

Catholic

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WHAT ARE SACRAMENTS?



Through the sacraments, we celebrate God's saving presence in our past, present, and future faith lives.

by Joseph Martos

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What do the sacraments mean? It's a simple question that can't be answered simply. Sacraments are rituals that are highly symbolic. Unlike traffic signs or signs in a store, symbols can mean more than one thing at the same time: they can mean different things to different people, and they can have different levels of meaning. Ceremonies that are rich in symbolism can mean many things at once.

All public ceremonies and social rituals are meaningful when they have present, past, and future dimensions to be honestly and joyfully celebrated.

CHRISTIAN RITUALS

Christian rituals and ceremonies range from the very simple (for example, making the sign of the cross) to the very complex (for example, the Holy Week triduum). They all have aspects of past, present, and future.

In general, we can say that Christian rituals are meaningful to the extent that people know what they point to in the past, that people celebrate what is real for them in the present, and that people affirm what they point to in the future. The more important, significant, and cherished these past, present, and future dimensions are for people, the more the ritual symbolizes and celebrates what is *sacred* for them. That makes it more meaningful for them.

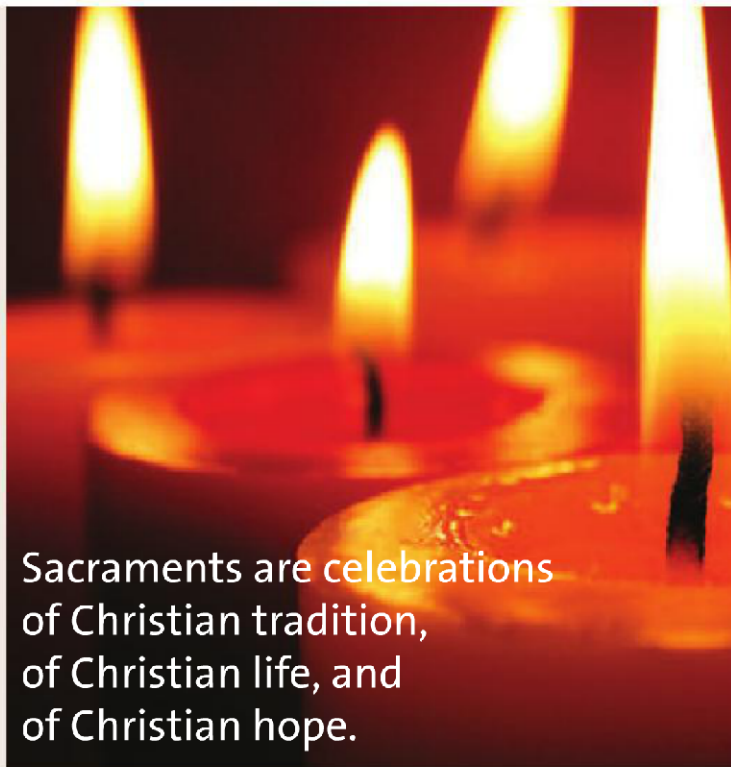
CATHOLIC SACRAMENTS

The Latin word *sacramentum* means "a sign of the sacred." The Catholic sacraments are ceremonies that point to what is sacred, significant, and important for Christians.

Sacraments are celebrations of *Christian tradition*, of *Christian life*, and of *Christian hope*. They share the dimensions of past, present, and future that give ordinary celebrations meaning.

Sacraments, though, are no ordinary celebrations. They are special occasions for experiencing God's saving presence. It is important for people to be in touch with what the sacraments celebrate if the rituals are to be as meaningful as possible for them.

Sometimes people who participate in a sacramental celebration do not fully appreciate one or another of the dimensions of a sacrament's meaning. In this case, the sacrament speaks its meanings, as it were, to those attending the ceremony and invites them to find out more about them. The sacrament also calls people to get in touch with the sacred realities it celebrates. The more people respond to this call (for example, Reconciliation's call to forgive and accept forgiveness), the more they will find meaning in the sacrament.



Sacraments are celebrations of Christian tradition, of Christian life, and of Christian hope.

SACRAMENTS CELEBRATE CHRIST'S LIFE

Of all the events that sacraments can point to in the past (biblical events, Church traditions, events in one's own faith journey), the most important are events in the life of Christ. Tradition tells us that all of the sacraments were instituted by Christ. Indeed, they each have a real foundation in the life and ministry of Jesus. Each relates to stories and teachings of Jesus.

For example, Baptism calls to mind the baptism of Jesus in the Jordan and the way Jesus gathered a community around himself. It also reminds us of the command of the risen Lord to carry the Gospel to others and to baptize them. Eucharist reminds us of the Last Supper. Those familiar with the Gospels are also reminded of other meals to which Jesus invited even those who were rejected by others. Reconciliation reminds us of Jesus' invitation to forgive one another and of the way he forgave those who put him to death.

SACRAMENTS CELEBRATE THE COMMUNITY'S LIFE

Each sacrament dramatizes and points to something that is happening in the lives of people who belong to the celebrating community. For example, Eucharist strengthens the unity of Christians as they receive it. It celebrates God's nourishing presence with us now. Sacraments celebrate the community's life now.

One reason for the current question about what age is right for Confirmation is that people cannot all agree about what ex-



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actly the sacrament should point to in the lives of those being confirmed.

It is easier to see what other sacraments are celebrating, however. For example, through the Baptism ceremony, some people are entering the Christian community while others are supporting and welcoming them into community. In Matrimony and Ordination ceremonies, people are likewise undergoing important changes in their relationships with others through the very process of the ceremony.

SACRAMENTS CELEBRATE THE KINGDOM OF GOD

The sacraments also point to a future that Jesus referred to as God's kingdom, realm, or reign. God already reigns in hearts that are converted to doing God's will and to loving others as Jesus instructed. God's realm is already found wherever justice and compassion are the basis of human relationships between individuals, in a group, in an institution, or even in a whole society. But the kingdom is always incomplete, so the sacraments look forward to the coming of God's kingdom in its fullness.

Of all the time dimensions of sacramental meaning, the future dimension is the most elusive. We remember the past and we can see the present, but how do we get in touch with

the future? Yet somehow we do this every time we participate in a ritual that we find meaningful.

Children who make their first Communion or the Sacrament of Penance and Reconciliation are expressing a desire to get closer to God. People who get married in church or who are ordained to the priesthood are saying something about their future in relation to God and the Christian community.

But sacraments imply more than just a personal future. They also point to the possibility and hope that the realities they celebrate will someday reign over all the earth. Eucharist looks forward to the time when all will be one. Reconciliation speaks the possibility of peace among all families and nations. Anointing of the Sick points to the hope that illness and disease will someday be no more.

MAKING THE CONNECTIONS

We often hear people talking about the meaning of the sacraments as though it were a simple thing, as though each sacrament had a single simple meaning. We see now, however, that the actual meaning of any sacramental celebration is rich and complex, for it has multiple dimensions.

A sacrament's meaning is multidimensional because it points to three different time dimensions: past, present, and future. A sacrament also has multiple levels of depth because it can be personally meaningful for an individual at one level, it can have a shared meaning for a particular group at another level, it can have a general meaning for the whole Church at yet a third level.

When people talk about *the* meaning of a sacrament, they may be referring to its general meaning or to its meaning in the life of the institutional Church. Yet sacraments are celebrations of God's gift and gracious action in our lives.

The fruitfulness of a sacramental celebration is strongly dependent on the connections among the people and to what the dimensions of past, present, and future bring to the celebration. In order for sacraments to be meaningful celebrations

for us, we need to be grounded in Scripture, involved with our faith community, and working toward God's reign.

DIG DEEPER

Why do we think of sacraments in three time dimensions?

How are sacraments alike and different from ordinary ceremonies?

What sacramental experience has most meaning for you?

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THE SEVEN SACRAMENTS

The *Catechism* groups the sacraments under three headings: initiation, healing, and service (see 1210-1666). These “sacred signs” share the dimensions of past, present, and future.

	PAST	PRESENT	FUTURE
INITIATION: These celebrate and introduce us to the experience of the Christian life.			
BAPTISM Baptism signifies our immersion in the Christian life and marks our spiritual rebirth in the Church.	Jesus called people to follow him and invited them into community and the life of God.	We call people to follow Jesus and invite them into our community.	We look forward to and work for the day when all people will be in unity.
CONFIRMATION Confirmation seals our Baptism and confirms our commitment both to the Church and to the work of Christ in the world.	Jesus communicated his spirit to people and strengthened them.	We communicate the spirit of Jesus to people and strengthen them.	We announce that all can be filled and strengthened by the spirit of God.
EUCCHARIST Eucharist celebrates our life together as a community, the presence of Christ in our midst, the Word that is proclaimed and explained, many dimensions of the paschal mystery of death and rebirth. We celebrate our unity with Christ in communion and service.	Jesus ate with sinners and was present to them.	We share Christ’s real presence today under the signs of bread and wine.	We anticipate the day when all people will be fed and will find God close to them.
HEALING: These celebrate and reveal to us God’s power to heal us in soul and body.			
RECONCILIATION Reconciliation celebrates and reminds us of God’s mercy and helps us to experience divine forgiveness, to forgive ourselves, and to become reconciled with others.	Jesus called for conversion and forgave those who were repentant.	We are called to conversion, we ask for forgiveness, and we forgive others.	We know that forgiveness and reconciliation are always possible with God’s help.
ANOINTING Anointing of the Sick celebrates and reminds us of God’s compassion and helps us to experience spiritual—and sometimes physical—strengthening when we are ill.	Jesus healed the suffering in body and soul.	We ask for God’s healing when we are sick and suffering.	We hope and work for the relief of all suffering in the world.
SERVICE: These celebrate the Christian vocation of service and consecrate us to minister within our own family and within the wider Church community.			
MARRIAGE Matrimony joins two people in marriage for a lifetime of dedication to each other’s well-being and the well-being of their children and the community.	Jesus called spouses to unconditional love and fidelity.	We honor and expect unconditional love and lasting fidelity between spouses.	We believe in and help others to find happiness in marital love and fidelity.
ORDINATION Ordination integrates men into the holy orders of bishops, priests, and deacons, empowering them for a lifetime of leadership and service in the Church.	Jesus appointed 12 to minister in a special way.	We ordain certain members to minister and lead us in the sacraments.	We raise up future ministers by proclaiming that ordained ministry is a special vocation of Christians.

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