

INTRODUCTION TO THE LITURGY AND THE SACRAMENTS

(C 1066-1209, USC Ch. 14)

Part II of the *Catechism* focuses on the worship life of the Church and how we celebrate our faith. It is divided into two sections:

Section One: Introduction to the Liturgy

Section Two: The Seven Sacraments

In this article, we will look at:

- What the Catechism Teaches about the Liturgy
- Introduction to the Sacraments

Introduction to the Liturgy (c 1066-1075, USC p. 167)

The *Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy* (Vatican 2 document) says: “*The liturgy is the summit toward which the activity of the Church is directed; at the same time it is the fountain from which all her powers flow*” (10). “*It is the primary and indispensable source from which the faithful are to derive the true Christian spirit*” (14).

The word *liturgy* comes from a Greek term meaning “public work” or “a service on behalf of the people.” In the church world, liturgy is the participation of the People of God in the work of God.

The work of God is the salvation of the human race. God, through Jesus’ passion, death, resurrection and ascension (often referred to as the *paschal mystery*), has achieved salvation for a sinful humanity. God, through Jesus, has “opened the gates of heaven” for all who wish to change their lives and become disciples of Jesus.

In the celebration of the liturgy, we rejoice and give thanks to God for what he has done for us in Jesus. But liturgy is more than the commemoration of an event that happened 2,000 years ago; it also celebrates the belief that Jesus’ once-and-for-all saving event is *extended in time* and continues to happen every time we gather for liturgy. In the liturgy, time collapses, the past becomes present.

Furthermore, liturgy has a future dimension. It looks forward to the Second Coming of Christ. Hence, after the consecration of the Mass, we sometimes sing: “Christ *has* died, Christ *is* risen, Christ *will come* again.” All of this is made possible through the power of the Holy Spirit.

So liturgy, which is the celebration of the sacraments but not confined to them, is at the heart of the Church’s life. As stated above, liturgy is:

- *The summit towards which all the activity of the Church is directed.* On Sundays we bring to the liturgy all that we are about, individually, and as a Church.
- *The liturgy is the fountain from which all her powers flow.* From the liturgy, we receive the strength to go out and continue our efforts to live as faithful disciples of Christ; we receive the power to participate in the Church’s mission to bring the Good News of the Gospel to all creation.

Pause: What are your childhood memories of the Mass?

The Liturgy—Work of the Trinity (C 1077-1112, USC p.167). The *Catechism* (1082) states: “*In the Church’s liturgy the divine blessing is fully revealed and communicated. The Father is acknowledged and adored as the source and the end of all the blessings of creation and salvation. In his Word who became incarnate, died, and rose for us, he fills us with his blessings. Through his Word, he pours into our hearts the Gift that contains all gifts, the Holy Spirit.*”

In the liturgy, God the Father, Son and Holy Spirit are the primary characters. Our role is to be active participants in what *God* does for us in the liturgy.

In his book *Fr. McBride’s College Catechism*, the author summarizes the work of the Trinity in the liturgy in this way:

- The Father, the source and goal of the liturgy, blesses us.
- The Son, at the heart of the liturgy, redeems us.
- The Spirit, the soul of the liturgy, sanctifies us.

The Father blesses us (C 1077-1083). From the beginning of creation until the end of time, God *blesses* us, i.e., he offers us a share in his life and goodness. This happens especially when we gather for liturgy. In the liturgy, God blesses us and we celebrate his blessings and respond with thanks, singing: “Praise God from whom all blessings flow.”

The Son redeems us (C 1084-1090). John 3:16 tells us that “God so loved the world that he sent his only Son...” The Son is sometimes called the sacrament of God. During his life on earth, Jesus was a visible, tangible sign of God’s love for humanity. In and through Jesus, people could touch the face of God and hear God speak to them in an audible way.

Catholics believe that the actions and words of Jesus foreshadow what happens in the sacraments. For example, Jesus feeding the multitudes anticipates what happens in the Eucharist; Jesus welcoming sinners and forgiving them anticipates what happens in the sacrament of Reconciliation.

Of course, the pinnacle saving event in Jesus' life was his passion, death and resurrection. Through his dying and rising, Jesus destroyed the power of sin, death and evil, and opened for us the gates of heaven. Our participation in the sacraments is a participation in the new life of Christ which God offers to us. Our participation in the sacraments is our constant opportunity to allow God to touch our lives, nourish us, heal us and draw us closer to him, and our opportunity to sing our praises to God.

The Spirit sanctifies us (C 1091-1109). When speaking about the role of the Holy Spirit in the liturgy, two Greek words are often used: *Anamnesis* (C 1103-1104) and *Epiclesis* (C 1105-1106).

Anamnesis is a Greek word for remembering. In the context of Christian liturgy, *anamnesis* is a special kind of remembering, one that makes a past event present today (C 1104). The Holy Spirit is sometimes called the "memory of the Church." He helps her especially in the Liturgy of the Word to remember God's marvelous deeds on our behalf.

Epiclesis is a Greek word for "calling down upon." During the *epiclesis* of the Mass (prior to the consecration), the priest asks the Father to send his Spirit upon the gifts of bread and wine to "make them holy so that they may become the body and blood of Christ." As we enter into the prayer of the Mass, the Holy Spirit is at work in us, sanctifying us and making us a little bit more like Jesus.

Pause: When you participate at Mass, how aware are you of its Trinitarian dimension? What one thing could we do to help us make our participation in the liturgy more Trinitarian, more centered on all Three Persons of the Trinity?

WHO Celebrates the Liturgy (C 1136-1144, USC p. 170). The whole Body of Christ celebrates the liturgy with Christ our High Priest. By the "whole Body of Christ," we mean the Church on earth and the Church in heaven. In the celebration of the liturgy, earth unites with heaven. Jesus is present and so are Mary, the angels and the saints. In the liturgy, all present are celebrants because of their baptism into Christ. Through ordination, certain members of the Church preside at the celebration of the seven sacraments.

HOW is the Liturgy Celebrated (C 1145-1162). Just as in daily life we use signs and symbols to communicate, we celebrate liturgy through signs and symbols. These signs and symbols come from creation around us as well as from our culture. In liturgy, "God speaks to us" through the most basic elements of life: water, bread, wine, oil, a touch, a word. The following four symbols are used in liturgy:

Actions (C 1153). The actions that occur during liturgy are called *ritual actions*, e.g., processing, kissing the book or altar, breaking bread, pouring wine, washing hands or feet, anointing with oil, extending hands, bowing.

Words (C 1154). Ritual actions are often accompanied by words, e.g., "I baptize you"; "I absolve you." Also, each sacrament is accompanied by a liturgy of the Word, a reading(s) from Scripture.

Song/Music (C 1156-1158). Paul exhorts us to sing psalms and hymns and to make melody to the Lord with all our heart (Eph. 5:19). St. Augustine says: "he who sings once prays twice." Singing in the liturgy has great power to touch hearts. Prior to Augustine's conversion, he would visit a church to listen to the music and sermons. In his *Confessions* he writes: "*How I wept, deeply moved by your hymns, songs, and the voices that echoed through your Church*" (C 1157).

Holy Images (C 1159-1162). All sacred images and icons principally represent *Christ*. Images of Mary and the saints point to Christ who is glorified in them (C 1159, 1161). Beautiful stained glass, sculptures and statuary can also lift our minds and hearts to God.

WHEN is the Liturgy Celebrated - Liturgical Seasons (C 1163-1173). *By means of the yearly cycle, the church celebrates the holy mystery of Christ, from his incarnation until the day of Pentecost and the expectation of his coming again.* (General Norms for the Liturgical Year Calendar, #17)

The Liturgical Year is the way Mother Church places before us the main events and teachings in the life of Jesus. When we remember the events and stories in the life of Jesus, we make them as real to us as they were to those who first experienced them. We bring past events into the now. So the Liturgical Year is not an historical look at past events, but the way our Church invites us to enter and experience Christ who continues to be present and active in the events of our lives in the here and now.

(For more on the Seasons of the Liturgical Year, see my booklet *The Liturgical Year*, available at the parish office or on the parish website: www.ascensioncatholic.net. Click on Welcome, then Archives, Topical Index of Writings, then Liturgy.)

WHERE is the Liturgy Celebrated (C 1179-1186). Because all creation is sacred, we can worship God anywhere. Where freedom of worship is allowed, Christians normally gather in churches to celebrate the liturgy.

Liturgical Diversity and Unity (C 1200-1209). The *Catechism* states: “*The mystery of Christ is so rich that it cannot be exhausted by its expressions in any single liturgical tradition*” (1201). The Catholic Church is blessed with a variety of beautiful rites (1203). “*The celebration of the liturgy should correspond to the genius and culture of different peoples.... It must be celebrated, and lived in all cultures in such a way that they themselves are not abolished by it, but redeemed and fulfilled*” (1204). Having recognized the rich diversity of liturgical rites within the Church and the many cultures in which the liturgy is celebrated, the *Catechism* (1206) also states that all adaptations of the liturgy must express fidelity to the common faith received from Christ and to hierarchical communion, i.e., be in unity with the local bishop and the Pope.

Pause: Any questions or comments on what we have just read?

Introduction to the Sacraments (C 1113-1134, USC p. 168)

In a broad sense, a sacrament is any visible person, place or thing through which we experience our *invisible* God. For example, in contemplating nature or stained glass in a church, we may experience God. An encounter with another may be a God experience. Events like the birth of a child, the death of a loved one, some suffering or joy, may put us in touch with God.

We stated above that Jesus is sometimes called the *Sacrament of God*. In Jesus, people experience our invisible God in a tangible way. The Church, the Body of Christ, is sometimes called the *Sacrament of Jesus* because she is the *visible* extension of his presence here on earth. In and through the Church, Jesus continues his ministry among us. The Church believes so deeply in the presence of Christ in her midst, and especially in the sacraments, that she says: “whatever was visible in our Savior has passed over into his sacraments” (Pope Leo the Great).

The Seven Sacraments. The *Catechism* (1131) states: “*Sacraments are efficacious signs of grace, instituted by Christ and entrusted to the Church, by which divine life is dispensed to us.*”

The above definition of sacraments contains four elements. Let’s look at each of them.

- “**Efficacious Signs**” of *Grace* (C 1127, 1145-1152). Sacraments are accompanied by special signs or symbols that produce what they signify. A wedding ring is a symbol of the love which exists between a husband and wife but it is *not* the love; it only points to the love. The symbols or rituals used in the sacraments effect or produce what they signify. Hence, water, an outward sign of washing, not only points to an inner reality occurring in the soul but actually accomplishes it. In the ritual washing that occurs in Baptism, the soul *is* cleansed of sin and filled with the grace presence of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. The *Catechism* (1127) states that the “*sacraments are efficacious because in them Christ himself is at work; it is he who baptizes, he who acts in his sacraments in order to communicate the grace that each sacrament signifies.*” More accurately, sacraments are actions both of Christ and the Church. In the celebration of the sacraments, the Church performs certain rituals (pouring of water on a child, anointing with oil, etc.) during which Christ is present bringing about an interior change in the recipient.

Pause: What are one or two very sacred symbols for you? What do they represent? Any questions on the difference between a symbol like a ring or country’s flag and a sacramental symbol?

- “**Instituted by Christ**” (C 1117). If one looks in the Gospel for a passage which lists the seven sacraments, one will look in vain. (When we study each individual sacrament, we will point out its biblical roots.) We may wonder how the Church ended up with seven rather than six or ten sacraments.

It may surprise you to discover that the Church did not finally decide on the number seven until 1215 AD at the *Fourth Lateran Council*. Prior to that, the Church had many rituals which were regarded as sacramental in that they bestowed God’s grace to the recipient.

We may wonder why it took the Church so long to decide on the number seven and how it decided on that number. In the same manner, it took the Church over 200 years to decide which books in circulation should be admitted to the New Testament. In the end, the Church decided on 27 books rather than 25 or 29. Actually, some books barely made it into the New Testament. We trust that the Holy Spirit, whom Jesus gave to the Church to guide her and “lead her into

the truth,” was guiding church leaders when they made their decision about the canon of the New Testament.

When it comes to the Church’s decision regarding the seven sacraments, we trust that just as the Holy Spirit guided church leaders on the number of books to include in the New Testament, he also guided them in deciding on the number of sacraments. The number seven is symbolic of perfection or wholeness. In the seven sacraments, Christ has left his Church with seven signs of his love to touch us during key moments of our lives and to empower us to be his priestly people. In this regard, it is good to recall Jesus’ words to his Apostles: “Whatever you bind on earth shall be considered bound in heaven...” (Mt 16:19).

- **“Entrusted to the Church”** (C 1118). Just as the scriptures are entrusted to the Church, so are the sacraments. By Christ’s will, the Church oversees the celebration of the sacraments. The sacraments make the Church and the Church makes the sacraments.

- **“Sources of Divine Life.”** When sacraments are validly celebrated, God always shows up offering us a share in his divine life.

Pause: Were you surprised to hear that the church did not finally decide until 1215 on the number of sacraments? Why are the sacraments so important in Catholicism?

The Sacraments “bear fruit in those who receive them with the required dispositions” (C 1131). For the sacraments to produce their true effect in our lives, we must come to them with faith and receive them with faith. Remember the woman with a bleeding problem in the Gospel? Many people were crowding around Jesus and many touched him that day, but she was the only one to come to him with faith. As a result, she was healed (Lk 8:43-48). At times, the faith we bring to the sacraments may be very weak. In those times, we can pray: “Lord, I believe. Help my unbelief.”

Purpose of the Sacraments. The *Catechism* (1123) states the threefold purpose of the sacraments: a) to sanctify the recipient; b) to build up the Church, the Body of Christ; and c) to give worship to the Father.

Three Groupings. *Sacraments of Initiation:* Baptism, Confirmation and Eucharist. Until all three sacraments are received, one is not a full member of the Church. *Sacraments of Healing:* Reconciliation and Anointing of the Sick. *Sacraments of Christian Service:* Holy Orders and Matrimony.

Sacramentals (C 1671-1679). The *Catechism* (1167) states: “*Sacramentals are sacred signs instituted by the Church. They prepare us to receive the fruit of the sacraments and sanctify different circumstances of life*”.

Sacramentals resemble the sacraments, but they are not the sacraments because Christ did not institute them. They are instituted by Mother Church to help us make holy every aspect of life. “*Among sacramentals, blessings (of persons, meals, objects and places) come first. Every blessing praises God and prays for his gifts*” (C 1671). (For more on the various forms of sacramentals, see the *Catechism*, 1671-1679.)

Pause: How do you feel about the Catholic use of sacramentals? Do you have a favorite sacramental, e.g., miraculous medal, rosary, prayer book?

Suggested Action

Keep in mind that sacraments are true encounters of meetings with Christ. In the sacraments, God comes to meet us and share with us his divine life. In the sacraments, we have the opportunity to worship God in spirit and in truth.

Meditation

Mother Church earnestly desires that all the faithful be led to that full, conscious, and active participation in liturgical celebrations which is demanded by the very nature of the liturgy. Such participation by the Christian people as “a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a purchased people” (1 Pet. 2:9; cf. 2:4-5), is their right and duty by reason of their baptism.

In the restoration and promotion of the sacred liturgy, this full and active participation by the people is the aim to be considered before all else; for it is the primary and indispensable source from which the faithful are to derive the true Christian spirit. Therefore, through the needed program of instruction, pastors of souls must zealously strive to achieve it in all their pastoral work.

(Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy, 14)

Fr. Eamon Tobin ©
tobin2@live.com
Ascension Catholic Church
Melbourne, FL