

UNDERSTANDING
THE
SACRAMENTS

Baptism

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What Is a Sacrament?

Most Catholics recognize that sacraments are an important part of life in the church. They see them as significant moments that mark transitions in life. They bring their babies to be baptized and send their second graders to prepare for First Communion. They come to the church to be married and ask for the anointing when someone is seriously ill.

Sacraments, however, are much more than mileposts in the spiritual life. The Second Vatican Council (1962–65) called for a renewal of the liturgy that included revising all the sacraments. The purpose of the revision was to re-think our understanding of these basic actions that shape our identity in the church. In their first document, the Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy, issued in 1963, the council fathers spoke of the importance of the sacraments for the 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 belong in the realm of instruction. They not only presuppose faith, but by words and objects they also nourish, strengthen, and express it. That is why they are called sacraments of faith. They do, indeed, confer grace, but, in addition, the very act of celebrating them is most effective in making people ready to receive this grace to their profit, to worship God duly, and to practice charity.

It is, therefore, of the greatest importance that the faithful should easily understand the symbolism of the sacraments and eagerly frequent those sacraments which were instituted to nourish the Christian life (no. 59).

Helping people to readily understand the sacramental signs is the goal of this series of booklets.

Though this booklet focuses on the sacrament of baptism, there are basic principles that can help us to understand all the sacraments, for they share some fundamental characteristics.

SACRAMENTS ARE HUMAN ACTIVITIES

First, the sacraments are human activities. We often think of the sacraments in terms of the elements of creation that we use: water, oil, bread and wine, etc. Yet the sacraments are better understood as the actions that we do with those elements, and those actions are all basic human gestures. We wash bodies, anoint foreheads, eat bread and drink wine, touch and caress the sick, lay on hands as a gesture of conferring power, etc. These human actions become the means of encountering the Lord.

These actions have become rituals; we follow familiar patterns of movement and gesture and recite the official words of the rite. We perform these rituals as our ancestors did. Nonetheless, rituals are revised and updated from time to time to keep them fresh and true to their original purpose.

Our ritual actions are symbolic, giving us a real and concrete way to experience or express something that is otherwise abstract. A symbol contains the reality it expresses. A kiss, for example, somehow contains the love it expresses, though it does not exhaust that love. So, too, the Eucharistic meal contains the presence of Jesus, though it does not exhaust that presence.

All the sacraments also rely on the word of God. The prayers and formulas of the rituals have been drawn from the Bible, and the celebrations always include a formal proclamation of the word of God. The word clarifies the meaning of the symbols we use. Proclaiming God's word in the celebration also reminds us that our actions are always a response to what God has done for us.

SACRAMENTS ARE ACTIONS OF THE CHURCH COMMUNITY

The ritual actions that we carry out in the sacraments are always communal actions. This may be the most important realization in our renewed understanding of the sacraments. They are the actions of the church community, not just of

The use of water, by immersion or pouring, speaks of both dying and rebirth.

"We were indeed buried with him through baptism into death, so that just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might live in newness of life" (Rom 6:4).

the presider or the recipient. As the Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy puts it: “It is very much the wish of the church that all the faithful should be led to take that full, conscious, and active part in liturgical celebrations which is demanded by the very nature of the liturgy” (no. 14). Liturgy is the public worship of the church in its various forms. Though we may celebrate around an individual or a group of people receiving a sacrament, we all celebrate the sacrament together. A sacrament is the action of the church, and its meaning and effects are not limited to those around whom we celebrate.

One primary effect of any sacrament is to form us for mission. Each sacrament, in its own way, strengthens us to carry on the mission of Christ in the world today. Sacraments, then, are necessary to the life of the community and the furtherance of its mission. They make the church what Christ intends it to be, and they make each of us what Christ intends us to become.

SACRAMENTS ARE THE ACTION OF CHRIST

At the same time, because the church is the Body of Christ, the action of a sacrament is also the action of Christ. The Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy puts it this way: “By his power he is present in the sacraments, so that when anybody baptizes it is really Christ himself who baptizes” (no. 7).

The church has long taught that the power of a sacrament is not dependent on the ability or holiness of the priest, bishop, or deacon presiding. The sacrament is effective even if the minister is unworthy or sinful. It does not ultimately depend on the minister, for it is Christ who acts through the gathered community, which is his Body.

The encounter with Christ in the sacraments is possible only through faith. That’s why baptism is the first sacrament and the precondition for all the others. It is the sacrament of initial faith, which is a response to God’s grace calling a person to belief. The sacraments express our faith and also nourish and strengthen faith, because they bring us into contact with the living Christ.

The tradition speaks of sacraments giving grace. That is ultimately a way of saying that they bring us into

“Liturgy” comes from the Greek meaning “work of the people” and refers to the various forms of public worship of the church.



contact with Christ and enable us to deepen our friendship with the Lord. Grace is, at root, that relationship, and the encounter with Christ in a sacrament deepens that friendship.

Sacraments are a part of our relationship with God, a part of our faith life. They express what God is already doing in our lives and move us further along the road of conversion and spiritual growth. Sacraments should never be viewed as isolated moments in our lives. They depend on a process that leads up to the moment of celebration and flows from that moment into our future. Sacraments require preparation on the part of the individual and on the part of the community. Sacraments affect the life of the individual and the community far beyond the celebration itself.

To summarize, sacraments are:

- human activities
- that have become symbolic ritual actions,
- clarified by the word of God,
- celebrated by the church community,
- recognized as the actions of Christ,
- that deepen our relationship with God
- and strengthen us to carry on the mission of Jesus.

Baptism

Call to Carry On the Mission

Baptism is the sacrament through which we enter the church. Most people think first of babies when they think of baptism, but the church also baptizes older children and adults. In fact, it is the adult process of entry into the church that gives us the clearest understanding of the meaning of baptism. In this booklet, we will look first at adult initiation into the church before we examine how

the understanding of this sacrament applies to the baptism of infants.

Many people also think of baptism as their ticket into heaven, but the Catholic Church teaches that people who are not formally baptized can also be saved. In the late 1940s, Father Leonard Feeney of Boston began promoting a very restrictive interpretation of the ancient saying that “outside the church there is no salvation—*extra ecclesiam nulla salus*.” Feeney insisted that no one can be saved without formally joining the Catholic Church through baptism with water. He rejected even the ancient teaching that baptism of desire and baptism of blood were enough for salvation for those who desired baptism with water but were unable to receive it. His teaching was that without baptism of water, there is no salvation.

Feeney’s teaching was rejected by the Vatican, and he was eventually excommunicated for his refusal to go to Rome to discuss the matter. Though his teaching was heretical, it is likely that many other Catholics of that time believed that only Catholics could get to heaven.

The Dogmatic Constitution on the Church issued by the Second Vatican Council presents a very different perspective. The council fathers see the possibility of salvation extending far beyond Catholics and beyond other Christians. They teach that Jews and Muslims, Hindus and Buddhists, and even agnostics (who aren’t sure whether there is a God) and atheists can get to heaven. Here’s a key sentence from that document: “Nor will divine providence deny the assistance necessary for salvation to those who, without any fault of theirs, have not yet arrived at an explicit knowledge of God, and who, not without grace, strive to lead a good life” (no. 16).

Where does that leave baptism? Should we even bother? Does it matter? Absolutely! For those who have the gift of faith, baptism is necessary. Those who are called by God to baptism and given the gift of faith must respond to that call in order to be saved. For such a person to reject baptism is to reject God’s will. Those who have not been given faith, however, are



not condemned for what they have not received. It is an example of the gospel teaching: “Much will be required of the person entrusted with much, and still more will be demanded of the person entrusted with more” (Luke 12:48). Each person is judged on how he or she responds to what God has given.

Recognizing that many people may be saved without formal baptism, however, forces us to think again about the meaning of baptism itself. If millions or billions of people have been and are being saved by God’s grace without baptism, what does it mean when God calls some to be baptized?

Baptism is the sacrament by which we are initiated into the Christian life and the church community. Thus, baptism is the means by which the church gains members. It is the sacrament that enables the church to carry on the mission that was entrusted to it by Christ. The church does not exist for its own sake but for the sake of the mission. So, too, those who are baptized are not baptized purely for their own sake (to get into heaven) but for the sake of the mission. Those who accept the call to baptism are accepting God’s call to continue the work of Christ in the world today.

Although infant baptism has become and remains the most common practice for Catholics, it is the Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults (RCIA) that stands as the model for understanding baptism. Participants in this rite, called catechumens, prepare for baptism through a lengthy process that includes instruction (catechesis), experience of the Christian community, prayer and worship, and Christian service. They become members of the church when they are enrolled as catechumens, even though it will be months or years before they are baptized. The decision to admit them to the sacraments should be based on judgment of their readiness to carry on the work of the church. Through the sacraments of initiation (baptism, confirmation, and Eucharist), they become members of the order of the faithful, the most basic order of the church. It is the faithful, assisted by the orders of deacon, priest, and bishop, that bear the responsibility for the mission Christ entrusted to the church. Baptism, then, means accepting responsibility for that mission.

*All who are
baptized make
up the order of
the faithful.*

A Look at Our History

Baptism through the current RCIA is a restoration of an ancient pattern of initiation, so it may be helpful to take a look at the history of Christian initiation through the centuries.

We know precious little about the rites of initiation or the preparation for them in the century following Jesus' death and resurrection. The New Testament does indicate that baptism was conferred in the name of the Trinity (e.g., Matt 28:19) and perhaps sometimes in the name of the Lord Jesus (e.g., Acts 8:16). The letter of St. Paul to the early church in Rome suggests that baptism may have been conferred through immersion in a pool (Rom 6), which was symbolic of going down into the tomb with Christ and rising to new life. We know from archeological evidence that this is how baptism was celebrated in the following centuries, but it is also possible that the rite developed after New Testament times following Paul's symbolic description.

In any case, we do know that baptism in the early centuries of the church's life was primarily baptism of adults. From the day of Pentecost on, the early Christians preached the gospel to adults and called them to a conversion of life away from sin and toward Christ that was celebrated in baptism. It is likely that children were also baptized when whole families and households were converted, but the majority of those initiated into the church were adults.

THE CLASSICAL CATECHUMENATE

It is also clear from various references in the writings of early church fathers that there were various forms of preparation for initiation. In the third, fourth, and fifth centuries this preparation developed into a full-blown structure called the catechumenate. Designed as a support for, and stimulus to, the process of conversion, the catechumenate was a long-term experience. Those who sought to join the Christian community were examined as to their intentions and their way of life. If these were in accord with the gospel, they were



admitted to the order of the catechumens. As catechumens they were instructed over a period of two or three years, while sharing the Christian way of life and joining in prayer and worship with the community on Sundays. They were generally dismissed after the homily, however, since the Eucharist was only for the baptized. Their sponsors, who had brought them to the community and vouched for them, accompanied them throughout the process of their preparation and also served as their sponsors for the celebration of the sacraments of initiation.

The church community celebrated various rituals with the catechumens as they continued their journey. When the candidates, their sponsors, and the community agreed that the catechumens were ready for the sacraments, their names were enrolled for baptism, and they were called “the enlightened ones.” This enrollment began a period of intensive spiritual preparation for the reception of the sacraments, generally lasting forty days. As the whole community began to share in this time of retreat, it developed into the season we call Lent.

Throughout this process, the church community sought to determine the progress of the catechumens. The question that was constantly being asked was whether the Spirit of God was bringing about a true conversion in the lives of those seeking baptism. It was the recognition of God’s action in their lives, changing them and making them new, that was the basis of the rituals that the community celebrated around them.

The highpoint of the journey came at the Easter Vigil, when those being initiated were baptized, anointed with the Spirit, and brought to the eucharistic table for the first time. This was the night of nights, the church’s annual celebration of the death and resurrection of the Lord, manifested concretely in the new Christians who died and rose in baptism. The whole community rejoiced with them as it welcomed them into the order of the faithful. After they received the sacraments, the new Christians entered a period of reflection and meditation on the “mysteries,” which was an early term for the sacraments. This was also a time for them to adjust to their new responsibilities as full members of the community, sharing fully in the life and work of the church.

Catechumen
(kat-eh-kyu-men)
is the term to
describe a person
preparing for
baptism. The
catechumenate
(kat-eh-kyu-men-et)
is the process of
formation for the
sacraments of
initiation.

Both are related
to catechesis
(kat-eh-kee-sis)
which means
“teaching” or
“instruction.”

*“Mysteries” is an
ancient term for
sacraments.*

THE DISINTEGRATION OF INITIATION

This classical form of the catechumenate was in its prime in the third, fourth, and fifth centuries. Christianity was a new faith, primarily converting adults and initiating adults into the church. Following this period, the unified structure of initiation (baptism, confirmation, and First Eucharist celebrated together) began to come apart. There were a variety of reasons for this decline, including the mass conversions of the German and Slavic tribes. Since they were largely nomadic tribes, they were not in one place long enough for an extended period of formation. But the most important reason was the shift toward infant baptism. Since most adults had already become Christians, the majority of baptisms being celebrated became baptisms of infants. The teaching of St. Augustine and others on original sin prompted an even stronger emphasis on the baptism of infants. Many believed that unbaptized infants who died could not enter heaven; thus, the church began baptizing infants as soon as possible after birth.

At the same time confirmation became separated from baptism, largely because it required the presence of the bishop in the West. The Eastern church allowed the baptizing priest to confirm at the same ceremony, but in the West, Pope Innocent I in 412 insisted that the anointing on the forehead with chrism must be done by the bishop. As dioceses got larger, it was impossible for the bishop to be present at all the celebrations of baptism at the Easter Vigil, so the anointing was postponed until he could come. Over the centuries the gap between baptism and confirmation widened further and further, reaching as much as fourteen years in recent centuries. In the process, we have come to see confirmation as a separate sacrament, an idea that would have been unthinkable to the early church.

The Second Vatican Council called for the rite of confirmation to be revised in such a way that its intimate connection with baptism would be made clear. While the new Rite of Confirmation issued in 1971 made some strides in that direction, this connection has been made most clear in the RCIA.

It was commonly believed that unbaptized infants went to a place called limbo, a place of happiness but not heaven. This teaching was never officially accepted by the church and has since been discarded by most theologians. The current Catechism of the Catholic Church does not even mention limbo.