

Seven Sacraments Our Encounter with Christ

The Sacraments in General

In the weeks ahead, I will dedicate this column to a series of essays on the Seven Sacraments: Baptism, Confirmation, Eucharist, Reconciliation, Anointing of the Sick, Matrimony, and Holy Orders.

Those of us who grew up with *The Baltimore Catechism* still remember the simple definition of a sacrament we memorized as children: *What is a sacrament? A sacrament is an outward sign instituted by Christ to give grace.* Let's spend a few moments with this simple definition that focuses our attention on the sacraments as signs.

A sacrament is a *sign* that points to a deeper reality. For example, the waters of baptism are a sign that point to cleansing from sin and the new life that Baptism brings about. The bread and wine of the Eucharist are a sign that points to the body and blood of Christ with which we are nourished. The first thing to note about a sacrament, then, is its sign value. All of the sacraments are signs that point to a deeper reality.

In pointing to this deeper reality, the sacraments bring about an *encounter* or meeting between us and Christ. In the waters of baptism, we are associated with the death and resurrection of Christ; we meet the risen Lord. In the anointing of Confirmation, we are sealed with the Holy Spirit; we meet the Lord who gives us the Spirit. In the bread and wine of the Eucharist, we are nourished by the body and blood of Christ; we meet the risen Lord who nourishes us. In the sacrament of Reconciliation, we encounter the merciful Christ who forgives our sins. In the anointing of the sick, we encounter the healing Christ who restores us to health. In the exchange of marriage promises, man and woman meet the Lord who loves the church and calls husband and wife to imitate this love in their marriage. In Holy Orders, a man encounters the Lord who comes to serve and not to be served and calls the priest to do the same.

The distinctive aspect of the sacraments is that they provide us with a way to meet and encounter Christ. Jesus Christ is not merely an historical figure of the past; he is living and alive within the community of the church, which is his body. This is the Christ we meet in the sacraments. This is the Christ who calls us to participate fully in the life of his risen body, the church, through the sacraments we receive.

The seven sacraments can be grouped into three groups. First, Baptism, Confirmation, and Eucharist are *sacraments of initiation*. In Baptism we are baptized into the body of the risen Christ. In Confirmation we are sealed with the power of God's Spirit. In the Eucharist we enter into an intimate union with the risen Christ.

Second, Reconciliation and Anointing of the Sick are *sacraments of healing*. Reconciliation heals us when we have broken or weakened our relationship with Christ through sin. Anointing strengthens and heals us when we are ill.

Third, Matrimony and Holy Orders are sacraments of service. By Holy Orders a man is called to service for church, by matrimony husband and wife are called to serve the church and world by witnessing to the love between Christ and the church. Both sacraments provide believers with a way to live their lives in the church and in the world.

New week, I will consider the gateway to all of the sacraments, the most fundamental sacrament: the sacrament of Baptism. *Father Matera*