

THE SACRAMENTS IN GENERAL.

We in the Catholic Church give a great deal of emphasis to the sacraments and understand and celebrate them in a way unique among most other Christian communities. We can look at the sacraments from several points of view.

First of all, the sacraments are signs which constitute the great “ritual acts” of our Christian life. In response to our Lord Jesus Christ, we use these ritual acts to celebrate important human events -- birth, entering adulthood, community life, marriage, forgiveness, death and the selection of those who serve our community.

We have named these ritual acts: Baptism, Confirmation, Eucharist, Matrimony, Penance/Reconciliation, Anointing of the Sick and Holy Orders. In celebrating these sacraments we attempt to see these important human events “in depth”, that is, we see them within the context of our relationship with God - from birth to death we live in the presence of God, which we experience and celebrate in a special way in the sacraments. In the celebration of the sacraments we are able to see or experience the sacred quality of special events in our secular world and thus give new meaning to the everyday experiences of our lives.

Secondly, we also believe that Jesus becomes personally present to us in several powerful ways in the sacraments. St. Paul describes the Church as the “Body of Christ”, thus when members of the Church gather together Christ is present in them. Jesus is also present to us as we read the Word - the Scripture. And when the celebrant of the sacraments explains the Word in a sermon, this is another way Jesus becomes present to us. Finally, the material signs of sacraments - water, oil, bread, wine - are taken up, given new meaning and used as vehicles of the real, personal presence of Jesus.

Thirdly, we believe that in celebrating the sacraments we can experience a “moment of salvation”. We understand salvation as the process, initiated by God, of healing our alienation from self, others, the world and God, which we experience as the effects of sin. The Genesis accounts teach us that God created us to live in peace -- right relationships established by love. This “peace” (shalom) has been destroyed by sin, but God promises to save us from ourselves, to save us from sin and reestablish peace with ourselves, others, the world and God.

It will be our purpose here to show how each sacrament can be a “moment of salvation”, a moment where the grace of God can help restore us to peace, if we accept His grace with a living faith. Because of the unique presence of Our Lord in each sacrament, when we celebrate the sacraments in faith, then we can experience the healing power of God. Thus the gift (grace) that is offered us by the presence of Jesus, is a power given us that enables us to love ourselves, others, the world and God more fully.

We will try to show in the following classes how each sacrament has a unique power to be a “moment of salvation” for us.

Ritual Acts

The words “ritual acts” have somewhat of a strange sound to our modern ears. We seldom use these terms in ordinary life. However, our ordinary lives are actually full of ritual acts. On the personal level we use ritual acts to express our inner feelings, e.g. a handshake, a salute, a kiss, a gift, a thumbs up or thumbs down, giving a party, and even the way we dress. As a society we stand and sing the national anthem before sporting events, celebrate the fourth of July, have Memorial Day parades, ritually inaugurate our presidents and gather at funerals to bury our dead. Ritual acts are a powerful way of communicating our feelings and beliefs.

The ritual acts which we call sacraments are in some ways like our ordinary rituals. They are both individual and communal. They are also signs of our belief, in this case, our belief in the presence of the Risen Lord. Like many of our ordinary rituals they involve more than one person. However, unlike any of our ordinary rituals, in the sacraments Our Lord is present for us. In the sacraments there is always this dual activity - first, God’s call or word addressed to our freedom and secondly, our free response to that call. For example, the Lord at the Last Supper asked His disciples to “do this in memory of me” and in response to this we gather together on Sundays to celebrate the Mass. Both the divine and the human activity are expressed in the ritual signs which constitute each sacrament. Using the analogy of a handshake, perhaps we can say that God offers His hand and we accept it. Without both “hands” freely involved there is no exchange of friendship, there is no moment of grace, no personal exchange.

Since the sacraments operate, not magically, but on a personal level, our free response in faith is absolutely necessary for the power of Our Lord to be effective and thus become a saving power in our lives. Magic is a great temptation for us. Magic promises us an escape from our real lives. Magic offers an escape from our human condition. We do not have to be personally involved in the solution of our problems. Think of diet pills as modern magic.

An old familiar Catholic definition of sacrament as “an outward sign, instituted by Christ, to give grace”, tended to make “grace” seem like a supernatural thing or substance somehow effective without being experienced, rather than a personal meeting with the Lord through which we might be transformed. We sometimes envisioned that we participated in the sacraments to “get grace” rather than to meet someone. We now better understand that grace (meaning gift) is actually the gift of the presence of the Lord communicated through the signs used in the ritual acts we call sacraments. Just as we communicate our personal inner feelings of friendship and love to others through a handshake, a kiss or an invitation to supper, so too Jesus uses the signs of the sacraments to communicate His powerful, life transforming love to us. This is the gift, the grace -- the personal presence of our Savior.

And so we believe that the powerful presence of Our Lord is always there in the sacraments, however our personal response in faith may or may not take place. In other words, if we sleep through Mass and do not receive communion, the powerful gift (grace)

of Our Lord's healing presence cannot be effective for us. Sacraments are not magic. We do not control God through simply performing ritual acts. We must respond personally.

The Origin of the Word Sacrament

The word *sacramentum* (sacrament in English) originated in the Latin language. In the pre-Christian era of the Roman Empire it was used to designate an oath of allegiance made by soldiers to their commander and the gods of Rome. Sometimes this oath was accompanied by branding the new recruit on the arm with the sign of the general he was to serve. This oath was considered a religious ceremony and was often conducted in a sacred place, e.g. a temple.

This term was borrowed by Christians in the 2nd century A.D. and first used to explain that Baptism was something like a *sacramentum*, administered to new army recruits. That is, it was a ritual in which, like new recruits, Christian converts pledged themselves to enter into a new way of life in the service of their God and they were signed (branded) with the waters of baptism.

Another word, the Greek *mysterion* was translated into Latin in the 3rd century by two terms: mystery and sacrament. The word was used to indicate that the sacraments were the outward signs of a hidden reality (the presence of Our Lord). This notion of "hiddenness" was taken from St. Paul's use of the word *mystery* to speak of the hidden plan of God's salvation kept "secret for long ages", the "mystery of his will", "a plan for the fullness of time" (Rom. 16:25, Eph 1:9-10)

Later when the Roman Empire became Christian, the original Roman meaning of *sacramentum* disappeared and the word was expanded to describe other Christian ritual acts. By the time of St. Augustine in the 5th century A.D., almost any sacred symbol or ritual was referred to as a *sacramentum*. These included such things as blessings, feast days and holy objects. St. Augustine defined *sacramentum* as "a sign of a sacred reality." In fact, he suggested that almost anything in the world could be considered a *sacramentum*, because all the world was created by God and therefore all created things could reflect or be a sign of their Maker.

Using this broad definition of St. Augustine one could say that, in a way, all religions have sacraments in that they use sacred symbols - places, things, rituals, seasons - that can put them in touch with the "divine or mysterious" which they believe is real, but beyond everyday human experience. Here too sacraments expresses a person's faith - what is believed about the "divine" within their particular religion. However, for our purposes, we are concerned with the Christian sacraments or more specifically the sacraments as understood in the Roman Catholic tradition.

In later Christian developments the word sacrament became more restricted and by the 12th century it was applied only to those seven sacraments which are now known to Roman Catholics as the seven sacraments. After the Reformation certain Protestant

churches still used the word sacrament, but applied it to fewer ritual acts than the seven of the Roman Church.

The Human Side of Sacraments - Outward Signs of an Internal Faith

Perhaps from the human side we could liken the sacraments to a ritual dance, the dance of the Christian life. Like a dance that symbolically communicates a message, so the sacraments are the ritual acting out, in body and mind, of our response in faith to the Word of God addressed to our lives. However, without the prior initiative of God, our actions would never come about. We respond to what God has done for us in the person of Jesus, that is why we hold that, in at least implicit way, all the sacraments flow from the Church's experience of Jesus.

While Jesus did not leave us a blueprint containing the specific rituals which now embody our sacraments, the sacraments flow from the teachings and the life of Jesus. For example, the Eucharist (Mass) contains some of the words and actions of Jesus at the Last Supper. From the beginning, in response to the experience of the risen Lord, the early Church baptized new converts, anointed the sick and appointed leaders of various kinds for service to the community. As to how the exact form of the early sacramental rituals originated, we simply do not know. What we do know is that from the beginnings of the Church, Christians acted out their faith in ritual forms. These specific ritual forms have changed and developed, but they have been preserved as important ways in which the presence and power of the Risen Lord comes to us in the ordinary and extraordinary moments of our lives.

It is of vital importance to understand that, while we indeed act out our faith in ritual form in celebrating the sacraments, this ritual response is hollow if it not a true expression of a living faith, which finds expression in the way we conduct our daily lives. The kiss that Judas gave Jesus was outwardly an accepted sign of friendship, however, it was not in this case a sign of the true inner self, but rather just the opposite. The warning of the prophet Amos is valid today:

I hate, I despise your feasts, and I take no delight in your solemn assemblies.

Even though you offer me your burnt offerings and cereal offerings, I will not accept them, and the peace offering of your fatted beasts I will not look upon.

Take away from me the noise of your songs; to the melody of your harps I will not listen,

But let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an everflowing stream. (Amos 5:21-24)

So in the Catholic tradition faith, a living faith, must be present for the sacraments to be effective. Again, we are not dealing with magic. We must believe that the presence of Our Lord is truly operating in the sacraments for them to be effective for us. By "effective for us" we mean that in some degree the sacraments have the power to change

or enrich our lives. This is not to say that it is our faith that makes the sacraments -- no, the power of the sacraments to change our lives comes only from the presence and power of Our Lord alone-- but without our response in faith the power of Our Lord cannot be effective for us.

A human example -- take an instance where we are very ill. A doctor examines us and his diagnosis is that we have a rare blood disease. He tells us that if we take a certain medicine, which he prescribes for us, we can be cured. Now if we do not have faith in the doctor -- his diagnosis and/or his prescription -- and therefore do not heed his advice, then the power that the doctor has for us cannot change or heal us. He is offering us the gift of life, but because we do not believe in him, his power to heal us cannot be effective. We must make a personal response of faith in the powers of the doctor. The power to heal is there regardless of our belief -- as the power of God is truly present in the sacraments -- but we must respond in personal faith to allow that power to come into our lives.

In this example, as in the sacraments, we are dealing on the level of personal relationships. One offers and the other must respond. Like any loving relationship, love may be offered, but another must respond to let that love enter into their lives. This was one of the valid objections of Martin Luther -- that mere "works" of religion have no value unless they express a living faith. Sacraments involve personal relationships, not magic rituals.

Sacraments - Special Signs

We have been describing the sacraments as signs, but in the Catholic tradition they are unique kinds of signs. Ordinary signs only point toward what they signify. A tear only points toward the sorrow or joy in a person's heart, the falling leaves are not the Fall, but only announce its coming. A sacrament, on the other hand, brings about simultaneously in itself what it signifies. For example, we call Christ the original or primordial sacrament. He not only pointed toward God or told us about God, but he is the Second Person Himself, present to us under the sign or sacrament of His humanity. The sacraments do not simply proclaim or point toward the activity of God in our lives, they are the signs through which the Spirit of God here and now becomes powerfully present bringing about salvation (unity-peace) in our lives.

From the point of view of the individual believer, these signs enable us to express our inner self and affirm our deepest beliefs about human life. All human communication is through signs, whether it be by word, gesture, gifts or in other ways. Furthermore, throughout history mankind has ritually celebrated the most significant events in life. Birth, coming of age, marriage, acceptance of positions of authority, festive eating and drinking and death are ritually celebrated to communicate the depth of their meaning. The great mysteries of life are acted out so that those who participate may experience life more deeply. The beliefs that are expressed in these celebrations spring from a faith molded by the individual's or community's experience of God (revelation).

In the sacraments, through the signs employed within the ritual acts, Jesus communicates Himself -- becomes present -- to us and in this way gives us a share in His life. In the same ritual act we who are believers express our inner response and openness to celebrate and receive the gift (grace) of life that is offered. Jesus came to reveal to us the ultimate meaning of human life and to enable us to overcome sin and come to the fullness of that life by sharing in His own. The Catholic tradition teaches that the sacraments provide a most profound experience of this saving activity of Jesus. While it is true that God is present to all human life everywhere and at all times, we believe that God's definitive revelation is in Jesus and this same Jesus comes to us explicitly and powerfully in the sacraments: Baptism, Confirmation, Penance, the Eucharist, Holy Orders, Matrimony and the Sacrament of the Sick.

We have just noted that God is present to all human life and that St. Augustine rightly observed that almost anything -- a flower, a starry sky, the birth of a child, a moment of silent meditation -- can be a "sacramental" moment. However, while it is true that we may choose to approach God in our own way, the Catholic tradition stresses that Our Lord has chosen the sacraments as His most powerful way of approaching us in this community of believers which we call the Church. Certainly the redeeming presence of Jesus is not confined to the sacraments or even the Church, but we believe His presence is most effectively communicated in the sacraments.

For example, we may decide to contact our mother by a telephone call. This may be a good contact, a personal contact and one where many good things are shared. But if our mother invites us to come to supper at her home, the meeting and communication there has greater possibilities for being more rich and rewarding than a telephone call. Catholics believe that Jesus has invited us to supper.

Sacramental Rituals in General

In the following lessons we will discuss each of the seven sacraments in detail. However, it may be helpful to examine some brief examples of how significant human events have been celebrated in the Old Testament and other cultures and how various symbols were used and understood.

Rituals of Initiation -- Judaism used circumcision as a sign of male entrance into a people. Desert people often sprinkled their infants with water as a welcome sign into the community. Initiation rites in college fraternities and sororities and secret handshakes are signs of entrance into a certain community of fellowship.

Often there are elaborate tribal rites of instruction and testing to initiate young males into adult tribal life. Young Hindus begin their four stages of life with a presentation of a sacred cord and a long period of religious instruction. Water was often employed as a sign of and a celebration of new life.

In all these rites symbols are explained and those initiated express their willingness to be transformed by the instructions given and the power of the symbols used. Something is

offered -- membership, wisdom -- and something is accepted -- new social commitments and perhaps a new identity.

Rituals of Meals -- There is a scene in Lawrence of Arabia where he is invited to a meal with a tribal leader. It is made clear that if invited to a meal, the person invited is sharing the very life of the one who invites and the host becomes protector of the life of the guest. The Japanese tea ceremony also is meant to achieve peaceful communion between guest and host. Ritual meals are often a sharing and strengthening of family life -- think of Thanksgiving and Christmas dinner.

Ritual Sacrifices -- While not part of our modern experience, ritual sacrifices were important rituals employed by ancient Israelites to express their faith in God. They offered the first born of their flocks and the first fruits of their harvests as a sign of their dependence on God. Blood was a sign of life and life was from God. It was used to protect from evil spirits (smeared on tent posts) and as a sign of social unity (sprinkled on the people by Moses at Mt. Sinai.)

Atonement Rituals -- Guilt made people realize that they were not "at-one" with God. So various rituals of atonement -- at-one-ment -- were celebrated to restore this unity. Various rituals involving water, blood and prayers were employed to restore the unity with God which sin or ritual impurity had destroyed. Israelites celebrated the Day of Atonement. Among other elaborate ritual sacrifices a scapegoat was selected and the high priest laid both hands on his head and make a solemn confession of the sins of the nation. The scapegoat was then driven out of their midst into the desert as a ritual expression of an inward change of heart -- turning from sin and a recommitment to the covenant.

Marriage Rituals -- Marriage rituals attempt to express the cultural meaning of marriage. Often these rituals included a time of preparation -- betrothment, e.g. Joseph and Mary --; rituals of separation from an old life -- pretended abduction of the bride, giving away childhood possessions; and finally a marriage ritual with prayers, promises, giving away the bride, a ceremonial meal and sexual intercourse.

Ordination Rituals -- A number of religions have rituals for entrance into religious life which include giving of a new name, new clothes, and anointing or laying on of hands. There are also rituals of ordination of certain persons to service for the community -- kings, presidents, priests. These rituals may also include a new name or title, a crowning ceremony, new clothing, taking of oaths, anointing, laying on of hands, pledges of obedience from subordinates and various other signs of office. These rituals aim to set the person apart and indicate their leadership status in the community.

Funeral Rituals -- Funeral rituals are common and varied among all cultures. These rituals attempt to express the beliefs of the community concerning death and prepare the survivors for a life of separation from the deceased. From the pyramids which preserved the bodies of the dead to the cremation pyres of the Hindus, rituals not only express

beliefs about life after death, but also attempt to help the deceased realize their destiny beyond death.

Understanding the Signs of the Sacraments

The obvious purpose of signs is to communicate. They may do so verbally (language) or non-verbally (a handshake, a meal). However, if the symbols cannot be understood by one of the parties, there can be no effective communication. For example, a radio announcer may broadcast some life giving information -- a tornado is approaching! However, if he does so using the Russian language and nobody who hears him understands Russian, no life-giving communication can take place.

In like manner, if we do not have an understanding of the symbols used in the sacraments our participation in them will be restricted. For example, if we do not understand that in the time of Jesus blood represented life, not death, then we may have a fundamental misunderstanding of the Eucharist. If we fail to understand the symbolism of water, oil, candles, and clothing in the baptismal ritual, we cannot enter fully into the sacrament.

In the lessons that follow we will make an effort to explain all the symbols used within the various sacramental rituals so that they can effectively communicate the presence of the Risen Lord.

Sacramentals

We noted earlier that in time of St. Augustine (5th century) the word sacrament had a very broad meaning. For Augustine a sacrament was “a sign of a sacred reality” and he believed that almost any created thing could serve as a sacrament, because God had created all things and so all created things could in some way reflect their Creator. Also included as sacraments were blessings, feast days, prayers, blessed ashes, holy water, vows and a vast variety of holy objects -- crucifixes, medals, statues, etc..

In the 12th century, when the word sacrament had been narrowed down to the seven sacraments, these other items were referred to as “sacramentals”. One explanation of the difference between sacraments and sacramentals was the suggestion that sacraments flow directly from Jesus, but sacramentals are sacred signs instituted by the Church and intended to make people more disposed to receive the sacraments (statues of Our Lord) and to sanctify various occasions in life (the blessing of a new home, grace before meals, stations of the cross).

The blessings of persons, meals, sacred objects and places are some of the more important sacramentals. The blessing of persons includes blessings for the congregation at the end of the Eucharist, the blessing of mass servers, readers, ministers to the sick and those who teach religion in the parishes. Blessings are also important to set aside certain objects such as holy water, ashes for Ash Wednesday, statues, bells, churches, and vestments. Other forms of popular piety are also considered sacramentals. These include the rosary, pilgrimages, religious dances, medals, etc.

While sacramentals play a part in the religious life of Catholics, they can never replace or interfere with the sacraments. They have their value in leading people into the public liturgy of the Church which by its very nature is far superior to any sacramental.

For Catholics, sacraments are at the heart of the public life of the Church (the liturgy), *but they are not an end in themselves*. The sacraments are gifts to us from the Lord, meant to transform our lives in the imitation of Him. Unless our participation in the sacraments transforms us into followers of Jesus, unless we become people who love ourselves, our families, the poor, our world and even our enemies, then for us the sacraments have become the hollow rituals of which the Prophet Amos spoke.

Jesus told us that when the Son of Man comes in his glory to determine who enters into the Kingdom of God, this determination it will not be based on the number of Masses we have attended or the number of times we read the Scriptures or the number of prayers we have said, but whether we have attended to those who are hungry, thirsty, strangers, naked, sick, or in prison -- "Truly, I say to you, as you did it to one of the least of my brethren, you did it to me" (Matthew 25:31-46).