

An Introduction to the Sacraments and The Sacrament of Baptism



The Catholic Church celebrates seven Sacraments—Baptism, Confirmation, Holy Communion, Reconciliation, Marriage, Holy Orders, and the Anointing of the Sick.

What is a Sacrament? By definition it is an outward sign, instituted by Christ to give grace. That's a short and sweet definition, but it packs a lot of punch. Let's break it down a little.

Outward Signs— Outward signs are God's way of recognizing our humanity and coming down to our level. He conveys His unseen grace into our spiritual souls through material and tangible means which our physical bodies can perceive—things and words and gestures that appeal to our senses. The outward signs of the sacraments have two parts: the "thing" itself (called the "matter") which is used (water, oil, etc.), and the words or gestures (called the "form") which give significance to what is being done. Both are required for a valid Sacrament.

Instituted By Christ— Between the time Jesus began His public life and the time He ascended into heaven, He fashioned the seven sacraments. When He ascended into heaven, that put an end to the making of sacraments. The Church cannot institute new sacraments. There never can be more or less than the seven Jesus has given us.

To Give Grace— Coming now to the third element in the definition of a sacrament, we have its essential purpose: "to give grace." What is grace? There are two answers to that question because there are two types of grace—sanctifying grace and actual grace. First and most important of all, the Sacraments give sanctifying grace. Sanctifying grace is that marvelous supernatural life, that sharing-in-God's-own-life that is the result of God's Love, the Holy Spirit, indwelling in the soul. It is a share in the Divine Life of God, infused into our souls. Sanctifying grace stays in the soul. It's what makes the soul holy; it gives the soul supernatural life. More properly, it *is* supernatural life. Then we have actual grace. Actual grace is a supernatural push or encouragement. It's transient. It doesn't live in the soul, but acts on the soul from the outside, so to speak. It's a holy help, a Divine hand on the shoulder that steers us toward sanctifying grace. Grace helps us live the life God is calling us to live—and the Sacraments of the Church are a true wellspring of grace.

A Sacrament is a visible sign of an invisible reality.

-Mother Angelica



Baptism—Where It All Begins



Baptism is the very first Sacrament to be received—the gateway into all of the other Sacraments. It is the entrance into the Divine Life, and into the Church. Let's look at a few quick facts about the Catholic Church and Baptism.

Who gets baptized? Everyone who practices the Catholic faith. Children are baptized as infants, following the Christ's command of "Let the little children come unto me," and adults who are converting to the Catholic Church are also baptized, unless they have been baptized in another church whose method is approved by the Catholic Church. No other Sacraments may be received prior to the Sacrament of Baptism.

Is Baptism necessary for salvation? In short yes, but not always. The Church does hold that Baptism is the normal and necessary means for salvation. Those who are aware of this are held to that standard. So what about the person in the third world country who has never heard of Jesus or the person from the non-denominational church down the street who doesn't believe in Baptism? The Catechism of the Catholic Church tells us: "This affirmation [the necessity to be baptized] is not aimed at those who, through no fault of their own, do not know Christ and his Church (CCC 847). " and "Although in ways known to himself God can lead those who, through no fault of their own, are ignorant of the Gospel, to that faith without which it is impossible to please him (CCC 848; cf. 1260). " In layman's terms this means that while we, as a Church, are bound by the Sacraments, God is not. For those who have never heard the Good News of Jesus, or the teachings of the Church, God can operate in ways that only He knows to bring salvation.

Isn't Baptism just a symbol? It is not. We discussed earlier how the Sacraments impart grace—which is a real thing that lives in our souls. Baptism literally washes our souls of Original Sin and welcomes us into the Divine Life of the Lord, and into His Body the Church.

What Happens at Baptism?

In Baptism we are buried with Christ through the water, and rise again to new life with Him (see Romans 6:4). Through this process we are cleansed from the original sin inherited from our first parents, Adam and Eve. Let's look at that matter and form of Baptism and the reasons behind them.

Water is used for the Rite (and may be sprinkled or the person may be submersed) because water was used when the our Lord Himself was baptized and when He instituted this Sacrament.

Chrism is used to anoint the one being baptized. Chrism is olive oil mixed with sweet smelling balsam that has been consecrated by the Bishop.

The White Garment symbolizes becoming a new creation and being clothed in Christ.

The Lighted Candle is a reminder that Christ is the light of the world, and we are to carry His light into the world, and live as children of the light.

