

# HOW GOD DISTRIBUTES HIS GIFTS

## THE SACRAMENTS



**J**esus promised he would not leave us orphans (John 14:18) but would send the Holy Spirit to guide and protect us (John 15:26). He gave the sacraments to heal, feed, and strengthen us. The seven sacraments —baptism, the Eucharist, penance (also called reconciliation or confession), confirmation, holy orders, matrimony, and the anointing of the sick—are not just symbols. They are signs that actually convey God’s grace and love.

The sacraments were foreshadowed in the Old Testament by things that did not actually convey grace but merely symbolized it (circumcision, for example, prefigured baptism,

and the Passover meal prefigured the Eucharist). When Christ came, he did not do away with symbols of God's grace. He supernaturalized them, energizing them with grace. He made them more than symbols.

God constantly uses material things to show his love and power. After all, matter is not evil. When he created the physical universe, everything God created was "very good" (Gen. 1:31). He takes such delight in matter that he even dignified it through his own Incarnation (John 1:14).

During his earthly ministry Jesus healed, fed, and strengthened people through humble elements such as mud, water, bread, oil, and wine. He could have performed his miracles directly, but he preferred to use material things to bestow his grace.

In his first public miracle Jesus turned water into wine, at the request of his mother, Mary (John 2:1–11). He healed a blind man by rubbing mud on his eyes (John 9:1–7). He multiplied a few loaves and fish into a meal for thousands (John 6:5–13). He changed bread and wine into his own body and blood (Matt. 26:26–28). Through the sacraments he continues to heal, feed, and strengthen us.

## **Baptism**

*(Catechism of the Catholic Church [CCC] 1213–1284)*

Because of original sin, we are born without grace in our souls, so there is no way for us to have fellowship with God. Jesus became man to bring us into union with his Father. He said no one can enter the kingdom of God unless he is first born of "water and the Spirit" (John 3:5)—this refers to baptism.

Through baptism we are born again, but this time on a spiritual level instead of a physical level. We are washed in the bath of rebirth (Titus 3:5). We are baptized into Christ's death and therefore share in his Resurrection (Rom. 6:3–7).

Baptism cleanses us of sins and brings the Holy Spirit and his grace into our souls (Acts 2:38, 22:16). And the apostle Peter is perhaps the most blunt of all: "Baptism now saves you" (1 Pet. 3:21). Baptism is the gateway into the Church.

## **Penance**

(CCC 1422–1498)

Sometimes on our journey toward the heavenly promised land we stumble and fall into sin. God is always ready to lift us up and to restore us to grace-filled fellowship with him. He does this through the sacrament of penance (which is also known as confession or reconciliation).

Jesus gave his apostles power and authority to reconcile us to the Father. They received Jesus' own power to forgive sins when he breathed on them and said, "Receive the Holy Spirit. Whose sins you forgive are forgiven them, and whose sins you retain are retained" (John 20:22–23).

Paul notes that "all this is from God, who has reconciled us to himself through Christ and given us the ministry of reconciliation. . . . So, we are ambassadors for Christ, as if God were appealing through us" (2 Cor. 5:18–20). Through confession to a priest, God's minister, we have our sins forgiven, and we receive grace to help us resist future temptations.

## **The Eucharist**

(CCC 1322–1419)

Once we become members of Christ's family, he does not let us go hungry, but feeds us with his own body and blood through the Eucharist. In the Old Testament, as they prepared for their journey in the wilderness, God commanded his people to sacrifice a lamb and sprinkle its blood on their door-posts,

so the Angel of Death would pass by their homes. Then they ate the lamb to seal their covenant with God.

This lamb prefigured Jesus. He is the real "Lamb of God," who takes away the sins of the world (John 1:29). Through Jesus we enter into a New Covenant with God (Luke 22:20), who protects us from eternal death. God's Old Testament people ate the Passover lamb. Now we must eat the Lamb that is the Eucharist. Jesus said, "Unless you eat my flesh and drink my blood you have no life within you" (John 6:53).

At the Last Supper he took bread and wine and said, "Take and eat. This is my body . . . This is my blood which will be shed for you" (Mark 14:22–24). In this way Jesus instituted the sacrament of the Eucharist, the sacrificial meal Catholics consume at each Mass.

The Catholic Church teaches that the sacrifice of Christ on the cross occurred "once for all"; it cannot be repeated (Heb. 9:28). Christ does not "die again" during Mass, but the very same sacrifice that occurred on Calvary is made present on the altar. That's why the Mass is not "another" sacrifice, but a participation in the same, once-for-all sacrifice of Christ on the cross.

Paul reminds us that the bread and the wine really become, by a miracle of God's grace, the actual body and blood of Jesus: "Anyone who eats and drinks without recognizing the body of the Lord eats and drinks judgment on himself" (1 Cor. 11:27–29).

After the consecration of the bread and wine, no bread or wine remains on the altar. Only Jesus himself, under the appearance of bread and wine, remains.

## **Confirmation**

(CCC 1285–1321)

God strengthens our souls in another way, through the sacrament of confirmation. Even though Jesus' disciples received grace before his Resurrection, on Pentecost the Holy Spirit came to strengthen them with new graces for the difficult work ahead.

They went out and preached the gospel fearlessly and carried out the mission Christ had given them. Later, they laid hands on others to strengthen them as well (Acts 8:14–17). Through confirmation you too are strengthened to meet the spiritual challenges in your life.

### **Matrimony** (CCC 1601–1666)

Most people are called to the married life. Through the sacrament of Holy Matrimony God gives special graces to help married couples with life's difficulties, especially to help them raise their children as loving followers of Christ.

Marriage involves three parties: the bride, the groom, and God. When two Christians receive the sacrament of matrimony, God is with them, witnessing and blessing their marriage covenant. A sacramental marriage is permanent; only death can break it (Mark 10:1–12, Rom. 7:2–3, 1 Cor. 7:10–11). This holy union is a living symbol of the unbreakable relationship between Christ and his Church (Eph. 5:21–33).

### **Holy Orders** (CCC 1536–1600)

Others are called to share specially in Christ's priesthood. In the Old Covenant, even though Israel was a kingdom of priests (Exod. 19:6), the Lord called certain men to a special priestly ministry (Exod. 19:22). In the New Covenant, even though Christians are a kingdom of priests (1 Pet. 2:9), Jesus calls certain men to a special priestly ministry (Rom. 15:15–16).

This sacrament is called Holy Orders. Through it priests are ordained and thus empowered to serve the Church (2 Tim. 1:6–7) as pastors, teachers, and spiritual fathers (1 Cor 4:14–15) who heal, feed, and strengthen God’s people—most importantly through preaching and the administration of the sacraments.

## Anointing of the Sick

(CCC 1499–1532)

Priests care for us when we are physically ill. They do this through the sacrament known as the anointing of the sick. Christ sent out the twelve apostles to preach and “they cast out many demons, and anointed with oil many that were sick and healed them” (Mark 6:13). Saint James instructs: “Is anyone among you suffering? He should pray. . . Is any one among you sick? He should summon the presbyters [priests] of the Church, and they should pray over him and anoint him with oil in the name of the Lord, and the prayer of faith will save the sick person, and the Lord will raise him up. If he has committed any sins, he will be forgiven” (Jas. 5:14–15). Anointing of the sick not only helps us endure illness, but it cleanses our souls and helps us prepare to meet **God**.

Source: *Pillar of Fire, Pillar of Truth: The Catholic Church and God’s Plan for You*, Catholic Answers, 1997.