

Introduction to Sacraments

What Are Sacraments?

As Christians, we believe in an **invisible God**. This means that sometimes others might dismiss our faith by claiming that we can't "prove" it. Yet we can't prove our love for our children, friends, or spouses either.

What we *can* see are **tangible signs** of our love and friendship. A giant hug when we welcome a child home after school is a sign of parental love. A peck on the cheek or sexual intimacy between spouses can both be signs of the love between husband and wife. Taking a meal to a friend when she has a new baby or to a neighbor who has experienced a death in the family is a symbolic gesture of friendship.

As humans, we know how to make the invisible visible. We have found ways to translate our invisible experience of love into **visible signs of love**. God does that too, particularly through Jesus and the sacraments.

Sacraments are nothing less than a way of making visible an invisible grace. Think of grace as a free and undeserved gift, a way in which we encounter and are transformed by God. The word sacrament is from the Latin word *sacramentum* which means "a sign of the sacred."

Jesus: The Original Sacrament

One of the wonderful things about our God is that he wanted to share in our human experience so much that he became one of us. We call this the incarnation—our **God became flesh and blood** to be like us. Jesus was born as we are. He had to learn to walk and talk. Mary and Joseph had to teach him his manners. He went through puberty and had the typical teenage anxieties. He learned to form friendships and to deal with people who were very different from himself. In short, he was like us in all things but sin (Heb. 4:15).

We can say that Jesus was the original sacrament because he was **God's visible sign about who God is**. When Jesus fearlessly touched the sick and the outcast, he was showing visibly God's grace that desires healing and inclusion for everyone. When he preached that the poor are blessed, his words were an audible expression of God's mercy. When he allowed himself to be crucified because he wouldn't back down from his criticism of unjust economic, social, and religious structures, he showed visibly that our God will choose sacrificial love and love for enemies over military might.

"Whoever has seen me has seen the Father," Jesus told his disciple Philip (Jn. 14:9). If we want to know our God, we can **look to Jesus** as the primary way that an invisible grace is made visible.

Sacraments Today

Jesus promised us that he would be with us "always, to the end of the age" (Mt. 28:20), and he promised to send the Holy Spirit to be with us forever (Jn. 14:16). That is all well and good, and sometimes we may be graced with the ability to feel or sense Jesus' spirit with us. But other times, we want Jesus "with skin on." Since Jesus isn't walking the earth as he did in Palestine 2,000 years ago, **Catholics celebrate ritual sacraments to symbolically remind ourselves of God's grace and Jesus' continuing presence** among us.

The sacraments are **signs of the sacred** that we can experience today. Although God can use anything as a sign of the sacred, Catholics think of the seven sacraments as our "official" signs. They are celebrations in which we experience grace and are reminded of God's love for us.

How Many Sacraments?

Over the centuries, Christians have recognized various numbers of sacraments. Even today, different denominations within Christianity recognize different sacraments. For example, many Protestant churches name two sacraments: baptism and Eucharist. For Catholics, we recognize **seven**, a number that suggests totality or completeness. These are:

- ▶ **Sacraments of initiation**
 - ▶ Baptism
 - ▶ Confirmation
 - ▶ Eucharist (Holy Communion)
- ▶ **Sacraments of healing**
 - ▶ Reconciliation (Confession)
 - ▶ Anointing of the Sick
- ▶ **Sacraments of vocation**
 - ▶ Marriage (Matrimony)
 - ▶ Holy Orders (Ordination)

It wasn't until the 12th century that we had recorded lists of the seven rituals we now call sacraments. In 1547, in response to the Protestant Reformation, the Council of Trent solidified the list we still have today.

Are They in the Bible?

Each sacrament can be traced back to some practice, event, or ritual in Scripture. For example, Jesus' followers baptized many into the faith, symbolizing a death to one's self and a rebirth in Christ for all the newly baptized. The Eucharist, of course, flows out of the Last Supper recorded in the Gospels. The letter of James provides the foundation for the sacrament of anointing. "Are any among you sick? They should call for the elders of the church and have them pray over them, anointing them with oil in the name of the Lord" (Jas. 5:14).

Sacramentals

Besides the seven sacraments, Catholics use **other concrete objects or actions** as visual reminders of God's presence and grace with us. These are sometimes referred to as sacramentals. Some examples are: rosaries, candles, incense, images or statues of Jesus and the saints, ashes, religious medals, etc. Even ritualistic gestures such as blessing ourselves with holy water, making the sign of the cross, and genuflecting before the tabernacle are considered sacramentals.

As any parent knows, an especially beloved stuffed animal can convey a sense of security and safety to a child at bedtime. In a sense, that stuffed doggie acts as a sacramental to little Rachel. Just so, **God offers everything in the created world as a potential sacramental reminder of God's presence and goodness!** If you look around, you can probably name other things in this material world that you use as reminders of love, friendship, protection, and "the sacred in the secular."

We might even say that Catholics are a materialistic group in the best sense of the word. We acknowledge the goodness of the created world and know that God can use anything to remind us of his presence.

Dig deeper: CCC: #1145-1162, 1210-1212, 1667-1679; CCA: Chapter 14; *Our Catholic Life*: Book 5.

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