

Journey of Faith



In Short:



- Sacraments are tangible signs of divine love.
- The Church recognizes seven official sacraments.
- Christ instituted the sacraments.
- Sacraments are different from magic or empty ritualism.

The Sacraments: An Introduction

Do you remember the first time you were handed the keys to your family car? If it hasn't happened yet, are you looking forward to that day when you'll be able to drive yourself? It's exciting!

But it's not really the keys or the car that makes it that way. Those things are symbols, outward signs of something more important. When you hold those keys, what it really means is:

You have freedom.

You now have the ability to go just about anywhere (with your parents' permission).

You have new power and responsibility.

It may not seem like it, but controlling a car gives you a lot of power. And that means you're also responsible for using it safely.

You have your parents' trust.

When your parents hand you those car keys, they're telling you, "You have earned our trust and confidence. We believe you'll use your best judgment when driving and that you're responsible enough to make good choices."

What Are the Sacraments?

Just like car keys represent privilege and freedom, sacraments are outward signs and actions that represent God's love, saving grace, and presence in our lives. We are physical beings. We learn and understand best through our senses (sight, sound, taste, smell, and touch). We communicate through these senses, too.

For example, if you want to show someone you care, you might use words (which are heard or seen), hugs (which are felt), flowers (which are seen and smelled), or candy (which is seen and tasted). While these physical expressions of love aren't the same as love itself, you communicate your love through them. Words, gestures, and physical objects become signs of love that couldn't be seen otherwise.

How Does Jesus Communicate Love?

Just like we sometimes express our love through symbols, one of the ways Jesus shows his love for us is through the sacraments. Jesus realized that humans needed physical signs to comprehend the incredible reality of his love. While on earth with his disciples, he frequently used physical signs to communicate his love.

Look up one or two of these Gospel passages and write down the physical sign Jesus used to help his followers understand how much he cared for them:

Matthew 8:1–3

Mark 10:13–16

Luke 9:12–17

John 13:3–5

Jesus still uses physical signs to communicate his love for us today in the signs and actions we call the sacraments. The **sacraments** are the saving actions of Christ happening right now for us, his beloved children. The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* helps us to understand this a little better. It tells us that the sacraments are visible signs instituted, or established, by Christ, through which the life of God is given to us. These visible signs and actions make the grace of God present to us through the Holy Spirit (CCC 1131).

The Holy Spirit prepares us for the sacraments through the word of God, and we must receive the sacraments with open and loving hearts. If we don't do anything to actively prepare for the sacraments or if our minds and hearts are closed, we won't be able to receive God's grace and love. Even God can't give us a gift we refuse to take.

"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."

CCC 1131

While the sacraments benefit us as individuals, they also bring life to the entire Church. As members of Christ's body, when we are strengthened as individuals, the family of God is strengthened as a whole (CCC 1134).

There are seven traditional Catholic sacraments. Baptism, confirmation, and the Eucharist are known as the sacraments of initiation. Reconciliation and the anointing of the sick are known as sacraments of healing because through them God heals our bodies and souls. Lastly, marriage and holy orders are sacraments of service. They prepare us to live out our vocation in the world.

Can We Look at Sacraments in Another Way?

Many of today's Church scholars (those who closely study and help us understand Church teachings) look at sacraments in a second sense. Any person, event, or thing through which you meet God or experience the presence of God is a kind of sacrament.

For example, the first time you climb a mountain and look down at the world below, you might feel God's presence and majesty in a way never experienced before. In a sense, the magnificent beauty of creation you behold in this moment becomes an individual, divine encounter. You are encountering God in a physical way.

Similarly, when your sadness is lessened by the comfort of a caring friend, your friend becomes an experience of God in your time of need. Both the mountains and the friend make God something we can see, hear, touch, and feel.

- How have you experienced these types of sacraments in your life?



Where Did the Seven Official Sacraments Come From?

The sacraments began with the human experience of the followers of Jesus. As Jesus' followers grew to know him, they also grew to know God. Jesus himself was sacrament for his disciples. It was through him and him alone that they came to know God (see John 8:19; 14:6–10).

In sharing the good news, the early Christians acted just like their Hebrew ancestors. So future generations wouldn't forget, the Hebrews told and retold important stories, always in the same pattern. These stories contained particular words, rich symbols, and important actions. When specific words and symbolic actions are used over and over again, in the same pattern, the words and actions are called rituals.

- Describe a ritual in your household. This can be how you celebrate birthdays or holidays or something only your family does.



God, the risen Lord now uses the seven special rituals we call the sacraments to help us feel, see, and know the presence of God. One very important reason why the Church exists (the Church's mission) is to make Christ truly present in a way that we can feel and understand.

How Do These Seven Sacraments Work?

The sacraments, through symbolic actions, bring about what they symbolize. For example, the ritual of baptism (which involves a person being submerged in water or having water poured over his or her head) symbolizes the person being cleansed of original sin and being filled with the life of the Spirit. At the same time, God is actually making that cleansing happen. This is what makes a sacrament more than just a ritual—God is really present in a sacrament.

We may not feel any different when receiving a sacrament for many reasons. It's possible we've never had the opportunity of experiencing the sacraments as they were meant to be. Or our hearts weren't open to the many ways God works in our lives. As we discussed earlier in this lesson, God can't give us a gift that we aren't open to receiving.

We also may not feel God's presence and action in the sacraments because we're expecting something magical. There is no magic in the sacraments. For example, the water of baptism is just water; there is no magic in it or in the words spoken by the priest. God is beyond magic.

An open heart allows God to act in and through us in ways we never imagined! An open heart does not manipulate God. There was no magic in the way the Church's sacraments began. The sacraments grew out of real-life experiences and the influence of the Holy Spirit. The early disciples wished to spread the good news that their Lord and Savior wasn't gone—he was with them every moment. The sacraments are Christ's loving gift of himself to his Church.


The disciples knew the story of Jesus' baptism: God proclaimed Jesus "beloved Son," and the Spirit came down upon him. This became the foundation of baptism. Under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, the apostles initiated this sacrament, which both symbolized what was happening to them and made God's Spirit present to them in a real way. They were also beginning a new life as sons and daughters of God and receiving the wonderful gift of the Spirit! This is how we experience baptism today.

The early Christians also remembered how Jesus often invited everyone to come and eat with him. We know the Last Supper became the most important of Jesus' shared meals. After the meal he commanded them to remember these events and do as he had done. So the ritual of "breaking bread" and sharing it with others became very important to the disciples. That breaking of the bread became the Eucharist. When the Holy Spirit descended upon the apostles at Pentecost (Acts 2:1–13), it provided them with the necessary graces to go out and evangelize. These same graces are available to us through the sacrament of confirmation. While the Holy Spirit doesn't descend on us in a literal tongue of fire, he still becomes present to us through the symbols and actions of confirmation.

In these and other ways, they continued what Jesus had done. They prayed and laid hands on one another, healed, and forgave, just as they had seen Jesus pray and lay hands on, heal, and forgive. As Jesus had been the sacrament of God for them, they—as members of his Church—were becoming the sacrament of Jesus for others.

Today, as members of Christ's Church, we continue the ritual actions of the first Christians. Just as Jesus used his physical body to bring people closer to

With a partner or as a group, create a visual (a chart, diagram, or image) to help explain the differences and similarities between a sacrament of the Church (the seven celebrated by the Church) and a sacrament as an individual, divine encounter.



Describe a person or experience that has given you the opportunity to know God a little better.

Is this a person who helps you feel the caring compassion of God? A place so magnificent you begin to understand God's creative power? This coming week, try to become more aware of these moments. Keep a record of them to help you remember.

Journey of Faith for Teens: Catechumenate, C2 (826290)

Imprimi Potest: Stephen T. Rehrauer, CSsR, Provincial, Denver Province, the Redemptorists.

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