

The Sacraments: A Personal Encounter

The “Liturgy” in its broadest definition refers to every form of liturgical rite offered within the Church. This includes each of the Seven Sacraments, the Liturgy of the Hours, Benediction of the Blessed Sacrament, blessings, and various other forms of liturgical rites and celebrations.

Among all liturgical worship, the Sacraments take pride of place. Baptism is the gateway to the Sacraments, and the Eucharist is the summit of the Sacraments. Each one offers the grace for a particular need.

Too often the Sacraments are seen primarily as an external ritual we participate in. They may be inspiring and uplifting, but some people never go beyond the externals. This is sad because the Sacraments are not meant to be only external signs and celebrations, they are also meant to be transforming internal realities in which we personally encounter the Living God! It is this deeply *personal* aspect that we will highlight here.

A Sacrament is an action of Christ and the Church that brings about what it signifies. For example, the water poured at Baptism is both an external sign and a spiritual reality. In this sacrament, the external and visible sign of washing with water actually accomplishes the interior and spiritual reality of cleansing the soul from all sin, making the person a new creation. When this is understood and believed, the Sacraments are able to take full effect in our lives. We must comprehend what is taking place and allow the spiritual reality to touch and change our lives.

The proper attitude to have toward the celebration of the Sacraments is an attitude of personal union with God. We must realize that this is a heart-to-heart encounter in which we can be deeply transformed. If we fail to realize this, the Sacrament is still valid; however, we will not allow God to change us. It would be as if God showed up, spoke to us, invited us to let Him change our life, and we simply ignored Him. Our lack of personal participation does not change the fact that God showed up, but it does eliminate the possibility of receiving Him into our soul.

When celebrating any one of the Sacraments, we must make it our goal to meet God in the depths of our being. It must be a real and transforming encounter with each person of the Trinity. We must look at the Sacraments with the spiritual eyes of faith: knowing, loving and receiving God Himself. This takes an authentic attitude of prayer.

There is a story of a child who came to realize this reality by watching his mother and father at Mass. This little child would follow them up to Holy Communion, return to the pew, and then watch as they closed their eyes and prayed. They tuned out everything else around them and entered into a deep communion with God. This child had been taught his catechism and understood that Holy Communion was the Body and Blood, Soul and Divinity of Christ. But it was this personal witness of his parents that truly taught the lesson of the Eucharist. Watching them encounter God in a real and personal way provided the insight necessary for him to want this sacred gift and to believe in the reality of the Eucharist. He understood, from the witness of his parents, that the Eucharist was real and deeply personal.

If the Sacraments were purely external, then fulfilling the external actions would suffice. But they are not just external; they are external and spiritual and require an interior spiritual participation. They require that one go through the external aspects, allow God to be made manifest, and then receive His presence and grace within one's soul. This is the way to celebrate the Sacraments!

It would be a very good idea if you spent time reflecting upon the way you celebrate the Sacraments. Do you meet God in a personal way? Do you truly pray the Sacraments? Are you letting God transform you as you participate? If you were to read this book in detail, knew all about the Sacraments and believed in what you study, this would not be enough. You must then live the Sacraments. They must become alive in your life. They must be true encounters with God and deeply personal encounters. Be honest with yourself. Think about your participation. And where your participation is lacking, resolve to make a change. You won't regret it! You'll discover that these precious gifts actually can transform your life, giving you all you need to live a fulfilled, holy and happy life!

An Overview

The Seven Sacraments are categorized as follows:

- 1) Sacraments of Initiation—Baptism, Confirmation, Eucharist
- 2) Sacraments of Healing—Confession, Anointing of the Sick
- 3) Sacraments at the Service of Communion—Marriage, Holy Orders

The following chapters will look at each of the Sacraments. We will reflect upon them not only from the theological and catechetical point of view (meaning the Church's teaching about them) but also from this very personal point of view. We have to discover how these sacraments can completely change our lives. We must understand that we meet God in each of them and that this encounter is deeply personal. So be open to looking at the Seven Sacraments in a whole new way!

Sacraments of Initiation

The Sacraments of Christian initiation—Baptism, Confirmation, and the Eucharist—lay the *foundations* of every Christian life. “The sharing in the divine nature given to men through the grace of Christ bears a certain likeness to the origin, development, and nourishing of natural life. The faithful are born anew by Baptism, strengthened by the Sacrament of Confirmation, and receive in the Eucharist the food of eternal life. By means of these sacraments of Christian initiation, they thus receive in increasing measure the treasures of the divine life and advance toward the perfection of charity” (Paul VI, apostolic constitution, *Divinae consortium naturae*: AAS 63 (1971) 657; cf. RCIA Introduction 1–2). (CCC #1212)

We're all familiar with initiation rites. For example, there are often rites of initiation for those college students who choose to join a fraternity or sorority. Or when joining the military, you have to go through basic training as a sort of initiation. When joining the Knights of Columbus in the Catholic Church, you must go through initiation ceremonies called degrees to become fully initiated.

In an analogous way, the Sacraments of Initiation are our official acts of initiation. But I say “in an analogous way” for a reason. The Sacraments are not just ceremonies or rituals you have to go through to be accepted as a member. They do not just symbolize our initiation nor are they a rite of passage. The Sacraments of Initiation actually *make* us members. They change us in such a way that we can never undo what is done. With these sacraments, we are fully initiated. But initiated into what, you may ask? They initiate us into two things: The Church and the Trinity. And these two are inseparable. To be initiated into one means you are initiated into the other. You can't have one and not have the other.

Each Sacrament will be dealt with in detail in the coming chapters, but for now let's look at the three Sacraments of Initiation together so as to see their unity and the unique focus of each. Each one of these sacraments involves the entire Trinity. But each one offers a unique personal focus also.

Baptism: Baptism makes us adopted sons and daughters of God. This is done by the power of the Holy Spirit, and we are made new creations in Christ Jesus. But the unique focus offered here is the relationship that is established with the Father through baptism.

In baptism we receive a spiritual adoption. This is far more significant than a physical adoption. Spiritual adoption makes us true sons and daughters for eternity. We forever are given God as our Father. And the relationship with the Father becomes deeply personal. So the personal aspect we are invited to focus on is that, because of your baptism, you have a new relationship with God as your Father. This relationship is established so that you can enjoy all the fruits of being God's child. It means the Father knows you, and you come to know the Father. It means that the relationship established is unbreakable and familial. It means you belong to God as you take on a new identity as God's child. This is who you are!

Baptism is not just a one-time event. Rather, it's a one-time event that has perpetual effects in our lives if we let it. It provides us with a permanent and unchanging relationship with God. Therefore, it is good to reflect daily upon your relationship with the Father that was established through baptism. Baptism has this ongoing effect in your life.

Confirmation: It should be obvious that confirmation provides us with a unique opportunity to deepen our personal relationship with the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit is not just some spiritual power of God; rather, the Holy Spirit is a Person—a divine Person we are called to know and love. Baptism introduces us to the Holy Spirit, but it is confirmation that deepens our ability to have a true and transformative relationship with the Spirit. Confirmation is a Sacrament in which the Holy Spirit enters our lives in a full way. We meet Him, get to know Him, and receive the unlimited benefits of that real and personal relationship. Knowing the Holy Spirit changes us. This relationship enables the Holy Spirit to possess us and act in and through us. We become one with Him in the Sacrament.

If you are confirmed, it is good to regularly reflect upon your daily conversation and relationship with God the Holy Spirit. Do you see Him active in your life? Is your relationship with Him guiding all your actions? Is He with you every moment of your day? God the Holy Spirit wants to have a friendship with you that is real and lasting. Once confirmed, He pledges to be there always as long as you remain open. Make the choice to be open and allow this friendship to change you.

Eucharist: The Eucharist is the Body, Blood, Soul and Divinity of Christ Jesus. Therefore, receiving the Eucharist has the unique effect of deepening our relationship with God the Son. It's easier to see God the Son in a personal way, since He took on flesh in the Person of Jesus. Therefore, we should strive to see the Holy Eucharist as a calling to strengthen our personal bond with Him. The Eucharist is not just some spiritual food; rather, the Eucharist is God Himself entering our soul in a real and personal way. It is an invitation from God the Son to enter into communion with us. Receiving the Eucharist in faith transforms us into Him whom we consume. In a sense, it's right to say that we are consumed by Him whom we consume. And this consumption takes the form of a real and personal relationship.

It's also good to adore Christ in the Blessed Sacrament on a regular basis. Though receiving Him in Holy Communion is the ultimate goal, adoration of Him in the Blessed Sacrament prepares our soul to receive Him more deeply and helps us make our reception of Him more personal and more transforming.

It would be like preparing a meal. If someone sits and watches a gourmet meal being prepared all day, salivates over it, and looks forward to that first bite, then that first bite will be wonderful! In fact, the person who watches the meal be prepared, and anticipates eating it, will most likely enjoy it much more than the person who shows up at the last minute and consumes it quickly.

So it is with the Eucharist. If we take time to adore Christ, speak to Him, gaze upon Him and grow in a desire for Him, then our reception of Him in Holy Communion will be all the more fruitful.

Trinity: The Sacraments of Initiation have the effect of deepening our relationship with each person of the Holy Trinity. We become children of the Father in baptism, strengthened in our Christian walk by our deepened relationship with the Holy Spirit in Confirmation, and become one with Christ Jesus as we consume Him and adore Him in the Holy Eucharist. Therefore, the Sacraments of Initiation have the effect of introducing us into the full life of the Most Holy Trinity!

Sacraments of Healing

Despite the unlimited grace given through our personal relationship with the Trinity in the Sacraments of Initiation, we still sin and we still encounter sickness and death. For that reason, God comes to us with healing in two additional and unique ways.

Confession: The Sacrament of Confession, Penance, or Reconciliation offers us a

unique encounter with God in our sinfulness. God loves us so much that He came to reconcile us with Himself. And He did it knowing full well that we are sinners in need of forgiveness and mercy.

Confession is an opportunity for a real and personal encounter with God in the midst of our sin. It's God's way of saying to us that He, personally, wants to tell us He forgives us. When we confess our sins and receive absolution, we should see that this is an act of a personal God coming to us, hearing our sins, wiping them away and then telling us to go and sin no more.

So when you go to confession, make sure you see it as a personal encounter with our merciful God. Make sure you hear Him speak to you and know that it is God who enters your soul wiping your sin away.

Anointing of the Sick: God has a special care and concern for the weak, the sick, the suffering and the dying. We are not alone in these moments. In this sacrament, we must strive to see this personal God come to us in compassion to care for us. We need to hear Him tell us He is near. We need to let Him transform our suffering, to bring the healing He desires (especially spiritual healing), and when our time comes, to let Him fully prepare our soul to meet Him in Heaven.

If you find yourself in need of this sacrament, make sure you look at it as this personal God coming to you in your time of need to offer you strength, mercy and compassion. Jesus knows what suffering and death are all about. He lived them. And He wants to be there for you in these moments.

Sacraments of Vocation

Each of us is given a mission. We are individually given a mission, and the Church as a whole is given a mission. The Sacraments of Vocation are given to us so that we as individuals, and we as a Church, can live out the mission God has entrusted to us.

Marriage: The first mission God gave to Adam and Eve, as the first members of the human race, was to “become one” and then to “go forth and multiply.” He established married life from the moment of creation as an integral part of humanity. Of course, the fall from the Garden of Eden left humanity so wounded that the perfect fulfillment of their mission became impossible. Therefore, God elevates this natural mission to a supernatural mission by establishing marriage as a sacrament. As a sacrament, marriage now includes a third participant. God now commits Himself to the couple in the form of a covenant. He enables each person in marriage to come to know, love and serve God Himself through coming to know, love and serve each other. Spouses love God as they love each other.

Parents love God as they love their children. Parents, in addition, are enabled to be unique instruments of God in the lives of their children. All of this means that marriage is a divine gift which has the potential of fostering a personal communion with God through one another.

Holy Orders: Jesus wanted to remain with us always. He does this through prayer and the Sacraments. Another way He does this is through the ordained ministry. First, the ordained minister, a bishop, priest or deacon is given the privilege of being deeply united with God, communicating God to the world in his very person. God lives in the soul of the minister in a real and personal way. So the very act of exercising his ordained ministry has the effect of establishing a unique and personal relationship between God and the minister.

Holy Orders also enables all of God's people to encounter Him through His minister. This is especially the case in the ministry of the Sacraments. Ordination also allows God's people to meet Him personally through the minister's preaching and shepherding. And the more a minister is open to divine grace, the better an instrument he becomes of the very person of God.

Hopefully this brief overview of the Sacraments helps you come to understand the personal nature of God and the personal way He desires to come to us in the Sacraments. From here, let's look more deeply at each one of these sacred gifts.