

The Essential Catholic Handbook of the Sacraments

**A SUMMARY OF BELIEFS, RITES,
AND PRAYERS**

A REDEMPTORIST PASTORAL PUBLICATION



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Introduction

Catholics are a sacramental faith community. They are identified by the celebration of the seven sacraments. Most Catholics understand that celebration of the sacraments is the primary way to experience the grace that comes from God. An understanding of sacrament is essential to the identity of Catholics, who they are and how they see themselves. This sacramental identity is also understood by most other Christians and even by members of other religious traditions as the defining focus of the Catholic spiritual tradition.

The significant moments of life and of death are celebrated in the Catholic practice of the sacraments. Most Catholics probably will not be able to recall their own baptism, but certainly they understand the emphasis and the concern expressed by parents and godparents that baptism is celebrated after the birth of a new baby. The celebration of a person's first holy Communion and first confession (sacrament of penance) is often a "special event," complete with a party and gift giving, in the life of Catholic children. The celebration of confirmation also receives a special emphasis, and, depending on the age at which it may be celebrated in a particular local church, it often marks the passage from childhood to the beginning of adult life in the church.

As a child grows into adulthood and often prepares to marry, the expectation of the family is that they will be married in church, with

an exchange of vows witnessed by a priest, and often within the celebration of a nuptial Mass. After marriage, the process begins again, this time for the children of the newly created and blessed family. Some Catholic families also have an opportunity to celebrate the ordination to the priesthood of a son or grandson and, occasionally, are able to celebrate the ordination to the diaconate of their father or perhaps a favorite uncle or close family friend. Finally, the anointing of the sick is celebrated, not only at the moment of impending death but also on those occasions when there is a serious illness or even when the advancing signs of the inevitable process of simply growing old are evident.

Catholics are a sacramental people, from the moment of their birth, through all the stages of their life, up to the moment of death. Even in death, family and friends at the funeral Mass usually celebrate a final sacrament in the memory of the deceased.

Sacraments, however, are more than simple rituals that mark significant steps in the spiritual journey. They are the life-giving celebration of the love and power of God that freely flows from Jesus Christ as a result of his passion, death, and resurrection. Understood in this sense, sacraments are an opportunity for the individual to encounter the saving action of God and the salvation promised to all who believe in Jesus Christ.

Most Catholics have been taught a simple definition of what a sacrament is from their first experience of religious education. It is not unusual to hear a Catholic answer, when asked to explain what a sacrament is, that “a sacrament is a sign, instituted by Christ, to give grace.” This simple definition learned long ago in a now forgotten time and place serves as a summary of extensive and detailed Catholic dogma and a shorthand understanding of sacramental theology. The ability to name all seven sacraments and to explain the “matter and form” of a sacrament and the “sacramental character” is not beyond the ability of many Catholics of a prior time and age.

The ability of Catholics of a certain period to quickly define the basic components of the sacraments should come as no surprise. This training in the basics of the Catholic faith, reflects a concern, rooted deep in the Protestant Reformation, of the need for the Catholic faithful to understand and explain an important foundation of their faith. Uniform answers, dutifully learned, to a set of uniform questions became a defining experience of Catholic life and education.

It is also true, however, that since the Vatican Council II there has been a change in emphasis and a change in sacramental training. Some perceive that these changes have produced a whole generation of Catholics who no longer understand the fundamentals of sacramental theology. This handbook may help to provide a small answer to these concerns.

The Essential Catholic Handbook of the Sacraments is envisioned as a helpful resource and a practical tool for understanding our Catholic sacramental tradition and belief. The text is presented in a popular style, with an emphasis on a clear and practical presentation of Catholic faith and dogma. The historical development of the sacraments is not ignored, but speculative theology, the argument for further development and change in sacramental theology from different theological starting points, is not included. The decision to omit presentation of possible scenarios for future avenues of sacramental theology has been made, not because of a lack of interest or perspective, but rather because it seems to be beyond the scope of what is essential. There are other fine resources available that discuss what may be possible or even required in future expressions of Catholic sacramental practice.

Also included in this handbook is a glossary of words, expressions, and key concepts that are useful in the study of the sacraments, along with a selection of prayers, both traditional and contemporary. Particular emphasis has been placed on the Eucharist, the core and sum-

mit of Catholic sacramental worship. Eucharistic meditations are included, as well as a selection of other prayers suitable for meditation and reflection. Whenever possible, *The Essential Catholic Handbook of the Sacraments* has been cross-referenced to the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (paragraphs cited from this book are indicated by the letters CCC).

Finally, the reader should be advised that as part of *The Essential Catholic Handbook* series, this handbook on the sacraments should be understood as an introduction to the sacraments but by no means a complete presentation. Readers who desire to know more about the sacraments are directed to Joseph Martos's book, *Doors to the Sacred: A Historical Introduction to Sacraments in the Catholic Church*. This is the most complete work on the sacraments to date. It is very readable, easily understood, and is highly recommended. Of course, readers are also directed to the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*. Further information on both of these valuable resources may be found in the bibliography section of this *Essential Catholic Handbook of the Sacraments*.