

The Seven Sacraments

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Introduction and Definitions:

The Greek word *mysterion* (something "secret" or "hidden"; used 28 times in the NT) was translated into Latin by several different words, mostly *mysterium* (19 times in the Vulgate NT: Matt 13:11; Mark 4:11; Luke 8:10; Rom 11:25; 16:25; 1 Cor 2:7; 4:1; 13:2; 14:2; 15:51; Eph 3:4; 6:19; Col 1:26; 2:2; 4:3; 2 Thess 2:7; 1 Tim 3:9; Rev 10:7; 17:5) and *sacramentum* (8 times: Eph 1:9; 3:3, 9; 5:32; Col 1:27; 1 Tim 3:16; Rev 1:20; 17:7; once also *testimonium*: 1 Cor 2:1). While all of these words can be translated "mystery," the Latin *mysterium* often refers more to the invisible or hidden dimensions, while *sacramentum* seems to refer more to the visible or symbolic aspects of a spiritual or divine mystery.

In a sense, Jesus Christ can be called the "mystery of salvation" or the "sacrament of God," since he, through his incarnation, made visible to us the mystery of the invisible God. Similarly, the Church as a whole is sometimes called the "sacrament of salvation," since it is "the sign and the instrument of the communion of God and men" (CCC, §780; cf. §§774-776).

Usually, however, the word "**sacrament**" refers to seven particular rites or rituals performed in and by the Church.

- Many older Catholics will still remember the very brief definition from the *Baltimore Catechism* (1941): "A sacrament is an outward sign instituted by Christ to give grace." (§304).
- The current official *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (1994; 2nd edition 1997), gives a slightly more complete definition: "The sacraments are efficacious signs of grace, instituted by Christ and entrusted to the church, by which divine life is dispensed to us. The visible rites by which the sacraments are celebrated signify and make present the graces proper to each sacrament. They bear fruit in those who receive them with the required dispositions." (CCC, §1131; see also "Sacrament" in the CCC's Glossary).
- These sacraments are considered "Sacraments of Christ," "Sacraments of the Church," "Sacraments of Faith," "Sacraments of Salvation," and "Sacraments of Eternal Life" (§§1113-1130).
- The **seven sacraments** can be subdivided, with *three "Sacraments of Christian Initiation"* (Baptism, Confirmation, Eucharist); *two "Sacraments of Healing"* (Penance/Reconciliation and Anointing of the Sick); and *two "Sacraments of Vocation"* (Holy Orders/Ordination and Matrimony/Marriage; also referred to as "Sacraments at the Service of Communion")

The *adjective* "**sacramental**" might refer to something related to the seven official rites: "sacramental preparation," "sacramental action," etc. Yet it can also be used more broadly: for example, the "sacramental imagination" or "sacramental principle" refers to the Catholic Christian conviction in general that invisible spiritual realities can be disclosed or made visible in and through created realities that function as symbols (see Rausch, *Catholicism in the Third Millennium*, p. 85). These can be considered "real symbols," in that they truly manifest and convey the divine graces that they symbolize, rather than "mere symbols," which simply point to divine realities outside themselves. Religious symbols are not merely intellectual, but also speak to us affectively and intuitively; they can "raise our minds and hearts to God" (ibid.).

The adjective "sacramental" should not be confused with the more rarely used *noun* "**sacramental**." A sacramental can be a simple ritual action, religious symbol, devotional object, or short blessing or prayer (for example, making the sign of the cross, sprinkling something with holy water, receiving ashes on the forehead on Ash Wednesday, lighting candles, going on a religious pilgrimage, wearing religious clothing, using a statue or icon or other artwork for devotional purposes, etc.). Such "sacramentals" can make us aware of divine realities (or, vice-versa, make divine realities present to us), although they can also be abused or become superstitious.

The noun "**sacramentality**" is the overall concept, the idea or conviction that God can be encountered in symbolic/sacramental ways. (Compare other words ending in "-ty", such as "reality" or "sexuality," which are overall concepts for anything having to do with the "real" or "sexual" dimensions of life, respectively).

Analysis and Explanations:

While many Protestant Churches regard only **Baptism**/Initiation and **Eucharist**/Communion as the two core Sacraments (directly instituted by Christ), Catholic Church (and most Orthodox Churches) officially recognizes the following seven sacraments (CCC, §§1113, 1210-1666), listed below with brief comments about their biblical backgrounds, the words and actions involved, their effects, and who can administer each of them:

Sacrament	Biblical Basis	Central Words	Central Actions	Effects	Ministers
BAPTISM	Matt 28:19 - Jesus commissions the apostles: "Go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit"; John 3:22; 4:1-2 - Jesus' first disciples baptize other disciples; Acts 2:38-41; 10:47-48 - new believers are baptized "in the name of Jesus" by Peter & others; (<i>not just</i> Jesus' own baptism: Mark 1:9-11 & par.)	"I baptize you in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit." (the " <i>Trinitarian Formula</i> ," from Matt 28:19) [Note: Some Protestants baptize "in the name of Jesus"; see Acts 2 & 10)	The candidate is immersed in water, or water is poured over the candidate's head.	Becoming a member of the Church of Christ (Christian Initiation); also being forgiven of one's sins.	Bishops, Priests, Deacons; any Christian (in case of urgent need)
EUCCHARIST	Mark 14:22-25; Matt 26:26-30; Luke 22:14-23; 1 Cor 11:23-25 - Jesus' "Last Supper" with his disciples; John 6: 48-58 - the end of the Bread of Life discourse: "eat my flesh; drink my blood"; Luke 24:35; Acts 2:42 - Christians gather for the "Breaking of the Bread"	"This is my body... This is my blood..." (the " <i>Words of Institution</i> " from the Last Supper)	The bread and wine are blessed/consecrated by the minister and received/shared by the communicants.	Being spiritually nourished by Christ's body and blood; being united ("in communion") with Christ and other believers.	Bishops or Priests
Confirmation	John 20:22 - "(Jesus) breathed on them (the disciples) and said, 'Receive the Holy Spirit';" Acts 8:17; 19:6 - believers receive the Spirit, esp. through laying on of the apostle's hands Acts 10:44-48 - the coming of the Spirit is closely associated with the Baptism of new believers	"(Name), be sealed with the Gift of the Holy Spirit."	Laying on of hands (the bishop lays his hands on the head of the confirmand).	Being strengthened by the Holy Spirit; being "confirmed" in the fullness of the Christian faith.	Bishops; in some cases also Priests

Penance/ Reconciliation	John 20:23 - "If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained"; Matt 16:19; 18:18 - more sayings on "binding and loosing"; James 5:16 - "confess your sins to one another"	"I forgive you of all of your sins, in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit" (the " <i>Words of Absolution</i> ")	The penitent confesses his sins, expresses contrition, and proposes amendment; the confessor suggests a penance and speaks the words of absolution.	Begin forgiven of one's sins; being reconciled to God the Church, and other people.	Bishops or Priests
Anointing of the Sick	Mark 6:7-13 - Jesus' disciples "anointed with oil many who were sick and healed them"; James 5:14-16 - "call for the elders of the church and have them pray over (the sick), anointing them with oil in the names of the Lord."	"Through this holy anointing may the Lord in his love and mercy help you with the grace of the Holy Spirit. May the Lord who frees you from sin save you and raise you up."	The minister anointing the sick persons forehead and hands with blessed oil	Being strengthened in time of illness.	Bishops or Priests
Matrimony/ Marriage	Gen 2:24 - "a man leaves his parents and clings to his wife and they become one flesh"; Mark 10:2-12; Matt 19:1-9 - Jesus teaches against divorce; "What God has joined together, let no one separate"; Eph 5:22-33; 1Cor 7:10-16 - Paul stresses the unity of husbands and wives; (<i>not simply</i> Jesus' presence at the wedding at Cana, John 2:1-11)	"I, (name), take you, (name), to be my husband/wife. I promise to be true to you in good times and in bad, in sickness and in health. I will love you and honor you all the days of my life." (<i>or a similar formula</i>)	The husband and wife make these promises to each other publicly. (Rings are exchanged as a visible sign of this verbal commitment.)	Being united ("one flesh") in God's eyes; becoming a publicly and legally recognized couple.	the couple themselves! (clergy are just the official witnesses)
Holy Orders (Ordination of Bishops, Priests, and Deacons)	Mark 3:13-19 & par. - Jesus "calls" and "appoints" the 12 apostles; Acts 6:6; 1 Tim 4:14; 5:22; 2 Tim 1:6 - "laying on of hands" as the "ordaining" or commissioning rite of local Christian leaders	A long "Prayer of Consecration"	The bishop lays his hands on the ordinand's head; he also anoints his hands and performs several other symbolic gestures	Becoming a member of the "ordained" clergy, the church's official leadership "orders"	Bishops only
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