

## Sacraments

Whether we receive the Sacraments regularly with great devotion, receive them more out of habit than anything else, have long since stopped receiving them, or have recently begun to question their importance, the Sacraments provide a seemingly unique Catholic experience that in many ways marks our identity as Catholics. Most have vivid memories, for better or for worse, of First Communions, Baptisms, Confirmation classes and family tensions on full display at weddings. Perhaps some may still even have the Rosary that they were given at First Communion or the Bible that they received at Confirmation. Whether or not you have actually used either of them since, it may be helpful to consider again why the Church makes such a big deal about the Sacraments.

From our discussion of Jesus' Paschal Mystery, we recall that God has made it possible for us to participate in the events which accomplished our Salvation by participating in the Sacraments, especially at Mass. In fact, it is through the Sacraments that the Church "dispenses the Mysteries," or applies the fruit of our Lord's saving work to us, granting us a share in the very life of God, Sanctifying Grace. But how do the Sacraments work? How do the fruits of the Paschal Mystery enter our souls? God's plan for sharing His divine life with us through a system of signs and symbols is known as the "Sacramental Economy." And although this economy is not related to supply and demand, gross national product, or a healthy return on investment, it does have to do with the distribution of something valuable: divine life, or Grace. And while the Sacramental Economy is concerned with our well-being in this world, it is oriented more importantly to our well-being in eternity. As they say, it has a retirement plan that is "out of this world." In order to lead us to the state of definitive happiness, which is Heaven, God has given us the Sacraments as the tools that we need to build our retirement portfolio.

The term "sacrament" comes from the Latin *sacrare*, meaning "to set aside as holy." We think of the chalice that Father uses at Mass, a very nice goblet that has been "set aside" for a holy purpose. In a similar way, God desires to "set us aside" for the holy plans that He has for our lives, and to "set us aside" for Himself for eternity in Heaven. The Sacraments "dispense" the divine life, or Sanctifying Grace, that makes it possible for us to overcome sin in our lives and become holy, to be used by Him to serve our brothers and sisters, to fight evil when we encounter it, and to prepare ourselves for an eternal destiny.

There are seven Sacraments, which the Church defines as "efficacious signs of grace, instituted by Christ, and entrusted to the Church, by which divine life is dispensed to

us.” (CCC 1131) The Sacraments are “efficacious” signs because they are not just symbols of God’s mercy, but rather, they actually communicate the grace that they signify. A stop sign is not an efficacious sign because, though it tells you to stop, it does not jump into the street to make you stop if you choose to ignore it. But in Baptism, water is an efficacious sign because it not only symbolizes the washing away of Original Sin, but actually “pours” divine life into the soul. Just as a child receives natural life from her parents, and resembles them in some way as a result, so too, and even more significantly, the child receives God’s life in Baptism making her a child of God in a way that is more real and lasting than the life she receives from her mother and father. The disciples of the early Church would kneel in the presence of a newly baptized child in recognition of the divine life that had just been efficaciously “poured in.”

The Grace that the Sacraments deliver is invisible and cannot be perceived through the senses, and the skeptics among us (and sometimes the skeptic in us) ask if this arrangement is really necessary. But God Himself made His spiritual presence available to us physically when, at the Incarnation, He became a man. In the same way, the Sacraments make the realities of our Faith present. God did not intend for us to be like the spectators at a baseball game who watch from the stands, but rather the players on the field who play on His team. We not only remember Christ’s Paschal Mystery, but are invited to join Him in it. St. Paul makes this clear in his own reference to the Sacraments, in which “we were buried therefore with [Christ] by baptism into death, so that as Christ as raised from the dead... we too might walk in newness of life” (Rom 6:4).

The Church places such importance on the Sacraments because is they were instituted by Christ. At the Last Supper, after giving the Apostles His body to eat and His blood to drink, He told them to “Do this.” And so we do, every time we celebrate the Mass. The Sacrament of Reconciliation was given by Jesus gave to His Apostles, “Whose sins you forgive are forgiven them, and whose sins you retain are retained.” (John 20:23) It is not unreasonable to expect that He intended them to exercise that power just as he did, to free His people from the bondage of sin, and restore them to newness of life. Each of the Sacraments finds its basis in the biblical accounts of Jesus’ ministry, and provides us with a direct and physical connection to Him.

At the same time, Christ’s institution of the Sacraments was not a completely new idea. St. Augustine speaks of the New Testament being “hidden” in the Old and the Old being manifest in the New. Rituals in the Old Testament anticipated the Sacraments of the New Covenant. For example, the Jewish celebration of the Passover, which included the killing and eating of an unblemished lamb, prefigured

the celebration of the Eucharist, where we receive the body and blood of the “Lamb of God.” At Passover, the Israelites recalled God’s saving work, freeing them from the bonds of slavery to the Egyptians. Similarly, in the celebration of the Eucharist, we recall Christ’s saving work, which freed us from the bonds of sin and death.

When administering the Sacrament, the priest is used by Jesus to bless His people. We say that the priest acts “in the person of Christ.” When he says the prayer of consecration at Mass, or absolves the sinner in the confessional, it is Christ Himself who confects the Eucharist and absolves our sins. This is why the priest prays, “I absolve you...” and not “God absolves you...” It is in this way that we see that the Sacraments which are “instituted by Christ,” are also “entrusted to the Church.”

Again, it was the Lord Himself, who, in His last words before ascending to the Father, commanded His Apostles to “Go make disciples... baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit...” (Matthew 28:16-20) Recognizing that the Lord may have saved something rather important for this moment, the Church sees in this “Great Commission” the outline of the fundamental work that the Apostles and their successors were to perform, the work of making disciples “of all nations” through teaching and the exercise of God’s power and presence through the Sacraments which He established.

The Sacraments are both “by the Church” and “for the Church.” They are “by” her in that she reveals Christ’s work, through the power of the Holy Spirit, continually sanctifying the Church. Saint Augustine describes that they are “for” her in that “the Sacraments make the Church.” They both reveal and bring about our communion with God in this world so that we may be united with Him eternally in Heaven. Let us consider how our own lives have been impacted by God through the Sacraments, and perhaps make a return to them if we have been away. Our definition adds one more very important point. Christ established the Sacraments to be the means “by which divine life is dispensed to us.” It is perhaps easy to see how this “divine life” is a necessary pre-requisite for Heaven, but how does it help us now? We have seen how God’s life is a life of love, and in many ways our journey to heaven is a journey of learning to love like God loves. The crucifix gives us some insight into the depth of that love, and yet those of us who aspire for Heaven, often find the imitation of the Master’s love more than a little challenging. The divine life dispensed by the Sacraments provides the power we need to meet that challenge... and overcome it. The Lord challenged us to love our enemies and to pray for those who persecute us... “that you may be children of your Father in Heaven.” (Matthew 5:45). Children of the Father receive His divine life, and demonstrate their family heritage by their love. The Sacraments are His plan to give us the power we need to love in a heroic way.

The seven Sacraments are a necessary part of the growth of our spiritual life, and God arranged the Sacraments to reflect the stages of growth in our natural life so that we could better understand that journey. Our life begins when we are conceived and born into the world. Similarly, our spiritual life begins when we are born into God's life and family through Baptism. We are nourished and strengthened by food as we grow and mature, and God provides "our daily bread" in the Eucharist to nourish and strengthen our spiritual life. Our life changes in a dramatic way when we graduate from school, begin our first job, or complete an apprenticeship leading to a career. By Confirmation we are empowered to take on the family business of the Church in witnessing to others the life of discipleship and fighting evil when we encounter it. Just as our physical bodies are susceptible to sickness and injury, and sometimes require the attention of a doctor or surgeon, our spiritual healing and restoration is performed by the Divine Physician in the Sacrament of Reconciliation. The Sacrament of Matrimony has a direct connection to Marriage, making it possible for a couple to love one another as Christ loved us, and so be a sign of God's love to the world. It also gives them the tools they need to raise children to be disciples and so increase God's Kingdom. Holy Orders equips men to be spiritual fathers like their heavenly Father, and to serve God's children entrusted to their care.

Finally the Sacrament of the Anointing of the Sick gives us the strength that we need to unite our sufferings to Christ, and receive spiritual, and sometimes even physical healing as well. When the Eucharist is offered to the person close to death it is called "Viaticum" which means "with you on the way." It is as if the Church wants the last thing that you taste on this earth to be the one with whom you will spend eternity. If you have not been allowing the Sacraments to nourish your life as much as you could, it may be time to meet Christ in them, allowing Him to heal and strengthen you with Grace as you meet the challenges of each day, and use your talents to become the person He's created you to be.