

The Seven Sacraments of the Catholic Church

The history of human salvation is the history of the way God came to men. The first step on this way was the bridging of the gulf separating God and man in the person of the one Mediator, Jesus Christ, and by his work of redemption. By means of this church, Christ makes his grace available to all. Only in this application of redemption to mankind is the redemptive action of Christ completed. The doctrine of the sacraments is the doctrine of the second part of God's way of salvation to us. It deals with the holy signs which Christ instituted as the vehicles of his grace.

The Church teaches that there are seven sacraments. They were instituted by Christ and given to the Church to administer. They are necessary for salvation. The sacraments are the vehicles of grace which they convey. They are validly administered by the carrying out of the sign with the proper intention. Not all are equally qualified to administer all the sacraments. The validity of the sacrament is independent of the worthiness of the minister. Sacramentals are instituted by the Church and are effective by virtue of the Church's intercession. Institution and alteration of them is reserved to the Holy See.

The Sacrament of Baptism

Baptism is the sacrament that frees man from original sin and from personal guilt, that makes him a member of Christ and His Church. It is thus the door to a new and supernatural life.

The Sacrament of Penance

If the Church is to fulfill in its entirety her task of saving mankind, she needs the power to forgive sins. It is a power essentially different from her mission to preach the Gospel and baptize. In baptism, indeed all sins and the punishment due to them are remitted. Baptism is the first justification. But the first justification is grace, and which asks of the person baptized no more than that he turn away from sin and turn in faith to Christ.

The Sacrament of the Holy Eucharist

The doctrine of the Holy Eucharist consists of that of the Eucharist sacrifice, the sacrificial meal and the sacrificial food, or it express it otherwise, it consists of the doctrine of the Mass, of Communion, and of the Real Presence. There is no presence of Christ in the Blessed Sacrament that is not meant first and foremost as food for the faithful people, and there is no sacramental union with Christ in Holy Communion that is not to be thought of as a sacrificial meal: *"For as often as you shall eat this bread, and drink the chalice, you shall show the death of the Lord, until he come"* (! Cor. 11:26). The Eucharist meal can only be prepared in the sacrifice of the Mass.

The Sacrament of Confirmation

The sacrament of confirmation completes the sacrament of baptism. If baptism is the sacrament of re-birth to a new and supernatural life, confirmation is the sacrament of maturity and coming of age. The real confession of Christ consists in this “that the whole man submits himself to Truth, in the judgement of his understanding, in the submission of his will and in the consecration of his whole power of love ... To do this, poor-spirited man is only able when he has been confirmed by God’s grace.

The Sacrament of Matrimony

Matrimony is the marriage contract between Christians raised by Christ to the dignity of a sacrament. The theological and dogmatic treatment of this sacrament does not look very much to its main features of unity and indissolubility which are basic characteristics of all marriage in natural ethics; they are rather premises, though of course they attain greater significance and depth and stability in marriage as a sacrament. The fact, then, that these features take up a considerable amount of space in church documents must not be allowed to hide the theological content of this sacrament which comes to us from revelation and belongs to the supernatural order. As a sacrament matrimony is entirely oriented on man’s supernatural goal. Matrimony and order are the two sacraments which not only serve the individual in reaching this goal but are there for the benefit of the community. Matrimony is there for the mutual help of the spouses and the increase of the people of God. Devotion to his twofold end is the way of salvation for married couple, a way sanctified by the sacrament. *“Yet she shall be saved through childbearing; if she continue in faith, and love, and sanctification, with sobriety.”* (1 Tim. 2:15.)

The Sacrament of Holy Orders

The supreme task which Christ had to fulfill was his priestly work of atonement which he completed as mediator between God and man. By the union in himself of humanity and divinity Christ is by nature the mediator. As a man from among men, Christ is our mediator with the Father; yet he is also capable of offering a worthy sacrifice to God because, by virtue of the union of his human nature with the Second Person of the Godhead, his human actions have infinite value. In this fullest sense, the priesthood belongs to Christ alone.

The Sacrament of the Anointing of the Sick

As to Anointing by conferring the Holy Spirit completes the sacrament of baptism, so extreme unction is the complement and completion of penance. Penance restores the justification lost by sin, extreme unction takes away the infirmity left by sin; it *“removes that state which might be an obstacle to the clothing with glory of the resurrection”*; and, as every sacrament makes us men in some respect like Christ, *“so we become by extreme unction like the risen Christ because it will be given to the dying as a sign of the glory to come in which everything mortal will be stripped from the elect”* (Albertus Magnus.) According to the teaching of great theologians, the holy anointing makes the man who stands at the threshold of eternity and loyally co-operates with the grace of the sacrament ready to enter directly upon the Beatific Vision.