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The Holy Mysteries: The Sacraments of Initiation

The culmination of the entire process of Christian initiation is the celebration of the sacraments of initiation: baptism, confirmation, and Eucharist. Let's take some time to look at each of these holy mysteries, or sacraments, of the Church.

Baptism

United with Christ. In baptism we are united with Jesus Christ. As we go down into the saving waters (or as the water is poured over us) we are made one with Christ. Just as surely as Jesus descended to the dead after his crucifixion and then rose to new life, we unite ourselves with Christ in the mystery of death and resurrection when we go down into the waters of baptism. Thus, in baptism we share in the death and the resurrection of Jesus Christ. Through the power of the holy water our lives become one with the life of Jesus Christ. As such, we share in all the promises of Christ. Most importantly, we share in the promise of everlasting life.

To symbolize the everlasting life and light of Christ that burns within us we are given a candle at baptism. The flame of the candle is taken from the flame of the Easter, or Paschal, candle. The Paschal candle represents the light of Christ. As the flame of our baptismal candle has as its source the light of Christ, so too, the source of our life is Christ.

A New Creation. In baptism we are made a new creation. The life-giving waters of baptism give us new life. The waters of life wash away the "old" and give us the "new." In baptism, we leave behind our former and sinful ways of living and we accept the way of Jesus Christ. The sinful ways of our past are washed away and made clean and new. Everything that is sinful or evil is wiped out by the power-filled waters of baptism. What remains is a new creation. This new creation is free from all sin. As Catholics we believe we are freed from original sin. Sin is wiped out and we begin life anew.

Thus the three sacraments of Christian initiation closely combine to bring us, the faithful of Christ, to his full stature and to enable us to carry out the mission of the entire people of God in the Church and in the world.

(Christian Initiation, "General Introduction," 2d)

To symbolize our new life in Christ, we are given a white garment. The white garment is a sign of our new life, our freedom from sin, and our unity with Christ.

Adopted as God's Children. In baptism we are adopted as God's children. In baptism, we celebrate our rebirth as God's own daughters and sons. We have been born of this earth by our human parents, and in baptism we are born again, or made new, as God's children. As God's adopted children, we share in the inheritance of our brother, Jesus Christ. We share in the inheritance of the eternal life that he won for us by his death and resurrection.

In baptism we are made into God's own people. That is, we become

one of God's chosen ones. We become part of the people of God, the Church. In baptism, we are incorporated into the life of Christ and also into the life of the Church. We become members of the Body of Christ.

In summary, through the power of the holy waters of baptism we are united forever with Jesus Christ. We are made one with Christ and share in the mystery of his life, death, and resurrection. The life-giving waters of baptism free us from sin and make us a new creation. We are given a new life as God's daughters and sons.

Confirmation

Confirmation is the second sacrament of initiation. It is closely connected to baptism and includes an anointing with chrism that is similar to the post-baptismal anointing for infants.

Full Outpouring of the Holy Spirit. Although we receive the gift of the Holy Spirit at our baptism, we believe that through the sacrament of confirmation we receive the full outpouring of the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit gives us strength to live as disciples of Jesus Christ and guides us on the way.

In addition to receiving strength and guidance from the Holy Spirit, we are given all the gifts of the Holy Spirit. We receive "the spirit of wisdom and understanding, the spirit of right judgment and courage, the spirit of knowledge and reverence..., the spirit of wonder and awe" (Rite of Confirmation, 25).

As the bishop or priest lays hands upon us, he prays that we will receive the many gifts of the spirit. Since ancient times, the laying on of hands has been a sign for calling the Holy Spirit upon a person.

Made More Like Christ. In confirmation we are also anointed with the holy oil of chrism. We are anointed to be more like Christ. In baptism, we are united with Christ, then by being anointed with oil in confirmation we are made even more like our savior. Through the sacred oil of chrism we are in a sense shaped or molded or configured to be like Jesus Christ.

What was begun in baptism is now sealed in the anointing of confirmation. As the bishop or priest signs us with the oil he says, "Be sealed with the Gift of the Holy Spirit" (Rite of Confirmation, 27).

In summary, in the sacrament of confirmation the laying on of hands symbolizes our being filled with the gifts of the Holy Spirit. Furthermore, we are anointed with the holy oil of chrism and thereby made to be more like Christ—priest, prophet, and king.

Eucharist

The Holy Eucharist is the culminating point of Christian initiation. Having been washed clean in baptism and made to be more like Christ in confirmation, the person now comes to the Eucharistic table to receive the bread and wine of everlasting life and to go forth in mission. The word *Eucharist* refers to Communion—when we receive the Body and Blood of Jesus Christ. *Eucharist* also refers to the Catholic Mass in its entirety.

The Bread of Life. In the Eucharist we receive the body and blood of Jesus Christ. We believe that through the power of the Holy Spirit the bread and wine offered at Mass become the Body and Blood of Jesus Christ. We believe the Eucharist is our bread of life. By receiving the

bread and wine of everlasting life we are given the strength and nourishment we need to live as faithful disciples of Jesus Christ.

A Memorial Sacrifice. In the Eucharist, or at Mass, we recall the great sacrifice that Jesus made for us. We recall the Last Supper where Jesus offered his own body and blood for us. We remember and give thanks for Jesus's death and resurrection. Not only do we remember, but also when we gather together at Mass for this memorial sacrifice, we make Christ Jesus actually present with us. We believe that by sacrificing himself on the cross Jesus won for us the forgiveness of our sins. By his death and resurrection he won our salvation.

In addition, we believe in the real presence of Jesus Christ in the bread and the wine. We

also believe that Christ is present in the assembly of believers, in the priest and in the Word of God proclaimed at Mass.

A Sacred Meal. The Eucharist is also a holy meal. As Catholic Christians we gather around the table to remember Jesus's life, death, and resurrection. Scripture is read, wine is poured, and bread is broken. By sharing in the Body and Blood of Christ, we are united with one another and

Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? Therefore we have been buried with him by baptism into death, so that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, so we too might walk in newness of life.

(Romans 6:3-4)

with Christ Jesus our Lord. By sharing in the flesh of Christ, we are united not only to him, but also to one another. Sharing the body of

Since the beginning of the Church, adult Baptism is the common practice where the proclamation of the Gospel is still new. The catechumenate (preparation for Baptism) therefore occupies an important place. This initiation into Christian faith and life should dispose the catechumen to receive the gift of God in Baptism, Confirmation, and the Eucharist.

[Catechism of the Catholic Church, 1247]

Christ strengthens us *to be* the Body of Christ.

We are sent forth from this sacred meal strengthened and nourished, that we might continue the work Jesus began on earth. The Eucharist sends us forth in mission. United with Christ and with one

another we have the strength and courage to continue to minister to others.

In summary, Eucharist is the bread of life. It is the Body and Blood of Christ Jesus our Savior. In Eucharist we give praise and thanks for the great sacrifice Jesus made for our salvation. We commemorate the great sacrifice Jesus made for us. We remember and celebrate by sharing in a sacred meal. And, finally strengthened by Christ's own Body and Blood, we are sent forth in mission for the life of the world.

For Reflection and Discussion

- In the description of the sacraments of baptism, confirmation, and Eucharist, what phrase, image, or symbol struck you or got your attention?
- When did you celebrate the sacrament of confirmation? What memory do you have of the celebration? What meaning did the sacrament of confirmation have for you then? What meaning does it have for you now?
- Eucharist is a weekly celebration, for some it is even daily. Why do you celebrate Eucharist? What is most powerful for you about the Eucharist?
- What images comes to mind when you think of your own baptism, confirmation, and First Eucharist? Spend some time thinking or writing about this. At some point in time, share these thoughts and feelings with your candidate.

Imagine, for a moment, accompanying another person on a magnificently beautiful, forested, mountainous hike. Imagine the terrain to be fabulously picturesque, yet rugged, even treacherous, at times. The hike leads to a breathtakingly stunning mountain peak—a view to die for! You are quite familiar with the pathway that leads to the peak. You have traveled the path many times and are sure-footed and confident. Though you, too, stumble and fall at times, you know the way.

You are the guide on this journey. You accompany your companion,