

THE SACRAMENTS OF CHRIST AND HIS CHURCH

Texts from the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*



The whole liturgical life of the Church revolves around the Eucharistic sacrifice and the sacraments. There are seven sacraments in the Church: Baptism, Confirmation (or Chrismation), Eucharist, Penance, Anointing of the Sick, Holy Orders, and Matrimony. This [section] will discuss what is common to the Church's seven sacraments from a doctrinal point of view. (1113)

THE SACRAMENTS OF CHRIST

All were instituted by Jesus Christ

“Adhering to the teaching of the Holy Scriptures, to the apostolic traditions and to the consensus... of the Fathers”, we profess that “the sacraments of the new law were... all instituted by Jesus Christ our Lord” (Council of Trent). (1114)

‘What was visible in our Saviour has passed over into his mysteries’

Jesus' words and actions during his hidden life and public ministry were already salvific, for they anticipated the power of his Paschal mystery. They announced and prepared what he was going to give the Church when all was accomplished. The mysteries of Christ's life are the foundations of what he would henceforth dispense in the sacraments, through the ministers of his Church, for “what was visible in our Saviour has passed over into his mysteries” (St Leo the Great). (1115)

‘Powers that come forth from the Body of Christ’

Sacraments are “powers that come forth” from the Body of Christ, which is ever-living and life-giving. They are actions of the Holy Spirit at work in his Body, the Church. They are “the masterworks of God” in the new and everlasting covenant. (1116)

THE SACRAMENTS OF THE CHURCH

Seven sacraments instituted by the Lord

As she has done for the canon of sacred Scripture and 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 and, as the faithful steward of God's mysteries, has determined its ‘dispensation’. 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. (1117)

‘The sacraments make the Church’

The sacraments are ‘of the Church’ in the double sense that they are ‘by her’ and ‘for her’. They are ‘by the Church’, for she is the sacrament of Christ's action at work in her through the mission of the Holy Spirit. They are ‘for the Church’ in the sense that ‘the sacraments make the Church’, since they manifest and communicate to men, above all in the Eucharist, the mystery of communion with the God who is love, One in three persons. (1118)

Forming ‘as it were, one mystical person’ with Christ the head, the Church acts in the sacraments as ‘an organically structured priestly community’. Through Baptism and Confirmation the priestly people is enabled to celebrate the liturgy, while those of the faithful ‘who have received Holy Orders, are appointed to nourish the Church with the word and grace of God in the name of Christ’. (1119)

The ordained priesthood ties the liturgy and the sacraments to the apostles

The ordained ministry or ministerial priesthood is at the service of the baptismal priesthood. The ordained priesthood guarantees that it really is Christ who acts in the sacraments through the Holy Spirit for the Church. The saving mission entrusted by the Father to his incarnate Son was committed to the apostles and through them to their successors: they receive the Spirit of Jesus to act in his name and in his person. The ordained minister is the sacramental bond that ties the liturgical action to what the apostles said and did and, through them, to the words and actions of Christ, the source and foundation of the sacraments. (1120)

The sacramental character of Baptism, Confirmation, Holy Orders

The three sacraments of Baptism, Confirmation and Holy Orders confer, in addition to grace, a sacramental character or ‘seal’ by which the Christian shares in Christ's priesthood and is made a member of the Church according to different states and functions. This configuration to Christ and to the Church, brought about by the Spirit, is indelible; it remains for ever in the Christian as a positive disposition for grace, a promise and guarantee of divine protection, and as a vocation to divine worship and to the service of the Church. Therefore these sacraments can never be repeated. (1121)

THE SACRAMENTS OF FAITH

The sacramental mission is implied in the mission to evangelise

Christ sent his apostles so that “repentance and forgiveness of sins should be preached in his name to all nations”. “Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptising them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit”. The mission to baptise, and so the sacramental mission, is implied in the mission to evangelise, because the sacrament is prepared for by the word of God and by the faith which is assent to this word:

“The People of God is formed into one in the first place by the Word of the living God... The preaching of the Word is required for the sacramental ministry itself, since the sacraments are sacraments of faith, drawing their origin and nourishment from the Word.” (Vatican II, the Priestly Ministry) (1122)

“The purpose of the sacraments is to sanctify men, to build up the Body of Christ and, finally, to give worship to God. Because they are signs they also instruct. They not only presuppose faith, but by words and objects they also nourish, strengthen, and express it. That is why they are called ‘sacraments of faith’.” (1123)

The law of prayer is the law of faith

The Church's faith precedes the faith of the believer who is invited to adhere to it. When the Church celebrates the sacraments, she confesses the faith received from the apostles - whence the ancient saying: *lex orandi, lex credendi*. The law of prayer is the law of faith: the Church believes as she prays. Liturgy is a constitutive element of the holy and living Tradition. (1124)

For this reason no sacramental rite may be modified or manipulated at the will of the minister or the community. Even the supreme authority in the Church may not change the liturgy arbitrarily, but only in the obedience of faith and with religious respect for the mystery of the liturgy. (1125)

THE SACRAMENTS OF SALVATION

Sacraments are efficacious because it is Christ who is acting in them

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

The sacraments act ‘ex opere operato’

This is the meaning of the Church's affirmation that the sacraments act *ex opere operato* (literally: “by the very fact of the action's being performed”), i.e., by virtue of the saving work of Christ, accomplished once for all. It follows that “the sacrament is not wrought by the righteousness of either the celebrant or the recipient, but by the power of God” (St Thomas Aquinas). From the moment that a sacrament is celebrated in accordance with the intention of the Church, the power of Christ and his Spirit acts in and through it, independently of the personal holiness of the minister. Nevertheless, the fruits of the sacraments also depend on the disposition of the one who receives them. (1128)

Sacramental grace gives a share in the divine life

The Church affirms that for believers the sacraments of the New Covenant are necessary for salvation. “Sacramental grace” is the grace of the Holy Spirit, given by Christ and proper to each sacrament. The Spirit heals and transforms those who receive him by conforming them to the Son of God. The fruit of the sacramental life is that the Spirit of adoption makes the faithful partakers in the divine nature by uniting them in a living union with the only Son, the Saviour. (1129)

THE SACRAMENTS OF ETERNAL LIFE

The pledge of future glory

The Church celebrates the mystery of her Lord “until he comes”, when God will be “everything to everyone” (I Cor 11:26; 15:28). The liturgy thus shares in Jesus' desire: “I have earnestly desired to eat this Passover with you... until it is fulfilled in the kingdom of God” (Lk 22:15). In the sacraments of Christ the Church already receives the guarantee of her inheritance and even now shares in everlasting life, while “awaiting our blessed hope, the appearing of the glory of our great God and Saviour Christ Jesus” (Titus 2:13). The “Spirit and the Bride say, ‘Come... Come, Lord Jesus!’” (Rev 22:17,20)

St. Thomas [Aquinas] sums up the various aspects of sacramental signs: “Therefore a sacrament is a sign that commemorates what precedes it - Christ's Passion; demonstrates what is accomplished in us through Christ's Passion - grace; and prefigures what that Passion pledges to us - future glory”.

IN BRIEF

- **The sacraments are efficacious signs of grace, instituted by Christ and entrusted to the Church, by which divine life is dispensed to us. The visible rites by which the sacraments are celebrated signify and make present the graces proper to each sacrament. They bear fruit in those who receive them with the required dispositions. (1131)**
- **The Church celebrates the sacraments as a priestly community structured by the baptismal priesthood and the priesthood of ordained ministers. (1132)**
- **The Holy Spirit prepares the faithful for the sacraments by the Word of God and the faith which welcomes that word in well-disposed hearts. Thus the sacraments strengthen faith and express it. (1133)**
- **The fruit of sacramental life is both personal and ecclesial. For every one of the faithful on the one hand, this fruit is life for God in Christ Jesus; for the Church, on the other, it is an increase in charity and in her mission of witness. (1134)**

