

Roots and Wings: Helping Students Understand and Celebrate the Sacraments

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by Kate Ristow

A Timeless Definition

Generations of Catholics grew up learning by rote the Baltimore Catechism definition of a Sacrament: “an outward sign instituted by Christ to give grace.” For many of us, the words had little meaning; they were just something we were required to memorize. In time, though, through a combination of formation, experience, and maturity, we grew in our understanding of the deeper meaning behind that definition.

“Outward sign” was the easiest part. We understood signs! A cake and candles represented a birthday. Fireworks and a parade were integral parts of celebrating Independence Day.

Even as young children, we saw that Church celebrations were centered around signs—the pouring of the water, anointing with oil, drinking from the cup or sharing the bread. These were what theologians call the “matter” of the Sacraments. These signs were the “what” of the ritual, the action. In the “matter,” we understood what was received or done in celebrating the Sacrament.

“Grace,” too, was something we were able to grasp in relationship to the Sacraments. Grace was a gift, a present from God. In time we learned that grace was the gift of God’s life and presence that made us holy. We could not earn grace; we received grace through the Sacraments.

This is not to say that we understood exactly how God gave us grace; like so many other beliefs of the faith, it was part of the great mystery of God’s love for us. As we grew in faith and in our ability to understand deeper concepts, we learned about the different kinds of grace: sanctifying grace (which enables us to share in God’s life) and actual grace (through which God helps us choose good and to avoid sin).

Did Jesus Invent the Sacraments?

The easiest part of the definition—or at least it seemed so at the time—was the middle section: “instituted by Christ.” Most kids—and adults, too, no doubt—took that to mean that Jesus invented the Sacraments.

But think about it. There were married people in the Old Testament and Jesus worked his first public miracle at a wedding, so he could not possibly have invented Matrimony. There were priests in the Old Testament, even a priestly tribe descended from Levi, one of Jacob's twelve sons. So, again, Jesus clearly did not invent the priesthood. How about Reconciliation? At 2 Samuel 12, David confesses his sin to Nathan and is forgiven by the Lord. In Matthew 3, John the Baptist urges people to repent to prepare for the coming of the kingdom. Jewish people today continue to celebrate Yom Kippur, or the Day of Atonement, first described in Leviticus 23:27.

The list goes on, but it is clear that there is a relationship between biblical rituals and the Sacraments as we know them today.

Did Jesus Institute the Sacraments?

The reality is, we can find the roots of many of our sacramental rituals in the Old Testament. So why do we say that Jesus instituted the Sacraments?

Remember that through his life, death, Resurrection, and Ascension, Jesus fully revealed the Father to us. In Jesus, God established the new and everlasting covenant. Jesus came to fulfill the Old Law, the Law of Moses and the Prophets.

Jesus did this in all aspects of his ministry, so it is important to recognize that, in speaking of the Sacraments, Christ did not simply put new wine in old wineskins. The Lord did not merely "Christianize" the sacred rituals we now call Sacraments. Theologians tell us that although Jesus instituted the Sacraments, it does not mean that he determined the names of the Sacraments or even how they were to be celebrated.

Rather, in his ministry, Jesus recognized key human experiences, needs, and transitions and imbued them with grace—his life-giving presence. Then, beginning with the Apostles, the Church continued and institutionalized this tradition in the celebration of the Seven Sacraments.

Today, when we teach children about the Sacraments, we use age-appropriate language that can be developed and expanded as children grow in faith. Yet, no matter how old our students are, any definition of a Sacrament will include these three key elements: sign, grace, and Christ. These concepts are at the heart of the definition for Sacrament found in the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*: "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" (n. 1131).

The Development of the Sacraments

The word sacrament is derived from two sources: the Latin word *sacramentum*, which means "oath" or "pledge" and the earlier Greek term *mysterion*, which means "mystery," referring to the hidden nature of God's plan that enlightens only those who have faith. In ancient times, soldiers would swear an oath to their commander. As a sign of their pledge, they were branded on the arm, leaving them with an indelible mark. Tertullian, a third-century theologian, used this secular practice to explain the indelible character we are graced with in Baptism. Confirmation and Holy Orders also confer an indelible mark that "remains forever in the Christian as a positive disposition for grace, a promise and guarantee of divine protection, and as a vocation to divine worship and to the service of the Church" (*Catechism of the Catholic Church*, n. 1121).

Our sacramental theology developed over time. After his Ascension, Jesus worked through the Apostles and the Church. Many of the practices we now term "sacramentals" were considered sacraments by the early Church. Saint Peter Damian (1007-1072), a Doctor of the Church, declared that there were 12 sacraments. The renowned theologian Peter Lombard (1100-1160) was reportedly the first to narrow the number to seven. This was affirmed at the Council of Florence in 1439, but the Seven Sacraments were not fully defined until the Council of Trent in 1551.

Jesus, Sacrament of God

Saint Augustine (354-430) defined the Sacraments as “visible signs of invisible grace.” He taught that through the mystery of the Incarnation, when Jesus took on human flesh while remaining fully divine, Jesus became our first, or primordial, Sacrament. God revealed himself most fully in Jesus. Jesus Christ is our visible sign of the invisible God. We call Jesus the “Sacrament of God” because he made God known to us.

The Church, too, is properly called a Sacrament. The Church is the Body of Christ. We are called to be a visible sign of Jesus in the world today, channels of God’s grace for one another.

Kate Ristow, Contributing Editor to CATECHIST, has worked in Catholic publishing for over 25 years as a national speaker and writer, building on a wealth of experience in the religious formation of children and catechists in both parish and Catholic school programs.

The Seven Sacraments of the Church (see the Catechism of the Catholic Church #1210 – 1666)

Christ instituted the sacraments of the new law. There are seven: Baptism, Confirmation, the Eucharist, Penance (Reconciliation), the Anointing of the Sick, Holy Orders and Matrimony. The seven sacraments touch all the stages and all the important moments of Christian life.

Sacraments of Initiation: The sacraments of Christian initiation lay the foundations of every Christian life.

1. **Baptism** – Holy Baptism is the basis of the whole Christian life, the gateway to life in the Spirit, and the door which gives access to the other Sacraments. Through Baptism we are freed from sin and reborn as sons and daughters of God.
2. **The Eucharist** – The Eucharist is the source and summit of our faith. The Eucharist is a celebration of thanksgiving and communion. It is a memorial of Christ's death and resurrection, and a sign of unity and charity. Jesus is substantially present in the Eucharist — body, blood, soul, and divinity — in Holy Communion. Catholics often refer to this as the Real Presence of Jesus in the Eucharist and we believe that receiving the Eucharist unites us more closely as the body of Christ.
3. **Confirmation** – The reception of the Sacrament is necessary for the completion of baptismal grace. For by the Sacrament of Confirmation, the baptized are more perfectly bound to the Church and are enriched with a special strength of the Holy Spirit. Hence they are, as true witnesses of Christ, more strictly obliged to spread and defend the faith by word and deed.

Sacraments of Healing: The Lord Jesus Christ, physician of our souls and bodies has willed that His Church continue, in the power of the Holy Spirit, His work of healing and salvation, even among Her own members.

4. **Reconciliation** – Those who approach the Sacrament of Reconciliation obtain pardon from God's mercy for the offense committed against Him. The Sacrament of Reconciliation reconciles us with God. "The whole power of the sacrament of Penance consists in restoring us to God's grace and joining us with him in an intimate friendship" (CCC, no. 1468).
5. **The Anointing of the Sick** – By the sacred anointing of the sick and the prayer of the priest the whole Church commends those who are ill to the suffering and glorified Lord, that He may raise them up and save them.

Sacraments of Service: These Sacraments are directed towards the salvation of others; if they contribute as well to personal salvation, it is through service to others that they do so. They confer a particular mission in the Church and serve to build up the People of God.

6. **Holy Orders** – Holy Orders is the Sacrament through which the mission entrusted by Christ to his apostles continues to be exercised in the Church until the end of time.
7. **Matrimony** – The matrimonial covenant, by which a man and a woman establish between themselves a partnership of the whole of life, is by its nature ordered toward the good of the spouses and the procreation and education of offspring.