

the sacraments

Like you and me, the Mass is a member of a family – it belongs to a family called SACRAMENTS.

So, what is a sacrament, and how do they work?

the traditional definition of a sacrament is an
outward and visible sign of an inward and spiritual grace

What on earth does that mean?
Let's look at it phrase by phrase:

Outward and visible – a sign isn't a sign unless you can see it!

With each sacrament there is a **THING** or **ACTION** to **SEE** and **NOTICE** and **THINK ABOUT**.

Sign – a sign is something that points beyond itself to something much bigger. Driving along the road there's a sign saying "Welcome to Scotland". The sign itself is a real bit of Scotland, but it's telling you miles of truth!

There are other sorts of sign too. A smile can tell you a lot about a person – not just something about their mouth! The smile means something in itself, but also means a lot more beyond itself... So a sign is a means of leading us deeper into big things which, though they are very real, just can't be put in front of our eyes.

Inward & spiritual grace – this is the big, real thing to which the sign points, and which the sign is a part of: God's action.

Grace is something given only by God – a gift that can't be seen (usually... see Acts 2:1-4). Grace is a spiritual strength given by God to help us in our relationship with him. Our "spirituality" can't be seen or measured, but it can be fed and shaped: God leaves us free to respond to his gift, or not. Sacraments are like hooks we can hold on to to touch what's going on spiritually.

All clear! Probably not... but don't despair. Keep looking at the signs!

Who does Sacraments?

Sacraments are God's action to which we respond with our free will. But for the sake of good order, so that we can be certain of what is going on, people are ordered, or ordained to do them by the Church, i.e. bishops and priests. (Except for Holy Matrimony)

How many Sacraments are there?

The short answer to this question is that there are many! However – the list of seven has been recognised by most Christians since the 12th century, though some say there are only two singled out by Jesus in the Gospels: (Baptism and the Mass). Today we talk too about the Church herself being a sacrament – Christ's presence in a special way.

Above all CHRIST himself is THE sacrament: the one in whom we touch and see God.

But a Christian should be familiar with the basic kit ...

The family of sacraments falls into two groups:

(A)

REPEATABLE SACRAMENTS (Sacraments we do over and over again...)

1. The MASS or EUCHARIST

The Christian family meal, sometimes called the sacrament of unity. Here we join in communion with God and each other. The bread and wine become what is known sometimes as the Blessed Sacrament.

The Mass must be presided over by a bishop or priest.

2. PENANCE - or the Sacrament of Reconciliation. We are sinful beings and our sins do harm to the Body of Christ. Penance is the formal way we are restored to unity. Formal absolution can only be given by a bishop or priest.

3. ANOINTING

Each Holy Week the bishop blesses oils for anointing the sick and dying, and for those being baptised, confirmed and ordained. Anointing is administered by a bishop or priest.

(B)

NON-REPEATABLE SACRAMENTS (Sacraments we do once in a person's life)

4. BAPTISM

Usually this is the first sacrament we receive in life. It admits us totally to the Body of Christ (the Church) by symbolically drowning us and causing us to rise again, following the pattern of the death and resurrection of Jesus whose name we adopt: we are Christ-ened and become Christ-ian.

Originally only adults were baptised, by total immersion in water. Christians are always baptised "in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit" (Matthew 28:19)

As time went on babies were baptised and (in colder climates!) water was merely poured over the head...but total immersion is making a comeback – and why not!

The symbol of death and resurrection is much clearer in total immersion.

The idea of the water washing away sin is sometimes useful but is not the point of the symbol.

People are baptised at any age. Today adults are usually baptised and confirmed at the same time. Baptism is usually administered by a bishop or priest. A deacon can baptise if necessary, and in an extreme emergency any Christian can baptise using the formula of Matthew 28:19.

5. CONFIRMATION

In the ancient Church, as soon as adults were baptised the Bishop laid his hands on their heads and prayed that the Holy Spirit come to them. He then anointed them.

As babies were brought for baptism and bishops had more congregations to visit, this Confirmation became delayed until people re-affirmed their baptism vows as adults.

It still remains the fact that Baptism is not really complete until Confirmation...like a painting torn in two they need each other. Bishops usually confirm, but priests sometimes deputise.

Usually at Confirmation we become "communicant" Christians – receiving the signs of bread and wine we are COMMITTED to being part of the unity of the Church each week!

6. HOLY MATRIMONY (Marriage)

Unlike the others, this sacrament is performed by the couple who marry one another, the bishop or priest witnesses and blesses the union.

The main sign is the joining of hands (and ring), the marriage of two people helps make real the union of Christ and his Church for all of us. Quite a responsibility!

The question of divorce and "re-marriage" in church - whether Christians can make marriage vows more than once in a lifetime, is too big a subject for here and needs explanation by your priest.

7. ORDINATION or Holy Orders. There are three orders in the Church: Bishop, Priest and Deacon.

Deacons (See Acts 6:1-6) assist the bishop. The bishop is the successor of the Apostles and represents to us our unity in Christ. He has authority over the Church.

Orders are administered by a bishop or bishops, sometimes with priests. First a candidate is made deacon, assisting in a parish but not usually administering any sacrament.

Deacons may be ordained as priests, who deputise for the bishop who can't be in every parish every day! Their main job is to preside at the mass and give God's blessing.

THE CHURCH'S TOOLS

Sacraments are the "tools" by which the Church does her job of bringing the touch of God's love to this life. In God's kingdom, they won't be needed. There Christ himself is the only sacrament.

No one is perfect!

We all make promises, not least when we are Confirmed, but we all fall short and fail to keep them.

However much we mentally accept ideals, we find ourselves unable to live up to them.

And in life, some things just go wrong!

This was a problem for the early Christians. They thought that Baptism should bring about a total change in a person. But they soon found out how easy it was to fall into sin after baptism (see 1 John 1:5-2:2).

Basically sin separates us from God and his Church. It isn't God that cuts us off, we do that ourselves.

So it is we who have to make the effort to return, remembering that no sin is too big for God to forgive – if we want.

Helping hands

The Church, through the guidance of the Holy Spirit, has evolved various ways of helping us in the struggle which the Christian life becomes from time to time.

The two sacraments of Penance (perhaps better known as Reconciliation) and Anointing (sometimes called Unction) are the most intense expressions of the help that is on offer. But there is much more which surrounds these "repeatable" sacraments. The Church has many ways to help Christians in their problems: sins, spiritual difficulties or sickness.

Soul Friend

This is the title of a book about the need of every Christian to have someone to talk to about their spiritual life.

Our relationship with God is not just our own concern. It affects others. If we are good examples of our faith then we will support our fellow Christians.

We cannot go it alone in the Christian life. The idea that our faith is our business and nobody else's is a modern heresy (i.e. a mistaken belief) that would horrify early Christians. We come to church to mix with others, to learn from them and support them.

And we need to talk about our problems (e.g. with our habit of prayer) with someone who can help. We also need to share our experiences with that person. An experienced Christian may be able to shed light on our situation, but also sees you as someone unique from whom to learn too!

Experienced Christian friends can help, but the sure way of seeking help is to talk to your priest, and/or make a formal confession as appropriate. Priests are there to be used – ask them, they are not telepathic! And when you talk to a priest you know you are talking in confidence to someone with no hidden agenda.

THE SACRAMENT OF RECONCILIATION (Confession or Penance)

In a formal confession the “penitent” helps the priest to see the person’s spiritual life in perspective so he may be able to help. Confession is not a shopping list of sins, as you see on TV sitcoms.

After prayerful preparation the penitent should indicate the kind of things that are troubling them, with as much detail as is necessary. The priest will try to help with advice. He will then suggest something specific (like reciting a psalm or saying a prayer) to do as a sign of penance and will pronounce God’s forgiveness.

Your priest will help you with a much fuller explanation of this sacrament and how to prepare for it – just ask!

Formal confession is the sacramental expression of the need of every Christian for help in following Jesus. Facing things by literally naming them out loud is a lot different from keeping them inside. But Confession isn’t the only way. At the very least Christians should have a regular private discussion about their spiritual life with someone they respect.

The Ministry of Healing: THE SACRAMENT OF ANOINTING

What we have talked about so far in this sheet is one form of healing – trying to deal with the pain of sin and our problems.

Another aspect of healing is the Sacrament of Anointing (See James 5:14-16).

Until fairly recently this sacrament had become only associated with those near to death and was usually called last rites. Whilst it is right to send for the priest when someone is dying (so that he may pray, give absolution, anoint and bring the Blessed Sacrament for Communion), this is not the only time when anointing is appropriate.

Today the Church has recovered the full meaning and use of this sacrament. It can be used for any serious situation, before an operation or giving birth, and regularly in chronic illness, mental illness etc. Also it should be used in praying for the healing of relationships, the needs of this broken world and can be received on behalf of others.

Anointing is always administered with prayerful preparation and is usually accompanied by the laying-on-of-hands. This sign in which a priest or maybe others specially licensed prays whilst laying hands on someone’s head is a way of concentrating our prayer.

In all cases, anointing and the laying-on-of-hands are ways that we allow the Holy Spirit to help to bring God’s strength and healing to our lives.

Home Communion

Many people make their Communion at home for one reason or another. They may be temporarily sick, or be too frail to leave their home to come to church. In these cases a priest, deacon or someone authorised by the bishop can take the Blessed Sacrament (usually the bread alone) to the home, as a sign that this person is not cut off from the body of the church.

D.I.Y.

I hope like me you hate that pompous saying “God helps those who help themselves”!

But: It is vital that as mature Christians you make use of these forms of help we have discussed. Your priest can suggest and advise and even sometimes warn! But most of the time he can only wait for you to ask for his help. Never be shy or worried about asking your priest for help or guidance. He is ordained to be a sign of God’s help.

But also never expect a priest to know or do something without being told about it first. Believe it or not, priests are not mind readers.

Agents of healing...

The things we have looked at on this sheet are special ways the church has developed for helping people in special need.

But what is just as important is the ministry that every baptised and confirmed Christian is thus commissioned to carry out in the world: through our lives as Christ’s body we can bring God’s healing touch to the world in millions of different ways.

Something to do at home:

Try to remember what the 7 sacraments are – write them down (try not to look them up first!) 1 2 3 4 5 6 7
What is the definition of a Sacrament?
What work does a Deacon do?