

UNDERSTANDING
THE
SACRAMENTS

Eucharist

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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. These revisions call us to rethink 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 Eucharist, there are basic principles that can help us to understand all the sacraments, for they share some fundamental characteristics.

Christ is present in the Eucharist in four ways: in the assembly, in the presider, in the Word, and in the consecrated bread and wine.

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

Scripture clarifies the symbols we use: "the Lord Jesus, on the night he was handed over, took bread, and after he had given thanks, broke it and said, 'This is my body that is for you. Do this in remembrance of me'" (1 Cor 11:23-24).

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 is 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



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.

*“Mass” and
“Eucharist” both
describe the same
sacrament.*

*Communion is
the culmination
of the sacrament,
but the whole*

*Mass is the
celebration of
the sacrament.*

Eucharist Center of the Christian Life

Many Catholics think of Eucharist as just another word for Communion. For decades some Catholics have gone to church just to take Communion and considered the obligation to attend Mass fulfilled as long as they arrived by the preparation of the gifts. This approach to Eucharist, however, misses the fullness of the sacrament. Without full participation in the entire sacrament, which includes every part of the Mass, we are likely to miss Christ’s pres-

ence and the gifts that are available to us in this sacrament. The Communion rite is only part of the sacrament we call the Eucharist.

The name “Eucharist” comes from the Greek, and it means “thanksgiving.” The Eucharist is primarily a worship service of thanksgiving. It is also called “Mass,” a term that comes from the dismissal rite of the service, meaning “the sending forth,” a reminder that Christians who gather for Eucharist are sent out again to live out its meaning in their daily lives. The two terms are interchangeable and describe the entire sacramental liturgy. Christ reveals his presence in the Eucharist not just in the bread and wine, but in four significant ways that we will explore as we examine the various parts of the Mass, looking at both their history and their purpose in the liturgy.

The Second Vatican Council, in its Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy (no. 7), reminded us of the church’s traditional teaching that Christ is present in the Eucharist in various ways:

To accomplish so great a work Christ is always present in his church, especially in liturgical celebrations. He is present in the sacrifice of the Mass both in the person of his minister, “the same now offering, through the ministry of priests, who formerly offered himself on the cross,” and most of all in the eucharistic species. . . . He is present in his word since it is he himself who speaks when the holy scriptures are read in church. Lastly, he is present when the church prays and sings, for he has promised: “where two or three are gathered together in my name there am I in the midst of them.” (Matt 18:20)

The General Instruction of the Roman Missal summarizes that teaching more succinctly: “For in the celebration of Mass, in which the Sacrifice of the Cross is perpetuated, Christ is really present in the very liturgical assembly gathered in his name, in the person of the minister, in his word, and indeed substantially and continuously under the eucharistic species” (no. 27). Celebrating the Eucharist well requires attention to each of the ways that Christ reveals his presence during the celebration. Our recognition and response to his presence are ways we show reverence for the Lord in our midst.

The Shape of the Celebration

The Eucharist has four parts: gathering, listening, sharing, and sending forth.

The Mass shares the basic structure of any human celebration. Every celebration has four basic parts: gathering, listening, sharing, and sending forth. People gather and form a community to celebrate. They listen to one another or to a speaker to understand the meaning of the event. They share food, drink, conversation, and themselves in a variety of ways. Finally, they disperse, ending the event. These elements may be formal or informal, but they are part of every celebration in some way.

The Mass can be divided into two major sections: 1) the gathering and the listening, and 2) the sharing and the sending forth. In the Mass these are called the introductory rites and the Liturgy of the Word (sometimes together called the Liturgy of the Word), and the Liturgy of the Eucharist and the dismissal (sometimes together called the Liturgy of the Eucharist or the Liturgy of the Table).

Part I—The Gathering

The people of God, who form the Body of Christ, reveal Christ's presence as they assemble.

The Mass begins with the assembling of the People of God. Already in the gathering, Christ reveals his presence, for he promised to be in our midst whenever two or three gather in his name. This presence of Christ in the assembly of the faithful is fundamental to a proper understanding of the Eucharist. Through baptism we become members of the Body of Christ. When the Body, which has been dispersed throughout the community during the week, comes together for worship, we make Christ's Body visible. We greet one another in Christ as we recognize the face of Christ in those who gather with us.

This presence of Christ in his Body, the church, is crucial to understanding the mystery of the Eucharist and the whole purpose of the Mass. It is the gathering of the assembly in Christ that makes the Mass possible, and the purpose of the Eucharist is to draw us more fully into Christ's Body and to nourish and sustain the Body of Christ throughout the week.

Recognizing Christ in one another as we gather is the basis of true hospitality at Mass. Hospitality is not exhausted by being friendly and sharing coffee and donuts after the liturgy. It is also not a role limited to the ushers