

UNDERSTANDING
THE
SACRAMENTS

Holy Orders

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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 holy orders, 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

In the rites of ordination, the basic symbol is the laying on of hands, followed by the prayer of consecration.

Scripture clarifies the symbols we use: "They presented these men to the Apostles, who prayed and laid hands on them" (Acts 6:6).

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.

Holy Orders

Sacrament of Service

Recent history has seen dramatic changes in the shape of ministry in many Catholic churches. Laypeople have taken on more responsibility in the church, and many new ministerial positions have developed in parishes. Some of this is a result of the rapidly declining number of priests, but these developments are also a result of the teaching of the Second Vatican Council. The council emphasized the baptismal dignity and responsibility of laypeople in the church and called for the renewal of the ordained ministry of bishops and priests. The council fathers also called for the restoration of the diaconate as a permanent order of service in the church.

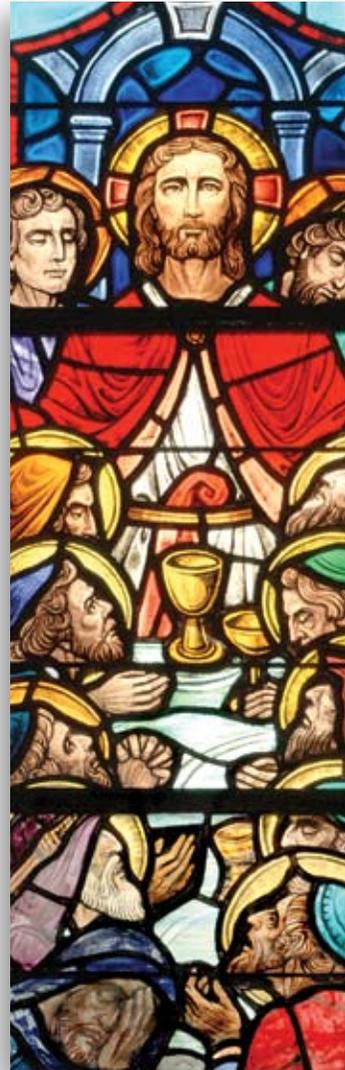
All of these developments have led to reexamination of the meaning of the sacrament of holy orders and the

broader range of ministries of service in the church community. The sacrament of holy orders is the way that the church celebrates three major ministries of leadership: deacons, priests, and bishops. This leadership must be exercised in light of Christ's teaching and witness. One of the choices for the gospel reading at ordination is Matthew 20:25b-28, where Jesus tells his disciples: "[W]hoever wishes to be great among you shall be your servant." Leading through service is the primary call of the ordained.

The Catechism of the Catholic Church calls marriage and holy orders "sacraments at the service of communion" and says that these sacraments "are directed toward the salvation of others; if they contribute as well to personal salvation, it is through service to others that they do so. They confer a particular mission in the Church and serve to build up the people of God" (no. 1534). This brief statement might serve as a touchstone for understanding the sacrament of holy orders. Like marriage, it consecrates some members of the church into a way of life through which they live out their baptismal commitment. While married couples live their faith in the domestic church and provide the wider church with new members, those called to holy orders build up the church by serving the whole faith community. The fundamental order of the church is the order of the faithful, all the baptized. Those called to holy orders are called to serve that largest and most basic order.

A Look at History

Do you know that at one time there were seven orders in the church, not just the three we recognize today? The way that those in holy orders have served the church through the centuries has varied significantly. Various orders have appeared and disappeared, while others have significantly changed their focus and their identity. Seeing how this process has occurred in the past can help us to understand changes in our own time as well as possibilities for the future.



THE EARLY CENTURIES

The New Testament shows us a church with a variety of structures and ministries. Jesus did not establish bishops, priests, and deacons. The only ministerial structure he established, the Twelve, was not maintained long. Matthias was chosen to replace Judas, but after that the Twelve were not replaced when they died.

Instead, we find local churches developing different forms of leadership. Though the evidence is limited, the churches founded by Paul seem to have developed a charismatic structure, based on gifts of the Spirit manifested in various individuals and groups. He lists apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastors, teachers, miracle workers, healers, assistants, administrators, and those who speak in tongues (see 1 Cor 12:28 and Eph 4:11) among others.

The bishop was the head of the early Christian councils of elders and was called the overseer, in Greek episkopos.

Other churches adopted a structure that was common in the Jewish synagogue, with a council of elders (*presbyter* is the Greek word for elder) directing the church's life. In at least some of these, there was a head of the council, called the overseer (*episkopos*) or bishop. Eventually the bishop-presbyter model came to prevail, but there was great variety in those early years. Late in the New Testament period, we also see the development of the order of deacons, who were assistants to the bishop.

Among the various charismatic ministries, prophets and teachers seem to have been especially important (see 1 Cor 12:28), and another early church document gives us a valuable insight into their role. The *Didache*, written in the early second century, around the same time as the later New Testament books, indicates that prophets and teachers customarily presided at the Eucharist. The *Didache* seems to be encouraging the communities to which it was addressed to choose bishops and deacons to replace the prophets and teachers, since they performed the same service to the church. What seems to be happening here is a shift from wandering and charismatic ministries to a more stable and structured ministry. The office of prophet and teacher was eventually absorbed into the role of bishop, and the bishop increasingly appears as the dominant figure, gradually standing out from the council of elders as a separate order and the chief minister of the church.

This development did not occur without some struggle, however. At the end of the fourth century there was an