

UNDERSTANDING THE SACRAMENTS



Pathways
to the Future

The Order of the Knights of St Columbanus

Foreword by Bishop Alan McGuckian

Bishop of Down and Connor



My dear brothers and sisters,

The seven sacraments are all extraordinary gifts of God. He wants to walk with us on our earthly journey and to share His life with us. The sacraments are such powerful realities that we say that God is REALLY present in each one of them. We can touch Him, hear Him and see Him in the sacraments and experience His abundant blessings. This is a very big claim, made in faith, and it takes a real effort to understand it.

This booklet has been prepared by the generosity of the Order of the Knights of St Columbanus to guide you in understanding the beauty and meaning of the sacraments. You will discover what happens during the ceremony, what the symbols and signs mean, and how each sacrament will fill your heart with God's love.

I earnestly ask that you open your heart to the power and working of the Holy Spirit and allow His gifts to bear fruit in your life, a life of Christian witness and charity towards everyone.

It is my sincere hope that through this booklet and the reception of the sacraments throughout your life, you may be drawn into a deeper relationship with the Lord who loves you dearly.

May God bless you.

+ Alan McGuckian SJ



INTRODUCTION

Father Martin Graham Adm.



The Sacraments are awesome!

They have been called “the Seven Channels of Grace” because they are seven wonderful ways in which God pours out on us all His love, His life and His blessing as we move through the years of our lives.

Our experience of the Sacraments can vary considerably. Some, such as the Eucharist and Reconciliation we may receive on a very regular basis, others such as Baptism and Confirmation we will receive only once, and yet others, such as Marriage and Holy Orders, may pass us by entirely. They are with us through our life's journey, from receiving the grace of Baptism in the first years of our life to the Anointing of the Sick towards its end. It is wonderful to know that right around the world, at every single moment of the day, people are receiving grace from the Sacraments somewhere on the Earth.

Hopefully this booklet will help explain how we receive grace from each of the different Sacraments. So, the next time you are at Mass or attending a Baptism or a wedding, you will be able to watch what is happening with a better understanding of the Sacrament being undertaken and so be able to participate more fully in these wonderful ceremonies which brings God's life and grace to us.

Father Martin Graham

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THE SACRAMENTS

In the Catholic Church there are seven Sacraments: Baptism, Penance, Holy Communion, Confirmation, Matrimony, Holy Orders and The Anointing of the Sick. These correspond with the Sacraments of the Orthodox Church, albeit sometimes under different names.

BAPTISM

For a Christian our journey through life begins at Baptism, and as a norm the Catholic Church accepts and encourages the Baptism of infants. At Baptism Original Sin is washed away and we are fully reconciled with God. At Baptism we are baptised in the name of the Holy Trinity and water is poured over our heads as a symbol of that washing away of sin and the restoration of our souls to complete purity.

Symbols used in Baptism

Water - Represents purification and the washing away of sins. During Baptism, water is poured over the head or the person is completely immersed in it.

Sacred Chrism - The most holy of the oils used in the Church. Olive oil is mixed with balsam (a sweet-smelling resin) which is consecrated by the bishop at a special Mass each year. The word Christ means the “Anointed One” and it reminds us that we are called to follow Christ in our lives. The newly-baptised is anointed on the crown of the head with Chrism after he or she has been baptised.

White Garment - The white baptismal garment symbolizes purification and new life in Christ. It represents being “clothed” in Christ and wrapped in God’s love.

Candle - The baptismal candle represents the light of Christ and the flame of faith. It is lit from the Paschal Candle.

At Baptism we are made the children of God and the heirs to Heaven. ‘I tell you solemnly, unless a man be born again of water and the Holy Spirit, he cannot enter the Kingdom of God.’ (John 3:5)

At Jesus’ Baptism by Saint John the Baptist in the River Jordan, Saint Mark tells us that the heavens were torn apart and God declared ‘This is my beloved Son’. It was a huge event as it is a huge event in the life of a Christian.

The formula for Baptism is: **N. I baptise you in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.**



RECONCILIATION

The Sacrament of Penance has many names; it is also known as Confession and Reconciliation. After Baptism it is the way through which Our Lord forgives sins and restores the soul to a state of grace. Many ask why a Priest must hear Confessions. Jesus Christ authorised the Priests of His Church to hear confessions and empowered them to forgive sins in His name.

To the Apostles, the first Bishops, Christ said, 'As the Father has sent me, so I send you...receive the Holy Spirit. Whose sins you shall forgive, they are forgiven them; and whose sins you shall retain, they are retained.' (John 20:21-23) Again He says, 'I tell you solemnly, whatsoever you shall bind on Earth shall be bound in Heaven; and whatsoever you shall loose on Earth, shall be loosed in Heaven.' (Matthew 18:18) In other words, Catholics confess their sins to Priests because Priests are God's duly authorised agents in this world, representing Him.



When Catholics confess their sins to a Priest they are, in reality, confessing to God Himself. Each night, Catholics are asked to think about what they may have done during the day and make an Act of Contrition.

Formula for Confession:

Penitent: Bless me Father for I have sinned, it is _____ since my last Confession.

Sins are then told. The Priest may then offer some words of advice and impose a Penance. The penitent then says the Act of Contrition.

O my God, I am sorry for my sins and I firmly resolve, by the help of Thy most holy grace, never to sin again. Amen.

The Act of Contrition does not have to be this version and the penitent may make up one. The Priest then gives absolution.

Priest: 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 grant 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. Amen.

Confession is now over and the penitent does the penance given.

Confession is one of the most difficult tasks for us to do. No one likes to go, no one likes to admit they have been wrong, but for many to go and to lay our sins in the Confessional is a great relief. Also, what is told to the Priest in the Confessional is protected by the Seal of Confession. The Priest **must never** disclose what he has heard even if his or another's life is in danger. It is as if he never heard it. The Seal is protected by law in many countries.



THE EUCHARIST

Holy Communion is the central Sacrament in the life of the Church and the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass is the central act of worship. Holy Communion, also known as the Most Holy Eucharist or the Most Blessed Sacrament, is the true Body, Blood, Soul and Divinity of Jesus Christ under the appearance of bread and wine.

At the Last Supper Christ said, *'This is My Body...this is My Blood'* and that is what Christ said the people must receive in order to have **Eternal Life**. *'Unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man, and drink His blood, you will not have life in you...'* (John 6).

The Apostles also believed that Christ's Body and Blood were truly present in the bread and wine.

'The chalice of benediction, which we bless, is it not the communion of the blood of Christ? And the bread, which we break, is it not partaking of the body of the Lord?' (1 Cor 10:16).

'Therefore whosoever shall eat this bread, or drink the chalice of the Lord unworthily, shall be guilty of the body and of the blood of the Lord. But let a man prove himself: and so let him eat that bread and drink of that chalice. For he that eats and drinks unworthily, eats and drinks judgement to himself, not recognising the body of the Lord.' (1 Cor 11:27-29)

Some wonder why Catholics generally receive only the Host (the wafer) at Mass and not the Precious Blood. The belief of the Church has been that it is sufficient to receive one or other as they both contain the fullness of Christ's Body and Blood. In recent times the Church has encouraged the reception of the Precious Blood to show a greater link with the Last Supper.

One practical reason for the Precious Blood not to be routinely distributed is that if the Sacred Host were to fall on the ground it can be wholly retrieved but if the Precious Blood were to be spilt it would be impossible to retrieve it all.

To understand the Catholic Church's belief in the Real Presence, read St John's Gospel, Chapter 6. Notice how the Jews walked away at Christ's statements – and He let them go. He didn't clarify His teaching as symbolic. They didn't accept His word; He wouldn't change His message to suit them because He meant exactly what He said. It was not another parable that could be rephrased.

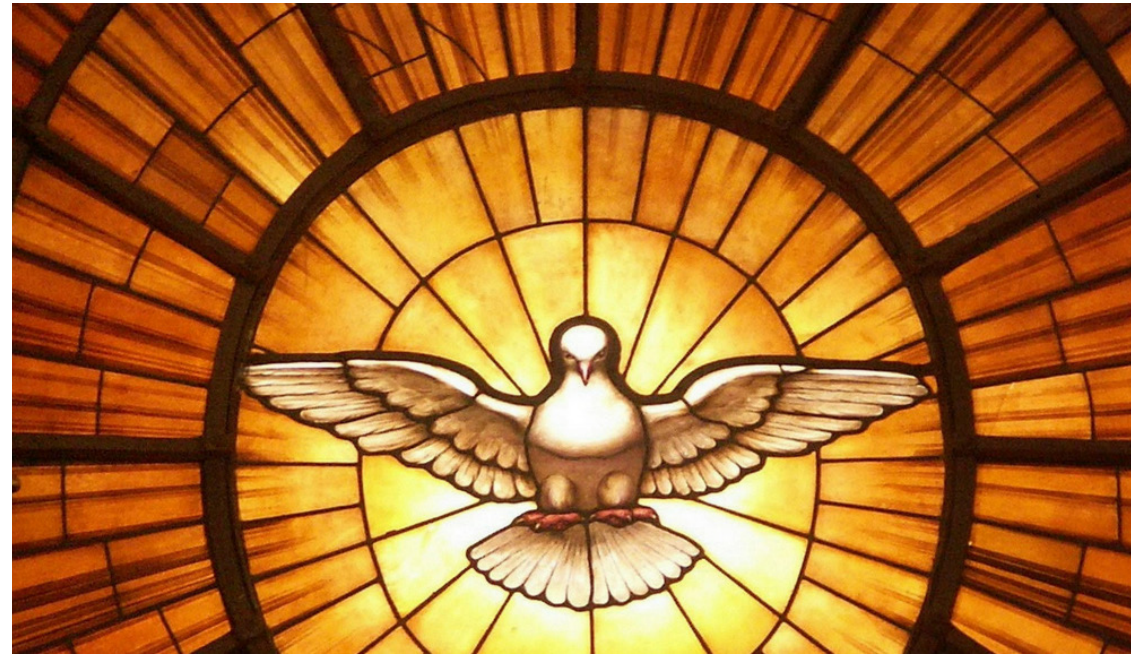


CONFIRMATION

Confirmation is the second sacrament of initiation which 'confirms' the work of our Baptism. The Letter to the Hebrews lists among the first elements of Christian instruction both the teaching about Baptism and the Laying-on of hands. This laying on of hands takes place at Confirmation.

Sacred Chrism used in this ceremony is the most sacred of all the oils, of which there are three; the Oil of the Catechumenate, used at Baptism; the Oil of the Sick; and Sacred Chrism. The Oil of the Catechumenate and the Oil of the Sick can be blessed by any priest whereas Chrism is consecrated by the Bishop at a special 'Chrism Mass' held in the presence of the Clergy of the Diocese each year in Holy Week. Where the Oil of Chrism is placed, one is never anointed there again; it is as if the Oil is never removed. After a person is baptised, he or she is anointed on the crown of the head, at Confirmation it is on the forehead. When a Priest is ordained, he is anointed on the hands.

In the Orthodox Church Confirmation is called Chrismation. An Orthodox baby will be baptised, confirmed, and receive First Holy Communion at the one time but the thought of the Western Church has been that Confirmation should be left until a person is older. Currently the age is about 11 but there are some who advocate this age being raised to 16 or 18 because Confirmation is when a baptised Christian takes responsibility for his or her faith upon themselves.



Confirmation is a very powerful ceremony which emphasises to the one being Confirmed of the duties and the obligations they take upon themselves by receiving this Sacrament.

At Confirmation, the candidate also chooses a new name. It is to be a Christian name and thought is to go into deciding that name because the name of the Saint or Martyr is chosen because of their life, their death, their faith – and the candidate asks that Saint to be their patron, their heavenly sponsor.

MATRIMONY

As a Sacrament, Marriage is a sign of the incredible love of God for us, reflected in the love of husband and wife. Properly, Christian Marriage goes by the name of The Sacrament of Matrimony. For Catholics, marriage is not just a contract; it is a covenant, based upon the covenant between Christ and His Church.

“The matrimonial covenant, by which a man and a woman establish between themselves a partnership of the whole of life, is by its nature ordered toward the good of the spouses and the procreation and education of offspring; this covenant between baptised persons has been raised by Christ the Lord to the dignity of a sacrament.”
Codex Iuris Canonici, 1055.

The Sacrament of Matrimony signifies the union of Christ and the Church. It gives spouses the grace to love each other with the love with which Christ has loved His Church; the grace of the sacrament thus perfects the human love of the spouses, strengthens their indissoluble unity and sanctifies them on the way to eternal life. Marriage is based on the consent of the contracting parties, that is, on their will to give themselves, each to the other, mutually and definitively, in order to live a covenant of faithful and fruitful love.

Since marriage establishes the couple in a public state of life in the Church, it is fitting that its celebration be public, in the framework of a liturgical celebration, before the priest, the witnesses and the assembly of the faithful.

Unity, indissolubility and openness to fertility are essential to marriage. Polygamy is incompatible with the unity of marriage; divorce separates what God has joined together; the refusal of fertility turns married life away from its supreme gift, the child.



The remarriage of persons divorced from a living, lawful spouse contravenes the plan and law of God as taught by Christ. They are not separated from the Church, but they cannot receive Holy Communion. They continue to lead Christian lives by educating their children in the Faith.

The Christian home is the place where children receive the first proclamation of the faith. For this reason the family home is rightly called ‘the domestic Church’, a community of grace and prayer, a school of human virtues and of Christian charity.

HOLY ORDERS

It is from the Sacrament of Holy Orders that the structure of the governance of the Church and the authority of the Church come. In the Catholic Church, there are three orders; Diaconate, Presbyterate and Episcopate. These three orders have been in the Church since biblical times, the first Martyr of the Christian Faith was Saint Stephen, a Deacon. The Apostles were the first Bishops and those they 'laid hands' upon became the first priests and through the laying on of hands those orders have been passed down from generation to generation to the present day.

Within the Catholic Church there are various other titles; Archdeacon, Canon, Dean, Monsignor, Archbishop, Cardinal, Patriarch and Pope. Many of these titles are honorary and one cannot have any of these titles unless one is ordained to one or all of the three orders.

The Deacon is the Servant, from which his title comes, Diakonoï. He assists the Priest or Bishop at Mass or the other Sacraments. He is ordained to preach the Word of God, to baptise, to marry and to bury the dead. He cannot anoint, consecrate, confirm or absolve. Until recently the Diaconate was a step on the road to the Priesthood but the ancient practice of a Permanent Diaconate has been re-introduced. Permanent Deacons may be married and need not be necessarily 'young'. Before a Priest is ordained, he must first be ordained a Deacon.

The Priest is the minister of the Altar and his primary duty is to offer the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass. The word Priest comes from Presbyteroi, elder. The Priest is a co-worker with the Bishop and is an extension of the Bishop into the Diocese. By his proclaiming the words of Consecration, the Priest makes present upon the Altar the Body and Blood of Christ. A common name for a Priest is 'alter Christus', another Christ, because when a Priest acts in his ministry he is Christ, Christ works through him. For example, at the Consecration of the Mass, the Priest does not say 'This is Christ's Body', rather he says 'This is My Body'.

The Bishop is the 'overseer', Episkopoi. He is a successor of the Apostles and is responsible for the spiritual welfare of all those in his Diocese. He is the chief Priest or shepherd in his Diocese. He has the 'fullness of the Priesthood', in other words he alone can administer all the Sacraments because only a Bishop can ordain a Priest or Bishop and from this comes the 'Apostolic Succession'. Each Priest and Bishop could trace his ordination back through the centuries to one of the Apostles. This has always been required if a Priest or a Bishop was to be considered validly (really) consecrated or ordained.

The Bishops are the successors of the Apostles and as all the Apostles were united with Peter under his authority, so too all the Bishops are united with the Pope and under his authority. The Pope, as the Successor of Saint Peter, is first among equals. He is the Bishop of Rome, and it is to him that the Bishops of the Church and the faithful look for guidance and direction.



THE ANOINTING OF THE SICK

Like all the other Sacraments of the Catholic Church, the Anointing of the Sick is firmly rooted in Holy Scripture. In the Letter of Saint James it is written:

‘If any one of you is in trouble, he should pray; if any one of you is feeling happy, he should sing a psalm. If one of you is ill, he should send for the elders of the Church, and they must anoint him with oil in the name of the Lord and pray over him. The prayer of faith will save the sick man and the Lord will raise him up again; and if he has committed any sins, he will be forgiven.’ (James 5:13-15)

The Sacrament of the Anointing of the Sick is a sign of comfort, peace, hope and solidarity with others. It also provides a ‘winning’ attitude – the victory of Jesus Christ – in the most painful of human situations, serious illness and near death. The Sacrament has three purposes and effects; to strengthen and comfort the sick person during the trials of illness, to bring both spiritual and physical healing, to wipe away sin.

The Catholic Church believes that the Sacrament has dramatic effects. We believe that Our Lord’s power may physically heal the person if it be for his or her good but most often, the Sacrament gives spiritual strength. What is most needed by the seriously ill, the elderly, and the dying, is the strength to hope and to not falter in their love for God. We pray that the ill person may return to health and remain with us but if this is not possible, we pray that our brother or sister may die in the company of God and with confidence in Him.

Besides healing, this Sacrament also forgives sins. One of its effects is the reconciliation of the sick or dying person to God and so, if possible, the sick person should confess his or her sins. If this is not possible, then the forgiveness of God is still extended to the person by the anointing and the prayer with it.

Through this holy anointing, may the Lord in His love and mercy help you with the grace of the Holy Spirit. May the Lord who frees you from sin save you and raise you up. Amen.

At the time when a person’s death is drawing near, if possible, the person will receive Holy Communion, receive Absolution and be anointed, the common name for this is ‘The Last Rites’.



When a person is dying, then they receive the Last Rites in a simple or more elaborate form, depending on the person’s strength or time left. The person will make Confession, if possible, and receive the Apostolic Pardon, forgiving all manner of sins which may have been committed in life. If the person is not able to make Confession the person may still receive the Apostolic Pardon. The reason for the Apostolic Pardon is that there are some sins which are so serious that only a Bishop may grant the Absolution, but when someone is dying, every Priest has the faculty (permission) to absolve any sin, no matter how serious. The person is then anointed on the forehead and palms, as the formula of Anointing is said.

The person, if they are able, will then receive Viaticum. This is known as the ‘Sacrament of the Dying’, even though it is not one of the Seven Sacraments. Viaticum is Holy Communion given to a dying person and is a corruption of the Latin, *Via Tecum* – with you on the way. The Viaticum is food for the person for the journey to Heaven. It is also a strengthening for the person, as if Christ is saying to him or her, ‘I am with you on the way’.

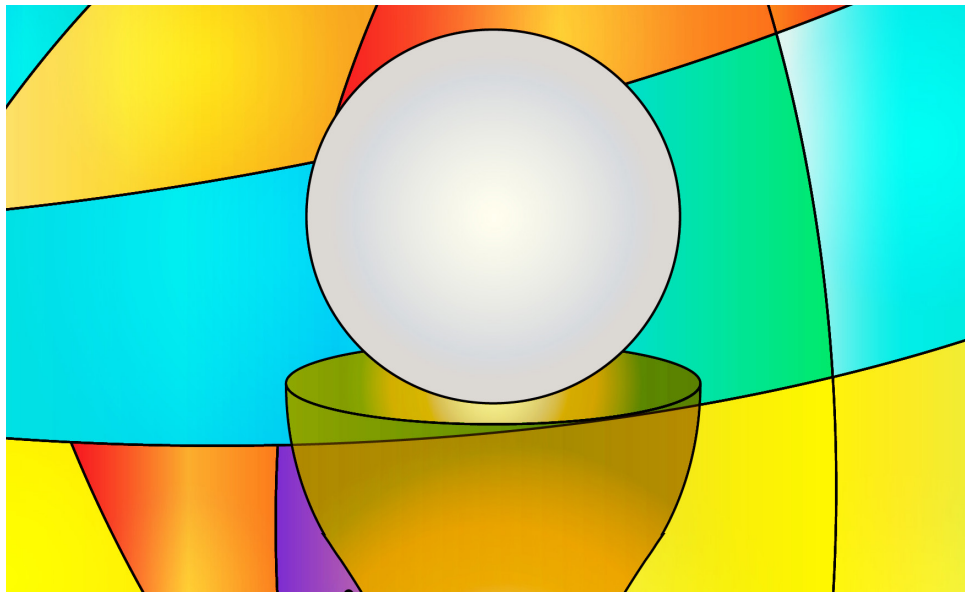
Separate from the Last Rites but usually added on to the end is the Commendation of the Dying, a prayer addressed to the person’s soul when death is imminent. ‘Go forth, Christian soul, from this world in the name of God the almighty Father, who created you, in the name of Jesus Christ, Son of the living God, who suffered for you, in the name of the Holy Spirit, who was poured out upon you, go forth, faithful Christian...’ Other psalms and readings, the Rosary and/or the Litany of the Saints may also be said.

SACRAMENT	BIBLICAL BASIS
Baptism	<p>Matt 28:19 - Jesus commissions the Apostles: “Go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit”;</p> <p>John 3:22; 4:1-2 - Jesus’ first disciples baptize other disciples;</p> <p>Acts 2:38-41; 10:47-48 - new believers are baptized “in the name of Jesus” by Peter and others;</p> <p>(not just Jesus’ own baptism: Mark 1:9-11 & par.)</p>
Holy Eucharist	<p>Mark 14:22-25; Matt 26:26-30; Luke 22:14-23; 1 Cor 11:23-25 - Jesus’ Last Supper with His disciples;</p> <p>John 6: 48-58 - the end of the Bread of Life discourse: “eat my flesh; drink my blood”;</p> <p>Luke 24:35; Acts 2:42 - Christians gather for the “Breaking of the Bread”</p>
Confirmation	<p>John 20:22 - “(Jesus) breathed on them (the disciples) and said, ‘Receive the Holy Spirit’”;</p> <p>Acts 8:17; 19:6 - believers receive the Spirit, esp. through laying on of the apostle’s hands</p> <p>Acts 10:44-48 - the coming of the Spirit is closely associated with the Baptism of new believers</p>
Penance/ Reconciliation	<p>John 20:23 - “If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained”;</p> <p>Matt 16:19; 18:18 - more sayings on “binding and loosing”;</p> <p>James 5:16 - “confess your sins to one another”</p>
Anointing of the Sick	<p>Mark 6:7-13 - Jesus’ disciples “anointed with oil many who were sick and healed them”;</p> <p>James 5:14-16 - “call for the elders of the church and have them pray over (the sick), anointing them with oil in the names of the Lord.”</p>
Matrimony/ Marriage	<p>Gen 2:24 - “a man leaves his parents and clings to his wife and they become one flesh”;</p> <p>Mark 10:2-12; Matt 19:1-9 - Jesus teaches against divorce; “What God has joined together, let no one separate”;</p> <p>Eph 5:22-33; 1Cor 7:10-16 - Paul stresses the unity of husbands and wives; (not simply Jesus’ presence at the wedding at Cana, John 2:1-11)</p>
Holy Orders (Ordination of Bishops, Priests, and Deacons)	<p>Mark 3:13-19 & par. - Jesus “calls” and “appoints” the 12 apostles;</p> <p>Acts 6:6; 1 Tim 4:14; 5:22; 2 Tim 1:6 - “laying on of hands” as the “ordaining” or commissioning rite of local Christian leaders</p>

During Holy Week it is at the Celebration of the Chrism Mass by the Bishop and Priests of the Diocese, that the oils used in the Sacraments of Baptism, Confirmation, Ordination and Anointing of the Sick are blessed and distributed to the Parishes of the Diocese.



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Understanding the Sacraments: YouTube Videos

The Sacraments publication is supported by a series of 8 videos available on YouTube at: <https://youtube.com/playlist?list=PLmaPZU6217VQ3K5NXfHqgy1T63D2vv1R&feature=shared> or by scanning QR Code >



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