

SACRAMENTS

An elderly couple was enjoying an Alaskan cruise, a fiftieth wedding anniversary gift from their children, when the woman suddenly realized that her wedding band was missing. She went into panic mode, trying to remember the last time she had seen it. Was it in the pool or Jacuzzi? Had she left it in a restroom at a port? She asked everyone to search; some children even dove into the pool to try to find the missing treasure. Trying to be reassuring, her husband reminded her that the ring was not very expensive—they couldn't afford much fifty years ago—and he promised a new, lovely ring when they docked.

The woman cried; no other ring could ever be the same! This thin silver band represented fifty years of life together: their initial love that had grown and deepened; the happiness and tribulations of raising their children; the joy of grandchildren; the shared meals and holiday traditions that bound their family together; the little arguments that called for forgiveness; the challenges of illnesses; and the sadness of becoming family elders when their own parents died. That inexpensive ring symbolized their entire journey together as a married couple.

A General Understanding of Sacraments

Like the ring, sacraments are visible signs that point beyond themselves to a greater, invisible reality. But sacraments are more. Sacraments are efficacious signs—they effect or bring about what they symbolize because Christ acts in the sacraments. They freely give grace, a share in the divine life. When we respond to this grace, our union with Christ deepens and increases. Sacraments are encounters with the living God: Father, Son and Spirit.

Liturgical life in the Church centers on the sacraments, which were inaugurated by Christ and given to the Church. Sacraments make use of many symbols, ritual actions, and specific formulas. All of the sacraments include a Liturgy of the Word, and many are celebrated within the Mass. The seven sacraments are:

- The Sacraments of Initiation: **baptism, confirmation, and Eucharist**, which initiate and incorporate persons into the Body of Christ, the Church; strengthen the baptized to carry out the mission of the Christ; and nourish them with the Body and Blood of Christ.
- The Sacraments of Healing: **penance and anointing of the sick**, in which Christ forgives sins and heals and reconciles people to God, to each other, and to the Church.
- The sacraments at the service of Communion: **matrimony and holy orders**, which build up the Church by conferring a special mission to witness and to serve.

As a catechist, you will undoubtedly teach your students about several of the sacraments each year. You may even prepare

your young people to celebrate one or more of the sacraments. Your catechesis should always be appropriate to the age and maturity of the students. The sacramental formation you develop will be built on and amplified in succeeding years.

In providing catechesis for the sacraments, you will want to be familiar with the baptismal catechumenate, which has been called the “inspiration for all catechesis” (NDC 115). The catechumenate is the process by which the Church initiates adults and unbaptized children who have reached the age of reason.

The catechumenate process fosters lifelong catechesis and includes several rites and rituals. It encompasses four periods:

- **Evangelization**, in which inquiry about the faith and initial conversion takes place;
- **Catechumenate**, devoted to understanding the Sunday readings, to a systematic catechesis, and to discernment of readiness of those preparing for sacraments.
- **Purification**, usually coinciding with Lent, a time of prayer and the Scrutinies in which those who will be initiated are invited to turn from sinfulness and embrace a deeper relationship with the Lord.
- **Mystagogy**, following the reception of the sacraments of initiation, when the newly initiated receive extended catechesis and ongoing formation on living the Christian life.

Allowing the catechumenate to inspire catechesis means that our catechesis encompasses the elements of the process: invitation to conversion, prayer, systematic study of the faith, emphasis on Scripture, ritual, discernment of readiness, ongoing formation, and involvement of the community.

The Sacrament of Baptism

Baptism is the foundational sacrament in which people are initiated and incorporated into the life and mission of the Church. Through immersion or the pouring of water, the initiates die to sin and rise to new life in Christ while the trinitarian formula—"I baptize you in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit"—is prayed. Baptism cleanses original sin and personal sin and grants sanctifying grace, "...a habitual gift of God's own divine life, a stable and supernatural disposition that enables us to live with God and to act by his love" (*USCCA* 514).

The newly baptized person is anointed with sacred chrism (a perfumed oil consecrated by the bishop), sharing in the priesthood of Christ and in his prophetic and royal mission. The usual minister of baptism is a priest or deacon, but anyone can baptize in the case of an emergency. Baptism, the doorway to the other sacraments, imprints an indelible or permanent character and is only received once. But Christians continue to draw on the grace of baptism as they live out their lives in discipleship and mission.

In the Catholic Church, persons are most often baptized as infants, and parents profess their own faith and speak for their child. To help them prepare, parents and godparents receive formation in order to understand the rite of baptism and their responsibilities in raising the child in the faith. It is customary for the candidate for baptism to have at least one godparent, who must be a fully initiated, practicing Catholic, to support them throughout their faith journey.

Adults are initiated into the Catholic faith after lengthy formation in the catechumenate process (the rite of Christian

initiation of adults). They receive the sacraments of baptism, confirmation, and Eucharist, normally at the Easter Vigil. Persons baptized in another Christian faith tradition who wish to become Catholic are prepared and received into full communion of the Catholic Church. These persons are not re-baptized, but make a profession of faith and receive confirmation and Eucharist.

The Sacrament of Confirmation

Confirmation deepens the grace of baptism and strengthens the gift of the Holy Spirit that was given initially at baptism. In confirmation, "...wisdom, understanding, counsel, fortitude, knowledge, piety, and fear of the Lord" (*CCC* 1831) are increased, so that those who are confirmed are more firmly rooted in Christ. Confirmation confers the fruits of the Spirit (see *Galatians* 5:22-23), which empower recipients to carry on the mission of Christ as disciples.

At confirmation, the candidates renew their baptismal vows. The bishop, ordinary minister of confirmation, imposes hands and anoints the candidates with sacred chrism and prays that they will be sealed with the Holy Spirit. Confirmation imprints an indelible character and is received only once.

The Sacrament of the Eucharist

The Eucharist, "...source and summit of the Christian life" (*LG* 11) completes initiation. In the Eucharist, Jesus Christ is really present, wholly and entirely, God and man, under the appearances of bread and wine (see *NDC* 124). The Eucharist is an act of praise and thanksgiving, a sign of unity, and a communion with the Trinity.

Given to the Church at the Last Supper when Christ offered his body and blood to his disciples, the Eucharist is the sacrificial memorial in which Christ's death on the cross is made present. It is a sharing in the life, death and resurrection of Christ and an anticipation of the heavenly banquet. This sacred meal provides nourishment for the Church and strengthens individuals on their lifelong journey of faith. The Eucharist can be received often, even daily, by those who are free from serious sin. Through the Eucharist, venial sins are forgiven and help is provided to avoid serious or mortal sin.

The essential signs of the sacrament of the Eucharist are unleavened wheat bread and wine. Through the power of the Holy Spirit and the words of the eucharistic prayer spoken by the priest, the bread and wine really and substantially become the Body and Blood of Christ. This is called transubstantiation. "When we receive Communion, we need to remember that we are not changing Christ into ourselves. Jesus is transforming us into himself" (*USCCA 227*).

The basic structure of the eucharistic liturgy or the Mass that we celebrate today has remained unchanged since the second century. It consists of introductory rites, the Liturgy of the Word (including readings and homily), the Liturgy of the Eucharist (including preparation of gifts, the eucharistic prayer, and Communion), and concluding rites. We understand that it is our privileged obligation to actively participate in the celebration of Mass each Sunday.

The Sacrament of Penance

Before he ascended into heaven, Jesus gave power to his Apostles to forgive sins and to carry on his ministry of forgiveness. In the sacrament of penance, sins committed after

baptism are forgiven, and sinners are reconciled to God. This sacrament emphasizes the unconditional love and mercy of God, who seeks out sinners and draws them to himself like a good shepherd. The sacrament grants forgiveness for personal sin when the penitent expresses sorrow.

Penance is normally celebrated either in an individual rite or a communal rite. Both rites include: a Scripture reading, the individual confession of sins to a priest, a penance (prayer, self-denial, or a work of mercy) given by the priest to the penitent, an expression of sorrow and act of contrition by the penitent, and absolution given by the priest. There are usually several priests available to hear individual confessions at a communal celebration. We are encouraged to receive this sacrament of healing often, especially when we have committed serious sin.

The Sacrament of Anointing of the Sick

In the sacrament of anointing of the sick, the Church continues Christ's healing power and expresses concern for those who are sick in mind, body, or spirit. Any baptized person who is seriously or chronically ill, elderly, or undergoing surgery should receive this sacrament. By the laying on of hands, the anointing with oil, and the prayers of the priest, the sick person is united with the suffering Christ and receives strength. Through this sacrament, which is only administered by bishops or priests, sins are forgiven; physical, mental, and spiritual health may be restored. When a person is dying, the priest administers the last rites, which include penance, anointing, and Eucharist (called *Viaticum*, or food for the journey).

The Sacrament of Matrimony

In matrimony, a baptized man and a baptized woman freely give themselves in a permanent covenant based on the love of Christ and love of each other, expressed in mutual self-giving. In this sacred relationship, couples vow love and fidelity to each other for the length of their lives and willingly accept children as gifts from God. This sacrament, which the bride and groom administer to each other as they exchange vows and rings, establishes a permanent, indissoluble unity. The priest or deacon is the witness for the Church, as couples give their consent in the presence of two additional witnesses and the community.

The Sacrament of Holy Orders

While baptism confers a common priesthood upon all Church members, the Church calls forth some men to receive ministerial priesthood in the sacrament of holy orders. Through the laying on of hands and consecration by a bishop, baptized men are ordained for service to Christ and to his Church in one of three orders: deacon, priest, or bishop. Each order has its particular roles and functions, but all share in the saving action of Jesus through teaching, governing, and sanctifying.

PRACTICAL HELPS FOR THE CATECHIST

Some ways to increase your students' understanding of the important role of sacraments in the life of the Church are:

- Let young people experience the major sacramental symbols. Bring water, oil, bread, wine (grape juice), and discuss the qualities and everyday uses of these elements. Place older

students in groups and have them research and present their symbol to the class.

- As you study a sacrament, allow children to dramatize it. Assign different roles and include the signs, symbols, and ritual actions of the sacrament.
- Suggest that parents accompany their children to a celebration of baptism, confirmation, anointing, ordination, or matrimony and discuss what they all observed.
- Invite families to an upcoming penance celebration and a eucharistic liturgy. Ask parents to help their children learn the Mass responses.
- Teach students the order of the Mass by creating a game. Write the names of the parts of the Mass (Lord Have Mercy, Gloria, Gospel, etc.) on individual 3x5 cards. Shuffle them, and let students put them in order. Use pictures of the major parts of the Mass for younger children.
- Use an age-appropriate video of the celebration of sacraments to help students understand the celebration. Make a video of different sacraments being celebrated at your parish.
- Ask members of the parish community to become prayer partners for students who will be receiving a sacrament this year.