

RCIA CLASS 11B – THE SACRAMENTS OF SALVATION  
THE POWER OF HEAVEN BROUGHT TO EARTH

I. Jesus Christ gave the Church, and therefore the world, the seven sacraments to give guaranteed means of gaining certain types of grace.

A. The sacraments do not replace other means of grace, but rather are God's way of giving us special types of graces in a way that provides certainty and sacred symbols.

1. God guides and strengthens us continually with His grace in many ways, both visible and invisible. And there are thus many occasions of special grace through such things as: the Scriptures and learning; sacred or other inspiring art and music; our prayers and the prayers and assistance of other people; and the intercession of angels and saints. The effects of these occasions of grace are varied and even often unknown on earth; this offering is a part of the mystery of our life of faith.

2. But there are also other times when we need certainty about different aspects of life, Thus, for example, it needs to be clear when we become Christian, how one is forgiven of sin, who can represent Christ in ministry, when a couple is married in Christ, and His compassion and healing presence in grave illness. The sacraments give us this certainty through visible words and signs.

- In the secular realms, particularly important things are signified in a clear, definite ceremony (e.g., marriage, taking an office, one joining the military, becoming a citizen.) Likewise, in the spiritual realm, there are definite rites that lead to grace in particular occasions.

3. Furthermore, because we learn not only by hearing and reading, but also by signs and symbols, Jesus created certain signs and symbols to give different types of grace. As the Catechism says, "being at once body and spirit, man expresses and perceives spiritual realities through physical signs. As a social being, man needs signs and symbols to communicate with others." Catechism of the Catholic Church 1146; see also St. Thomas Aquinas, Summa Theologica part III, question 61 art. 1 (also explaining that, by giving certain symbols that are guaranteed to have definite effects, God is guarding against belief in superstitious practices that falsely promise specific effects at times that God has not chosen to designate.) This need for symbols is one reason why Jesus used parables so much in His teaching.

4. Thus, Christ, in His public ministry, used definite signs to show the grace that He was conferring. Thus, for example, He would lay hands on people (and instruct His disciples to do the same); He used bread and fish to feed the multitude; and people who touched the tassels of His cloak were cured. See, e.g., Matt. 8:1-4, 14-15, 14:13-21, 20:29-34; Mark 1:40-44, 5:21-43, 6:54-56, 7:31-37, 8:22-26; Luke 4:40, 8:49-56; John 2:1-11, 9:1-40. Even when the Gospels do not record Him using a symbol to cure people, He almost always was physically in the person's presence and spoke words, signifying the effect He was bringing about.

B. The seven sacraments are those signs instituted by Christ and given to the Church to confer their specific gifts of grace through visible words, signs and symbols. "The sacraments are perceptible signs (words and actions) accessible to human nature. By the action of Christ, and the power of the Holy Spirit, they make present efficaciously the grace they signify." Catechism 1084.

1. Thus, every sacrament has three central elements: (1) it was instituted by Jesus Christ during His public ministry; (2) it uses a specific symbol or symbols (always including words and usually including actions); and (3) it confers the grace that is promised as a part of the sacrament. There are also usually other words and symbols used; and other graces are given as well. But the institution by Jesus, the symbol used for the sacrament, and the grace promised as a part of the sacrament are what make the sacraments unique occasions of grace.

2. Through the sacraments, God meets us spiritually, intellectually, and physically, providing us the grace we need for the perfection of our souls. “In human life, signs and symbols occupy an important place. . . . God speaks to man through visible creation. . . [The Lord Jesus] performs healings and illustrates His preaching with physical signs or symbolic gestures. . . It is through the sacramental signs of his Church that the Holy Spirit carries on the work of salvation.” Catechism 1146-47, 1151-52.

3. “There are seven [sacraments]: Baptism, Confirmation (or Chrismation), the Eucharist, Penance, the Anointing of the Sick, Holy Orders, and Matrimony. The seven sacraments touch all the stages and all of the important moments of Christian life: they give birth, increase, healing, and mission to the Christian’s life of faith.” Catechism 1210.

C. With each of the sacraments, the words and symbols together signify the grace they truly confer. For example, in Baptism, the water signifies cleansing, life and mystery; and through the water and the words the sacrament of Baptism truly confers cleansing from original sin, life with the community of heaven, and the mystery of God’s calling. The term “baptism” itself comes from the Greek word for immersion; and the sacrament truly brings forth, an immersion into the death and resurrection of Christ, the Paschal mystery that brings us everlasting life. See Catechism 1214.

- There may also be other symbols (e.g., the baptismal candle or the wedding rings) that, while not essential to the sacrament, signify in visible form the invisible realities of the sacraments.

D. The sacramental system is itself supernatural, but it builds upon the natural realm. For, in other walks of life, visible signs to represent and bring about invisible realities. The sacraments take this natural aspect of humanity and bring it higher.

1. Thus, for example, a national flag represents and often brings about patriotism and a national spirit. Likewise, a uniform symbolizes and (hopefully) brings out the unity and common calling of some group, such as students, police, the military or medical professionals. A wedding ring signifies and increases the love of husband and wife. Gifts symbolize (or at should symbolize) in visible form the invisible love between the giver and the recipient. Meals together signify and should bring about family unity.

2. In the faith, we have such symbols as icons, rosaries, and sacred architecture, which represent and bring about a sense of invisible realities. However, these other symbols, because they are created by mere humans can be temporary and may or may not bring about the effect they signify.

3. The sacraments, by contrast, always offer the grace they signify as long as the recipient is open to it. It is true that the *effect* of that grace may vary according to the

person. For example, Confirmation has different effects depending on how one is willing to use the gifts given. However, the grace is always made available.

II. There are seven sacraments, and will never be any more or any less, for the were given by Jesus Christ Himself. See Council of Trent, Decree on the Sacraments (1547) Canon 1. The Church sometimes distinguishes between the Sacraments of Initiation, the Sacraments of Healing and the Sacraments of Calling.

A. The Sacraments of Initiation are: Baptism, Confirmation, and the Eucharist.

1. Baptism removes original sin, joins the new Christian to Jesus Christ, and, for Catholics, makes him a member of the Church. “Through baptism we are freed from sin and reborn as sons of God: we become members of Christ, are incorporated into the Church and made sharers in her mission.” Catechism 1213. At Pentecost, Peter said. “Repent, and be baptized, every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins, and you shall receive the gift of the Holy Spirit.” Acts 2:38.

2. Confirmation deepens the grace one receives at Baptism and especially makes one a greater witness to the faith. “The effect of the sacrament of Confirmation is the special outpouring of the Holy Spirit as once granted to the apostles on the day of Pentecost.” Catechism 1302.

- All of the faithful are a people consecrated to God and called to witnesses before the world of the glory He gives. Scripture says, “You are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people of His own, so that you may announce the praises of him who called you out of darkness into His wonderful light.” 1 Peter 2:9. Confirmation gives us a special power to fulfill this office and dignity.

- The distinction between Baptism and Confirmation is exemplified by the fact that St. Phillip baptized many people in Samaria. But then “Peter and John . . . came down and prayed for them that they might receive the Holy Spirit; for it had not yet fallen on any of them, but they had only been baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus. Then they laid their hands on them and they received the Holy Spirit.” Acts 8:14 -17. The Apostles were needed to confer the additional grace of the Holy Spirit made available in Confirmation.

3. At the Mass, Christ comes to His bride the Church as He overcomes the barriers of space and time, re-presents His suffering, death and resurrection, and becomes truly present to us under the appearance of bread and wine. The Eucharist is Jesus Christ, present to us under the appearance of bread and wine. “When the church celebrates the Eucharist, she commemorates Christ’s Passover and it is made present. The sacrifice of Christ offered once for all on the cross remains ever present.” Catechism 1364.

- At the Eucharist Jesus Christ is truly and fully present, body and soul, in His full human and divine natures. For at the Last Supper Jesus “took bread, and when he had given thanks he broke it and gave it to them, saying, ‘This is my body, which is given for you. Do this in remembrance of Me.’ And likewise the cup after supper, saying, ‘This cup which is poured out for you is the new covenant in my blood.’” Luke 22:19-20; see also Matt. 26:26-29; Mark 14:22-25; 1 Cor. 11:23-25.

- Even after the Mass, Jesus is truly present in the Eucharist, as reserved in

the tabernacle at churches. Thus, the Eucharist can be brought to people after Mass, particularly if they are housebound. Likewise, we genuflect to the Eucharist when entering and leaving a church, and when crossing the tabernacle.

B. The Sacraments of Healing are Penance (also called Confession or Reconciliation) and Anointing of the Sick.

1. Through the Sacrament of Penance, God forgives sins committed after Baptism. On the first Easter night, Jesus “said to them [the apostles] ‘Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained.’” John 20:22-23; see also Matt. 16:19, 18:18. “Those who approach the sacrament of Penance obtain pardon from God’s mercy for the offences committed against Him and are, at the same time, reconciled with the Church.” Vatican II Council, Lumen Gentium (1965) 11.

- There is an absolute guarantee of God’s forgiveness if the penitent is honest and has any level of real contrition. The penitent does not need to worry whether he is sorry enough for his sins or resolved enough to amend his life; any real contrition (real sorrow for sins and a desire to do better in the future), when joined with this sacrament, will lead to forgiveness of any sin. There is still, of course, the need to struggle to overcome the effects of the sin. But even with regard to this struggle, the sacrament also gives strength for that goal and greater ability to avoid sin in the future.

- The sacrament also makes people more forgiving of each other, having experienced God’s forgiveness. One can give more easily what he has received.

2. Anointing of the Sick gives us that guarantee of Christ’s special presence in times of great illness, particularly illnesses that may result in death. Jesus was especially present to the ill, had a special solace for them, and performed most of His miracles for them. And He sent forth His Apostles to cure the sick as a central part of their mission. See Mark 6:7-13; Luke 10:8-9. At end of life, He included among the signs of the Gospel the cure of the sick through the laying on of hands. Mark 16:17-18. And so James said that those who are sick should have the priests lay hands upon them for curing, for strength and for the forgiveness of sins. See James 5:14-15.

C. The Sacraments of vocation are Holy Orders and Marriage.

1. Through Holy Orders, men are consecrated as bishops, priests, or deacons. “The divinely instituted ecclesiastical ministry is exercised in different degrees by those who even from ancient times have been called bishops, priests, and deacons.” Vatican II Council, Lumen Gentium 28.

- In addition to the priesthood of all believers, see 1 Peter 2:9, there is also a special office of those who are set aside to sanctify, teach, and guide for the Church and thus continue the role of the Apostles in making Christ present throughout the ages. “The divine mission, which was committed by Christ to the Apostles, is destined to last until the end of the world (see Matt 28:20), since the Gospel which they were obligated to hand on is the principle of all the church’s life for all time. . . . The bishops, therefore, with priests and deacons as helpers, took on themselves roles of service to the community, presiding in God’s place over the flock of which they are the pastors, as teachers of doctrine,

priests for sacred worship and ministers of government.” Vatican II Council, Lumen Gentium 20.

2. Marriage consecrates a Christian couple to help each other on the road to sanctity, to raise their children in the ways of the faith, to establish their homes as domestic churches, and to be witnesses to the world.

- The Vatican II Council said, “In virtue of the sacrament of matrimony, by which they signify and share in the mystery of the unity and fruitful love between Christ and the Church, see Eph. 5:32, Christian married couples help one another attain holiness in their married life and in accepting and educating their children. . . . In what might be regarded as the domestic church, the parents are to be the first preachers of the faith for their children by word and example.” Lumen Gentium 11.

- God created three institutions on this earth, the family, the ancient country of Israel and the Catholic Church, which is the family of God and the new Israel. Jesus’s first miracle was at the wedding feast of Cana, and likewise at the end of all things, the heavenly Jerusalem will be brought to Christ as a bride to her husband. See John 2:1-11. Rev. 21:2. In addition to the natural blessings of marriage to all peoples, Christian or non-Christian alike, the sacrament of marriage gives couples the special guarantee of His presence with them as He is with the Church and the commissioning to witness to His kingdom before all of the world.