

Sacramental Origins

How did the practices and rituals we associate with sacraments originate? Historical records are not definitive, but the records that we do have, even the earliest, come from a time when these practices were already established and were a part of the community's religious inheritance.

Scripture

Some of the earliest records of the Christian community are the letters of the apostle Paul to various churches between 50 and 60 A.D. They do not mention the word 'sacraments' but do mention various actions or rituals performed by the first Christians such as **baptism, the laying on of hands, sharing of the Lord's supper, anointing the sick and appointing leaders of the community.** The earliest followers of Jesus performed these rituals that they believed were 'from the Lord' or approved by God, and they repeated them in roughly the same manner each time.

For example, the early Christians ate some meals in common, and during the meal they would share bread and wine in memory of Jesus, as he had told them to do (1 Cor 11:23-27). And it was a sacramental sharing, for through it they experienced their oneness with the Lord (1 Cor. 10: 16-17). They lived that unity every day, sharing their belongings and praying together at temple and at home (Acts 3:42-47;4:32-35). The apostles' preaching after their Pentecost experience also tended to follow a set pattern. It had a profound effect on many people, and it was often followed by a ritual washing which both symbolized and solidified the change that they felt in their hearts (Acts 2:37-41; 8:34-39). The meaning that this ritual washing (baptism) expressed was their acceptance of the message that they had heard, and their unity with the death and resurrection of Christ through whom they died to their sinful ways and were reborn into a new life (Acts 8:12-13; 16: 32-34).

For many of them, it was indeed the start of a new life. Salvation was real to them; what they were saved from was the way they used to live, and they experienced salvation both in the conversion of their own attitudes and in the shared life of their newly found community.

Probably the most amazingly effective sacramental ritual in the early Church was the **laying on of hands**, but to understand what it meant it is necessary to go back a step.

The book of Acts describes how, shortly after Christ's last appearance, some of his followers underwent a religious experience that totally transformed their lives. It was the Jewish feast of Pentecost, but since then it has also become the Christian feast of Pentecost, the coming of the Holy Spirit, the "birthday of the church."

From a purely historical standpoint it is hard to say exactly what that experience was, but the author of Acts says that those who were in the room heard what

sounded like a strong wind, and then something like tongues of fire appeared over each of their heads. Suddenly they felt themselves changed inwardly, filled as it were with a new spirit, that same spirit with which Jesus had been filled. They believed it was the spirit of God. And from their viewpoint, what else could it be? What human power could fill them with such exuberance, such hope, such courage in the face of what they saw happen to their master? What human power could make them start uttering what they felt in languages they had never heard before?

What was even more astonishing to them was that they could bring that spirit to others.

They began to tell others their good news about Jesus, and after the listeners would accept Jesus as Lord and be baptized in his name, they would lay their hands on them and ask the Holy Spirit to fill those persons as well. The converts would then have an experience of being filled with a new spirit, and sometimes even begin to praise God in strange languages. Usually this imposition of hands would take place immediately after baptism.

Undoubtedly, it was a sacramental action, for it was a symbol of something that could not be seen, of the spirit's being "poured forth" upon the converts. And it was an effective symbol, for its effects could be seen in their behavior, as well as felt by them personally. The meaning that it expressed was the imparting of the Holy Spirit, the spirit of love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control (Gal 5:22-23).

It was the 'confirmation' of their acceptance by God, for the Father gave them the same interior spirit that he had given to his son, Jesus.

The Word "Sacrament"

The term 'sacrament' comes from the Latin word *sacramentum*. In Roman times, it meant an oath of allegiance made by soldiers to their commander and the gods of Rome which involved a religious ceremony in a sacred place. Tertullian, a Christian writer in the second century, borrowed the term and used it to talk to his Roman contemporaries about the ceremony of Christian initiation.

He explained that baptism was something like the *sacramentum* administered to new recruits—it was a ritual through which people began a new life of service to God.

He would actually watch soldiers in boot camp. As the training was completed, Caesar would gather them all together and ask them to take an oath, a sacramentum. "Vow to me, in good times and bad, in sickness and in health, your allegiance." They would respond, "Caesar, we will be loyal soldiers to you, even to death for you. We will go to war for you...etc." Once they made this oath, they were branded as soldiers of Caesar and there was no way out. Except death. The vow was for life. Tertullian borrowed the term and concept from Roman military practice when he was examining what Christians were doing in the waters of death and enlightenment.

Augustine - A Visible Sign of Invisible Grace

By the fifth century, any sacred symbol or ceremony could be called a sacrament. Although the word was still used primarily in regard to the ceremony of initiation, it could also be applied to blessings, liturgical feasts, and holy objects. Augustine defined sacrament as “a sign of a sacred reality,” a “visible sign of invisible grace,” “an outward sign instituted by Christ to give grace.” He noted that according to this general definition anything in the world could be considered a sacrament since all of creation was a sign of God.

By the twelfth century, Christian usage became more restricted and was applied only to the seven church rituals known to Catholics as *the* sacraments. After the sixteenth century the use of the word was restricted still further by those Protestants who limited the number of sacraments to fewer than seven.

The Baltimore Catechism definition, “an outward sign instituted by Christ to give grace” comes from Augustine and the definition still works fairly well. However, with our renewed theology and reformed liturgical rites, it just doesn’t go far enough. Today we have come to see sacraments in a much broader sense. We have come to see them more like Augustine saw them.

The actual historical process of sacramental experience and theology has not been a neat and simple straight-line development. There have been dead ends, radical turning points, backtracking, and even some going around in circles.

Change

It is difficult to trace with precision how the Church, acting under the direction of the Holy Spirit, elaborated the present sacramental rituals and beliefs. But by the early twentieth century, it was generally accepted that many of the Roman church’s sacramental beliefs and practices had indeed changed through the years.

Changed practices presented little difficulty. Catholics believed the church was entitled to adapt forms of worship to the customs of different people, provided that nothing essential was altered. And changed teachings could be understood as doctrinal development. Catholics believed that the church, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, was becoming more aware of the fullness of divine revelation. So what was perhaps only implicit in scripture could in the course of time become an explicit part of the church’s doctrines. In short, doctrinal development was considered to be an evolution from less perfect to more perfect, with the Catholic Church finally arriving at the best understanding of the sacraments with the pronouncements of the Council of Trent (16th c.)—the norm for sacraments for subsequent centuries.

The Broader Perspective of Sacraments

And development goes on. Not long ago, the Catholic understanding of the word “sacrament” referred exclusively to seven liturgical rites. Since the Second Vatican Council (1960s), however, Catholic theologians have expanded the

meaning of the term. In the broad sense, a sacramental experience is an encounter with God through human experience which somehow changes us. And virtually any human experience can provide us with such an encounter.

The Old Testament is full of sacramental events touching the lives of the Hebrew people long before the Church defined or categorized sacraments, e.g., the dove returning to Noah carrying an olive branch, the flood, and Creation. Through the Exodus event (escape of the Israelites from slavery in Egypt), they came to recognize Yahweh in an entirely new way, and their whole history was altered. As a result, they told and retold the story, **not just in words but in symbols and actions** through their Passover ritual.

Christian Sacraments

“What was visible in the Lord has passed over into the sacraments.”
Pope Leo the Great (440-61 AD)

The Church’s seven ritual sacraments come from Jesus’ life and actions, and his values and teachings. He transformed those actions (baptism, breaking bread,) and the ordinary human values (forgiveness, concern for the sick, marriage and service) into spiritual values by helping people see God’s love made visible through the living of those values. Their encounter with Jesus changed them, and they shared the story of that transformation (like the Hebrews), not just with words and stories, but with symbolic action.

They told the story of Jesus, but also lived it. Like Jesus, they went into the waters of Baptism to symbolize their new life. They broke bread and shared it as a symbol of God’s love and care for them, and their love and care for each other. They prayed for each other, laid hands on each other, healed and forgave—just as they had seen Jesus break bread, lay hands on, heal and forgive. Thus the Church’s seven sacraments were born, even though they may not yet have been enumerated or named. Out of that birth comes the beginning of the definition with which most of us grew up.

Definition of Sacrament Unpacked

1) “**A sacrament is an outward sign**” – a **SIGN** *points out* from itself to something else. E.g., a red light means stop, it has one single meaning and usually an arbitrary one.

But sacraments are more than “outward signs,” they are **SYMBOLS** which have multiple meanings which *point into themselves, into their own depth* to express what cannot be expressed in any other way. They bring us in touch with the familiar and mysterious simultaneously.

For example, a wedding ring is a symbol with multilayered meanings, e.g. it indicates the person wearing it is not single; it is also symbolic of the mystery of love between two people who become symbols for others of the mystery of the love God has for his people. Similarly the waters of Baptism symbolize life and death, washing and cleansing, and the mystery of new life out of death. The bread and wine of Eucharist are symbolic of God’s care, nourishment, love,

nurture and sacrifice for us; and of our care, sharing, love, nurture, nourishment and sacrifice for one another.

Catholic Christians should never think of the seven sacraments as apart from life. All must be appreciated as peak moments that heighten and celebrate the sacramentality of life in the world. Note that all the sacraments are symbolized by the “ordinary” of life, by bread, wine, water, oil, touch, words, gestures, and lovemaking in marriage. Each symbolizes something profoundly everyday that by the power of God’s Spirit continues the saving mission of Jesus, enacting a peak moment in the divine-human partnership. As theologian Rosemary Haughton writes, “Sacraments are extraordinary experiences of the ordinary.”

2) “Instituted by Christ.” Jesus didn’t walk along with the disciples and say, “Aha, I’ll call it Baptism, Confirmation, Matrimony...and the outward signs will be oil...water...rings, etc. The sacraments arise out of the story of Jesus’ life and actions, and flow from his values and teachings. He allowed himself to be baptized, and he broke bread and shared it—out of those special events come Baptism and Eucharist. He saw very basic values and experiences (forgiveness, concern for the sick, marriage, service) and he transformed those ordinary human values into spiritual values by helping people see God’s love made visible through the living of those values.

So while sacraments were not necessarily set forth in every detail by Jesus, they were instituted by him because, clearly, they come from him. As we celebrate the sacraments, Jesus is present to us as he was to the early Church. In Jesus we encounter God’s presence. Jesus is the one great sacrament through which all other sacraments make sense.

3) “To give grace.” Most of us grew up with the notion that the sacraments provided us with something called grace which we were somehow lacking. But grace (the self-gift of God) is already there. Because it is always present, it frequently goes unnoticed. A sacrament makes grace present for you by bringing it to your attention, by allowing you to see it. It mediates God’s grace with heightened effect. Each sacrament is a way of meeting Christ and receiving the particular grace it symbolizes, be that of initiating, empowering, sustaining, forgiving, healing, serving or bonding.

As with any gift, the gift of grace, totally free and ever present, is ours to accept or reject. Our acceptance of grace in our lives is what we express and celebrate in the sacraments.

Sacraments and the Christian Community

Sacraments happen not simply to individuals. They can be understood completely only in relation to the Body of Christ, which is the Church. This is why the new rites insist that the sacraments be celebrated in the Christian assembly, with the community present and actively participating. The richness and

effectiveness of the symbolism often depends on our degree of participation and responsiveness.

Sacraments neither begin nor end with liturgical celebration. They begin with God's love and care through Christ to us, the Church. They continue with us, the Church, and so long as we continue to live and enact God's love and care in the world—they never end.

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