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THE SEVEN SACRAMENTS



SYMBOLS OF GOD'S CARE

Sacraments are more than just one-time liturgical celebrations. They serve as ongoing symbols of God's love made visible through us.

by Sandra DeGidio, OSM

PHOTO BY GENE PLAISTED, OSC

Years ago during a talk, I asked a group of grandparents if they remembered the definition of a sacrament from the *Baltimore Catechism*. One older man, who was obviously not happy about being at the talk, growled from his slouched position in the back row: “A sacrament is an outward sign instituted by Christ to give grace.” “Right,” I responded, “and it’s really not a bad definition.”

“It was good enough for *Baltimore*,” he shot back, “and it’s good enough for me!”

That definition actually originates with St. Augustine in the fifth century. He said that a sacrament was “a visible sign of invisible grace.” From Augustine, the phrase filtered down to us through the Middle Ages, the Council of Trent, and scholastic theology: each age elaborated on it and viewed it through its own theological perspectives.

Today, with our renewed theology and reformed liturgical rites, we have come to see sacraments in a broader sense than some definitions suggest. Actually, we have come to see sacraments more in the sense that St. Augustine saw them.

Sacraments are more than seven ritual acts that give grace. They are opportunities for people to gather and celebrate God’s grace through symbolic action or ritual. Our understanding of sacraments today begins not with Church rituals, but with the experience of God’s presence and care in our daily lives.

CHRISTIAN SACRAMENTS

A sacrament in the broadest sense can be any person, event, or thing through which we encounter or experience God’s presence in a new or deeper way. A sunset, a period of quiet prayer, a storm, the birth of a child, an intimate conversation with a close friend all have the potential for revealing God to us in new and deeper ways.

In the broad sense, then, we can say that a sacramental experience is an encounter with God through human experience that somehow changes us. And virtually any human experience can provide us with such an encounter.

The Church’s ritual sacraments have their roots in this broad idea of sacraments. The Christian sacraments we know today originated with a human experience, an experience of people who were followers of Jesus. By experiencing the person of Jesus, those people encountered God and God’s presence in a new way. Indeed, Jesus was, for them, the sacrament of God.

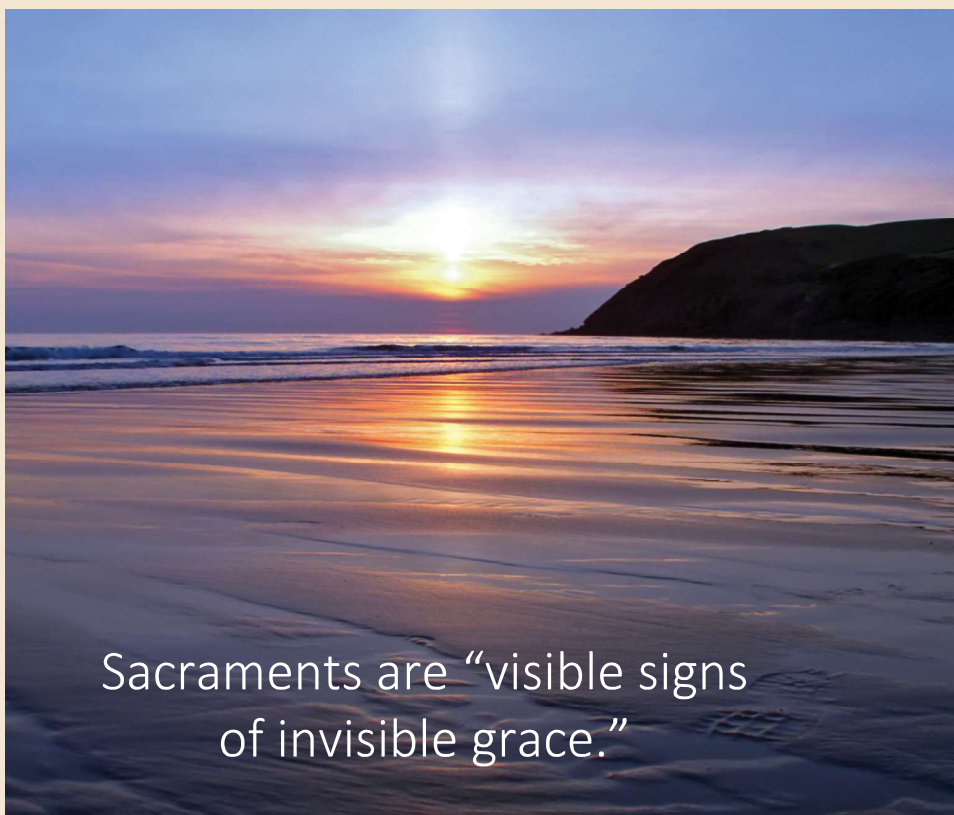
They told the story of Jesus, but they also lived the story. Like Jesus, they went into the waters of baptism to symbolize their new life. They broke bread and shared it as a symbol of God’s love and care for them and their love and care for one another. They prayed for one another, laid hands on one another, healed, and forgave—just as they had seen Jesus break bread, lay hands on, heal, and forgive. And, as Jesus was the sacrament of God for them, they, the Church, became the sacrament of Jesus.

Eventually sacraments were defined as “efficacious signs of grace, instituted by Christ and entrusted to the Church, by which divine life is dispensed to us. The visible rites by which the sacraments are celebrated signify and make present the graces proper to each sacrament” (*Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 1131).

THE SACRAMENTS AS SYMBOLS

Let’s look at that definition.

“The sacraments are efficacious signs of grace”—true, Christian sacraments are signs. But our theology of sacraments takes on richer meaning if the sacraments are also seen as *symbols*, which means they are more than simply “signs.” A sign carries a single meaning that has been arbitrarily assigned to it. Symbols have multiple meanings. They convey more than information. Symbols bring us into touch with the familiar and the mysterious simultaneously.



Sacraments are “visible signs
of invisible grace.”

In a very real sense, the symbols that are the heart of the Church's sacraments are not primarily objects but actions. The symbols of the sacraments are all expressions of human activity—a bath, a meal, an embrace, a laying on of hands, a touch, a rubbing with oil. They do for us what words alone or abstract thought cannot do. They put the coming of God in our lives into body language. The symbolic acts at the heart of the sacraments help us break open and share with one another the common human experiences through which God becomes present to us.

HOW THE SACRAMENTS ARE 'INSTITUTED BY CHRIST'

And what of that phrase in the *Catechism* "instituted by Christ"? The sacraments, as we have said, arise out of the story of Jesus' life and actions, and as such are representations of that life and those actions. Jesus allowed himself to be baptized; he broke bread and shared it, thus sharing himself. Out of those special events in Jesus' life come our sacraments of baptism and Eucharist.

But the sacraments also flow from the very meaning of Jesus' life, from his values and teachings. He saw very basic values and experiences (forgiveness, concern for the sick, marriage, service), and he raised those values and experiences to new levels. He transformed those ordinary human values into spiritual values by helping people see God's love made visible through the living of those values.

As we celebrate the sacraments, we, like the first followers of Jesus, have the opportunity to encounter him precisely in our acceptance of those same values that he lived and affirmed. In that encounter, Jesus is present to us as he was present to the early Church. In him, we encounter God and God's presence. Jesus is the one great sacrament through which all other sacraments make sense.

THE SACRAMENTS AND THE 'GIVING OF GRACE'

This brings us to the final phrase of our definition: "... make present the graces." Many of us, I suspect, have the notion that the sacraments provide us with a *thing* called grace that we are somehow lacking. But grace is not a *thing*, not a quality that can be measured; it is a quality that defies measurement. Grace is essentially the gift of God's love and presence into which we grow.

It is a relationship between God and us. Our side of the relationship
(continued on back page)

THE SEVEN SACRAMENTS: AN OVERVIEW

SACRAMENTS OF INITIATION

Baptism incorporates us into the Church and gives us a rebirth as daughters and sons of God.

Confirmation is a continuation, ratification, or sealing of baptism. It helps us focus on the missionary dimensions of the baptismal commitment.

Eucharist is the preeminent sacrament from which all others have meaning. In the Eucharist, Christ is most profoundly present in the Church, which gathers to hear the word of God and to share the nourishment of Christ's Body with one another.

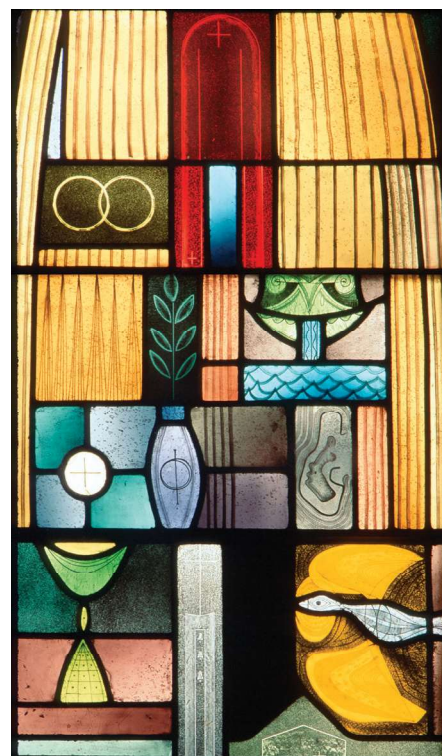


PHOTO BY GENE PLAISTED, OSC

SACRAMENTS OF HEALING

Reconciliation focuses on forgiveness in our lives and on our acceptance of that forgiveness, which brings us back to spiritual health in the family of God after we have turned away.

Anointing of the Sick takes place as the community gathers in faith to pray over and lay hands on those who are sick because the Church, like Christ, desires the health of the whole human person.

SACRAMENTS OF SERVICE

Matrimony celebrates and witnesses the covenant of love between two people and symbolizes in that union Christ's covenant of love for the Church.

Holy Orders is a sacrament of service by which some are called by God, through the Church, to be spiritual leaders.

DIG DEEPER

How do the sacraments arise from Jesus' actions?

What's your favorite sacrament? Why?

How have you experienced God's grace?

(continued from page 3)

develops gradually, but it is always a response to a love that was really always there.

The gift of God's grace is totally free and ever present. What we do with that gift is ours to choose. As with any gift, the gift of grace is ours to accept or reject. Our acceptance of it in our lives is what we express and celebrate in the sacraments.

Sacraments are indeed the visible signs of invisible grace that St. Augustine defined. We celebrate sacraments because we recognize the beginnings of that gift of grace in ourselves. And yet, at the same time, we can certainly experience an *increase* or deepening of God's gift of grace in and through our celebration of the sacraments if we are open and receptive to it.

That is why we can say that the sacraments *effect what they signify*. They can and do effect a change in us if we are ready to accept that change. The marvelous mystery of God's grace is that, while it is always there awaiting our recognition and acceptance of it in our lives, in that very recognition and celebration, the gift becomes even more present to us.

SYMBOLS OF GOD'S CARE

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, living and enacting God's love and care through Christ to the world.

And, in a very real sense, they don't end. So long as we, the Church, continue to live and celebrate them, they are ongoing symbols of God's care for all of us.

Sandra DeGidio, OSM, is a freelance writer and the director of development and communications for her religious congregation.

THE SACRAMENTS AND CHRISTIAN COMMUNITY

Sacraments do not happen only to the individual. Sacraments can be understood completely only in relation to the body of Christ, which is the Church. Remember, Christian sacraments grew out of an experience of the living Christ by his followers, who shared that experience in word and deed. Today, Christ lives in us, the Church. He is experienced when the Christian community lives his values and celebrates the lived reality of his presence among us.

Sacraments, then, happen not simply to individuals, but to Christ's body, the Church. And when something happens to the Church (to paraphrase St. Paul), it happens to the individual. The sacramental symbols are communal symbols

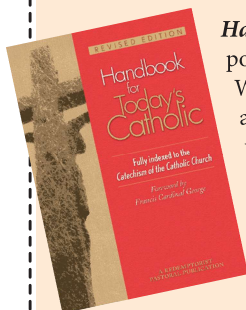
that touch us as members of a community. The richness and effectiveness of the symbolism often depends on our degree of participation and responsiveness. The grace of the sacraments is the grace of the Church in service to others.

The gift of grace is there because of God's magnanimous love for us. We have only to experience it, celebrate it as a sacrament, and then go forth to *be* sacramental to the world—*be* that visible expression of God's love and care. We, like the first followers of Jesus, break bread and share it, pray for one another, lay hands on one another in love, heal, and forgive. In so doing, we help strengthen the Christian community and offer a model for the building up of the whole human family.



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