

## WHAT IS A SACRAMENT?

St Augustine, in the 5<sup>th</sup> century described a sacrament as 'an outward and visible sign of an inward and invisible grace.' It sounds a very simple answer, but, to understand the depth of what that means, we need to probe rather more deeply.



## THE CHRISTIAN JOURNEY

As Christians the journey of our lives is about coming to know God better, about building the kingdom of God here on earth, and, finally, to be with God forever. As Catholic Christians we move on this journey as the Church, that gathering of the baptised, striving to be the sign of Christ in the world. Thus, we are a community, the community of Christ.

St John, in his gospel tells us '*God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life.*' (John 3:16) God's love for us, his will for us to participate in his life, is manifested in the Incarnation, God's giving of himself in the humanity of Jesus; '*the word became flesh and lived among us*' (John 1:14) Jesus is the visible, outward sign of God's love for us. And, in turn, it is in the Church that Christ remains visible and tangible for us, most particularly in our encounters with him in the sacraments. The sacraments are where we meet Christ, where God's action, in Christ, through the Church, transforms us, bringing us to what God wants us to be. As baptised Christians, this is what we want too, we want to be what God wills for us. And what God wills for us is a life of joy in his presence and the promise of eternity. As Psalm 16 tells us: '*You show me the path of life. In your presence there is fullness of joy; in your right hand are pleasures forevermore.*'

## 'SACRAMENT'

Historically, the word 'sacrament' developed from the Greek word '*mysterion*' and the Latin word '*sacramentum*'. '*Mysterion*' means 'something hidden or secret' – our word 'mystery'. The language surrounding 'sacraments' did not develop in the Church for some time. We hear of a ritual of baptism in the Christian community of the Acts of the Apostles, and of the 'breaking of bread' – the Eucharist (Acts 2:38, 41- 42). These celebrations were called by their name, there was no generic term for these experiences.

It was not until the third century that the word '*mysterion*', a word that the pagans used to describe rites of initiation, began to be used to describe Christian rites. In order to avoid any confusion with pagan thinking the theologian Tertullian began to use the Latin word, '*sacramentum*' for '*mysterion*' particularly in explaining baptism.

The *sacramentum* was a sacred oath of allegiance to the emperor taken by a Roman soldier. Tertullian suggested that just as the soldier's oath was an sign of the beginning of a new life, so too was initiation into the Christian community through baptism and eucharist. '*Sacramentum*' then became a general term for the rites of Christian initiation.

## DEVELOPMENT

A more detailed reflection on the sacraments came from St Augustine of Hippo in the 5<sup>th</sup> century. Augustine developed the notion that a *sacramentum* is a sign that sanctifies – makes holy – because it is efficacious – produces the intended effect. For instance, Christ and the Holy Spirit make effective, through grace, the cleansing that water signifies in baptism. It was Augustine who called a sacrament 'a visible sign of invisible grace'. He also, in his letters referred to a *sacramentum* as a *sacrum signum* 'sign of a sacred thing' It is worth mentioning that Augustine did not consider only rituals to be sacraments but listed over 300. The Church gradually reduced this by differentiating between rituals and signs and symbols that assist people in prayer and devotion such as holy water, palms, ashes etc. These latter are called sacramentals.

Gradually seven major rituals came to be accepted as sacraments, named in 1215 at the Fourth Lateran Council as the sacraments of the Church, confirmed at the Councils of Lyon II (1274), Florence (1439) and Trent (1547). These seven were, as we have today, baptism, confirmation, eucharist, penance, anointing of the dying (today the anointing of the sick), marriage (matrimony) and the ordination of priests.

## DEFINITIONS

So, then what is a sacrament?

As stated above, St Augustine described a sacrament as 'an outward and visible sign of an inward and invisible grace.'

'A Catechism of Christian Doctrine' – often called 'The Penny Catechism' tells us 'a sacrament is an outward sign of inward grace, ordained by Jesus Christ, by which grace is given to our souls.' (249)

The Catechism of the Catholic Church says, 'The sacraments are 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.' (1131)

The Code of Canon Law states, 'The sacraments of the New Testament were instituted by Christ the Lord and

entrusted to the Church.

As actions of Christ and the Church, they are signs and means which express and strengthen the faith, render worship to God, and effect the sanctification of humanity and thus contribute in the greatest way to establish, strengthen, and manifest ecclesiastical communion.' (840)

Sacrosanctum Concilium (The Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy) tells us, 'The purpose of the sacraments is to sanctify, to build up the Body of Christ and, finally, to worship God. Because they are signs, they also instruct. They not only presuppose faith, but by words and objects they also nourish, strengthen, and express it.' (59)

From the definitions there seem to be a number of significant words: sign, Christ, grace, and the Church.

## **SIGN & REALITY**

We, as human beings, need signs and symbols often to express what cannot be expressed in words. We see around us constantly signs to simplify communication – road signs, badges and logos, signs that point to a simple, and mostly fixed, reality. We use also more complex signs, symbols, signs that are multidimensional, pointing to another reality and manifesting that reality. A heart, for instance is a symbol of love. It is an organ of the human body that keeps us alive, but we imbue it with elements of life, eternity, energy, commitment, passion etc etc.

A symbol has many meanings, often with different nuances for different people. Its depth is inexhaustible and it is able to communicate meaning that is beyond words. How we interpret signs and symbols will be shaped by the communities to which we belong. Just as signs and symbols are necessary for human communication so also, and perhaps more so, they are necessary in the communication between God and ourselves. In the Catholic community signs and symbols help to articulate the mystery that is God and to communicate with our God. We sprinkle water to remind us of our baptism, ashes to remind us of our mortality, liturgical colours to reflect moments and seasons in the Church's Year. We stand at the proclaiming of the Gospel to emphasise its importance, we shake hands with others to symbolise our sharing of Christ's peace with all. These are the sacramentals mentioned above and help us in prayer and devotion.

Sacraments, particularly, depend on signs and symbols which signify a sacred reality.

Thomas Aquinas in the 13<sup>th</sup> century wrote of the elements that make up a sacrament. There was the sign itself (sacramentum tantum), something concrete like bread and wine and the words of consecration in the eucharist, or water in baptism. What is signified he calls *res et sacramentum* (literally the 'thing' or the reality –and the sign). What is signified in the eucharist is the real presence of Christ; what is signified in baptism is the baptismal seal or character, that indelible mark of God. The final effect of the sacrament is the *res tantum*, the reality alone. This is the spiritual effect, grace. In the eucharist this is God's grace and further incorporation into the Body of Christ. Just as one loaf is made of many grains so we, the many, gathered at the eucharist become one body in Christ. In baptism the spiritual effect is forgiveness of sins and entry into the Body of Christ.

To look at sacraments simply as a series of signs and rituals that alone produce a guaranteed effect would be to ignore their importance for our lives. They are celebrations of our journey of faith within the community of the Church. They are moments relating to, and enriching our human experience, that make present the mystery and the actions of God in Christ, and are celebrated within the Body of Christ, the Church.

God became visible in Christ, Christ is visible in the Church, communicating himself in the sacraments. Thus the Church, as the visible sign of Christ, is also sacrament. The Catechism of the Catholic Church tells us:

*'The seven sacraments are the signs and instruments by which the Holy Spirit spreads the grace of Christ the head throughout the Church which is his Body. The Church, then, both contains and communicates the invisible grace she signifies. It is in this analogical sense, that the Church is called a "sacrament."*' 774

*'The Church "is the visible plan of God's love for humanity," because God desires "that the whole human race may become one People of God, form one Body of Christ, and be built up into one temple of the Holy Spirit."*' 776

And because we are members of the Body of Christ, we too can be the sacrament of Christ in the world. When we act as Jesus did we embody the presence of Christ in the world, we are living sacraments.

## **CHRIST**

If we understand Christ as the first and most important sacrament, then we recognise that the sacraments are always actions of Christ. They are rooted in experiences in the New Testament where Christ uses specific symbolic actions (words, gestures, signs) as visible signs of the life he brings.

- Jesus was baptized with *water* in the Jordan and the Holy Spirit descended upon him. Mk 1:9-10
- Jesus' first miracle was to turn *water* into *wine*. Jn 2:1-11
- Jesus multiplied *bread* and *fish* to feed the crowd. Mk 6:41-44
- Jesus *touched* people to heal them. Mk 6:41-44
- Jesus used his *spittle* to cure a blind man. Mk 8:23

- Jesus *breathed* on his apostles to give them the Holy Spirit. (Jn 20:22)
- Jesus gave his apostles his own body and blood in the form of *bread* and *wine*. Mk 14:22-23
- Jesus teaches against divorce Mark 10:2-12; Matt 19:1-9 -
- The Apostles followed the example of Jesus and carried out his teaching.
- The apostles anointed the sick for healing. Mk 6:13
- They (the Twelve) drove out many demons, and they anointed with oil many who were sick and cured them.
- The apostles laid their hands on people to receive the Holy Spirit. Acts 8:17
- The apostles laid their hands on others to be set apart for special ministry or mission in the church. Acts 6:6
- The apostles baptized. Mt 28:19
- The apostles forgave sins Mt 18:18
- Paul stresses the unity of husbands and wives; Eph 5:22-33; 1Cor 7:10-16
- The apostles understood marriage as a mystery (Greek: *mysterion*; Latin: *sacramentum*). Eph 5:32
- The apostles offered bread and wine in thanksgiving (*eucharist*) for Jesus' death. Lk 22:19

The sacraments are always actions of Christ because they make Christ present, in his dying and rising. They are always actions of Christ because they are celebrated by the body of Christ, the Church.

'He (Jesus) is present in the sacraments by his power, in such a way that when someone baptises, Jesus himself baptises' *Constitution On the Sacred Liturgy*, 7

And for those who take part in the celebration of a sacrament, they are a personal meeting with Christ.

## GRACE

The Church describes the seven sacraments as 'sacraments of faith'. In that personal meeting with Christ faith is presupposed, a necessary initial element for the effectiveness of the sacrament. For the sacraments 'nourish, strengthen and express' that faith. The grace we receive in the sacraments, God's communication of love to us, leads us then to express that love, worshipping God and living the life Christ reveals to us through the Spirit. Grace transforms us, for the knowledge and experience of love can do nothing less. God offers us the gift of grace freely, the onus on us is to accept that grace, to be open to a relationship with God, through Christ, in the power of the Spirit. This demands then not a passive or mechanistic understanding of the sacraments but an active experience which leads us to recognise, and celebrate, what is sacred in our human life. The sacraments shed a new light on our human experiences. The sacraments of initiation – Baptism, Confirmation, Eucharist – affirm and celebrate our experiences of belonging and acceptance, commitment, thanksgiving and community; the sacraments of healing – Reconciliation and Anointing of the Sick - our need forgiveness and strengthening; the sacraments of vocation – marriage and orders – the call to fidelity and service. In each of the sacraments our openness to the personal encounter Christ offers us the opportunity to accept the free gift of grace that God gives us.

## THE CHURCH

We have seen that the sacraments are described as '*the signs and instruments by which the Holy Spirit spreads the grace of Christ the head throughout the Church which is his Body.*' We have seen that the Church is the sacrament, the outward sign, of Christ himself. Thus, the sacraments are actions of the Church, ecclesial actions. They exist both for us personally and as part of the Church community.

It is the liturgy of the Church that we come to experience the sacramental life of the Church, those encounters with Christ. We gather as the body of Christ united with the Father to encounter Christ in Word – sacred scripture - and in sign - the symbols and rituals we engage in. Scripture sets our symbols and rituals in a context, it tells our story and leads us to reflect anew on those symbols. Our symbols then speak to us of the realities of God, of our lives in Christ. Our responsibility is to open ourselves to their depths of meaning they offer so that we are ready receptacles for the great gift of God's grace.

## AND FINALLY

We need, perhaps, when reflecting on the sacraments, when celebrating the sacraments, to be ready allow the symbol and ritual to shake us, to enliven us, to question and recognise the depth of its meaning. Shaken by the sacramental encounter we can be ready to enter ever more fully that relationship of love with God that Christ invites us to. And finally, we must be courageous in our willingness to be transformed by the graces we receive.