

The Sacraments

Source of Our Life in Christ



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MIDWEST THEOLOGICAL FORUM
Downers Grove, Illinois

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CHAPTER 1

Efficacious Signs of Grace

In the Sacraments, God makes us more like him by giving us his grace, a share in his divine life, which sanctifies us.

OPENING ACTIVITY

Read the following story:

A gardener worked on a king's estate. He loved his job and cheerfully set about planting new trees, trimming the hedges, and designing new and creative floral arrangements in many bright and beautiful colors. The king would often come out on his balcony in the morning and observe him working. In time, he developed an affection for the cheerful gardener. However, the gardener, being a simple and common man from the local village, was not educated in the finer techniques of gardening. The king would often see him committing unintentional mistakes or simply doing things in a way that might easily be improved. One day the king called the gardener to the palace. He told the gardener that he was impressed with the job that he was doing and his willingness to serve the king. He asked the gardener to move into the palace, and together they would plan a garden that would be the greatest in the land.

Then write for a few minutes on how we can consider ourselves like the gardener and God like the king.

Share responses.

BASIC QUESTION

This chapter attempts to answer the following basic question:

- ✦ What is a Sacrament?

KEY IDEA

The key idea of this chapter is:

- ✦ A Sacrament is an efficacious sign of grace, instituted by Christ and entrusted to the Church, by which divine life is dispensed to us.



The Saviour by Joos van Cleve.

Christ gave his Apostles a command to evangelize, or spread the Gospel, everywhere.

Before ascending into Heaven, the resurrected Christ gave his Apostles a command to evangelize, or spread the Gospel, everywhere.

All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, to the close of the age. (Mt 28:18-20)

Christ was able to give this command to his Apostles because God the Father had given him “all authority in heaven and on earth.” His goal was for every man, woman, and child—everyone made in his image and likeness, even if not yet known—to become a follower, or disciple, and to become a part of the Kingdom of God. Becoming a disciple of Christ involves having faith in Christ, following his teachings, and receiving the Sacrament of Baptism.

Baptism is the first of the Seven Sacraments that Christ gave to his Church. The others are the Sacraments of Confirmation (or Chrismation), the Holy Eucharist, Penance (also called Reconciliation or Confession), the Anointing of the Sick, Holy Orders, and Matrimony.

Although some Protestant denominations speak of “sacraments,” only the Catholic and Orthodox churches acknowledge all Seven Sacraments.

DEFINING SACRAMENT

The word *sacrament* comes from the Latin word *sacramentum*, which in its religious context means “consecration,” or “the act of making holy or sacred.” It has its earliest origins as a legal term in the Roman Empire: When a person entered into a contract or filed a lawsuit, he would give a *sacramentum*, or “pledge,” of money or property to the temple, and he would forfeit this *sacramentum* if he were to lose the lawsuit or break the contract. *Sacramentum* later also meant the oath taken by a Roman soldier pledging loyalty to the emperor and to the Roman gods.

By the second century, Christians had appropriated the word to describe the profession of Christian Faith which bonded the Christian to God. (The equivalent Greek word for this was *mysterion*, or “mystery,” which became the favored term in Eastern Christianity for Sacrament. In the Eastern Orthodox and Eastern Catholic Churches, the Sacraments are still called “the Mysteries.”) Eventually, *sacramentum* was applied to any sacred Christian ceremony. In time, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, the Church came to understand the unique character of seven of these rites and began to refer to these alone as the Sacraments.

The Sacraments are the primary means by which Christ acts in the world today, enabling us to receive his grace. Through the Sacraments, Christ fulfills his promise to remain with his Church “always.”

But what exactly are Sacraments? The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (cf. CCC 1131) gives us a three-part definition (here broken into three bullet points):

- ✦ The Sacraments are efficacious signs of grace, instituted by Christ and entrusted to the Church, by which divine life is dispensed to us.
- ✦ 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.

The first part concerns what a Sacrament is; the second part speaks of how they are celebrated; and the third part details what they do for us. This chapter will attempt to clarify the first part of this three-part definition. Chapter 2 will examine the second and third parts.

SACRAMENTS AS EFFICACIOUS SIGNS

The *Catechism* begins by stating that the Sacraments are “efficacious signs.” What does this mean in plain language?

A sign is a way of directing our attention to a deeper reality. We use and encounter signs in everyday life. We witness signs even in nature. For example, we recognize a dark raincloud as a sign that a storm may be approaching; when we are running a fever, it is a sign of an underlying illness.

Signs or symbols are also a primary way in which human beings communicate. A railroad crossing sign warns us to watch out for a coming train; a sign on an office door indicates the function or personnel particular to that room. Actions can also be signs. A referee at a sporting event uses signs or signals to indicate the results of a play or a foul call; a mother hugs her child as a sign of her love. In Scripture, when Pontius Pilate washed his hands after he gave the order to crucify Our Lord, he was attempting to signify his innocence of an obvious injustice.

Even the words we speak or write are signs. Words and sounds stand for real things, whether material objects or abstract ideas. We might use the word

Focus Question 1:

What three things does becoming a disciple of Christ involve?

Focus Question 2:

What is the definition of a Sacrament?

Focus Question 3:

The Sacraments are the primary means by which Christ does what in the world today?

VOCABULARY

SACRAMENT

An efficacious sign of grace, instituted by Christ and entrusted to the Church, by which divine life is dispensed through the work of the Holy Spirit. There are seven Sacraments.



Sacraments of Baptism, Confirmation, and Penance.
Seven Sacraments Triptych (detail)
 by Weyden.

Focus Question 4:

What is a sign?

Focus Question 5:

What does efficacious mean?

FROM YouCat

Why do the Sacraments belong to the Church? Why cannot anyone use them however he wants?

Sacraments are Christ’s gift to his Church. It is her duty to administer them and to protect them from misuse. [1117–1119, 1131]

Jesus entrusted his words and signs to specific men, namely, the apostles, who were to hand them on; he did not hand them over to an anonymous crowd. Today we would say: He did not post his inheritance on the Internet for free access but rather registered it under a domain name. Sacraments exist *for* the Church and *through* the Church. They are for her, because the Body of Christ, which is the Church, is established, nourished, and perfected through the sacraments. They exist *through* her, because the sacraments are the power of Christ’s Body, for example in confession, where Christ forgives our sins through the priest. (YouCat 175)



Sacraments of Holy Orders, Marriage, and Anointing of the Sick.
Seven Sacraments Triptych (detail)
by Weyden.

chair to designate the place we are sitting; we say *tired* to express how we feel after a long or difficult day. These words are “signs” of the reality we are trying to express.

In addition to spoken words that we hear with our ears, we can use many other physical things as signs, such as:

- ✦ alphabetic letters, hand signals (in sign language), or pictures (like a “no smoking” sign) that we see with our eyes; or
- ✦ bumps on paper (as in Braille) that we touch with our fingers.

The Sacraments, too, are signs in that they indicate a deeper reality. Each of the Sacraments employs a *material* or *physical sign* as an essential component. For example, in the Sacrament of Baptism, water is used as a sign of life and interior cleansing. Each of the Seven Sacraments has a material element that is central to its nature.

MATERIAL SIGNS USED IN THE SACRAMENTS	
Baptism	Water
Confirmation	Sacred Chrism (oil)
Eucharist	Wheat bread and grape wine
Penance	Oral confession
Holy Orders	The laying on of hands
Marriage	Exchange of vows and consummation
Anointing of the Sick	Oil and laying on of hands

But these sacramental signs are not just “symbols” of the deeper reality to which they point; they actually make that deeper reality happen. In other words, they are *efficacious*. They carry out the actions they signify. They accomplish the very things they symbolize.

As an example, let us consider a ritual to which every student eagerly anticipates: graduation. At a graduation ceremony, we witness visible signs of the student’s accomplishment. Those who are graduating dress in gowns and wear mortarboards with tassels, signs of their academic achievement. As each graduate’s name is called, that person strides across the stage to accept his or her diploma, a document that states clearly that this individual has completed a particular stage in his or her education. When the ceremony has concluded, we say that the person has “graduated.”

The graduation ceremony is important to us because of our human need to ritualize our achievements, to celebrate certain milestones in our lives. Yet, these are not efficacious signs, but more like ritual symbols. It is not the wearing of the gown or the handing over of the diploma that makes us graduates, but the achievements that preceded that ceremony. The student “graduates” when he or she completes his requirements for the diploma—when he or she passes the final exam or receives his or her final grades. The ceremony, in fact, is optional: If the student is sick and cannot attend, he or she is still a graduate and still has earned his or her diploma. So the diploma and ceremony are more like symbols of our academic standing, but not efficacious “signs” that actually confer upon us the fruits of our academic studies.

It should not be hard to see that Baptism is a “sign” of cleansing, since we have been washing our entire lives, and we cleanse our hands many times a



Institution of the Eucharist by Poussin.

Each of the Sacraments is a personal “encounter” with Christ.

day. However, the pouring of water while speaking the words, “I baptize you in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit,” does more than just symbolize a cleansing from sin. It actually effects that cleansing. This is why the Sacraments are *efficacious* signs, meaning that they “produce the desired effect.”

What makes them effective? Christ does. While each Sacrament has a human minister who performs the sign—for example, the person who pours water and speaks words in Baptism—Christ accomplishes the sacramental action. It is akin to the way God spoke “Let there be light” at Creation, and light was created.

Thus, each of the Sacraments is a personal “encounter” with Christ. For example, in Confession when the human minister—a priest or bishop—speaks the words of absolution, it is really Christ speaking and forgiving.

For this reason, when receiving a Sacrament, a person does not have to worry about the holiness of the human minister who is the instrument of this grace. Of course, every priest should live a prayerful and morally good life, but the Church affirms that when a Sacrament is celebrated with the intention of the Church, “the power of Christ and his Spirit act in it and through it, independently of the personal holiness of the minister” (CCC 1128).

This is the meaning of the Church’s affirmation¹ that the sacraments act *ex opere operato* (literally: “by the very fact of the action’s being performed”), i.e., by virtue of the saving work of Christ, accomplished once for all. It follows that “the sacrament is not wrought by the righteousness of either the celebrant or the recipient, but by the power of God.”² (CCC 1128)

Thus, the Sacraments are efficacious *ex opere operato*, by the work done. They “work” because God is good, not because human beings are good. It would be quite discomfoting to have to consider the state of holiness of the priest each and every time that we receive a Sacrament.

Let us continue with the essential meaning of the Sacraments, i.e., that they impart “grace” or “divine life” to us.

Focus Question 6:

What is an efficacious sign?

Focus Question 7:

What is an example of a sacramental sign?

Focus Question 8:

What makes Sacraments effective?

Focus Question 9:

What does *ex opere operato* mean in relation to the Sacraments?

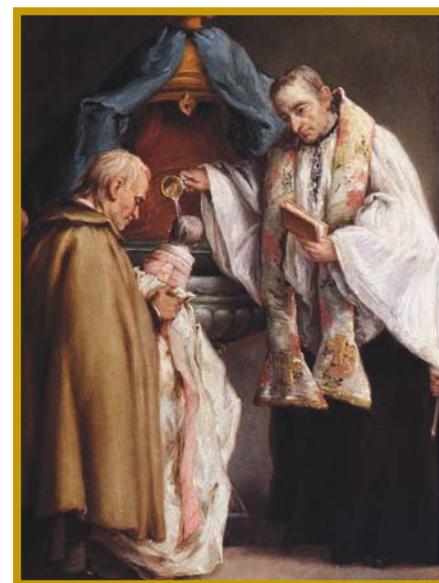
Focus Question 10:

What is the relationship between the personal holiness of the celebrant of a Sacrament and the ability of the Sacrament to impart grace?

VOCABULARY

EX OPERE OPERATO

A term in sacramental theology (literally, “by the work done”), meaning that Sacraments are effective by means of the sacramental rites themselves, and not because of the worthiness of the minister or recipient.



Sacrament of Baptism by Longhi.

The Sacraments are efficacious *ex opere operato*, by the work done.