**Why Do we Need Sacraments: Part I-Overview**

**by Gerard-Marie Anthony**

The Sacraments are beautiful gifts from God, but there can be a lot of confusion about them. So we will take this time to briefly explain the 7 Sacraments of the Catholic Church because they truly are blessings from the Lord. In order to explain this, we must first explain what they are not, then define the Sacraments, give their basis, and then in the next article give some principles that help us to see their beauty.

First, we will note what the Sacraments are not. The Sacraments are not: magic, unbiblical, or a bunch of antiquated rituals without power. They are not magic because it is not man manipulating nature or pretending to bring about a desired result, but it is Christ himself acting through His creation and bride the Church to bring about His blessings. The Sacraments are not unbiblical because all of the Sacraments and even the foundations that the Sacraments are based on can be found in Scripture. There will be a chart at the end of the article to show this. Finally, the Sacraments are not just “antiquated rituals without power” because we will see that their power comes from God whom “all things are possible” (Matt. 19:26).

So now that we have looked at what the Sacraments are not, we can look at what they are. A Sacrament is, “An external sign instituted by Christ that gives the grace it signifies.” In its definition, we find the Sacraments are based upon three Biblical principles and these principles make up the three principal parts of a Sacrament:

1. That God uses matter to do His will and give grace (“An external sign.” This will be known as the matter of a Sacrament)
2. God gives His authority to people to achieve His will and glory (“Instituted by Christ” who has all authority. This will be known as the minister of the Sacrament).
3. That Words have power (“Gives the grace it signifies.” This will be known as the Form of the Sacrament)

Let us look at each part in a little more detail.

The first principle of a Sacrament, “an external sign” or the matter of a Sacrament is based upon the fact that God uses matter to do His will, give grace, and communicate something about Himself and mankind as well. St. Paul tells us this, “For what can be known about God is plain to them, because God has shown it to them. Ever since the creation of the world his invisible nature, namely, his eternal power and deity, has been clearly perceived in the things that have been made” (Rom. 1:19-20). We see this from the very beginning of Scripture from the fact that there is creation. God made the world so that we might choose to be with Him for eternity. Throughout history and creation, God would continue to use matter or external signs to show His love for us and draw us closer to Him. The examples are numerous: God used water to cleanse the world from sin with Noah and the flood (Gen. 7-9), He used matter through Moses with the 10 plagues so that Pharaoh would let the Israelites leave (Ex. 7-12), He made His dwelling among the Israelites and promised to them in the Ark of the Covenant (see Ex. 25:21-22). The ultimate external sign that God gives to man is Himself through His Son Jesus Christ. In Him, “the Word was made flesh and dwelt among us” (Jn. 1:14). So we see that God consistently gave external signs to do His will and give out blessings to mankind.

The second principle of a Sacrament, “Instituted by Christ who has all authority” or the minister of the Sacrament is based upon the facts that Jesus has complete authority in heaven and earth as He is “the name above all names” (Phil 2:9); the “King of Kings and Lord of Lords” (Rev. 19:16); as well as the fact He shares His authority to accomplish His will. We saw this in the Old Testament in the examples noted above in the “External sign” Principle like Moses for the plagues, Noah for the flood, and even God’s kings and prophets later on. The ultimate authority, Jesus chose to share His authority with mankind too. We see this in His choosing of the Twelve Apostles, “And he called the twelve together and gave them power and authority over all demons and to cure diseases, and he sent them out to preach the kingdom of God and to heal” (Lk. 9:1-2). Thus, we see that when God chooses someone to speak or act for Him, that action takes place.

The third principle of a Sacrament, “Gives the grace it signifies” or the form of the Sacrament is based on the fact that God’s Word has power. The prophet Isaiah tells us this, “So shall my word be that goes forth from my mouth; it shall not return to me empty, but it shall accomplish that which I purpose, and prosper in the thing for which I sent it” (Is. 55:11). Therefore, when God speaks His word, the Word, it always accomplishes what it was meant to accomplish. Again, we see this in Creation. God said, “Let there be light” and light appeared. We call this being efficacious. We can see the power of the word even in everyday things. By the very fact we say something, the thing that we speak of happens:

* I walk up to you after a job interview and say, “You’re hired”. By the very fact I said that you now are working for me.
* You have a boyfriend/girlfriend and they say, “We’re not going together any more”. By the very fact you said that you are no longer a couple.
* How about when a man and woman love each other and they say, “I do”. By their very words (and intention), they are officially married.

So if the power of the word in human events is great enough to affect our lives, wouldn’t it be even greater in God’s Word whom we have all ready seen “does not return back to Him void?” Therefore, we see that God’s actions always give the grace they signify (form).

Therefore, by invoking God’s name through specific words (the form), having the right stuff (matter), and the right person who is chosen by God to do something (minister); something great happens-a blessing from God. This blessing is efficacious or brings about the desired effect because God’s word cannot return void. This blessing also happens ex opera operato (Latin for “by the work done”) not based on the holiness of the minister performing them. This is important for two reasons:

1. “Since all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God” (Rom. 3:23), if the Sacraments depended on the holiness of the minister, there would be nobody worthy to give them to us.

2. Our holiness does not diminish Christ’s holiness who is the true high priest (Heb. 10: 5-23) and the one who performs every Sacrament through His minister/unworthy instrument.

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| Terms | Definition | Biblical basis |
| Sacrament ( Three things that make up a Sacrament: Form, Matter, Minister) | An external sign instituted by Christ that gives the grace it signifies | God speaks through a person who uses matter to achieve His will/purpose |
| Matter | “External sign”-the physical sign or material of the Sacrament | Gen. 1:31-God looked at all that He had made and found it very God  Jn. 1:14-The Word was made flesh and dwelt among us |
| Minister | The person who administers or has the authority to perform the Sacrament | Jesus is the name above all names” (Phil 2:9); and shares His authority with mankind (Lk. 9:1) |
| Form | The necessary ritual words for the Sacrament to take place | So shall my word be that goes forth from my mouth; it shall not return to me empty, but it shall accomplish that which I purpose, and prosper in the thing for which I sent it” (Is. 55:11) |
| Efficacious | It always accomplishes what it was meant to accomplish. We call this being | See Is. 55:11 |
| Ex Opera Operato | “By the work done” not based on the holiness of the person doing the work | Is. 55:11 and Rom. 3:23 |

It is fitting that Christ perform every Sacrament because He is the ultimate external sign of God’s intimate reality.

Through His incarnation, death, and resurrection, God’s love is revealed to us in an external, sensible way.

So, we see God’s signs, or the Sacraments are not just insignificant antiquated rituals without power. They are significant, powerful, and even crucial because they are used to achieve God’s will. What is God’s will? Again St. Paul tells us, “For this is the will of God, your sanctification” (1Thess. 4:3). God wants to make us holy, complete, and happy. In order to do this, He left us with the 7 Sacraments. In return, we must do our part and accept His gifts by disposing ourselves to receive them as the fruits that result from the Sacrament depend on how we dispose ourselves to God’s grace. This is why some people can go to Mass once a week and still never change or people can go to Confession and still stay addicted to the same sins. We must remember that God always respect or free will and He will not force Himself or His goodness and help upon us. This is the only way that the Sacraments are limited. Their power comes from God, but their effectiveness within us depends on our ability to allow them to recreate us in the image of Christ.

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| **Sacrament** | **Biblical Basis** | **Old Testament Pre-figurement** | **Form/Matter** | **Effects** | **Ministers** |
| **BAPTISM** | **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"; **John 3:22; 4:1-2** - Jesus' first disciples baptize other disciples; **Acts 2:38-41; 10:47-48** - new believers are baptized "in the name of Jesus" by Peter & others; (*not just* Jesus' own baptism: Mark 1:9-11 & par.) | **Gen. 1:2**-God’s spirit hovering above the waters  **Gen. 6:5-9:17**-The Flood (Note 1Pet. 3:19-21 says this was a prefigurement)  **Ex. 14:15-31**- Crossing of the Red Sea  **Ez. 36:25**-God pouring water over Israel to cleanse them  **Zech. 13:1**-A fountain opened to cleanse impurities  **Is. 1:16, 18; 4:4**-God washing Israel clean | "I baptize you in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit." (the "*Trinitarian Formula*," from Matt 28:19)  Matter: Water | Becoming a member of the Church of Christ (Christian Initiation); also being forgiven of one's sins. | Bishops, Priests, Deacons;  any Christian (in case of urgent need) |
| **EUCHARIST** | **Mark 14:22-25; Matt 26:26-30; Luke 22:14-23; 1 Cor 11:23-25** - Jesus' "Last Supper" with his disciples; **John 6: 48-58** - the end of the Bread of Life discourse: "eat my flesh; drink my blood"; **Luke 24:35; Acts 2:42** - Christians gather for the "Breaking of the Bread" | **Gen. 14:18-**Melkizedek, priest of the God most high offering sacrifice of bread and wine  **Ex. 12:1-3**-Passover feast  **Ex. 16:4**-Bread from Heaven | "This is my body... This is my blood..." (the "*Words of Institution*" from the Last Supper)  Matter: (unleavened) bread and wine from “the vine” | Being spiritually nourished by Christ's body and blood; being united ("in communion") with Christ and other believers. | Bishops or Priests |
| **Confirmation** | **John 20:22** - "(Jesus) breathed on them (the disciples) and said, 'Receive the Holy Spirit'";  **Acts 8:17; 19:6** - believers receive the Spirit, esp. through laying on of the apostle's hands **Acts 10:44-48** - the coming of the Spirit is closely associated with the Baptism of new believers | **Is. 11:1-3-**Gifts of the Holy Spirit  **Is. 44:3**-Pouring out of Spirit upon Israel  **Ez. 39:28-29**-Pouring out of Spirit  **Joel 3:1**-Pouring out of Spirit and quoted by St. Peter at Pentecost | "(Name), be sealed with the Gift of the Holy Spirit."  Matter: Holy Chrism | Being strengthened by the Holy Spirit; being "confirmed" in the fullness of the Christian faith. | Bishops; in some cases also Priests |
| **Penance/ Reconciliation** | **John 20:23** - "If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained";  **Matt 16:19; 18:18** - more sayings on "binding and loosing"; **James 5:16** - "confess your sins to one another" | **Lev. 4 and 5**-Priests making sin offerings to atone for sins of people | "I forgive you of all of your sins, in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit" (the "*Words of Absolution*")  Matter: Sins, actions of the penitent | Begin forgiven of one's sins; being reconciled to God the Church, and other people. | Bishops or Priests |
| **Anointing of the Sick** | **Mark 6:7-13** - Jesus' disciples "anointed with oil many who were sick and healed them"; **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." | **2Kgs. 4:1-36**-Elisha multiplies oil for the widow and son and prays over the child of another and heals him  **Jer. 33:6-**Healing for Israel | "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."  Matter: Oil of Anointing | Being strengthened in time of illness. | Bishops or Priests |
| **Matrimony/ Marriage** | **Mark 10:2-12; Matt 19:1-9** - Jesus teaches against divorce; "What God has joined together, let no one separate"; **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) | **Gen. 1:27; 2:18-24:** Man created in the state of marriage to image God  **Is. 62:5**-the reality that marriage is a sign of | Reception and giving of vows (form and matter): "I, (name), take you, (name), to be my husband/wife. I promise to be true to you in good times and in bad, in sickness and in health. I will love you and honor you all the days of my life." | Being united ("one flesh") in God's eyes; becoming a publicly and legally recognized couple. | **the couple** themselves! (clergy are just the official witnesses) |
| **Holy Orders** (Ordination  of Bishops,  Priests, and  Deacons) | **Mark 3:13-19 & par.** - Jesus "calls" and "appoints" the 12 apostles;  **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 | **Ex. 19:6**- A Kingdom of Priest  **Ex. 28:1-5**-Priest set apart from this kingdom of priest  **Num. 11:16-17, 24-26**-Elders chosen to keep order and judge the people (note-the word *prebytoros* (Greek) is where we get the word priest and literally means “elder”)  **Sir. 7:31**-Honor and respect priest | A long "Prayer of Consecration" | Becoming a member of the "ordained" clergy, the church's official leadership "orders" | Bishops only |
| **Sacrament** | **Biblical Basis** | **Old Testament Pre-figurements** | **Form/Matter** | **Effects** | **Ministers** |

**Sacraments Chart**

Note: Part of Chart accessed at: <http://catholic-resources.org/ChurchDocs/Sacraments.htm> . Old Testament prefigurements and matter of Sacraments are added by Gerard-Marie Anthony.