

Sacraments 1:

The Sacraments of Initiation

Sacraments:

As we begin the next major section of our introduction to Catholicism, I feel it necessary to give an intro to the basics of Sacraments. Sacraments are visible expressions of the invisible realities of God. In the words of my seminary professor, Abbot Jeremy: “A Sacrament is a concrete reality that when you bump into them you bump into God.” Therefore Sacraments have several sides to them. Each Sacrament has something tangible that relates to the things of the world and an eternal reality about the life of God. These Sacraments are rooted in the life and ministry of Jesus and those specific parts of his life and ministry that relate directly to our salvation. The Catholic Church holds that there are seven Sacraments: Baptism, Confirmation, Eucharist, Penance, Anointing of the Sick, Matrimony, and Holy Orders. The Sacraments are not of human origin or function by human power. Jesus inaugurated these Sacraments and they function by the power of God. During the controversies of the 4th and 5th centuries, some Christians held the belief that the Sacraments were considered invalid if the priest who administered them was in mortal sin. The basic understanding is that the holiness of the priest affects the dignity of the Sacraments. The Church declared that the holiness of the priest does not affect the efficacy of the Sacraments but that the Sacraments work by their own merit. In Latin this is stated as: *ex opere operato* (they work on their own). Nevertheless as extensions of the priestly ministry of Jesus, they are extensions of the priesthood and therefore are generally celebrated by priests. Many people are also confused by the phrasing “necessary for salvation” as though God needs these sacraments in order to bring people to salvation. Believing that God needs the Sacraments in order to save people puts limits on God’s ability and his mission to save the world. The Sacraments are extensions or expressions of God’s will who manifests his saving power through and in the Sacraments. Therefore the Sacraments are meant for us to experience who God is and come to be saved through him.

The Sacraments of Initiation:

Becoming a Christian and a full member of the Christian community is a process. The main stages of the process are called the Sacraments of Initiation, namely Baptism, Confirmation, and Eucharist. Until the 4th century these Sacraments were celebrated together with the order Baptism, Confirmation, and Eucharist happening simultaneously. After the 4th century the order of the Sacraments got split in the Latin Church. In the Eastern Catholic and Orthodox churches the order and unity still remain. Most infants who are initiated are given all three sacraments at the moment of baptism. The Latin Church reserved the celebration of Sacraments to the bishops, who were also the head of each individual church. As Christianity grew under the Edict of Constantine in 313 AD, the bishops could not handle the number of new Christians and the explosion of interest in Christianity. Therefore the bishops gave authority to their priests for Baptism and Eucharist but Confirmation remained with the bishop. Thus Confirmation split from Baptism and became more readily recognized as its own Sacrament. Until the 1970’s the common age of Confirmation was 7. At this age, the child would find a bishop who would

confirm the child and admit the child to Communion. During the 1970's the church decided to keep the age of 7 for receiving communion but moved the age of Confirmation to 14-18 years old. This was not a universal practice. Only the United States and Europe changed the practice. Nevertheless the three Sacraments have their own dignity, character, and biblical and historical precedence.

Baptism:

The only necessary Sacrament for salvation is Baptism. Baptism is the entry into the life of God, the moment the person accepts God into his/her life, becomes a member of the community, and is freed from both the temporal punishment due to sin and the effects of original sin. All of these will be explained in greater detail below. Baptism is necessary for salvation because it is the only way through which a person enters the life of God, which is what salvation is. Those who are not baptized or choose against baptism cannot be saved. This leads to an important question that a lot of people ask: what if someone could not be baptized because of other factors but wanted to be baptized? Since the Sacrament of Baptism is necessary for salvation and God can work outside of the Sacraments, we call this form of baptism "baptism by desire." The person wished to be baptized but could not, therefore God supplied what fallen humanity could not.

What is baptism? Baptism has several elements to it. The most prominent part is the washing with water. According to the laws of the early church, the water must be cold and moving symbolizing living or life-giving water. The church allowed for warm and still water if necessary. Our modern churches have baptismal fonts that contain the water used in baptisms. Some have flowing water to cleanse the otherwise stagnant water. Others are bowl-shaped intended for the water to be poured over the head instead of a full-immersion baptism. Water is necessary for the Sacrament of Baptism and nothing can substitute for water. Normally the person who is about to be baptized undergoes a series of rites. These rites ensure the desire of the person to be baptized and encourages the community to support this person in prayer. The most essential parts of the rite are the washing with water and the recitation of the words: "I baptize you in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit." No other words can suffice for a valid baptism. These words come from the New Testament letters and the writings of the early Church.

The Sacrament of Baptism confers a number of benefits on the newly baptized person. The most prominent sign is the washing away of sins. The newly baptized person is free from the effects of original sin that now affect all people due to the choices of Adam and Eve. Some people argue that original sin cannot be passed on like a gene and therefore we should abandon the language of original sin. Original sin is the consequence of free-will. We are in a fallen world whose existence is affected by the choice to abandon God. The freedom from original sin gives the person greater strength in fighting against temptations and sins. Baptism also removes any sins the person committed before being baptized. This element is symbolized by the white robes the person wears after being baptized. The second major element of baptism is the entrance into the community of believers. This entrance is symbolized by the person being baptized at the doors to the church and then entering through the font to the rest of the church. The third main element of baptism is the new life the person has with God. The newly baptized person is brought into the

life of God and given the Holy Spirit so that the person can now pray with God. The last element is the acceptance of God into the life of that person. Many people like to think of this event as a one-time event. This could not be further from the truth. Accepting God into one's life is a daily task that one must choose each and every day. This element is symbolized by the lighted candle.

Confirmation:

Some people argue that the Sacrament of Confirmation is still undergoing theological reflection and needs a new theology. The principle reason for this thought is the splitting of Baptism and Confirmation in the 4th century. The more I reflect on the Sacrament of Confirmation, the less I think it needs a new theology but to return to its original dignity and theology. Modern day Catholics experience Confirmation at the age of 16-18, the same age they are graduating from high school. Thus Confirmation looks like a "graduation" from religion or the decision of a person to become part of the Church. Both of these ideas are very wrong. Confirmation is the recognition that one is now an adult in the faith. A person who is confirmed has all the rights and responsibilities of a practicing adult Catholic and must take up the challenge to live the faith he/she professes. The second part – the decision to become part of the church – was already completed at baptism and should be a daily choice. At any point a person could leave the church or come back to the church. These are daily decisions not a one-time decision.

What is Confirmation? Confirmation is the sealing of a baptized person with the Holy Spirit. For adults who enter the church and those from the Eastern churches, this Sacrament is celebrated moments after baptism. The theology of the Sacrament is connected with the Descent of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost. Since Baptism is commonly celebrated as an infant, Confirmation is delayed to give the person a chance to learn the faith and be ready to become a full-adult in the faith. In this way it is easy to see why it is connected with graduation. A person who is confirmed is given a greater share in the Holy Spirit and is sealed with the Holy Spirit. A sealing is a protection against evil and sin. The sign for this sealing and the Sacrament of Confirmation is the use of Chrism Oil. The Sacred Chrism oil is consecrated by the local bishop once a year around Holy Thursday. This consecration can only be celebrated by a bishop. The word Chrism comes from the Greek word Christos, which means "anointed one." The bishop uses olive oil mixed with balsam to make the Chrism oil. The oil represents the healing power of the oil, the preparation for battle, and the warding off of evil. Historically oil was used to protect the skin against dirt and to help limber athletes for competitions. Thus the oil has the same basic focus for the Sacrament of Confirmation. The sweet fragrance of the balsam reminds the person of the sweet fragrance of Christ.

Eucharist:

The Sacrament of the Eucharist is not the same as the Mass. The Mass is the set of rites and rituals that help a person understand and prepare for the celebration of the Eucharist and Communion is the action in the Mass during which we receive the Eucharist. The Sacrament of the Eucharist is primarily about the fact that the bread and wine is Jesus' Body and Blood. Both Baptism and Eucharist are celebrated most commonly by all Christian denominations, the other five are much less common. The word "Eucharist" comes from two Greek words eu – good, and

charis – thanks or charity. Thus Eucharist means “thanksgiving,” we are giving thanks to God for what he has done and what he has given us. Jesus inaugurated the Sacrament of the Eucharist at the Last Supper when he took the bread and wine and said that these are his body and blood. He gave the command to “do this” in memory of him and the church has faithfully done so. The Church believes that once the bread and wine are consecrated, they are no longer bread and wine but the flesh and blood of Jesus. Not bread and flesh and wine and blood called Consubstantiation, but fully transformed and not bread and wine, but flesh and blood, Transubstantiated. Unlike the Sacrament of Baptism and Confirmation, a person could receive the Sacrament of the Eucharist every day.

What is the Sacrament of the Eucharist? In relation to the present topic, the Sacrament of the Eucharist is the consummation of the Sacraments of Initiation. The newly initiated person who has been washed with water, made clean, and sealed with the Holy Spirit marking him/her as a full member of the community now receives the Body and Blood of Jesus and invites Jesus into his/her life in a physical and mystical way. The other side of the Sacrament of the Eucharist the fulfillment of the words of the Our Father: “give us this day our daily bread.” We don’t simply eat the Eucharist once and say we are good for life just like we don’t eat one meal and we never eat again. We constantly need nourishment both physical and spiritual in order to survive. The consuming of the Body of Jesus is like eating a meal that sustains our spiritual life; the drinking of Jesus’ Blood is like receiving a blood transfusion after losing blood fighting in the battle. This Sacrament is the one most connected with daily living. In a similar way, the Sacrament of the Eucharist reminds us that even the act of eating is imbued with God.

The physical/tangible elements of the Sacrament of the Eucharist are bread and wine. Only wheat bread with no additives and grape wine with no additives and a 12% or higher alcohol content can be consecrated in the Mass. These rules seem arbitrary to many people, but these rules persevere the event where Jesus used bread and wine and make firm what constitutes bread and wine. Only a priest can validly consecrate the bread and the wine into the Body and Blood of Jesus since he is acting in the person of Jesus, who consecrated these elements at the Last Supper.

Often Sacraments become a check-list or another moment in the life of faith as opposed to spiritual realities that continue to affect our lives. I want to take a moment at the end of this part on the Sacraments of Initiation to focus on their spiritual realities. Baptism. Not only does Baptism give us an identity it informs our way of living. We are not a representation of Jesus to the world. We are tasked with showing the beauty and value of new life in the way we live and act. Baptism isn’t just an identity, it’s a way of life. Confirmation. The power of the Spirit of God coursing through us gives us a pouring forth of virtue. No one should be surprised that almost every Christian denomination came from Confirmed Catholics. The power of the Spirit in our lives gives us a new strength to prayer, a new vigor to our lives, and the strength to persevere through the challenges should we choose to believe it. Eucharist. We allow the Body and Blood of God to enter our bodies. We should be able to spend a great amount of time reflecting on that mystery. God desires us with such intensity that he humiliates himself to allow us to grind us with his teeth, enter our stomachs, and become part of our lives.