INTRODUCTION

Symbol and Ritual

_May God give you peace and all things good!_  
(Greeting of Saint Francis of Assisi)

Some of my friends who are not Catholic tell me that when they attend services in a Catholic church they find our way of praying—well, “complicated,” to say the least. Many of them say that their Sunday worship consists of singing a hymn, reading together from the Bible, listening to a sermon and singing a final hymn. Compared to that, I guess our way of praying is complicated. But I grew up with this Catholic way of praying; I don’t find it complicated at all. And I think that it can be rather easily explained.

That is what I would like to do in this book. I would like to walk with you on a tour through the sacraments and try to make them less complicated by explaining the meaning of the rites, by giving the reasons why we do what we do, and by telling you something of the history of these ceremonies to help you understand how Catholics pray.

I am writing this book partly for my non-Catholic friends who sometimes attend Catholic services. Perhaps some of you are married to Catholics and attend Catholic services rather regularly; maybe you are merely curious. Some of you may be thinking about becoming Catholic yourselves.

I am also writing for those Catholics who, while they are baptized and readily acknowledge their Catholic identity, need a quick refresher course in the sacraments. This book is _not_ for Catholics who want to know why things have changed or why the Mass isn’t like it used to be. The perspective here is different. This book is for people who want to know how Catholics pray _now._
Neither is this book for those Catholics whose experience has taken them far beyond the “first look” presented here. This book is only a first look at how Catholics pray; it is not a theology of the sacraments or a catechism. I hope, however, that this “first look” will whet your appetite to know more about the sacraments and to read books that do treat them in a fuller and more complete way.

The Catholic Church has recently published an official summary of Catholic teaching, the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*. Intended primarily for bishops and other teachers of the Catholic faith, it could be useful to you also. I have given *Catechism* references at the end of each chapter of this book for those who would like to clarify any issues that may arise from reading or discussions.

**A Few Key Terms**

Traveling in a foreign land is often made much easier if you know the local language, or at least a few key words and phrases. Similarly, our tour through the sacraments will be easier if I explain a few key terms.

The word *sacrament* will be the topic of the first chapter, and the words *Mass* and *Eucharist* will be discussed shortly after that. Here I would like to introduce three terms: *The Second Vatican Council*, *ritual* and *liturgy*.

**The Second Vatican Council**

Anyone who sets out to learn more about how Catholics pray will quickly come upon the Second Vatican Council. In 1959 Pope John XXIII announced his intention to call together all the bishops in communion with him throughout the world. The purpose of this meeting was: (1) to discuss ways in which new vigor could be given to Christian life; (2) to adapt Church institutions to the needs of our times; (3) to foster whatever promotes unity among Christians; and (4) to strengthen whatever would help the whole of humanity hear the Good News of Christ. Such a meeting of all the bishops is called a council. This particular Council (the twenty-first such meeting in the Church’s history) took place in Vatican City in Rome, and is therefore called the Vatican Council. A similar meeting had been held at the Vatican in 1869-1870; consequently this 1962-1965 meeting is called the Second Vatican Council.

The Council issued sixteen major documents. The first of these was the *Constitution on the Liturgy*. This document stated the general principles for a reform of Roman Catholic prayer that radically altered the Catholic worship throughout the world.

The Second Vatican Council is a watershed event for us Catholics. It not only changed the shape and language of our ritual prayers but also changed the way in which we speak about the sacraments. Before the Council, I celebrated Mass in Latin; now I celebrate in the language of the country where I am. Before the Council, I said Mass with my back to the people; now I celebrate facing the people. Before the Council, if I had written a book about the sacraments, it would have been a very different book from this book! The fact that we experience sacraments in a new way has led us to talk about the sacraments in a new way.

For many people 1965 (the close of the Council) was a long time ago. But many Catholics still refer to the prayer forms renewed by the Council as the *new* liturgy. It may seem strange that something which has been in use so long is still being called *new*! But one of the first and most important things to know about the way Catholics pray is that our prayer forms change very slowly. It is good to be aware of this at the very beginning of our tour through the sacraments: It takes a long time to establish new rituals. It takes a long time for Catholics to change their traditional ways of praying.

**Ritual Actions**

My friend Brad is thinking about becoming a Catholic. A member of a small evangelical Church, he became interested in the Catholic Church through some Catholic friends and started attending Sunday Mass. One day Brad stopped by my house to ask me some questions about the way Catholics act in church. I was struck by Brad’s first observation: “Father, the thing that is most different between my Church and your Church is that you
Catholics always seem to know what is going to happen next! In my Church we sit and listen and sing now and then, but in the Catholic Church you have to know what to do."

Brad has a good point: We Catholics do know what is going to happen next. One of the basic, distinctive marks of our way of praying is ritual: we do things over and over in set ways, and after a while, we know what is going to happen next. When the priest says, "The Lord be with you," the congregation responds without any thought or hesitation, "And also with you." The priest says, "Let us pray," and the congregation stands up.

Our daily lives have rituals also. There are set ways of shaking hands, eating with a fork, responding to a letter. And when we are accustomed to a certain way of doing things we seldom ask why we do it that way. For example, on your birthday you probably blow out the candles on your cake. Why? Does it have something to do with that first gasp of breath when you were born and the countless, continuous breaths you have taken from that moment to this birthday? Whatever the meaning of the candles on the birthday cake, I know that I never worry about such things when I blow out the candles on my cake—a thing which is getting increasingly harder to do! It is just part of the celebration, part of what we do to celebrate birthdays. It's a ritual.

We seldom ask why when performing rituals. But if a visitor from another culture who had never seen candles on a birthday cake were present at your birthday party, the visitor might well find this custom rather strange and ask, "Why are you doing that?" We Catholics have many ritual actions which we perform at Mass without asking why. But when visitors from other Churches come to Mass they will ask lots of why questions! I hope this book will help you understand the meaning of some of these ritual actions.

Liturgy: Public Prayer
There are times when we Catholics pray privately as individuals and there are times when we join together and pray together as Church in the name of Christ. This prayer of the Church has come to be called liturgy. The word embraces our celebration of Mass and the sacraments, the Liturgy of the Hours and the liturgical year, music and art.

Liturgy is our official prayer, the prayer which expresses who we are as Catholics and how we understand the meaning of Jesus' passion, death and resurrection. In the formal language of the Second Vatican Council, the liturgy is "the means whereby the faithful may express in their lives and manifest to others the mystery of Christ and the real nature of the true Church" (Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy, #2). In other words, liturgy makes visible, both to ourselves and to others, who we are and what God wants us to be.

Almost everyone has had some experience of prayer. Most Americans, even those who do not consider themselves "religious," readily acknowledge that they pray—and many pray frequently. In this book, however, we will explore that ritual, repetitious, formal, official, collective, public prayer we call liturgy.

The sacraments are the principal liturgical rites you will encounter if you attend a Catholic Church. The sacraments are such a "special" kind of prayer that many Catholics do not think of them as prayer at all! Some Catholics would be surprised at the title of this book, Sacraments: How Catholics Pray. They think of sacraments as something we "receive," not a way in which we pray.

A lot of people tell me that they go to church to pray—meaning to pray privately. Nothing wrong with that. But I can pray at home. In fact, I pray better at home. I pray especially well on long walks down by the river. It takes me a while to get into it, but after a mile or so, God and I have some really good talks—often better than the ones we have in church. I go to church for public prayer—for the liturgy.

Many of my Baptist friends tell me that they go to church to read the Bible and to sing and especially to hear the sermon. I certainly appreciate hearing the Bible proclaimed; I love to sing; and God knows I enjoy a good sermon or homily. But the liturgy is more than all that. Just hearing the Word of God and understanding it isn’t enough for me. I am more than my understanding, more than just my head: I want to worship God with my whole body. And I think it is my Catholic tradition which makes me want to experience Church in this way.
Catholics are big on Incarnation—not just Christmas, though we’re big on that, too—but the Incarnation: God taking our flesh, coming here to our earth so that we can find God in our very “earthy-ness”: “And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have his glory, the glory as of the Father’s only son, full of grace and truth” (John 1:14).

Catholics believe in a God who knows all about us: knows what it is to be happy, to be sad, to worry, to cry, to be disappointed, to be like us in every way. “Because [Jesus] himself was tested by what he suffered, he is able to help those who are being tested” (Hebrews 2:18).

Jesus knew what we are all about—and not just knew in his head, but also in his body: knew the strain of lifting a heavy table, the sweat of working in the desert sun, the pain of hunger, the embrace of friends, the joyful taste of rich red wine! God dwelt among us, and in that Incarnation, that taking flesh, God wants to save not just our “souls” but also our bodies, our nations, our ancestors, our whole earth. Mountains and hills, fire and heat, dew and rain, birds and beasts, wild and tame, “bless the Lord!” (see Daniel 3:57-88).

For Catholics the Incarnation means that the very stuff of this earth has been taken up into the Kingdom of God. The things of this earth are not distractions from praying or hindrances to our worship but are the very way—media, means, symbols, instruments, sacraments—for liturgical prayer.

Catholics worship not just with their heads but with the things of the earth: bread and wine, water and oil, coming together and going apart, standing still and processing forward, lighting candles and smelling flowers, even dust and ashes! That’s liturgical prayer—prayer with the body, the earth, ritual, song, celebration.

In the liturgy we not only hear of God’s dreams for us, we further act them out; we are taken up into those dreams. I hear of God’s dreams of justice for all peoples of all nations; in Holy Communion I see how the Body and Blood of the Lord is broken and shared and how everyone receives “enough”—the rich and the poor, the young and the old, the hungry and the weak. And the contrast between the Table of the Lord and the table of this world (where very few have “enough,” indeed millions are starving!) forces me to rethink my ideas of justice and charity.

We don’t just pray, “Thy kingdom come”: We experience what the Kingdom promises. We don’t just talk about Holy Thursday: We eat and drink. We don’t just talk about Good Friday: We are sacrifice. We don’t just talk about Easter: We are risen in the promise of Christ. That is what liturgy is: living out our story.

The statement of the Bishops’ Committee on the Liturgy, Environment and Art in Catholic Worship (#16), reminds us that a culture such as ours, “oriented to efficiency and production has made us insensitive to the symbolic function of persons and things.” This is one of the reasons why many Americans find liturgical prayer difficult: It demands a sensitivity to the symbolic function of persons and things.

Symbol is the very language of liturgy. For people who are schooled in the scientific, the practical and countable, symbols and rituals are often “foreign” and take some getting used to.

Symbols can carry more meaning than a declarative statement or scientific formula or theological dogma. When I received Holy Communion for the first time at the age of six, I did so with great reverence. I “knew what I was doing.” Today I certainly know more about the Eucharist then I did then. I have written books on the Eucharist. But the same liturgical action, sharing a piece of bread with the other worshipers at Sunday Mass, is able to hold all these meanings—and more besides! That is the beauty of liturgy: Liturgy means more than we can ever understand it to mean. A symbol “says” more than mere words could ever say.

Often at weddings, when I watch the couple exchange rings, I wonder at what that means. The meaning is more than the ring itself. I have seen seventy-dollar rings and I have seen seven thousand-dollar rings. The meaning is not in the gold or the price. I am glad that the Catholic ceremony doesn’t try to explain anything at this point of the ceremony. Even the best of words are inadequate.

The Bishops’ statement Environment and Art in Catholic Worship (#16) adds that the American “cultural emphasis on individuality and competition has made it more difficult for us
to appreciate the liturgy as a *personal-communal* experience. As a consequence, we tend to identify anything private and individual as 'personal.' But, by inference, anything communal and social is considered impersonal." This is another American difficulty with liturgy: Because liturgy is public and communal, some see it as impersonal and distant. Good liturgy is never private, but good liturgy is always personal. I have experienced private prayer and public prayer; both can be my personal prayer. I can't imagine what impersonal prayer would be; but insofar as I can imagine it, I am sure I wouldn't want it.

I'd hate to go to church some Sunday and find I was the only one who came! I need the witness of other folks. There are times when I am not too sure that I want to get out of bed and go to church, but I can look around the church and see that others, by their very presence there, tell me, "This is important to us, too." The presence of others is especially helpful when I know how their faith is important in their lives: How Jane has found strength from her faith following her miscarriage; how Henry faithfully comes to Mass every Sunday even after his divorce, and how our faith community is one of his major supports in dealing with the loneliness. My faith is strengthened by the faith of the other worshipers—especially when I know them and know of their faith. Liturgy is something bigger than just *my* prayer and *my* faith.

The liturgy constantly reminds me that I am taken up into something much bigger than myself. At Mass we pray, "Lord, remember your Church throughout the world..." and we recall the name of our bishop. The liturgy is something we do with the bishop, whom I don't think of very often and see even less often. But this Mass is his liturgy and the worship of this whole diocese. We also ask God to remember the bishop of Rome, whom I see even less frequently. This is his worship also, and the liturgy of the diocese of Rome and the worship of millions of Catholics all over the earth: Catholics in Zaire and Australia, Catholics in Israel and Iran, Catholics in New York City and Catholics in Tell City, Indiana—in every place and in every age!

What we are doing now is what we will be doing forever when,

freed from every shadow of death,
we shall take our place in the new creation....
(Eucharistic Prayer for Masses of Reconciliation I)

There we will be seated at table with:

people of every race, language, and way of life
to share in the one eternal banquet
with Jesus Christ the Lord.
(Eucharistic Prayer for Masses of Reconciliation II)

**How to Use This Book**

Each chapter is relatively short and covers one topic. I have tried to select the information which would be most useful for a "first look." Frequently I will use words from the prayers of the liturgy as a source for our understanding of the sacraments. This practice has a long tradition among Catholics, as evidenced in the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*. As the topic of the book is prayer, it might be good actually to pray with each chapter. At the end of each I have given a few suggestions "For Prayer" to stimulate your own prayer.

Discussion can help to clarify ideas even if the "discussion" is only an imaginary conversation with yourself. Some readers will be exploring the sacraments in a discussion group or perhaps during their catechumenate. With each chapter I have given some questions to start the conversation under the heading "For Reflection and Discussion."

Finally, at the end of each chapter I make a few suggestions "For Further Information." For the most part, I have listed books that I myself have found useful. I have also listed the numbers in the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* where more information on the topic may be found.

May God be with us as we begin this journey through the sacraments, the way Catholics pray!
FOR PRAYER

Jesus, be with me
as I begin this journey through the sacraments.
I need to understand how Catholics pray.
Most of all, Jesus, help me to pray.
Help me to pray more earnestly, more sincerely.
Help me discover new ways to pray
that will make my love for you grow
and help me realize even more your immense love for me.

FOR REFLECTION AND DISCUSSION

1) Where do you do your best praying?

2) Do you prefer praying alone or praying with others?

3) Recall your best experience of communal prayer. What caused it to be such a good experience?

FOR FURTHER READING


*Catechism of the Catholic Church*, “The Celebration of the Christian Mystery” (#1066-1075); “Celebrating the Church’s Liturgy” (#1136-1199).

CHAPTER ONE

It All Starts With Jesus:
The Sacrament and the Sacraments

As we take our first steps on our journey through the sacraments, it might be good to say what the word sacrament means. Catholics my age all memorized the definition from the *Baltimore Catechism*: “A sacrament is an outward sign instituted by Christ to give grace.” While this is a good definition, I think it might be more helpful to enter through a different door.

The first thing I want to say about the way Catholics pray is that Catholics do believe in Jesus and Catholics do read the Bible. We are sometimes accused of being caught up in empty rituals and neglecting Jesus and the Bible, yet nothing could be further from the truth. Our Catholic faith and way of praying—indeed all Christian faith—begins with Jesus and is based on the Bible. It all starts with Jesus. So our journey through the sacraments will start at the beginning, with Jesus.

In the Beginning...

The loving God who created us wants to be present to us, to be with us. Lovers want to be together. God knows how hard it is for us to love someone we cannot see or touch. And so, in God’s mysterious plan, the invisible God took flesh, came among us and became truly human. Central to the mystery of Christmas (and Catholic prayer centers on Christmas and Easter) is the realization that God comes to us and we come to God in the flesh: through our bodies in the created world.
The invisible God, whom no eye has seen, was seen in the humanity of Jesus. God, whose wonder and love are beyond our imagination, wished to become visible and close to us. This is the very basic, root meaning of sacrament: making the invisible visible.

Saint Augustine (d. 430) calls sacraments “visible signs of invisible grace.” Our understanding of sacrament starts with “making the invisible visible.” As we pray at Christmas Mass,

In the wonder of the incarnation
your eternal Word has brought to the eyes of faith
a new and radiant vision of your glory.
In him we see our God made visible
and so are caught up in love of the God we cannot see.
(Preface I)

The first step in understanding the meaning of sacrament is to see Jesus himself, in his humanity, as the first and original sacrament. It all starts with Jesus: Jesus himself is sacrament, the visible sign of the invisible God.

**From Jesus to Church**

Sometimes I hear people say: “Wouldn’t it have been wonderful to have lived at the very time of Jesus, to have seen him in the flesh and moved among the disciples!” We Catholics believe that, in the wonderful plan of God, we who live in the twentieth century are not at a disadvantage from those people who were alive when Jesus walked the earth. We, today, see Christ and move among the disciples.

This is neither a modern nor a specifically Catholic notion. Saint Paul was born again in the light of the revelation that Christ is still present among us: “I fell to the ground and heard a voice saying to me, ‘Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?’ I replied, ‘Who are you, Lord?’ Then he said to me, ‘I am Jesus of Nazareth whom you are persecuting’” (Acts 22:7-8).

From that moment on Paul realized that Christ cannot be separated from his members. The risen Christ is so identified with the Christian that whatever Paul did to a Christian (whether persecution or blessing) Paul did to Christ himself. The Christian is baptized into Christ and can say with Paul: “[A]nd it is no longer I who live, but it is Christ who lives in me” (Galatians 2:20a).

As Jesus is the original sacrament, so we who are baptized into the risen Christ become sacraments. Today it is Christ’s Body the Church which is the primary sacrament, the revelation of the loving plan of God.

The Church itself is sacrament. The sacraments are not so much something we receive as something that we are. We are sacrament, instruments of grace; we are the ordinary way God graces today’s world.

Consequently, this book is not merely about something that Catholics do (sacraments in the plural); it is about the Church itself (the sacrament). It is about who we are as Catholics. The sacraments are “outstanding means whereby we express in our lives and manifest to others the mystery of Christ and the real nature of our Church” (Constitution on the Liturgy, #2).

**God’s Dreams for the World**

What is it that the sacraments make visible? They make visible the story of God’s dreams for the world. “God...sent his Son, the Word made flesh, anointed by the Holy Spirit, to preach the Gospel to the poor, to heal the contrite of heart... For his humanity united with the Person of the Word, was the instrument of our salvation. Therefore, ‘in Christ the perfect achievement of our reconciliation came forth and the fullness of divine worship was given to us’ ” (Constitution on the Liturgy, #5).

We read of God’s plan for the world on every page of sacred Scripture. On the very first pages of the Bible we see God creating this magnificent world and all that is in it. God created the universe and from the earth God created an earthling and breathed into it God’s own image. And all was at peace.

I like to see in the first chapters of Genesis a threefold harmony: (1) Men and women were at peace with each other;
they were naked and not ashamed. (2) The human creatures were at peace with the earth; Adam named the animals and tilled the earth, and it brought forth its fruit. And (3) they were at peace with God; Adam walked in the garden and talked with God. And it was good. On the first page of the Bible we get a glimpse of the harmony God wants at the end of time: all creation reconciled and at peace.

But sin shatters every layer of the dream: harmony with each other (they accuse each other); with the earth, which must be coaxed to yield up its fruits by human labor; and with God, from whom Adam hid himself.

When the time was ripe, Jesus came to bring the dream of God to completion. He spent his life healing sickness and division. By his death and resurrection he reconciled all things in himself and made it possible for God’s plan to be realized. Easter is the promise that the dream will be realized. We enter into this magnificent plan of God by Baptism/Confirmation/Eucharist, by celebrating the sacraments.

Telling the Story

In this world divided by war and greed we must continually retell the story of God’s plan for unity and reconciliation. We must keep the dream of God alive. We, the Church, do this first of all in the celebration of the sacraments. The sacraments are the celebration of our Christian story. This is the principal reason why the proclamation of Scripture is an essential part of every sacramental celebration. Sacraments are worded signs. Scripture is the word, the story which makes the sacramental sign meaningful.

Sacraments celebrate the goodness of all creation—one of the great themes of the Catholic prayer tradition. Material things are good. Our human bodies, our very flesh and bones are good. God took flesh and dwelt among us, and in this mystery of taking on human flesh proclaimed that the things of this earth are not obstacles to God but are intended to be windows to the divine. The magnificence of creation enables us to see something of the wonder, the multiplicity, the superabundance of God.

This theme—creation is good—is key to understanding the way Catholics pray. Catholicism is a sacramental religion that prays with bathing and eating, singing and embracing. Sacraments celebrate the goodness, the grace-filled essence, of creation: water and fire, oil and salt, ashes and palm branches, bread and wine. Creation draws us into the very life of the Creator:

Bless the Lord, all you works of the Lord....
Bless the Lord, sun and moon....
Bless the Lord, fire and heat....
Bless the Lord, ice and cold....
Bless the Lord, seas and rivers....
Bless the Lord, you whales and all that swim in the waters....
Bless the Lord, all wild animals and cattle.... (see Azariah 1:35-65 or Daniel 3:57-88)

How Many Sacraments Are There?

If you ask a Catholic how many sacraments there are, you will probably be told that there are seven: Baptism, Confirmation, Eucharist, Reconciliation, Anointing of the Sick, Marriage and Holy Orders. If Jesus is a sacrament and the Church is a sacrament, does that make nine sacraments?

The question “How many sacraments are there?” has received different answers at various periods of our history, depending on what the question meant and how the questioner understood the word sacrament.

Today we Americans usually (nearly always!) use numbers as quantities. They tell us how much or how many. How much is my gas bill? How many days till Christmas? But numbers can also be used as qualities. For example, many people feel that thirteen is unlucky. Thirteen in this sense indicates a quality (unlucky) rather than a quantity (twelve plus one). It is not something you can figure out mathematically or explain to a nonbeliever. In our industrial America this qualitative use of
numbers sounds strange or superstitious. But this use is quite common in other societies and other historical periods. Numbers as qualities have often been used in religion.

Seven, for example, symbolizes totality. This is an important factor in the Church's speaking of seven sacraments. Four is the number for earth and three is the number for heaven (from the four elements: earth, air, fire and water, and the three Persons of God). When we join earth and heaven, the material and the spiritual, the created and the divine, four and three, we have all that is. And so, seven means universality, completeness, totality. When we say that there are seven sacraments we are suggesting in this religious sense that the material universe is a sacrament, that all created things are windows to the divine, that we have all the sacraments we will ever need! (Seven is frequently used in this sense: There are seven gifts of the Holy Spirit. In the Book of Revelation John writes to the seven Churches, that is, to the universal Church.)

Sacraments in the Bible

We do not find the word sacrament in the Bible. Sacrament is a Latin word; our Christian Scriptures, however, were written in Greek. Hence the word for "sacrament" we find in the Bible is the Greek word mysterion, "mystery."

Today the English word mystery is frequently used to mean something we cannot understand. ("How she could have all that money and still be so unhappy is a mystery to me.") The Greek word mysterion is usually translated in English Bibles as "plan," referring to the wonderful, mysterious plan that God had before creation began, to take flesh in Jesus and to draw all of creation into a harmonious unity so spectacular and breathtaking that the very idea is too wonderful for us, something we can never fully understand. This is the fundamental meaning of "sacrament" in the Bible.

Saint Paul says that it is his life's work to announce and bring to completion this "mystery that has been hidden throughout the ages and generations" (Colossians 1:26a).

"Although I am the very least of all the saints, this grace was given to me to bring to the Gentiles the news of the boundless riches of Christ, and to make everyone see what is the plan of the mystery hidden for ages in God who created all things; so that through the Church the wisdom of God in its rich variety might now be made known..." (Ephesians 3:8-10a, emphasis added).

When the language of the Church changed from Greek to Latin, the Greek word mysterion was sometimes translated by the Latin word sacramentum; it is in this word that we find the biblical roots of the word sacrament.

For the first eleven centuries of Christian history the word sacrament was frequently used in this more general sense, referring to the mysterious plan of God. Little by little specific aspects of this mysterious plan (for example, Eucharist, Baptism, Anointing of the Sick) began to be singled out and called sacraments. In the twelfth century, in the works of teachers such as Hugh of St. Victor (d. 1141) and Peter Lombard (d. 1160), we begin to see the list of the seven actions which Catholics now call sacraments. In 1547, responding to specific questions being asked at the time, the Council of Trent stated: "The sacraments of the new law are seven, no more and no less" (Session VII, Canon 1).

The Presence of God

We cannot understand sacraments without looking at our understanding of grace. Grace has been understood in many different ways in Christian history. Probably most Catholics today think of grace as "a gift of God."

The greatest gift that God can give us is the gift of God's very self, God's personal self-communication. Grace is not so much something that is given but someone who is experienced as present. Sacramental celebrations enable us in faith to touch Grace itself, to contact the all-pervading presence of the loving God who sustains all created things in existence. The sacraments allow us to become conscious and aware of God's greatest gift: the creative, sustaining, loving presence of God.

Our Catholic understanding of sacrament is related to our
ideas of grace and presence. All of the sacraments, not just the Eucharist, are celebrations of God’s real presence. In celebrating the sacraments we, the Church, proclaim anew the marvelous, mysterious plan (mysterion, sacramentum) of God to bring all things together in Christ.

To accomplish so great a work, Christ is always present in his Church, especially in its liturgical celebrations. He is present in the sacrifice of the Mass, not only in the person of his minister, “the same now offering, through the ministry of priests, who formerly offered himself on the cross,” but especially under the eucharistic elements. By his power he is present in the sacraments, so that when a man baptizes it is really Christ himself who baptizes. He is present in his word, since it is he himself who speaks when the holy Scriptures are read in the Church. He is present, lastly, when the Church prays and sings, for he promised: “Where two or three are gathered together in my name, there am I in the midst of them” (Matthew 18:20).

(Constitution on the Liturgy, #7)

Sacraments proclaim the mysterious, hidden plan of God to bring all things together in Christ. Sacraments are the celebration of the presence of Christ in our midst.

**Toward a Definition of a Sacrament**

Sacrament is such a complex, dynamic reality that no one is really going to be able to define it adequately. Think, for example, of how you would define Thanksgiving dinner at Grandmother’s or the high school prom or the final game of the World Series. These dynamic ritual celebrations are more verb than noun. Definitions are impossible; even lengthy, detailed descriptions fail. After all the defining and describing are over, we are left with: “Well, you would have to be there!” Sacraments are like that. To understand them fully, you have to be there! You have to experience them in person.

Contemporary Christians, reflecting on their experience, have given us descriptions of sacrament that can help us reflect on our experience: “A sacrament is a festive action in which Christians assemble to celebrate their lived experience and to call to heart their common story. The action is a symbol of God’s care for us in Christ. Enacting the symbol brings us closer to one another in the Church and to the Lord who is there for us.”

“Sacraments are symbolic actions manifesting the offer of God’s saving love for us in Christ and through the Spirit in the Church. In the sacraments, we respond to God’s self-giving and draw closer not only to God but also to one another in the Church.”

A description which helped me rethink my idea of sacrament is: “As long as you notice, and have to count the steps, you are not yet dancing but only learning how to dance. A good shoe is a shoe you don’t notice. Good reading becomes possible when you do not consciously think about eyes, or light, or print, or spelling. The perfect liturgy would be one we were almost unaware of; our attention would have been on God.”

I hope this chapter has helped you see that Mass and the sacraments are not merely something that one “receives” or “goes to.” They are how Catholics pray. Our focus is not on the ritual. Our attention is on God. God’s plan is disclosed. God’s people are renewed. Christ’s presence is celebrated. Salvation is realized. In celebrating the sacraments we, the Church in today’s broken world, keep the dreams of God alive!
FOR PRAYER

O loving God, help me to know your plan for me. Help me to know my place in your plan for the world. Help me to dream your dreams. Help me to keep your dreams alive. Help me to live a life of generosity, of compassion, of understanding.

Jesus, you came to us to save us, to heal us, to love us.

By your cross and resurrection you restored the wonderful plan for the destiny of the world.

I want to follow you, to walk in your footsteps, to be an instrument of your peace and an ambassador of reconciliation.

Forgive me for the times when I cause division rather than peace, especially for those times when I _____.

Thank you for the beautiful things which reveal your love, and especially, thank you for _____.

FOR REFLECTION AND DISCUSSION

1) Have you read the Bible? Have you read the whole New Testament? How frequently do you read the Bible?

2) Do you see the Bible as your story or as stories about people who lived a long time ago?

3) Does reading the Bible influence the way that you pray? What is the relationship between the Bible and your personal prayer?

4) How would you describe God’s dreams for the world?

FOR FURTHER INFORMATION


Catechism of the Catholic Church, “And in Jesus Christ, His Only Son, Our Lord” (#430-455); “The Liturgy: Work of the Holy Trinity” (#1077-1112); “The Paschal Mystery in the Church’s Sacraments” (#1113-1134).

Notes