

PART II  
THE SACRAMENTS:  
THE FAITH CELEBRATED



# 14 THE CELEBRATION OF THE PASCHAL MYSTERY OF CHRIST

---

INTRODUCTION TO THE CELEBRATION OF THE  
LITURGY IN THE SACRAMENTS  
—CCC, NOS. 1076-1209

## MARTIN LOVED LITURGY



“Today, Sunday, November 9, 1890, at 4 o’clock in the afternoon, the Lord blessed us with our first child. Next Sunday he will become a Christian and his name will be Martin Hellriegel.” These words were written by Martin’s mother in her prayerbook, and the Baptism took place at St. Peter Church in Heppenheim, Germany. The child flourished in a good Catholic home, and at age seventeen he received a scholarship to Kenrick Seminary in St. Louis, Missouri.

Ordained in 1914, he served first as an assistant in a parish, then as a chaplain to the Sisters of the Precious Blood at O’Fallon, Missouri, for twenty-two years. In 1940 he became pastor of Holy Cross Church in St. Louis where he served until his death forty years later. During his long years as a priest, he was a pioneer of the liturgical movement in the United States, always from the viewpoint of pastoral practice. This movement aimed to bring people closer to the meaning and effectiveness of Christian worship.

Following the teaching of Pope Pius XII’s 1947 encyclical *On the Sacred Liturgy (Mediator Dei)*, Msgr. Hellriegel sought to help his parishioners draw from the liturgy grace and strength for Christian living. He did this by showing them how the readings, ceremonies, and music can open their hearts to the presence of Jesus living and active in the liturgy. He drew his people into a loving participation in the Mass and the other

Sacraments. He believed that all the aspects of liturgical celebration should be understood.

Martin produced a small card that contained a record of days of grace in his life: Baptism, First Confession, First Communion, Confirmation, and his ordination (Holy Orders). On the respective days, he burned a candle before this framed card and spent an hour in prayer reflecting on the saving grace he had received from God. He frequently reminded his people to celebrate the anniversaries of their own sacred days, when they received their own first Sacraments.

He spent several Lenten sabbaticals in Rome. Each day he participated in Lenten liturgies at various ancient churches in Rome, studying their history and art. He incorporated this experience into his Lenten catechesis for his parishioners and others, helping them to sense Lent as a journey to Easter. He possessed an instinctive appreciation of the sacramental principle in which the visible elements of nature and history speak of the hidden but active presence of God in Christian worship.

Inspired by Pope Pius X's *motu proprio* on sacred music, he popularized Gregorian Chant to the point where his people could sing it easily and prayerfully. He taught them the prayer life of the Church by which they could enrich their lives in union with Jesus ever interceding for us before the Father.

Msgr. Hellriegel died in 1981.

The encyclical *On the Sacred Liturgy* by Pope Pius XII was a major statement about the Church's liturgy in the years prior to the Second Vatican Council. Pope Pius provided a vision for the Church's liturgical life that bore fruit in the Second Vatican Council's *Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy* (*Sacrosanctum Concilium*). Msgr. Hellriegel and others working in the liturgical movement drew inspiration from these developments.



## LITURGY CELEBRATES THE PASCHAL MYSTERY

*The Church celebrates in the liturgy above all the Paschal mystery by which Christ accomplished the work of our salvation.*

Part Two of the *Catechism*, containing two sections, deals with the liturgy of the Church. Section One presents the basic teachings about liturgy. Section Two presents the Seven Sacraments. The word *liturgy* comes from a Greek term meaning “public work or work done on behalf of the people.” Liturgy always referred to an organized community. A work, then, done by an individual or a group was a liturgy on behalf of the larger community. All the worshipers are expected to participate actively in each liturgy, for this is holy “work,” not entertainment or a spectator event. Every liturgical celebration is an action of Christ the High Priest and of his Mystical Body, which is the Church. It therefore requires the participation of the People of God in the work of God.

Liturgy is centered on the Holy Trinity. At every liturgy the action of worship is directed to the Father, from whom all blessings come, through the Son in the unity of the Holy Spirit. We praise the Father who first called us to be his people by sending us his Son as our Redeemer and giving us the Holy Spirit so that we can continue to gather, to remember what God has done for us, and to share in the blessings of salvation.

Through the liturgical celebrations of the Church, we participate in the Paschal Mystery of Christ, that is, his passing through death from this life into eternal glory, just as God enabled the people of ancient Israel to pass from slavery to freedom through the events narrated in the Book of Exodus (cf. Ex 11-13). The liturgies of the Church also help to teach us about Jesus Christ and the meaning of the mysteries we are celebrating.

A mystery is a reality that is both visible and hidden. Jesus Christ’s death and Resurrection become present to us and effective for us in the liturgical life of the Church. His death and Resurrection are hidden now in the eternity of God, but as Risen Lord and Head of the Church, Jesus Christ calls us to share in them through the liturgy of the Church, that is, by the visible gathering of the community for worship and remembrance of what God has done for us. It is the Holy Spirit, the source of the Church’s life, who draws us together through liturgical actions, the chief of which are the Sacraments. The term *liturgy* itself has a broader application than that of Sacrament, for it embraces all the official public

prayer life of the Church, while the term *Sacrament* refers to a particular celebration of Christ's salvific work.

## THE SACRAMENTS

*The whole liturgical life of the Church revolves around the Eucharistic sacrifice and the sacraments.*

—CCC, no. 1113

As we come to understand the Sacraments, it is important to recognize that the Sacraments have a visible and invisible reality, a reality open to all the human senses but grasped in its God-given depths with the eyes of faith. When parents hug their children, for example, the visible reality we see is the hug. The invisible reality the hug conveys is love. We cannot “see” the love the hug expresses, though sometimes we can see its nurturing effect in the child.

The visible reality we see in the Sacraments is their outward expression, the form they take, and the way in which they are administered and received. The invisible reality we cannot “see” is God's grace, his gracious initiative in redeeming us through the death and Resurrection of his Son. His initiative is called *grace* because it is the free and loving gift by which he offers people a share in his life, and shows us his favor and will for our salvation. Our response to the grace of God's initiative is itself a grace or gift from God by which we can imitate Christ in our daily lives.

The saving words and deeds of Jesus Christ are the foundation of what he would communicate in the Sacraments through the ministers of the Church. Guided by the Holy Spirit, the Church recognizes the existence of Seven Sacraments instituted by the Lord. They are grouped together in the following way:

- Sacraments of Initiation: Baptism, Confirmation (or Chrismation, as it is called in the Eastern Churches), and Eucharist
- Sacraments of Healing: Penance and Reconciliation and Anointing of the Sick

- Sacraments at the Service of Communion: Holy Orders and Matrimony

What are the Sacraments? “The sacraments are efficacious signs of grace, instituted by Christ and entrusted to the Church, by which divine life is dispensed to us” through the work of the Holy Spirit (CCC, nos. 1131; cf. no. 774).

First of all, Sacraments are efficacious signs: that is, they are effective. In human life, signs and symbols are found everywhere. Because we are both body and spirit, we express our inner selves through visible signs and symbols. We use them to communicate with each other in speech, gestures, and deeds. Sacramental signs are different in the sense that Christ uses them to confer his life and grace. When these sacramental signs are celebrated, they reveal and make present the reality they signify. They are efficacious, that is, effective, because Jesus Christ is at work in them. “It is he who baptizes, he who acts in the sacraments in order to communicate the grace that each sacrament signifies” (CCC, no. 1127). As we reflect on the individual Sacraments in later chapters of this *Catechism*, we will see that each Sacrament brings with it some particular grace.

Second, Christ instituted the Sacraments. “Adhering to the teaching of the Holy Scriptures, to the apostolic traditions, and to the consensus . . . of the Fathers,” we profess that “the sacraments of the new law were . . . all instituted by Jesus Christ our Lord” (CCC, no. 1114, citing the Council of Trent: DS 1600-1601).

Third, Jesus entrusted the Sacraments to the Church. By Christ’s will, the Church oversees and celebrates the Sacraments. Throughout his earthly life, Christ’s words and deeds anticipated the power of his Paschal Mystery. Sacraments confer the grace that comes forth from Jesus Christ and that appears in the life of the Church by the power of the Holy Spirit.

Fourth, the Sacraments transmit divine life. Our share in this life is God’s grace, his gift to us. In the Sacraments, we encounter Jesus Christ. The Spirit heals us and draws us closer to Christ and makes us partakers in the life of the Holy Trinity. Depending on our responsiveness to the grace of each Sacrament, our loving union with Jesus can increase

throughout our journey of faith. Fruitful reception of the Sacraments presupposes the faith of the one who receives them. This faith is preceded by the faith of the Church (cf. CCC, no. 1124). We grow in holiness, which is both personal and communal—a matter of personal sanctity and of unity with the mission and holiness of the Church.

Jesus gave us the Sacraments to call us to worship God, to build up the Church, to deepen our faith, to show us how to pray, to connect us with the living Tradition of the Church, and to sanctify us. While God works primarily through the Sacraments, he also touches us through the community of the Church, through the lives of holy people, through prayer, spirituality, and acts of love. But “for believers, the sacraments of the New Covenant are necessary for salvation. . . . The fruit of the sacramental life is that the Spirit of adoption makes the faithful partakers of the divine nature” (CCC, no. 1129).

## LITURGY IS THE BODY OF CHRIST AT PRAYER

*Liturgy is an action of the whole Christ. . . . Liturgical services are not private functions but are celebrations of the Church.*

—CCC, nos. 1136, 1140

When it comes to celebrating the Sacraments, there are four questions that need our attention: Who celebrates the liturgy? How is the liturgy celebrated? When is the liturgy celebrated? Where is the liturgy celebrated?

### Who Celebrates?

The entire Body of Christ, animated by the Holy Spirit, celebrates the liturgy. The celebrating assembly is the community of the baptized. Liturgy is not a matter of private prayer, but a public act of worship by the faithful gathered together by the power of the Spirit under the authority of the bishop, their teacher and shepherd. “Mother Church earnestly desires that all the faithful should be led to that full, conscious and active participation in liturgical celebrations which is demanded by the very

nature of the liturgy, and to which the Christian people . . . have a right and an obligation by reason of their Baptism” (CCC, no. 1141). The faithful are called to come to the liturgy consciously prepared to make their thoughts agree with what they say and hear, and to cooperate with divine grace.

Within the assembly, the ordained have a unique function of service. “These servants are chosen and consecrated by the sacrament of Holy Orders, by which the Holy Spirit enables them to act in the person of Christ the head, for the service of all the members of the Church” (CCC, no. 1142). Thus, for example, priests preside at the Eucharist, in which the elements of bread and wine are changed into the Body and Blood of Christ. Priests act in the person of Christ, the Head of the Church, and in the name of the Church when presenting to God the prayers and self-offering of the people and when offering the Eucharistic sacrifice, above all as they proclaim the Eucharistic Prayer.

## How Do We Celebrate?

The Church celebrates the liturgy using an abundance of signs, symbols, and rituals. We celebrate the Sacraments with scriptural readings, homilies, music, processions, blessings, bread, wine, oil, arms outstretched in prayer, gestures of peace, bowed heads, kneeling, standing, sitting, incense, holy water, flowers, candles, colors, ritual vestments, choirs, and musical instruments.

We do this in a holy environment in which architecture, sculpture, paintings, icons, and stained glass lend an ambience that speaks of the mystery of God and divine transcendence on the one hand, and the unity of God with the worshiping community on the other. Since the Son of God honored us by becoming incarnate—the true visible image of the invisible God—we use these signs and symbols to help us experience God’s invisible presence.

The Liturgy of the Word is part of all sacramental celebrations. The reading of Sacred Scripture is meant to awaken a response of faith in the listeners. When the word is proclaimed, Christ himself speaks. Having encountered Christ in the word, the people enter with a deeper appreciation into the heart of the celebration. The signs that accompany this

reading emphasize its dignity: the use of a beautiful book, a procession with the Book of the Gospels including incense and candles, an effective reading of the Scripture, a homily that breaks open the word, silent reflection, and a prayerful response from the assembly. The combination of word and action helps make visible the invisible action of Christ and the Holy Spirit to open the hearts of the assembly to the grace of the particular sacramental celebration.

### **Liturgical Traditions and the Catholicity of the Church**

The liturgical traditions or rites presently in use in the Church are the Latin (principally the Roman rite, but also the rites of certain local churches such as the Ambrosian rite, centered in Milan, Italy, or those of certain religious orders) and the Byzantine, Alexandrian or Coptic, Syrian, Armenian, Maronite, and Chaldean rites. In “faithful obedience to tradition the sacred Council declares that Holy Mother Church holds all lawfully recognized rites to be of equal right and dignity, and that she wishes to preserve them in the future and to foster them in every way.” (CCC, no. 1203, citing SC, no. 4)

The rich variety of ecclesiastical disciplines, liturgical rites, and theological and spiritual heritages proper to the local churches, “unified in a common effort, shows all the more resplendently the catholicity of the undivided Church.” (CCC, no. 835, citing LG, no. 23)

## **When Do We Celebrate?**

### **The Lord’s Day**

Central to the Church’s liturgical life is Sunday, the day of Christ’s Resurrection. The observance begins with the evening of the preceding day. It is a day when all Catholics are obliged to take part in the Mass. “The Lord’s Supper is its center, for there the whole community of the faithful encounters the risen Lord who invites them to his banquet”

(CCC, no. 1166). The Church encourages that Sunday, the “Lord’s Day,” also be a day for rest and recreation. It is also a day when the faithful can devote themselves to works of mercy and to the apostolate. This is discussed again in the chapter on the Third Commandment.

## **The Liturgical Year**

In the Liturgical Year, the Church celebrates the whole mystery of Christ from the Incarnation until the day of Pentecost and the expectation of Christ’s second coming. The summit of the Liturgical Year is the Easter Triduum—from the evening of Holy Thursday to the evening of Easter Sunday. Though chronologically three days, they are liturgically one day unfolding for us the unity of Christ’s Paschal Mystery. The presence of the Risen Lord and his saving work permeates the entire Liturgical Year: Advent, the Christmas Season, Lent, the Easter Season, and Ordinary Time.

## **The Cycle of Saints**

Besides the liturgical times just cited, the Church, with a special love, venerates Mary, the Mother of God, and also offers for the devotion of the faithful the memory of the martyrs and other saints. The veneration of Mary is evident in the number of feasts of the Blessed Virgin Mary. Mary is intimately linked to the saving work of her Son. Her feasts call us to admire and praise her as the outstanding fruit of Christ’s redeeming work. Mary is the pure image of the kind of discipleship we hope to attain. She prays for us, loves us, and always brings us to Jesus. The feasts and memorials of the martyrs and other saints are occasions to praise God for their identification with Christ’s Paschal Mystery. They are examples to us of love for God and others, of heroic courage in practicing faith, and of concern for the needs of others. We also rely on their intercession when we present our needs to God in prayer.

## **The Liturgy of the Hours**

Closely tied to the Eucharist in the daily liturgical life of the Church is the Liturgy of the Hours, especially Morning and Evening Prayer. The

Liturgy of the Hours, in which the whole Church pours out her praise to God, prolongs the Eucharistic celebration, and leads us back to it. Besides offering praise to God, the Church in the Liturgy of the Hours expresses the prayers and desires of the Christian faithful. This is evident especially in the Intercessions at Morning and Evening Prayer, the praying of the Our Father, and the concluding prayer.

This public prayer of the Church is intended for the whole People of God. In this prayer Christ continues his priestly work and consecrates time. All God's people can participate in it according to their calling and circumstances. In this prayer, we harmonize our voices with praying hearts, and we come to a more profound understanding of the Psalms and other parts of Scripture that make up the largest part of the Liturgy of the Hours.

Even though the Liturgy of the Hours is celebrated in various ways in the Eastern and Latin Churches, the hymns, canticles, and readings from Church Fathers, other saints, and other Church writers offer us a rich meditation on God's Word. This public prayer prepares us for private prayer.

### Where Do We Celebrate?

In one sense, worship is not confined to any one place, for the whole earth is entrusted to God's people. But practically, when religious freedom is not suppressed, it is customary to build churches for divine worship. A church is "a house of prayer in which the Eucharist is celebrated and reserved, where the faithful assemble, and where is worshiped the presence of the Son of God our Savior" (CCC, no. 1181, citing Second Vatican Council, *Decree on Priestly Life and Ministry* [*Presbyterorum Ordinis*; PO], no. 5). While the church building is important, the worshipping community, "living stones built into a spiritual house" (1 Pt 2:4-5), is of greater importance. Nevertheless, church buildings should be dignified enough to reflect the importance of what takes place there. They should be beautiful places that foster prayer and a sense of the sacred.

## FROM THE CATECHISM

### **1. What does Sunday and its vigil mean for Catholics?**

Sunday, the “Lord’s Day,” is the principal day for the celebration of the Eucharist because it is the day of the Resurrection. It is the pre-eminent day of the liturgical assembly, the day of the Christian family, and the day of joy and rest from work. Sunday is the “foundation and kernel of the whole liturgical year.” (CCC, no. 1193, citing SC, no. 106)

### **2. What are the criteria for the use of songs and music in the Liturgy?**

Songs and music fulfill their function as signs . . . when they are closely connected . . . with the liturgical action, according to three principal criteria: beauty expressive of prayer, the unanimous participation of the assembly at the designated moments, and the solemn character of the celebration. In this way they participate in the purpose of the liturgical words and actions: the glory of God and the sanctification of the faithful. (CCC, no. 1157)

### **3. What is the purpose of the Liturgy of the Word?**

The Liturgy of the Word is an integral part of the celebration. The meaning of the celebration is expressed by the Word of God which is proclaimed and by the response of faith to it. (CCC, no. 1190)

## THE LINK BETWEEN LITURGY AND LIFE

Our society favors being practical and tends to evaluate people and institutions in this light. Practicality has led to numerous inventions that have made life more humane. It also asks people to draw a closer link between theory and everyday life, urging them to be more down-to-earth.

But for some practical-minded people, religion appears to put too much emphasis on the next world rather than this one. Further, they claim that the time and effort devoted to ceremonies and otherworldly endeavors seems to have little value. They would want religion to confine itself to humanitarian deeds.

The Church has a vital role to play in shaping responsible citizens with moral character and with a willingness to contribute to the well-being of society. The liturgy and worship of the Church have much to do with these admirable goals. At divine worship, people receive the grace to help them to be formed ever more closely to Christ. The saving grace of the dying and rising of Christ are communicated to us in the Sacraments so that we might live more perfectly Christ's truth and virtues such as love, justice, mercy, and compassion.

Every Mass ends with the mission to go forth and serve the Lord. This sending means that the love of God and neighbor and the moral implications of the Beatitudes and the Ten Commandments should be witnessed by the participants in everyday life. People of faith know that their liturgical experience provides a unique spiritual vision and strength for making this a better world.

The lives of the saints provide ample evidence of this truth. Saints of every age have improved health care and education and fostered the human dignity of the poor, the oppressed, and the society at large. Saints attribute their remarkable energies to the power that comes from prayer and above all from the Sacraments, especially the Eucharist.

## FOR DISCUSSION

1. How might you participate more fully, more consciously, and more actively in the Sunday Mass? In a culture that is centered on the "weekend," what can people do to observe Sunday as a day dedicated to God?
2. Review the definition of the Sacraments. How would you explain its elements to others? What can you learn from the sacred times in which liturgy is celebrated, such as Sunday, the Liturgical Year, and the feasts and memorials of the saints?

3. In what ways are you aware of the link between liturgy and your daily life? What are some stories about people you know or read about that illustrate the connection between liturgy and Christian witness?

## DOCTRINAL STATEMENTS

- In liturgy, we praise and adore the Father as the source of all the blessings of creation, salvation, and divine adoption.
- “The liturgy is the work of the whole Christ, head and body” (CCC, no. 1187). In liturgy, Christ the Son of God made flesh acts in the Sacraments in which he communicates his saving power for his Body the Church.
- In liturgy, the Holy Spirit brings the assembly to meet Christ, to make Christ’s saving work present, and to sanctify the members that they may witness Christ.
- “The Sacraments are efficacious signs of grace, instituted by Christ and entrusted to the Church, by which divine life is dispensed to us” (CCC, no. 1131).
- The Church celebrates the Sacraments as an assembly of all the baptized, led by the ordained, each having a special role to play in the sacramental celebrations.
- The Holy Spirit prepares the faithful for the Sacraments by helping them to welcome the Word of God in faith.
- The Sacraments communicate to each person a participation in God’s life and a growth of love and witness in the Church. This is grace, the result of God’s favor and initiative.
- A liturgical celebration uses signs and symbols drawn from creation, human life, and the history of salvation. Integrated into faith, the signs become bearers of the sanctifying action of Christ.
- The Liturgy of the Word is an important part of every liturgy because the proclamation of the Word of God and the response of faith to it help give meaning to the celebration.
- Sacred song and music, closely linked to the celebration, should lead to prayer, invite the participation of all in the assembly, and reflect the sacred character of the Sacrament.

- Sacred images nourish faith in the mystery of Christ. Through images of Christ we are moved to adore him and his saving works. In images of Mary and the saints we venerate the persons represented.
- Sunday and its vigil celebrate Christ's Resurrection, and it is the day that the faithful are obliged to attend Mass, rest from work, and engage in charitable works.
- In the course of the Liturgical Year, the Church unfolds the mystery of Christ's Incarnation, public ministry, death and Resurrection, Ascension, sending of the Holy Spirit, and the Church's expectation of his second coming.
- The feasts and memorials of the Mother of God and the saints call us to praise God for what he has accomplished in them and to imitate their virtues.
- The faithful who pray the Liturgy of the Hours are united with Christ in giving glory to the Father and imploring the gifts of the Holy Spirit for the world.
- Our parish churches are places where the faithful gather for public worship and personal prayer. These holy places are images of the heavenly kingdom to which we journey.
- "The diverse liturgical traditions or rites, legitimately recognized, manifest the catholicity of the Church, because they signify and communicate the same mystery of Christ" (CCC, no. 1208).

## MEDITATION

For two thousand years, Christian time has been measured by the memory of that "first day of the week" (Mk 16:2, 9; Lk 24:1; Jn 20:1), when the Risen Christ gave the Apostles the gift of peace and of the Spirit (cf. Jn 20:19-23). The truth of Christ's Resurrection is the original fact upon which Christian faith is based (cf. 1 Cor 15:14), an event set at the center of the mystery of time, prefiguring the last day when Christ will return in glory. We do not know what the new millennium has in store for us, but we are certain that it is safe in the hands of Christ, the "King of kings and Lord of lords" (Rev 19:16); and precisely by celebrating his Passover not just once a year but every

Sunday, the Church will continue to show to every generation “the true fulcrum of history, to which the mystery of the world’s origin and its final destiny leads.”

—Pope John Paul II, *At the Close of the Great Jubilee of the Year 2000 (Novo Millennio Ineunte; NMI)*, no. 35

## PRAYER

Sing to the LORD a new song,  
a hymn in the assembly of the faithful.  
Let Israel be glad in their maker,  
the people of Zion rejoice in their king. . . .  
Let the faithful rejoice in their glory,  
cry out for joy at their banquet,  
With the praise of God in their mouths.

—Ps 149:1-2, 5-6



How I wept when I heard your hymns and canticles, being  
deeply moved by the sweet singing of your Church.

—St. Augustine, *The Confessions*, bk. 9, chap. 6;  
*Liturgy of the Hours*, vol. IV, 1337



# 15 BAPTISM: BECOMING A CHRISTIAN

---

BAPTISM IS THE FIRST OF THE SACRAMENTS OF INITIATION  
—CCC, NOS. 1210-1284

## A BAPTISMAL WITNESS TO JUSTICE FOR MINORITIES



In 1829, Bishop Benedict Joseph Fenwick of Boston founded a Catholic newspaper to explain, defend, and spread the teachings of the Catholic Church. By 1836 he decided it would be better to put the paper in the hands of the laity. He transferred the ownership to Patrick Donahue, who renamed the paper *The Boston Pilot*.

One of the *Pilot's* editors, John Boyle O'Reilly, assumed that office in 1876. He was born to a family of educators in Ireland. As a young man, he enlisted in the British army, where he worked covertly to advance the cause of Irish independence. When he was discovered, he was arrested, given a twenty-year prison term, and sent to a penal colony in western Australia. Eventually he escaped and made his way to Boston, where he became a reporter and then the editor of the *Pilot*.

For the next twenty years, O'Reilly was the foremost influence in directing Irish immigrants through the process of cultural assimilation. For a time his literary talents and friendly attitude toward the Protestant establishment earned him a favorite place in society and an invitation to join the exclusive Papyrus Club.

But he never forgot his ethnic roots or his Catholic faith. He used his gifts as a public speaker, civil rights leader, poet, and novelist to bridge the gap between Catholics and Protestants in nineteenth-century Boston while enhancing Catholic identity in the process. He wrote a book of

verse, *Songs from the Southern Seas*. He also wrote articles for *The Atlantic Monthly* and *Scribner's Monthly*.

He used the *Pilot* as a platform for defending an independent Ireland and addressing the rights of African Americans and Native Americans. He compared the oppression that these minorities were suffering to that which the Irish immigrants were experiencing. These oppressed groups had a friend in this man. He openly campaigned in the *Pilot* for political candidates who were for social reform. He joined several charitable organizations and was an outstanding proponent of Catholic education. He received honorary doctorates from Georgetown University, in Washington, D.C., and Notre Dame University, in South Bend, Indiana.

His unexpected death from a heart attack in 1890 was termed a "public calamity" by Cardinal Gibbons of Baltimore. "When he died," observes historian Mark Schneider, in *Boston Confronts Jim Crow*, "the opportunity slipped away for some kind of progressive association between Irish Catholics and members of Boston's small African American community. The light of 'green and black' unity flickered and died."<sup>13</sup>

Because of his forceful public presence and outstanding Catholic witness, the wake for O'Reilly was held in St. Mary's Church, in Charlestown, a neighborhood in Boston, where mourners by the thousands came to pay their respects.

The *Catechism* says that all who are reborn as children of God in Baptism "must profess before men the faith they have received from God through the Church and participate in the apostolic and missionary activity of the People of God" (CCC, no. 1270). God gave John Boyle O'Reilly the grace to live out, in a vigorous and inspiring manner, his baptismal commitment to the cause of Christ, the Church, and God's Kingdom. He showed how the laity can bring the Gospel to society and can make a difference.




---

13 Cited in Thomas H. O'Connor, *Boston Catholics* (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1998), 145.

## SACRAMENTS OF INITIATION

The Sacraments of Initiation—Baptism, Confirmation, and the Eucharist—are the foundations of the Christian life. “Baptism, the Eucharist, and the sacrament of Confirmation together constitute the ‘sacraments of Christian initiation,’ whose unity must be safeguarded” (CCC, no. 1285). We begin with our study of Baptism in this chapter and will treat the other two Sacraments in the following ones.

### DYING AND RISING WITH CHRIST

*Are you unaware that we who were baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? We were indeed buried with him through baptism into death, so that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might live in newness of life.*

—Rom 6:3-4

*Baptism is birth into the new life in Christ. In accordance with the Lord’s will, it is necessary for salvation, as is the Church herself, which we enter by Baptism.*

—CCC, no. 1277

In his dialogue with Nicodemus, Jesus taught that Baptism was necessary for salvation. “No one can enter the Kingdom of God without being born of water and Spirit” (Jn 3:5). After his Resurrection, Jesus met with the eleven Apostles and gave them the commission to preach the Gospel and baptize, telling them, “Whoever believes and is baptized will be saved” (Mk 16:16). The word *baptism* in its origins is Greek and means “immersion” and “bath.” Immersion in water is a sign of death, and emersion out of the water means new life. To bathe in water is also to undergo cleansing. St. Paul sums up this truth when he says, “You were buried with him in baptism, in which you were also raised with him through faith in the power of God, who raised him from the dead” (Col 2:12).

The origin and foundation of Christian Baptism is Jesus. Before starting his public ministry, Jesus submitted himself to the baptism given by John the Baptist. The waters did not purify him; he cleansed the waters. “He comes to sanctify the Jordan for our sake . . . to begin a new creation through the Spirit and water” (St. Gregory Nazianzen, *Liturgy of the Hours*, I, 634). Jesus’ immersion in the water is a sign for all human beings of the need to die to themselves to do God’s will. Jesus did not need to be baptized because he was totally faithful to the will of his Father and free from sin. However, he wanted to show his solidarity with human beings in order to reconcile them to the Father. By commanding his disciples to baptize all nations, he established the means by which people would die to sin—Original and actual—and begin to live a new life with God.

## THE LITURGY OF BAPTISM

*The meaning and grace of the sacrament of Baptism are clearly seen in the rites of its celebration.*

—CCC, no. 1234

The eight major elements in the baptismal ceremony teach us the meaning of this Sacrament of Initiation and help us appreciate our life in Christ. Signs and symbols have their own capacity to communicate their meaning. Of course, the Sacrament is more than an instructive symbol; it accomplishes what it signifies.

### The Sign of the Cross

At the beginning of the celebration, the celebrant traces the Sign of the Cross on the forehead of the one being baptized. This recalls Christ’s saving death and the redemption it brought. Baptism is a Sacrament of salvation.

## Readings from Scripture

Proclaiming the Word of God in the midst of the community sheds divine light on the celebration and is meant to build the faith of all the participants. One of the traditional names for Baptism is “Illumination.” The Holy Spirit fills the heart and mind with the light of revealed truth and enables the response of faith.

## Exorcism and Anointing

Baptism liberates us from sin. An exorcism prayer is recited over the one being baptized, preparing the person to renounce sin and be released from evil. The celebrant anoints the person to be baptized with the Oil of Catechumens (an oil that has been blessed by the bishop for the candidates for Baptism) or imposes hands on the person. In this way, the person is being called to renounce sin and to leave behind the domination of the power of evil.

## Blessing the Baptismal Water

Baptismal water is blessed at the Easter Vigil. Outside the Easter Season, the water used for Baptism can also be blessed at each celebration of the Sacrament. The blessing prayer asks the Father “that through his Son the power of the Holy Spirit may be sent upon the water, so that those who will be baptized may be ‘born of water and the Spirit’” (CCC, no. 1238).

## Renunciation of Sin and Profession of Faith

Those being baptized are asked to reject sin and Satan, and to profess their faith in the Triune God. In the case of infants, parents, godparents, and the entire community present for the liturgy do this on behalf of those who cannot yet speak for themselves.

## The Essential Rite of the Sacrament

The bishop, priest, or deacon either pours water three times on the person's head or immerses the candidate in water three times. In the Latin Church, he accompanies the act with the words, "[Name], I baptize you in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit." The celebrant matches each pouring or immersion with the invocation of each of the Divine Persons. The ritual of immersion or washing helps us understand that our sins are buried and washed away as we die with Jesus, and we are filled with divine light and life as we rise from immersion in the water or are cleansed by the pouring.

In the Eastern liturgies the catechumen turns toward the East and the priest says: "The servant of God, [Name], is baptized in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit." At the invocation of each person of the Most Holy Trinity, the priest immerses the candidate in the water and raises him up again. (CCC, no. 1240)

"Today in all the rites, Latin and Eastern, the Christian initiation of adults begins with their entry into the catechumenate and reaches its culmination in a single celebration of the three Sacraments of Initiation: Baptism, Confirmation, and the Eucharist" (CCC, no. 1233). After the completion of initiation, the neophytes or new members begin the period of continued learning and formation in Christian life called *Mystagogy*.

With regard to infants, in the Latin Church, the Sacraments of Confirmation and Eucharist are received at a later time after Baptism. This is partly because of the emphasis on the bishop as the ordinary minister of Confirmation. Though the bishop cannot baptize everyone, he has a role in everyone's initiation into the Church by confirming them. In the Eastern Churches, the Baptism of infants is followed in the same ceremony by Confirmation (Chrismation) and Eucharist.

## The Anointing with Sacred Chrism

The celebrant anoints the newly baptized with the sacred Chrism (a perfumed oil signifying the gift of the Holy Spirit), so that united with

God's people the person may remain forever a member of Christ, who is Priest, Prophet, and King. In the liturgy of the Eastern Churches, this anointing is the Chrismation, or the Sacrament of Confirmation, and is done immediately after Baptism. At the initiation of adults into the Church at the Easter Vigil, Confirmation follows Baptism.

## Reception of the White Garment and the Candle

Following the Anointing with Chrism, the minister of Baptism presents the newly baptized with a white garment and a candle. The white garment shows that the newly baptized have put on Christ and have risen with him. To be clothed in the baptismal white garment is to be clothed in Christ's protective love. Included in this ceremony is the admonition to keep the garment unstained by sin. The Book of Revelation describes the significance of the white robe: "They have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb" (Rev 7:14).

The candle is lit from the Paschal Candle, which represents the Risen Christ. The lighted candle reminds the newly baptized of the light of Christ they have received. It also reminds us that all those baptized in Christ are to be lights for the world.

These two symbols used at Baptism appear again in the Latin Church's funeral liturgy in the forms of the white pall covering the casket and the lighted Paschal Candle, which ordinarily stands near the casket. This is to remind us that the salvation and new life promised at Baptism can now be experienced fully by the one who has gone to God.

## THE NECESSITY OF BAPTISM

As mentioned earlier in this chapter, the Lord himself affirms that Baptism is necessary for salvation. "No one can enter the Kingdom of God without being born of water and the Spirit" (Jn 3:5). Christ commanded his disciples to preach the Gospel, draw people to faith in him, and baptize those who come to conversion. The Church does not neglect the mission she has received from Christ to ensure that all be baptized and reborn of water and the Spirit.

## Who Can Baptize?

The ordinary ministers of Baptism are the bishop and priest and, in the Latin Church, also the deacon. In case of necessity, anyone, even a non-baptized person, with the required intention, can baptize, by using water and the Trinitarian baptismal formula. The intention required is to will to do what the Church does when she baptizes. The Church finds the reason for this possibility in the universal saving will of God and the necessity of Baptism for salvation. (CCC, no. 1256)

## WHO CAN RECEIVE BAPTISM?

### The Baptism of Adults

For adults today, the Church, after the Second Vatican Council, has restored the order of the Catechumenate in the Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults (RCIA). It outlines the steps for the formation of catechumens, bringing their conversion to the faith to a greater maturity. It helps them respond more deeply to God's gracious initiative in their lives and prepares them for union with the Church community. This process is meant to form them into the fullness of the Christian life and to become disciples of Jesus, their teacher. This includes an initiation into the mystery of salvation, the practice of faith, hope, and love, and other virtues in a succession of liturgical rites.

Persons baptized into another Christian church and now seeking full communion with the Catholic Church are also welcomed to participate along with catechumens in the RCIA in the process of learning about the Catholic faith and being formed in that faith. They bring to the process of preparation their prior experience of Christian life and prayer. For a baptized Christian, reception into full communion with the Catholic Church involves reception of the Sacrament of Penance and Reconciliation and then a Profession of Faith followed by the celebration of Confirmation and the Eucharist.

## SPONSORS FOR BAPTISM

Whenever a person is baptized, as an infant, as a child, or as an adult, there should be at least one person present who will act as sponsor for the one being baptized. The sponsor, commonly referred to as one's godmother or godfather, accepts the responsibility of helping the person grow in the Catholic faith. One who acts as a sponsor for an infant or child agrees to help the parents teach their child about the faith and how to live as a practicing Catholic. One who acts as sponsor for an adult agrees to encourage and support the person, pray with and for the person, and offer whatever help, information, or support is needed while the person is preparing to enter the Church and then is living out the rest of his or her life as a practicing Catholic.

For a person to act as a sponsor for Baptism, he or she must be at least sixteen years old, must have already received all the Sacraments of Initiation (Baptism, Confirmation, and Holy Eucharist), and must be living in a way that demonstrates that one's faith is strong enough to be able to fulfill the responsibilities involved with being a sponsor. A sponsor who is married must be married in accord with the laws of the Church (cf. CIC, can. 874).

### The Baptism of Infants

Infant Baptism has been practiced since apostolic times. Infants need to be baptized because through this Sacrament, they are freed from Original Sin and are welcomed into the community of the Church, where they have access to the fullness of the means of salvation. Their parents, godparents, and the parish community commit themselves to their ongoing formation in faith and knowledge of the tradition of the Church. The best gift that parents can give their children is a life in the Church. "The Church and the parents would deny a child the priceless grace of becoming a child of God were they not to confer Baptism shortly after birth

## RCIA STEPS

For adults who have not yet been baptized, the RCIA has three major liturgical rites: Acceptance into the Order of Catechumens; Election or Enrollment of Names, and Celebration of the Sacraments of Initiation. The celebration of initiation is followed by a postbaptismal catechesis, or *Mystagogy*. (For those already baptized, there are rites appropriate for their journey into full communion in the Catholic Church. These are sometimes celebrated separately from the catechumens, and sometimes in a combined rite with the catechumens.)

The process begins with the **Precatechumenate**, in which the person shows initial faith in Jesus Christ and the Church. This is a time for inquiry and the exploration of the beginnings of faith.

After the person has been given a fundamental understanding of the Gospel and has decided to take the first step to become a member of the Church, the person is brought into the Catechumenate at the Rite of Acceptance.

The period of the **Catechumenate** is a time for exploring the teachings of the faith in a deeper and more systematic manner within the context of worship and prayer. At Sunday Mass, the catechumens with their catechists are often dismissed after the homily for further, prayerful study of the Scripture readings for the day.

This period concludes with the **Rite of Election or Enrollment of Names**, which takes place on the First Sunday of Lent. This rite is celebrated by the bishop or his delegate, usually at the cathedral of the diocese. The catechumens' suitability and resolve to be initiated into the sacramental life of the Church is supported by the testimony of their sponsors and catechists. After this, the catechumens become known as the Elect.

The Elect enter the stage of **Purification and Enlightenment** that occurs during the season of Lent. They prepare themselves for the reception of the Sacraments of Initiation by prayerful reflection. On the third, fourth, and fifth Sundays of Lent, the Scrutinies are celebrated. These rites, which take place during Mass, offer opportunities for the Elect to reflect on the full meaning of the step they are preparing to take. They are meant to bring God’s illuminating Word to the Elect so that whatever is weak or sinful in their hearts can be healed and so that whatever is good in them can be strengthened. The parish community joins them by examining their own lives and interceding with God for the Elect. This period concludes at the Easter Vigil, when the Elect receive the Sacraments of Initiation and become full members of the Church and are called neophytes.

From Easter to Pentecost, there is a period of postbaptismal catechesis, or **Mystagogy**. This is a time for the neophytes, or newly initiated, along with the members of the parish to come closer together as a faith community to examine more deeply the Gospel, to share in the Eucharist, and to do works of charity. During this joyful time, the neophytes’ enthusiasm can inspire the faithful of the parish, who in turn can share their experiences of the faith with them.

(CCC, no. 1250; cf. *Code of Canon Law* [*Codex Iuris Canonici*; CIC], can. 867). However, the Church also teaches that the Baptism of an infant may be postponed if there is not a “founded hope” that the child will be brought up in the Catholic Faith (CIC, can. 868 §2).

There are the children—born and unborn—who die without Baptism. The Church entrusts them to the mercy of God, who wills that all people be saved. We recall Christ’s tender welcome of children saying, “Let the children come to me and do not hinder them” (Mk 10:14). Because of

this the Church confidently hopes for the salvation of children who die without Baptism.

## Baptism of Blood, Baptism of Desire

Often the question is raised about those who die without Baptism. The *Catechism* offers this principle: “God has bound salvation to the sacrament of baptism, but he himself is not bound by the sacraments” (CCC, no. 1257). The Church holds that those who suffer and die for their faith in Christ before they could be baptized are saved by Baptism of Blood.

Candidates for Baptism who die before they receive the Sacrament but have repented their sins and have embraced Christ’s love are saved by what is called Baptism of Desire. What about those people who have never had the Gospel presented to them, who do not know Jesus or the Church, yet seek the truth and try to do God’s will as they understand it? “It is may be supposed that such persons would have desired baptism explicitly had they known its necessity” (CCC, no. 1260).

## EFFECTS OF BAPTISM

### Sins Forgiven

By Baptism all sins are forgiven, Original Sin and all personal sins, and temporal punishment due to sin is removed. After one has been reborn in Christ, there is nothing to prevent one’s entry into God’s Kingdom.

However, though all sins are removed, there remains, as an effect of Original Sin, the inclination to sin that is called *concupiscence*. This inclination to sin shows itself in what is sometimes referred to as a darkening of the mind and a weakening of the will, that is, the inability to know clearly the right or wrong of an action and/or the lack of strength to resist temptation and always to do the right thing no matter how hard this is. The effects of Original Sin need not harm us so long as we seek strength to resist them through the Sacrament of Penance, the Sacrament of the Eucharist, prayer, a deepening spirituality, growth in virtue, and a wholehearted dependence on God.

## Adopted Children of God

Baptism also gives us new life as adopted children of God. We become sharers of divine life and temples of the Holy Spirit. We are now made righteous by God and live in a state of grace, that is, we live in union with God because of his gracious and loving initiative. Our permanence in the state of grace is called *sanctifying grace* because God “sanctifies” us, that is, makes us his holy people by giving us his life. God continues to assist us by many helps that are called *actual graces*. Thus, we have the ability to live and act under the guidance and light of the gifts of the Holy Spirit. This helps us mature in goodness through the practice of virtues, such as the Cardinal Virtues: prudence, justice, temperance, and fortitude.

## Initiated into the Church

By Baptism we become members of the Church, the Body of Christ. We share in the priesthood of Christ as well as his prophetic and royal mission. “You are ‘a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people of his own, so that you may announce the praises’ of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light” (1 Pt 2:9). We enjoy the community we find in the Church, share our talents and gifts with its members, respond willingly to its teachings and requirements, and assume the responsibilities that our membership implies.

## Bonded to Other Christians

Baptism provides a common foundation among all Christians, including those not yet in full communion with the Catholic Church. The Church recognizes the validity of Baptism in other Christian Churches as long as the rite involved the pouring of or immersion in water, a Trinitarian formula, and the intention to baptize. Those who have been baptized have been saved by their faith in Christ and the grace of Baptism. “They therefore have a right to be called Christians and with good reason are accepted as brothers [and sisters] by the children of the Catholic Church” (CCC, no. 1271, citing UR, no. 3).

## FROM THE CATECHISM

### **1. Why are the rites of Baptism so helpful for understanding this Sacrament?**

The meaning and grace of the Sacrament of Baptism are clearly seen in the rites of its celebration. By following the gestures and words of this celebration with attentive participation, the faithful are initiated into the riches this sacrament signifies and actually brings about in each newly baptized person. (CCC, no. 1234)

### **2. Why is sin possible after Baptism?**

Certain temporal consequences of sin remain in the baptized, such as suffering, illness, death, and such frailties inherent in life as weaknesses of character . . . as well as an inclination to sin that Tradition calls *concupiscence*. (CCC, no. 1264)

God also gave us free will. While he gives us Baptism and the other Sacraments to help us make the correct choices, these Sacraments do not force a person to do good and to avoid sin.

### **3. What helps the growth of faith after Baptism?**

For all the baptized, children or adults, faith must grow after Baptism. . . . For the grace of Baptism to unfold, the parents' help is important. So too is the role of the godfather and godmother who must be firm believers and ready to help the newly baptized—child or adult—on the road of Christian life. (CCC, nos. 1254-1255)

## Baptismal Character

“Incorporated into Christ by Baptism, the person baptized is configured to Christ. Baptism seals the Christian with the indelible spiritual mark

## ARE CATHOLICS BORN-AGAIN?

A number of non-Catholic Christians call themselves “born-again.” Catholics, for the most part, do not use this term. A “born-again” Christian is one who has experienced a particularly intense moment of conversion that leads him or her to want to dedicate his or her life to God. It is a one-time action that is not necessarily tied to any type of baptismal rite. While we Catholics are born again as children of God in the Sacrament of Baptism, our rebirth happens in and through the grace of the Sacrament. Our rebirth in Baptism is also not a one-time event but a lifelong process through which we continually strive to die to sin and rise to new life in Christ. Catholics are indeed born again.

(character) of his belonging to Christ. No sin can erase this mark, even if sin prevents Baptism from bearing the fruits of salvation. Given once for all Baptism cannot be repeated” (CCC, no. 1272). This spiritual mark is also called a character, which St. Augustine likened to distinctive brandings impressed upon soldiers and slaves during Roman times to signify the commander or owner to whom they belonged. Baptism marks us permanently as belonging to Christ, whose image we bear.

## BAPTISM IS A CALL TO HOLINESS

*Reborn . . . [the baptized] . . . must participate in the apostolic and missionary activity of the People of God.*

—CCC, no. 1270

“Baptism is the door to life and to the Kingdom of God. Christ offered the first sacrament of the new law to all that they may have eternal life. Baptism is, above all, the sacrament of that faith by which men

and women, enlightened by the Spirit's grace, respond to the Gospel of Christ" ("Christian Initiation, General Instruction," in *The Rites of the Catholic Church* [1976], no. 3).

In Baptism, the Holy Spirit moves us to answer Christ's call to holiness. In Baptism, we are asked to walk by the light of Christ and to trust in his wisdom. We are invited to submit our hearts to Christ with ever deeper love. What is this light, this wisdom, this holiness? Jesus is clear about the high ideals to which he invites us:

Be perfect, just as your heavenly Father is perfect. (Mt 5:48)  
 Be merciful as your Father is merciful. (Lk 6:36)  
 Love one another as I love you. (Jn 15:12)

The Lord Jesus, our divine teacher and model of all virtue, preached holiness of life to everyone without exception. Through Baptism, we are cleansed of all sin, are made partakers of the divine nature, and are truly sanctified. Our goal now is to hold onto this gracious act of sanctification that we have received from Christ. St. Paul lays out a practical plan for holiness:

Put on, then, as God's chosen ones, holy and beloved, heartfelt compassion, humility, gentleness and patience, bearing with one another. If one has a grievance against another, as the Lord has forgiven you, so must you also do. And over all these put on love, that is, the bond of perfection. (Col 3:12-13)

This is a strong challenge that we cannot meet by human strength alone. "Accordingly, all Christians in the conditions, duties and circumstances of their life and through all these, will sanctify themselves more and more if they receive all things with faith from the hand of the heavenly Father and cooperate with the divine will, thus showing forth in the temporal service the love with which God has loved the world" (LG, no. 41). The baptized are called to transform the world with the light and power of the Gospel.

Living out one's Baptism is a lifelong responsibility. Growing in holiness and discipleship involves a willingness to continue to learn throughout one's whole life about the faith and how to live it. It also involves a willingness to support and encourage others who share the faith and who

have committed themselves to the ongoing process of conversion of heart and mind to God, which results in the holiness to which we are called.

## FOR DISCUSSION

1. St. Paul tells us that in Baptism we die and rise with Christ. Why is it necessary to remember the “dying” part? If you were to do a survey of what Baptism means to people, what answers do you think you would hear?
2. What differences do you see between some “cradle Catholics” and those who have entered the Church through the RCIA? What are the responsibilities of godparents in looking after the growth in faith of the baptized they sponsor?
3. What is an effective way of attracting others to Christ?

## DOCTRINAL STATEMENTS

- The Sacraments of Initiation are Baptism, Confirmation, and Eucharist.
- The Risen Jesus commissioned the Apostles to baptize when he said, “Go, therefore, and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit” (Mt 28:19-20).
- Baptism gives a person birth into new life. It is necessary for salvation and for entry into the Church.
- The rite of Baptism consists in immersing the person in water three times or pouring water on his or her head three times while invoking the Holy Trinity: the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.
- The effects of Baptism are delivery from all sins (Original and personal), reception of the grace of divine adoption, being made a member of Christ and a temple of the Holy Spirit, initiation into the Church, and being made a sharer in Christ’s mission as priest, prophet, and king.

- Baptism seals the person's soul with a permanent spiritual mark or character identifying one as belonging to Christ. Because of this character, Baptism cannot be repeated.
- People who die for the faith, catechumens who died before being baptized, and those who do not know Christ or the Church through no fault of their own but who, by the action of grace, seek God sincerely and do his will can be saved even without being baptized.
- Infants have been baptized since apostolic times, for this is a gift from God and does not presuppose human merit. Children are baptized in the faith of the Church.
- Trusting in God's mercy, we confidently hope for the salvation of children who die without Baptism.
- In time of necessity such as the danger of death, all persons can baptize. The person baptizing must intend to do what the Church does, by pouring water three times on the candidate's head while saying, "I baptize you in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit."

## MEDITATION

By three immersions and as many invocations, the great mystery of Baptism is performed. So the appearance of death is conveyed, and through the handing over of divine knowledge the baptized are enlightened. Therefore, if there is any grace in the water, it is not because of any power the water may possess, but because it derives from the power of the Spirit. . . . The Lord, to prepare us for the risen life, lays before us all the gospel precepts. We must avoid anger, endure evil, be free from the love of pleasure and the love of money. So by our own choice we shall achieve those things which are the natural endowments of the world to come.

—St. Basil the Great, *On the Holy Spirit*, XV, nos. 35-36

## PRAYER

God the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ has freed you from sin,  
given you a new birth by water and the Holy Spirit,  
and welcomed you into his holy people.

He now anoints you with the chrism of salvation.  
As Christ was anointed Priest, Prophet and King,  
so may you live always as members of his body,  
sharing everlasting life. Amen.

—Prayer for Anointing with Chrism,  
*Rite of Baptism*



You were buried with him [Christ] in baptism,  
in which you were also raised with him through  
faith in the power of God, who raised him from the dead.

—Col 2:12



# 16 CONFIRMATION: CONSECRATED FOR MISSION

---

CONFIRMATION IS THE SECOND SACRAMENT  
OF INITIATION  
—CCC, NOS. 1285-1321

## FRANCES CABRINI, “GO TO AMERICA”



When Frances Cabrini received the Sacrament of Confirmation, she was more perfectly bound to the Church as a true witness to Christ and more urgently called to spread and defend the faith in word and deed. She heard that call and responded with extraordinary generosity. This is her story.

This spirited woman was born in Italy in 1850. Early on, she felt the call to religious life, but no congregation accepted her because of her poor health.

At age twenty-seven, her missionary zeal led her to found a new congregation, the Missionary Sisters of the Sacred Heart. Within a few years, she and her sisters had opened six orphanages.

In 1889, she obtained an audience with Pope Leo XIII, asking him to support her desire to open a mission in China. Pope Leo directed her elsewhere. He told her to go to America and work among the Italian immigrants there.

A short time later, she was in New York City opening a Catholic school at St. Giocchino’s parish church. Within a year, she had begged enough money to buy a 450-acre Jesuit property across the Hudson River to house her first American orphanage. Soon after, she realized that Italian immigrants and others needed a hospital. Her skills at fundraising and getting people to give of themselves led her to found the first Columbus Hospital, where she relied on the donated services of the doctors, Catholic as well

as Jewish and Protestant. The hospital had free wards for the poor and private rooms for the rich, whose fees helped finance the care of the poor. She built other Columbus hospitals in Denver, Los Angeles, Philadelphia, Seattle, New Orleans, and Chicago.

She continued to visit the various convents and institutions she founded in Europe. She also sailed to Brazil and Argentina to expand the work of her community. Her thirty-seven years of apostolic service saw her almost constantly on the move. She could be found deep in a Denver mine encouraging Italian American miners or, on another occasion, at a scaffold holding hands and praying with Italian American prisoners who were about to be hanged.

When she died in 1917, she left behind sixty-seven convents in Europe, the United States, and South America and 1,500 Missionary Sisters of the Sacred Heart. She had become a citizen of the United States in 1909 and was the first American citizen to be canonized a saint. At her canonization in 1946, Pius XII said this in his homily:

Where did she acquire all that strength and the inexhaustible energy by which she was able to perform so many good works and to surmount so many difficulties? She accomplished all this through the faith that was always so vibrant in her heart; through the divine love that burned within her; and, finally, through the constant prayer by which she was so closely united to God. . . . She never let anything turn her aside from striving to please God and to work for his glory for which nothing, aided by grace, seemed too difficult or beyond human strength. (*Liturgy of the Hours*, vol. IV, 2022)

Mother Cabrini lived deeply the mission of the Church to bring Christ's compassion and care to all people. She responded generously to the grace of the Sacrament of Confirmation that binds Christians to such a deeper identification with the Church and her mission.



## THE SACRAMENT OF THE HOLY SPIRIT

*The reception of the sacrament of Confirmation is necessary for the completion of baptismal grace. . . . “By the sacrament of Confirmation [the baptized] are more perfectly bound to the Church and are enriched with a special strength of the Holy Spirit.”*

—CCC, no. 1285, citing LG, no. 11

Confirmation, together with Baptism and Eucharist, form the Sacraments of Initiation that are all intimately connected. In the Sacrament of Confirmation, the baptized person is “sealed with the gift of the Holy Spirit” and is strengthened for service to the Body of Christ.

The prophets of the Old Testament foretold that God’s Spirit would rest upon the Messiah to sustain his mission. Their prophecy was fulfilled when Jesus the Messiah was conceived by the Spirit and born of the Virgin Mary. The Holy Spirit descended on Jesus on the occasion of his baptism by John. Jesus’ entire mission occurred in communion with the Spirit. Before he died, Jesus promised that the Spirit would be given to the Apostles and to the entire Church. After his death, he was raised by the Father in the power of the Spirit.

The New Testament reports many manifestations of the Holy Spirit, two of which we note here. St. John’s Gospel describes an outpouring of the Spirit on Easter night when Jesus breathed on the Apostles and said, “Receive the holy Spirit” (Jn 20:22). St. Luke’s Acts of the Apostles gives another account of the sending of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost, fifty days after the Resurrection of Christ (cf. Acts 2). Filled with the Holy Spirit, the Apostles proclaimed God’s mighty deeds. Peter preached that this coming of the Spirit fulfilled the prophecy of Joel: “In the last days . . . I will pour out a portion of my spirit / upon all flesh” (Acts 2:17; cf. Jl 3:1).

Those who believed in the Apostles’ preaching were baptized and received the Holy Spirit through the laying on of hands. The Apostles baptized believers in water and the Spirit. Then they imparted the special gift of the Spirit through the laying on of hands. “The imposition of hands is rightly recognized by the Catholic tradition as the origin of

the sacrament of Confirmation, which in a certain way perpetuates the grace of Pentecost in the Church” (CCC, no. 1288, citing Pope Paul VI, *Divinae Consortium Naturae*, no. 659).

By the second century, Confirmation was also conferred by anointing with holy oil, which came to be called sacred Chrism. “This anointing highlights the name ‘Christian,’ which means ‘anointed’ and derives from that of Christ himself whom God ‘anointed with the Holy Spirit’” (CCC, no. 1289, citing Acts 10:38).

## THE LITURGY OF CONFIRMATION

The signs, symbols, ritual acts, and words of the liturgy speak to us of the meaning of a Sacrament and of what Christ enacts in the event through his ministers and the disposition of the candidate. With this in mind, we reflect on the following elements of Confirmation: the anointing with sacred Chrism, the recipient, the essential rite, the ministers, and the effects of the Sacrament.

### The Anointing with Sacred Chrism

*The post-baptismal anointing with sacred chrism in Confirmation . . . is the sign of consecration. . . those who are anointed, share more completely in the mission of Jesus Christ.*

—CCC, no. 1294

In or near Holy Week, the bishop consecrates the sacred Chrism during the course of the Chrism Mass. It is used to anoint the newly baptized, to confer the Sacrament of Confirmation, and to anoint bishops and priests during the celebration of the Sacrament of Holy Orders.

Anointing with oil has many meanings such as cleansing as part of a bath, limbering up the muscles of athletes, and healing the wounds of the sick. Two other sacramental celebrations make use of blessed oil: “The pre-baptismal anointing with the oil of catechumens signifies cleansing and strengthening; the anointing of the sick expresses healing and com-

fort” (CCC, no. 1294). The Oil of Catechumens is used in Baptism. The Oil of the Sick is used for the Sacrament of the Anointing of the Sick.

## The Recipient of Confirmation

Each baptized person not yet confirmed can and should receive the Sacrament of Confirmation. In the Latin Church, it is customary to confirm candidates between the age of discretion, also called the age of reason, and about sixteen years of age. It is not uncommon that Catholics not confirmed during this period of their lives for a variety of reasons are confirmed as adults, often on Pentecost Sunday. The candidate should be in the state of grace (that is, without serious sin), be well prepared by prayer and catechesis, and be committed to the responsibilities entailed by the Sacrament.

## The Essential Rite of Confirmation

In continuity with the New Testament custom of laying hands on those who would receive the gift of the Spirit, the bishop extends his two hands over all those to be confirmed. He recites a prayer that begs the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ for the outpouring of the Holy Spirit and for the seven gifts traditionally associated with the Spirit. These gifts are permanent dispositions that move us to respond to the guidance of the Spirit. The traditional list of the gifts is based on Isaiah 11:1-3: wisdom, understanding, knowledge, counsel, fortitude, piety (reverence), and fear of the Lord (wonder and awe in God’s presence).

The essential rite then follows. In the Latin Rite, “the Sacrament of Confirmation is conferred through the anointing with Chrism on the forehead, which is done by the laying on of hands, and through the words, ‘Be sealed with the gift of the Holy Spirit’” (Introduction to the *Rite of Confirmation*, no. 9). In the Eastern Churches, after a prayer for the presence and action of the Holy Spirit, the priest anoints the forehead, eyes, nose, ears, lips, chest, back, hands, and feet of the candidate with *Myron* (holy oil). With each anointing he says, “The seal of the gift of the Holy Spirit.” The Eastern Churches call Confirmation “Chrismation.”

When Confirmation is celebrated separately from Baptism, its connection with Baptism is expressed, among other ways, by the renewal of baptismal promises. The celebration of Confirmation during the Eucharist helps underline the unity of the sacraments of Christian initiation. (CCC, no. 1321)

The connection between Confirmation and Baptism is also reflected in the choosing of a name by which the candidate will be confirmed, especially when the chosen name is one of the names by which the candidate was baptized.

### The Minister of Confirmation

In the early Church, sacramental initiation always involved the bishop; the bishop was the ordinary minister of both Baptism and Confirmation. However, pastoral practice changed as the Church expanded rapidly. When bishops could no longer be present at all celebrations of Baptism, they chose to retain a role in the process of initiation by continuing to be the ordinary minister of Confirmation.

In the Latin Church, with the bishop as the minister of Confirmation, it is evident how this Sacrament can serve to strengthen the person's bond with the Church and her apostolic origins. However, there are also times when the bishop entrusts the celebration of the rite of Confirmation to a priest, such as in the case of the Baptism of an adult or the reception of an adult from another Christian community into full communion with the Church. Bishops may also give this permission in other cases.

In the Eastern Churches, Confirmation is conferred by a priest at the time of Baptism, and in some of these Churches, it is followed by the reception of the Eucharist. This practice underlines the unity of the three Sacraments of Initiation. The priest confirms with the *Myron* or oil consecrated by the bishop. This expresses the apostolic unity of the Church.

## The Effects of Confirmation

*Confirmation brings an increase and deepening of baptismal grace:*

*—it roots us more deeply in the divine filiation [becoming adopted sons and daughters of God] which makes us cry, “Abba! Father!”;*

*—it unites us more firmly to Christ;*

*—it increases the gifts of the Holy Spirit in us;*

*—it renders our bond with the Church more perfect;*

*—it gives us a special strength of the Holy Spirit to spread and defend the faith by word and action as true witnesses of Christ, to confess the name of Christ boldly, and never to be ashamed of the Cross.*

—CCC, no. 1303

As the words of the liturgy indicate, the person being confirmed is sealed with the Holy Spirit. This seal is called a *character*, marking the person forever as called to fulfill the Church’s mission in all the circumstances of life.

The one who gives us security with you in Christ and who anointed us is God; he has also put his seal upon us and given the Spirit in our hearts as a first installment. (2 Cor 1:21-22)

## THE MISSION AND WITNESS OF THE CONFIRMED

Confirmation deepens our baptismal life that calls us to be missionary witnesses of Jesus Christ in our families, neighborhoods, society, and the world. Through Confirmation, our personal relationship with Christ is strengthened. We receive the message of faith in a deeper and more intensive manner with great emphasis given to the person of Jesus Christ, who asked the Father to give the Holy Spirit to the Church for building up the community in loving service.

The Holy Spirit bestows seven gifts—wisdom, understanding, knowledge, fortitude, counsel, piety, and fear of the Lord—to assist us

## FROM THE CATECHISM

### 1. Who may receive Confirmation?

Every baptized person not yet confirmed can and should receive the Sacrament of Confirmation. Since Baptism, Confirmation, and Eucharist form a unity, it follows that “the faithful are obliged to receive this sacrament at the appropriate time.” (CCC, no. 1306, citing CIC, can. 890)

### 2. How should candidates for Confirmation be prepared?

*Preparation* for Confirmation should aim at leading the Christian toward a more intimate union with Christ and a more lively familiarity with the Holy Spirit—his actions, his gifts, and his biddings—in order to be more capable of assuming the apostolic responsibilities of Christian life. To this end catechesis for Confirmation should strive to awaken a sense of belonging to the Church of Jesus Christ, the universal Church as well as the parish community. The latter bears special responsibility for the preparation of confirmands. (CCC, no. 1309)

### 3. Why do we not receive Confirmation more than once?

Confirmation, like Baptism, imprints a spiritual mark, or indelible character on the Christian’s soul; for this reason one can receive this Sacrament only once in one’s life. (CCC, no. 1317)

in our mission and witness. The impact of these gifts accompanies us in the various stages of our spiritual development.

As the confirmed, we walk with the seven gifts of the Holy Spirit. Wisdom enables us to see the world from God’s viewpoint, which can help us come to grasp the purpose and plan of God. It grants us the long-range view of history, examining the present in the light of the past and the mystery of the future. It saves us from the illusion that the spirit of the times is our only guide. The Spirit’s gift of knowledge directs us to a

contemplation, or thoughtful reflection, of the mystery of God—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit—as well as of the mysteries of the Catholic faith. We are drawn to meditative prayer, where we allow God to lead us while we rest patiently in the divine presence.

The gift of understanding stimulates us to work on knowing ourselves as part of our growth in knowing God. It is what St. Augustine meant when he prayed, “That I may know You, may I know myself.” When the Spirit pours fortitude or courage into our hearts, we can trust that we will be prepared to stand up for Christ and the Gospel when challenged. As the gift of counsel or right judgment grows in us, we can sense the quiet teaching that the Spirit gives us about our moral lives and the training of our consciences.

The gift of piety or reverence is an act of respect for the Father who created us, for Jesus who saved us, and for the Spirit who is sanctifying us. We learn reverence for God and people from our parents and others who train us in virtue. The Spirit fills us with this gift at liturgy, which is a masterful school of reverence, as well as through popular devotions and piety.

Finally, the gift of fear of the Lord or wonder and awe in God’s presence can infuse honesty into our relationship with God, a frankness that places us in awe before the majesty of God. Yet the gift also imparts an attitude of grateful wonder that God loves us and that we can share in his life.

When we are responsive to the grace of Confirmation and the seven gifts of the Holy Spirit, we begin to bear the fruits of the Spirit. The tradition of the Church names twelve fruits of the Holy Spirit: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, generosity, gentleness, faithfulness, modesty, self-control, and chastity (cf. CCC, no. 1832; Gal 5:22).

## FOR DISCUSSION

1. If you have been confirmed, describe what the experience was like. When did it happen? Who confirmed you? How were you prepared?
2. How are the healing and cleansing qualities of anointing with oil symbols of what happens in the Sacraments of Baptism and Confirmation?

3. What are the consequences of the deeper identification with the mission of the Church that comes from Confirmation?

## DOCTRINAL STATEMENTS

- Jesus promised the Apostles that he would send the Holy Spirit to them. At Pentecost that promise of Christ was fulfilled (cf. Jn 16:12-15; Acts 2:1-47).
- The effects of Confirmation include a permanent character, a perfection of baptismal grace, an increase in the gifts and fruits of the Holy Spirit, a deepening of our identity as adopted sons and daughters of God, a closer bond to the Church and her mission, and helps for bearing witness.
- In the Eastern Churches, Chrismation (Confirmation) is administered immediately after Baptism, followed by participation in the Eucharist. This tradition emphasizes the unity of these three Sacraments of Initiation.
- In the Western or Latin Church, Confirmation is administered after the age of reason is attained and is normally conferred by the bishop, signifying one's bond with the Church and its apostolic origins.
- The candidate for Confirmation in the Latin Church should be in the state of grace, be well prepared by prayer and catechesis, and be committed to the responsibilities entailed by the Sacrament.
- This is the essential rite of Confirmation in the Western Church: The bishop confers Confirmation through the anointing with Chrism on the recipient's forehead, which is done by the laying on of the hand, while saying the words "Be sealed with the gift of the Holy Spirit."
- In the Eastern Churches, after a prayer for the presence and action of the Holy Spirit, the priest anoints the forehead, eyes, nose, ears, lips, chest, back, hands, and feet of the candidate with *Myron* (holy oil). With each anointing, he says, "The seal of the gift of the Holy Spirit."
- The spiritual, indelible marks (or characters) received in the Sacraments of Baptism, Confirmation, and Holy Orders affirm a

permanent relationship with God and indicate that these Sacraments may be received only once.

- “When Confirmation is celebrated separately from Baptism, its connection with Baptism is expressed, among other ways, by the renewal of baptismal promises. The celebration of Confirmation during the Eucharist helps underline the unity of the Sacraments of Christian Initiation” (CCC, no. 1321).

## MEDITATION

There are those who have said that courage in witnessing our faith is one of the best proofs for the existence of God. Confirmation is the Sacrament that makes possible courageous witness. The never-ending stories of martyrs and other Christian heroes and heroines throughout the centuries to the present provide ample evidence of the Holy Spirit’s gift of courage. Today, there are plenty of opportunities to act courageously on behalf of the teachings of Christ and the Church, to promote the stability of marriage, to support the ideals of family life, to be brave in defending human life from conception to death, to be steadfast in seeking justice for the oppressed, and to be determined that the light of Christ’s compassion and peace will shine everywhere on earth.

## PRAYER

### **Come, Holy Ghost (A Hymn to the Holy Spirit)**

Come, Holy Ghost, Creator blest,  
and in our hearts take up thy rest.  
Come with thy grace, and heavenly aid  
to fill the hearts which thou hast made.



Breathe on me breath of God, my soul with grace refine,  
Until this earthly part of me, glows with your fire divine.

—Edwin Hatch



# 17 THE EUCHARIST: SOURCE AND SUMMIT OF THE CHRISTIAN LIFE

---

THE HOLY EUCHARIST COMPLETES CHRISTIAN INITIATION  
—CCC, NOS. 1322-1419

## AN APOSTLE OF THE EUCHARIST



In 1946, a bright young man named Carlos Manuel Rodriguez enrolled at the University of Puerto Rico. But despite excellent grades and his love of learning, he fell ill with ulcerated colitis, which prevented him from completing his second year. Nevertheless, he continued to study on his own. He read widely in science, philosophy, arts, and religion. He learned to play the organ for the sacred music that he was enthusiastically promoting.

Born in 1918 to parents who valued education, he showed signs of great intelligence early on. When a fire destroyed the family store and home, his family moved in with Carlos' maternal grandparents. His grandmother, Alejandrina Esteras, imparted her devout faith in the Eucharist to Carlos. Under her influence, he began his devotion to the liturgy and decided to commit his life to Jesus Christ.

Though he was unable to finish his university education, he experienced a call to do whatever he could to help the university students respond to God's call to holiness through the liturgy. Carlos became an unofficial campus minister. He wanted to open up the riches of the Mass to them, to show them how to participate actively in the Eucharistic celebration. He urged them to build their spirituality from the wealth of God's grace given in the Sacraments, especially the Eucharist.

Carlos obtained a job as an office worker at the University Agriculture Experiment station. He spent his salary to promote an appreciation of the

spiritual wealth of the liturgy. He started a magazine, *Liturgy and Christian Culture*, in which he published articles on liturgy that he translated into Spanish from English and French journals.

He gradually gathered a number of students and professors together in a Liturgy Circle that met at the University Center. He taught them how to live out the liturgy and the Easter mystery of Christ's dying and rising, especially at the Easter Vigil.

He organized Christian Life days for the students to renew their spirituality through the liturgy. He promoted the active participation of the laity in the Mass and the use of the vernacular. Carlos anticipated a number of the teachings of the Second Vatican Council, especially those found in the *Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy (Sacrosanctum Concilium)*.

Carlos did not let his deteriorating physical condition get in the way of his calling. He knew he was rising with Christ even as his body was dying. He kept reminding his disciples at the university that they should be joyful because they are called to live the joy and hope that Jesus brings with his Resurrection. He frequently said, "*Vivimos para esa noche de la Resurrección*" (We live for the night of the Resurrection). He entered eternal life on July 13, 1963, at age forty-four.

A crowd that traveled to Rome from Puerto Rico cheered and waved their island's flag in St. Peter's Square on April 29, 2001, when Pope John Paul II beatified Carlos Manuel Rodriguez. The pope pointed out that this lay activist witnessed the fact that all Christians are called to pursue holiness "in a conscious and responsible way."

Blessed Carlos loved the Eucharist, which is the center of the liturgy. Remarkably, in the twenty years before the Second Vatican Council when the voices for liturgical renewal were being heard from Benedictine monks, scholarly theologians, and visionary priests, this alert Puerto Rican layman showed university students how to base their faith life on the liturgy, especially the Eucharist.



## THE REVELATION OF THE EUCHARIST

*The holy Eucharist completes Christian initiation. . . .  
The Eucharist is the efficacious sign and sublime cause  
of that communion in the divine life and that unity of the  
People of God by which the Church is kept in being.*

—CCC, nos. 1322 and 1325, citing Sacred Congregation of Rites,  
*Instruction on the Worship of the Eucharistic Mystery*  
(*Eucharisticum Mysterium*), no. 6

The origins of the Eucharist are found in the Last Supper that Jesus shared with his Apostles. “In order to leave them a pledge of this love, in order never to depart from his own and to make them sharers in his Passover, he instituted the Eucharist as the memorial of his death and Resurrection and commanded his apostles to celebrate it until his return; ‘thereby he constituted them priests of the New Testament’” (CCC, no. 1337, citing Council of Trent: DS 1740).

So rich is this mystery that we have a number of terms to illumine its saving grace: the Breaking of the Bread; the Lord’s Supper; the Eucharistic Assembly; the Memorial of Christ’s Passion, Death, and Resurrection; the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass, the Holy and Divine Liturgy; the Eucharistic Liturgy; Holy Communion; and Holy Mass (cf. CCC, nos. 1328-1332).

The use of bread and wine in worship is already found in the early history of God’s people. In the Old Testament, bread and wine are seen as gifts from God, to whom praise and thanks are given in return for these blessings and for other manifestations of his care and grace. The story of the priest Melchizedek’s offering a sacrifice of bread and wine for Abraham’s victory is an example of this (cf. Gn 14:18). The harvest of new lambs was also a time for the sacrifice of a lamb to show gratitude to God for the new flock and its contribution to the well-being of the family and tribe.

These ancient rituals were given historical meaning at the Exodus of God’s people. They were united into the Passover Meal as a sign of God’s delivering the Israelites from slavery in Egypt, a pledge of his fidelity to his promises and eventually a sign of the coming of the

Messiah and messianic times. Each family shared the lamb that had been sacrificed and the bread over which a blessing had been proclaimed. They also drank from a cup of wine over which a similar blessing had been proclaimed.

When Jesus instituted the Eucharist he gave a final meaning to the blessing of the bread and the wine and the sacrifice of the lamb. The Gospels narrate events that anticipated the Eucharist. The miracle of the loaves and fish, reported in all four Gospels, prefigured the unique abundance of the Eucharist. The miracle of changing water into wine at the wedding feast in Cana manifested the divine glory of Jesus and the heavenly wedding feast in which we share at every Eucharist.

In his dialogue with the people at Capernaum, Christ used his miracle of multiplying the loaves of bread as the occasion to describe himself as the Bread of Life: “I am the living bread that came down from heaven. . . . Unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you do not have life within you” (Jn 6:51, 53).

## THE LAST SUPPER

The account of the institution of the Eucharist may be found in the Gospels of Matthew, Mark, and Luke as well as in Paul’s First Letter to the Corinthians (see Mt 26:17-29; Mk 14:12-25; Lk 22:7-20; 1 Cor 11:23-26). Jesus chose the Passover feast as the time in which he would institute the Eucharist and would undergo his dying and rising (cf. CCC, nos. 1339-1340). With the institution of the Eucharist, Jesus gave the Passover its new and definitive meaning. He showed himself to be the High Priest of the New Covenant, offering himself as a perfect sacrifice to the Father. Jesus changed the bread and wine into his Body and Blood, given now as an offering for the salvation of all people.

For I received from the Lord what I also handed on to you, that the Lord Jesus, on the night he was handed over, took bread, and, after he had given thanks, broke it and said, “This is my body that is for you. Do this in remembrance of me.” In the same way also the cup, after supper, saying, “This cup is the new covenant in my blood. Do this, as often as you drink it, in remembrance

of me.” For as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the death of the Lord until he comes. (1 Cor 11:23-26)

By the words “Do this in memory of me,” Jesus commanded the Apostles and their successors to repeat his actions and words “until he comes again.” From earliest times, the Church has remained faithful to this command. Particularly on Sunday, the day of Christ’s Resurrection, the faithful has gathered for the Breaking of the Bread. This practice has continued unbroken for two thousand years right up to the present day.

In the Gospel of John, instead of an account of the institution of the Eucharist, there is the narrative of the foot washing (Jn 13:1-20) at the beginning of the Last Supper, which sets the tone of humble service, exemplified by Christ and fulfilled in his death on the Cross. The Church has selected this Gospel for the Holy Thursday liturgy, highlighting Christ’s teaching: “If I, therefore, the master and teacher, have washed your feet, you ought to wash one another’s feet. I have given you a model to follow, so that as I have done for you, you should also do” (Jn 13:14-15).

Christ’s Last Supper Discourse (Jn 14:1–17:26) reflects Eucharistic themes of divine love, a union with Christ as intimate as a branch is to a vine, and a priestly prayer for the Apostles and those who would believe through them.

## THE MASS FOR THE ROMAN RITE

Since the second century, the Mass (or the Eucharistic Liturgy) has had a structure that is common to all Catholics. While there can be different emphases during the celebration of Mass in Eastern Churches, they maintain the fundamental twofold structure with which members of the Latin Church are familiar. Thus, the Mass unfolds in two major parts that form a single act of worship. First, there is the Liturgy of the Word, with Scripture readings, homily, Profession of Faith, and General Intercessions. Second, there is the Liturgy of the Eucharist, with the presentation of the bread and wine, the Eucharistic Prayer, and the reception of Holy Communion. The essential elements of Eucharistic celebrations may be summarized in the following four points.

## 1. The Introductory Rites

The Christian community, united by the Holy Spirit, gathers for worship in response to God's call. Jesus, our High Priest, is the principal agent of our celebration. The bishop or priest acts in the person of Christ, the Head of the Church. All the worshipers participate actively with interior devout attention and with external reverence shown by singing the hymns and giving the responses and, when appropriate, observing silence. There are also the deacon, the lectors, those who present the offerings, the extraordinary ministers of Holy Communion, the altar servers, the musicians, and other ministers. This first movement contains the Introductory Rites, which begin the celebration of the Mass. These include the Penitential Rite, the *Gloria*, and the Opening Prayer.

Mother Church earnestly desires that all the faithful should be led to that full, conscious and active participation in liturgical celebrations which is demanded by the very nature of the liturgy, and to which the Christian people, "a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a redeemed people" (1 Pt 2:9, 4-5) have a right and obligation by reason of their baptism. (SC, no. 14)

## 2. Liturgy of the Word

Over the course of the liturgical year, readings from Scripture, especially the Gospels, provide the heart of this part of the celebration. The proclamation of God's Word and its explanation are meant to arouse our faith and prepare us for an ever deeper participation in the mystery of the Eucharist. The readings are followed by a homily from a bishop, priest, or deacon; the Profession of Faith in the recitation of the Creed; and intercessory prayers.

## 3. Liturgy of the Eucharist

a. *The Preparation of the Gifts* (Jesus took bread and wine). The offerings of bread and wine are received by the priest, who may be assisted by a deacon. "They will be offered by the priest in the name of Christ in the Eucharistic sacrifice in which they will become his Body

## THE CHURCH AND THE EUCHARIST

The Church draws her life from the Eucharist. This truth does not simply express a daily experience of faith, but recapitulates the heart of the mystery of the Church. In a variety of ways, she joyfully experiences the constant fulfillment of the promise, “Lo, I am with you always, to the close of the age” (Mt 28:20), but in the Holy Eucharist, through the changing of the bread and wine into the Body and Blood of the Lord, she rejoices in this presence with unique intensity. Ever since Pentecost, when the Church, the People of the New Covenant, began her pilgrim journey towards her heavenly homeland, the Divine Sacrament has continued to mark the passing of her days, filling them with confident hope. (Pope John Paul II, *On the Eucharist* [*Ecclesia de Eucharistia*; EE], no. 1)

and Blood” (CCC, no. 1350). From the earliest days of the Church, there was also an offering of gifts for the poor and needy. This has become the customary place and time for the parish collection.

b. *The Eucharistic Prayer* (Jesus blessed and gave thanks). This is the heart of the Eucharistic Liturgy, which unfolds in the following manner.

- *Thanksgiving* (expressed especially in the Preface): In this prayer, we thank God the Father, through Christ in the Spirit, for the gifts of creation, salvation, and sanctification.
- *Acclamation*: The whole congregation joins with the angels and saints in singing or saying the *Sanctus* (Holy, Holy).
- *Epiclesis* (Invocation): The Church implores the power of the Holy Spirit to change the bread and wine offered by human hands into Christ’s Body and Blood.
- *Institution Narrative and Consecration*: The priest proclaims Jesus’ words at the Last Supper over the bread and wine. “The power of the words and the action of Christ, and the power of

the Holy Spirit, make sacramentally present, under the species of bread and wine, Christ's Body and Blood, his sacrifice offered on the cross for all" (CCC, no. 1353).

- *Anamnesis* (The Remembrance): We recall the death and Resurrection of Christ and look forward to his glorious return.
- *Second Epiclesis*: The Holy Spirit is invoked upon the gathered community, to bring unity to the worshippers who will receive Holy Communion.
- *Intercessions*: With the whole Communion of Saints and all God's people on earth, we pray for the needs of all the members of the Church, living and dead.
- *Doxology and Great Amen*: We conclude the Eucharistic Prayer with praise of God the Father, through his Son Jesus Christ, in the Holy Spirit. This glorification is confirmed and concluded by the people's acclamation "Amen."

c. *Communion Rite* (Jesus broke the bread and gave his Body and Blood). After the Lord's Prayer, the Lamb of God is sung or said during the breaking of the Body of Christ, or fraction, then we receive the Body and Blood of Christ in Holy Communion. The Communion Rite concludes with a closing prayer.

## 4. Concluding Rite

Following the prayer after Holy Communion, the priest blesses the people and dismisses the assembly.

Centuries of reflection on the Eucharist have left us a spiritual heritage that continues to deepen and grow. Three key truths about the Eucharist draw our attention: it is a Sacrifice, a Holy Meal, and the Real Presence of Christ.

## THE MASS IS A SACRIFICE

The Mass is a sacrifice in the sense that when it takes place, Jesus Christ, through the bishop or priest celebrating the Mass, makes present sacramentally his saving, sacrificial death on the Cross by which he redeemed

us from our sins. This Eucharistic sacrifice is the memorial of Christ's redeeming death. The term *memorial* in this context is not simply a remembrance of past events; it is a making present in a sacramental manner the sacrifice of the Cross of Christ and his victory. "When the Church celebrates the Eucharist, the memorial of her Lord's death and resurrection, this central event of salvation becomes really present and 'the work of our redemption is carried out'" (EE, no. 11). The Eucharistic sacrifice is offered to adore and thank God, to pray for all our needs, and to gain pardon for our sins.

In this divine sacrifice which is made present in the Mass, especially in the Eucharistic Prayer, the same Christ who offered himself once in a bloody manner on the altar of the Cross offers himself in an unbloody manner. Present and effective, Christ's sacrifice is applied to our lives. "If the blood of goats . . . can sanctify those who are defiled . . . how much more will the blood of Christ . . . cleanse our consciences from dead works to worship the living God" (Heb 9:14).

The Mass is also the sacrifice of the Church. The ordained priest in the Mass links the Eucharistic consecration to the sacrifice of the Cross and to the Last Supper (cf. EE, no. 29), thus making it possible that the sacrifice of Christ becomes the sacrifice of all the members of the Church. "The lives of the faithful, their praise, sufferings, prayer, and work, are united with those of Christ and with his total offering, and so acquire a new value" (CCC, no. 1368). This also reminds us of the importance of sacrifice in each individual's life. In a self-centered culture where people are taught to extend themselves only for something in return, the sacrifices each of us make, following the example of Jesus, who freely sacrificed his life in love for all, point to the reality and power of God's love for us.

The offering of Christ unites the members here on earth and those in heaven. The Pope, as chief shepherd of the People of God, is named at every Mass for the sake of the unity of the whole Church. The bishop of a diocese is named because he is the shepherd of the local Church and the instrument of its unity. The text of the Eucharistic Prayer also recalls the presence of the Blessed Virgin Mary and all the saints as they join us in this act of worship. Drawing from the benefits of Christ's sacrifice,

the Mass is also offered for the faithful departed—who have died in Christ but may not yet be totally purified—so they may enter the glory of heaven.

## THE MASS IS A HOLY MEAL

“Unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you do not have life within you” (Jn 6:53). Jesus Christ shares with us his Body and Blood under the form of bread and wine. Thus the Mass is a sacred banquet that culminates in the reception of Holy Communion. The Church urges us to prepare conscientiously for this moment. We should be in the state of grace, and if we are conscious of a grave or serious sin, we must receive the Sacrament of Penance before receiving Holy Communion. We are also expected to fast from food or drink for at least one hour prior to the reception of Holy Communion. “Like every Catholic generation before us, we must be guided by the words of St. Paul, ‘Whoever therefore eats the bread or drinks the cup of the Lord in an unworthy manner will be guilty of profaning the Body and Blood of the Lord’ (1 Cor 11:27). That means that all must examine their consciences as to their worthiness to receive the Body and Blood of our Lord. This examination includes fidelity to the moral teaching of the Church in personal and public life” (United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, *Catholics in Political Life*, 2004). The Church gives us the humble words of a Roman centurion to say as we prepare to receive Communion: “Lord, I am not worthy to receive you, but only say the word and I shall be healed” (cf. Mt 8:8).

Although the Church urges us to receive Communion at each Mass, there is an obligation for everyone to receive Communion at least once a year some time during the interval between the First Sunday of Lent and Trinity Sunday. Since Christ is fully present under each form of the Eucharist (that is, both the consecrated Bread and Wine), it is sufficient to receive him under the species (form) of bread or wine alone. However, the “sign of communion is more complete when given under both kinds, since in that form the sign of the Eucharistic meal appears more clearly” (CCC, no. 1390).

Holy Communion increases our union with Christ. Just as bodily food sustains our physical life, so Holy Communion nourishes our spiritual life. This Communion moves us away from sin, strengthening our moral resolve to avoid evil and turn ever more powerfully toward God. “The more we share the life of Christ and progress in his friendship, the more difficult it is to break away from him by mortal sin” (CCC, no. 1395).

## THE REAL PRESENCE OF CHRIST

By the power of the Holy Spirit, Christ is present in the proclamation of God’s Word, in the Eucharistic assembly, in the person of the priest, but above all and in a wholly unique manner in the Eucharist. “This presence is called ‘real’—by which is not intended to exclude the other types of presence as if they could not be ‘real’ too, but because it is presence in the fullest sense: that is to say, it is a *substantial* presence by which Christ, God and man, makes himself wholly and entirely present” (CCC, no. 1374, citing Pope Paul VI, *Mystery of Faith*, no. 39).

Since the Middle Ages, the change of bread and wine into the Body and Blood of Christ has been called “transubstantiation.” This means that the substance of the bread and wine is changed into the substance of the Body and Blood of Christ. The appearances of bread and wine remain (color, shape, weight, chemical composition), but the underlying reality—that is, the substance—is now the Body and Blood of Christ.

The Real Presence of Jesus Christ endures in the consecrated elements even after the Mass is ended. Once Communion has been distributed, any remaining hosts are placed in the tabernacle. If any of the Precious Blood remains, it is reverently consumed. The hosts are reserved to provide Communion for the sick, *Viaticum* (Communion for the dying), and to allow the faithful to worship Christ in the reserved Sacrament and to pray in his presence. As a sign of adoration, Latin Catholics genuflect to the Real Presence of Jesus Christ in the tabernacle or genuflect or kneel when the Blessed Sacrament is exposed for prayer. Eastern Catholics show their reverence by a profound bow rather than a genuflection: “It is for this reason the tabernacle should be located in an especially wor-

thy place in the Church and should be constructed in such a way that it emphasizes and manifests the truth of the real presence of Christ in the Blessed Sacrament” (CCC, no. 1379).

With the passage of time, reverent reflection led the Church to enrich its Eucharistic devotion. Faith that Jesus is truly present in the Sacrament led believers to worship Christ dwelling with us permanently in the Sacrament. Wherever the Sacrament is, there is Christ, who is our Lord and our God. Such worship is expressed in many ways: in genuflection, in adoration of the Eucharist, and in the many forms of Eucharistic devotion that faith has nourished.

The Eucharistic Liturgy contains the entire treasure of the Church since it makes present the Paschal Mystery, the central event of salvation. Eucharistic adoration and devotion flow from and lead to the Eucharistic Liturgy, the Mass.

## WAYS OF PARTICIPATING IN THE PASCHAL MYSTERY

Through participation in the Eucharist, we also participate in the Paschal Mystery of Christ, that is, in his dying and rising, which is made present for us in the Eucharistic sacrifice. This participation in the Paschal Mystery of Christ reaches its consummation when we receive his Body and Blood in Holy Communion. Christ’s victory and triumph over death is then made present in the lives of those who participate in the Eucharist.

Holy Communion increases our union with Christ. “Whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood remains in me and I in him” (Jn 6:56). Communion with the Body of Christ preserves, increases, and renews the life of grace received at Baptism.

Holy Communion separates us from sin. We receive the Body of Christ “given up for us” to save us from sin. We receive the Blood of Christ “shed for many for the forgiveness of sins.” Our love of God is intensified and therefore our disordered attachments are weakened and even broken. Divine love wipes away venial sins.

Holy Communion offers us strength, called grace, to preserve us from mortal sin. By deepening our friendship with Christ, this Sacrament makes it more difficult for us to break our union with him by mortal sin.

Holy Communion expands the life of the Church. The Church as a communion is bound ever more closely together through the celebration of the Eucharist. As an ancient axiom states, the Church makes the Eucharist, and the Eucharist makes the Church. In receiving Communion, we are more fully united to the Church.

Holy Communion commits us to care for the poor. St. Paul reminded the Corinthians that in sharing the Body of Christ in the Eucharist, they were also called to care for the poorer members of the community (cf. 1 Cor 11:17-34).

Participation in the celebration of the Eucharistic sacrifice is a source and means of grace even apart from the actual reception of Holy Communion. It has also been long understood that when circumstances prevent one from receiving Holy Communion during Mass, it is possible to make a spiritual communion that is also a source of grace. Spiritual communion means uniting one's self in prayer with Christ's sacrifice and worshiping him present in his Body and Blood.

## THE EUCHARIST TRANSFORMS THE RECIPIENT

To participate actively in the Mass, we need to resist a tendency to passivity when gathered in an audience-like setting. At Mass, we are an assembly of believers called to be a community joined in the praise and worship of God. We do this in the singing of hymns, psalms, recitation of prayers and responses, especially in our "Yes" to God in the Great Amen. Active participation also requires an interior attention and a profound inner offering, as St. Paul urges in Romans 12:1: "I urge you therefore, brothers, by the mercies of God to offer your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God, your spiritual worship."

When the assembly of the faithful, from the hands of the priest, offers the sacrifice of Christ to the Father, the members of the assembly are called to offer their bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God. In using the word *body*, St. Paul does not mean simply our flesh

## FROM THE CATECHISM

### 1. What happens at the consecration in the Mass?

By the consecration, the transubstantiation of the bread and wine into the Body and Blood of Christ is brought about. Under the consecrated species of bread and wine, Christ himself, living and glorious, is present in a true, real and substantial manner: His Body and Blood, with his soul and divinity. (CCC, no. 1413; Council of Trent: DS 1640, 1651)

### 2. What are the effects of Holy Communion?

Communion with the Body and Blood of Christ increases the communicant's union with the Lord, forgives his venial sins, and preserves him from grave sins. Since receiving this sacrament strengthens the bonds of charity between the communicant and Christ, it also reinforces the unity of the Church as the Mystical Body of Christ. (CCC, no. 1416)

### 3. Why is it valuable to visit the Blessed Sacrament?

Because Christ himself is present in the sacrament of the altar, he is to be honored with the worship of adoration. "To visit the Blessed Sacrament is . . . a proof of gratitude, an expression of love, and a duty of adoration toward Christ our Lord." (CCC, no. 1418; Pope Paul VI, *Mystery of Faith*, no. 66)

and bones, but rather our very selves. This, then, is a spiritual sacrifice. How can we do this?

In the Eucharistic Prayer, we hear that Jesus took the bread, blessed it, broke it, made it his Body, and gave it for our salvation. One way of identifying with this is to pray, "Lord, take me. Bless me. Break me. Make me a part of your saving, sacrificial gift for the world's bodily and

spiritual needs.” Having offered ourselves to the Father in union with Christ, we practice active participation in the Mass in its highest form.

This inner drama at each Mass contributes to the process of our spiritual transformation into Christ. It all takes time. When we receive Communion, we need to remember that we are not changing Christ into ourselves. Jesus is transforming us into himself. This requires a proper understanding of the Real Presence of Jesus under the appearance of bread and wine. It is not simply a symbol that merely points to Jesus. Nor is Christ’s presence just a projection on our part in the sense that we make him present when we receive him. As Pope Benedict XVI told the young people gathered for the Twentieth World Youth Day:

The Body and Blood of Christ are given to us so that we ourselves will be transformed in our turn. We are to become the Body of Christ, his own Flesh and Blood.

We all eat the one bread, and this means that we ourselves become one. In this way, adoration, as we said earlier, becomes union. God no longer simply stands before us as the One who is totally Other. He is within us, and we are in him. His dynamic enters into us and then seeks to spread outwards to others until it fills the world, so that his love can truly become the dominant measure of the world. (Benedict XVI, Homily at Marienfeld, Twentieth World Youth Day [August 21, 2005])

The consecrated bread has become Christ’s Body. The consecrated wine has become Christ’s Blood. Jesus Christ is substantially present in a way that is entirely unique. This happens by the power of the Holy Spirit through the ministry of the priest’s or bishop’s acting in the person of Christ during the Eucharistic Prayer. At Mass, when we are offered the Host and hear the statement “The Body of Christ,” we answer, “Amen,” that is, “Yes, I believe.”

Only Jesus can transform us into himself. Our inner receptivity is critical. To receive love, we need to be open to it. The sacrificial gift of self at every Mass is the best way to be continuously transformed into Christ. Then in Christ we become bread for the world’s bodily and spiritual hungers.

## FOR DISCUSSION

1. What has been your experience of Mass at various times in your life? What has helped you to become a more active participant in the celebration of the Eucharist?
2. Who are the people who have influenced your appreciation of the Eucharist? What do we mean when we speak of the Real Presence of Jesus? What can draw you to visit the Blessed Sacrament more frequently and spend time there in the adoration of Christ?
3. The *Catechism* reminds us that the Eucharist commits us to care for the poor (see CCC, no. 1397). How do you live this commitment during the week? How are you the “Body of Christ” at work, at home, at school?

## DOCTRINAL STATEMENTS

- Jesus instituted the Eucharistic sacrifice, the banquet of divine life, at the Last Supper.
- We need to remember that the Eucharist is the summit and source of our Christian life. Why? Because in the Eucharist is found the entire treasure of the Church—Jesus Christ.
- The Eucharistic celebration begins with the Introductory Rites and the Liturgy of the Word, followed by the Liturgy of the Eucharist—the preparation of the gifts, the Eucharistic Prayer (the prayer of thanksgiving and praise, including the consecration of the bread and wine), and the reception of Holy Communion. The celebration concludes with the sending forth to serve the Lord.
- The Eucharist is the memorial of Christ’s saving life, death, and Resurrection, made present for our salvation by the action of the liturgy.
- Christ, acting through the ministry of his priests, is both the priest offering the sacrifice and the victim being sacrificed.
- “Only validly ordained priests can preside at the Eucharist and consecrate the bread and wine so that they become the Body and Blood of the Lord” (CCC, no. 1411).

- The essential signs of the Eucharist for the Latin Church are unleavened wheat bread and grape wine.
- At Mass, the consecrated bread is Christ's Body. The consecrated wine is Christ's Blood. Jesus Christ, whole and entire, is fully present under each form of the Eucharist. He is substantially present in a way that is entirely unique. This happens by the power of the Holy Spirit through the ministry of the priest's acting in the person of Christ during the Eucharistic Prayer.
- "As sacrifice, the Eucharist is also offered in reparation for the sins of the living and the dead and to obtain spiritual and temporal benefits from God" (CCC, no. 1414).
- To receive Communion, one should be in the state of grace. A person conscious of mortal sin may not receive Communion until absolved from the sin in the Sacrament of Penance (see 1 Cor 11:27-29).
- A person who is conscious of grave sin but has no opportunity for sacramental confession may receive Communion for a serious reason; in such a case, the person must first make an act of perfect contrition and have the intention of confessing as soon as possible (cf. CIC, can. 916).
- The fruits of Holy Communion include a deeper union with Christ, a closer identity with all the faithful, a commitment to the poor, and a pledge of future glory.
- The faithful are urged to receive Communion at Mass. The Church obliges them to do so at least once a year during the Easter season.
- Once Communion has been distributed, the remaining hosts are placed in the tabernacle to provide Communion for the sick and *Viaticum* for the dying and also to provide opportunity for prayer and worship before Christ in his Real Presence.

## MEDITATION

O Jesus, joy of loving hearts,  
the fount of life and my true light,  
We seek the peace your love imparts  
and stand rejoicing in your sight.

We taste in you my living bread  
and long to feast upon you still.  
We drink of you my fountain head,  
my thirsting soul to quench and fill.

For you my thirsting spirit yearns,  
where'er our changing lot is cast;  
Glad when your presence we discern,  
blest when our faith can hold you fast.

O Jesus ever with us stay;  
make all our moments calm and bright.  
O chase the night of sin away;  
shed o'er the world your holy light.

—Attributed to St. Bernard of Clairvaux,  
*Jesu Dulcedo Cordium*

(*Jesus Joy of Loving Hearts*),

trans. Ray Palmer, *Worship Hymnal*, Third Edition, 605

## PRAYER

### Anima Christi

Soul of Christ, be my sanctification.  
Body of Christ, be my salvation.  
Blood of Christ, fill all my veins.  
Water of Christ's side, wash out my stains.  
Passion of Christ, my comfort be.  
O good Jesu, listen to me.  
In Thy wounds I fain would hide,  
N'er to be parted from Thy side,  
Guard me, should the foe assail me.  
Call me when my life shall fail me.  
Bid me come to Thee above,  
With Thy saints to sing Thy love,  
World without end. Amen.

## **Guidelines for the Reception of Communion**

On November 14, 1996, the National Conference of Catholic Bishops (now the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops) approved the following guidelines on the reception of Communion. The guidelines seek to remind all those who may attend Catholic liturgies of the present discipline of the Church with regard to the sharing of Eucharistic communion.

### *For Catholics*

As Catholics, we fully participate in the celebration of the Eucharist when we receive Holy Communion. We are encouraged to receive Communion devoutly and frequently. In order to be properly disposed to receive Communion, participants should be conscious of no grave sin and normally should have fasted for one hour. A person who is conscious of grave sin is not to receive the Body and Blood of the Lord without prior sacramental confession except for a grave reason where there is no opportunity for confession. In this case the person is to be mindful of the obligation to make an act of perfect contrition, including the intention of confessing as soon as possible (CIC, can. 916). A frequent reception of the Sacrament of Penance is encouraged for all.

### *For Our Fellow Christians*

We welcome our fellow Christians to this celebration of the Eucharist as our brothers and sisters. We pray that our common baptism and the action of the Holy Spirit in this Eucharist will draw us closer to one another and begin to dispel the sad divisions which separate us. We pray that these will lessen and finally disappear, in keeping with Christ's prayer for us "that they all may be one" (Jn 17:21).

Because Catholics believe that the celebration of the Eucharist is a sign of the reality of the oneness of faith, life and worship, members of those churches with whom we are not yet fully united are ordinarily not admitted to Holy Communion. Eucharistic sharing in exceptional circumstances by other Christians requires permission according to the directives of the diocesan bishop and the provisions of canon law (CIC, can. 844

§4). Members of the Orthodox Churches, the Assyrian Church of the East, and the Polish National Catholic Church are urged to respect the discipline of their own Churches. According to Roman Catholic discipline, the Code of Canon Law does not object to the reception of communion by Christians of these Churches (CIC, can. 844 §3).

*For Those Not Receiving Holy Communion*

All who are not receiving Holy Communion are encouraged to express in their hearts a prayerful desire for unity with the Lord Jesus and with one another.

*For Non-Christians*

We also welcome to this celebration those who do not share our faith in Jesus Christ. While we cannot admit them to Holy Communion, we ask them to offer their prayers for the peace and unity of the human family.



All my other senses, cannot now perceive,  
But my hearing, taught by faith, always will believe:  
I accept whatever God the Son has said:  
Those who hear the Word of God, by the truth are fed.

—St. Thomas Aquinas, *Adoro Te Devote*  
(*God with Hidden Majesty*),  
trans. Anthony G. Petti

# 18 SACRAMENT OF PENANCE AND RECONCILIATION: GOD IS RICH IN MERCY

---

IN THIS SACRAMENT OF HEALING WE ARE  
RECONCILED TO GOD AND THE CHURCH  
—CCC, NOS. 1420-1498

## AUGUSTINE: THE SINNER WHO BECAME A SAINT



Very few men have had such an impact on Christianity as St. Augustine. He was born in AD 354 in North Africa, at that time a strong and dynamic Christian region. His father was a prominent pagan, but his mother, Monica, was a devout Christian. She intended that Augustine be baptized, but in his adolescence he distanced himself from the Church and did not want to be baptized. He studied Latin literature and became a follower of an esoteric philosophy known as Manichaeism.

He had a mistress with whom he lived for fifteen years. She bore him a son, but he later broke off with her while living in Milan, where they had gone because he had been given a teaching position there. He found himself gradually more attracted to Christianity as he listened to the preaching of St. Ambrose, the bishop of Milan. But he resisted conversion, though his mother prayed persistently for him.

In a book entitled *The Confessions*, written in his later years as a spiritual and theological reflection on his life, Augustine describes the final steps to his conversion. He had felt the tension between attachment to his

sinful ways and attraction to Christ and the Gospel. One day in the year 386, he went crying into the garden of the house where he was staying with friends. He was weeping because of his inability to make a decision for conversion. But then he heard the voice of a child from a neighboring house singing the refrain, "Take it and read, take it and read." He picked up the Letters of St. Paul and read the first passage his eyes fell upon: "not in orgies and drunkenness, not in promiscuity and licentiousness, not in rivalry and jealousy. But put on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make no provision for the desires of the flesh" (Rom 13:13-14). Augustine recognized the grace of God in this reading and embraced conversion.

He was baptized by St. Ambrose in 387 and returned to North Africa in 388. In 391, while visiting the town of Hippo, he was urged by the Christian population to become a priest; he accepted, though reluctantly. In 395 he became bishop of Hippo. As a Christian, priest, and bishop, he wrote numerous books to explain and defend Christian doctrine. His homilies and sermons were written down, and they witness to the depth and power of his preaching. He died in 430.

Augustine knew the damaging effects of sin. In *The Confessions*, he admits his own sinfulness even as a boy: "Many and many a time I lied to my tutor, my masters, and my parents, because I wanted to play games or watch some futile show or was impatient to imitate what I saw on the stage." But he also experienced the greater power of grace, of God's enabling us to overcome sin and accept the Gospel of his Son. St. Augustine knew God's mercy in the forgiveness of sins gained for us by Jesus Christ. Today Catholics encounter this same mercy and forgiveness in the Sacrament of Penance.



## THE FORGIVENESS OF SINS

*The Lord Jesus Christ, physician of our souls and our bodies . . . has willed that his Church continue, in the power of the Holy Spirit, his work of healing and salvation.*

Because of human weakness, the new life in Christ, which we receive in the Sacraments of Initiation, is often threatened by sin. Moreover, we all face sickness and death. God constantly reaches out to us to reconcile ourselves to him. Through the gifts of the Church, Jesus, our divine physician, has given us the Sacraments of Healing—Penance and Reconciliation and Anointing of the Sick—for the forgiveness of sins and the ministry to the sick and the dying.

Sins committed after Baptism are forgiven in the Sacrament of Penance and Reconciliation, also called the Sacrament of Forgiveness, Confession, and Conversion. We will refer to the Sacrament both as Penance and as Reconciliation, using the terms interchangeably.

Divine mercy and conversion from sin are constant themes in Scripture. God's mercy makes possible the repentance of the sinner and the forgiveness of sin. Time and again in the Old Testament, the sins of the people are met with God's outreach of mercy and the invitation to be healed and return to a covenant relationship. Even when the beloved King David lied, committed adultery, and caused the death of an innocent man, he was not beyond God's mercy, to which he had a humble recourse. Psalm 51 gives us words to express the kind of contrition and to trust in God's forgiveness that David felt after committing these sins.

## JESUS FORGAVE SINS

The Gospels provide numerous examples of Christ's mission to forgive sins. When a paralytic was lowered through the roof of a house and placed at his feet, Christ first forgave the man's sins and then cured his affliction (cf. Lk 5:17-26). When a sinful woman knelt at his feet in the house of Simon the Pharisee, Jesus forgave her sins because she had "loved much," unlike the Pharisee, who had little insight into his own sinfulness (cf. Lk 7:36-50). Christ's parable of the prodigal son illustrates the sublime meaning of his earthly ministry, which is to forgive sins, reconcile people to God, and lead us to true happiness (cf. Lk 15:11-32).

Jesus died on the Cross and rose from the dead to reconcile sinful people with God through the forgiveness of sins and the gift of new life with the Triune God. Even on the Cross, he forgave those who were killing him and had mercy on the repentant thief.

Only God can forgive our sins. But Jesus willed that the Church should be his instrument of forgiveness on earth. On Easter night the Risen Christ imparted to his Apostles his own power to forgive sins. He breathed on them, imparting the promised Holy Spirit, and said, “Peace be with you.” Jesus was actually filling them with peace that is rooted in friendship with God. But he did more. He shared with them his own merciful mission. He breathed on them a second time and said,

As the Father has sent me, so I send you. . . . Receive the holy Spirit. Whose sins you forgive are forgiven them, and whose sins you retain are retained. (Jn 20:21-23)

That night Jesus gave the Church the ministry of the forgiveness of sins through the Apostles (cf. CCC, no. 1461). By the Sacrament of Holy Orders, bishops and priests continue this ministry to forgive sins “in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.” In this Sacrament, the priest acts in the person of Christ, the Head of the Church, to reconcile the sinner to both God and the Church. “When he celebrates the Sacrament of Penance, the priest is fulfilling the ministry of the Good Shepherd who seeks the lost sheep. . . . The priest is the sign and instrument of God’s merciful love for the sinner” (CCC, no. 1465).

The Sacrament of Penance involves a conversion of our hearts to God, a confession of sins to a priest, the forgiveness of our sins, a penance to make some amends for sin, and reconciliation with God and the Church. For those who commit mortal sin after Baptism, this Sacrament is necessary for being reconciled to God and the Church.

## CONVERSION, CONFESSION, FORGIVENESS

The Sacrament of Penance must be seen within the context of conversion from sin and a turn to God. Peter wept bitterly over his triple denial of Christ but received the grace of conversion and expressed it with a three-fold confession of love for Jesus (cf. Lk 22:54-62; Jn 21:15-19). Paul was converted from persecuting Christians to becoming one of the greatest disciples of Christ who ever lived (cf. Acts 9:1-31). These moments of conversion were only the beginning of their lifelong commitment to living in fidelity to the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

Sin harms our relationship with God and damages our communion with the Church. Conversion of heart is the beginning of our journey back to God. Liturgically this happens in the Sacrament of Penance. In the history of the Church, this Sacrament has been celebrated in different ways. Beneath the changes, there have always been two essentials: the acts of the penitent and the acts of Christ through the ministry of the Church. Both go hand in hand. Conversion must involve a change of heart as well as a change of actions. Neither is possible without God's grace.

## THE LITURGY OF THE SACRAMENT OF PENANCE

In the Liturgy of Penance, the elements are ordinarily these: a greeting and blessing from the priest, a reading from Scripture, the confession of sins, the giving and accepting of a penance, an act of contrition, the priest's absolution, a proclamation of praise of God, and a dismissal. We offer here a description of the acts of the penitent and that of the priest.

### Contrition

In order to be forgiven, we need to have sorrow for our sins. This means turning away from evil and turning to God. It includes the determination to avoid such sins in the future. Such sins may either be mortal or venial.

Sins are rightly evaluated according to their gravity. The distinction between mortal and venial sin, already evident in Scripture (cf. 1 Jn 5:16-17), became part of the tradition of the Church. It is corroborated by human experience. (CCC, no. 1854)

Mortal sin destroys charity in the heart of man by a grave violation of God's law; it turns man away from God, who is his ultimate end and beatitude, by preferring an inferior good to him. Venial sin allows charity to subsist, even though it offends and wounds it. (CCC, no. 1855)

Contrition that arises from the love of God above all else is called "perfect contrition." This loving sorrow remits venial sins and even mor-

tal sins so long as we resolve to confess them as soon as possible. When other motives, such as the ugliness of sin or fear of damnation, bring us to confession, this is called “imperfect contrition,” which is sufficient for forgiveness in the Sacrament. The Holy Spirit moves us in either case and initiates the conversion.

## Confession

Confession liberates us from sins that trouble our hearts and makes it possible to be reconciled to God and others. We are asked to look into our souls and, with an honest and unblinking gaze, identify our sins. This opens our minds and hearts to God, moves us toward communion with the Church, and offers us a new future.

In confession, by naming our sins before the priest, who represents Christ, we face our failings more honestly and accept responsibility for our sins. It is also in confession that a priest and penitent can work together to find the direction needed for the penitent to grow spiritually and to avoid sin in the future (cf. CCC, nos. 1455, 1456).

When we have examined our consciences and have taken responsibility for our sins, we then confess them to the priest. We must confess all our mortal sins in kind and number. The Church strongly recommends confessing venial sins, though this is not strictly necessary. In the Latin Church, children must go to confession before making their First Communion.

There are three rites of Reconciliation: the rite for the Reconciliation of individual penitents; the rite for the Reconciliation of several penitents with individual confession and absolution; and the rite of Reconciliation of penitents with general confession and absolution.

In the first rite, which is the most familiar, the penitent goes to a reconciliation room or a traditional confessional and either confesses face to face with the priest or kneels behind a screen to confess the sins. In the second rite, which usually happens in Advent or Lent, there is a communal service during which the Scripture is read and a homily is given. This is followed by individual confession and individual absolution.

General confession and absolution is the third rite and is used only in extraordinary situations, danger of death, or an insufficient number of confessors so that “penitents would be deprived of sacramental grace

## WHAT IS THIS SACRAMENT CALLED?

It is called the Sacrament of Conversion because it makes sacramentally present Jesus' call to conversion, the first step in returning to the Father from whom one has strayed by sin. It is called the Sacrament of Penance, since it consecrates the Christian sinner's personal and ecclesial steps of conversion, penance, and satisfaction. It is called the Sacrament of Confession since the disclosure or confession of sins is an essential element of this Sacrament. In a profound sense, it is also a "confession"—acknowledgment and praise—of the holiness of God and of his mercy toward sinful man. It is called the Sacrament of Forgiveness, since by the priest's sacramental absolution, God grants the penitent "pardon and peace." It is called the Sacrament of Reconciliation because it imparts to the sinner the love of God who reconciles: "Be reconciled to God" (2 Cor 5:20). He who lives by God's merciful love is ready to respond to the Lord's call: "Go, first be reconciled to your brother." (CCC, nos. 1423-1424, citing Mt 5:24)

or holy communion for a long period of time through no fault of their own" (cf. CIC, can. 961). General absolution involves one priest's giving absolution to a group of people, who do not make individual confessions to a priest. Those penitents guilty of serious or grave sin are expected to make an individual confession as soon as possible but certainly within a year of receiving general absolution. Judgment as to whether the conditions for general absolution are present is a matter not for the confessor, but for the diocesan bishop to determine under the guidance of norms established by the Holy See.

### Absolution from the Priest

After we confess our sins to the priest, we are given some encouragement from the priest for our moral and spiritual growth. The priest then gives us a penance and asks us to say an Act of Contrition. Then the priest

grants absolution, that is, he sets us free from our sins, using the power that Christ entrusted to the Church and by which he pardons the sins of the penitent (cf. CCC, no. 1424). In the Latin Church, the priest, representing Christ and bringing us his forgiveness, absolves us from our sins with these words:

God the Father of mercies, through the death and resurrection of his Son, has reconciled the world to himself, and sent the Holy Spirit among us for the forgiveness of sins; through the ministry of the Church may God give you pardon and peace, and I absolve you from your sins in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.

### Satisfaction

“Absolution takes away sin, but does not remedy all the disorders sin has caused” (CCC, no. 1459). It is obvious that we need to repair certain damages that our sins have caused, such as restoring the reputation of someone we have injured, returning money that we have stolen, or rectifying an injustice. Sin also weakens the relationship we have with God and others. Our inner life is harmed by sin and needs restoration.

This is the reason for acts of penance and satisfaction for sins. The penance given by the priest helps us to begin making satisfaction for our sins. Just as when we get physically out of shape, we need to take up some exercise, so also when the soul is morally out of shape, there is the challenge to adopt spiritual exercises that will restore it. Obviously, this is always done in cooperation with God’s graces, which are essential for the healing.

Absolution takes away sin, but it does not remedy all the disorders that sin has caused. Raised up from sin, the sinner must still recover his full spiritual health by doing something more to make amends for sin: he must “make satisfaction for” or “expiate” his sins. This satisfaction is called “penance.” (CCC, no. 1459)

## FROM THE CATECHISM

### **1. How can we prepare for the Sacrament of Penance?**

The reception of this sacrament ought to be prepared for by an examination of conscience made in the light of the Word of God. The passages best suited to this can be found in the Ten Commandments, the moral catechesis of the Gospels and the apostolic Letters, such as the Sermon on the Mount and apostolic teaching. (CCC, no. 1454)

### **2. What is the seal of Confession?**

The Church declares that every priest who hears confessions is bound under very severe penalties to keep absolute secrecy regarding the sins that his penitents have confessed to him. He can make no use of knowledge that confession gives him about penitents' lives. This secret, which admits of no exceptions, is called the "sacramental seal," because what the penitent has made known to the priest remains "sealed" by the sacrament. (CCC, no. 1467)

### **3. How does reception of the Sacrament of Reconciliation anticipate a person's judgment before God?**

In this sacrament, the sinner, placing himself before the merciful judgment of God, anticipates in a certain way the judgment to which he will be subjected at the end of his earthly life. For it is now, in this life, that we are offered the choice between life and death, and it is only by the road of conversion that we can enter the Kingdom, from which one is excluded by grave sin. In converting to Christ through penance and faith, the sinner passes from death to life and "does not come into judgment." (CCC, no. 1470, citing Jn 5:24)

## EFFECTS OF THE SACRAMENT

The Sacrament of Penance reconciles us with God. “The whole power of the sacrament of Penance consists in restoring us to God’s grace and joining us with him in an intimate friendship” (CCC, no. 1468).

This Sacrament also reconciles us with the Church. Sin should never be understood as a private or personal matter, because it harms our relationship with others and may even break our loving communion with the Church. The Sacrament of Penance repairs this break and has a renewing effect on the vitality of the Church itself.

In this Sacrament, the penitent receives the merciful judgment of God and is engaged on the journey of conversion that leads to future life with God. The Church also recommends that a person go regularly to confession, even if only for venial sins. This is because “the regular confession of our venial sins helps us form our consciences, fight against evil tendencies, let ourselves be healed by Christ and progress in the life of the Spirit” (CCC, no. 1458).

## RECOGNIZE SIN—PRAISE GOD’S MERCY

The Sacrament of Penance is an experience of the gift of God’s boundless mercy. Not only does it free us from our sins but it also challenges us to have the same kind of compassion and forgiveness for those who sin against us. We are liberated to be forgivers. We obtain new insight into the words of the Prayer of St. Francis: “It is in pardoning that we are pardoned.”

By the help of God’s grace, our call to holiness will be clearer when we recover an awareness of the reality of sin and evil in the world and in our own souls. Scripture will be enormously helpful in this since it reveals sin and evil clearly and fearlessly. Scriptural realism does not hesitate to pronounce judgment on the good and evil that affects our lives. The New Testament is filled with calls to conversion and repentance, which need to be heard in our culture today.

If we say, “We are without sin,” we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us. If we acknowledge our sins, he is faithful and

just and will forgive our sins and cleanse us from every wrongdoing. (1 Jn 1:8-9)

In our churches, we behold Jesus nailed to the Cross, an image that reminds us of his painful sacrifice to bring about the forgiveness of all our sins and guilt. If there were no sin, Jesus would not have suffered for our redemption. Each time we see the crucifix, we can reflect on the infinite mercy of God, who saves us through the reconciling act of Jesus.

Despite society's efforts to downplay the reality of sin, there is an instinctive recognition of its existence. Children generally know, even when not told, when they have done something morally wrong. Adults readily admit the evil of terrorism, unjust war, lies, unfair treatment of people, and similar matters. Society as a whole must also learn to admit the evil of abortion, physician-assisted suicide, and obtaining stem cells from embryos, which results in the death of embryonic human life. Denying evil corrupts us spiritually and psychologically. Rationalizing our own evil is even more destructive.

Jesus laid the foundation for the Sacrament of Penance during his ministry and confirmed it after his Resurrection. When Peter asked the number of times a person should forgive, Jesus told him that there should be no limit to forgiving. Jesus forgave Peter his triple denial, showed mercy to the woman taken in adultery, forgave the thief on the cross, and continually witnessed the mercy of God.

Jesus entrusted the ministry of reconciliation to the Church. The Sacrament of Penance is God's gift to us so that any sin committed after Baptism can be forgiven. In confession we have the opportunity to repent and recover the grace of friendship with God. It is a holy moment in which we place ourselves in his presence and honestly acknowledge our sins, especially mortal sins. With absolution, we are reconciled to God and the Church. The Sacrament helps us stay close to the truth that we cannot live without God. "In him we live and move and have our being" (Acts 17:28). While all the Sacraments bring us an experience of the mercy that comes from Christ's dying and rising, it is the Sacrament of Reconciliation that is the unique Sacrament of mercy.

## INDULGENCES

Every sin has consequences. It disrupts our communion with God and the Church, weakens our ability to resist temptation, and hurts others. The necessity of healing these consequences, once the sin itself has been forgiven, is called temporal punishment. Prayer, fasting, almsgiving, and other works of charity can take away entirely or diminish this temporal punishment. Because of the fullness of redemption obtained for us by Christ, the Church attaches to certain prayers and actions an *indulgence* or pardon, that is, the full or partial remission of temporal punishment due to sin. Christ, acting through the Church, brings about the healing of the consequences of sin when an individual uses such a prayer or engages in such an action.

### FOR DISCUSSION

1. What is your attitude to confession today? How would you explain the Sacrament of Reconciliation to people of other faiths?
2. How can Scripture help you discern the reality of sin in the world? Why do we confess our sins to a priest? Why is it necessary to be reconciled to the Church as well as to God?
3. Why do you think that people need to have the burden of sin and guilt lifted from their hearts? Why is it essential to understand the mission of Jesus Christ as the Savior? How can you commit yourself to a lifelong process of moral and spiritual conversion?

### DOCTRINAL STATEMENTS

- On Easter night Jesus appeared to the Apostles, greeted them with peace, and breathed on them, saying, “Receive the holy Spirit. Whose sins you forgive are forgiven, and whose sins you retain are retained” (Jn 20:22-23).
- “The Creed links ‘the forgiveness of sins’ with its profession of faith in the Holy Spirit, for the risen Christ entrusted to the apostles the

power to forgive sins when he gave them the Holy Spirit” (CCC, no. 984).

- Sins committed before Baptism are forgiven by Baptism. Sins committed after Baptism are forgiven in the Sacrament of Penance and Reconciliation, also called the Sacrament of Forgiveness, Confession, and Conversion.
- Sin wounds our relationship with God and others and our human dignity. Faith reveals to us the destructive force of sin in our lives and the world.
- The path back to God after sin is a process of conversion initiated by his grace. The return to God includes sorrow for sin and the resolve to sin no more.
- In the Sacrament of Penance and Reconciliation, the acts of the penitent are contrition, confession, and satisfaction. The act of the priest is absolution for the sins of the penitent.
- Perfect contrition arises from love for God; imperfect contrition results from other motives.
- The penitent, after an examination of conscience, needs to confess all mortal sins. While it is not necessary to confess venial sins, the Church strongly recommends this practice.
- The priest proposes a penance to the penitent to repair the harm due to sin and to restore the penitent’s commitment to be a disciple of Christ.
- Individual confession of grave sins according to kind and number is the only ordinary way of receiving absolution and reconciliation with God and the Church.
- The effects of the Sacrament of Penance and Reconciliation include reconciliation with God and the Church, peace of conscience and spiritual consolation, the remission of eternal punishment due to mortal sin as well as some degree of temporal punishments, and a greater power to face spiritual challenges (cf. CCC, no. 1496).
- “Through indulgences the faithful can obtain the remission of temporal punishment resulting from sin, for themselves and also for the souls in Purgatory” (CCC, no. 1498).

## MEDITATION

### **A Paraphrasing of the Parable of the Prodigal Son (Also Known as the Parable of the Forgiving Father: Lk 15:11-22)**

A man had two sons. The younger son said to his father, “Father, give me my inheritance now.” The father agreed, giving his son the inheritance that was due to him. Upon receiving it, the son traveled to a foreign country, where he wasted his money on sinful pleasures. Totally broke, he found himself in a land facing its own financial woes because of a famine. A swineherd gave him a job taking care of the pigs. So small were his wages that he could not buy enough food to feed himself. He yearned to eat the food given to the pigs but was not allowed to.

Hitting rock bottom, he came to his senses, realizing that his father’s workers had plenty to eat while he was starving. He decided to go home, apologize to his father and to God for his sins, declare that he was unworthy to be called his father’s son, and ask for a job on the estate.

Meanwhile, the father sorely missed his young son. Each day he stood on a hill, peering into the distance, aching to see his son and hoping he would come home. Then one day he saw his son coming toward him. He ran to his son, hugged and kissed him, and praised God for his son’s return. With tears of joy and much embracing, the father smothered the repentant words of his son.

The father jubilantly called out to his servants to clothe his son in the best robe and to put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet. He ordered the fattened calf to be slain and roasted for a feast. Why? “Because this son of mine was dead and has come to life again; he was lost and has been found” (Lk 15:24).

The older son heard the excitement and asked what it was about. When he heard the reason, he was furious. Pouting, he refused even to enter the house. The father came out and pleaded with him to come inside and celebrate the homecoming of his younger brother. The older son argued that his younger brother did not deserve this party. He had wasted his inheritance. Why should he who had been the good and faithful son—and never had a party like this given in his honor—be humili-

ated by experiencing the festive meal, joyous music, and enthusiastic welcome for such a good-for-nothing brother?

The father replied that the older son had absolute security and the utmost love and regard of his father. Everything the father owned belonged to him. “My son, be forgiving and generous of heart. Your brother was dead and is now alive. We must celebrate. Rejoice in his return to us and this home of love.”

Usually this story is named after the prodigal son who wasted his inheritance. But it could just as well be entitled “The Forgiving Father,” as he has a heart of sheer generosity and spends his love lavishly on forgiving and welcoming his son back home. In scriptural terms, the son represents a sinner in need of forgiveness who is moved to repent, confess his sin, and humble himself before God.

The father in the story represents God’s immense compassion, rich in mercy and ever willing to search out sinners and offer them the forgiveness that brings them home. The story encourages us to trust in God the Father’s love and forgiveness, which we receive in the Sacrament of Reconciliation.

## PRAYER

### *An Act of Contrition (a traditional version)*

O my God, I am heartily sorry for having offended thee  
and I detest all my sins, because of thy just punishments,  
but most of all because they offend thee, my God,  
who are all good and worthy of all my love.  
I firmly resolve, with the help of thy grace,  
to sin no more and to avoid the near occasions of sin. Amen.

### *Prayer of the Penitent (Rite of Penance)*

Lord Jesus, Son of God  
Have mercy on me, a sinner.



A clean heart create for me, God.