

Journey of Faith



In Short:

- A sacrament is a visible sign of God's grace.
- The seven sacraments fall into three categories.
- Christ instituted the sacraments and made the Church their minister.



The following Scripture readings will show you a few of the ways Jesus used the physical world to help his followers understand his profound love for them. As you read, list the way each reading shows this.

Matthew 8:1–3

Mark 10:13–16

Luke 9:12–17

John 9:6–7

John 11:35–36

John 13:4–5

John 20:21–22

The Sacraments: An Introduction

How do you communicate your love to someone? We're physical beings living in a physical world, so we communicate in physical ways. We experience life through our senses, and we communicate through our senses, too.

We can experience love, and love is real, but it's not a physical object. Our expressions of love aren't the same as love, but we communicate our love through them. Words, gestures, and physical objects become *signs* of our love.

Jesus realized that as physical beings, we need physical signs to comprehend the incredible reality of his love. When Christ uses physical signs—symbols we can sense and observe—to work in us, the Church calls it a **sacrament**.

What Is a Sacrament?

In the broadest sense, a sacrament can be any person, event, or thing through which we encounter or experience God's presence in a new or deeper way. A sunset, a period of quiet prayer, a storm, the birth of a child, an intimate conversation with a close friend—all have the potential for revealing God to us in new and deeper ways.

In the broad sense, then, we can say that a sacramental experience is an encounter with God through human experience that somehow changes us. Virtually any human experience can provide us with such an encounter.

Sacraments Are Expressions of God's Grace

In the fifth century, St. Augustine defined *sacrament* as "a visible sign of invisible grace." To understand sacrament, we also need to understand what **grace** means. Grace is the gift of God's love and presence into which we grow. It's "the help God gives us to respond to our vocation to become his adopted sons and daughters." God's "initiative of grace precedes, prepares, and elicits our free response in faith and commitment" (*United States Catholic Catechism for Adults*, glossary, p. 514).

Grace is a relationship between God and us. Our side of the relationship develops gradually, but it's a response to a love that was always there. The gift of God's grace is totally free and ever present. What we do with that gift is ours to choose, and our eternal salvation is affected by our choice. We express and celebrate our acceptance of it in the sacraments.

- Reflect on a way God has loved you through another person, a specific event, or physical object.
- Give an example of how God has used you to show his love to others.



"In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. 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."

John 1:1, 14

- How have you encountered God's presence and love for you through Jesus?



The Church as Sacrament

In reflecting on this special relationship, the Church discovered its unique vocation: just as Jesus used his physical body to carry out the Father's mission, the Church uses its human members (the Mystical Body) as an instrument of salvation—as "sacraments" for the world. Sacraments are physical expressions of spiritual realities. As the body of Christ on earth, the Church is called to be a physical sign of the spiritual reality of Christ's ongoing presence in the world.

- How is your local parish community a sign of Christ's love to others?



Jesus as Sacrament

Those who first followed Jesus encountered God and God's presence in a new way through his human presence. Jesus was, for them—and is for us—the sacrament of God. In Jesus, we encounter God and God's presence. Jesus is the one great sacrament through which all other sacraments make sense.

What Are the Seven Sacraments?

The official seven sacraments of the Catholic Church are baptism, confirmation, Eucharist, penance and reconciliation, anointing of the sick, matrimony, and holy orders. They are commonly grouped under three headings:

Sacraments of Initiation

These sacraments celebrate and introduce us to the experience of the Christian life. While most Catholics receive these in separate ceremonies over several years, catechumens are initiated in one combined rite at the Easter Vigil.

- *Baptism* incorporates us into the Church and gives us a rebirth as daughters and sons of God.
- *Confirmation* is a continuation, ratification, or sealing of baptism. It helps us focus on the missionary dimensions of the baptismal commitment.
- *Eucharist* is the preeminent sacrament from which all others have meaning. In the Eucharist, Christ is most profoundly present in the Church, which gathers to hear the word of God and to share the nourishment of Christ's Body with one another.

Sacraments of Healing

These sacraments celebrate and reveal to us God's power to heal us in soul and body.

- *Penance and reconciliation* focuses on forgiveness in our lives and on our acceptance of that forgiveness, which brings us back to spiritual health in the family of God after we have turned away.
- *Anointing of the sick* takes place as representatives of the community gather in faith to pray over and lay hands on those who are sick. The Church, like Christ, desires the health of the whole human person.

Sacraments of Service

These sacraments celebrate the Christian vocation of service and consecrate us to minister within our own families and within the wider Church community.

- *Matrimony* (marriage) celebrates and witnesses the covenant of love between two people and symbolizes in that union Christ's covenant of love for the Church.
- *Holy orders* (ordination) is a sacrament of service by which some are called by God, through the Church, to be spiritual leaders.

You will learn more about each of the sacraments as you continue your study.

How Do the Sacraments "Work?"

The traditional explanation is that the sacraments *effect*, or bring about, what they symbolize. For example, the pouring of or immersion into water in the rite of baptism symbolizes the soul being cleansed of sin. At the same time, God is making that cleansing happen. The laying on of hands and anointing in the rite of confirmation *both symbolize and make happen* the sealing of the recipient with the gift of the Holy Spirit. This occurs "independently of the personal holiness of the minister....The fruits of the sacraments also depend on the disposition of the one who receives them" (CCC 1128).

Sacraments Celebrate Christ's Life

The Church teaches that the seven sacraments were instituted by Christ. The sacraments come out of the story of Jesus' life and actions. 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 Jesus' command to carry the gospel to others and to baptize them. The Eucharist recalls the Last Supper. The Gospels also include accounts of other meals when Jesus invited those who were rejected by others to eat with him. Penance and reconciliation reminds us of Jesus' invitation to forgive one another, and of the way he forgave those who put him to death.

The sacraments also flow from Jesus' values and teachings. He raised basic values and experiences (forgiveness, concern for the sick, marriage, service) to new levels. He transformed ordinary human values into spiritual values by helping people see God's love made visible through them. As we celebrate the sacraments, we, like the first followers of Jesus, have the opportunity to encounter him in our acceptance of the values he lived and affirmed. In that encounter, Jesus is present to us as he was present to the early Church.

When Jesus instituted the sacraments and placed Peter at the head of the Church, he gave the apostles, and those who follow them in leading the Church, the mission and authority to minister and maintain the sacraments.

Sacraments Celebrate the Life of the Community

Each sacrament celebrates through ritual and symbols something happening in the lives of the celebrating community. For example, Eucharist strengthens the unity of Christians as they receive it. It celebrates God's nourishing presence with us now.

While the sacraments benefit us as individuals, they also bring life to the entire Church. As members of Christ's body, when we are strengthened as individuals, the family of God is strengthened as a whole (CCC 1134). Sacraments are more than just one-time liturgical celebrations. They serve as ongoing symbols of God's love made visible to and through us.

Looking for and responding to Jesus' signs of love will keep our connection to God alive and strong. Read about some of the ways people in the Bible responded to Jesus' signs of love. Discuss what you find with the rest of the group.

Mark 14:3–9

Luke 7:36–39

Luke 10:38–42

Luke 5:27–32

- *When you experience God's love, how do you respond?*



Reflect on the question below in your prayer journal:

- *How might the sacraments help keep my heart open to God's love?*



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Journey of Faith for Adults: Catechumenate, C2 (826245)

Imprimi Potest: Stephen T. Rehauer, CSsR, Provincial, Denver Province, the Redemptorists.

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