

Signs of the Christ: Sacraments of the Catholic Church

ISSUE: What is a sacrament? How many are there?

RESPONSE: “The sacraments are efficacious signs of grace instituted by Jesus Christ to make us holy.”¹ As explained in the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (Catechism):

“Seated at the right hand of the Father” and pouring out the Holy Spirit on his Body which is the Church, Christ now acts through the sacraments he instituted to communicate his grace. The sacraments are perceptible signs (words and actions) accessible to our human nature. By the action of Christ and the power of the Holy Spirit they make present efficaciously the grace that they signify (no. 1084).

The Church herself is the universal sacrament of salvation through which we receive the seven sacraments of Baptism, Confirmation, Eucharist, Penance, Anointing of the Sick, Holy Orders, and Marriage.²

DISCUSSION: There are three points to consider about sacraments in general that can be taken from the definition noted above. First, sacraments are efficacious signs. As humans, we express spiritual realities through signs and symbols. These signs signify something greater than the sign itself (Catechism, nos. 1145-1152). The rainbow is only colored light, but signifies God’s mercy and promise never to destroy the earth by flood again (Gen. 9:12-17). As an efficacious sign, a sacrament not only signifies something greater, it becomes what it signifies. And so the water poured over the infant in Baptism not only signifies a washing of sin, it accomplishes what it signifies and all sin is removed. The bread used in the sacrament of Eucharist not only signifies the Body of Christ, but actually becomes in substance the Body of Christ.

Second, sacraments are instituted by Christ Himself. This is important for two reasons. First, sacraments are not something made up by the Church. They are given by God as a gift to aid us in our life on earth and assure us of our salvation. God wills that the Church make the sacraments available. As the *Code of Canon Law* notes, “The Christian faithful have the right to receive assistance from the sacred pastors out of the spiritual goods of the Church, especially the word of God and the sacraments” (canon 213).³

As the author of the sacraments, Jesus Himself defines their purpose; we, in turn, must accept them. In general, for a sign to make sense, the one seeing the sign must know what purpose the author intended. For example, new drivers must learn the meaning of traffic signs before they can receive a valid driver’s license. While the government determines the signs and their meaning, the driver has the obligation of learning and accepting the meaning of the signs. Likewise, Christ has instituted the sacraments and given them purpose. We have an obligation to accept them, understand them, and use them for the purpose He has designed. Because the sacraments become a greater reality than a mere sign, there is a certain mystery that clouds human perception. We cannot fully understand the sacred mysteries represented by the sacraments, but we can grasp them through the gift of faith.

Finally, sacraments make us holy. The purpose of the sacraments are to assure us of salvation. They are the ordinary means through which the Church provides the grace of redemption. Jesus won salvation for all men through His death and resurrection (1 John 2:2). Though He has won this grace for us, and has given it as a free gift, we can squander the gift and lose our salvation (Heb. 10:26-36). The sacraments provide the necessary grace that assures our salvation. If we use the sacraments as intended by Christ, and live our lives accordingly, we can rejoice that our names are written in the Book of Life (Lk. 10:20).

As noted above, the Church herself, the Bride and Body of Christ, is a sacrament; the universal sacrament of salvation. Within her is found the seven sacraments instituted by Christ. To fulfill her purpose in dispensing the graces of salvation, the Church makes present these sacraments for the benefit of all.

There are three principle divisions of the seven sacraments: sacraments of initiation, sacraments of healing, sacraments of service. The sacraments of initiation include Baptism, Confirmation, and Eucharist. The sacraments of healing are Penance and Anointing of the Sick. The sacraments of service are Holy Orders and Marriage (Catechism, no. 1211).

Sacraments of Initiation

Baptism is the gateway to all other sacraments. It is the first to be received. In Baptism, we die with Christ and share in His resurrection (Rom. 6:3-4). We are freed from sin, particularly the eternal effects of Original Sin, and enter the life of grace in the Holy Spirit as sons of God. Through Baptism, we share in the work of Christ and become members of His one Body, the Church.⁴ Our Lord Himself stated that Baptism is necessary for salvation (Jn. 3:5), and the Church knows of no other means through which the grace of salvation is given except Baptism (Catechism, no. 1257). For this reason, she does not neglect her mission to “make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit” (Mt. 28:19).⁵

Three elements are necessary for a Baptism to be recognized as valid by the Catholic Church. The one baptizing must intend to do what the Church intends. It is not necessary that the person be baptized himself, only that his intention is the intention of the Church. Second, true water must be sprinkled or poured over the person, or the person immersed in water. The Catholic Church prefers pouring or immersion, and requires one of these two methods in her celebrations of Baptism. Finally, the Trinitarian formula, “I baptize you in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit,” must be used. No other name or title for the Father, Son and Holy Spirit can be substituted (Catechism, no. 1256).

Confirmation completes and perfects baptismal grace.⁶ By Confirmation, the baptized are strengthened by the Holy Spirit, and the grace of all other sacraments is enlivened. For this reason, Confirmation should be administered after Baptism and before the reception of other sacraments. The most ancient tradition of the Church, maintained today in the Eastern Churches, was to administer Confirmation at the time of Baptism. In the West, it is preferred that Confirmation take place before First Communion at about the age of reason, although the Conference of Bishops can establish a different age.⁷ If a baptized adult is to be confirmed, he should receive the sacrament of Penance first in order to be cleansed for the gift of the Holy Spirit (Catechism, no. 1310).

The sacrament of the Holy Eucharist completes Christian initiation. As explained in the Catechism,

Those who have been raised to the dignity of the royal priesthood by Baptism and configured more deeply to Christ by Confirmation participate with the whole community in the Lord’s own sacrifice by means of the Eucharist (no. 1322).

The Eucharist is “the source and summit of the Christian life” “The other sacraments, and indeed all ecclesiastical ministries and works of the apostolate, are bound up with the Eucharist and are oriented toward it. For in the blessed Eucharist is contained the whole spiritual good of the Church, namely Christ himself, our Pasch” (no. 1324).

In brief, 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” (no. 1327).

Participation in the celebration of Mass is the ordinary means of receiving the sacrament of Eucharist. This liturgical celebration represents the entire Paschal mystery, and makes present true worship of God in Spirit and in truth (c.f.: Jn. 4:23). In a mysterious way known only through the sacrament, time ceases and we are made present with Christ during His Last Supper, His passion and death, His resurrection and ascension, and we are present with the saints worshipping before the throne of God in heaven.

Sacraments of Healing

The sacrament of Penance has been called by some as a “second baptism” because it cleanses us from sin and makes us pure in the eyes of God.⁸ When we pray to God and ask forgiveness of venial sins, He forgives us.

However, this act alone does not repair the wrongs we have committed. If I steal \$100.00 and later repent, my sin is forgiven, but the other man is still out \$100.00. My repentance is not complete until I have repaired the wrong and restored the money. Having done so, I have experienced not only repentance, but true conversion of heart. The sacrament of Penance provides this opportunity of true conversion of heart, to ask and receive God's forgiveness, but also to repair the wrongs we have committed and be reconciled with the Church. Furthermore, this sacrament is the ordinary means given by Christ for the forgiveness of mortal sins. Regular participation in this sacrament will have one of two effects; the penitent will either quit going to confession, or quit sinning.

By the sacrament of Anointing of the Sick,

“the prayer of the priests and the whole Church commends those who are ill to the suffering and glorified Lord, that he may raise them up and save them. And indeed she exhorts them to contribute to the good of the People of God by freely uniting themselves to the Passion and death of Christ.”⁹

This sacrament is not intended for those at the point of death, but rather for those who are in danger of death due to illness or old age (Catechism, no. 1514). Before a serious surgery, during a difficult or long illness, even burdensome effects of old age provide opportunity to receive Anointing of the Sick. If a long illness takes a turn for the worse, and the person has already received the sacrament previously during the illness, he can receive it again (Catechism, no. 1515). While physical healing sometimes occurs, the primary effects of Anointing of the Sick is a spiritual healing from sin and a strengthening of the person to persevere in grace during this difficult time. Through this sacrament, the person is united to the sufferings of Christ, and so shares in His consolations (1 Cor. 1:3-7).

Sacraments at the Service of Communion

Holy Orders is the sacrament through which the mission entrusted by Christ to his apostles continues to be exercised in the Church until the end of time: thus it is the sacrament of apostolic ministry. It includes three degrees: episcopate, presbyterate, and diaconate.¹⁰

Only a man can receive the sacrament of Holy Orders. When he receives this sacrament, his soul receives an indelible mark that represents his power to act in the person of Christ when performing the tasks proper to him. As a bishop, he shares in the high priesthood of Christ and obtains the full power to rule, sanctify and teach in the person of Christ. To the bishop alone belongs the fullness of the sacrament of Holy Orders. As a priest, he shares in the power of the bishop and becomes his coworker in ruling, sanctifying and teaching the People of God. As a deacon, he becomes a servant of all the faithful. His principal tasks are to assist at the altar, distribute Holy Eucharist, proclaim the Gospel, preach, preside over funerals, and perform works of charity (Catechism, no. 1570).

The sacrament of Marriage is a covenant between a man and woman. This covenant establishes a permanent partnership of the whole of life, and is ordered toward the good of the spouses and the procreation and education of children.¹¹ Being ordered to the good of spouses, the Church recognizes the will of Christ that spouses remain faithful in a permanent union broken only by death (Mt. 19:3-9). Their openness to children during the union of their bodies provides a clear witness to the creative actions of Christ and His love for His Bride, the Church. As St. Paul writes, marriage is a mysterious sign of God's love for His Church, and the love He wants from her (Eph. 5:21-33). As sacraments bring about what they signify, marriage brings about the union of man and woman, and the union of Christ with His Church.

Conclusion

The seven sacraments touch all the stages and all the important moments of Christian life: they give birth and increase, healing and mission to the Christian's life of faith. There is thus a certain resemblance between the stages of natural life and the stages of the spiritual life (Catechism, no. 1210).

Because Christ Himself instituted the sacraments for our salvation and the good of the whole world, we would do well to participate fully in the sacramental life of the Church. Strengthened by the sacraments, we are better able to fulfill our mission as disciples of Christ and renew the face of the earth.

¹ *Catechism of Christian Doctrine*, published by order of Pope St. Pius X, trans. Eugene Kevane, Institute for Christian Culture, Notre Dame Institute Press, 1974, question 267, p. 48.

² *Dogmatic Constitution on the Church [Lumen Gentium (LG)]*, nos. 9§2, 48§2. See also: Catechism, nos. 774-776, 1210.

³ Translation from the Canon Law Society of America, *Code of Canon Law: Latin-English Edition*, 1983.

⁴ See: Catechism, nos. 1213-1284.

⁵ The Church recognizes that the desire for Baptism and Baptism of blood has the same effects as the sacrament of Baptism without being a sacrament (Catechism, no. 1258). Regarding infants who die without the benefit of Baptism, the Church entrusts them to the mercy of God without absolute knowledge of their final destiny (Catechism, no. 1261).

⁶ See: Catechism, nos. 1285-1321.

⁷ *Code of Canon Law*, canon 891; c.f.: Catechism, nos. 1306, 1322.

⁸ See: Catechism, nos. 1420-1498.

⁹ Catechism, no. 1499 (quotations in original). See also, Catechism, nos. 1500-1532; Jas. 5:14-16.

¹⁰ Catechism, no. 1536. See also, Catechism, nos. 1533-1600.

¹¹ See Catechism, nos. 1601-1666.

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