

# Sacraments

## Key Concept

**Sacrament:** a sacred ritual that is a visible sign of God's presence with people at key moments in their lives.

## Objective

Outline the Christian understanding of sacrament.

## Activity: "Love is everything"

**TASK:** TO BE AWARE OF HOW WE COMMUNICATE A MESSAGE OF LOVE.

The most important message any person can communicate is the message of love.

- \* Love is real.
- \* We can experience it.
- \* We know what it is.
- \* Yet, love is invisible.

Love exists, but it is not a physical reality. We cannot see it, hear it or touch it. We cannot break a bit off and give it to someone like we would divide up and share a bar of chocolate.

- ◆ So how do we communicate our love to another person? We might:
  - ◇ Send a card.      ◇ Bring flowers.
  - ◇ Give a present.   ◇ Share a hug or a kiss.
  - ◇ Spend time      ◇ Help him/her in any way with him/her.      way we can.

There are many ways in which people can express their love. Yet this is not the same as love itself. We show our love through what we say, what we do, and the things we give to one another. These are all symbols of our love. We communicate an invisible reality such as love, through a series of visible symbols. These symbols might be words, actions or carefully chosen gifts.

## Discuss

- ☞ How do parents show their love for a child?
- ☞ Love is invisible, how do we know that it is real?
- ☞ How can offering a gift to someone communicate the fact that we love them and care about them?

## Sacrament

*The love of God is communicated to people through the sacraments.*

Christians believe in the invisible and mysterious presence of God in their lives. Before his ascension into heaven Jesus promised his apostles that he would never leave them.

**'I will be with you always'** Matthew 28:20.

Christians believe that Jesus kept his promise. The risen Jesus is present in the world today. Many Christians believe that Jesus reaches out to them in a special way through the words, actions and symbols of the sacraments. The sacraments are sacred rituals. They are a visible sign of God's loving, invisible presence with people at key moments in their lives, such as:

- the birth of a child,
- arriving at religious maturity,
- getting married, or
- preparing for death.

When a sacrament is celebrated, it is a visible sign of something sacred and invisible happening. God is present, communicating his love for the persons involved.



Parents express their love for a child in many different ways.

## Sacraments in the Christian Churches

Christianity is divided into three main parts.

- ❖ The Roman Catholic Church.
- ❖ The Orthodox Churches.
- ❖ The Protestant Churches.

### The Orthodox Churches

Orthodox Churches celebrate seven sacraments.

- ❖ Baptism.
- ❖ Confirmation.
- ❖ Eucharist.
- ❖ Reconciliation.
- ❖ Marriage.
- ❖ Holy Orders.
- ❖ Anointing the Sick.

### Baptism in the Orthodox tradition

In the Orthodox Churches the first three sacraments, Baptism, Confirmation and Eucharist, are administered together in infancy.

A family brings their newborn baby to the church when he/she is eight days old. The child is baptised by total immersion in the water of the font. He/she is then confirmed with holy oil; this is called Chrismation. Finally he/she receives Holy Eucharist, the body and blood of Christ. It is given to the child on a spoon from the chalice.

### Marriage in the Orthodox tradition

Marriage is a sacrament in the Orthodox tradition. Two people make vows before God and witnesses that they will love and cherish each other all the days of their lives.



Marriage ceremony in an Orthodox church.

## The Protestant Churches

Many Protestant Churches recognise only two sacraments, Baptism and Holy Communion (the Lord's Supper). A few Protestant Churches, such as the Society of Friends (Quakers) and the Salvation Army, do not celebrate any sacraments. They believe that outward signs are unimportant. To them, what matters more is the relationship with God within the heart of each person.



Pastor handing out communion bread during a church service.

### Sacraments in the Anglican tradition

Anglicans believe that a sacrament is an outward visible sign of an inward spiritual grace. Anglicans believe Jesus instituted only two sacraments while he was on Earth, namely:

- ❖ Baptism.
- ❖ Holy Communion.

The other sacraments, Confirmation, Ordination, Holy Matrimony, the Ministry of Absolution (Penance) and the Ministry of Healing (Extreme Unction) emerged later in the early Christian Church. As such they are celebrated as 'sacramentals', or special occasions. Anglicans believe they are important, but do not have the same importance as the two sacraments instituted by Jesus during his public ministry in Galilee.

In the Church of Ireland people are usually baptised in infancy, are confirmed at around fourteen years of age and receive Holy Communion for the first time shortly afterwards.

## The Roman Catholic Church

In the Roman Catholic Church the word 'sacrament' is understood in three ways.

1. *Jesus as sacrament* - When Jesus was on Earth he was the love of God made visible. Jesus was the fundamental sign or sacrament of God.
2. *Church as sacrament* - Members of the Catholic Church are meant to be Jesus-like for those around them. The Church is a sign of the continuing presence of Jesus in the world today.
3. *The seven sacraments* - The sacraments are the Church's way of showing that Jesus reaches out to people with God's love at significant moments in their lives. The seven sacraments of the Catholic Church are divided into:

### Sacraments of Initiation

- ◆ Baptism.
- ◆ Confirmation.
- ◆ Eucharist.

### Sacraments of Healing

- ◆ Reconciliation.
- ◆ Anointing the Sick.

### Sacraments of Vocation

- ◆ Marriage.
- ◆ Holy Orders.

### Sacraments of Initiation

When Jesus was on Earth he called his disciples to follow him. Today, the risen Jesus calls people in the sacraments of initiation. Through these sacraments a person becomes a full member of the Christian community. In the Roman Catholic Church people are usually baptised in infancy, receive Holy Communion at eight years of age, and Confirmation at twelve years of age.

#### ◆ Baptism

Through the waters of Baptism the risen Jesus unites the person with God. The child is called to be a Christian, a follower of Christ.

#### ◆ Confirmation

Through the oil of chrism the risen Jesus sends the Holy Spirit to give each young person the strength and courage to follow him.

#### ◆ Eucharist

Through the bread and wine the risen Jesus gives himself to his followers so that they may be more fully united with him and with one another. The Eucharist helps a Christian to be better able to live a Christian life in the world.

### Sacraments of Healing

Jesus healed and forgave many people during his time on Earth two thousand years ago. He not only healed their physical ailments, he also healed their spirit and forgave their sins. The risen Jesus brings comfort and forgiveness to people today through the Church's sacraments of healing.

#### ◆ Reconciliation

Through the words of the priest the risen Jesus forgives the sins of those who are sorry for what they have done wrong. Jesus reconciles, or heals, their relationship with God and with each other. The sacrament of reconciliation gives people the strength and encouragement to begin again to live a Christian life.

#### ◆ Anointing the Sick

Through the holy oil the risen Jesus offers inner healing and peace of mind to those who are seriously ill. The sacrament assures the sick person that he/she is not alone in their pain and suffering.

### Sacraments of Vocation

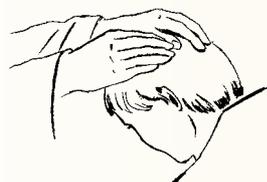
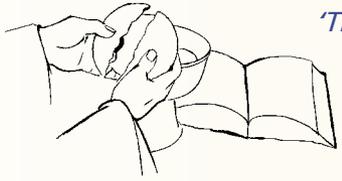
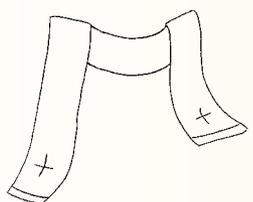
Jesus called his disciples to serve the community in different ways. He gave them special roles to perform for the benefit of all. Sacraments of vocation are special ways in which Christians are called to serve in the Church today.

#### ◆ Marriage

Through the words of the priest, and the exchange of rings, the risen Jesus helps the love of a married couple to grow and deepen all the days of their lives. The love and commitment they have for one another, their family and their community, will reflect the love of God for all his people.

#### ◆ Holy Orders

Through the oil of chrism and the priestly vestments the risen Jesus gives priests, bishops, and deacons the authority to be leaders of a Christian community. They serve God's people by preaching the Gospel and administering the sacraments.

Sacrament	Significant Words	Significant Actions	Key symbols
◆ Baptism: 	<i>'I baptise you in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.'</i>	✧ Pouring of water. ✧ Anointing with oil. ✧ Lighting baptismal candle. ✧ Clothing in a white garment.	- Water. - Oil of Chrism.
◆ Confirmation: 	Prayer of the bishop. <i>'Be sealed with the Holy Spirit.'</i>	✧ Laying on of hands. ✧ Anointing with oil.	- Oil of Chrism.
◆ Eucharist: 	The Eucharistic Prayer (the words of consecration). <i>'This is my body... This is my blood... Do this in memory of me.'</i>	✧ The offering of bread and wine. ✧ The distribution of Holy Communion.	- Bread and Wine.
◆ Reconciliation: 	The confession of sin (the words of absolution). <i>'...I absolve you from your sins in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.'</i>	✧ The priest stretches out his hand and says the prayer of absolution.	- None.
◆ Anointing the Sick: 	The prayer of anointing. <i>'Through this holy anointing may the Lord in his love and mercy help you with the grace of the Holy Spirit.'</i>	✧ Laying on of hands. ✧ Anointing with oil.	- Holy oil.
◆ Marriage: 	The exchange of vows. The couple promise each other <i>'to love... for better for worse, for richer for poorer, in sickness and in health, all the days of our lives'.</i>	✧ The exchange of rings.	- Wedding rings.
◆ Holy Orders: 	Prayer said by the bishop. <i>'Almighty Father, grant to this servant of yours the dignity of the priesthood...'</i>	✧ Laying on of hands. ✧ Anointing with oil. ✧ Putting on vestments for Mass.	- Oil of Chrism. - Vestments.

## Experiencing the love of God

Each sacrament has its own set of significant words, actions and religious symbols. Catholics use ordinary material things such as bread, wine, water and oil to symbolise the presence of Jesus. It is through these things that God reaches out and touches them at key moments in their lives. In the sacraments God's love is made present and real for those who believe.

The sacrament of Marriage in a Catholic church.



Sacraments are communal celebrations. When a sacrament is celebrated, members of the Christian community gather together in small or large numbers to participate fully in what is taking place. While one or two persons may be 'receiving' the sacrament, the whole community actually celebrates the sacrament. This means all who attend benefit from the loving presence of God. The sacrament changes everyone. The presence of the risen Jesus strengthens people's faith, and their commitment to follow the example of Jesus in their everyday lives.

For details of rites of passage:  
In **Judaism** see p249. In **Islam** see p299.

## Questions

### Knowledge

1. What is a sacrament?
2. Name two key moments in life when a sacrament is celebrated.
3. What do Christians believe happens when a sacrament is celebrated?
4. a. List the sacraments celebrated in the Orthodox Churches.  
b. Name the sacraments celebrated in infancy in the Orthodox Churches.
5. a. How many sacraments are celebrated in the Protestant Churches?  
b. What are 'sacramentals' in the Anglican tradition?
6. a. What is distinctive about the Catholic understanding of the term 'sacrament'?  
b. Name the seven sacraments of the Catholic Church.
7. a. In the Catholic Church name:  
- The three sacraments of initiation.  
- The two sacraments of healing.  
- The two sacraments of vocation.  
b. State when each of the sacraments is celebrated.
8. Select one sacrament of initiation.  
a. What is the purpose of this sacrament?  
b. What words, actions and key symbols are used in this sacrament?  
c. What is communicated through the use of these symbols?  
d. How does this sacrament affect the way a person lives their life?

### Understanding

1. What is the Christian understanding of sacrament?
2. Outline the place of sacraments in any two Christian denominations.
3. How do Christians benefit by being present and participating fully in the celebration of a sacrament?

### Research

- Find out about sacramental ceremonies attended by members of the class.
  - ✱ Have you participated in/attended the celebration of a Christian sacrament?
  - ✱ Name the sacrament(s).
  - ✱ Describe what took place during the ceremony.
  - ✱ Explain the significance or meaning of the sacrament for the person(s) involved.
  - ✱ Share your experience and insights with the class.