

UNIT

1



The Sacramental Nature *of the* Church

WHAT IS THE MEANING OF THE SACRAMENTS?

While you are likely familiar with the names of the Seven Sacraments of the Church, Unit 1 provides a fuller definition of **sacrament** and defines Jesus himself as a sacrament and his Church as both the Body of Christ and the sacrament of Christ.

The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* defines sacraments in the following way:

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. (*CCC* 1131)

The next sections briefly elaborate on this definition.

Efficacious Signs of Grace

St. Thomas Aquinas wrote that sacraments “have efficacy from the incarnate Word himself.” In a related way, the sacraments themselves are efficacious symbols, meaning they effect what they symbolize and symbolize what they effect. Further, as “efficacious signs of grace,” each sacrament confers a grace that is proper to it.

The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* defines *grace* as “a participation in the life of God” (*CCC* 1997). Grace is the “free and undeserved help that God gives us” so that we can respond to his call (*CCC* 1996).

It is important to understand that grace is not some *thing* that is outside of the relationship we have with God. Rather, grace is a gift that helps us participate in a relationship with him as the Three Persons of the Holy Trinity are in relationship with one another. Grace is first and foremost a gift of the Holy Spirit himself, but grace also includes the ability God gives us to participate in and collaborate with his work.

sacrament

an outward (visible) sign of an invisible grace. An “efficacious” symbol that brings about the spiritual reality to which it points. This term applies to Christ Jesus, the great sign of God’s love for us; to the Church, his continuing presence in our world; and to the Seven Sacraments.

efficacious

a term that means “capable of producing a desired effect.” This means that the sacraments actually confer the grace they signify.



DID YOU KNOW?

In the twelfth century, theologian Peter Lombard wrote that a sacrament is “an outward sign of invisible grace.” He meant that a sacrament is both a sign and a cause of grace.

sacramental economy
an expression that means the communication or dispensation of the fruits of Christ’s Paschal Mystery through the celebration of the sacramental liturgy.

God gives us his grace in many ways and through many opportunities in our lives. The Seven Sacraments are guaranteed moments of encountering Father and Son, through the grace of the Holy Spirit. Sacraments strengthen and deepen our relationship with Jesus and our brothers and sisters in the Church and the world. They draw us into the wonder and completeness of the divine life.

Instituted by Christ

The sacraments are rooted in Jesus and traceable to him. His ongoing presence in the Church through the gift of the Holy Spirit has helped the Church know and understand the Seven Sacraments as times when Christ is with us. The same Jesus who in his earthly ministry healed the sick, forgave the sinner, celebrated marriage with his friends, and fed thousands with his bread and with his words is present today in the Seven Sacraments. As St. Leo the Great put it, “What was visible in our Savior has passed over to his mysteries.”

Commemorations of the Paschal Mystery

The sacraments celebrate the Paschal Mystery—the Life, Passion, Death, Resurrection, and Ascension of Christ—that brought about our Salvation. In each sacrament, the saving actions of Christ are made present. The way Christ dispenses the fruits of the Paschal Mystery until he comes again is known as the **sacramental economy**. The term originates from Greek words that mean “management of the household.” The sacramental economy refers to the way Christ cares for his household, the Church.

Of course, the actual historical events of the Paschal Mystery occurred

only once, but by the power of the Holy Spirit the liturgy makes the events present for us today. It brings us into communion with the Blessed Trinity and with one another. More information about this unity is shared in Chapter 1. How the Blessed Trinity works in the liturgy is explored in Chapter 2.

SACRAMENTS ARE THE MASTERWORKS OF GOD

In the sacraments, God really becomes present to us. No created object, no spoken word, or no ritualized action can ever “force” God to be present. Nothing we do or say can control what God does. Pouring water over someone’s head or saying certain words doesn’t produce God “on demand.” Instead, God comes to us in the sacraments because he chooses to communicate with us during these times and places, through these rituals. The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* teaches that sacraments are powers that emanate from the Body of Christ. They are actions of the Holy Spirit at work in the Church. They are the “masterworks of God” (CCC 1116).

In a sacrament, God acts first, and then we act in response. God takes the initiative of being present, of offering us a share in his own life and love. We, in turn, open our hearts to the divine, giving God worship and accepting God’s Word as the truth on which to base our lives. In other words, every sacrament is an *encounter*, a dialogue, a two-way street. A sacrament always involves a relationship between God and humanity.

This understanding means that a definition of *sacrament* can now read: “a visible sign that points to and *makes*



real God's presence; God invites us to enter into communion with him and with all those who are celebrating with us." But even this definition falls short of what a sacrament truly is. We also need to realize that each sacrament fills us with grace and *transforms* us. Each sacrament works to make us completely whole and holy. We start to live more fully; we grow in God's likeness through our participation in the sacraments. Each sacrament empowers us to come alive in the Holy Spirit, so that our every thought and action can praise God and give witness to Christ's saving power.

In summary, every sacrament has four aspects or dimensions. It is a

1. *memorial*—a remembering that God is present with us now and has always acted for our benefit in the past;
2. *celebration*—a Church-approved ritual—involving objects, words, and actions—that gives worship and thanks to God for our Salvation in Christ;
3. *communion*—a real encounter of oneness between God and humanity, and oneness between Church members; and
4. *transformation*—an empowerment to become more holy and to minister to others through the gift of God's grace.

It is important to realize that these four aspects or dimensions are not like stages or steps. One does not happen necessarily before the other, nor is there any particular order. Rather, each sacrament—in its entirety—is a memorial, a celebration, a communion, and a transformation.

From Catholic Bloggers

SACRAMENTS ARE GOD'S CLEAR GIFT

I believe that all the tools God gives us through his Church work so well for one reason. What they all have in common is that they bring us grace. I'm certainly not saying non-Catholic Christians don't receive grace because they don't have all the tools. God cannot be put in a box, he is not tied to the sacraments, he can give grace where he sees fit. But, the sacraments and other tools are God's clear gift and promise to us, they are an assurance that when we need grace to overcome sin, he is there waiting in the sacraments to give it to us.

—from Stephanie, Austin, Texas

SOME REASONS TO ATTEND MASS (FROM MY RELIGION CLASS)

- Grace
- The Mass is Calvary continued
- Holy Mass is the world's most powerful atonement for your sins
- At the hour of death, the Masses you have heard will be your greatest consolation
- One Mass heard during life will be of more benefit to you than many heard for you after your death
- Every Mass wins for you a higher degree of glory in Heaven
- You receive the priest's blessing which our Lord ratifies in Heaven
- You kneel amidst a multitude of holy angels, who are present at the adorable Sacrifice with reverential awe
- You are blessed in your temporal goods and affairs

—from Elm



The Church *and the* Sacramental Economy *of* Salvation

The Incarnation

God loves us and wants to be near to us.

Jesus Christ Is the Sacrament of God

Jesus himself is the way to God the Father. He is the prime, or primordial, sacrament.

The Church, the Universal Sacrament of Salvation

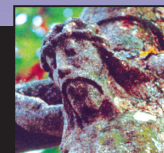
The saving work of Christ is revealed and communicated through the Church.

The Mission of the Church, the Body of Christ

The Church completes the work of Christ and brings us into unity with the Blessed Trinity and with one another.

The Church, the Channel of Grace

As the sacrament of Christ, the Church has the power to transform us.



THE INCARNATION

The June sky was rumbling with thunder. The little girl's room lit up with the aftermath of the bright lightning strikes that followed in proximity. Finally, she had enough. She removed her covers and dashed down the hall to her parents' bedroom.

Her sleepy mother spoke to the girl as she peered into her eyes, the mother prone, the girl standing near the edge of the bed.

"Honey, you can go back to your room. You aren't alone. Jesus is with you," the mother gently told her.

"Mommy, I know Jesus is with me," the girl said in return. "But I want someone with skin."

The message of this story of the little girl on the night of a storm is that we want to be close to the ones who know us, protect us, and most of all, love us. This is why God, who is

Spirit, took on flesh and became a human being:

And the Word became flesh
and made his dwelling among us,
and we saw his glory,
the glory of the Father's only Son,
full of grace and truth. (Jn 1:14)

God's becoming man, entering human history as a fellow human, and becoming flesh like us is the mystery of the **Incarnation**. St. Augustine described the sacraments as

Incarnation

A word that means "taking on human flesh." Jesus is the Incarnation of God. In Jesus, God took human form.



“visible signs of invisible grace.” This means that to understand the sacraments we must make the invisible visible. To understand how Christ is the ever-present Sacrament of God,

we must also understand how the Church is the Universal Sacrament of Jesus Christ.

For Reflection

What is your experience of loving someone who isn’t physically present with you? How is that different from loving someone who is in physical proximity to you?

JESUS CHRIST IS THE SACRAMENT OF GOD

lives in me; insofar as I now live in the flesh, I live by faith in the Son of God who has loved me and given himself up for me. (Gal 2:19–20)

Likewise, we too have a deep longing for Christ that our participation in the sacraments satisfies. While this longing often becomes staid and taken for granted, it was not always so. For example, you might remember your great desire for Jesus at the time of your First Communion. St. Thérèse of Lisieux recalled her First Communion as the “most wonderful day of my life” in her autobiography, *Story of a Soul*:

I can remember every tiny detail of those heavenly hours: my joyous waking up at dawn, the tender, reverent kisses of the mistresses and older girls, the room where we dressed—filled with the white “snowflakes” in which one after another we were clothed—and above all, our entry into chapel and the singing of the morning hymn: “O Altar of God, Where the Angels Are Hovering.” I would not tell you everything, even if I could, for there are certain things which lose their fragrance in the open air, certain thoughts so intimate that they cannot be translated into

liturgy

The official public worship of the Church. The sacraments and the Divine Office constitute the Church’s liturgy. Mass is the most important liturgical celebration.

Simply put, we meet Jesus, our Redeemer and High Priest, in the **liturgy**. *Liturgy* traditionally meant a “public work” or “people’s work.” More properly, it refers to the participation of God’s people through prayer and celebration in the fruits of the Paschal Mystery—that is, our Salvation. The sacraments and liturgy—known as the “sacramental economy”—are the system Christ uses to make himself and his saving graces present on earth.

Because of his love for us, Jesus simply cannot remain separated from his members, the Church. He communicated this fact to his disciples while he lived on earth: “I am the vine, you are the branches. Whoever remains in me and I in him will bear much fruit, because without me you can do nothing” (Jn 15:5). St. Paul also understood this connection. He wrote to the Galatians:

I have been crucified with Christ; yet I live, no longer I, but Christ

earthly language without losing at once their deep and heavenly meaning. How lovely it was, that first kiss of Jesus in my heart—it was truly a kiss of love.

Today, Jesus' desire to be with us remains strong. Jesus longs to share your life, both the tragedies and joys. The sacramental economy is the way the fruits of Christ's Redemption are given to us. This is accomplished in the Church's liturgy through the work of the Holy Trinity.

Christ, the Prime Sacrament

One of the definitions of *sacrament* is that it is a mystery. This tells us that sacraments cannot be fully explained or understood. This description fits Jesus as well. To say that Jesus is a sacrament is to say that he too is a mystery that cannot be fully explained or understood. Jesus is truly human, like us in all ways, "yet without sin" (Heb 4:15). Jesus also is truly divine, the Second Person of the Holy Trinity—without beginning and without end.

We do not understand *how* Jesus can be fully man yet fully divine at the same time. This mystery is known as the **hypostatic union**. This doctrine of faith, first expressed by St. Cyril of Alexandria (d. 444), says that in Jesus there are two natures—one human and the other divine—in one Person. These natures are united in such a way that Jesus was human like every human. He was born as a baby, grew as a child, experienced adolescence, and finally became an adult. He needed to eat, sleep, drink, breathe, bathe, and learn—just as we do. He laughed, cried, and felt real pain. And because he had a real human body, he was subject to death just as we are.

Along with his humanity, Jesus is fully and completely divine. As the Son of God, Jesus is the equal of God the Father and God the Holy Spirit. Jesus is all-knowing, all-powerful, all-good, and all-loving. As God, he is not limited in any way by time or space. He is everywhere, in all places at once. He is with us always.

The four Gospels in the New Testament give us a glimpse into the historical life of Jesus. We know that Jesus was born of a young Jewish woman in Bethlehem during the reign of Herod the Great (sometime before 4 BC). He grew up in Nazareth. Then he worked throughout Palestine as a spiritual teacher and healer for one to three years before his Death in Jerusalem under Pontius Pilate (around AD 30). The Gospels never tell us what Jesus looked like. Nor do they methodically describe his personality or temperament. The **evangelists** were more concerned about proclaiming the Good News of Salvation that Jesus taught by his words and actions.

In addition to being a mystery, Jesus fulfills the definition of *sacrament* in many other ways. For example, he is a *sign of something hidden*—the divine presence. He is also an *efficacious sign*. Instead of simply pointing to or revealing God's love for us, Jesus actually

hypostatic union

The doctrine of faith that recognizes two natures (one human and one divine) in the one divine Person of Jesus Christ.

evangelists

The writers of the four Gospels in the New Testament. According to tradition, the four evangelists are Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John.



Jesus

A Hebrew name that means “God saves.” This name explains the purpose of Jesus’ life—to save all people from sin.

Christ

A Hebrew name that means “anointed one.” This name, when applied to Jesus, means he is the Son of the living God.

Messiah

The long-prophesized Savior that God would send to save people from their sins. Some Jews in the time of Jesus thought this Messiah would be a political figure, someone who would rescue them from domination by the Romans.

primordial sacrament

A reference to Jesus as the “prime sacrament” because he points to God’s love while at the same time he is God’s love for us as he reconciles the world to his Father.

brings us this love, this saving grace. He makes communion with the divine possible because he is God.

Jesus is a sacrament because he is the perfect, most complete visible sign of the Father’s presence. A person may witness God in the beauties of creation or in a relationship filled with love. But there is no greater expression of God’s presence than Jesus, the Second Person of the Trinity. As he told his disciples the night before his Death, “Whoever has seen me has seen the Father. . . . I am in the Father and the Father is in me” (Jn 14:9–10). The name **Jesus** means “God saves.” The name **Christ** means “anointed one.” Jesus is the anointed one of God, the promised **Messiah** who came to save all people from sin. But even more important, as the Second Person of the Holy Trinity, he is the visible expression of the Father’s eternal being and love. God became man in the historical Jesus.

Think about it. When the Apostles heard Jesus speak, they were hearing God’s actual words to them. When they saw Jesus, they were really looking upon the face of God. When they witnessed the healing miracles of Jesus, they were seeing God’s love in action. And when Jesus touched them, it was God himself touching them.

Throughout the Gospels, Jesus tells people in many different ways that he is *the* sign of God’s love. He doesn’t just talk about water or use it as a sign of God’s love. He *himself* is the living water of eternal life. “Whoever drinks the water I shall give will never thirst; the water I shall give will become in him a spring of water welling up to eternal life” (Jn 4:14).

Jesus doesn’t just bake bread for his disciples or multiply bread as visible proof of God’s love. He *himself* is the living bread come down from Heaven. “I am the bread of life; whoever comes

to me will never hunger” (Jn 6:35). “I am the living bread that came down from heaven; whoever eats this bread will live forever; and the bread that I will give is my flesh for the life of the world” (Jn 6:51).

Likewise, Jesus doesn’t merely talk about light in his parables as a way to explain the absence of darkness (see Luke 11:33–36). He presents *himself* as God’s light to a world darkened by sin. “I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will not walk in darkness, but will have the light of life” (Jn 8:12).

Jesus is called the prime sacrament, or **primordial sacrament**. To put it more simply, Jesus himself is our only way to God the Father. “I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me” (Jn 14:6).

Jesus, an Efficacious Sign

Recall from the Unit opener that a sacrament is an efficacious sign. It not only points to God’s presence, it makes his presence an experienced reality in the here and now. Jesus is similarly an efficacious sign. Jesus is not only a sign of God’s love, he effects that love and makes it present. During his life on earth, Jesus brought people into direct contact with God through his words and actions.

And the Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us, and we saw his glory, the glory as of the Father’s only Son, full of grace and truth. . . . From his fullness we have all received. . . . No one has ever seen God. The only Son, God, who is at the Father’s side, has revealed him. (Jn 1:14, 16, 18)

After his Resurrection, Jesus appeared to his disciples in the same body that had been tortured and crucified;

yet at the same time had new properties of a glorious body that would eventually take his place “at the right hand of God” (see Acts 7:55–56). Christ gave the Apostles the power (through the gift of the Holy Spirit) to form the Church and establish the Seven Sacraments so that he would remain present to them always. Through the Seven Sacraments, the Church continues Christ’s work of perfectly worshiping the Father and of making redeeming grace available to humanity.

To say that Jesus is the Sacrament of God or the primordial sacrament does not mean he is an eighth sacrament, on top of the Church’s Seven Sacraments. Rather, Jesus Christ is the reason for, the basis of, all Seven Sacraments.

For Review

1. What is meant by the “sacramental economy”?
2. How is Christ, like the sacraments, a mystery?
3. How is Jesus an efficacious sign?
4. Explain why saying Jesus is the “primordial sacrament” is different from saying he is the “eighth sacrament.”
5. What is the saving effect of the Paschal Mystery?

For Reflection

- What are your remembrances of your own First Communion?
- How would you describe your personal longing for Christ?

New Life in Christ

We believe that Jesus came into the world to bring us full, abundant life (see John 10:10). St. Irenaeus, a second-century bishop who was killed for his faith in Jesus, said it brilliantly: “The glory of God is the human person fully alive.” Think about it: God actually rejoices when we are fully, abundantly alive! God’s will is that we should live forever. The saving effect of the Paschal Mystery of Christ is a vibrant new life in the Blessed Trinity. We participate in this new life through the sacraments. The sacraments, in turn, empower us to share our God-fulfilled life with others.

Read the following Scripture passages. For each one, reflect in your journal about what you think this aspect of new life is like. Then write down a specific plan to bring new life to someone you know—at home, at school, or in your local community. Carry out your plan sometime this week.

- We are to be bread to others. (see John 21:15-17)
- We are to be life-giving water in the desert. (see Matthew 10:42)
- We are to be light in the darkness. (see Matthew 5:14-16)
- We are to be salt to those who feel flat or depressed. (see Matthew 5:13)
- We are to be yeast to everyone. (see Matthew 13:33)
- We are to be good soil that nurtures the seeds of faith. (see Matthew 13:23)
- We are to bear fruit that will last. (see John 15:16)

THE CHURCH, THE UNIVERSAL SACRAMENT OF SALVATION

The saving work of Christ's entire life is the sacrament of salvation; this work is "revealed and active in the Church's sacraments" (CCC 774). The Church's sacraments have meaning only in and through Jesus. Each sacrament is primarily and fundamentally a personal act of Christ himself acting through his Mystical Body, the Church. Each sacrament is the saving action of Christ in visible form; it is the act of Christ the High Priest who "entered once for all into the sanctuary, not with the blood of goats and calves but with his own blood, thus obtaining eternal redemption" (Heb 9:12). In the words of the *Catechism*, "it really is Christ who acts in the sacraments through the Holy Spirit for the Church" (CCC 1120).

In the Church, especially in her Seven Sacraments, Jesus continues to live and work among us. "Christ now acts through the sacraments he instituted to communicate his grace" (CCC 1084). "[The sacraments] are *efficacious* because in them Christ himself is at work; it is he who baptizes, he who acts in his sacraments in order to communicate the grace that each sacrament signifies" (CCC 1127). The Church is the "universal sacrament of salvation" because she is the visible channel of grace to the whole human race. Cardinal Joseph Bernardin of Chicago once explained, "As Christ is the sacrament of God—the visible and incarnate, efficacious and gratuitous bestowal of divine grace and life, so the Church is the sacrament of Christ in human history." The Church makes Christ present in today's world.

The relationship between the Church and Christ is much like the relationship between the moon and the sun. The moon has no light of its own, but it shines in

the night sky because it reflects the light of the sun. In the same way, the Church is a light to the world because she reflects the light of Christ. She makes this light—the grace of Salvation and new life—available to all people.

To understand further how the Church is the sacrament of Christ, we need to see how the Church herself meets the definition of *sacrament*.

First, a sacrament is a mystery.

Second, it is also a visible sign of the unseen divine reality.

Third, a sacrament is an efficacious sign—something that makes real what it signifies. The Church also has these same three dimensions, explained in the following sections.



The Church as Mystery

St. Paul spoke of the Church as a great mystery—something we cannot fully explain or understand (see Ephesians 5:32). For this reason, he and the other writers of the New Testament described the Church in symbolic language. They used images that would help people understand the Church as mystery. Some of the images for the Church found in the New Testament are included in the following table:

Symbols for Church	New Testament Reference
Sheepfold (a fenced enclosure with Christ as the gate)	John 10:1–18
Flock of sheep	John 21:15–19
Cultivated field or vineyard	John 15:1–10
Building of God	Ephesians 2:19–22
Bride of Christ and Mother	Ephesians 5:25–27
New Jerusalem (Kingdom of God)	Revelation 21:9–27



The last image is perhaps the most difficult to comprehend. On the one hand, the Church is the New Jerusalem, the Kingdom of God, and “the kingdom of Christ already present in mystery” (*Lumen Gentium* [Dogmatic Constitution on the Church] 3). At the same time, however, the Church is not yet perfect. As the *Catechism* teaches, the Church is “the seed and beginning of the Kingdom” (CCC 764). The Church is indeed holy, but she is a pilgrim Church. The Church “grows visibly in the world through the power of God” (*Lumen Gentium* 3). In addition,

the Church, to which we are all called in Christ Jesus, and in which by the grace of God we attain holiness, will receive its perfection only in the glory of heaven, when the time for the renewal of all things will have come (Acts 3:21). (*Lumen Gentium* 48)

The Church as Visible Sign

A sacrament is a visible sign of an unseen divine dimension. The same is true for the Church. The Church is the visible sign of Jesus Christ, who is the perfect sign of the Father’s saving love. In more detail:

The Church is both human and divine, visible but endowed with invisible realities, zealous in action and dedicated to contemplation, present in the world, yet a migrant, so constituted that in it the human is directed toward and subordinated to the divine, the visible to the invisible, action to contemplation, and this present world to that city yet to come, the object of our quest (see Hebrews 13:14). (*Sacrosanctum Concilium* [The Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy] 2)

As the visible sign of Christ’s presence in today’s world, the Church has four distinguishing characteristics, or marks. The **marks of the Church** are one, holy, catholic, and apostolic. Here is what we mean when we use these words.

1. The Church is a visible sign of *oneness*. Each individual parish is part of a larger diocese, which is part of the universal Church. These local communities share the same faith received from the Apostles. All local communities share the same Mass and sacraments. In other words, all local churches within the one universal Church are united to one another. “All those, who in faith look towards Jesus, the author of salvation and the source of unity and peace,

marks of the Church

Four essential signs or characteristics of Christ’s Church that mark her as his true Church. The Church is one, holy, catholic, and apostolic.



MARKS OF THE CHURCH

Review the meaning of the marks of the Church described on pages 13–14. Then do one of the following:

- Research several periods in Church history when each mark of the Church was especially influential.
- Research and report on the words of St. Paul, St. Ignatius of Antioch, and St. Irenaeus of Lyon on the importance of unity in the Church.
- Read and summarize the meaning of *catholicity* from the New Catholic Encyclopedia: www.newadvent.org/cathen/03449a.htm.

God has gathered together and established as the Church, that it may be for each and everyone the visible sacrament of this saving unity” (*Lumen Gentium* 9).

2. The Church is a visible sign of *holiness*. The Holy Spirit “dwells in the Church and in the hearts of the faithful, as in a temple” (*Lumen Gentium* 4). The presence of the Holy Spirit in the Church is seen most clearly in the lives of Mary and numerous saints throughout the centuries. Following their example, we grow in holiness by participating in the Church’s sacraments and mission of charity.
3. The Church is a visible sign of *catholicity*. The word *catholic* means “universal.” The Church is catholic in a double sense. First, she is catholic because Christ is present in her. As St. Ignatius of Antioch wrote: “Where there is

Christ Jesus, there is the Catholic Church” (quoted from CCC 830). The Church offers the fullness of the means of Salvation, the fullness of faith, the sacraments, and ordained ministry by apostolic succession. Second, the Church is universal because her mission is to everyone. (See pages 16–20).

4. The Church is a visible sign of *apostolicity*. The Church is a hierarchical community, under the supervision of leaders who are authorized to act in the name of Christ. The Church is founded on the Apostles, whom Jesus himself chose. The Church hands on the Apostles’ own teaching and faith through the Sacrament of Holy Orders. The pope and bishops can trace their authority back to the Apostles and their successors.

The Church as Efficacious Sign

A sacrament is more than a visible sign. It is also efficacious. A sacrament makes the real, saving action of the Risen Christ present to us through the work of the Holy Spirit. The Church, too, is a visible sign of Christ. The Church is both the means and goal of God’s plan—prefigured in creation, prepared for in the Old Covenant, and instituted by the words and actions of Jesus. On the other hand, the Church is the Mystical Body of Christ, continuing to bring God’s saving love to people throughout the world. The Holy Spirit makes the Church “the temple of the living God” (CCC 797).

The power of the Church to effect what she signifies was given by Christ to Peter and the Apostles when he said, “I will give you the keys to the kingdom of heaven. Whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven; and



whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven” (Mt 16:19; 18:18). “And behold, I am with you always, until the end of the age” (Mt 28:20). Further, Jesus instructed:

“Amen, amen, I say to you, whoever believes in me will do the works that I do, and will do greater ones than these, because I am going to the Father. And whatever you ask in my name, I will do, so that the Father may be glorified in the Son. If you ask anything of me in my name, I will do it.” (Jn 14:12–14)

Because of the power Jesus gave her, “the Church, then, both contains and communicates the invisible grace she signifies. It is in this analogical sense, that the Church is called a ‘sacrament’ (CCC 774). “The church, in Christ, is a sacrament—a sign and instrument, that is, of communion with God and of the unity of the entire human race” (*Lumen Gentium* 1). This was the reason the Fathers of the Second Vatican Council called the Church “the universal sacrament of salvation” (*Lumen Gentium* 48).



The Holy Spirit works so intimately within the Church that he inspires the Magisterium (the college of bishops in union with the pope) to teach on the truth, the will of God for today’s world.

For Review

1. What are three dimensions of the Church that are similar to three dimensions of the sacraments?
2. What biblical symbols have been used to describe the Church as mystery?
3. Name and explain the four marks of the Church.
4. How is the Church an efficacious sign?

For Reflection

Use another analogy (besides the sun and the moon) to explain the relationship between Jesus and the Church.



THE MISSION OF THE CHURCH, THE BODY OF CHRIST



BUILDING THE BODY OF CHRIST

Read what St. Paul wrote about the Church as a body with many parts (1 Cor 12:14-26) and the Church as a community (Rom 12:9-18). Then check the following websites or others like them for ideas on how you can practically be a witness to the faith by serving others both in and out of the Catholic Church. Write a proposal for your plan of service in this area. Incorporate some of St. Paul's words into your plan. Enact the plan. Write a summary of your actions. Sample websites for service:

- **Catholic Relief Services:** www.crs.org/act/participate.cfm
- **Urban Youth Ministry:** www.dirtyvagabond.com/live/

The Church, which is the Body of Christ, completes the mission of Christ and the Holy Spirit. This mission is to bring us into communion with the Three Persons of the Holy Trinity: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. "Through the Church's sacraments, Christ communicates his Holy and sanctifying Spirit to the members of his Body" (CCC 739). How this is specifically done in the individual sacraments is the subject of Chapters 3 to 9 of this textbook. For now, it is important to introduce the image of Church as the Body of Christ and point out ways Christ and the Spirit animate her members through the sacraments to engage in and live out their mission.

The origins of this image come from the Epistles of St. Paul. In the First Letter to the Corinthians, Paul wrote: "As a body is one, though it has many parts, and all the parts of the body, though many, are one body, so also Christ. For in one Spirit we were all baptized into one body" (1 Cor 12:12-13a).

The Second Vatican Council also expressed the importance of this description of the Church very clearly:

Rising from the dead (see Rom 6:9) [Christ] sent his life-giving Spirit upon his disciples and through him set up his body which is the Church as the universal sacrament of salvation. Sitting at the right hand of the Father he is continually active in the world in order to lead people to the church and through it to join them more closely to himself; by nourishing them with his own Body and Blood, he makes them sharers in his glorious life. (*Lumen Gentium* 48)

As members of the Body of Christ, we are united not only to Christ but also to one another. Our participation in the sacraments—especially in the Eucharist—strengthens this unity and helps us to live morally. Also, we participate in the Body of Christ, the Church, with the understanding that Christ is the Head. Part of a prayer in the Letter to the Colossians reads:

[Christ] is the head of the body, the church.

He is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, that in all things he himself might be preeminent. (Col 1:18)

An understanding of the Church as the Body of Christ has several implications that involve our communion with the Blessed Trinity as well as our communion with other Catholics, locally and universally, with all people throughout the world, and with the **communion of saints**. Each of these implications of the Church as the Body of Christ is discussed in the sections that follow.

Communion with Christ and the Church

Through our participation in the Church and particularly due to the graces of the sacraments, we find communion with Christ and the Church. The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* describes the intimacy of this communion:

- “The comparison of the Church with the body casts light on the intimate bond between Christ and his Church. Not only is she gathered *around him*; she is united *in him*, in his body” (CCC 789).
- “[The Church] draws her life from the word and the Body of Christ and so herself becomes Christ’s Body” (CCC 752).
- “The Church . . . is the visible sign of the communion in Christ between God and men” (CCC 1071).

Pope John Paul II, in his encyclical *Redemptor Hominis* (Redeemer of Man), wrote that communion with Christ is the Church’s main purpose for existing—that “each person may be able to find Christ, in order that Christ may walk with each person the path of life” (13). That is why we can say the Church is “the sacrament of unity” (CCC 1140). She is the “sign

and instrument . . . of communion with God” (*Lumen Gentium* 1).

We also encounter Christ and delve more deeply into a relationship with the Holy Trinity *whenever* we come together as Church. This means that when we do the things Christ did and in his name—visit the sick, attend a Bible study class, volunteer in a soup kitchen, sort clothes for a St. Vincent de Paul thrift shop, or even have fun at a church social event—we grow in communion with Christ and the Church. *Whatever* we do as Catholics, we act as the Body of Christ, as Christ himself in today’s world.



Communion with Other Catholics

A second type of communion the Church makes possible is unity with other Catholics. Just as the human body has many parts, so we need everyone in the Church to make up the Body of Christ. We form community in local parishes with other Catholics in two ways. First, we try to welcome everyone—even those we disagree with politically, those in a different economic bracket, those who may not like us,

communion of saints

The unity in Christ of all those he has redeemed: the Church on earth, in Heaven, and in Purgatory.

or those of other races. Second, we realize that every person has something positive to add to the Church. Whether that person is a priest, an altar server, a member of the choir, a catechumen, or a family member sitting in the pews, each person is important and needed in Christ's Body.

Catholics share communion with the Church worldwide. The "particular churches," which refers to a diocese under the leadership of a bishop, are fully Catholic through their communion with the Church of Rome. This means that the universal Church is not a loosely gathered federation of particular churches, each doing its own thing. Rather, its vocation and mission connect the particular local churches with the universal Roman Catholic Church.

Communion with People Throughout the World

The Church is the universal sacrament of salvation. Christ gave the Church the mission of witnessing to the Gospel and baptizing in his name. The Second Vatican Council taught that "the church, in Christ, is a sacrament . . . of the unity of the entire human race" (*Lumen Gentium* 1). Such unity can be understood by understanding catholicity, a mark of the Church. This mark has several implications for a Catholic's participation in the world and communion with others. This applies to the relationship of Catholics with other members of the Church, with others who believe in Christ, and finally with all of humankind who are called by God's grace to Salvation.

The Church is joined, albeit imperfectly, to those who are baptized Christians but do not profess the Catholic faith in its entirety or have not remained united under the pope. With Orthodox churches the communion is profound and, in the words of Pope Paul VI, "lacks little to attain the fullness that would permit a common

celebration of the Lord's Eucharist" (quoted in CCC 838).

Non-Christians, too, share a unity with the Church in different ways. Jewish people hold a special place of honor because Jews first received God's covenant. Because of a shared belief in one God, Muslims also are related to the Church. Even many non-believers distinguish between right and wrong and experience something transcendental in their lives.

The Church has a missionary mandate to proclaim the Gospel to all peoples. This is a requirement of the mark of catholicity. This mission originates with Christ's commandment to the Apostles:

"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 behold, I am with you always, until the end of the age." (Mt 28:19–20)

The Church's message expresses the eternal love that the Holy Trinity has for all people. "The ultimate purpose of mission is none other than to make men share in the communion between the Father and the Son in their Spirit of love" (CCC 850). The message preached by those who undertake this missionary charge directed by the Holy Spirit is that God wills the Salvation of all through the knowledge of truth.

The task requires missionaries and all who witness the Gospel to live a life of penance, accept the cross, and



abide in a deep respect for others by building on their religious beliefs. We must see everyone as our brother or sister in Christ. We are interconnected. Because God is the Father of all people, we care about everyone as we care about the members of our own family. Like members of the same human body (e.g., arms, legs, vital organs), “if (one) part suffers, all the parts suffer with it; if one part is honored, all the parts share its joy” (1 Cor 12:26). If people in another part of the world are suffering from famine, a natural disaster, or oppression, we suffer with them and try to help. We call such concern for others **human solidarity**.

Also, we try to treat everyone fairly and equally. We try to protect the rights and needs of everyone, especially those who are most vulnerable and in danger of being exploited or abused. We work together to try to bring about just laws that are good for everyone. This is known as **social justice**. As the *Catechism* explains,

Society ensures social justice when it provides the conditions that allow associations or individuals to obtain what is their due, according to their nature and their vocation. Social justice is linked to the common good and the exercise of authority. (CCC 1928)

The Church is called to be both a sign of social justice and an instrument of that justice. Catholics are to regard all people throughout the world as “neighbors” and to follow Jesus’ command to love these neighbors as themselves (cf. Luke 10:25–37).

Finally, in working toward communion with others, we live in peace with all people. As the Risen Jesus said to his Apostles, “Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you” (Jn 20:21), so we are to be peacemakers in today’s world. Not only do

Catholics work to avoid war, but the Church also tries to improve communication, understanding, and cooperation between countries. “For all of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free person, there is not male and female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus” (Gal 3:27–28).

Communion of Saints

Another type of communion in the Church is among the communion of saints; that is, of all the living faithful and all the deceased faithful—those being purified after death and those already in Heaven. The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* teaches that “the communion of saints is the Church” (CCC 946). This statement has two meanings.

First, everyone in the Church shares a communion in spiritual goods. Among these goods are the following:

- *Communion in the faith.* The faith we share among Catholics today is the same faith inherited from the Apostles.
- *Communion of the sacraments.* The sacraments of the Church unite us to the communion of saints because they unite us to God in Christ. The name “communion” is applicable to all of the sacraments, but it “is better suited to the Eucharist than to any other, because it is primarily the Eucharist that brings this communion about” (CCC 950).
- *Communion of charisms.* A **charism** is a special gift, talent, or ability given to each Church member by the Holy Spirit. Charisms are intended to help build up the Church; they are for the good of all. The Church collectively shares the charisms she has received individually.

human solidarity

The virtue of social charity, friendship, and responsible sharing whereby we recognize our interdependence on others and that we are all brothers and sisters of one family under a loving Father.

social justice

A form of justice that treats all people fairly and equally, according to their due. Social justice involves fair treatment of individuals. It also involves the structures of society that protect or oppress the rights of certain people.

charism

A God-given talent, gift, skill, or ability that is given to each person for the good of everyone in the Church.



YOUR COMMUNION OF SAINTS

Make a prayer card as a reminder of your personal “communion of saints.” Cut an equilateral triangle out of construction paper or card stock. On the front at one corner, list one or more names of living people who are pilgrims with you in the journey of faith. In the second corner, list one or more names of people who have died but are not known officially as saints. In the third corner, list one or more names of saints in Heaven to whom you have a particular attachment. Finally, put your own name in the center of the triangle. On the back, write your own prayer of communion with these people. Pray for their spiritual well-being and also ask them to help you be a better Church member. Be prepared to share all or part of your prayer at the prayer service at the end of this chapter.

- *Communion of goods.* The early Christians held everything in common. So too, “all Christians should be ready and eager to come to the help of the needy” (CCC 952).
- *Communion in charity.* Every act of charity performed by Catholics benefits the entire Body of Christ. Every sin harms this communion.

Second, there is a communion of all holy people—between the Church

of Heaven and the Church of earth. The saints in Heaven intercede for those who are living and for the dead who are still being purified. Likewise, the living can receive strength and aid from the saints in Heaven. And living members of the Church can pray for those who have died. “Our prayer for them is capable not only of helping them, but also of making their intercession for us effective” (CCC 958).



For Review

1. What are four types of communion to which the image of the Body of Christ refers?
2. What are two ways we form community with other Catholics?
3. How does human solidarity relate to the Church’s mission?
4. What are two meanings of the *communion of saints*?
5. What does the *Catechism* mean when it says the Church is a communion in spiritual goods and a communion of all holy people?

For Reflection

- How do you understand the ultimate purpose of the Church’s mission: to come into unity with the Holy Trinity?
- Describe a charism with which you have been gifted. How can this charism help build up the Church?

THE CHURCH, THE CHANNEL OF GRACE

As the universal sacrament of salvation, the Church first affects the inner union of people with God. Second, the Church is also the sacrament of the unity of the human race. In both of these ways, the Church, as the sacrament of Christ, has the power to transform us. While the transformation has already begun, the Church is also a sign and an instrument of the unity that has yet to be realized.

Christ uses the Church as his instrument of salvation for all. Through the Church we are transformed into the Body of Christ. We ourselves become the Church, the sign and instrument of Christ's presence in the world today. This understanding is detailed in the New Testament: "Do you not know that you are the temple of God, and that the Spirit of God dwells in you?" (1 Cor 3:16). "Like living stones, let yourselves be built into a spiritual house to be a holy priesthood to offer spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ" (1 Pt 2:5).

The Second Vatican Council summarized much of how the sacraments transform us into the Church, and hence how the Church herself is transforming. Examples from each sacrament follow:

- *Baptism.* Our faith and participation in this sacrament makes us members of the Church and the People of God. We are "reborn as sons and daughters of God" (*Lumen Gentium* 11).
- *Confirmation.* Our union with Christ and the Church is strengthened. We are "endowed with the special strength of the holy Spirit" so that we may act "as true witnesses of Christ," spreading and defending the faith (*Lumen Gentium* 11).
- *Eucharist.* "Strengthened by the body of Christ in the Eucharistic communion, [we] manifest in a concrete way that unity of the people of God which this most holy sacrament aptly signifies and admirably realizes" (*Lumen Gentium* 11).
- *Penance and Reconciliation.* Every sin is not only an offense against God; it is also an offense against the Church. Sin separates us from the Church. This sacrament forgives sin and restores our unity with God and with the Church (cf. *Lumen Gentium* 11).
- *Anointing of the Sick.* This sacrament strengthens the sick and suffering members of the Church



to "contribute to the good of the people of God by freely uniting themselves to the passion and death of Christ" (*Lumen Gentium* 11).

- *Holy Orders.* This sacrament enables bishops, priests, and deacons to "nourish the church with the word and grace of God in the name of Christ" (*Lumen Gentium* 11).
- *Matrimony.* As a sign of oneness between Christ and the Church, this sacrament strengthens married couples to help one another attain holiness in their lives together and to build up the Church by "accepting and educating their children" in the faith (*Lumen Gentium* 11).

As Church, we join in carrying out the mission of Christ in today's world. Just as Jesus had a threefold mission as priest, prophet, and king, so "the whole People of God participates in these three offices of Christ and bears the responsibilities for mission and service that flow from them" (CCC 783). These next sections consider how participating in the Church transforms us into priests, prophets, and royalty.

Our Mission as Priests

Baptism transforms us into a spiritual house and a holy priesthood. This common priesthood differs from the hierarchical priesthood of bishops and priests. On the basis of our Baptism, we are to act as Christ. We are to offer ourselves to God in worship, become holy, and

sacramental grace

A participation in the life and love of the Trinity that comes to us through the sacraments. Each sacrament brings us a different dimension of God's life and love.

theological virtues

Three important virtues bestowed on us at Baptism that relate us to God: faith (belief in and personal knowledge of God), hope (trust in God's Salvation and his bestowal of graces needed to attain it), and charity (love of God and love of neighbor).

laity

All the members of the Church who have been initiated into the Church through Baptism and who are not ordained (the clergy) or in consecrated life. The laity participate in Jesus' prophetic, priestly, and kingly ministries.

help others grow in holiness. Duties of the common priesthood include:

- *Spiritual sacrifices to God.* Catholics have a responsibility and duty to worship God at all times and in all places by their holy actions. "All [the laity's] works, prayers, and apostolic undertakings, family and married life, daily work, relaxation of mind and body, if they are accomplished in the Spirit—indeed even the hardships of life if patiently born—all these become spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ" (CCC 901).
- *Personal holiness.* Through the Church, God sanctifies us, transforming us with his presence and grace through the Holy Spirit. Grace is not a particular thing or a quantifiable amount. Rather, grace is a sharing in the actual life and love of the Trinity. We become holy because we are united with God in grace. Each sacrament enables us to share God's life in a particular way. In other words, each sacrament brings us **sacramental grace**, a different aspect of God's life and love. For example, the Sacrament of the Anointing of the Sick brings us the healing dimension of God's life and love. The Sacrament of Penance and Reconciliation offers us the forgiving dimension of God's life and love. All sacraments also dispense sanctifying grace (a sharing in God's life that transforms us into the divine, or makes us holy) and actual grace (divine help to perform some good action we would not ordinarily be able to do on our own such as forgiving an enemy, avoiding a habitual sin, or remaining faithful to Jesus despite torture or death). Grace is

never something we "earn." Our holiness is God's wonderful and generous gift to us.

- *Helping others grow in holiness.* In making us holy, the sacraments transform us into a community of faith, hope, and charity. These three **theological virtues** not only permeate our lives. They also help us form a community of faith, hope, and charity with others.

Our Mission as Prophets

A prophet is someone who speaks God's Word to others, witnesses to the truth about Jesus Christ, and reminds people to persevere in the true faith—not a person who predicts the future, as is commonly understood. Jesus was a prophet because he spoke the truth about God's infinite saving love. He called people to repent of their sins and turn back to God's covenant of love. As Church, we share in the prophetic mission of Christ whenever we give witness to him through our words, actions, or example. We also act as prophets whenever we encourage others in the Church to persevere in faith despite times of discouragement, disillusionment, and confusion.

The Church's sacraments transform us into evangelists—people who spread the message of Christ throughout the world. We become "God's co-workers," "God's field," and "God's building" (1 Cor 3:9). We help proclaim the faith to others *in* the Church through discussions, religious education classes, Bible study groups, and the use of communications media. Furthermore, we help proclaim the Good News of Jesus Christ to those outside the Church by our every word and action.

While ordained bishops and priests work as prophets mainly within the Church, the **laity** carry their

prophetic mission primarily *outside* the Church, in the secular world—in neighborhoods, workplaces, shopping malls, schools, hospitals, and so forth. The Second Vatican Council clarified that laypeople have “the special vocation” to help build God’s Kingdom “by engaging in temporal affairs and directing them according to God’s will. . . . They are called by God to contribute to the sanctification of the world from within, like leaven” (*Lumen Gentium* 31). “In faith, hope and charity they manifest Christ to others” (*Lumen Gentium* 31). We act as salt of the earth and light to the world. We help bring all people to Christ.

Think about it: Everywhere you go, you can bring Christ’s presence and love to others. In everything you do—whether it is working in a grocery store, chatting on the Internet, counseling a friend, competing in sports against a rival school, or talking with your parents—you can be Christ to others. As St. Augustine once said, “Let us rejoice then and give thanks that we have become not only Christians, but Christ himself.”

Our Royal Mission

Christ offered us the gift of “royal freedom” so that we might overcome our own sinfulness and encourage the world at large—institutions and individuals—to do the same. Those who embrace the royal mission do not let themselves be, as St. Ambrose wrote, “imprisoned by sin, or thrown headlong into wickedness.” Laypeople can cooperate with priests in this royal mission by participating in various ministries to which they are called and in which they are gifted.

Many people equate royalty with worldly power and riches. However, the true role of those in power is to serve the people they are charged to protect and provide welfare for. True royalty—as Jesus lived—does not seek to be served, but rather seeks to serve others, especially the poor and the suffering. Just as Jesus came “to bring glad tidings to the poor” (Lk 4:18), and “to seek and to save what was lost” (Lk 19:10), so we participate in his royal mission whenever we work for justice and peace and serve others in charity. “The Church encompasses with its love all those who are afflicted by human infirmity and it recognizes in those who are poor and who suffer, the likeness of its poor and suffering founder. It does all in its power to relieve their need” (*Lumen Gentium* 8).

One way the Church carries out her royal mission is by establishing and maintaining foreign missions. In addition to spreading the Good News of Jesus throughout the world, these missions serve people in many other ways—by providing food, clothing, shelter, and education. The Church also carries out her royal mission by serving needy people in local areas. For example, the Church operates hospitals; St. Vincent de Paul thrift stores; centers for the blind and deaf; homes for the care of cancer patients; rehabilitation facilities for substance abuse (alcohol and other drugs); prison ministries; dining rooms for the poor; shelters for run-aways, the abused, the exploited, and the homeless; facilities for retired and aged people; facilities for children and adults with disabilities; houses of retreat and renewal; elementary schools; high schools; colleges and universities; and Catholic newspapers, magazines, and newsletters, as well as radio, television, film, and theater programs. In all these services, Catholics seek to treat others as Christ would treat them—with love, patience, understanding, and genuine caring.

Catholics who involve themselves in the Church’s priestly, prophetic, and royal mission become a sign and an instrument of Christ’s presence in every part of today’s world. As sacrament, the Church brings the healing, forgiving, and comforting love of God to all those in need. Whenever we act as Church—even in small, ordinary ways—we are a type of sacrament. We are the Church, the sacrament of Christ.

For Review

1. How does each of the Seven Sacraments transform us as Church?
2. How do Catholics carry out the priestly, prophetic, and royal missions of Christ?
3. Explain the difference between sacramental grace, sanctifying grace, and actual grace.
4. What are the theological virtues?

For Reflection

Describe a person your age you consider to be holy.