

RCIA
The Sacraments: An Overview
Session 14

“Christ instituted the sacraments of the new law. There are seven: Baptism, Confirmation, the Eucharist, Penance, the Anointing of the Sick, Holy Orders and Matrimony. 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.”

(#1210 Catechism of the Catholic Church)



SACRAMENTS: An Overview

We experience God in the Sacraments of the Catholic Church. Catholicism is very sensual when it comes to the practice of faith. Although we have had some magnificent thinkers, Catholicism is not simply a thought process. It is a way of life involving all five senses. We do not simply think things; we see hear, smell, taste, and feel. One of the principal ways we do that is through *Sacraments!*

When the Church speaks of the sacraments it refers to seven specific moments in Catholic life that were established out of the example and ministry of Jesus as sign of God's presence: **Baptism, Confirmation, Eucharist, Reconciliation, Anointing of the Sick, Matrimony, and Holy Orders.**

These Sacraments are visible, concrete signs of God's loving relationship with us and God's desire to transform our lives. In these seven moments, the Church tries to capture the fact that all of life is sacramental, because all of life points to the glory of God and the unity of people.

How does this happen with Sacraments? The Church does this through *rituals* that allow us not only to think about the values that we hold as a community but also to *experience* those values in a sensual way. These rituals or church ceremonies are highly symbolic. Through an environment of objects that are seen, words and music we hear, incense and perfumed oil we smell, bread and wine we taste, and the human touch we feel, we are drawn even closer into the mystery of our god who communicates with us through all that we encounter in life – and in every way we encounter life. The church has always understood the nature of the human person. We are *EMBODIED SPIRITS*. We are spiritual beings learning how to be fully human in the image of Jesus. The important point is we experience through these bodies so we need external reinforcement for things not seen. Sacraments are ***visible signs (outward signs, instituted by Christ, to give grace)*** *Baltimore Catechism*. Sacraments are symbols of something sacred, rituals that touch our entire being and express faith in a concrete manner.

To understand more clearly, think about some meaningful signs, rituals and ceremonies in our everyday life. Something as simple as a red octagonal sign on the street corner means STOP. There is a very common symbol of money \$\$\$. Then there are rituals such as shaking hands, which in western civilization is a greeting but in eastern cultures is a pledge or even something else. Thus, some rituals or ceremonies have different meanings depending on participants. Many ceremonies have complex meanings depending on participants. Many ceremonies have complex meanings, i.e. a birth day party is celebrating a milestone of the present - completing another year, the family's happiness. Yet at the same time the party points to the memories of the past – the child's actual day of birth, the years of Love, care, challenges. Yet it also points to the hoped for future. All social rituals are meaningful when they have a present, past and future dimension being celebrated.

Our Christian rituals are the same. They point back to Christ (initiated by Christ), they look forward to salvation in Jesus, and they offer grace to live in hope today. Also as in social rituals meaning depends on the participants understanding and belief. For a Christian, our sacraments are meaningful to the extent that people know what they point to in the past, people celebrate what is real for them in the present, and affirm what they point to in the future. Christian sacraments would have almost no meaning for an atheist.

What do Sacraments Do? In *The Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy* the Second Vatican Council states: "The purpose of the sacraments is to sanctify people, to build up the Body of Christ, and finally, to give worship to God." "The whole liturgical life of the Church revolves around the Eucharistic sacrifice and the sacraments (1113). They give birth and increase, healing and mission to the Christian's life of faith. (1210).

When the Father sent Jesus, we experienced God's love in the most visible way; thus, we can call Jesus the '*primordial sacrament*'. *Jesus is God's Sacrament to the world*. Jesus' followers became a Church led by the Holy Spirit, and Vatican II reminded us that the Church too is a kind of sacrament (*Lumen Gentium, 1*) since the Church is a sign and instrument of the grace that unites us to God and to one another.

Within the context of the seven sacraments established by the church, we celebrate three key elements of our lives of faith: initiation, healing, and relating. The sacraments of initiation are Baptism, Confirmation, and Eucharist. Through these three sacraments a person is reborn in the image of the risen Christ (Baptism), confirmed in Christ's mission as a light to the nations (Confirmation), and joined more closely to the community through table fellowship in Jesus' name (Eucharist.) These are the sacraments received at the Easter Vigil for those entering the Catholic faith.

The sacraments of healing are Reconciliation and the Anointing of the Sick. In the sacrament of Reconciliation there are actually two healings that take place. First the person who has sinned is restored to wholeness as a child of God. But a healing also takes place between the person and the community that has been wounded by the person's sin. Sin is not just something that affects an individual. It also makes us less than the community Jesus wants us to be.

When we experience sickness, we know how debilitating it can be. The longer the sickness lasts, the more it seems to rob us of our spirit. In those times, the church celebrates the sacrament of the Anointing of the Sick so that we can be strengthened in our faith and reminded of the community of believers that is praying with us and for us. This sacrament keeps us from being alone in our sickness.

The sacraments of relating are Holy Orders and Matrimony. These two sacraments indicate the way God is present to us: as head and shepherd of the community (Holy Orders) and as unconditional, selfless love (Matrimony). As head and shepherd, Jesus calls us together as one. So, too do bishops, priests, and deacons call the community together around the lord's table and ensure we

stay together through their ministry of leadership and service. Through the sacrament of Matrimony, a man and a woman become a sign to the whole community of the love God has for us.

Why Are There Seven Sacraments? In a broader sense, we believe that all of life is sacramental, because all of life holds religious meaning for us. But, as theologian Monika Hellwig has pointed out, "Given the confusion of the world of human experience in a history distorted by consequences of sin, we do not spontaneously see and experience everything in relationship to God." Therefore, the church provides us with seven "helps."

The number of sacraments was not always considered to be seven. The early church applied the word sacrament to any event that mediated the presence of God for people, and Saint Augustine called a sacrament simply a "sign of a sacred thing." The idea of connecting the sacramental action with an official rite of the church did not come into prominence until after the 12th century, as the church – and European society as a whole – began to emerge from what was called the Dark Ages. There came to be a distinction between sacraments, which were celebrated according to the official rites of the church, and sacramentals, which were ordinary actions anyone could perform to remind them of God's grace in their lives.

At the Council of Trent (1545 – 1563), the number of sacraments was firmly fixed at seven, a number the theologian Peter Lombard had first proposed in the 12th century but that had continued to be debated by theologians up until the Council of Trent. While not officially a reason for there being seven sacraments, it should also be noted that the number seven is used in the Judeo-Christian tradition to signify completeness or fullness. Thus, the fullness of God's life within us is celebrated in the seven sacraments of the church.