

Background Notes-The seven sacraments

The seven sacraments—Baptism, Confirmation, Holy Communion, Confession, Marriage, Holy Orders, and the Anointing of the Sick—are the life of the Catholic Church. Each sacrament is an outward sign of an inward grace. When we participate in them worthily, each provides us with graces—with the life of God in our soul. In worship, we give to God that which we owe Him; in the sacraments, He gives us the graces necessary to live a truly human life.

The first three sacraments—Baptism, Confirmation, and Holy Communion—are called the sacraments of initiation, because the rest of our life as a Christian depends on them.

The Sacrament of Baptism:

The Sacrament of Baptism, the first of the three sacraments of initiation, is also the first of the seven sacraments in the Roman Catholic Church. It removes the guilt and effects of Original Sin and incorporates the baptized into the Church, the Mystical Body of Christ on earth.

The Sacrament of Baptism is often called "The door of the Church," because it is the first of the seven sacraments not only in time (since most Catholics receive it as infants) but in priority, since the reception of the other sacraments depends on it. It is the first of the three Sacraments of Initiation, the other two being the Sacrament of Confirmation and the Sacrament of Holy Communion. Once baptized, a person becomes a member of the Church. Traditionally, the rite (or ceremony) of baptism was held outside the doors of the main part of the church, to signify this fact. The Necessity of Baptism:

Christ Himself ordered His disciples to preach the Gospel to all nations and to baptize those who accept the message of the Gospel. In His encounter with Nicodemus (John 3:1-21), Christ made it clear that baptism was necessary for salvation: "Amen, amen I say to thee, unless a man be born again of water and the Holy Ghost, he cannot enter into the kingdom of God." For Catholics, the sacrament is not a mere formality; it is the very mark of a Christian, because it brings us into new life in Christ.

Baptism of Desire:

That doesn't mean that only those who have been formally baptized can be saved. From very early on, the Church recognized that there are two other types of baptism besides the baptism of water.

The baptism of desire applies both to those who, while wishing to be baptized, die before receiving the sacrament and "Those who, through no fault of their own, do not know the Gospel of Christ or His Church, but who nevertheless seek God with a sincere heart, and, moved by grace, try in their actions to do His will as they know it through the dictates of conscience" (*Constitution on the Church*, Second Vatican Council).

Baptism of Blood:

The baptism of blood is similar to the baptism of desire. It refers to the martyrdom of those believers who were killed for the faith before they had a chance to be baptized. This was a common occurrence

in the early centuries of the Church, but also in later times in missionary lands. The baptism of blood has the same effects as the baptism of water.

The Form of the Sacrament of Baptism:

While the Church has an extended rite of Baptism which is normally celebrated, which includes roles for both parents and godparents, the essentials of that rite are two: the pouring of water over the head of the person to be baptized (or the immersion of the person in water); and the words "I baptize you in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit."

The Minister of the Sacrament of Baptism:

Since the form of baptism requires just the water and the words, the sacrament, like the Sacrament of Marriage, does not require a priest; any baptised person can baptise another. In fact, when the life of a person is in danger, even a non-baptised person—including someone who does not himself believe in Christ—can baptise, provided that the person performing the baptism follows the form of baptism and intends, by the baptism, to do what the Church does—in other words, to bring the person being baptised into the fullness of the Church.

In both cases, a priest may later perform a conditional baptism.

Infant Baptism:

In the Catholic Church today, baptism is most commonly administered to infants. While some other Christians strenuously object to infant baptism, believing that baptism requires assent on the part of the person being baptised, the Eastern Orthodox, Anglicans, Lutherans, and other mainline Protestants also practice infant baptism, and there is evidence that it was practiced from the earliest days of the Church.

Since baptism removes both the guilt and the punishment due to Original Sin, delaying baptism until a child can understand the sacrament may put the child's salvation in danger, should he die unbaptised.

Adult Baptism:

Adult converts to Catholicism also receive the sacrament, unless they have already received a Christian baptism. (If there is any doubt about whether an adult has already been baptised, the priest will perform a conditional baptism.) A person can only be baptised once as a Christian—if, say, he was baptised as a Lutheran, he cannot be rebaptised when he converts to Catholicism.

While an adult can be baptised after proper instruction in the Faith, adult baptism normally occurs today as part of the Rite of Christian Initiation for Adults (RCIA) and is immediately followed by Confirmation and Communion.

The Effects of the Sacrament of Baptism:

Baptism has six primary effects, which are all supernatural graces:

1. The removal of the guilt of both Original Sin (the sin imparted to all mankind by the Fall of Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden) and personal sin (the sins that we have committed ourselves).
2. The remission of all punishment that we owe because of sin, both temporal (in this world and in Purgatory) and eternal (the punishment that we would suffer in hell).
3. The infusion of grace in the form of sanctifying grace (the life of God within us); the seven gifts of the Holy Spirit; and the three theological virtues.
4. Becoming a part of Christ.
5. Becoming a part of the Church, which is the Mystical Body of Christ on earth.
6. Enabling participation in the sacraments, the priesthood of all believers, and the growth in grace.

The Sacrament of Confirmation:

The Sacrament of Confirmation is the second of the three sacraments of initiation because, historically, it was administered immediately after the Sacrament of Baptism. Confirmation perfects our baptism and brings us the graces of the Holy Spirit that were granted to the Apostles on Pentecost Sunday.

- The Sacrament of Confirmation
 - Although, in the West, Confirmation is usually received as a teenager, several years after making First Communion, the Catholic Church considers it the second of the three Sacraments of Initiation (Baptism being the first and Communion the third). Confirmation is regarded as the perfection of Baptism, because, as the introduction to the Rite of Confirmation states:
 - 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. Hence they are, as true witnesses of Christ, more strictly obliged to spread and defend the faith by word and deed.
 - **The Form of the Sacrament of Confirmation:**
 - Many people think of the laying on of hands, which signifies the descent of the Holy Spirit, as the central act in the Sacrament of Confirmation. The essential element, however, is the anointing of the confirm and (the person being confirmed) with chrism (an aromatic oil that has been consecrated by a bishop), accompanied by the words "Be sealed with the Gift of the Holy Spirit" (or, in the Eastern Catholic Churches, "The seal of the gift of the Holy Spirit"). This seal is a consecration, representing the safeguarding by the Holy Spirit of the graces conferred on the Christian at Baptism.
 - **The Minister of the Sacrament of Confirmation:**
 - As the Catechism of the Catholic Church points out, "The *original minister* of Confirmation is the bishop." Each bishop is a successor to the apostles, upon whom the Holy Spirit descended at Pentecost—the first Confirmation. The Acts of the Apostles mentions the

apostles imparting the Holy Spirit to believers by the laying on of hands (see, for example, Acts 8:15-17 and 19:6).

- The Church has always stressed this connection of confirmation, through the bishop, to the ministry of the apostles, but She has developed two different ways of doing so.
- **Confirmation in the East:**
- In the Eastern Catholic (and Eastern Orthodox) Churches, the three sacraments of initiation are administered at the same time to infants. Children are baptized, confirmed (or "chrismated"), and receive Communion (in the form of the Sacred Blood, the consecrated wine), all in the same ceremony, and always in that order.
- Since the timely reception of Baptism is very important, and it would be very hard for a bishop to administer every baptism, the bishop's presence, in the Eastern Churches, is signified by the use of chrism consecrated by the bishop. The priest, however, performs the confirmation.
- **Confirmation in the West:**

The Church in the West came up with a different solution—the separation in time of the Sacrament of Confirmation from the Sacrament of Baptism. This allowed infants to be baptized soon after birth, while the bishop could confirm many Christians at the same time, even years after baptism. Eventually, the current custom of performing Confirmation several years after First Communion developed, but the Church continues to stress the original order of the sacraments, and Pope Benedict XVI, in his apostolic exhortation *Sacramentum Caritatis*, has suggested that the original order should be restored.

Eligibility for Confirmation:

Even in the West, priests can be authorized by their bishops to perform confirmations, and adult converts are routinely baptized and confirmed by priests. All those who have been baptized are eligible to be confirmed, and, while the Western Church suggests receiving the sacrament after reaching the "age of reason" (around seven years old), it can be received at any time. (A child in danger of death should receive Confirmation.)

A confirmand must be in a state of grace. If the sacrament is not received immediately after Baptism, the confirmand should participate in the Sacrament of Confession before Confirmation.

The Effects of the Sacrament of Confirmation:

The Sacrament of Confirmation confers special graces of the Holy Spirit upon the person being confirmed, just as such graces were granted to the Apostles on Pentecost. Like Baptism, therefore, it can only be performed once, and Confirmation increases and deepens all of the graces granted at Baptism.

The Catechism of the Catholic Church lists five effects of Confirmation:

- it roots us more deeply in the divine filiation [as sons 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.

The Sacrament of Holy Communion:

While Catholics in the West today normally make their First Communion before they receive the Sacrament of Confirmation, the Sacrament of Holy Communion, the reception of Christ's Body and Blood, was historically the third of the three sacraments of initiation. This sacrament is the source of great graces that sanctify us and help us grow in the likeness of Jesus Christ.

- The Sacrament of Holy Communion
 - The Sacrament of Holy Communion is the third of the Sacraments of Initiation. Even though we are required to receive Communion at least once per year (our Easter Duty), and the Church urges us to receive Communion frequently (even daily, if possible), it is called a sacrament of initiation because, like Baptism and Confirmation, it brings us into the fullness of our life in Christ.
 - In Holy Communion, we are eating the True Body and Blood of Jesus Christ, without which "you shall not have life in you" (John 6:53).
 - **Preparing for the Sacrament of Holy Communion:**
 - Because of the intimate connection of the Sacrament of Holy Communion to our life in Christ, we must be free of any grave or mortal sin before receiving it, as St. Paul explained in 1 Corinthians 11:27-29. Otherwise, as he warns, we receive the sacrament unworthily, and we "eateth and drinketh damnation" to ourselves.
 - If we are aware of having committed a mortal sin, we must participate in the Sacrament of Confession first. The Church sees the two sacraments as connected, and urges us, when we can, to join frequent Confession with frequent Communion.
 - **Making a Spiritual Communion:**

- If we cannot receive Holy Communion physically, either because we cannot make it to Mass or because we need to go to Confession first, we can pray an Act of Spiritual Communion, in which we express our desire to be united with Christ and ask Him to come into our soul. A spiritual communion is not sacramental, but prayed devoutly, it can be a source of grace that can strengthen us until we can receive the Sacrament of Holy Communion once again.

The Effects of the Sacrament of Holy Communion:

Receiving Holy Communion worthily brings us graces that affect us both spiritually and physically. Spiritually, our souls become more united to Christ, both through the graces we receive and through the change in our actions that those graces effect. Frequent Communion increases our love for God and for our neighbour, which expresses itself in action, which makes us more like Christ.

The Sacrament of Confession:

In reconciling us to God, it is a great source of grace, and Catholics are encouraged to take advantage of it often, even if they are not aware of having committed a mortal sin.

Confession Is a Sacrament:

The Sacrament of Penance, commonly called Confession, is one of the seven sacraments recognized by the Catholic Church. Catholics believe that all of the sacraments were instituted by Jesus Christ himself. In the case of Confession, that institution occurred on Easter Sunday, when Christ first appeared to the apostles after his Resurrection. Breathing on them, he said: "Receive the Holy Spirit. For those whose sins you forgive, they are forgiven; for those whose sins you retain, they are retained" (John 20:22-23).

The Marks of the Sacrament:

Catholics also believe that the sacraments are an outward sign of an inward grace. In this case, the outward sign is the absolution, or forgiveness of sins, that the priest grants to the penitent (the person confessing his sins); the inward grace is the reconciliation of the penitent to God (which is why the sacrament is also sometimes called the Sacrament of Reconciliation).

The Purpose of Confession:

That reconciling of man to God is the purpose of Confession. When we sin, we deprive ourselves of God's grace. And by doing so, we make it even easier to sin some more. The only way out of this downward cycle is to acknowledge our sins, to repent of them, and to ask God's forgiveness. Then, in the Sacrament of Confession, grace can be restored to our souls, and we can once again resist sin.

What Is Required?:

Three things are required of a penitent in order to receive the sacrament worthily:

1. He must be **contrite**—or, in other words, sorry for his sins.
2. He must **confess** those sins fully, in kind and in number.
3. He must be willing to **do penance** and **make amends** for his sins.

How Often Should You Go to Confession?:

While Catholics are only required to go to Confession when they are aware that they have committed a mortal sin, the Church urges the faithful to take advantage of the sacrament often. A good rule of thumb is to go once per month. (The Church strongly recommends that, in preparation for fulfilling our Easter Duty to receive communion, we go to Confession even if we are aware of venial sin only.) The Church especially urges the faithful to receive the Sacrament of Confession frequently during Lent, to help them in their spiritual preparation for Easter.

Why Is Confession Necessary?:

Non-Catholics, and even many Catholics, often ask whether they can confess their sins directly to God, and whether God can forgive them without going through a priest. On the most basic level, of course, the answer is yes, and Catholics should make frequent acts of contrition, which are prayers in which we tell God that we are sorry for our sins and ask for His forgiveness.

But the question misses the point of the Sacrament of Confession. The sacrament, by its very nature, confers graces that help us to live a Christian life, which is why the Church requires us to receive it at least once per year. Catholics are encouraged to receive it during Advent and Lent to prepare for Christmas and Easter. Moreover, it was instituted by Christ as the proper form for the forgiveness of our sins. Therefore, we should not only be willing to receive the sacrament, but we should embrace it as a gift from a loving God.

The Sacrament of Marriage:

Marriage, a lifelong union between a man and a woman for procreation and mutual support, is a natural institution, but it is also one of the seven sacraments of the Catholic Church. It reflects the union of Jesus Christ and His Church.

- The Sacrament of Marriage

Marriage is a practice common to all cultures in all ages. It is, therefore, a natural institution, something common to all mankind. At its most basic level, marriage is a union between a man and a woman for the purpose of procreation and mutual support, or love. Each spouse in a marriage gives up some rights over his or her life in exchange for rights over the life of the other spouse.

While divorce has existed throughout history, it has been rare until recent centuries, which indicates that, even in its natural form, marriage is meant to be a lifelong, union.

The Elements of a Natural Marriage:

As Fr. John Hardon explains in his *Pocket Catholic Dictionary*, there are four elements common to natural marriage throughout history:

1. It is a union of opposite sexes.
2. It is a lifelong union, ending only with the death of one spouse.
3. It excludes a union with any other person so long as the marriage exists.
4. Its lifelong nature and exclusiveness are guaranteed by contract.

A Supernatural Institution:

In the Catholic Church, however, marriage is more than a natural institution; it was elevated by Christ Himself, in His participation in the wedding at Cana (John 2:1-11), to be one of the seven sacraments. A marriage between two Christians, therefore, has a supernatural element as well as a natural one. While few Christians outside of the Catholic and Orthodox Churches regard marriage as a sacrament, the Catholic Church insists that marriage between any two baptized Christians, as long as it is entered into with the intention to contract a true marriage, is a sacrament.

The Union of Christ and His Church:

This sanctifying grace helps each spouse to help the other advance in holiness, and it helps them together to cooperate in God's plan of redemption by raising up children in the Faith.

In this way, sacramental marriage is more than a union of a man and a woman; it is, in fact, a type and symbol of the divine union between Christ, the Bridegroom, and His Church, the Bride. As married Christians, open to the creation of new life and committed to our mutual salvation, we participate not only in God's creative act but in the redemptive act of Christ.

The Sacrament of Holy Orders:

The Sacrament of Holy Orders is the continuation of Christ's priesthood, which He bestowed upon His Apostles. There are three levels to this sacrament: the episcopate, the priesthood, and the diaconate.

- The Sacrament of Holy Orders
 - The Sacrament of Holy Orders is the continuation of Christ's priesthood, which He bestowed upon His Apostles; thus, the Catechism of the Catholic Church refers to the Sacrament of Holy Orders as "the sacrament of apostolic ministry."

- "Ordination" comes from the Latin word *ordinatio*, which means to incorporate someone into an order. In the Sacrament of Holy Orders, a man is incorporated into the priesthood of Christ, at one of three levels: the episcopate, the priesthood, or the diaconate.
- **The Priesthood of Christ:**
- The priesthood was established by God among the Israelites during their exodus from Egypt. God chose the tribe of Levi as priests for the nation. Their primary duties were the offering of sacrifice and prayer for the people.
- Christ, in offering Himself up for the sins of all mankind, fulfilled the duties of the Old Testament priesthood once and for all. But just as the Eucharist makes that sacrifice present to us today, so the New Testament priesthood is a sharing in the eternal priesthood of Christ. While all believers are, in some sense, priests, some are set aside to serve the Church as Christ Himself did.

The Ordination of Bishops:

There is only one Sacrament of Holy Orders, but there are three levels. The first is that which Christ Himself bestowed upon His Apostles: the episcopate. A bishop is a man who is ordained to the episcopate by another bishop (in practice, by several bishops). He stands in a direct, unbroken line from the Apostles, a condition known as "apostolic succession."

Ordination as a bishop confers the grace to sanctify others, as well as the authority to teach the faithful and to bind their consciences. Because of the grave nature of this responsibility, all episcopal ordinations must be approved by the Pope.

The Ordination of Priests:

The second level of the Sacrament of Holy Orders is the priesthood. No bishop can minister to all of the faithful in his diocese, so priests act, in the words of the Catechism of the Catholic Church, as "co-workers of the bishops." They exercise their powers lawfully only in communion with their bishop, and so they promise obedience to their bishop at the time of their ordination.

The chief duties of the priesthood are the preaching of the Gospel and the offering of the Eucharist.

The Ordination of Deacons:

The third level of the Sacrament of Holy Orders is the diaconate. Deacons assist priests and bishops, but beyond the preaching of the Gospel, they are granted no special charism or spiritual gift.

In the Eastern Churches, both Catholic and Orthodox, the permanent diaconate has been a constant feature. In the West, the office of deacon was reserved to men who intended to be ordained to the priesthood. The permanent diaconate was restored in the West by the Second Vatican Council. Married men are allowed to become permanent deacons.

Eligibility for the Sacrament:

The Sacrament of Holy Orders can be validly conferred only on baptized men, following the example set by Christ and His Apostles, who chose only men as their successors and collaborators. A man cannot demand ordination; the Church has the authority to determine eligibility for the sacrament.

While the episcopate is reserved to unmarried men, the discipline regarding the priesthood varies in East and West. The Eastern Churches allow married men to be ordained priests, while the Western Church insists on celibacy. Once a man has received the Sacrament of Holy Orders, however, he cannot marry.

The Form of the Sacrament:

As the Catechism of the Catholic Church notes:

The essential rite of the sacrament of Holy Orders for all three degrees consists in the bishop's imposition of hands on the head of the ordained and in the bishop's specific consecratory prayer asking God for the outpouring of the Holy Spirit and his gifts proper to the ministry to which the candidate is being ordained.

Other elements of the sacrament, such as holding it in the cathedral (the bishop's own church); holding it during Mass; and celebrating it on a Sunday are traditional but not essential.

The Minister of the Sacrament:

Because of his role as a successor to the Apostles, who were themselves successors to Christ, the bishop is the proper minister of the sacrament. The grace of sanctifying others that he receives at his own ordination allows him to ordain others.

The Effects of the Sacrament:

The Sacrament of Holy Orders, like the Sacrament of Baptism and the Sacrament of Confirmation, can only be received once for each level of ordination. Once a man has been ordained, he is spiritually changed, which is the origin of the saying, "Once a priest, always a priest." He can be dispensed of his obligations as a priest (or even forbidden to act as a priest); but he remains a priest forever.

Each level of ordination confers special graces, from the ability to preach, granted to deacons; to the ability to act in the person of Christ to offer the Mass, granted to priests; to a special grace of strength, granted to bishops, which allows him to teach and lead his flock, even to the point of dying as Christ did.

The Sacrament of the Anointing of the Sick:

Traditionally referred to as Extreme Unction or Last Rites, the Sacrament of the Anointing of the Sick is administered both to the dying and to those who are gravely ill or are about to undergo a serious operation, for the recovery of their health and for spiritual strength.

- The Sacrament of the Anointing of the Sick
 - Traditionally referred to as Extreme Unction or Last Rites, the Sacrament of the Anointing of the Sick was previously most commonly administered to the dying, for the remission of sins and the provision of spiritual strength and health. In modern times, however, its use has been expanded to all who are gravely ill or are about to undergo a serious operation, and the Church stresses a secondary effect of the sacrament: to help a person recover his health. Like Confession and Holy Communion, to which it is closely linked, the Sacrament of the Anointing of the Sick can be repeated as often as is necessary.
 - **Biblical Roots:**
 - The modern celebration of the Sacrament of the Anointing of the Sick recalls the early Christian use, going back to biblical times. When Christ sent His disciples out to preach, "they cast out many devils, and anointed with oil many that were sick, and healed them" (Mark 6:13). James 5:14-15 ties physical healing to the forgiveness of sins:
 - Is any man sick among you? Let him bring in the priests of the church, and let them pray over him, anointing him with oil in the name of the Lord. And the prayer of faith shall save the sick man: and the Lord shall raise him up: and if he be in sins, they shall be forgiven him.
 - **Who May Receive the Sacrament?:**
 - Following this biblical understanding, the Catechism of the Catholic Church notes that:
 - The Anointing of the Sick "is not a sacrament for those only who are at the point of death. Hence, as soon as anyone of the faithful begins to be in danger of death from sickness or old age, the fitting time for him to receive this sacrament has certainly already arrived."
 - When in doubt, priests should err on the side of caution and provide the sacrament to the faithful who request it.

The Form of the Sacrament:

The essential rite of the sacrament consists in the priest (or priests, in the case of the Eastern Churches) laying hands on the sick, anointing him with blessed oil (usually olive oil blessed by a bishop, but in an emergency, any vegetable oil will suffice), and praying "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."

When circumstances permit, the Church recommends that the sacrament take place during Mass, or at least that it be preceded by Confession and followed by Holy Communion.

The Minister of the Sacrament:

Only priests (including bishops) can administer the Sacrament of the Anointing of the Sick, since, when the sacrament was instituted during Christ's sending out of His disciples, it was confined to the men who would become the original bishops of the Church.

The Effects of the Sacrament:

Received in faith and in a state of grace, the Sacrament of the Anointing of the Sick provides the recipient with a number of graces, including the fortitude to resist temptation in the face of death, when he is weakest; a union with the Passion of Christ, which makes his suffering holy; and the grace to prepare for death, so that he may meet God in hope rather than in fear. If the recipient was not able to receive the Sacrament of Confession, Anointing also provides forgiveness of sins. And, if it will aid in the salvation of his soul, Anointing may restore the recipient's health.