

UNDERSTANDING THE *Sacraments*



STEVE MUELLER

Nothing is more characteristic of Catholicism than its emphasis on the principle of sacramentality, which is rooted in our fundamental beliefs in God's creation and Jesus' incarnation. This principle reminds us that only through the visible and tangible can we encounter the invisible God who is truly present and active in every person, place, event or object throughout creation. The Catholic vision seeks God in all things and understands the sacraments as rituals through which we now experience and celebrate God's hidden, disruptive and transforming presence.

Thus we do not come to meet Christ in the sacramental rituals as if he were absent from the rest of our lives. We celebrate the sacraments to deepen our awareness of, and commitment to, the action of his Holy Spirit in the whole of our lives at every moment. We participate in the sacramental rituals to acknowledge God's love poured out among us in the work of the Holy Spirit, and to be transformed by the life of God-with-us now.

THROUGH THE MATERIAL TO THE SPIRITUAL

A sacrament is a "visible sign of the hidden reality of salvation" (*Catechism of the Catholic Church*, #774). The words and acts of Jesus bring salvation by creating and establishing right relationships of communion with God through the Church's sacramental rituals. By

inviting us into communion with himself, Jesus invites us into a new relationship. The Church remembers and makes available to us this relationship with God through symbols and rituals called the *sacraments*. When the gathered assembly—priest and people together—perform these symbolic ritual actions, the salvation that they represent actually occurs.

Many say that this sacramental outlook makes Catholics uniquely Catholic. It's a way of being so shaped by these sacramental moments that we begin to see everything as sacrament or sign pointing to God's transforming presence. Thus, we develop a habit of sensitivity to God's presence everywhere, seeking out God's presence in the persons, places, objects and events that constitute our daily lives.



THE CHURCH IS THE SACRAMENT OF SALVATION

Salvation describes God's effort through Christ to bring us from alienation and estrangement by our sins into a right relationship with God and others. Thus we must recognize that the Church itself is a sacrament, the visible sign of God's saving work to bring about the inclusive unity to which all humanity is called. The Church attempts to live now the ideal right

relationships to God and to others that Jesus taught, lived and died for.

But a sacrament not only stands as a sign, but through God's power working within it, the sacrament actually brings about what it signifies. Thus because the Holy Spirit is working in and through the Church, it not only draws persons into union with God but it also transforms the world through them into right relationship with God and others.



The challenge of a sacrament is that for it to be effective, the sign must be recognized. Thus the Church, which is all of us and not just the hierarchy, must avoid everything that make it less oriented to God—e.g., materialism, racism, greed, abuse, power-politics, oppression, scandals, lies, etc.—or less inclusive—e.g., aligning itself too closely with any culture, class or political group and thus endangering its faithfulness to the message, truth and values of Jesus.

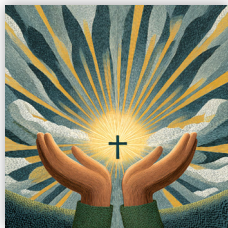
THE CHURCH'S SACRAMENTS ARE SIGNS OF GRACE

The Church has chosen seven sacraments related to the actions of Jesus in order to bring to consciousness what often remains unnoticed and unrecognized in our everyday lives—God's transforming presence. By

paying attention to their symbolic actions and their accompanying words, these sacramental rituals make us aware of what is always going on at a deeper level in our lives.

A sacramental symbol is a sign that holds together the hidden mystery of God's presence and the visible, tangible realities that we can experience. In the sacramental rituals, Christ's presence establishes, maintains and nurtures our communion with him and with others. Each sacrament has a special symbolic sign that helps us recognize God's presence that is transforming our lives.

As Christians, we believe that what happened to Christ is the pattern or model for what is also happening to us. Our challenge is to bring together the material and spiritual dimensions of our lives so that all the common experiences of our lives—birth, growth to maturity, friendship and love, creating communities, sickness and suffering, sin and reconciliation and finally death—may be related to the life, death and resurrection of Jesus. So we rely on the sacraments to help with this connection.



THE SACRAMENTS MAKE GOD LIVE IN US

The sacraments are the common work of God and the Christian assembly. They are outward signs that bring about what they signify—new life in Christ. The deepest reality of our existence is that we live always in relationship with God.

We exist only because God desires it, and eventually we will die when God wills. As Jesus showed, at our death God continues the relationship formed during life, granting new life without end. Yet this divine life begins here, what we call “grace” (from the Latin: *charis*, Greek: *gratia*, which describe a benefactor’s gift that is neither owed or merited but given freely to one in need in order to favor or honor the recipient and create a reciprocal relationship of loyalty and trust).

As ritual actions, the sacraments not only remind us of this divine life but actually produce it in us. Their effect is to bring God’s life as Jesus did for those who encountered him. Today Christ is present in the ritual words and actions of the sacraments, making real what their signs point to. As Pope St. Leo the Great taught: “Our redeemer’s presence has passed into the sacraments” (*Sermon 2, On the Ascension*).



THE THREE KINDS OF SACRAMENTS

There are three groups of sacraments that correspond with the way we begin, deepen, and strengthen relationships to create a community that follows God's guidelines for healthy and happy living.

The **sacraments of initiation** celebrate the beginning and deepening of our relationship with God's community. Baptism incorporates us into Jesus' covenant community, confirmation fills us with God's Spirit to witness and worship, and the eucharist nourishes our ongoing sharing in God's own life.

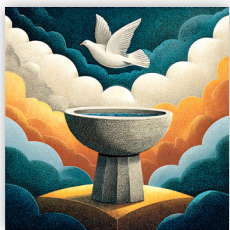
The **sacraments of healing** help us maintain strong relationships with God and the community. Reconciliation (also called *penance* or *confession*) overcomes the weakening or breakdown of the relationship by our sinfulness, and the anointing of the sick brings Christ's healing strength to those whose sickness isolates them from the community.

The **sacraments of vocation** or service remind us that we are called to create and maintain God's kingdom community here on earth. Like Jesus, spouses and priests build this community. Through their marriage commitments, spouses pledge to create a household that imitates the Trinity and the Church. By ordination the community affirms the priest as leader, who must sustain it through witness, worship, and ordering life toward God.

BAPTISM CELEBRATES A NEW LIFE IN CHRIST & HIS COMMUNITY

Baptism means to immerse or wash in water. It becomes a natural sign for expressing the transition from the old life of sinfulness and alienation in our relation with God to a new life with God in the Christian community.

In Judaism, there were many ceremonial washings either in preparation for celebrating a ritual or as part of



a cleansing rite. John the Baptist uses a baptism of repentance (Mk 1:4) to symbolize the desire to put off sinful ways and live as God wants. For the Christian community, baptism replaced Jewish circumcision for men as

the initiation ritual and sign of covenant belonging. This also meant that full covenant membership was now available to women as well as men.

Besides washing, Christian ritual immersion under water reminded the community that by this submersion they “died” with Christ and rose from the water to new life (Rom 6:8). Gradually other symbols were added as part of the ritual. Today, the baptized person is also anointed to share in Christ’s roles as “priest, prophet and king,” that is, in the ministry of worship, witness and ordering all life anew. He or she is also clothed in a white baptismal garment and receives a candle lit from the Easter candle.

CONFIRMATION CELEBRATES THE HOLY SPIRIT'S GIFTS FOR MISSION

Confirmation celebrates God's gift to each new member of the community of both essential spiritual gifts (faith, hope and love) and personal service gifts that are to be used for making the community better. This sacrament "confirms" those gifts and gives the person the strength to use them in service to others and to the community.

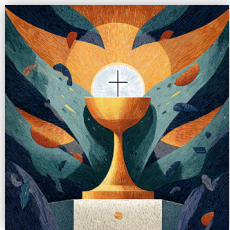
The sacramental sign is the laying on of hands. The hand (especially the right hand) was a natural symbol for power and strength. Thus the laying on of hands signified the transfer of power, strength or holiness. In Judaism, it was part of the rituals for sacrifice, for the consecration of priests and for conferring blessings.

This sacrament echoes in each Christian's life the Pentecost experience of the early disciples (see Acts 2) in which they received the Holy Spirit and were empowered to proclaim, witness and serve the Lord. St. Paul also describes how the power of the Holy Spirit was manifested by the members of the early Christian community in many different types of service gifts (charisms) that are used to respond to needs within the Christian community and make it function more smoothly (Rom 12:6-8; 1 Cor 12:4-11, 27-31).



EUCHARIST CELEBRATES OUR ONGOING COMMUNION WITH CHRIST

Paul asked his Corinthian community, “What do you possess that you have not received?” (1 Cor 4:7). So our whole lives are characterized by giving thanks (Greek, *eucharistia*) for God’s gifts. Jesus emphasized that God was our heavenly benefactor (Father), to whom we pray for our daily bread—both spiritual and material.



The sign of our “thanksgiving” or eucharist is to imitate Jesus’ action of taking, blessing, breaking and sharing bread and wine, which represent the essential nourishment for our lives. He transforms the bread and wine into his own body and blood so we can share his life as our sustenance. Just as plants and animals give up their lives to become our food, so Jesus gives his life to become our nourishment. He calls us to do the same.

The sacrament of the eucharist, then, is the ritual way that we nourish our relationship with God and deepen our communion with God and one another. Our communion grows through the ritual of receiving and giving, gathering to immerse ourselves in God’s Word, sharing a sacred meal and eagerly accepting the commission to carry on Christ’s work for the world.

RECONCILIATION CELEBRATES FORGIVENESS FOR RENEWED RELATIONSHIPS

Although in the past this sacrament was often identified with only one of its parts—penance, confession—the emphasis now is on the whole experience of reconciliation in which the repentant sinner encounters the forgiving love of Jesus. The sacramental sign is the ritual interaction of the penitent and the priest, who as mediator represents the Christian community and through whom Christ's healing power is shared.

The sacramental celebration of reconciliation parallels our human experience of an important relationship breaking down and being restored to harmony through forgiveness. We recognize our sin, are sorry, ask forgiveness and are granted forgiveness by the one we hurt. Then we try to renew the relationship with a changed attitude and behavior.

The sacramental ritual is a dialogue between the penitent and the priest. The penitent expresses sorrow and asks forgiveness; the priest, acting for Christ and representing the community, offers the prayer of forgiveness (absolution). Forgiveness is also expressed by the priest's hand extended in blessing, showing how reconciliation transforms the penitent's life into one that is more just, loving, and peaceful for all.



ANOINTING OF THE SICK CELEBRATES HEALING OF BODY, MIND & SPIRIT

God's presence in our world offers something new and unexpected. God no longer holds our sinfulness against us but offers us new possibilities for relating to God and others. The sign of this new order is found in Jesus' healing acts. The healing we celebrate is a sign of



the reordering of our society and of our world according to the vision and values of Jesus.

The anointing of the sick is “especially intended to strengthen those who are being tried by illness” (CCC, #1511). It “is not a sacrament for only those who are at the point of death. Hence, as soon as anyone of the faithful begins to be in danger of death from sickness or old age, the fitting time to receive this sacrament has certainly already arrived” (CCC, #1511).

The sacramental sign is the laying on of hands and the anointing of forehead and hands with blessed oil. Through this sacrament the sick person is united with the sufferings of Christ, encouraged to endure in a Christian manner the sufferings of illness or old age, receives the forgiveness of sins (if unable to receive the sacrament of reconciliation) and often the restoration of physical health.

HOLY ORDERS CELEBRATES SERVICE TO GOD'S PEOPLE

The sacrament of orders, that is, the deeper incorporation of the bishop, priest and deacon into the structured group of those who assume responsibility for leadership in the Church, is a special sacrament that deepens the basic baptismal call to holiness, to the mission of proclaiming the Good News and the building of Christ's kingdom community on earth.

The sign of this sacrament is the imposition of the bishop's hands on the head of the one to be ordained together with the prayer of consecration. Other symbols have gradually been introduced into the liturgical ritual such as a special anointing with chrism (the same oil that was used at baptism to make every Christian a participant in Christ's prophetic, priestly and royal roles), giving the book of the Gospels and the presentation of the chalice and paten.

This sacrament produces the special grace to configure one's life to the example of Christ so that the ordained person might serve the Church as a teacher, priest and pastor as Christ did. Those consecrated by this sacrament dedicate their lives to continue the ministry in service to God's people as Christ wanted.



MATRIMONY CELEBRATES SERVICE TO ONE ANOTHER IN CHRIST

Christianity did not invent marriage. Every culture devises some kind of rules regarding marriage. But the sacramental dimension of marriage changes this familiar social institution into a source of grace when it is associated with Jesus' desire to build a kingdom for



God. The couple's covenant of love mirrors God's covenant with the whole Christian community.

The sacramental sign is the mutual commitment of the spouses, witnessed by the priest and the whole community.

Their covenant pledge serves the whole community by making God's kingdom community a reality in their household as they care for one another and any children. Their vows or pledge of exclusive fidelity is usually accompanied by the exchange of rings and various blessings.

The effect of marriage is that the couple is strengthened in their covenant love to struggle against the attitudes and behaviors that can lead to the breakdown of loving relationships—discord, a spirit of domination, infidelity, jealousy and conflicts that can escalate into hatred and separation.

THE SACRAMENTALS REMIND US OF GOD'S PRESENCE

Encountering God's divine reality cannot be limited to the seven particular sacraments. Hence in the spaces between sacraments, in the "ordinary time" where we live out the gracious gift of God's presence, there are innumerable *sacramentals*—persons, places, objects and events whose reality reveals God's hidden presence.

God did not simply create the world but continues to be active in it. The Catholic stance has always been that since God is not simply contained in the world but revealed through it, we must be sensitive to the "signs" of the divine and seek God's presence and ongoing revelation in the particular circumstances of our daily lives. St. Augustine of Hippo claimed that "There is nothing that cannot become a sacramental encounter."

Though these sacramentals do not, like the seven sacraments, confer the grace they signify, nevertheless they can be powerful personal indicators and reminders of our ongoing daily relationship with God. They help us recognize God's presence in the persons and events that may at first seem insignificant and times that may appear trivial. But when we start to see all objects and experiences, both positive and negative, as sacramental, it makes daily life fuller, more graced.



Then nothing is ever just common; everything is filled with divine presence. As St. Thérèse of Lisieux so aptly put it in one of her last conversations, “Everything is a grace, everything is the direct effect of our Father’s love—difficulties, contradictions, humiliations, all the soul’s miseries, her burdens, her needs—everything, because through them, she learns humility, realizes her weakness. Everything is a grace because everything is God’s gift. Whatever be the character of life or its unexpected events—to the heart that loves, all is well.”

