

Doctrinal Themes: Sacraments

Introduction

This segment is meant to help you reflect on the mystery of the Sacraments. It will also point out how to approach the mystery of the Sacraments with your group. Just follow the outline. Begin by reflecting or journaling on the first question. Watch the video *Theological Foundations: Sacraments*, and note how the explanation sheds light on the topic for your own understanding. Then read the article “Sacraments” and write down your responses to the reflection questions.

First Question

Describe a meaningful sacramental celebration you were a part of in the past year. What made it meaningful?

Article: Sacraments

Read the following article and respond to the questions:

In the sixteenth century, the Council of Trent defined sacraments as outward signs of inner grace, instituted by Christ for our sanctification. This understanding was indeed well-established, dating from the writings of Saint Augustine in the fourth century. In modern times, the Second Vatican Council affirmed the great importance of the Sacraments in Christian life. “The purpose of the sacraments is to sanctify men, to build up the body of Christ, and, finally, to give worship to God; because they are signs, they also instruct,” the Council taught (*Sacrosanctum Concilium*, 59). The Council went on to say that the Sacraments “nourish, strengthen, and express” faith, and lead

to a life of charity (SC, 59).

The word for sacrament in Greek is *mysterion*, which is often translated “mystery,” but literally means “a truth whispered.” The word *mysterion* suggests that the signs of the Sacraments “whisper” to us great truths about God. Through the Sacraments, we become aware of the presence and action of the God we cannot see. Sacraments do not exhaust God’s mystery, but allow us to draw near to it and be transformed by it.

The word for sacrament in Latin is *sacramentum*, which means “oath.” In classical antiquity, this term referred to symbolic gestures that committed people to future action. A soldier’s declaration of allegiance was a *sacramentum*. When two persons made an agreement, the *sacramentum* was a sum of money set aside and forfeited by anyone who failed to keep their part of the bargain. The Christian view of sacrament took shape in this cultural context. It is not surprising therefore that the Sacraments make many references to faithfulness and covenant. They have been called “the sacraments of the New Covenant” (CCC 1091). Sacraments are effective signs of God’s fidelity and love, and a pledge of our future inheritance.

In the course of human history, God formed a relationship with his chosen people. Special signs of God’s love arose naturally out of this relationship. Israel developed sacred rites of the covenant God had made with them. Circumcision, sacrifices and other ritual practices, such as the Passover meal, have been regarded by Christians as signs that in various ways foreshadow the Christian sacraments.

Today that relationship with God continues and one of the ways the whole Church celebrates God’s presence is through the sacred rituals, signs and symbols of the Seven Sacraments. The Sacraments sustain the Church and give her life. They not only reveal the presence and action of God, they are also the effective means by which grace—

God's own life—is given to us over and over again.

Catholics believe that the Sacraments contain what they signify and grant a share of God's own life when those who receive them are open to God's grace. Preparation, catechesis, and the full and intentional use of the actions, gestures and signs of the Sacraments help us to achieve that openness and experience the power of the Sacraments. Sacraments are the work of God, not simply a human custom or ceremony.

Besides the lesson plans at each grade level, some of the most effective ways to catechize young people to understand the meaning of the Sacraments include the following:

- Using the primary signs and symbols of the Sacraments (water, oil, bread, wine, candles, blessings, the Bible) over and over again during prayer or as part of the environment in the catechetical setting.
- Gathering the group for special sacramental celebrations, such as a family Eucharist or the Baptism of one of the children's siblings, and reflecting on the celebration after.
- Reflecting on the celebration of Sunday Eucharist or a parish Reconciliation service at which young people have been present. Use questions, such as: What did you see hear or feel? What did you learn about God, Church, or being a follower of Jesus during the celebration?
- Involving young people in planning liturgies.

Reflection Questions

- What did “The Story of the Tarnished Cross” tell you about the connection between living a Christian life and the Sacraments?
- What does it mean when we say that something is a Sacrament?
- Why do you think the Sacraments are important in an individual’s or a community’s faith life?