

A PRACTICAL GUIDE TO

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THE  
SACRAMENTS  
THEN & NOW

BY  
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# Introduction

I would like to help people realize how much the understanding and practice of the sacraments has changed over the past 2,000 years. Change is a fact of life, even in the Church. What follows are some historical observations, organized by topic which can act as a kind of “glossary” for understanding the development of the celebration of the sacraments and to inspire and engage our thinking about the sacramental life. Sacraments are not just a Catholic concern. Sacraments are Christian realities.

## In the Beginning

The earliest canonical writings, the letters of Paul (5 BCE–64 CE, all dates are in the Common Era unless otherwise noted) mention some early Christian ritual practices. Most notably are the immersion of converts in water (baptism) and reception of the Holy Spirit (confirmation) and the sharing of a commemorative meal the “Lord’s Supper.”

## The Lord’s Supper

The Synoptic Gospels describe Jesus’ Last Supper with his disciples, during which Jesus instructs them to continue the practice in his memory, and which ostensibly was the model for the “Lord’s Supper,” the communal meal shared among early Christians which was characterized as a “love feast” (Greek: *agápē*). The Eucharist was one part of the *agápē* meal gathering. But probably between the latter part of the 1st century and 250, the two became separate.

In 1 Corinthians 11:34, for instance, Paul asks the richer people to eat their meals at home. By doing this, Paul eliminated the meal annoyances and occasional drunkenness problems which had become problematic in some Corinthian *agápē* gatherings. Inequality and partisan discrimination were big problems in the quite diverse Corinthian community. Paul’s exhortation about love in 1 Corinthians 13 makes very understandable sense here.

## Immersion

The Synoptic Gospels (Mt 3:13-17; Mk 1:9-11; Lk 3:21-23) mention the ritual immersion practiced by John the Baptizer in which Jesus himself participated. Matthew also portrays the risen Lord commanding his disciples to baptize using a Trinitarian formula (28:19). Biblical scholars suggest that the formula was not from the historic Jesus himself but from early Church practice around the year 80.

## Acts of the Apostles

The Acts of Apostles enlarges the scriptural picture of the early Church with

some references to the Lord's Supper and a number of references to baptisms. Acts also mentions another ritual action, the laying on of hands, which in this context usually results in charismatic activities such as speaking in tongues, and which is sometimes described as "receiving the Holy Spirit." See for instance Acts 2:4: "And they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other tongues as the Spirit enabled them."

### **Laying on of Hands**

The laying on of hands was an action mentioned numerous times in the Hebrew Scriptures. It involved placing one or both hands palms down on the top of another person's head, usually while saying a prayer or blessing. It was a common practice used by parents blessing their children. Jacob in the book of Genesis, for instance, blesses his two grandsons by laying his hands on their heads (Gen 48:14). The laying on of hands was also used to bless someone for ministry. In Numbers, the people of Israel lay hands on the Levites to dedicate them to the Lord's service (Num 8:9-10). Moses laid hands on Joshua as his successor in leadership (Num 27:18-23; Dt 34:9).

### **Jesus & the Laying on of Hands**

Jesus followed the laying on of hands tradition. His most common practice in healing was touch, often described as "laying his hands on" the one to be healed (Mt 9:18; Mk 5:23; 6:5; 7:32; 8:22-25; Lk 13:13). Jesus also "lays his hands" on the little children who come to him, to bless them (Mt 19:13-15; Mk 10:16). Only centuries later was the laying on of hands strictly understood as a uniquely Christian "ordination ritual."

### **Confirmation Separated from Baptism**

Confirmation emerged from baptism as a separate ritual in the 4th century, after Christianity became the official religion of the Roman Empire in 380.

### **Reconciliation—Penance—"Confession"**

In the New Testament there is no description of a ritual or ceremony associated with penance or reconciliation. However even a quick reading of the Gospels shows that Jesus was greatly concerned with the forgiveness of sins and the reconciling of sinners. And Jesus clearly told his followers to forgive sinners (see Mt 6:14-15).

### **Medieval Practice**

Between the 8th and 9th centuries, altar placement and worship space arrangements changed. When celebrating Mass, the celebrant no longer faced

the people but faced the apse. This practice was first adopted in the basilicas of Rome and then became common practice across Europe.

What was lost was the sense that the congregation was the Body of Christ and the ritual was a meal. Mass became the celebrant's ritual not a community liturgy. The celebrant "said Mass." The congregation watched from a distance, often praying in their own way with their own devotions. The church's stained glass windows were also a source of devotion. And if the congregation made too much noise and the celebrant found them disturbing, bells were rung to keep the people quiet.

Moving beyond the early Christian understanding of the Lord's Supper as a community celebration and sharing of and in the presence of Christ, the Eucharist, especially around the 13th century, began to be understood and ritualized in a very narrow way. It became not so much a sacrament to be received but a mysterious ritual to be observed and adored.

If they received communion at all, most medieval people received it just once a year. The purpose of the Mass became to consecrate and preserve the Eucharist wafer so that it could be adored. The celebrant, with his back to the congregation, raised the consecrated wafer or host (Latin, *hostia*, a sacrificial victim), above his head so that it became visible to all in the congregation and often held it there for an extended time. Some people only came to church when the host was about to be elevated. So that people could come into the church for the short time necessary to see the elevation of the host, the ringing of an announcement bell from the church tower was introduced.

Since some celebrants, now called "priests," found it difficult, wearing heavy vestments to raise the host for a long time, altar servers lifted the priest's ornate chasuble and supported his elbows to help secure the maximum elevation. Medieval laity wanted to adore Christ at the elevation of the consecrated bread during Mass. Many people, in fact, left Mass immediately following the elevation and never thought about receiving communion.

Ornate display cases called *monstrances* were created to display the consecrated host outside of Mass. They were first created in response to the Feast of the Body of Christ (*Corpus Christi*) established in 1264. The eminent theologian Thomas Aquinas (1225–1274) first proposed this feast to Pope Urban IV (1195–1264) in order to create a feast focused solely on adoring the Holy Eucharist. Aquinas wrote special hymns for the occasion. The monstrances were placed high on altars thus enabling the faithful better to see and adore the consecrated host. The monstrances were also carried in public processions.

Unfortunately, the medieval Eucharistic Body of Christ rituals ignored the biblical understanding of the Body of Christ as, first of all, the community of believers. Recall, for instance, Paul's words "Now you are the body of Christ, and each one of you is a part of it" (1 Cor 12:27), Jesus' words "For where two or three gather in my name, there am I with them" (Mt 18:20), and "I am the vine; you are the branches. If you remain in me and I in you, you will bear much fruit; apart from me you can do nothing" (Jn 15:5).

### **Anointing**

Up until the 8th century, anointing the sick was a widespread if not uniform practice done by Christian people for their relatives, by men and women with a reputation for healing, and by priests, monks and nuns. Especially noteworthy, however, is the fact that anointing of the sick remained primarily a lay practice.

### **Marriage**

The first official declaration that marriage is a sacrament was made in 1184 at the Council of Verona. However, it wasn't until the Council of Trent in 1563 that marriage was officially deemed one of the seven sacraments.

### **Holy Orders**

This is a complex history. The historical Jesus did not ordain anyone at the Last Supper. Ordination began not as a way to pass on "sacred power to consecrate the Eucharist" but as a form of quality control—a way to assure communities that their leaders were competent and persons of genuine and solid faith. Today many historical theologians would say that we have no direct evidence of ordinations during the first three centuries of Christianity.

### **Seven Only**

Before the 13th century, there was no talk of just seven sacraments, because Christians had a variety of rituals and symbols. By the end of the 13th century, however, Catholic discussion of sacraments was limited to the familiar seven. Prior to the 13th century, however, Church practices and Christian beliefs were far from uniform and far from what they would later become.

### **Women**

For centuries women had been ordained as deacons and abbesses, and even as presbyters and bishops. This was certainly the case until the 12th century. In *The Hidden History of Women's Ordination: Female Clergy in the Medieval West*, professor Gary Macy of Santa Clara University shows that references to the ordination of women exist in papal, episcopal and theological documents of the

time and the rites for these ordinations have survived.

Not everyone was comfortable with accounts of ordained medieval women. I suggest that when the institutional historians were male and theologians were male, it was easy and convenient for the men in leadership positions to declare findings like Macy's a "misinterpretation." Macy however claims that: "This is a history that has been deliberately forgotten, intentionally marginalized, and, not infrequently, creatively explained away."

## **Reformation**

Martin Luther (1483–1546) and other Protestant reformers rejected the ritual sacramentality of medieval Catholicism. Using the New Testament they acknowledged baptism and Eucharist, which are both explicitly mentioned in the scriptures, as genuine sacraments. But they regarded the other five as ecclesiastical inventions.

## **Counter-Reformation**

In response to Luther and the Protestant Reformation, the Council of Trent, meeting for twenty-five sessions between 13 December 1545 and 4 December 1563, initiated a Catholic Counter-Reformation. The greatest attention in the Council's decrees was given to the seven sacraments in great detail to refute the claims of the Protestant Reformers. The bishops insisted on the numbering of the sacraments as seven and that all seven were instituted by Jesus Christ.

## **Contemporary Challenge**

It is important for us today to have a better and clearer understanding of the evolution of sacraments, especially regarding the changes in their ritual structure and the regulations for their celebrations. But that is not enough. Sacramental actions today need to regain their dynamism. Sacraments are not just appropriate rituals for various stages of life. As my friend Joseph Martos so often said and wrote, they are our "doors to the Sacred." Today those doors need to be opened wide because people today are hungry and searching for a taste of the Divine which is truly experienced in the sacraments.

### ***For Discussion:***

- (1) What questions arise with this introduction to the sacraments?
- (2) Is there a particular sacrament that especially interests you?
- (3) How do you understand change in Church teaching and understanding?