

Catholic Sacraments: Vehicles of Grace

The sacraments are Christ's own gift that provide us with his grace.

They are the divine helps which God gives us to enable us to:

- Believe the truths of his faith
- Live according to his moral code
- Grow in his gift of divine life

The seven sacraments are a fundamental part of the Catholic faith.

Freely choosing to accept grace

When God made us, he gave us **free will**.

He continues to respect our free will to the end. When Jesus died upon the Cross to redeem us from our sins, it did not mean that from then on everyone would **have** to go to Heaven whether they wanted to or not.

When Jesus died upon the Cross, he paid an infinite price for an inexhaustible flow of **grace**. That grace would enable each person to turn back to God and to remain united with God through this life and through eternity.

That brings us to a question: **How** would Jesus provide for this flow of grace to individual souls?

- Would the whole thing be invisible?
- Would God simply give to each person of good will a silent inner conviction of being saved?
- Each time that we felt the need of divine help, would we simply ask for it and immediately feel welling up within us a great surge of spiritual strength?

Consistent with how we are made

God could have done it that way, of course. But God chose to be consistent. He chose to deal with man, in this matter of grace, in the same manner in which He had made man—through a **union** of the material and the spiritual, of body and of soul.

The grace itself would be invisible, as by its nature it must be. But the grace would come to us **through** the visible things that we deal with daily.

And so God took the common things from the world about us—objects which we could taste and touch and feel, words that we could hear and gestures that we could understand—and made these the **carriers** of His grace.

He even matched the sign to the purpose for which the grace was given:

- Water for the grace which cleanses
- The appearances of bread and wine for the grace which nourishes and gives growth
- Oil for the grace which strengthens

To this combination of outward sign and inner grace, welded together by Christ, the Church gives the Latin name of *sacramentum*—a holy thing.

Sacraments: a definition

The sacraments are chosen instruments of divine power.

The exact definition of a sacrament is that it is “an outward sign instituted by Christ to give grace.” We readily can see that there are three distinct ideas contained in that short definition:

- Outward sign
- Instituted by Christ
- To give grace

Let’s examine exactly what each of these three ideas means:

Outward signs...

The outward signs are God’s way of treating us like the human beings we are. He conveys His unseen grace into our spiritual souls through material symbols which our physical bodies can perceive—things and words and gestures.

The outward signs of the sacraments have two parts: the “thing” itself which is used (water, oil, etc.), and the words or gestures which give significance to what is being done.

...Instituted by Christ...

We know that no human power could attach an inward grace to an outward sign—not even the divinely guided but humanly applied power of the Church.

Only God can do that.

Which brings us to the second element in the definition of a sacrament: “instituted by Christ.”

Between the time He began His public life and the time He ascended into heaven, Jesus 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 seven, the seven Jesus has given us: [Baptism](#), [Confirmation](#), [Holy Eucharist](#), [Reconciliation](#) (Confession or Penance), [Anointing of the Sick](#), [Holy Orders](#), and [Matrimony](#).

Jesus did completely specify the matter and form of some of the sacraments—notably Baptism and the Holy Eucharist. But this does not mean that He necessarily fixed the matter and form of all the sacraments down to the last detail.

Concerning some of the sacraments (Confirmation, for example) He probably left it to His Church, the keeper and the giver of His sacraments, to specify in detail the broad matter and form assigned by Christ.

...To give grace

Coming now to the third element in the definition of a sacrament, we have its essential purpose: “to give grace.”

What kind of grace do the sacraments give?

First and most important of all, they 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.

- To the soul cut off from God by original sin, **Baptism** brings sanctifying grace for the first time. Baptism opens the soul to the flow of God’s love, and establishes union between the soul and God.
- To the soul cut off from God by its own sin, by mortal sin, the sacrament of **Reconciliation** restores the sanctifying grace that has been lost. Reconciliation removes the barrier that has kept the Holy Spirit outside and once again gives entrance to God’s life-giving love.

The other five sacraments—Confirmation, Holy Eucharist, Anointing of the Sick, Holy Orders, and Matrimony—give an **increase** in sanctifying grace.

They deepen and intensify the spiritual life of sanctifying grace which already pulsates through the soul. As each additional sacrament is received (and repeated, when it can be) the level of spiritual vitality rises in the soul—somewhat as the brightness of a fire increases as you add more fuel.

(God's love does not increase—it is infinite to begin with. But the soul's capacity to **absorb** His love increases as a child's capacity for life increases with each meal that he eats.)

Other kinds of grace

If each sacrament gives (or increases) sanctifying grace in the soul, then why did Jesus institute seven sacraments? Wouldn't just one sacrament have been enough, to be received as needed?

Yes, one sacrament would have been enough, if sanctifying grace were the **only** kind of grace God wanted to give us. But God did not choose simply to give us spiritual life and then let us fend for ourselves.

God gives us the spiritual life which is sanctifying grace, and then does all that He can (short of taking away our free will)...

- To make that life operative within us
- To expand that life and intensify it
- To preserve and protect it

So in addition to the sanctifying grace which is common to all the sacraments, each sacrament also gives the **sacramental grace** of that particular sacrament. These are other special helps which God wills to give us, helps keyed to our particular spiritual needs and our particular state in life.

In [Baptism](#) we receive sanctifying grace and also a continuing chain of graces enabling us to preserve and extend that grace by the practice of the virtues of faith, hope, and charity.

[Confirmation](#) increases our basic vitality (sanctifying grace) but also establishes a permanent fund of actual graces (sacramental grace) upon which we may draw in order to be strong and active and productive exemplars of Christian living.

The [Anointing of the Sick](#) strengthens us in sickness or prepares us to meet death with confidence. Its sacramental grace comforts us in our sufferings and, by supporting us in any final temptations that may assail us, enables us to face eternity unafraid.

The Holy Eucharist, whose special sacramental grace is growth in supernatural charity (love for God and neighbor).

- One article here discusses [the nature of the Holy Eucharist itself as the Real Presence of Christ](#).
- Another article covers the act by which we receive the Holy Eucharist—[Holy Communion, and its sacramental purpose and effects](#).

The [Sacrament of Reconciliation](#)—inoculation against sin—whose special sacramental grace is to cure us of the spiritual illness of sin and to help us resist temptation.

There are also the two great states in life which impose upon us grave responsibility for the souls of others: the priesthood and marriage. The two sacraments of [Holy Orders](#) and [Matrimony](#) give to their recipients each its own sacramental grace, which will enable priests and spouses to discharge, creditably before God, the sometimes heavy burdens of their state in life.

Proper dispositions

A sacrament gives grace of and by itself, by its own power.

This is because Jesus attached grace to the outward sign, so to speak, so that that outward sign and grace always go together.

But our own **attitude** does matter. Our interior dispositions have an effect on the amount of grace we receive. The more perfect is our sorrow in the sacrament of Reconciliation, the more ardent our love in receiving the Holy Eucharist, the more lively our faith in receiving Confirmation—then the greater will be the grace we receive.

Our dispositions do not **cause** the grace; they simply remove the obstacles to the freer flow of grace and, in a sense, make more room for grace. We might illustrate this by saying that the more sand we empty out of the pail, the more water the pail will hold.

We can, of course, by a positive act of the will prevent the grace of the sacrament from entering our soul: for example, by positively not wanting to receive it or by not being truly repentant for mortal sin. But, unless we interpose an outright barrier, when we receive a sacrament we receive grace; the sacrament itself gives grace.

The dispositions of the one who administers the sacrament do **not** influence the effect of a sacrament. It would be very wrong for a priest to administer a sacrament if he had mortal sin on his soul, but it wouldn't diminish the grace the sacrament gave one bit.

The person receiving the sacrament would receive the same amount of grace, regardless of whether the priest was a saint or a sinner. All that is required of the one who administers a sacrament is that:

- He have the power to give it (this means the power of the priesthood except for Baptism and Matrimony)
- He have the intention of administering the sacrament (the intention of doing what the Catholic Church intends)
- He perform the essential ceremonies of the sacrament (such as the pouring of the water and the saying of the words in Baptism).

If you assume a receiver who does not put any obstacles to grace and a giver who is qualified to administer the sacrament—then always and infallibly a sacrament will confer grace.

Special “marks” on the soul

Besides the bestowal of grace (sanctifying and sacramental) we should mention another effect specific to three of the sacraments.

This is the **character** imprinted on the soul by the sacraments of Baptism, Confirmation, and Holy Orders. We sometimes say that in these sacraments God puts a “mark” on the soul. The individual mark imparted by Baptism, Confirmation, and Holy Orders is defined by theologians as a “quality” which imparts to the soul powers which it did not previously possess.

It is a permanent quality of the soul, an alteration in the soul which forever will be visible to God, the angels, and the saints.

- The character of Baptism is a supernatural quality which gives us the power to absorb the grace of the other six sacraments and to participate in the Mass.
- The character of Confirmation gives us the power to profess the faith fearlessly and to spread the faith.
- The character of Holy Orders gives the priest the power to celebrate Mass and to administer the other sacraments.

The extraordinary through the ordinary

The Catholic sacraments are quite extraordinary: they are ordinary signs that do God’s own work.

God in His wisdom chose to bestow His grace in a visible way to give us the quieting certainty that we had received grace when He did give it.

Christ has given us so many tremendous gifts. In his sacraments, he continues to provide those gifts to us, beyond all measure, whenever we need them.

Blessed is the Lord!