THE SACRAMENTS IN GENERAL:

I. Nothing happens without God’s grace!
   A. What is grace?
      1. (CCC 1996) Grace is favor, the free and undeserved help that God gives us to respond to his call to become children of God, adoptive sons, partakers of the divine nature and of eternal life.
      2. (CCC 1999) The grace of Christ is the gratuitous gift that God makes to us of his own life, infused by the Holy Spirit into our soul to heal it of sin and to sanctify it. It is the sanctifying or deifying grace received in Baptism. It is in us the source of the work of sanctification.
   B. God gives us or increases in us this sanctifying grace primarily through the Sacraments.
      (There are other sacramental graces that are given to us depending on the purpose of the Sacrament, e.g. penance gives us special graces to avoid temptations.)
   C. Why does God give us grace through the Sacraments?
      1. Because God adapts his methods to our nature. We are not angels. We are body and soul composites. Everything we do, including those things that are universal and eternal in nature such as thoughts and prayers, requires some kind of bodily adaptation to understand and communicate them.
      2. This is the sacramental principle: material things are good and God uses them! The Incarnation itself is proof of this!

II. What are the Sacraments?
   A. The Baltimore Catechism #136: “A Sacrament is an outward sign instituted by Christ to give grace.”
   B. (CCC 1084) "Seated at the right hand of the Father" and pouring out the Holy Spirit on his Body which is the Church, Christ now acts through the sacraments he instituted to communicate his grace. The sacraments are perceptible signs (words and actions) accessible to our human nature. By the action of Christ and the power of the Holy Spirit they make present efficaciously the grace that they signify.
      1. Outward, perceptible signs:
         a) (CCC 1146) In human life, signs and symbols occupy an important place. As a being at once body and spirit, man expresses and perceives spiritual realities through physical signs and symbols. As a social being, man needs signs and symbols to communicate with others, through language, gestures, and actions. The same holds true for his relationship with God.
         b) “An outward or perceptible sign” is something that is perceived by the senses. A sign represents something. It reveals and conceals another reality beyond itself. (1) Natural & human signs: smoke, dark clouds, a flag, stop sign, words, etc.
      2. The sacramental sign is composed of matter (water, oil, bread) and form (the words).
         a) The meaning of the sacrament is indicated by the sign/s, which points beyond itself to a deeper spiritual reality. There is a difference between the sign and the mystery

"The Sacraments in Scripture"
Nicholas Lebish, D.Min. (cand.)
Lesson 1, Page 1/4
signified by it. The Sacrament itself is the visible sign, but the mystery is the invisible reality behind it.

(1) Baptism signs: water, dunking, rising, Trinitarian formula, etc;
(2) Baptism reality: cleansing, death to sin, rebirth in Christ, etc.

3. The sacraments actually accomplish what they signify. They are efficacious because they belong to Jesus. He instituted them and accomplishes them in his Church. No material thing can confer grace unless it is God who performs it.
   a) (Isaiah 55:11) So shall my word be that goes out from my mouth; it shall not return to me empty, but it shall accomplish that which I purpose, and succeed in the thing for which I sent it.
   b) (CCC 1115) Sacraments are "powers that comes forth" from the Body of Christ, which is ever-living and life-giving. They are actions of the Holy Spirit at work in his Body, the Church. They are "the masterworks of God" in the new and everlasting covenant.
   c) Forgiveness, salvation, and divine life are won by the paschal mystery and given to us though the sacraments. In the sacraments Christ unites the temporal and eternal, the invisible and the visible to give us his own divine power.

III. The number and order of Sacraments:
   A. There are seven and only seven easily organized into three sections:
      1. Sacraments of Initiation: Baptism, Confirmation, Eucharist
      2. Sacraments of Healing: Reconciliation and Anointing
   B. (CCC 1210) The seven sacraments touch all the stages and all the important moments of Christian life: they give birth and increase, healing and mission to the Christian's life of faith. There is thus a certain resemblance between the stages of natural life and the stages of the spiritual life.
      2. Confirmation = maturity.
      3. Eucharist = nourishment.
      4. Reconciliation = healing.
      5. Anointing = death.
      6. Holy Orders = governance.
      7. Marriage = propagation.

IV. Objective and subjective elements of the Sacraments:
   A. (CCC 1128) The sacraments act ex opere operato (literally: "by the very fact of the action's being performed"), i.e., by virtue of the saving work of Christ, accomplished once for all. It follows that "the sacrament is not wrought by the righteousness of either the celebrant or the recipient, but by the power of God." From the moment that a sacrament is celebrated in accordance with the intention of the Church, the power of Christ and his Spirit acts in and through it, independently of the personal holiness of the minister. Nevertheless, the fruits of the sacraments also depend on the disposition of the one who receives them.
   B. (CCC 1123) The purpose of the sacraments is to sanctify men, to build up the Body of Christ and, finally, to give worship to God. Because they are signs they also instruct.

"The Sacraments in Scripture"
Nicholas Lebish, D.Min. (cand.)
Lesson 1, Page 2/4
They not only presuppose faith, but by words and objects they also nourish, strengthen, and express it.

V. The Sacraments are liturgical.
   A. (CCC 1113) The whole liturgical life of the Church revolves around the Eucharistic sacrifice and the sacraments.
   B. (CCC 1069) Through the liturgy Christ, our redeemer and high priest, continues the work of our redemption in, with, and through his Church.
      1. When we celebrate the liturgy here on earth, we participate in the eternal liturgy in heaven. The mysteries of Christ, his graces, the life of the Trinity is communicated to us in the Sacraments via their liturgical celebrations.
      2. Christ gave the Sacraments to the church in their terms of both their matter and form. The Church cannot change that. However, the liturgical ceremonies to celebrate the sacraments are entrusted to the Church.
   C. The liturgical celebrations of the sacraments have various purposes:
      1. To prepare us to receive the Sacraments worthily and to increase our dispositions to receive their graces.
      2. To increase our devotion and reverence for the Sacraments.
      3. To present the dignity and sacredness of the Sacraments.
   D. (SC 10) The liturgy is the summit toward which the activity of the Church is directed; it is also the font from which all her power flows.

VI. The sacraments and Scripture.
   ★ (General Directory for Catechesis, 108) “Catechesis...should situate the sacraments within the history of salvation.”
   A. The big picture of salvation history:
      1. Knowing the biblical background of the sacramental signs helps us understand the mystery behind them and increases our devotion and reverence for them.
      2. Example: Why are there seven sacraments?
         a) Covenants create kinship, family bonds. They’re not the same thing as contracts. They are made by swearing an oath to keep certain terms, offering a sacrifice, and sealing it with a meal. All covenants have blessings and curses attached to them based on obedience or disobedience of the covenant's terms.
         b) Covenants were associated with the number 7 because they share the same Hebrew root (sheba). To swear a covenant oath literally meant “to 7 oneself.”
            (1) (Gen 21:30-31) [Abraham said], ‘These seven ewe lambs you shall accept from my hand, in order that you may be a witness for me that I dug this well.’ Therefore that place was called Beer-sheba; because there both of them swore an oath...They had made a covenant at Beer-sheba.
         c) Creation was in seven days. Why? Because God was swearing a covenant oath with mankind and creation. The sign of this covenant with mankind and creation is the Sabbath rest!

“The Sacraments in Scripture”
Nicholas Lebish, D.Min. (cand.)
Lesson 1, Page 3/4
d) “Swearing an oath” in Latin is known as a “sacramentum.” Sacraments are covenant oaths that create kinship between God and us! There are seven for a reason. Through the sacraments, taken individually and as a group of seven, God is swearing a covenant oath with us so we’ll be his children. When we receive the sacraments we are swearing a covenant oath and we are bound by the loving obedience it requires.

B. Jesus Christ is the center of salvation history:
   1. Scripture and salvation history speaks of and points to Jesus. The sacraments are prefigured in every stage of salvation history (e.g. creation, the law of the Old Testament, the history of Israel) until they are ultimately fulfilled in Christ. They are the completion and fulfillment of God’s plan of salvation in Jesus.
   2. There were indeed various “sacraments” or signs in the OT (e.g. purifications, sacrifices, healings, etc), but they were all a prelude (types) to the sacraments in Christ. The OT sacraments were not “efficacious” like the NT sacraments.
      a) (Heb 10:1-4) Since the law has only a shadow of the good things to come and not the true form of these realities, it can never, by the same sacrifices that are continually offered year after year, make perfect those who approach. Otherwise, would they not have ceased being offered, since the worshippers, cleansed once for all, would no longer have any consciousness of sin? But in these sacrifices there is a reminder of sin year after year. For it is impossible for the blood of bulls and goats to take away sins.
   3. So, every sacramental sign is rooted in and takes its meaning from the Old Testament but especially in the life of Christ, who fulfills all of salvation history in himself!
      a) E.g. Baptism:
         (1) OT: Water points back to creation, the flood, the exodus, (and more) which point forward to new life, new creation coming forth from the water.
         (2) Jesus: Baptism allows us to really and truly participate in the death and resurrection of Christ and become a new creation.

C. Thus, every section in the Catechism situates the particular sacrament in salvation history. The sacramental signs have a deep historical meaning in salvation history as they point forward to Christ. The signs reveal the deeper spiritual reality that we are members of Christ and participants in salvation history! “The Sacraments turn past history into present mystery.” (Gray, p. 32).

Take away points:
1. God gives us his sanctifying grace through the sacraments because we’re human!
2. The sacraments are divine signs that efficaciously give us grace, the powers of Christ.
3. The sacraments work ex opere operato, but our dispositions aid or block the grace.
4. Sacraments are covenant oaths between God and man that make us children of God.
5. The sacramental signs can only be understood in the context of Scripture.