

## The Sacraments as Sources of Grace on our Pilgrim Journey

1. We are **born** into life
  - **Baptism** gives us birth into the Christian life
2. We need regular **feeding** to sustain our life
  - **The Eucharist** provides us with ongoing spiritual food
3. We need confidence when we feel low and we need to **maintain friendships** within society
  - **Penance and Reconciliation** cures the effects of sin and reunites us to God and the Church
4. We must learn how to grow and become **mature** adults
  - **Confirmation** helps us gain spiritual maturity to enable us to witness in the world that exists outside our Christian community
5. We need a structured society and **leaders** to co-ordinate our efforts in the most effective way
  - **Holy Orders** ensures that we are guided and led effectively, by giving a special grace to those called to carry out this task as successors of the apostles
6. Any community needs a safe and secure environment in which to **raise children**
  - **Christian marriage** provides the best framework to do this, because it is strengthened by God's special grace
7. We need curing of **serious illnesses** that occur in our life and we all hope for a **painless death**.
  - **The Anointing of the Sick** helps us when we are seriously ill and prepares us for death in the best way possible, giving us perfect peace ready to meet God.

There are other ways to present the sacraments to help us understand their importance. They can be seen as:

**Sacraments of Initiation** - Baptism, Confirmation and the Eucharist

**Sacraments of Healing** - Penance and Reconciliation, and Anointing of the Sick

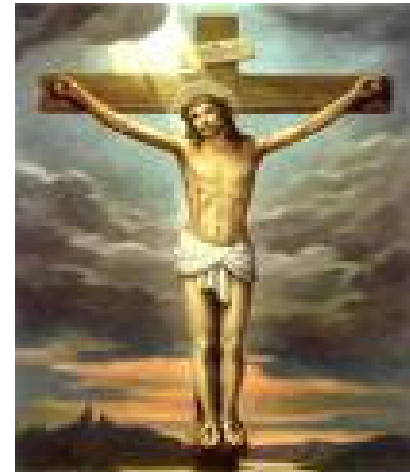
**Sacraments of Vocation** - Holy Orders and Marriage

Whatever way the sacraments are grouped, the key factors to recognise are:

1. They all originate in **Christ's saving actions**
2. They have a **community** dimension
3. They all have a **scriptural base**
4. Against the argument that there is no evidence that Jesus intended to institute any sacrament other than Baptism and the Eucharist, there is also the **reality of the Church as the Mystical Body of Christ**, and the fact that it is itself, therefore, a sacrament dispensing Christ's saving grace through itself.

## Our Catholic Faith

### 18. Why the Sacraments Are So Special - *The Pinnacles of Grace*



#### Questions for Reflection

1. How would you describe what a sacrament is, as opposed to a sacramental?
2. Is any sacrament more important than the others?
3. God gives us grace in many different ways, so why are the sacraments so important?

# What is Meant by Sacrament?

The Greek word for sacrament means ‘mystery’ and the Christian sacraments are mysteries of Christ. What is meant by this? To answer this effectively, a number of preliminary themes need to be outlined:

1. The importance and value of human actions as signs.
2. The nature of religious signs and symbolism
3. The traditional definition of a sacrament
4. The essence of sacraments

## 1. The Importance and Value of Human Actions as Signs

Many human actions are not just physical movements. They also serve to convey a meaning that reflects the relationship between people. The shaking of hands or hugging on meeting someone has a special invisible meaning, namely friendly relations. Sometimes when people speak to one another a meaning is readily understood between the parties involved that goes beyond the literal meaning of the actual words used e.g. with idioms “it’s raining cats and dogs” or sarcasm “You can’t talk”. There is a reality behind the obvious words or actions. Something very similar exists with sacraments, but also something very holy.

## 2. The Nature of Religious Signs and Symbolism

As human beings we are all influenced and affected by our environment, moods and emotions. Religious signs and symbols help us to be aware of God, and to recognise him, more easily in our daily lives.

A sign points to something **directly**, while a symbol is meant to embody or **represent** what it symbolises. Some things act as both signs and symbols. In the early Church the cross and a picture of a fish (ichthys) were used to symbolise Christ, while a crucifix directly related to Jesus as a sign of special religious significance. You can think of many signs and symbols used in the Church e.g. water, candles, chrism, while our actions themselves can be symbolic, like making the sign of the cross, genuflecting. All these help us get closer to God by helping us prepare our minds and hearts to meet him. In addition, the blessing of objects (or people) is a special way of dedicating them to God and making them holy. Signs blessed in this way are called **sacramentals** N.B. it is the blessing that is important, not the physical object of itself.

## 3. The Traditional Definition of a Sacrament

The early Church used the word sacrament to describe a variety of Church practices. Several great saints of the Church thought, for example, that foot



washing, the prayers of the Creed and Our Father, the anointing of kings, the dedication of churches and funerals, were all sacraments.

It was not until the 12th century that a universally accepted definition of a sacrament was accepted, namely that of Peter Lombard “**Something can properly be called a sacrament if it is a sign of the grace of God and a form of invisible grace .... sacraments were instituted for the sake of sanctifying as well as signifying**”



The sacraments, therefore, are signs of an invisible reality behind the actual sign; they go beyond normal signs like human actions, because they actually deliver what they signify - the grace of God. **Sacraments are not only signs that inform, they actually make that thing happen as well - they create a reality of grace.**

The number of sacraments traditionally accepted by the Catholic Church is 7: Baptism, Confirmation, Penance and Reconciliation, the Eucharist, Marriage, Holy Orders, and the Sacrament of Anointing of the Sick (formerly known as Extreme Unction). However, it was not until the Middle Ages, at the Fourth Lateran Council 1215, that the number of sacraments was officially confirmed. However, this decision was only defined as a Dogma of Faith at the Council of Trent 1547, in the face of the Protestant Reformation that generally only regarded Baptism and the Eucharist as sacraments because most of the reformers believed that only these two had a scriptural basis for their clear institution by Jesus Christ.

## 4. The Essence of Sacraments

Behind every sacrament is Jesus Christ, because each sacrament reveals his saving actions in a special way. **In each sacrament we really meet Jesus.** The sacraments derive their power and effectiveness from Jesus’ death, resurrection and exaltation. He is their essence because he reveals God’s love, forgiveness and mercy through the actions of the Holy Spirit. The Sacraments, therefore, exist as an act of the Trinity. **It is for this reason that they are appropriately called sacraments, or mysteries of Christ.**

## Sacraments as a Special Source of Grace

God gives us his grace in many different ways. It is given us when we are tempted, when we pray, when we read Holy Scripture, when we worship in community. However, **the sacraments are the most powerful sources of grace** available to us, and are ordered to help us at various stages in our pilgrim journey. Seeing them in this light is a very effective way of appreciating their importance.