

# THE SEVEN LITURGICAL SACRAMENTS OF THE CHURCH: *God's saving work visibly continued*

*(Catechism of the Catholic Church 1210 -1690)*

## **1. The Sacraments: God's *human* communication with man**

God was, is and always will be present among his people. We take that on faith. But faith is not a blind denial of reason. God does not expect us to believe the unbelievable: he reveals to those who have eyes to see, that there is reason and sense behind his actions. This shouldn't surprise us: after all, he made us with the capacity for thought and reason, for logic and argument - and it is his desire that we should employ all of the faculties he has empowered us with to search for him, to find him and to worship him. So, even in the realm of faith, there is a proper and even essential place for common sense, logic and reason. In fact, if we did not use our ability to think and perceive, we would be believing imperfectly as human beings, because that thinking capacity is what makes our faith so uniquely human. We worship God with our whole person – not just the heart and the ability to feel but also with the mind and the ability to think and with the body and our whole physical material existence.

The seven liturgical sacraments of the Catholic Church are examples of common sense *par excellence*. This is not to deny their divine origin in any way, nor to play down the power of the sacraments through which the power of the Most High breaks visibly into our world - it is simply to state that in the sacraments, God completes his divine work in a perfectly human way - reasonable, logical & practical. The means he uses to communicate with us are unquestionably human, and make absolute sense to us. But, the actual job he is accomplishing through the sacraments is literally out of this world because it is supernatural and in the realm of grace - and here we can no longer rely on reason and logic to help us.

- In summary, what he does to us in the sacraments is beyond adequate explanation, because we are yet to describe adequately what it means to share

the life of God. But how he does it (in the sacraments), is brilliantly simple and unquestionably familiar to us.

## 2. Natural objects changed into vehicles for supernatural gifts

Put simply, the sacraments are natural things we use every day and which already have a meaning for us (like water - for washing and for drinking, or oil - for cooking and lubricating) which God takes, alters in a real & spiritual way and then gives back to us so that when we receive them, we receive a supernatural gift in a recognisable, physical and familiar way.

Many non-Catholics see this as almost idolatry: God is spiritual and has no need to use physical things, so if we worship him through material objects, like the host at Mass, we are giving to physical things what we should only give to God.

The Church would partly agree with this - non-Catholics are right to say that God has no need to use physical things because he is perfectly capable of communicating through the Holy Spirit. In the same way, we are able to communicate without recourse to physical objects: we usually use words.

BUT, we make a grave mistake if we assume that God operates only on the level of what he needs to do: that is not the language of love. Lovers don't just give each other that which is necessary: the delight of the lover is to give that which is, in a way, superfluous – no one needs to receive a bunch of flowers to realise that they are loved ... but it can really help! In the same way, God communicates with us through physical things not because *he* has to, & is obliged to, but because it helps - *we* need it. Human beings are not generally convinced by words alone: words are cheap. We like to *see* them as well, and if possible, *touch* them. You only have to watch the way film stars, pop stars, members of the Royal family etc. are mobbed by the public to realise how important it is to see and touch the things that mean so much to us. No wonder Presidents and Popes go on their walkabouts! At heart, we are an *incarnational* people: we believe that our God took flesh, became a part of his own creation, received a body at a particular time and in a particular place. In other words, Christianity is not a purely spiritual matter, concerned only with the spiritual, with abstract thoughts and the mind – instead it is down to earth, solid, rooted in this material world. For this reason, we believe that particular places, buildings, material objects, bodies can be set aside and dedicated specifically for the worship of God. It is not GOD who needs to be limited to the physical and visible - it is you and I who need this physical element, because we ourselves communicate both on the conceptual, invisible level AND on the material, touching, physical level. It is because *we* are limited by time and place, by having physical bodies that are not omnipresent etc, that we need to worship God in a way that takes this into consideration – physical, visible, material. God can, of course, be with us without any need for visible objects and sometimes we are supremely aware of this. However, we don't find it easy to live in a purely spiritualised relationship – we draw enormous reassurance from being able to see and touch, to feel, hear and taste. God, in his determination to relate to us in a

human way, desires to communicate his love and his life through these intensely tangible forms. Would it not be strange if he simply ignored our physical reality and chose to relate to us purely in the realm of the mind, heart or spirit?

God is aware of this need of ours, so he freely chooses to communicate with us in this manner as well as through words and the inner inspiration of the Holy Spirit. And if we need any further evidence of God's willingness to work this way, just look through the Sacred Scriptures and count the times God speaks to his people through a physical, visible medium.

- He *could* have called Moses to lead the people of Israel out of Egypt just by inspiring this idea in Moses heart - but he doesn't: he appears visibly & speaks audibly to him through the burning bush.
- God leads his people through the desert in a visible way - a pillar of cloud by day & a pillar of fire by night goes ahead of the people.
- How does he teach & lead his people but through human agents – the prophets & kings who speak God's words & who are a visible, physical guarantee of God's invisible presence among them?

The seven liturgical sacraments of the Church are simply a development of this deeply Scriptural concept of God leading us through the medium of visible things and people. We should be surprised if God chose to lead us in any other way: *that* would be un-Scriptural!

### 3. The Sacramental Ladder

Last time we looked at Jesus Christ as THE Sacrament, the original and perfect way that the Father reveals himself and makes himself accessible to mankind. He perfectly makes present the invisible Father. This is very much the theology of St. John's Gospel: "*Anyone who has seen me has seen the Father*" (Jn. 14:9). When Christ spoke, it was the Father who spoke through him, healed through him, forgave through him. In other words, through welcoming Christ, we can know that we are receiving & welcoming the Father who is accessible through him. ***In a mysterious but very real way, Jesus Christ made the Father present.***

In addition, Christ gathered the Apostles and united them so completely to himself that he could say that whatever they proclaimed in his name was actually proclaimed by Christ himself. In other words, ***the Apostles make the life and power of Christ actually present.*** When they spoke, it was Christ who spoke through them, worked miracles through them (see the Acts of the Apostles). In other words, the disciples of Christ (united to the twelve Apostles) who make up the Church, are the sacrament of Christ - they make Christ present in a powerful and effective way.

Where do the seven sacraments we have heard about fit in to all this? The seven liturgical sacraments we speak of are the seven '*makings-present*' of the work of the Church in a visible way. This is where the whole structure comes together - here goes:

- (1) *the seven sacraments are the Church at work* - visibly assembled in worship of God. We could say they make the faith of the Church visible through a liturgical ritual.
- (2) *The Church, made visibly present in the seven sacraments is Christ at work* - through the faithful disciples of the Church, Christ is seen and experienced (because the work of the Church is the making-present of Christ).
- (3) *Christ, (made present through the gathered community of faith, who themselves are the Church in the worship of God in the seven sacraments) is the Father at work.* Where there is Christ, there also is the Father

To be brief - who ever receives the sacraments in faith, is being offered union with the Father - mankind calls this salvation. That is why the Church teaches that the sacraments are essential for salvation - they are salvation in the sense of a foretaste, given in anticipation of the fullness of salvation which awaits us after our death.

We can speak of a *sacramental ladder* established by the Father through the Son, by which we can have visible union with Him:

**GOD THE FATHER**

*(union with him is salvation)*

He sends, reveals himself in and is at work through

**JESUS CHRIST, DIVINE SON OF THE FATHER**

*(THE sacrament of the Father – he is unbreakably united to the Father who is visible through him – whoever is bound to the Son is also bound to whomsoever the Son is bound i.e., THE FATHER)*

Christ sends, is present among and actively is at work in

**THE CATHOLIC CHURCH**

*(THE sacrament of Christ – she is filled with his Spirit and so is Christ visibly at work – whoever is bound to the Church is bound to he whom the Church makes present, i.e., to Christ who is the making present of the Father)*

She celebrates and powerfully applies her authority through

**THE SEVEN SACRAMENTS**

*(THE sacraments or ‘makings-present’ of the Church – through them the Church becomes a visible reality not just an association of the like-minded – they are the work of the Church, therefore of the one they ‘make-present’ – Christ, the Head of the Church. To receive the sacraments is to be bound to the Church which is Christ visibly at work among us, who in turn is the making-present of the Father)*

The sacraments of the Church bind us to the visible Body of Christ (the Church), which is bound to Christ who is bound to the Father. Whoever receives the sacraments in faith with the right belief is, through the reception of those Sacraments, receiving the physical pledge through which Christ binds us to himself, & therefore to the Father.

- ***Whoever is united to Christ through the sacraments of the Church is united with the Father.***

## 4. God and the Sacraments

- *"In this age of the Church, Christ now lives and acts in and with his Church, in a new way, appropriate to this new age. he acts through the sacraments in what the common Tradition of the East & the West calls "the sacramental economy"; this is the communication of the fruits of Christ's Paschal mystery in the celebration of the Church's "sacramental" liturgy." (C.C.C. 1076)*

Christ established each of the seven sacraments as seven mutually complimentary ways of allowing his disciples to receive the benefits of the victory he has achieved over sin & death through his own life, death & resurrection. This is why the Church teaches so strongly that the sacraments do not just *remember* what Christ did, rather like reading a diary helps us remember what we did in the past. ***A sacrament makes the whole person & therefore the whole achievement of Christ dynamically present in our day*** - so that by uniting ourselves with the sacrament, we are united with the person of Christ & therefore share in the triumph he has won over fallen human nature.

- *"Christian liturgy not only recalls the events that saved us but actualises them, makes them present." (C.C.C. 1104)*

We always need to remember that although the sacraments are celebrated by human beings (you see the priest celebrate the Mass, or administer Baptism etc.) they are, at their core, actions of *Jesus Christ* using his own sacrament, the Church, as the vehicle through which to pour out his life on us. None of the sacraments were established by human beings - they are divine actions, carried out through the ministry of human beings who have been set apart for this role. This needs to be stressed over and over again - because the most important actor in any sacrament, and the one who gives the sacraments their power to transform and glorify us, is GOD. It is God who is the powerful one in the celebration of the sacraments in our churches. Unfortunately for us, the powerful one is hidden from our eyes (and that's exactly why he uses visible, material ways to give his life to us): so we may get the impression that the sacraments are primarily human actions, carried out by human beings for a purpose that we decide. This could not be more misguided: it is God who established the sacraments and God who reveals the purpose of the sacraments for the building up of the Church, the Body of Christ. It is because God has bound himself to work through the human agents of his Church that we can be *certain in faith* that the sacraments are valid and guaranteed vehicles of divine life. It is because God is faithful to his word and has never deceived his faithful that we can be reassured that whenever we celebrate the

sacraments in faith he will offer anew the graces which Christ won for us through the merits of his suffering and death.

## 5. Sacramentum

*Sacramentum* is the Latin translation of a Greek word, *mysterion*: wherever the Sacred Scriptures speak of God swearing an oath, the Hebrew word for oath was translated into Greek using the word *mysterion*. When the Scriptures were then translated into Latin by St. Jerome (fourth century A.D.) he used the word *sacramentum*. This should help us keep the sacraments in perspective. At the core of the sacraments are seven sacred oaths sworn by God.

The sacraments are NOT primarily human actions, although they are all carried out by human beings. The seven sacraments are seven oaths sworn by God, through which he gives us his Word and guarantee that his redemptive power will be operative in and through them. Because of his nature, we can say with absolute confidence that God is always faithful to his Word - what he has promised, he will deliver.

This means we can have the most supreme confidence in God's presence in the seven sacramental oaths he swears to his community in the Church. Wherever else he *may* be present, & in whatever other way he *may* be inspiring his people, leading them to holiness & giving them the gift of the Holy Spirit, we can be ***certain***, through faith, that he is present, powerful & operative in the liturgical oaths, or *sacramenta* that we celebrate. Why? Not because when we celebrate the sacraments we are forcing him to be there (as Martin Luther constantly said we believed) as if God was reluctant to be present to us, but because God himself has sworn to be there - and God always keeps his promise. SO, the sacraments don't *bind* God to offer his grace whenever we click our fingers: they are the sworn oaths that God gives us that he *certainly* will be at work whenever these liturgical actions are celebrated. Remember – the problem is not that God is too busy to be concerned with us until we rub the magic lamp, like Aladdin, or ring the enchanted bell that brings him running: the problem is that we lost interest in him, not he in us – that is what we call *sin*. God is trying to raise in us an interest and desire for him, because in him is life. Remember – God is a loving Father, not a grumpy childminder: he *wants* to be called by his children!

So, whenever we as the Church celebrate, for example, the sacrament of Baptism, we can know that God freely chooses to pour out on the child or adult concerned the new life of the Holy Spirit. Whenever we celebrate the sacrifice of the Mass, God honours his oath and makes real & present in the Church the victory of Calvary & the new life of the resurrection.

- *"Celebrated worthily in faith, the sacraments confer the grace they signify. They are efficacious because in them Christ himself is at work: it is he who baptises, he who acts in the sacraments in order to communicate the grace that each sacrament signifies. The Father always hears the prayers of his Son's Church ... As fire transforms into itself everything it touches, so the Holy Spirit transforms into the divine life whatever is subjected to his power."* (C.C.C. 1127)

The sacraments are God's sacred oaths by which he reassures us of his unending presence. Although they are carried out by human beings (priests, deacons & people), they are effective because it is God who carries them out (because the Church is the making-present of Christ!)

## 6. What is a Sacrament?

The Church teaches that there are five essential elements to a sacrament, summed up in the definition of a sacrament in the Catechism of the Catholic Church:

- *"The sacraments are efficacious signs (1) of grace (2), instituted by Christ (3) & entrusted to the Church (4), by which divine life is dispensed to us (5)."* (1131)

That is a very dense compression of a great deal of thought and prayer. It needs to be unpacked and explained if it is to be understood

### (1) Efficacious signs

The sacraments are *signs* - they are human means of communication, so they are both visible and audible. This is important - no human being can communicate effectively without some use of signs (either bodily or verbal), & God chooses to communicate to us in ways we can understand.

What makes a sacrament different from all other signs that we use is that in the sacrament, the visible signs do not just *represent* what they describe, they actually convey it: they are efficacious - they work and carry out the thing they represent. For instance, the host does not just symbolise Christ in the Mass, it becomes the means Christ uses of giving himself - it *is* Christ. Mere human signs are just that: mere signs - when a man gives his beloved a bunch of flowers, they visibly represent his love for her, but we could never say they actually *are* his love for her - they are simply flowers! But in sacraments, words and actions are used to bring about in the recipient the spiritual thing which the signs represent. Thus:

- (1) **Baptism:** the effect (invisible) is cleansing of sin. This is actually carried out through the sign of washing with water & the baptismal formula ("*I baptise you in the name of the Father & of the Son & of the Holy Spirit*").
- (2) **Confirmation:** the effect is to be strengthened with the gift of the Holy Spirit. This is actually carried out by the Bishop anointing the candidate with the oil of Chrism (sign of strength) and the words "*Be sealed with the gift of the Holy Spirit.*"
- (3) **The Mass:** the effect is feeding the soul and uniting us with Christ. This is actually carried out by the priest consecrating bread & wine (food), through praying the Eucharistic Prayer, especially Christ's own words, the words of Institution "*Take this all of you...*"

- (4) **Confession:** the effect is forgiving us our sin. This is actually carried out by the priest blessing the penitent with the sign of the cross (the sign of God's forgiving love), and the words *"I absolve you from your sins in the name of the Father & of the Son & of the Holy Spirit."*
- (5) **Anointing of the Sick:** the effect is to strengthen the faith of the sick and forgive their sins when illness separates them from the faith of the community. This is actually carried out by the priest anointing the sick person on forehead and hands with holy oil (sign of strength and cleansing), and the words *"Through this holy anointing, may the Lord in his love and mercy strengthen you with the gift of the Holy Spirit. May the Lord who frees you from sin help you and raise you up."*
- (6) **Matrimony:** the effect is the indissoluble joining in love of man and woman. This is actually carried out by the couple giving themselves to each other in the formula of consent *"I take you to be my lawful wedded wife / husband..."*
- (7) **Holy Orders:** the effect is to configure the soul to the likeness of Christ the Servant (Deacon), Christ the Priest (Priest) or Christ the Head of the Body, the Church (Bishop). This is actually carried out by the laying on of hands by the Bishop on the head of the candidate and the Prayer of Consecration.

## **(2) Grace**

This is what is actually given. Grace is not a thing or an object, measured in quantities, any more than friendship is a measurable thing. Grace is the gift of the life of God (divine life). The sacraments are offerings by God to us of a deepening in our relationship with him. How? By receiving his life, not just a sign of it, through a visible and audible means. In the sacraments, God gives us himself, whole & entire, each time we receive those sacraments in faith. If we do not receive in faith, we do not grow in grace / divine life: this is not because God decides not to offer himself when we are ill-prepared for him, but because every friendship at all levels (even the most profound, here between God & his beloved creatures) needs to be accepted as well as offered. If we choose not to accept God's self-gift, it is not forced on us.

## **(3) Instituted by Christ**

Each one of the seven sacraments was ordained by the will of God & revealed through Christ during his lifetime or in the life of the Church through the inspiration of the Holy Spirit.

- *"Adhering to the teaching of the Holy Scriptures, to the apostolic traditions, & to the consensus ... of the Fathers,' we profess that 'the sacraments of the new law were ... all instituted by Jesus Christ, our Lord.'" (Solemn doctrine of the Council of Trent, proclaimed in 1547 A.D. See also C.C.C. 1114)*
- *"As she has done for the Canon of Sacred Scripture & for the doctrine of the faith, the Church, by the power of the Spirit who guides her "into all truth", has gradually recognised this treasure received from Christ ... Thus the Church has discerned over the centuries that among liturgical celebrations*

*there are seven that are, in the strict sense of the term, sacraments instituted by the Lord." (C.C.C. 1117)*

Some of the sacraments have obvious origin in the ministry & teaching of Christ. They are actions which Christ himself carried out or which he specifically ordered his disciples to carry out in his name:

- **BAPTISM** (Mt. 28:19)
- **CONFESSION** (Mt. 18:18, Jn 21:23)
- **THE SACRIFICE OF THE MASS** (Mt. 26:26-29, Mk. 14:22-25, Lk. 22:19-20 & 1 Corinthians 11:23-25)

The others are certainly & clearly implicit in Christ's teaching. In the course of time the Church reflected upon the teaching of the Apostles and of Christ and came to understand that Christ also instituted certain other actions as vehicles of his Divine Life:

- **MARRIAGE** (Mt. 5:31-32, 19:3-6)
- **CONFIRMATION** (Jn. 14:25-26)
- **ANOINTING THE SICK** (James 5:14-15)
- **HOLY ORDERS** (Mt. 18:18, Lk. 10:16, 22:19, Jn. 21:23, Acts 1:17-26, 6:1-6, 1 Cor. 11:24 & 25)

#### ***(4) Entrusted to the Church***

Christ has given the Church guardianship of the sacraments, as he has given creation to the stewardship of mankind. *Neither belong to us by right*, but both are given to us for our welfare. Thus, the Church may alter & update the *means* through which the sacraments are given so long as she does not remove from them the essential symbolism (i.e., the Mass is about divine nourishment given to human disciples: we could not re-write the Mass and drop the use of bread & wine, for instance). As the priests of the New Covenant, guardianship of the sacraments is entrusted specifically to the Bishops - and through them to the priests of the diocese. They are commissioned to administer the sacraments according to the mind of the whole Church, not simply according to whim. For this reason, they are called on to determine whether a particular sacrament may be celebrated and to ensure that the sacrament is celebrated according to the rites of the Church. They are not the property of the priest or of the parish because they are, at their heart, the very life of Jesus Christ. Thus, since the Church understands that Holy Communion is the sacrament that expresses our full communion with the Church, Christ's Body, it would be essentially inappropriate to offer the sacrament to those who are not fully united to the Catholic Church. Equally, since Baptism is the sacrament of entry into the Church, it would be absolutely wrong to administer any of the other sacraments to one who has not been baptised - first they need to enter the family of the New Covenant before they may receive the most precious inheritance of that family.

#### ***(5) By which divine life is dispensed to us***

The key words here are "by which": the visible sacramental signs (the water in Baptism, the oil in Confirmation, the laying on of hands in Holy Orders etc.) are the actual means through which God has covenanted himself to give to us the gift of his

divine presence. They aren't simply representations of that gift, as flowers are representations of human love, but the visible vehicles of the gift, so that we can know that whenever we do receive communion, it is through the reception of the host that God gives us the whole person of Jesus Christ - body, blood, soul & divinity. This means that the sacramental signs, what is called the *matter* of the sacrament (oil, bread and wine, water etc.), are effective - they truly communicate God's life to us as well as being useful and true symbols of the life that is being given to us. This aspect of the sacraments is one of the hardest for people to accept: they truly change the recipients because in celebrating them, the very life of God is truly communicated.

The next few sessions will concentrate on these seven divine oaths in more individual detail. They correspond to seven basic rituals that every human community needs to survive as a social body. In the Church, God takes these human rituals and covenants himself to them, elevating them to become the means not only of our human social cohesion, but to bind human beings together in the family of God, from which they may all draw on his life:

Human Ritual	Corresponding Oath
A Rite of <i>welcome</i> , drawing a new member into the community	<b>BAPTISM</b>
A Rite of <i>full membership</i> , entailing greater responsibility	<b>CONFIRMATION</b>
A Rite of <i>coming together</i> , esp. a meal, to celebrate our unity	<b>THE MASS</b>
A Rite to <i>heal divisions</i> and overcome weakness	<b>CONFESSION</b>
A Rite <i>coping with serious sickness</i>	<b>ANOINTING THE SICK</b>
A Rite <i>integrating love &amp; family</i> into the community	<b>MATRIMONY</b>
A Rite to <i>commission a leader, teacher and representative</i>	<b>HOLY ORDERS</b>

The Church groups these divine sacramental oaths into three types:

- (A) Three sacraments of **Initiation into the Church**: *Baptism, Confirmation, Holy Communion*.
- (B) Two sacraments of **Healing & Salvation**: *Reconciliation, Anointing the Sick*.
- (C) Two sacraments of **Vocation to serve the Unity of the Church**: *Marriage, Holy Orders*.

If you would like to read more, may I suggest you have a look at a very good, clear and above all short (!) book on the sacraments by **Fr. Peter Stravinskis** entitled *Understanding the Sacraments*, (Ignatius Press)