

The Rite of Christian Initiation for Adults

by Fr. Antony

The Sacraments

The liturgical life of the Church revolves around the Eucharistic sacrifice and the sacraments. Sacraments are channels of divine grace; they are outward signs of inward grace instituted by Christ for our sanctification. The council of Trent puts it very clearly, “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**).

The word “sacrament” in Greek means “mystery” and Christ has been called by St. Paul, “the mystery hidden from the ages. A sacrament, in a very broad sense of the term, combines two elements: one visible, the other invisible--one that can be seen, tasted, touched or heard; the other unseen to the eyes of the flesh. For example; in baptism, water is the visible sign, and the unseen is the freedom from original sin and membership in God’s Kingdom.

Christ instituted the sacraments to give us the grace we need to reach heaven, to grow in His grace, and thus earn a greater happiness in eternity, to regain His friendship if we have lost it through our disobedience to His will. 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 (**CCC-116**).

Christ’s reason for taking upon Himself a human nature was to pay for sin by death on the cross and to bring us a higher life: “*I have come so that they may have life, and have it more abundantly*” (**John 10:10**). But, we might argue by saying, that man already has life. Indeed he does; he has a biological, physiological life. He once had a higher divine life, which he lost. Christ came to bring that life back to man and it is a free gift of God.

Three things, then, are absolutely required for a sacrament: (1) Its institution by Christ; (2) An outward sign; and (3) The power of conferring the grace or divine life purchased for us by the Passion, Death, and Resurrection of Christ (an authorized and commissioned person by Jesus Christ).

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.” (**CCC. 1119**)

The Church has taught that the sacraments act “*ex opere operato*,” that is “by the very fact of the action’s being performed.” The efficacy of the sacrament does not depend upon the human minister — whether a bishop, priest, deacon or layperson — being free of mortal sin and thereby in a state of grace. Christ, who instituted the sacraments, acts through them to communicate His grace, and the human person who acts as Christ’s minister is only performing the sacrament. **(CCC. 1128)**

When a sacrament is celebrated according to the norms of the Church and in faith, we believe that it confers the grace it signifies. While a human being is the minister of the sacrament, Christ Himself is the one who is at work: He baptizes, He confirms, He absolves, He changes the bread and wine into His Body and Blood, He unites a couple in marriage, He ordains and He anoints. Acting in His sacraments, Christ communicates the grace — that sharing in the divine life and love of God — offered through each sacrament. **(CCC. 1127)**

If anyone presumes to receive a sacrament and has not the proper disposition, he not only deprives his soul of the grace of that sacrament, but he also commits a grievous sin of sacrilege. The more perfectly one is disposed, by frequent and fervent acts of faith, hope, charity, and other holy virtues, the more abundant grace he will receive. Pope John Paul II, while introducing the Catechism of the Catholic Church said, “Guarding the deposit of faith is the mission which the Lord entrusted to His Church and which she fulfills in every age.” As believing Catholics, loyal to the Vicar of Christ, our first responsibility is to guard the deposit of faith in the sacraments which Christ became man to give us, the grace we need to reach eternal life. As the sacraments are instituted by Jesus Christ to be the never failing means of communicating his grace to our souls; they, therefore, contain in themselves an inexhaustible treasure of heavenly grace.

The sacraments bring us comfort and confirm our faith in His promises. Through the sacraments, Christ unites, also, all the members of His church in one body. As we celebrate the sacraments, we, like the first followers of Christ have the opportunity to encounter Jesus precisely in our acceptance of those same values which he lived and affirmed. In that encounter Jesus is present to us as He was present to the early church. In him we encounter God and God’s presence. Jesus is “the one great sacrament” through which all other sacraments make sense.