

Sacraments and Liturgical Celebrations (Overview)

“What was visible in our Saviour has passed over into his mysteries”
Pope Saint Leo the Great¹

What is a Sacrament?

The word ‘**sacrament**’ means:

- an effective sign of something hidden which comes from God
- the visible ways in which the invisible gifts of God’s love and mercy² are given to us through the Holy Spirit
- an encounter with Jesus Christ

Sacraments are actions of the Holy Spirit in the Church whereby the visible is united to the invisible. Through sacramental actions we, the Body of Christ, receive the strength, power, and gifts to live and act as God’s Holy People in service of the Kingdom. They are a personal encounter: as Cardinal Basil Hume said, “an event when Christ meets us and we meet him.”³

Through the Church and in the sacraments, God communicates His Divine Life. As Catholics we understand Jesus Christ as the Sacrament of God because He makes God visible in the world. The sacraments we celebrate as Church are God’s gift freely given.

Sacraments are often spoken of as ‘outward signs of inward grace’. This language originated with the theologian Peter Lombard,⁴ and was taken up by Thomas Aquinas⁵ and adopted by the Council of Trent.⁶

Outward Signs

In the Old Testament we recognise visible signs of God’s loving covenant with His people e.g. the Rainbow⁷ and the Tent and Ark of the Covenant.⁸ These signs are perfected by Jesus, as we learn in the New Testament. In Him the Kingdom of God is both proclaimed and made present in the world. Through the sacraments Christ cares for his Body, the Church. The sacraments were instituted by Him and are administered and celebrated by the Church through liturgical rites. The Eucharist, instituted by Jesus at the Last Supper, is the centre to which the other sacraments are ordered.

¹ Sermon 74.2

² Understood as Grace

³ *Basil in Blunderland*, by Cardinal Basil Hume, Darton, Longman & Todd, 1997

⁴ AD c.1296-1160

⁵ AD 1225-1247

⁶ AD 1545-1563

⁷ Genesis 9:11-17

⁸ Exodus 29:43-45

Kinds of Sacrament

We recognise Sacraments of **Initiation**, by which we enter into Christ’s Body: Baptism, Confirmation and Eucharist; Sacraments of **Healing**, by which we are restored to health in body, mind and spirit: Reconciliation,⁹ and Anointing of the Sick; and Sacraments of **Service and Commitment**: Matrimony and Holy Orders.

Sacraments comprise two aspects: **word** and **action**. Both are necessary for the valid administration of a Sacrament.

The Catholic Church recognises these seven Sacraments:

	<i>Action</i>	<i>Word</i>
<i>Baptism</i>	The pouring of water ¹⁰ three times	“I baptise you in the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit”
<i>Confirmation</i>	Laying on of hands by the Bishop ¹¹ and anointing with the Oil of Chrism	“Be sealed with the gift of the Holy Spirit”
<i>Eucharist</i>	Extension of hands by the priest over the bread and wine	“... may they become for us the Body and Blood of our Lord Jesus Christ”
<i>Penance</i>	Extension of hands by the priest over the penitent person	“...I absolve you of your sins in the Name of the Father, and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit...”
<i>Anointing of the Sick</i>	Anointing of the palms of the sick person with holy oil and the laying on of hands by the priest	“... through this holy anointing may the Lord in his love and mercy help you with the grace of the Holy Spirit. May the Lord who frees you from sin save you and raise you up...”
<i>Matrimony</i>	The mutual consent of the persons being married together with the consummation of their vows	“I... do take you... to be my husband/wife...”
<i>Holy Orders</i>	The laying on of hands by the Bishop and the anointing with the Oil of Chrism	The prayer of ordination according to the Diaconate, Presbyterate or Episcopate

The ordinary minister of the Sacrament is the Bishop, or the Presbyters (Priests) and Deacons ordained by the Bishop for ministry in the diocese. Some Sacraments are reserved

⁹ Also called ‘Confession’ or ‘Penance’

¹⁰ Or full immersion into water

¹¹ Or, with the Bishop’s authority, the Priest

to the Bishop alone,¹² and Baptism may be validly administered by anyone – Christian or not – if the need is urgent,¹³ although the ordinary minister is the Presbyter or the Deacon. Matrimony is exceptional in that it is administered by the two persons getting married.

Liturgical Celebrations

The Liturgy is the ritual praise and worship of God. It is both the right and the duty of all baptised Christians and represents both the source and summit of our life as the People of God.

The liturgy... is rightly seen as an exercise of the priestly office of Jesus Christ. In the liturgy the sanctification of women and men is given expression in symbols perceptible by the senses and is carried out in ways appropriate to each of them. In it, complete and definitive public worship is performed by the mystical body of Jesus Christ...¹⁴

Sacrosanctum Concilium

The *Decree on Sacred Liturgy* was among the first to be published by the Second Vatican Council. This is because preparatory work for the Decree had already been done prior to the start of the Council, and so it was largely ready for the Council Fathers to consider and decide upon.

The need for a revision of sacred liturgy had been apparent for some decades, and the aim of the Council Fathers was to restore it to a more complete and accurate reflection of the prayer and worship of the early Church.

Those who claim that the Decree introduced innovations do not understand either the history of the Decree, nor the history of Christian worship, which was alive with symbol and prayer rooted in the faith experience of the Church.

The Council of Trent,¹⁵ focused predominantly on questions of truth and unity in response to the challenges of the Protestant Reformation, had proposed, for example, a rite for Mass (the Tridentine Rite) which unified the practice of the Catholic tradition yet lost many of the riches of the deep Catholic tradition.

The Second Vatican Council sought to restore this ancient tradition and to redirect the prayer and sacramental worship of the Church towards the Paschal Mystery of Christ's Life, Death and Resurrection. In subsequent decades we have continued to grapple with this challenge, but – trusting in the Providence of God – we continue to grow in faith and understanding of this mystery and how our worship makes present that mystery in our daily lives.

¹² Notably, Holy Orders; and Confirmation which may, in some circumstances, be delegated to a Priest

¹³ For example, if there is the risk of death and no 'ordinary' minister is available. It remains necessary that the correct form of words and action be used in administering valid Baptism

¹⁴ Second Vatican Council, Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy, *Sacrosanctum Concilium* n.7, 4 December 1963

¹⁵ AD 1545-1563

What is Liturgy?

Liturgy is both action and symbol: it speaks to the whole person and involves all the senses, sight, touch, sound, taste and smell. Its function is to build up Christ's Body, to strengthen us in our faith and in proclaiming Christ to the world.

As human creatures we learn through ritual repetition and copying. Thus, in liturgy, we discover - through word and gesture, silence and stillness, the riches of our Faith, and grow in prayer and understanding.

In the liturgy, Christ Himself acts in and through his Holy People gathered together in prayer and worship.

The Cycle of the Liturgical Year

Throughout the year, through the pattern of worship and prayer each day, with Christ at the centre of our lives, we journey through the Paschal Mystery of the Life, Death and Resurrection of Jesus in celebration with the whole Church and with all the saints.

The Cycle begins on the First Sunday of Advent and ends with the Solemnity of Christ the King. The Season of Advent leads us towards Christmas, which is celebrated as an 'Octave'.¹⁶ Then follows 'Ordinary Time', which means *time ordered to our salvation*. As we approach Easter¹⁷ we enter the Season of Lent, and after the Easter Octave we enter Eastertide as we approach Pentecost, the celebration of the Coming of the Holy Spirit. After this we return to Ordinary Time until we reach the Solemnity of Christ the King, which marks the end of the Liturgical Year.

The Cycle moves through three liturgical years in which the gospel texts come from Matthew, Mark and then Luke. Readings from the gospel of John are interspersed throughout the three years.

Liturgical Colours

Colours distinguish the different liturgical seasons and celebrations:

- Green (marking Ordinary Time) is used throughout the year
- Purple or Violet is used during Advent and Lent, and also for funerals
- White is used during Christmas and Easter, and also for celebrations of our Lord Jesus, of the Blessed Virgin Mary, of the Holy Angels, and of Saints who were not martyrs
- Red denotes the Passion of the Lord and is used at Pentecost and for the celebrations of martyrs. It represents witnessing even to the shedding of one's blood

¹⁶ That is, eight days of celebration

¹⁷ Which, again, is marked as an Octave

- Rose may be used on the Third Sunday of Advent (Gaudete Sunday) and, also, the Fourth Sunday of Lent (Laetare Sunday)

Suggested Points for Discussion

- Are there particular liturgical symbols – words or actions - which are important to you? Can you say why?
- Which of the Sacraments have you received? What do you remember of the celebration? Do you have photos or something else to remember them by?
- Have you attended or participated in the celebration of any of the Sacraments? What did you notice?
- ‘Liturgy is the *source* and *summit* of the life of the People of God.’ What, would you say, does this mean?
- ‘Liturgy... speaks to the whole person, it involves all the senses: sight, touch, sound, taste and smell.’ Can you think of examples of this from celebrations in which you have participated?

Suggested Activities

- Arrange a visit to your parish church to explore the signs and symbols of the sacraments e.g., the font, the tabernacle, the holy oils
- Reflect, as a group, on how the seven sacraments accompany us on the journey of our lives. Think about their meaning and what difference they make
- When visiting your parish church, look at the liturgical vestments used by the priest and reflect together on the meanings of the different liturgical colours

Further Reading

Catechism of the Catholic Church, Catholic Truth Society, 2016

Second Vatican Council, Decree on Sacred Liturgy *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, 4 December 1963

Dictionary of the Liturgy, by Jovian P. Lang, Catholic Book Publishing, 1989

Sacred Liturgy: The Source and Summit of the Life and Mission of the Church, by Dom Alcuin Reid, Ignatius Press 2014

You might also find it helpful to look at *Exploring Vatican II*, a short course which can be found at: <https://www.dioceseofleeds.org.uk/education/our-faith/learning-about-our-faith/resources-2/exploring-vatican-ii-2/>