

Ministering to Catholics

The Sacraments

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Perhaps the most significant part of the religious experience of a Catholic is found in the sacraments. Today we will discuss why the sacraments are so important to Catholicism, what the problems are with them and how to serve Catholics from a biblical perspective of them.

1. The definition of sacrament

Over the course of many centuries, the Catholic Church replaced the biblical teaching of salvation by grace through faith, apart from works, with a sacramental system that serves as the means of salvation. In Catholicism, a sacrament is a means of grace that God has established that brings salvation to those who participate with the proper disposition. Pope John Paul II wrote in his Catechisms, “The Church affirms that for believers the sacraments of the New Covenant are necessary for salvation.”

Pope John Paul reaffirmed the statement from the Council of Trent in the sixteenth century when he declared, “if anyone says that the sacraments of the New Law are not necessary for salvation, but superfluous, and that without them, or without the desire for them, men obtain of God, through faith alone, the grace of justification (though all the sacraments are not necessary for every individual), let him be anathema.”

The sacrament is considered to be a means of grace regardless of the personal holiness of the person administering it but if the recipient lacks a proper disposition, the sacrament is rendered ineffective.

Roman Catholicism has seven sacraments, each with a specific purpose. Each of the seven are detailed as follows:

2. The sacrament of baptism

According to the Catholic Church, baptism is believed to reverse the effects of the sin of Adam. It does this by removing original sin and replacing it with sanctifying grace, bringing the person to become a member of the Church.

“Through Baptism we are freed from sin and reborn as sons of God; we become members of Christ, and incorporated into the Church and made sharers in her mission: “Baptism is the sacrament of regeneration through water in the word.” (Catechism of the Catholic Church).

Because of the view of baptism, it is done as soon as possible, which obviously results in infant baptism. Indeed, when a child is in danger of dying, Catholics are required to seek baptism. If no priest or deacon is available, any Catholic is authorized to baptize the dying child. These emergency baptisms require a protocol that involves water poured, the proper wording and intent that is consistent with Catholicism.

Baptism is the starting point for justification, not faith. The act of baptism duly administered by the Catholic Church is the instrumental cause of justification, or being made right with God, through baptism.

Because of the very small number of Catholic converts, the vast majority of Catholics were born into the Church and were baptized at a very young age, before they can even remember. The result of this is most Catholics go through life with a degree of confidence through their baptism.

Accordingly, many Catholics find it difficult to accept the biblical understanding of baptism, which requires belief as a prerequisite. They often wrestle with a willingness to be baptized after they believe in Christ because it seems to invalidate their Catholic baptism. This false hope with infant baptism undermines the baptism that the Lord calls His people to obey.

This is an important conversation to have with those Catholics who come to faith in Christ since it brings about the issue of the authority of Scripture over the teachings of the Church. Leading a Catholic through a study of every mention of baptism in the Bible will help them to see the purpose of it, to identify us with Christ as an initial step of faith.

In addition, some Catholics are reluctant to be baptized after they believe because of their perceived loyalty to their family. This again is an important moment for the exercise of faith. The choice to follow the teaching of the Scripture even over the opposition from family is a part of living the Christian life (Matthew 10:35-38).

3. The sacrament of the Eucharist

The Eucharist, also known as Holy Communion, is the “Sacrament of Sacraments.” It is considered to be the body and blood of Christ and unites one more closely with God. It is to provide spiritual food for the Catholic and is given after the bread and wine are “consecrated” during the Mass by a priest. At the moment of consecration, the wafer and wine is said to become the body and blood of Christ. Christ is “truly, really, wholly and continuously present” in the elements. This doctrine is known as “transubstantiation.” The Church sees a literal understanding of the words “Take, eat; this is my body” by Jesus in Matthew 26:26 for support. Receiving the Eucharist is why many devout Catholics attend Mass daily.

This sacrament is said to not only bring the recipient into union with Christ, nourishing the soul, but is also the punishment of venial (or lesser) sins.

The view of the Lord's Supper in the early church was varied. Quite a number of early church fathers viewed it as the literal body and blood of Christ (Cyril of Jerusalem, Irenaeus of Lyons, Chrysostom, Ambrose, etc). Yet many viewed the bread and wine as symbolic only (Augustine, Tertullian, Clement of Alexandria, Origen). One thing is clear, there was no consensus of the early church fathers on the Eucharist. In fact, the views of leading church fathers such as Augustine were in opposition to transubstantiation but were nevertheless condemned by the Council of Trent in 1551.

Therefore, the doctrine of the Eucharist is supposed to be accepted by Catholics on the basis of church teaching alone, regardless of any physical evidence and regardless of the lack of unanimous consent of the church fathers.

Participating in the sacrament of the Eucharist requires (1) receiving the First Holy Communion, usually a special ceremony conducted by a priest; (2) either not being conscious of any grave sin or else having taken part in the sacrament of confession; and (3) not eating for at least an hour prior.

Quite often, non-Catholics misrepresent the Catholic belief when speaking with knowledgeable Catholics. While the wafer becomes the body of Christ in a literal meaning, using the word "physically" may be objected to since it infers that Christ is limited to a local area. Likewise, Christ is not understood as being "re-sacrificed" for the Eucharist is not understood to be another sacrifice of Christ but rather it "re-presents" or "makes present" the holy sacrifice of Christ. Catholicism considers the Eucharist a mystery that is not apparent to the sense or to the intellect, so explaining it is challenging. Taking care with words will allow us to not offend those with whom we speak.

Surveys showing that half of all US Catholics are unaware of the doctrine of transubstantiation show the need to understand how much a person may understand of the Eucharist as we discuss this doctrine. In practice, most Catholics receive communion although it depends on the background of the person. According to the Pew Research Center, white Catholics are more than twice as likely to receive communion every time they attend mass as compared with Hispanic Catholics. Also, college graduates are twice as likely to receive communion every time they attend mass as compared to those with less formal education.

Furthermore, although the Church considers those cohabitating or remarried without obtaining an annulment forbidden to receive communion, nevertheless, one-third of these Catholics who attend Mass weekly take communion each time. This shows the lack of respect for the Eucharist among many modern Catholics.

The errors of this sacrament are many. Catholicism views the body and blood of Christ existing in every fragment of consecrated bread and wine in every Catholic Church worldwide (contra Hebrews 10:12-13). The Catholic Church believes the consecrated bread and wine are due worship (contra Exodus 20:4-5; Isaiah 42:8). The Catholic Church sees the Last Supper as a real sacrifice for sins (contra 1 Peter 2:24), with the Eucharist as a means of forgiveness (contra Ephesians 2:8-9).

4. The sacrament of confirmation

These first three sacraments are considered sacraments of initiation, for they are the means by which all Catholics are to pass through their Catholic experience.

While Catholicism has misconstrued baptism and communion, at least those practices are at least found in the Bible. The other five sacraments have no biblical basis at all. Catholicism weakly looks to Acts 8:14-17 to support the sacrament of Confirmation.

According to the Catechism of the Catholic Church, the purpose of confirmation is to “perfect Baptismal grace” and to “strengthen our bond with the Church.” Confirmation is done after completing a preparatory course of study, typically as a teenager. It is intended to solidify one’s faith to defend and promote the Catholic Church.

During the first millennium, confirmation was done closely after baptism, usually on infants under one year of age. As the years went on the age for confirmation increased to the point of a child arriving at the age of reasoning ability, often seven years old. In 1932, official permission was granted to allow confirmation to take place after First Holy Communion, resulting in the practice of delaying Confirmation until up to the mid-teen years in the United States.

The role of the Holy Spirit is confused in this sacrament. The Catechism states, “it is the sacrament which gives the Holy Spirit” and “Confirmation, like Baptism, imprints a spiritual mark or indelible character on the Christian’s soul; for this reason one can receive this sacrament only once in one’s life. Indeed, the bishop when anointing the forehead speaks the words “be sealed with the gift of the Holy Spirit.”

The truth is that the Holy Spirit is received upon faith in Christ according to Ephesians 1:13-14, uniting us to Christ’s body, the universal church (1 Corinthians 12:13). This is the act of God, not man.

We should not assume that someone who has been through the confirmation process is highly committed to the Catholic Church or even that knowledgeable about it. For most, this is merely a religious endeavor practiced out of a sense of obligation.

5. The sacrament of penance

Penance is known as “confession” and is for the forgiveness of serious sins that were committed after baptism and restores the sanctifying grace. It is received along with “First Holy Communion,” typically around the age of eight years old. The reason that these two are joined is because a person who has committed sin and without penance is forbidden to receive the Eucharist.

The early church practiced confession publicly and there was no role of a priest involved or acts required for forgiveness. By the third century certain restitutions were expected upon confession of more serious sin.

Private confession replaced public confession by the eighth century but there were disagreements of the role of the priest and the nature of penance until the thirteenth century. The Council of Trent detailed penance in opposition to the teaching by the Reformers, which was instrumental to developing the sacrament of today.

Forgiveness is considered an important part of the sacrament of penance. According to the Catechism, "It is called the sacrament of forgiveness, since by the priest's sacramental absolution God grants the penitent 'pardon and peace.'"

As baptism is viewed as necessary for the infant born with original sin, penance is viewed as necessary for the removal of moral sin of a baptized Catholic. However, there are steps that are required for this forgiveness:

a. Confession of sin

This is why Catholics refer to this sacrament as "confession" for the Catholic discloses his sins to a priest. This is done after making the sign of the cross and saying words such as "Forgive me, Father, for I have sinned. My last confession was ___ days/months/years ago" followed by the kind of sin and the number of times committed.

b. Contrition of the sinner

The person must demonstrate sorrow for his sins and a determination to avoid sinning in the future. This contrition is usually expressed in the prayer called the Act of Contrition after the prayer:

"My God, I am sorry for my sins with all my heart. In choosing to do wrong and failing to do good, I have sinned against you, whom I should love above all things. I firmly intend, with your help, to do penance, to sin no more, and to avoid whatever leads me to sin. Our Savior Jesus Christ suffered and died for us; in his name, my God, have mercy. Amen."

c. Judgment by the priest

While Catholicism teaches that God alone forgives sin, He chose to do so through the Church. Therefore, the priest evaluates the nature of the sin to measure the guilt involved, along with the contriteness of the sinner. Based upon this, the priest decides whether or not the sinner is pardoned.

d. Absolution by the priest

When the sinner is absolved he is set free from the consequences of his guilt. The Church teaches, "the form of the sacrament of penance, in which its effectiveness chiefly lies, is expressed in those words of the minister, "I absolve you from your sins." This frees the sinner from eternal punishment.

e. Penance by the sinner

The final requirement for forgiveness is that a sinner must make satisfaction to God. According to the Catechism, “Raised up from sin, the sinner must still recover his full spiritual health by doing something more to make amends for the sin: he must “make satisfaction for” or “expiate” his sins. This satisfaction is called “penance.”

According to the nature of the sins, the types of penance may vary but the typical penance is to recite a certain number of prayers, such as the “Our Father” and the “Hail Mary.” Other deeds might be fasting, giving to the poor, serving in some way or self-denial.

Participation in confession is at a low. Only 43% of Catholics who attend mass regularly say they go at least once each year. About one-third does not go at all. This is in spite of Catholic exhortation to go to confession often.

Because the view of the church is that the sacrament of penance is “the only ordinary way by which the faithful person who is aware of serious sin is reconciled with God and with the Church” (Canon Law 960), there are a great many Catholics burdened with guilt.

It is truly good news when a Catholic learns the forgiveness of Christ through faith, without confession to a priest. The biblical truth that Christ’s death completely absolved all sin, past, present and future completely apart from any work of penance on our part brings true spiritual freedom. Catholicism has set its members up to respond to the good news of the gospel and a great many are doing so.

6. The sacrament of the anointing of the sick

Penance and anointing the sick are considered the two sacraments of healing.

This sacrament used to be referred to as “extreme unction” and its purpose is to provide spiritual and physical strength for those seriously ill or near death. It also is said to prepare the soul in case of death.

It typically is administered along with penance and the Eucharist in case of death. Together these three sacraments are called the “last rites.”

The Catechism teaches the broad range of usefulness of this sacrament, “the special grace of the sacrament of the Anointing of the Sick has as its effects: the uniting of the sick person to the passion of Christ, for his own good and that of the whole Church; the strengthening, peace and courage to endure in a Christian manner the sufferings of illness or old age; the forgiveness of sins, if the sick person was not able to obtain it through the sacrament of Penance; the restoration of health, if it is conducive to the salvation of his soul; the preparation for passing over to eternal life.”

This sacrament is administered even on sick people who have lost consciousness. It is not for the dead, but if the priest is unsure he is to administer the sacrament. It is the sacrament that is viewed as effectual, regardless of the person's disposition.

James 5:14-15 is cited as a proof text for this sacrament. Since the discussion of this text is beyond the scope of this class, suffice it to say that those in need ought to have spiritual truth and care brought to them, not a sacrament done to them.

7. The sacrament of the matrimony

This is the Catholic marriage ceremony. Through this sacrament the union of husband and wife is considered to be made holy with special grace to help in married life. It was first listed as a sacrament in 1184 at the council of Verona and subsequent councils agreed. The practice of conducting marriages has been a challenge for the Church from the beginning, but in particular once it became a sacrament. The marriage between two baptized Catholics has always been the ideal within Catholicism. But there has been a variety of perspectives with so-called "mixed marriages.

a. A marriage between a Catholic and a baptized non-Catholic Christian

The Church long considered marriages between Catholics and so-called heretics to be invalid. With the Reformation in the sixteenth century, the problem of this type of mixed marriage grew. Over time in different areas, marriages between Catholics and Protestants became allowed. The code of Canon law 1124 states that Catholics are forbidden to marry non-Catholic Christians "without express permission of the competent authority." In practice, this is now permitted without hesitancy.

The condition for granting permission to marry a non-Catholic is that the Catholic person must not seek to defect from the Church and to do all in his or her power to ensure that all children are baptized and brought up in the Catholic Church. The non-Catholic is to be made aware of this obligation on the part of the Catholic. As long as the non-Catholic is a baptized Christian, the Church views this now as a sacramental marriage.

b. A marriage between a Catholic and a non-Christian

The church has typically viewed marriage to a non-Christian as invalid unless a person came to faith already married. The prohibition became codified by the twelfth century as part of canon law where all such marriages were seen as invalid unless a dispensation was granted, known as a "disparity of cult" (that is, difference in worship).

Such marriages today are recognized as valid but "natural" rather than sacramental. These marriages, like all Catholic marriages, cannot be dissolved by the will of the couple or by the action of the government. However, Rome is able to allow a divorce in such cases when it deems that it benefits the faith of the Catholic person to dissolve the marriage.

c. Annulment

Annulment, technically called a “decree of nullity,” has become common among Catholics in the modern age. An annulment declares that the marriage was invalid at the time of the vows. Thus the marriage is not dissolved but rather it never existed.

There are conditions for a valid marriage, including being old enough (16 for males, 14 for females), being fertile, being unmarried, an intent of monogamy, an intent “good of each other,” not being ordained, having an ability to reason, being free of fear and force, and contracted in the presence of a priest or his delegate and at least two witnesses (using the “Form of the Celebration of Marriage”).

In spite of a wedding ceremony and a belief that there was a marriage, if some aspect of a marriage bond was somehow lacking, the Catholic view is that a sacramental bond never existed and an annulment is granted.

Annulments are granted commonly and practically speaking, it is the Catholic way for couples to separate from a marriage. Annulments are granted to non-Catholic marriages when a non-Catholic wishes to marry a Catholic. The process of an annulment can take a few weeks for simple situations to eighteen months of examination. There are documents to be filed and usually fees to be paid.

The Catholic view of sacramental marriage results in a large number of Catholics who are divorced and remarried but forbidden from receiving communion by the Church. This status is fixed until an annulment of the first marriage or the couple commits to abstinence. With the number of divorces in existence, the opportunity to understand and receive true forgiveness is a message that may resonate with many people.

8. The sacrament of the holy orders

Holy Orders is the sacrament where men are made bishops, priests or deacons. Matrimony and holy orders are considered the two sacraments of service.

No New Testament passage speaks of a professional minister with a title of “priest.” The earliest church fathers used the word to refer to only the Old Testament priests or to Christ as priest. The first reference of the word “priest” to refer to a Christian minister was Origen, a church father from the third century. Also in the third century we find the first formal ordination spoken of.

By the fourth century the priesthood was commonly understood to refer to those in the work of ministry as opposed to laymen. The lifting of the persecution of the church to a favorable status by Constantine in 313 AD gave Christians more ability to function in professional capacities. With Augustine in the early fifth century we see the rise of the formally educated class of priests.

The position of priest dates much earlier than the Roman Catholic concept of the sacerdotal function of the priest. Sacerdotal (from the Latin word for priest) means the involvement of a priest for the propitiation for sin. This function of the priest as mediator on behalf of man for the forgiveness of sin was connected to the development of the Eucharist as the sacrifice of Christ. There is a parallel in the development of the concept of a priest as the consecrator of the Eucharist, the role of the priest in the sacrament of penance and the sacrament of holy orders.

As there were conflicting views of the Eucharist over the centuries, the development of the priesthood in its present sense did not appear formally as a sacrament until the infamous Council of Trent in the sixteenth century. By this time the function of the priest as conferring the grace of God was well established.

The function of the priest is described by the Second Vatican Council as, “the ministry of priests, the spiritual sacrifice of the faithful is made perfect in union with the sacrifice of Christ, the sole Mediator. Through the hands of the priests and in the name of the whole Church, the Lord’s sacrifice is offered in the Eucharist in an unbloody and sacramental manner until He Himself returns.”

The New Testament says nothing about a special group of men who are set apart as priests. Indeed, the very concept of a special priesthood was set aside in Christ, “For when the priesthood is changed, of necessity there takes place a change of law also” (Hebrews 7:12ff.). As Christ is the end of the law for everyone who believes (Romans 10:4) and with the end of the law came the end of the priesthood.

The New Testament teaches that all believers are priests (1 Peter 2:9). The concept of a recognition of certain men for church leadership (elders and deacons) exists (1 Timothy 3, Titus 1) but not in a mediatory capacity.

Catholics have become increasingly reluctant to participate in confession to a priest, and the growing awareness of priestly behavior has removed some of the spirituality from the position.

9. Conclusion

The practice of the Roman Catholic sacramental system is founded upon a works oriented view of salvation. While people participate in most of these sacraments with much thought (or any thought with infant baptism), the underlying impression is that forgiveness is connected to the work of baptism, confession, receiving communion, etc.

We ought to be moved to help Catholics we know to understand the grace of God and the freedom that comes by faith to lift the burden of religious obligation. May we take every opportunity to serve the Lord in each case the Lord brings our way.