once again takes the bread, blesses God, breaks it, and shares it. And through the offering of praise and thanksgiving and by the power of the Holy Spirit, we recognize him once again in our midst.

Nourished at the Table of the Lord

After the Eucharistic Prayer, the assembly prepares to share the Body and Blood of Christ in Communion through two important acts: the Lord’s Prayer and the sign of peace. By reciting together the prayer that Jesus himself taught us, the assembly is reminded that God provides the daily bread of our lives, principally the Eucharist, and that just as we are forgiven, we too must forgive others. The sharing of the sign of peace reminds us that peace is the gift of Christ and that the unity of God’s Kingdom is what we long to share in Communion. The handshake, embrace, or kiss of peace shows forth the unity and peace that Christ promises to his followers. It also points to the day when all people will sit together in lasting

peace. Following the sign of peace is the practical act of breaking the bread and placing it into various vessels for the distribution of Communion. The litany that accompanies this action, “Lamb of God,” is sung or recited by all.

The priest then holds the Eucharist before the people and invites them to share in the banquet of the Lord. The people respond to this invitation with a prayer of humility, recognizing that no one is truly worthy to receive Christ (see Luke 7:6–7). By this act, we recognize that grace and the Eucharist are free gifts from God. No one has earned these mysteries as a reward; rather Christ freely pours himself out for us and for our salvation. The priest and people then prepare their hearts and minds to receive Communion. A chant or song begins as people come forward to receive the Body and Blood of Christ from the priest or another minister. By singing the Communion song together, the hearts, minds, and voices of the people are united as they come forward to be nourished at the table of Christ who gives us his very own Body and Blood as a feast and sacrifice.

After Communion the assembly takes a few moments of silence for meditation on the sacred mysteries they have just shared and for silent prayer. After this time of silence, a hymn of praise may also be sung. The priest then invites the assembly to pray. This Closing Prayer brings an end to the Communion Rite. This purpose of this prayer is to ask for the fulfillment of the promises made through the sharing of Communion, namely growing closer to Christ. As with the Opening Prayer, the Closing Prayer is meant to collect the prayers of the assembly together.

Go Forth to Love and Serve the Lord

The concluding rites prepare the assembly to go forth from the celebration of the Eucharist as faithful disciples. At this point brief announcements for the good of the community may be made. The priest then prays a blessing over the assembly and, once again, all make the Sign of the Cross. The priest (or deacon) dismisses the assembly to go forth to do good works for others and to praise God with their lives. The priest kisses the altar; reverences it with a bow, along with the other ministers; and processes out. As the entrance procession symbolized the gathering of the Church, this procession now symbolizes the sending forth of the assembly to be disciples in the world.

Like the disciples who ran from Emmaus to Jerusalem to tell the others of their encounter with the Risen Christ, so too do the people leave Mass as witnesses to the presence of Christ. Inspired by the Word of God and nourished by the Body and Blood of Christ, the Church can fulfill its duty to be light for the world, instruments of peace, and the living presence of Christ for the world.

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Sacrament of Reconciliation

Dr. Maura Thompson Hagarty

Extraordinary Forgiveness

A scene from the Broadway show Les Misérables—based on the Victor Hugo novel of the same name—offers us a glimpse of the power of forgiveness in human life. The main character, Jean Valjean, just paroled from prison, is in despair because he cannot find work. The requirement that he reveal his past imprisonment to prospective employers makes him virtually unemployable. In the midst of his struggle to find work, a bishop offers him a good meal and a room for the night.

Valjean takes advantage of the bishop's kindness, however, and steal several pieces of the bishop's silver and runs off. Local police intercept him and bring him back to the bishop to report his thievery. In a surprising move, the bishop tells the guards that he had given the silver to Valjean and dismisses the guards. Then he gives Valjean *more* silver pieces! The bishop tells him to take all the silver and use it to become an honest man. The bishop also tells him that through Christ, God has brought him out of darkness.

The bishop's acts of forgiveness and generosity truly move Valjean. He leaves and searches his soul about his life and who he is. He recognizes that his past crimes don't define him and he vows to transform his life.

The surprising element in Valjean's story is not so much that he received forgiveness, but the timing of it. Valjean was in the midst of stealing and seemed totally undeserving. He hadn't expressed sorrow or made amends. The forgiveness preceded and precipitated his transformation. This is the kind of forgiveness God offers us.

God's Love and Forgiveness

A trio of parables in Luke 15 gives us further insight into the nature of God's love. Jesus asks his listeners "Which one of you, having a hundred sheep and losing one of them, does not leave the ninety-nine in the wilderness and go after the one that is lost until he finds it?" (Luke 15:4). When the shepherd finds the lost sheep he is full of joy. "There will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents," explains Jesus "than over ninety-nine righteous persons who need no repentance" (Luke 15:7).

Then in the second parable Jesus asks "what woman having ten silver coins, if she loses one of them, does not light a lamp, sweep the house, and search carefully until she finds it?" (Luke

15:8). When she finds it she is overjoyed. Jesus explains that "there is joy in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner who repents" (Luke 15:10).

The third parable is the story of a young man who returns home after a period of reckless and immoral living with the hope that his father will take him back as a hired hand. Jesus' listeners might have expected the father to be angry upon seeing his son especially since the son had spent his entire inheritance foolishly, but quite the opposite was true. The father saw the son from a distance and was filled with compassion. He ran to his son, put is arms around him and kissed him. The father said, "Let us eat and celebrate; for this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found!" (Luke 15:23-24).

Now imagine that the young man returning home is your brother and that, unlike him, you have always been a good and obedient son or daughter. Perhaps you can understand the reaction of the second son in Jesus' parable. When he came in from working in the field, he was angry to encounter a celebration for his brother, who had done so many things wrong. He felt that he himself was much more deserving of the special treatment. The father tried to make him understand saying, "We had to celebrate and rejoice, because this brother of yours was dead and has come back to life" (Luke 15:32).

Jesus' parables are striking because the lost and seemingly undeserving become the recipients of so much care and concern. This is an extremely hopeful message for us. Even when we are at a desperate, low point in our lives, in God's eyes, we remain lovable and forgivable. Jesus' relationships with the people he encountered during his earthly ministry convey this same truth.

Can't Stop God's Love

The Gospels tell numerous stories of Jesus reaching out to the lost of his day, especially sinners and tax collectors. He even shared meals with them, a sign that he desired a relationship with them. In fact, Jesus earned the reputation of being "a friend of tax collectors and sinners" (Luke 7:34). He saved a woman caught in adultery from being stoned (John 8:3-11). While dining at the home of Simon the Pharisee, Jesus graciously accepted an anointing from a woman regarded as a sinner and then defended her hospitality when the host was critical (Luke 7:36-50).

Jesus didn't wait until "the lost" changed their lives to show them acceptance and befriend them. He reached out to them in the midst of their broken and sinful existence, and this brought about their transformation.

The Gospels recount that some people were critical of Jesus for associating with outcasts. Luke tells of grumbling scribes and Pharisees who complained saying, "This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them" (Luke 15:2). After Jesus dined with a large group of tax collectors at the

home of Levi he explained why. “Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick; I have come to call not the righteous but sinners to repentance” (Luke 5:32).

God’s forgiveness is not a matter of what any of us do to earn it. God is constantly reaching out to us with love and mercy. Nothing we do will make God turn away and abandon us. This is at the heart of Catholic belief. We can harden our hearts and turn ourselves away, but we can’t stop God’s love for us. The real challenge is for us to open our hearts, accept this love, and let it change us.

Sin

Why do we need to change? Why is transformation so important? Not only does Scripture make clear that God’s love is constant, it also clearly conveys that sin is a serious matter in human lives. There is something inherent in us that makes us weak and opens us up to the temptation of sin. This struggle is life-long and it affects us all. Jesus came to call us to repent and to resist the lure of selfish and sinful choices. The outpouring of love from God made possible through Jesus and the Holy Spirit helps us to recognize the reality of sin in our lives and inspires us to do something about it.

The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* describes sin as “an offense against God,” as a “failure in genuine love for God and neighbor,” as “disobedience,” as “a revolt against God,” and as “proud self-exaltation” (*CCC* 1849-1850). “Sin sets itself against God’s love for us and turns our hearts away from it” (*CCC* 1850). Sins include actions and thoughts as well as omissions – the things we should have done but didn’t. Our sins harm us and disrupt our relationship with God. The sins of individuals also adversely affect the Christian community. They bring about division in what is supposed to be the one unified body of Christ.

Pope John Paul II highlights the communal nature of sin. “There is no sin, not even the most intimate and secret one, the most strictly individual one, that exclusively concerns the person committing it. With greater or lesser violence, with greater or lesser harm, every sin has repercussions on the entire ecclesial body and the whole human family” (John Paul II, *Reconciliation and Penance*, 16)

Sacramental Reconciliation

At Baptism, we were welcomed into the Christian community and cleansed of all sin. We even wore white to symbolize our purity and our new life in Christ. Our initiation, however, did not rid us of the inclination to sin. The reality of sin means that the whole of life, ideally, is a process of ongoing conversion. We are always moving and changing. We never become finished products in this life.

The challenge of Christian conversion is the challenge of constantly "turning ourselves toward God. The Church sometimes uses the word *metanoia*, a Greek term for "turning away from sin," to refer this desired change in our life. Part of the challenge is resisting all the things that try to create distance between ourselves and God. One of the many ways the Church helps us meet this challenge is through the celebration of the Sacrament of Penance and Reconciliation.

The Sacrament of Penance and Reconciliation gives us an opportunity to confess our sins and reconcile ourselves with God and the Church. This is helpful to all Christians regardless of the seriousness of one's sins. Even if we have not committed gravely serious sin–mortal sin, rightly named because it brings about a kind of death in a person's heart and can lead to eternal death—the Church encourages us to participate.

The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* explains why. "Without being strictly necessary, confession of everyday faults . . . helps us form our conscience, fight against evil tendencies, let ourselves be healed by Christ and progress in the life of the Spirit" (*CCC* 1458). The grace of the sacrament opens our hearts to God's merciful love and enables us to better follow Jesus' command to "be merciful, just as your Father is merciful" (Luke 6:36).

Preparing to Celebrate Reconciliation

Before celebrating the Sacrament of Penance and Reconciliation, we are encouraged to prepare by thinking about our lives in relation to the word of God. This is often referred to as an examination of conscience. It can take place in the context of a celebration or be carried out on one's own at any time. The Rite of Penance, the ritual text that guides the celebration of Reconciliation, includes a series of suggested questions for people to use as a guide. Here is a sampling of the questions:

- Is my heart set on God?
- When I pray, do I really raise my mind and heart to God or is it a matter of words only?
- Do I keep Sundays and feast days holy?
- Are there false gods that I worship by giving them greater attention and deeper trust than I give to God?
- Have I genuine love for my neighbors?
- In my family life, have I contributed to the well-being and happiness of the rest of the family by patience and genuine love?
- Do I share my possessions with the less fortunate?
- Am I concerned for the good and prosperity of the human community in which I live, or do I spend my life caring only for myself?
- If I am in a position of responsibility or authority, do I use this for my own advantage or for the good of others, in a spirit of service?
- Have I tried to grow in the life of the Spirit through prayer, reading the word of God and meditating on it, receiving the sacraments, self-denial?

- Have I imposed my own will on others, without respecting their freedom and rights?
- What use have I made of time, of health and strength, of the gifts God has given me to be used like the talents in Gospel?
- Have I been lazy and too much given to leisure?
- Have I been patient in accepting the sorrows and disappointments of life?
- Have I kept my senses and my whole body pure and chaste as a temple of the Holy Spirit?
- Have I gone against my conscience out of fear or hypocrisy?

(*Rite of Penance*, Appendix III)

Central Parts of the Sacrament

God "casts a living light on sin" (*CCC* 1848). Because of this, the proclamation of Scripture is an important part of reconciliation. The sacrament "should begin with a hearing of God's word, because through his word God calls his people to repentance and leads them to a true conversion of heart" (Rite of Penance, 24). When the sacrament is celebrated in the context of community a full Liturgy of the Word is celebrated complete with readings and a homily that encourages us to turn away from sin. When a person meets individually with a priest, the rite encourages the two to begin by reading from Scripture.

The sacrament of reconciliation also includes these four key elements:

1. **Contrition**. When we participate in the sacrament, feeling and being contrite is the most important thing we do. Being contrite means being sorry for all of our failings. When we are truly contrite and genuinely sorry we experience a change of heart or *metanoia* that opens the way for a renewed relationship with God. It doesn't mean a complete transformation. It doesn't mean we have attained perfect holiness. Without some degree of contrition, however, our participation in sacramental reconciliation is ritualistic and empty.

2. **Confession**. Our contrite hearts lead us to the Sacrament of Penance and Reconciliation and to the confession of sins. This involves admitting our sins to a priest confessor. Recognizing and naming our sin is an important step in the process of healing and reconciliation. The sacrament also involves an expression of the sorrow we feel. Here is a sample prayer from the rite for individual penitents:

   My God,
   I am sorry for my sins with all my heart.
   In choosing to do wrong
   And failing to do good,
   I have sinned against you
   Whom I should love above all things.
   I firmly intend, with your help,
   to do penance,

to sin no more,
and to avoid whatever leads me to sin.
Our Savior Jesus Christ
Suffered and died for us.
In his name, my God, have mercy
(*Rite of Penance*, 45)

3. **Act of Penance**. The priest hearing confession gives each individual something to do to make amends for his or her sins. Ideally the penance is suited to the sin in the sense that it contributes to a remedy for whatever bad consequences may have resulted from the sin. The penance is not punishment for the sake of punishment. Rather, it seeks to translate a person's change of heart into a change in one's daily practices.

   As Pope John Paul II explained, penance is "a conversion that passes from the heart to deeds and then to the Christian's whole life" (John Paul II, *Reconciliation and Penance*, 4). Our whole lives are to be penitential, that is, "directed toward a continuous striving for what is better" (John Paul II, *Reconciliation and Penance*, 4). The acts of penance we receive in the sacrament from the priest are intended to support this goal. "It can consist of prayer, an offering, works of mercy, service of neighbor, voluntary self-denial, sacrifices, and above all the patient acceptance of the cross we bear" (*CCC* 1460).

4. **Absolution**. The sacrament is completed by a sign of absolution which expresses God's pardon. The priest extends his hands over the penitent's head and gives absolution with these words:

   God, the Father of mercies,
   through the death and resurrection of his Son
   has reconciled the world to himself
   and sent the Holy Spirit among us
   for the forgiveness of sins;
   through the ministry of the Church
   may God give you pardon and peace,
   and I absolve you from your sins
   in the name of the Father, and of the Son,
   and of the Holy Spirit
   (*Rite of Penance*, 55).

   The penitent responds "Amen."

While participating in prayer and worship, we often say the world *amen*, a Hebrew term meaning "so be it." When we use the term in the Sacrament of Penance and Reconciliation we are not simply stating agreement with the ideas expressed in the priest's prayer of absolution. Our "amen" signifies that we surrender ourselves to the power of the Holy Spirit in our lives. It signals our desire to open our hearts and minds and accept God's love and forgiveness. Our

"amen" expresses our intention to go forth from the celebration to live out the implications of the celebration.

Our "Amen" in the Sacrament of Penance and Reconciliation is closely related to our "amen" when we receive communion and our "I do's" when we renew our baptismal promises. Likewise, the Sacrament of Reconciliation is closely connected to Baptism and the Eucharist. Reconciliation renews our bond with God and the whole community that was established in Baptism and is strengthened in Eucharist. Our "amen" is a reaffirmation of our Christian identity and a recommitment to fully participate in the life and mission of the Church.

This article has an imprimatur from the Most Reverend John G. Vlazny, May 12, 2005.

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Sacrament of Anointing of the Sick

Dr. Maura Thompson Hagarty

Jesus the Healer

Jesus' Parable of the Good Samaritan challenges us to take care of those in our midst who are suffering from illness or injury. The traveler from Samaria is moved with compassion when he encounters a man lying on the side of the road who had been attacked and left for dead. The Samaritan pours oil and wine over the man's wounds and bandages them. Then he takes the man to an inn and cares for him. Surely this was an inconvenience since it interrupted the Samaritan's travels.

When you consider that people from Samaria were despised by Jews and that the man on the side of the road may well have been a Jew, the Samaritan's actions are all the more significant. The parable makes clear that we are to think of the ill or suffering stranger as a neighbor even if that person may think little of us.

Through his words and actions, Jesus expresses love and concern for the sick and suffering. The Gospels tell many stories of Jesus healing people. He cured Peter's mother-in-law of a fever (See Matthew 8:14-15), healed a centurion's paralyzed servant in Capernaum (See Matthew 8: 5-13), cleansed a leper (See Matthew 8:1-3), cured a woman who had suffered for many years from hemorrhages (See Luke 8:43-48), restored the life of Jairus' twelve year old daughter (See Luke 8:49-56), healed a woman who was crippled (See Luke 13: 11-13), and opened the eyes of a man blind since birth (See John 9:1-12). This list refers to but a small sampling of Jesus' many healing acts.

Jesus encouraged his followers to participate in his ministry of caring for the sick and suffering. The Gospel according to Matthew's parable about the last judgment includes the following criterion for attaining eternal life: "I was sick and you took care of me" (See Matthew 25:36).

A passage from the first letter of James attests to the importance placed on the care of the sick in the early Church: "Are any among you sick? They should call for the elders of the church and have them pray over them, anointing them with oil in the name of the Lord. The prayer of faith will save the sick, and the Lord will raise them up; and anyone who has committed sins will be forgiven" (James 5: 14-15).

The Church today continues Jesus' ministry by caring for the ill and celebrating the Sacrament of the Anointing of the Sick with them.

To understand the purpose of this work and ministry it is important to begin with the recognition that Jesus didn't heal everyone who was sick. Even those whom he did heal

eventually died. Jesus' ministry was not primarily focused on physical healing and prolonging life indefinitely and neither is the Church's ministry today. By God's design earthly life is fleeting. No matter how healthy we are we cannot escape the aging process and its culmination in death.

Understanding the ultimate reality of death helps us to put Jesus' healing and the Anointing of the Sick in a clearer context. Jesus' healings were part of his mission to announce and usher in the kingdom of God. They signify that God's kingdom is at hand. The physical healing of the sick is not an end in itself.

As the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* explains, Jesus' healings "announced a more radical healing: the victory over sin and death . . . . By his passion and death on the cross Christ has given a new meaning to suffering: it can henceforth configure us to him and unite us with his redemptive Passion" (*CCC* 1505).

Jesus' Paschal mystery – his passage from life through suffering and death to new life – demonstrates that suffering has redemptive meaning and value. Neither sickness, nor suffering, nor death should be viewed as punishments. These are not signs that God has turned away from us. These realities of human existence join us to Christ's Paschal mystery. They are not an end just as Jesus' suffering and death were not.

We are challenged to view illness and injury in this light and to recognize that the Church's care of the sick, which includes the celebration of the Sacrament of Anointing, is not carried out for the sake of physical health in this world. It is carried out for the spiritual well-being of the entire Church.

From Extreme Unction to Anointing of the Sick

A little history helps to illumine the Church's practice of the Sacrament of Anointing of the Sick today. This is because the Second Vatican Council, held from 1962-1965, ushered in a change in the way Catholics understand the sacrament.

Since the Middle Ages until Vatican II, the Anointing of the Sick had been called Extreme Unction. As the name implies (the Latin *extremus* means "the end"), one celebrated this sacrament on one's deathbed. Another name that emerged in popular usage is "Last Rites."

This timing developed in tandem with the practice of delaying the Sacrament of Penance and Reconciliation until just before death. Reconciliation had come to be regarded as an unrepeatable sacrament, which led to its deathbed setting. Putting it off until the end of life was the best way to assure that one would not commit new sins before dying. Shortly before death, individuals would celebrate Reconciliation and then be anointed. As a result, sacramental anointing took on a penitential tone and came to be viewed as private, once-in-a-lifetime sacrament.

Vatican II and the publication of a new ritual text that guides the Church's pastoral care, entitled "The Pastoral Care of the Sick: Rites of Anointing and Viaticum" (PCS), brought about significant changes in the practice of anointing during the last several decades. As the name of the ritual text suggests, the Sacrament of Anointing takes place in the context of the Church's overall ministry of caring for the sick.

The Sacrament of Anointing is no longer restricted to people in imminent danger of death and the previous connection to penance is intentionally loosened now. If a sick person desires the Sacrament of Penance and Reconciliation it is preferrable for this to take place at a separate time in advance of the anointing. (See *PCS* 101).The name "Extreme Unction" has fallen out of use and been replaced by "Anointing of the Sick."

Another change in ritual and process is a renewed emphasis on the role of the community. Private celebrations still occur when necessary but this is not the ideal. Though the sacrament may be celebrated in a home, medical facility, or church, and within Mass or outside Mass, the preferred way to celebrate is with family and community present.

The most appropriate time for individuals to celebrate the Anointing of the Sick is whenever they become seriously ill. Those dealing with mental illness and the elderly who are coping with increasing frailty may also be anointed. The Church strongly encourages everyone in these situations to ask for the sacrament. There is no reason to wait until the time when the illness becomes grave and death is imminent.

Anointing may be repeated if an individual's situation becomes more serious, if a person gets well and then sick again, or in the case of someone with a chronic condition such as old age, at times when he or she would benefit spiritually from it.

Communal Anointing

Many parishes today regularly celebrate communal anointings within Mass. An interesting phenomenon is occurring in some of these places. If the presider issues a general invitation for any who are in need of healing to come forward to celebrate the sacrament, guess what happens? The seemingly healthy join the seriously ill in large numbers and flock to the priest for the laying on of the hands and anointing. Perhaps you have witnessed this or even participated in it.

This practice does not completely fulfill the intent of the rite, which says the sacrament is for the seriously ill and cautions against anointing people indiscriminately. This phenomena, however, says something powerful about people's sense that they need healing. Perhaps those who respond to the invitation have a need for spiritual healing that is experienced in a physical way, affecting their energy and limiting their zest for life, for example. Or perhaps they sense that the sacrament will bring the sort of healing they need because they believe—correctly—

the Sacrament of Anointing of the Sick is primarily focused on spiritual healing rather than physical healing.

Theologian Kathleen Hughes, in her book *Saying Amen*, discusses this phenomenon and points out that Catholics may be overlooking the healing aspects of Eucharist and Reconciliation. She notes the decline in participation in the Sacrament of Reconciliation in recent years, and comments that some who are drawn to Anointing are really candidates for Reconciliation. She also highlights the healing aspect of Eucharist: "The eucharist has been called the primary sacrament of healing—soul healing. We actually make that claim every time we celebrate the eucharist". . . when. . . "we say, 'Lord, I am not worthy to receive you, but only say the word and my soul shall be healed'" (Kathleen Hughes, *Saying Amen*, 157-158).

The Mission of the Sick

Serious illness and injury can affect almost every aspect of life. The experience of having limitations and being unable to perform one's regular activities as well as the uncertainty about one's future can be very disruptive. One's mind and spirit are affected right along with the body. For some, the experience gives rise to despair. They glimpse death and are afraid of what is to come. Some turn away from God, while others intensify their search for God. Some have a renewed awareness of the preciousness of life and are able to discern what matters most in life. Some remain full of hope even in the face of certain death and hold firm to their faith in God's mercy and love.

The celebration of the Sacrament of Anointing is one of the significant ways the Church tries to bring healing to the people in these various situations.

The shift away from the deathbed as the primary setting for anointing has led to a renewed understanding of the role sick people play in carrying out the mission of the Church. The sick are not simply the recipients of pastoral care or the objects of the Church's ministry. Those who sick through their sickness, have an important role to play in the continuation of Jesus' ministry in the world. They serve to remind us of "the essential or higher things" and they open our eyes to the reality that our "mortal life must be redeemed through the mystery of Christ's death and resurrection" (*PCS*, 3). They "contribute to the welfare of the people of God" when they "associate themselves willingly with the passion and death of Christ" (*PCS,* 5). As Paul said in his letter to the Romans "we suffer with [Christ] so that we may also be glorified with him" (Romans 8:17).

Anointing is not meant to function as a panacea to sickness, discomfort, and suffering. It doesn't mean we won't suffer, and we certainly won't escape death. It does mean that even in an impaired state we are part of Christ's mission on earth. Through the Sacrament of the Anointing of the Sick we embrace the fundamental Christian belief that if we die with Jesus we will rise to new life with him.

The Church's care of the sick has many facets beyond the celebration of the Sacrament of Anointing. It involves visiting the sick, praying for them, comforting them, showing them love, and nourishing them with Eucharist even when they are unable to attend Mass. It also means tending to the needs of the family and friends who are caring for them. When we carry out these ministries the intent is to bring about spiritual growth so that hope supplants any despair, and trust in God's love overpowers anxiety and worry. The intent is also to recognize the working of the Holy Spirit in the lives of the sick and to help them to see it also.

None of this is meant to suggest that sick people shouldn't do whatever they can to overcome illness and restore their physical health. "We should fight strenuously against all sickness and carefully seek the blessings of good health, so that we may fulfill our role in human society and in the Church" (*PCS*, 3). Doctors and all who care for the sick should "consider it their duty to use all the means which in their judgment may help the sick, both physically and spiritually. In so doing, they are fulfilling the command of Christ to visit the sick" (*PCS*, 4).

Central Symbolic Actions

The gathering of the community and the proclamation of the Word are central symbolic actions in the Sacrament of Anointing of the Sick, just as they are in all the other sacraments. Beyond these two, there are three actions at the heart of the Sacrament of Anointing: the prayer of faith, the laying on of hands, and the anointing itself.

The Prayer of Faith

The community's prayer of faith can be understood in a general and particular way. In general, the entire celebration of the sacrament is the prayer of faith. The people – healthy and sick – join together in prayer to ask God for comfort, healing, and spiritual strengthening for the sick.

In particular, there are certain prayers that stand out in importance. The first is the prayer over the oil that will be used for the anointing. Two scenarios are possible here. If the oil was blessed by the bishop during Holy Week, as is the custom, then the presider says a prayer of thanksgiving over the oil. If it was not previously blessed, then the presider blesses it. In the latter situation, the priest may use the following words:

> God of all consolation,
> You chose and sent your Son to heal the world.
> Graciously listen to our prayer of faith:
> Send the power of your Holy Spirit, the Consoler,
> into this precious oil, this soothing ointment,
> this rich gift, this fruit of the earth.
> Bless this oil and sanctify it for our use.
> Make this oil a remedy for all who are anointed with it;
> heal them in body, in soul, and in spirit,

and deliver them from every affliction.
We ask this through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son,
who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit,
one God, for ever and ever.
Amen.
(*PCS,* 123).

The blessing is integral to the sacrament even when it takes place ahead of time. Regardless of the setting and the precise formulation, the blessing includes a special prayer request called an *epiclesis*. The prayer asks that God send the Holy Spirit into the oil so that those anointed with it will experience healing.

Another prayer central to the sacrament is the litany the community prays. The priest offers a prayer to which the community responds, "Lord, have mercy." Here are a few examples of the prayers:

- Bless N. and N. and fill them with new hope and strength.
- Sustain all the sick with your power.
- Give life and health to our brothers and sisters on whom we lay our hands in your name (*PCS,* 138).

The Laying on of Hands

After the litany the priest lays hands on the head of each sick person in silence. This biblical gesture is a calling down of the Holy Spirit upon the sick to give them strength and healing grace. It evokes images of the many stories in the New Testament in which Jesus healed through the power of touch. Think, for example, of Jesus touching the eyes of the two blind men whose vision he restored (See Matthew 9:27-31) and the woman in the crowd who reached out and touched Jesus and was immediately healed (See Luke 8:43-48).

The Anointing with Olive Oil

As the blessing prayer states, the oil is "precious" and a "rich gift," even before it is blessed. In ancient times, olive oil was considered a necessity of life. Possessing it, especially in ample quantity, was a sign of God's abundant love. In liturgy today, our use of the oil signifies the inspiring and powerful presence of the Holy Spirit. The rite emphasizes the need for "a generous use of oil so that it will be seen and felt by the sick person as a sign of the Spirit's healing and strengthening presence" (*PCS*, 107).

In the sacrament, the priest anoints the sick on the forehead saying: "Through this holy anointing may the Lord in his love and mercy help you with the grace of the Holy Spirit." The sick respond: "Amen." Then the priest anoints the hands saying, "May the Lord who frees you from sin save you and raise you up." Again the sick respond, "Amen." (*PCS*, 124) When the sick

say “Amen” after being anointed they offer their assent to what the Church intends by celebrating the sacrament. They don’t participate filled with false hope born out the mistaken idea that the sacrament is intended to bring about physical healing. With “Amen” they open themselves to the power of the Holy Spirit and they surrender to God’s will for them.

The commitment they make is really an affirmation of their Christian identity and a recommitment to participate in Christ’s Paschal mystery. The anointing is meant to assure the sick person and the whole community that God is with us and will enable us to pass through suffering and sickness to new life, just as Jesus did.

Through the power of the Holy Spirit, the sacramental life of the Church brings us into closer intimacy and communion with God and the whole body of Christ. The Anointing of the Sick in particular gives the sick strength to face their struggles and to continue to live faithfully, confident in God’s loving presence. The overall care of the sick as well as the celebration of the sacrament is the concern of the whole community.

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Sacrament of Holy Orders

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This practice does not completely fulfill the intent of the rite, which says the sacrament is for the seriously ill and cautions against anointing people indiscriminately. This phenomena, however, says something powerful about people's sense that they need healing. Perhaps those who respond to the invitation have a need for spiritual healing that is experienced in a physical way, affecting their energy and limiting their zest for life, for example. Or perhaps they sense that the sacrament will bring the sort of healing they need because they believe—correctly—

the Sacrament of Anointing of the Sick is primarily focused on spiritual healing rather than physical healing.

Theologian Kathleen Hughes, in her book *Saying Amen*, discusses this phenomenon and points out that Catholics may be overlooking the healing aspects of Eucharist and Reconciliation. She notes the decline in participation in the Sacrament of Reconciliation in recent years, and comments that some who are drawn to Anointing are really candidates for Reconciliation. She also highlights the healing aspect of Eucharist: "The eucharist has been called the primary sacrament of healing—soul healing. We actually make that claim every time we celebrate the eucharist". . . when. . . "we say, 'Lord, I am not worthy to receive you, but only say the word and my soul shall be healed'" (Kathleen Hughes, *Saying Amen*, 157-158).

The Mission of the Sick

Serious illness and injury can affect almost every aspect of life. The experience of having limitations and being unable to perform one's regular activities as well as the uncertainty about one's future can be very disruptive. One's mind and spirit are affected right along with the body. For some, the experience gives rise to despair. They glimpse death and are afraid of what is to come. Some turn away from God, while others intensify their search for God. Some have a renewed awareness of the preciousness of life and are able to discern what matters most in life. Some remain full of hope even in the face of certain death and hold firm to their faith in God's mercy and love.

The celebration of the Sacrament of Anointing is one of the significant ways the Church tries to bring healing to the people in these various situations.

The shift away from the deathbed as the primary setting for anointing has led to a renewed understanding of the role sick people play in carrying out the mission of the Church. The sick are not simply the recipients of pastoral care or the objects of the Church's ministry. Those who sick through their sickness, have an important role to play in the continuation of Jesus' ministry in the world. They serve to remind us of "the essential or higher things" and they open our eyes to the reality that our "mortal life must be redeemed through the mystery of Christ's death and resurrection" (*PCS*, 3). They "contribute to the welfare of the people of God" when they "associate themselves willingly with the passion and death of Christ" (*PCS,* 5). As Paul said in his letter to the Romans "we suffer with [Christ] so that we may also be glorified with him" (Romans 8:17).

Anointing is not meant to function as a panacea to sickness, discomfort, and suffering. It doesn't mean we won't suffer, and we certainly won't escape death. It does mean that even in an impaired state we are part of Christ's mission on earth. Through the Sacrament of the Anointing of the Sick we embrace the fundamental Christian belief that if we die with Jesus we will rise to new life with him.

The Church's care of the sick has many facets beyond the celebration of the Sacrament of Anointing. It involves visiting the sick, praying for them, comforting them, showing them love, and nourishing them with Eucharist even when they are unable to attend Mass. It also means tending to the needs of the family and friends who are caring for them. When we carry out these ministries the intent is to bring about spiritual growth so that hope supplants any despair, and trust in God's love overpowers anxiety and worry. The intent is also to recognize the working of the Holy Spirit in the lives of the sick and to help them to see it also.

None of this is meant to suggest that sick people shouldn't do whatever they can to overcome illness and restore their physical health. "We should fight strenuously against all sickness and carefully seek the blessings of good health, so that we may fulfill our role in human society and in the Church" (*PCS*, 3). Doctors and all who care for the sick should "consider it their duty to use all the means which in their judgment may help the sick, both physically and spiritually. In so doing, they are fulfilling the command of Christ to visit the sick" (*PCS*, 4).

Central Symbolic Actions

The gathering of the community and the proclamation of the Word are central symbolic actions in the Sacrament of Anointing of the Sick, just as they are in all the other sacraments. Beyond these two, there are three actions at the heart of the Sacrament of Anointing: the prayer of faith, the laying on of hands, and the anointing itself.

The Prayer of Faith

The community's prayer of faith can be understood in a general and particular way. In general, the entire celebration of the sacrament is the prayer of faith. The people – healthy and sick – join together in prayer to ask God for comfort, healing, and spiritual strengthening for the sick.

In particular, there are certain prayers that stand out in importance. The first is the prayer over the oil that will be used for the anointing. Two scenarios are possible here. If the oil was blessed by the bishop during Holy Week, as is the custom, then the presider says a prayer of thanksgiving over the oil. If it was not previously blessed, then the presider blesses it. In the latter situation, the priest may use the following words:

> God of all consolation,
> You chose and sent your Son to heal the world.
> Graciously listen to our prayer of faith:
> Send the power of your Holy Spirit, the Consoler,
> into this precious oil, this soothing ointment,
> this rich gift, this fruit of the earth.
> Bless this oil and sanctify it for our use.
> Make this oil a remedy for all who are anointed with it;
> heal them in body, in soul, and in spirit,

and deliver them from every affliction.
We ask this through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son,
who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit,
one God, for ever and ever.
Amen.
(*PCS,* 123).

The blessing is integral to the sacrament even when it takes place ahead of time. Regardless of the setting and the precise formulation, the blessing includes a special prayer request called an *epiclesis*. The prayer asks that God send the Holy Spirit into the oil so that those anointed with it will experience healing.

Another prayer central to the sacrament is the litany the community prays. The priest offers a prayer to which the community responds, "Lord, have mercy." Here are a few examples of the prayers:

- Bless N. and N. and fill them with new hope and strength.
- Sustain all the sick with your power.
- Give life and health to our brothers and sisters on whom we lay our hands in your name (*PCS,* 138).

The Laying on of Hands

After the litany the priest lays hands on the head of each sick person in silence. This biblical gesture is a calling down of the Holy Spirit upon the sick to give them strength and healing grace. It evokes images of the many stories in the New Testament in which Jesus healed through the power of touch. Think, for example, of Jesus touching the eyes of the two blind men whose vision he restored (See Matthew 9:27-31) and the woman in the crowd who reached out and touched Jesus and was immediately healed (See Luke 8:43-48).

The Anointing with Olive Oil

As the blessing prayer states, the oil is "precious" and a "rich gift," even before it is blessed. In ancient times, olive oil was considered a necessity of life. Possessing it, especially in ample quantity, was a sign of God's abundant love. In liturgy today, our use of the oil signifies the inspiring and powerful presence of the Holy Spirit. The rite emphasizes the need for "a generous use of oil so that it will be seen and felt by the sick person as a sign of the Spirit's healing and strengthening presence" (*PCS*, 107).

In the sacrament, the priest anoints the sick on the forehead saying: "Through this holy anointing may the Lord in his love and mercy help you with the grace of the Holy Spirit." The sick respond: "Amen." Then the priest anoints the hands saying, "May the Lord who frees you from sin save you and raise you up." Again the sick respond, "Amen." (*PCS*, 124) When the sick

say “Amen” after being anointed they offer their assent to what the Church intends by celebrating the sacrament. They don’t participate filled with false hope born out the mistaken idea that the sacrament is intended to bring about physical healing. With “Amen” they open themselves to the power of the Holy Spirit and they surrender to God’s will for them.

The commitment they make is really an affirmation of their Christian identity and a recommitment to participate in Christ’s Paschal mystery. The anointing is meant to assure the sick person and the whole community that God is with us and will enable us to pass through suffering and sickness to new life, just as Jesus did.

Through the power of the Holy Spirit, the sacramental life of the Church brings us into closer intimacy and communion with God and the whole body of Christ. The Anointing of the Sick in particular gives the sick strength to face their struggles and to continue to live faithfully, confident in God’s loving presence. The overall care of the sick as well as the celebration of the sacrament is the concern of the whole community.

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Sacrament of Marriage

Dr. Owen Cummings

In God's Image

As it sets out to speak of the Sacrament of Matrimony, the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* notes that Scripture begins with the creation of humankind in the image and likeness of God, and ends with the wedding-feast of the Lamb in Revelation (See *CCC*, 1602). This surely suggests that the best possible way to grasp something of the Catholic teaching and understanding of the Sacrament of Matrimony is to begin with our understanding of God. We are made in God's image and likeness, and through the Eucharist, our earthly anticipation of the wedding feast of the Lamb, we are drawn further into this image and likeness.

God is never an additional element of our world-view, but the very foundation of it. In God, we live and move and have our being. Thus, everything that we think and everything we do ought to reflect this view, including marriage. God is the key to unlock our understanding of this sacrament.

Who or What Is God?

If "God himself is the author of marriage" (*CCC* 1603), the central question is: *Who or what is God*? We have become accustomed to speaking of "images of God," and to recognizing that not all the images of God that we operate with are worthy of the reality of God. There are dysfunctional ways of imaging God. An image of God as a sort of cosmic policeman, watching and scrutinizing our every move, and ready to hand out a ticket for bad moves, is seriously inadequate.

We all probably have some degree of dysfunction in our thinking about God. We could come to a better understanding by considering the writings of the New Testament. Quite simply, God's best name is "Love." In the First Letter of St. John we read: "God is love, and those who abide in love abide in God, and God abides in them"(1 John 4:16).

The *Catechism* also expresses this idea: "God who created man out of love also calls him to love—the fundamental and innate vocation of every human being. For man is created in the image and likeness of God who is himself love" (*CCC*, 1604). While that conviction of the First Letter of John and the *Catechism* is beautiful, it is also abstract. The New Testament, in a number of places, provides us with a picture of what this Love—this God—is like.

Luke's Picture of God

Let's go to the Parable of the Prodigal Son in Luke 15. Speaking of the image of the father, Saint John Paul II was fond of referring to this parable as the definitive picture of God in the New Testament.

The younger son asked his father for his inheritance, has obtained it, and squandered it in a distant country. Starving for food, and love, he comes crawling home in shame, full of self-accusation. But, before he could get these words out, the father was waiting and watching and preparing to welcome him. We are told: "While he was still far off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion; he ran and put his arms around him and kissed him" (Luke 15:20).

The father in the parable is Love—God as Love—waiting and watching to welcome his errant children home, into his company, into his arms. Christian marriage embodies this waiting and watching Love of God as each partner seeks to forgive the other, and to be reconciled to the other, as the need arises during the course of their marital relationship.

The snapshot of the father in the Parable of the Prodigal Son shows us that, even when we go wrong, as the younger son did, God as Love waits to have us home, to have us back, to embrace us, and to do all of this without a word of accusation. It is the son who accuses himself; his father does not accuse him. The elderly father suggests a loving God whose very nature will not let us go.

This snapshot shows us that when at times spouses hurt or offend one another, there is an urgency to work towards forgiveness and reconciliation.

John's Picture of God

In the Gospel according to John we find a concrete and dramatic portrayal of what it means to say that God is Love. In the Gospel we recognize that Jesus is the Word of God: "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God . . . And the Word became flesh and lived among us . . ." (John 1:1, 14).

A word, we might say, is our very self-expression. A carefully chosen word expresses exactly our understanding. The Word that is Jesus expresses exactly the understanding of God the Father. To hear and to see that Word when he became flesh and lived among us is to understand the meaning of Love—that is God—incarnate.

What does Love "become flesh," look like? Look at John 13:1, where we read: "Having loved his own who were in the world, he loved them to the end." Pay attention to the last three words, to the end—in Greek, *eis telos.* We know what happened. Jesus loved in the Last Supper; he loved in the foot-washing. He said: "This is my commandment, that you love one another as I

have loved you. No one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends" (John 15:12-13). He loved in the arrest in the garden, in the trials, in the suffering that led up to the cross, and finally, he loved on and from the cross.

His last words in this gospel were: "It is finished" (John 19:30), in Greek, *tetelestai.* This Greek verb has the same root as the word *telos,* "end," in John 13:1. In other words, having loved "to the end," he acknowledged his death as the end. He laid down his life, and there is no greater love than that. Christian marriage embodies this self-giving love to the end, as the spouses pattern their lives on God-in-Christ, on loving each other without calculation, without counting the cost.

The Gospel records that after Jesus said *It is finished*, "he bowed his head and gave up his spirit" (John 19:30). *Gave up his spirit* is not here a synonym for *died*. It does not say, "He bowed his head and died." There's more to it than that. The verb to *give up* is in Greek *paredoken,* a word that means "to hand over." Thus, the sentence would read, more literally and indeed more theologically, *He bowed his head and handed over his spirit*.

To whom did the Lord Jesus hand over his spirit? We know from this Gospel that at the foot of the cross were "his mother, and his mother's sister, Mary the wife of Clopas, and Mary Magdalene. . . and the disciple whom he loved standing beside her [Mary, his mother]" (John 19:25-26). In other words, the Church was there at the foot of the cross. Mary, mother of the Church is there as well as the beloved disciple. As Jesus *expired,* he *inspired* the Church, "he handed over his spirit" to the Church. In the Gospel according to John the Church was born from the cross.

This enables us to say that every aspect of being Church shares in some way in the cross of Christ. Every aspect of being Church, including the Sacrament of Matrimony, shares in the Paschal mystery, the event of Jesus' dying and rising.

This snapshot of Jesus' loving to the end, to death, shows us how wildly passionate this loving God is. He becomes human, like us, and through the entirety of his life, demonstrates this Love. This snapshot invites the Christian married couple to show forth God as self-giving love—without counting the cost—in the totality of their marriage. It invites each of them to be the face of the self-giving Jesus to the other.

In the first two sections of this magazine we examined two concepts of what it means to say that "God is Love." Each is a look into the heart of God as Love, and each offers us insight into the meaning of Christian marriage. Taken together, the two concepts tell us that God as Love is an unconditional gift. These concepts show us that the Sacrament of Matrimony should reveal to us an image of God who is unconditional love.

The Sacrament of Matrimony

As Catholics understand it, the primary sacrament of God- is the Church, and marriage is a sacrament of the Church. The word *sacrament* means "sign," but in Catholic theology sacrament is not just a sign that points to something else. Rather, it is sign that both communicates and participates in the life and reality of God. The Church is the primary and central sign of God in the world.

One of the most common manifestations of the Church is a Christian married couple. Through them the Church can grow, they provide the Church with new members, one generation after another. In the Sacrament of Matrimony God embraces the couple so that they become together a communication of and a participation in God. God is Love, and the married couple becomes the effective sign of that Love in their marriage.

Some may think that the wedding celebration is what constitutes the sacrament, but it is just the public beginning of the sacrament. The married couple's entire life is the sacrament. Just as the Rite of Baptism is only the beginning of the life of the baptized, so too it is with marriage. Baptism doesn't end at the font, but begins there. Marriage doesn't end in the sanctuary, but begins there.

The fabric of a couple's married life involves many things for example, how they listen and speak to each other, how they handle disagreement, and how they respond to disappointment and failure. This is finely expressed in the *Catechism:* "Marriage helps to overcome self-absorption, egoism, pursuit of one's own pleasure, and to open oneself to the other, to mutual aid and to self-giving" (*CCC,* 1609).

We might put it like this: the Sacrament of Matrimony is Church. Marriage does not simply point to Church, nor is it simply modeled on the love of Christ for the Church. It *is* Church, it *is* Body of Christ in this particular home, on this specific street. Sometimes marriage is described as the domestic Church, the Church of the *domus,* "the home and the family."

This is the kind of theological thinking that lies behind the somewhat controversial but nonetheless magnificent passage in the Letter to the Ephesians:

> Be subject to one another out of reverence for Christ. Wives, be subject to your husbands as you are to the Lord. For the husband is the head of the wife just as Christ is the head of the Church, the body of which he is the Savior. Just as the church is subject to Christ, so also wives ought to be, in everything, to their husbands. Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her. (Ephesians 5: 21-25)

Clearly, the controversial words in this passage have to do with a wife being "subject to her husband" (vv. 22, 24). New Testament scholars tell us that these sentiments probably derive

from a household moral code adapted from popular Greco-Roman philosophy to assist in the moral instruction of Christians. In these Greco-Roman codes the household was understood as a patriarchal and hierarchical social unit, with the father of the house firmly in charge and in control.

Paul accepted this patriarchal and hierarchical account of marriage and family because he was a man of his times and of his culture. His times and his culture are not ours, nor is the patriarchal and hierarchical account of marriage.

The Catholic understanding of marriage is described by Vatican II's *Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World* in these contrasting terms: "The unity of marriage will radiate from the equal personal dignity of wife and husband, a dignity acknowledged by mutual and total love" (Vatican II, *Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World,* 49). Marriage is based on the equal personal dignity of both spouses.

It would be a tragedy if acknowledging Paul's time-conditioned perspective prevented us from seeing and owning the sentiments: "Husbands and wives, love each other just as Christ loved the Church and gave himself up for it. The view of marriage here is of mutual self-giving, based on Jesus' example of self-giving unto death, and of forgiveness and reconciliation when those are needed.

The Rite of Marriage

Falling in love is easy; staying in love requires work. Christian married couples must remain in love, and must be love in action. That is costly indeed. Married love is the vocation to give oneself to and for the other until death. We must give until, as with the Lord Jesus, there is nothing left to give. In the Rite of Marriage, couples promise to take each other, to have and to hold, from this day forward, for better or for worse, for richer or for poorer, in sickness and in health, until death parts them.

The essence of these vows is simply not understood if thought of as just staying with this person until death comes around. No! It means being prepared to lay down one's life for this person. There is nothing more one can do for another than to lay down one's life. That is the pledge of Christian marriage.

Married love is the commitment to be there for the other without an exit clause, or an "out" to abandon the enterprise as soon as the other's otherness gives us difficulty. Therein lies the Paschal mystery dimension of Christian marriage. It demands a giving of oneself to the other as God gives himself to us, without qualification, without condition, even to the point of laying down one's life, modeled by the Lord Jesus.

Vatican II puts it like this, “Authentic married love is caught up into divine love” (Vatican II, *Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World* 48). Essential to this being caught up into divine love is the constant and regular giving of the spouses, one to the other.

Promises All Around

At a wedding, we all know that the spouses make a solemn vow to each using their own words, or those prescribed by the Church. The keys to proper and valid marriage vows are statements that reflect the following:

- Marriage is a lifelong commitment.
- Marriage is more than a contract. It’s a covenant.
- The love of spouses ideally reflects God’s unconditional love for all creation, and Christ’s love for the Church.

One thing that we may not know is that marriage is more than a private agreement between two persons. In addition to the promise made between spouses, there are two other promises made at every wedding: 1) the couple promises to the community to be a living witness and model of covenant love, and 2) the community promises to support and hold accountable the couple in their journey of life and love.

Without these promises between the couple and the community, few, if any, couples would be able to keep their vows to each other. Plus, without the communal promises there is little reason for a public wedding.

The Eucharist

Catholic marriages are often celebrated within the context of the Eucharist, though for pastoral reasons this is not always the case. The reason for placing the Sacrament of Matrimony within the celebration of the Eucharist is to recognize the participation of marriage in the Paschal mystery—the dying and rising with Christ. Paul tells us in the First Letter to the Corinthians that the Eucharist “proclaims the Lord’s death until he comes” (11:26). Nowhere are we drawn closer to the death of the Lord than in the Eucharist.

Celebrating a marriage in the context of the Eucharist proclaims that the self-giving of the spouses is to be like the self-giving of the Lord, complete unto death. In marriage each spouse dies to self-centeredness and rises in service and giving of self to the other.

Another way of looking at this is to recall that many Catholic churches are built in the shape of the cross—the nave or main part of the church being the vertical beam of the cross, and the sanctuary the horizontal beam. The Rite of Marriage takes place just inside the sanctuary, at the intersection of the vertical and horizontal beams of the cross. The spouses make their pledge to

one another on the cross, as it were, because this is a costly pledge, demanding death to self-preoccupation and rising to the new life of self-giving to the other.

Whether the Rite of Marriage is celebrated within the Eucharist or not, every Christian marriage is implicitly eucharistic. The Eucharist is the memorial of Calvary, the proclamation of the Lord Jesus' self-giving unto death. Since every Christian marriage explicitly intends this spousal self-giving unto death, every Christian marriage is implicitly eucharistic.

When we take the Eucharist as a memorial to Jesus, we are remembering this costly-crucial love. We receive him into ourselves, and his paschal presence energizes us. It enables us to continue to struggle to let this reality permeate every aspect of our married lives. Marriage is profoundly eucharistic.

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Sacrament of Holy Orders

Rev. Richard Keolker

Transformed for Ministry

When the Church gathers for an important sacramental celebration, the people present and participating, indeed the whole Church are transformed. One such transformative experience is the celebration of an ordination—whether to the diaconate, to the priesthood, or to the episcopacy (bishops).

The entire Church is transformed, not only those receiving the Sacrament of Holy Orders or participating in the Liturgy. The Church is transformed because the sacrament is oriented in a special way toward the service of the Church.

Those ordained and those participating in the rite will find many rituals, actions, sights, and smells to remember. For some the lights, vestments, great clouds of incense, and majestic music will stir their hearts. Others are deeply moved when those to be ordained prostrate themselves, and the entire congregation prays with the Church gathered in heaven through the Litany of the Saints. Still others, recall the silent laying on of hands. With this ritual there is no music, no shout of acclamation. All is still. God is present, active, creating anew in the world and the hearts of all those who are present.

This particular experience of the Church at worship, and of God at work, is not necessarily available to all. It might take place at a distant Cathedral, and might involve persons not widely known to most parishioners. To explore this powerful sacramental action, we must look at a deeper understanding of the Sacrament of Holy Orders.

God Sends Word

After God's creative Word of creation at the beginning or recorded history, and Adam and Eve's subsequent word of disobedience, God, ever merciful, slowly shaped a people and, by means of the Covenant at Sinai, said to them, "You shall be for me a priestly kingdom and a holy nation" (Exodus 19:6). God wanted to live in union with a human creation which was slow to appreciate such a relationship. "You shall be my people and I will be your God" (Ezekiel 36:28).

Throughout the Old Testament God called individuals and gave them a mission to his "priestly kingdom and holy nation." He called Abraham, Jacob, Moses, Aaron, Samuel and David. He called leaders, kings, priests, and prophets. Those summoned to proclaim God's Word were set apart and consecrated for their mission to instruct, guide, and care.

Priests of the Old Testament served at the altar of the Temple by offering sacrifices and prayers for the people. They were assisted in turn by the Levites. Both priests and Levites were primarily in service to God and their duties were primarily cultic, that is, in offering worship to God.

The urgency of God's care increased until finally he sent not just those to bear the Word, but the Word himself. The Word Incarnate was sent to save. "And the Word became flesh" (John 1:14).

The Mission and Ministry of Jesus

> Long ago God spoke to our ancestors in many and various ways by the prophets, but in these last days he has spoken to us by a Son, whom he appointed heir of all things, through whom he also created the worlds. He is the reflection of God's glory and the exact imprint of God's very being, and he sustains all things by his powerful word. (Hebrews 1:1-3)

Go sent the Word Incarnate, Jesus Christ with a mission in the line of the prophets, kings and priests of old. He was sent to "bring to speech" the saving will of God, to make present and effective "the exact imprint of God's very being" (Hebrews 1: 1-3).

"Jesus came to Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God, and saying, 'The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news'" (Mark 1:14-15). Jesus was sent to teach, preach the Good News, heal, lead, serve and save. "I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly" (John 10:10).

Ultimately, Jesus completed his mission by his saving death and Resurrection. He offered the single sacrifice of his life, "once for all when he offered himself" (Hebrews 7:27). But before he gave his disciples his Body and Blood and said, "Do this in remembrance of me" (Luke 22:19).

Jesus was to continue his mission to bring all people into union with himself, God the Father, and the Holy Spirit, and in union with one another. He did this by the commissioning and sending of his Apostles (*apostolos* in Greek means sent).

Jesus said:

> All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age. (Matthew 28:18-20)

Those sent, then, not only were to serve God, but they were also to serve others. They were to continue the mission and ministry of Jesus.

A New Being

Those called to service as priests of old were called to a service that was truly ministerial, that is, directed to all. “For the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many” (Mark 10:45). The word that is used for “serve” in Latin is “*ministrare*” (from which comes the English word “minister”) and in Greek “*diakonein*” (from which comes the word “deacon”).

Some years ago the priests of a diocese in the Western United States had gathered for a week long workshop on Baptism. For a week they heard nothing but Baptism: its importance, theology, history, meaning, celebration, effects. Toward the end of the week the speaker asked for a show of hands on how many knew the date of their ordination. Every hand went up. Then he said, “Now, considering what we’ve said about how Baptism is much more important than your ordination, how many of you know the date of your Baptism?” Not even a handful of hands went up.

Why is Baptism so important? Baptism and Confirmation are two sacraments that give a whole new identity to a person. They are called Sacraments of Christian Initiation or, sometimes, Christian Identity. Through these sacraments, there is a change in the “who” of a person and, because of that change, there is a change in the “what,” in what a person does, or how a person behaves. God gives a call, calls by a new name, but also gives a capacity for living a new life.

By Baptism and Confirmation one is conformed to Christ who is Priest, Prophet, and King. Just as the people of old were called to be “a priestly kingdom and a holy nation,” so now by Christ’s sacramental action they “are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God’s own people” (1 Peter 2:9).

The Sacrament of Holy Orders is the third sacrament that gives a new identity. Just as with Baptism and Confirmation, because of this new being, this new identity, the Sacrament of Orders cannot be repeated. Just as Christ is the “exact imprint of God’s very being” (“*charakter*” in Greek), so there is an “imprint,” a “character,” an “indelible mark” that is bestowed on the one ordained. This new being gives the call and capacity to manifest the mission and ministry of Jesus Christ.

In the chapel of the old St. Joseph Seminary in California there was an inscription over the main altar that read: “Deus providebit sibi victimam.” The translates to “God himself will provide the victim” (Genesis 22:8). Abraham is asked to sacrifice his son, Isaac. When Isaac asks, innocently, “Where is the victim?” Abraham replies, “God himself will provide the victim.” This rich and illusive expression is most fitting for a seminary chapel. For those who are ordained are conformed in a special way not only to Christ who “came not to be served but to serve,” but also conformed to Christ who came “to give his life as a ransom for many” (Mark 10:45).

The wise old priests of the seminary used to say: “If you want to be priest with Christ at the altar, you must also be victim with Christ on the altar.” The new identity, in both call and capacity, is not only to Christ the minister and priest, but to Christ the victim.

Order and Ordination

What the word “order” means in the expression “Holy Orders” is a grouping or body of persons set aside, consecrated for a particular work and way of life. There are three such bodies or “orders” in the Church: the order of deacons (diaconate), the order of priests (presbyterate) and the order of bishops (episcopate). All three orders share in a triple ministry that is evangelical, ministerial, and liturgical. It is a ministry to teach, to lead, and to make holy; a ministry of prophet, of king, and of priest.

Ordination is the rite of the Church by which the recipient is incorporated into one of these orders. The central part of the ordination combines the ancient and powerful gesture of the laying on of hands and the prayer of consecration. The very word *consecration* implies a being set apart, in this instance a being set apart for the purpose of service.

The priests and Levites of old had God alone as their lot or inheritance: “[T]he LORD is their inheritance” (Deuteronomy 18:2). The word for lot or inheritance in Greek is “*kleros*” from which comes the English word “clergy.” By ordination, then, one becomes a “cleric,” a member of the clergy.

Traditionally in the Western Church one sign of that clerical status—the decision that God alone is one’s lot or inheritance, has been celibacy. Of course the restoration of the permanent diaconate has made it possible for married men to be ordained permanent deacons. In the Eastern Church and in very particular instances in the West, married priests have been permitted. However, in both East and West bishops are celibate.

There are three “orders” of consecrated life. All three orders share in the evangelical, pastoral, and liturgical ministries of the Church, each in a different manner.

The Order of Deacons

Before the Vatican II, in the Latin Church only “transitional” deacons. These were men on their way to being ordained priests and this final step of diaconate might last only a few days. When the Second Vatican Council restored the permanent diaconate, the question on everyone’s lips seemed to be “What do deacons do?”

The Church was familiar with what priests and bishops did. Deacons were new. The tendency was to define a person by function. The question was rather, “How does a deacon be? Who is the deacon?” The answer is that the deacon is the quintessential minister. His very name, “deacon,” says as much. The ordination rite, then, consecrates the recipient for service in the

Church. Jesus came to serve and the deacon manifests that serving and saving Christ in the midst of the Church.

There is a telling moment in the ordination of a deacon when the newly ordained deacon is handed the Book of the Gospels and is instructed by the bishop: “Receive the Gospel of Christ, whose herald you now are. Believe what you read, teach what you believe, and practice what you teach” (*Ordination of a Deacon*, 24). This brief ceremony underscores the centrality of the Scripture and, above all, the Gospel in the life and ministry of the deacon. It is that Gospel that tells of Jesus who said: “[T]he Son of Man came not to be served but to serve” (Mark 10:45).

The Order of Priests

The priest finds his identity, his new being in relationship to the bishop, the one who is the successor of the Apostles. As such, it is primarily in the Eucharist that he manifests who he is and who he is called to be.

One of the ceremonies in the rite of priestly ordination stresses this new Eucharistic identity. After the newly ordained priest has had his hands anointed and has been vested in chasuble and stole, the bishop says to him as he hands to him the gifts of bread and wine brought by the people: “Accept from the holy people of God the gifts to be offered to him. Know what you are doing, and imitate the mystery you celebrate: model your life on the mystery of the Lord’s cross” (*Ordination of a Priest*, 26).

The priest is to become in a particular way this ecclesial, Christological mystery of the Mass. But the priest also imitates the mysteries he celebrates in the other sacraments: bringing new life to the Church in Baptism, proclaiming the Word of God, being the official witness of the Church for Matrimony, extending the healing mission of Christ in the Anointing of the Sick, and offering the Sacrament of Reconciliation.

Order of Bishop

In a sense it is the Order of Bishop that comes first. The bishops are the successors of the Apostles, and, consequently, the commissioning at the end of Gospel according to Matthew (See Matthew 28:18-20)) is handed on especially to them. Thus this fullness of shepherding is found in the bishops and they, in turn, associate others in their ministry, namely the priests (see *Lumen Gentium* 28), and the deacons who assist the priests and bishop, in the mission of the local Church.

The spiritual gift that is bestowed on the bishop is the gift of governance and leadership. At the ordination of a bishop, when his crosier is handed to him, these words are said: “Take this staff as a sign of your pastoral office: keep watch over the whole flock in which the Holy Spirit has appointed you to shepherd the Church of God” (*Ordination of a Bishop*, 32). These words

demonstrate the new being of the bishop. The bishop is specially conformed to Christ the Good Shepherd in his mission to bring care and salvation to Christ's own flock.

Apostle: Hand, Heart, Head

The ordained are called to make clear what is the basic apostolic meaning of the Church. The ordained are called to "sacramentalize," that is, to make concrete and effective, the reality of the Apostle: hands, heart, and head.

The deacon is the most fundamental level of continuing Christ's apostolic ministry. Although he is called to the ministry of the altar, of the proclamation of the Word, and of service, his most defining element is his service. It gives him his very name. The deacon makes visible to the whole Church through his sacramental identity and functioning the call to service that is the basis of the entire Christian identity. The deacon is the *hands* of the apostle.

There is a wonderful story told of the deacon of Rome—Saint Lawrence—during the third century. Lawrence was responsible for the distribution of Church goods to the poor. Lawrence was summoned before the magistrates and ordered to turn over the treasures of the Church before he was executed. Lawrence went to obey that command. He returned with all the poor and needy and widowed and orphans and said, "Here is the Church's treasure." He was martyred, but had given witness to (that's what the Greek word "*martyr*" means) the dignity of diaconate in loving service.

In his Apostolic Exhortation *Pastores Dabo Vobis* ("I Will Give You Shepherds") Saint John Paul II indicates that the defining characteristic and motivating force of the priest is pastoral charity, that is, the love and care of a shepherd: "I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep" (John 10:11). The very word *pastor* is simply the Latin word for "shepherd." The ordained priest, then, is called to live out and to make visible in his sacramental identity and functioning that loving care of the Good Shepherd. The priest is the *heart* of the apostle.

There is a particular affinity of priests for St. Thérèse of Lisieux. She wanted to be a priest. She wanted to know where she fit in the Body of Christ, what member she could identify herself as. Finally, she knew. She would be the heart and she would love. This woman who died so young, who lived a totally cloistered life became a model for parish priests and the patroness of the Church's missions.

Finally, the Apostle must have vision and be able to lead the way. The baptized must know where to go and how to witness. Some are ordained, consecrated for this service in the Church. They bear a special bond with the New Testament Apostles and are their successors. These are the bishops. In his sacramental identity and functioning, the bishop makes visible the leadership and governance of the Apostle. The bishop is the *head* of the Apostle.

There is a delightful legend about Saint Denis, the first bishop of Paris. Denis was sent to Paris at a time when persecution was rampant. He was to provide leadership to a tormented Church. He was closely associated in his difficult episcopal ministry of reconciliation, healing, and shepherding with the priest Rusticus and the deacon Eleutherius. They were martyred together at Montmartre (the "Mount of Martyrs").

According to the legend, after Denis was beheaded he picked up his head and walked two miles, accompanied by choirs of angels, to his final resting place! This legend seems to show the faith of the Church in the headship of the bishop. Evil might strike at the head of the local Church and seek to destroy it, but the bishop represents and makes visible to the local Church Christ who is the true head, and it is Christ who gives the victory.

Pray for Him

When the Church gathers together to become Church, that is, when the Church gathers together in Eucharist, the Eucharistic Prayer features prominently prayers for bishops, priests, clergy. It is important to understand how important these ministers are to the whole life of the Church, in this understanding, prayer is seen as vital to the life of the Church. Prayer for the Church's ministers is prayer for the Church. They do not get more prayers because they deserve more prayers, but because they need more.

The new identity of ordination does not "angelize" the ordained into something nonhuman. Each age of the Church shows the need for fervent prayer for the ordained in order that they might respond to their calling and exercise their capacities. This age is no exception. The Church must pray to realize her apostolic reality: hands, heart, head.

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The Rite of Ordination

Many of us have never witnessed the sacramental celebration of ordination. If ever you have the opportunity to attend the ordination of a deacon, priest, or bishop don't pass it up! When you go, you will notice the following ritual actions as unique to the ceremony. These actions follow after the Liturgy of the Word and precede the Liturgy of the Eucharist.

1. Calling of the Candidates
2. Presentation of the Candidates
3. Election by the Bishop and Consent of the People
4. Homily
5. Examination of the Candidate
6. Promise of Obedience to the bishop and his successors
7. Invitation to Prayer (Litany of Saints while candidates lie prostrate)
8. Laying on of Hands
9. Prayer of Consecration
10. Investiture with Stole and Chasuble
11. Anointing of Hands
12. Presentation of the Gifts
13. Kiss of Peace

Prayer of Consecration

The candidate for priesthood kneels before the bishop. With his hands extended over the candidate, the bishop sings the prayer of consecration.

> . . . Almighty Father,
> grant to this servant of yours
> the dignity of the priesthood.
> Renew within him the Spirit of holiness.
> As a co-worker with the order of bishops
> may he be faithful to the ministry
> that he receives from you, Lord God,
> and be to others a model of right conduct.
>
> May he be faithful in working with the order of bishops,
> so that the words of the Gospel may reach the ends of the earth,
> and the family of nations, made one in Christ, may become God's one, holy people.
>
> We ask this through our Lord Jesus Christ, you Son, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. Amen
> (*Ordination of a Priest* 22).