

THE SACRAMENTS IN SCRIPTURE: INTRODUCTION

“All the invisible realities of our redemption become visible in the sacraments.”

–Pope Leo the Great

Before we jump into a full-on Bible study on the sacraments, I think it's important that we cover a few very important topics, namely: what is a sacrament?

1. A sacrament is, by definition, a mystery. Our English word sacrament comes from the Latin, *sacramentum*, a translation of the Greek word *mysterion*, which means “a secret that is revealed” and whose root word means “to close the eyes and mouth.” What does this mean? It means that these mysteries are revealed to us, so we are supposed to receive them with gratefulness and wonder, not grasp at them while demanding perfect understanding. It means that we are approaching God Himself in these mysteries, so we ought to stand in reverence and awe, and we need to accept that the mysteries have been revealed to us, not because we deserve it, but because God loves us.

Mk 4:11 (Jesus speaking of the mystery of the kingdom) – And he said to them, “To you has been given the secret (*mysterion*) of the kingdom of God, but for those outside, everything comes in parables.”

Col 2:2 – I want their hearts to be assuaged and united in love, so that they may have all the riches of assured understanding and have the knowledge of God's mystery (*mysterion*), that is, Christ himself, in whom are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge.

Col 1:25-27 – I became its [the Church's] servant according to God's commission that was given to me for you, to make the word of God fully known, the mystery (*mysterion*) that has been hidden throughout the ages and generations but has now been revealed to his saints. To them God chose to make known how great among the Gentiles are the riches of the glory of this mystery (*mysterion*), which is Christ in you, the hope of glory.

So the sacraments are, by definition, mysteries that have been revealed to us through Jesus Christ.

2. The sacraments are a visible manifestation of God's invisible grace. They make visible in the physical world what is real in the spiritual world. They are, if you will, touchstones of God's grace. Speaking from personal experience as a convert from Evangelical Protestantism, it is easy, if you only think of God as interacting with us spiritually, to fall into one of two traps: either to question whether or not your encounters with God are real or imagined (“Was that really God?”), or to make your faith dependent on your feelings (“I *felt* close to God at that moment, so it must have been real”). Contrast that with the sacraments. The sacraments ground us in reality: they are physical touchstones that give us concrete reminders that yes, God did indeed reach down and touch us with His grace. “Am I saved?” Yes, you were washed in the waters of baptism, and even if you were too young to recall the event, several people witnessed water getting poured over your head. “Have I received the Holy Spirit?” Yes, you were anointed with sacred chrism when you were confirmed. “Are my sins forgiven?” Yes, in confession the priest spoke the words of Jesus and absolved you of all your sins. These are all visible reminders that God really did touch us, He really did interact with us, that He really was there at these moments of our

lives. But it's not just a reminder; this is also how God interacts with us. We are physical creatures: we are, as it says in Scripture, dust, and to dust we shall return. That means that we have interact with the world in a physical way because there is a definable limit to what we can know by simply thinking about things in an esoteric sense. In order for us to really know and experience something, we almost have to be able to reach out and touch it (example of math: my concept of "3" is grounded in reality of seeing 3 of something). As a good friend of mine likes to say, "We need a God with skin."

3. God does not need the sacraments; we do. Again: "We need a God with skin." WE need a God with skin. Does *God* need the sacraments to save us? No, of course not. But are the sacraments the ordinary method He has chosen by which to physically transmit His grace to the world? Yes, so if we know that and we're able to receive it, we owe it to ourselves to obey Him in this regard, because the salvation of our souls literally hangs in the balance. Call me crazy, but if Jesus said to his disciples, "You need to do *x* or you do not have eternal life," can you think of a compelling reason why I should actively avoid *x* and instead opt with the much riskier strategy of doing my own thing and simply trusting that God's mercy will overlook the fact that I blatantly disregarded Him and ignored the words of His Son? For the life of me I can't, so I've decided to go with the words of Christ and the wisdom of the Church.

4. The sacraments are essentially liturgy, and all liturgy is essentially sacramental. That is to say, a sacrament is, *in its essence*, liturgical. A sacrament without liturgy is not a sacrament, and we can see this even in the very simple "emergency rites" when you have to quickly baptize or anoint someone who is dying – even then, there is a liturgical element. Sacraments are liturgy. The liturgy, however, is the work of Jesus Christ himself, not anyone else, so a non-sacramental liturgy, while technically possible, would not be the work of Christ. This also means that the sacraments are public, since the liturgy is a public work, so things that cause public scandal are taken into account and are the Church's business.

5. The sacraments are not anything we do, but what Christ is doing. Jesus Christ is the minister of the sacraments, not the priest, not the deacon, not anyone else. The sacraments are *always* the work of Jesus Christ in his Church and in the world. If the sacraments are essentially liturgical, and liturgy is the work of Christ, the sacraments are also the work of Christ. This means, firstly, that we are not saving ourselves by "doing" the sacraments: it is not human effort, but only and always the grace of God given to us freely. The second implication is that the validity of a sacrament is not dependent on the holiness of the minister. There is a phrase that gets used a lot to describe this: *ex opere operato Christi* – literally, "from the work worked of Christ." In other words, the sacraments derive their power from Christ, not the minister. Now, this does NOT mean that the sacraments happen automatically and independently of the faith of the recipient; over and over again in Scripture we read that Jesus was unable to perform signs and miracles in certain towns "because of their lack of faith." So in every case, the faith of the recipient is necessary. What is not necessary is for the minister to be a saint. It is, of course, better for everyone involved if the person administering the sacraments is himself a friend of God and striving to live a holy life, but the sacrament does not depend on that, because the sacraments are always the work of Jesus Christ, not the minister.

6. The sacraments are gifts. In other words, God does not owe us the sacraments; in fact, God does not owe us anything. We do not get to demand the sacraments on our terms because they are freely given

to us by God. “Why won’t Father let me do such-and-such?” Well, this isn’t always the case, but it’s possible that you’re asking for something that liturgically cannot be done, something that undermines the very sacrament that you are asking for. We don’t receive the sacraments on our terms, we receive them on God’s terms, because they are His work and His gift to us. And notice the language we use for this too: we say that we *receive* the sacraments, not that we *take* them. We do not *take* forgiveness, we *receive* forgiveness. We do not *take* Communion; we *receive* Communion. We should never, ever grasp at the gifts that God is freely offering us.

7. The sacraments affect what they signify. They are both realities and signs, so each sacrament will have both a symbolic meaning and a reality that it makes present. Consequently, we say that the sacraments affect what they signify. Using baptism as an example, we would say that the waters of baptism are a symbol or a sign of us dying with Christ and rising again with him for the forgiveness of our sins – but it is not just a symbol, *that is what actually happens*: through baptism we really “die” with Christ and are raised again, and the waters of baptism wash away the stain of sin on our souls. The sign of baptism is death and resurrection; the reality is the forgiveness of sins. It is both a symbol and a reality: it affects what it signifies.

8. The sacraments point us to heaven and help us get there. This goes back to the idea that the sacraments are both signs and realities. The sign or symbol part of each points us to heaven; the reality helps us get there. Here’s the implication of that, though: while nothing that is good, true, and beautiful will ever completely vanish, once we get to heaven we won’t need the sacraments any more, at least not the way we have them here on earth. Think about it for a second: will we need to baptize anyone in heaven? What about confirmation or confession? No, no, and no. While we’re going down this path, Jesus said that we won’t marry or be given in marriage in heaven, why? Not because marriage is bad; in fact, it’s just the opposite: *heaven is the divine wedding feast of the Lamb*, where Christ will marry his bride, the Church! All of heaven is a marriage, so we won’t need the sign any longer. Will we need more vocations to the priesthood in heaven? No, we will have Jesus Christ our great High Priest leading us and teaching us himself. So no more ordinations in heaven either. Okay, but what about the Eucharist? Surely that will still be in heaven, right? It is “the source and summit of the Christian life” (LG 11), the Real Presence of Jesus Christ: body, blood, soul, and divinity. Well, that’s true, but will we need that to unite us to Christ when we are with him in heaven? I don’t know, but it seems to me that if everything else is pointing us to some greater reality that we can’t fathom in our finite minds, then the Eucharist probably is too. My best guess is that while all that is good, true, and beautiful in the sacraments will remain into eternity, the way we experience them on earth will be fundamentally changed in heaven in a way that surpasses anything that you or I could imagine. They are meant to point us to heaven and to help us get there, but they will not “be” there in the way we experience them here on earth.

9. Form and Matter. These are the two indispensable parts of every sacrament, and we’re going to be talking about these at every subsequent session, so make sure you remember them: FORM and MATTER. What are they? Form is, simply, the prayer (or “formula”) said at the respective sacrament. So for instance, in baptism, we have what we call a Trinitarian formula because the form of the sacrament is the words, “I baptize you in the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.” That’s the form. Matter is the stuff of the sacrament. So going back to baptism again, the matter is water. In order

for you to have a valid baptism, you must have water and you must use the Trinitarian formula. Form and matter: words and stuff. Remember that. Every sacrament has both matter and form.

10. Valid v. Invalid / Licit v. Illicit. Okay, technical jargon warning. To say that a sacrament is both valid and licit means that the form and matter were in place, and that the sacrament was performed correctly by the proper minister. A sacrament is invalid if either the form or the matter are missing, or if, in the case of the majority of the sacraments, they are not performed by a validly ordained minister; a sacrament cannot be invalid but licit because if it was invalid, then no sacrament took place. A sacrament is considered illicit if it was validly performed – the form and matter were there – but performed improperly, which in the case baptism, could include the sacrament being performed by someone who is not authorized to administer it. It's easier to understand this by using examples, so picking on baptism again... While anyone, even an atheist, is allowed to baptize someone in danger of death, the ordinary minister of baptism is supposed to be a validly ordained Catholic priest or deacon. That, plus the Trinitarian formula and water, are what is required for a valid and licit baptism. Real life example that comes up more often than I'd like: Grandma is upset that her son or daughter isn't going to have her grandchild baptized, so she baptizes the baby herself during bath time. Now, assuming that she uses the Trinitarian formula and isn't bathing the baby in something other than water, the baptism is valid but illicit (as an aside, PLEASE don't do this). Contrast that with some Protestant denominations. Most of our Protestant brothers and sisters use the Trinitarian formula found in Scripture, meaning that if they were to join the Catholic Church they would not need to be baptized. However, a small handful of churches do their own thing and baptize "in the name of the Creator, the Redeemer, and the Sanctifier." Invalid. We might be tempted to think, "Oh, come on, it's basically the same thing." But is it? In the Trinitarian formula we use the Triune Name of God revealed by Jesus, and more to the point, we use the words that Jesus himself gave to us and told us to use. "Creator, Redeemer, and Sanctifier" are all *titles* that could be improperly and blasphemously applied to *anyone*. So that's out. Invalid. The baptism never happened, and that person, if they were to decide to become Catholic, would need to be baptized. Not "re-baptized," mind you (baptism is a one-time deal), but baptized, because the first one was invalid. Now before everyone starts freaking out, my own baptism took place in a Protestant church, so it was valid... but illicit. It wasn't done by a validly ordained Catholic minister, and I wasn't in danger of death, so it was illicit. That's okay. It counted, and because it wasn't done in the bathtub, there was a record of it taking place. But where the minister really does make a difference comes to bear with the other sacraments, such as confession. So for example, if a person goes to confession with an Anglican priest, even if the form and the matter are both present, the confession is invalid – *it never happened* – because it was not a validly ordained priest administering the sacrament. A simple way to remember the difference between invalid and illicit is this quote from a priest friend of mine from Wales: **"If a sacrament is invalid, Jesus isn't there; if it's illicit, he's there... but he's pissed."** Before we move on, I want to make sure that we don't become overly obsessed with this every time we go to a liturgy. We need to be aware, and we ought to be paying attention when the sacraments are being celebrated, but we don't need to be watching everything like the heretic police. The overwhelming majority of sacraments performed in the Church are both valid and licit, but it is good for us to understand what that entails. So be attentive, but above all, be prayerful.

11. The Church is the “New Israel.” This is an important hermeneutical point (recall that “hermeneutics” refers to the study and interpretation of Sacred Scripture) to keep in mind throughout all of this, because it will help us unlock the OT references to Jesus Christ and the sacraments, and see how they were foreshadowed in God’s plan of salvation from the very beginning.

12. The Book of Exodus can be read as a microcosm of the sacramental life of the Church, and the life of each individual Christian. While there is no reason to think that the events of Exodus are just allegories or invented myths, neither is there any reason to think that it is only a record of historical events. This is a classic instance of “both/and,” where what happened to the children of Israel in Egypt and following is a powerful foreshadowing of the work of Jesus as he established the New Covenant through his ministry, but especially through his death and resurrection. So at the risk of ruining the surprise of “where do we see the sacraments in the Old Testament?”, let’s take a look at Exodus. And so you know, even if we find all seven sacraments in the story of the Exodus of Israel, there are still plenty of other OT and NT references for each of them, so in future classes we’ll tend towards ignoring Exodus.

1. Moses’ name (“Drawn from the water”) and the circumstances of his birth: Exodus 2
2. Moses’ commissioning by God in the wilderness: Exodus 7
3. Signs and wonders, the first nine plagues of Egypt: Exodus 7-10
4. Institution of the Passover (*Pascha*) and the tenth plague: Exodus 12-13
5. Pillar of cloud by day and a pillar of fire by night: Exodus 13, Numbers 14
6. Crossing of the Red Sea: Exodus 14
7. Manna from Heaven: Exodus 16
8. Water from the rock (Meribah and Massah): Exodus 17
9. Ten Commandments given to the people of Israel through Moses on Mt. Sinai: Exodus 20
10. Aaron and his sons set apart and appointed (ordained) priests of God: Exodus 28
11. Wandering through the wilderness for 40 years (one generation): Numbers 13-14
12. Moses heals the people with the bronze serpent: Numbers 21
13. Crossing of the Jordan and entering the Promised Land under Joshua (“God’s salvation”): Joshua 3
14. If you noticed that marriage wasn’t explicitly foreshadowed, well done; that sacrament is *implicitly* foreshadowed in the story, but more explicitly mentioned by the prophets (Isaiah 62; Hosea 9; etc.) as God over and over again declares his desire to “marry” his people and proves this through his faithfulness to them and to the covenant He made with their ancestors.

Looking ahead to next week and beyond:

The Sacraments can be distilled into three categories:

1. Sacraments of Initiation – Baptism, Eucharist, and Confirmation
2. Sacraments of Healing – Anointing of the Sick and Penance/Reconciliation
3. Sacraments of Service – Holy Orders and Holy Matrimony