18

SACRAMENTS

Principle of Sacramentality

Catholics are "sacrament people." We have always depended on the use of things, places, and persons to touch divine presence and to be touched by it. Catholics subscribe wholeheartedly to the truth that "there is more to life than meets the eye." We believe that we come in contact with this "more" by way of sacraments and sacramentals. By celebrating them we preserve our fundamental religious beliefs and pass them on to another generation.

The familiar pattern of sacramental rituals holds the assembly together. The effectiveness of the rituals depends on faith. A believer's openness to mystery is very important for anyone participating in the church's rich symbolic life. Without faith, words are words, water is water, bread is bread, and wine is wine. But with faith, we step beyond the senses into a mystery dimension. Words of Scripture become a divine communication. Waters of baptism become a mystery-filled moment of new birth. Bread and wine become Communion and Presence.

Catholics share this principle of sacramentality with peoples throughout history, both Christian and non-Christian. From the most ancient of times, we humans have just naturally acted out important transitions in life by way of some kind of community or group ritual that makes use of sacred places, things, and persons. We do the same to remember important group experiences, face cyclic needs, or celebrate answers to the big questions of life and death. Like people of ancient times, we believe our social or community life has a God-dimension to it. By way of community rituals we come to grips with guilt and purification, initiate new members, celebrate communion with each other and with our God through a sacred meal, dramatize dependence or gratitude with ritual sacrifices, restore health, dramatize the meaning of death and farewell of loved ones, make sexuality and family life holy, and anoint chosen leaders to serve us.

Origin of Catholic Sacraments

It was natural that followers of Jesus depended upon sacred symbolism. They were not alone in this. When Christianity was beginning to spread throughout the Roman Empire, popular mystery cults were present almost everywhere. While there is no proof that the early followers of Jesus borrowed directly from these popular and usually secret groups, there are similarities in the sacramental rituals of both traditions.

The earliest of Christians naturally depended upon the symbolism and rituals that were part of their Jewish roots. Along with Jesus they had lived within the Hebrew tradition that celebrated their relationship with God in springtime rituals, the Passover, and other cyclic feasts, sacred places, burnt offerings, pouring of oil, rising incense, ritual meals, and scapegoats. Even before they knew themselves as a separate religious group or "church," they were already reliving Jesus' life-death-victory drama by telling the story and ritualizing it annually under the new spring moon like the clans of ancient times. In doing so they experienced the mystery of their own drama of life, death, and new life.

Christians, therefore, did not reinvent the sacramental wheel; nor did they dream up new religious forms. They borrowed the ones they were used to—simple, down to earth, now pregnant with new meaning—and went on from there. They learned about conversion, death, and resurrection, by going down into water, being anointed with sweet smelling oil, and by dressing in new white robes. Excitement and enthusiasm continued through the touch of the community's outstretched hands. They remembered Jesus and grew in relationship with the risen Lord by sitting weekly with him at table as they shared a holy bread and cup. Their own persecution-death-victory dramas were understood in light of his.

Greek-speaking Christians in those early times called these, and other, ritual religious experiences *mysteria*, or "mysteries." Latin writers began using the term *sacramentum*, or "sign," to describe the same thing. The fundamental truth expressed by these terms is the coming together of God and people, the divine and human, in a saving experience.

There was no intention during early centuries to limit the number of sacraments to seven. Any ritual that celebrated a divine saving action was considered a mystery or sacrament: feasts days such as Easter and Pentecost, actions such as the ritual washing of feet and imposition of blessed ashes, along with the more major ones we

would come to know as "the seven." Some lists of sacraments were very short, others had as many as thirty. In the mid-13th century the number was finally set at seven. Other holy things and rituals came to be called sacramentals (see Chapter 19).

As separate European languages evolved out of Latin and "barbarian" tongues, the western Catholic church chose to continue Latin as its language of worship. This had a drastic influence on sacraments. They still formed the center of religious activity and community life, but they had become unintelligible to all but the clergy. And poorly educated clergy did not always understand the sacred rites they performed. Details got out of focus. The power of ritual frequently got confused with magic and superstition. Abuses were prevalent.

The Reformation of the 1500s challenged much of Catholic sacramentality. Most Protestants kept only the rituals of baptism and Eucharist as sacraments because they were clearly mentioned in Scripture. The Catholic church continued to defend its sacramental traditions, with almost no change between the 1500s and the mid-1900s. Catholics "received" the sacraments faithfully, but sometimes with little insight into their rich and living symbolism. Instead of the community rituals that they had been, sacraments tended to become private affairs: confession in a dark "closet"; baptism on a Sunday afternoon with few persons (and usually not the mother) present; anointing of the sick as last rites in the shadows of death in a private bedroom or hospital room.

The Second Vatican Council mandated the renewal of the sacraments. Since then the principle of sacramentality has again become the living center of Catholic spiritual life.

BAPTISM

Baptism: An Initiation Process

Early Christians moved easily from the baptism made popular by John along the River Jordan to their own water ceremony. They required it for commitment to the new Way preached by Jesus and for membership in their community of faith. We have this description from as early as the turn of the first century: "...baptize in running water, in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. If you do not have running water, baptize in some other water, and if you cannot do it in cold water, do it in warm. If you are without either, then pour water on the head three times in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Let the baptizer, the one to be baptized, and others who can, fast before the baptism, but order the candidate to fast one or two days beforehand" (*Didache* 7:1-4).

At first it seems that new Christians were accepted into the community through this water ceremony without much formal preparation. Soon, however, persecution made it important to test candidates for their sincerity, both to protect the community and to meet the challenges that lay ahead. Candidates usually witnessed the Eucharistic liturgy only after baptism.

At a fairly early date, baptism became associated with the annual Easter Vigil. Surviving written records from this period are not plentiful, but it seems that in many places adults were tested for up to three years while they were instructed, supported in their withdrawal from pagan practices and loyalties, and taught to live a new way. Only then were they admitted to candidacy for baptism. Finally, during what would become Lent, they received intense instruction, submitted to exorcisms and other special rituals, fasted on Good Friday and Holy Saturday, and were baptized during the night of the Easter Vigil. This period of preparation leading to initiation at the Easter Vigil was the beginnings of the *catechumenate,* which would reach its golden age in the 4th and 5th centuries.

Baptistries

Baptistries became prominent features of churches, basilicas, and cathedrals. Some of these were elaborate separate buildings. Others were built into the entryway or vestibules of the place of worship, and some were close to the sanctuary. Different forms of baptism were popular. In some baptistries, the elect were fully immersed, usually three times, in a pool. In other baptistries, the elect stood in shallow water, with the waters of baptism poured over them.

Immediately after the water ritual the newly baptized were anointed with a sweet smelling oil, chrism. Sometimes the anointing was lavish, covering most of the body, with men and women separated, deaconesses performing the ritual for women. Then the newly baptized were dressed in new white robes that they sometimes wore all Easter week. Holding a burning candle, they were led to the altar table for Eucharist.

Private Baptism

In the early 4th century the Roman persecution of Christians ended and the church gained religious freedom. Becoming a Christian

became the popular thing to do as church and state began to blend together. There were mass conversions to Christianity that often overwhelmed the catechumenate and contributed to its decline. Eventually, most of the unbaptized left in Europe were newborn infants. The catechumenate process gradually fell into disuse, and other practices developed, some of which continued right into our own century.

By the 11th century it was considered a grave responsibility to baptize babies as soon as possible after birth. This was a consequence of a high infant mortality rate and the conviction that the unbaptized could not be saved. In the 14th century this became church law and remained the usual practice until recent years. Eventually baptism was no longer closely associated with the annual Easter experience. Adults were baptized in a private ceremony following a period of private instruction. The ordinary celebration of baptism became associated with infants, a rather simple ceremony, usually on a Sunday afternoon, with godparents and a few others present. Seldom was the mother present for two reasons. First, baptism usually closely followed birth; second, the mother was considered "unclean" until a ritual of purification was performed. Baptistries no longer were a prominent feature of the place of worship. A baptismal font, often in an out-of-the-way corner, became common. Just a little bit of water was poured onto the forehead of the infant.

Renewal of Baptism

Today, however, we have returned to more ancient practices. The baptism of infants frequently takes place in the midst of the worshipping community after the Sunday homily or at least in a more celebrative manner at another time. The adult catechumenate has been restored since 1972. Once again adults journey toward full faith with the whole parish community involved in some way as catechists, sponsors, godparents, and hospitality hosts. As in ancient times, public rituals once again grace the process: Rite of Acceptance, Rite of Election, Scrutinies, Presentation of the Creed, Presentation of the Our Father, dismissal after the Service of the Word for further breaking open the Word, baptism, confirmation and First Eucharist at the Easter Vigil, and a period of follow-up, or mystagogy. Baptismal pools, for immersion or for standing in, once again are designed as a prominent feature in the remodeling or building of churches.

Important sacramentals are still associated with baptism of infants: recitation of promises by those present, marking of the infant with the sign of the cross, pouring of water or immersion, anointing with holy chrism, clothing with a white garment, giving of a lighted candle, touching of the ears and mouth (optional).

For the close association of baptism with the season of Lent and Easter, see pages 71 and 90. For the customs associated with baptismal names and patrons, see page 111.

CONFIRMATION

Confirmation is a kind of accident in the development of Catholic sacramental rituals. During the first four centuries there was no uniformity in the initiation ritual as a person was led from the waters of baptism to the table of Eucharist in the same night or early dawn. Generally, the newly baptized were welcomed from the waters by the bishop, the official representative and leader of the local community. He, often with others, would lay hands on them. Or the bishop would extend his hands over them. If they had already been anointed, the bishop would often add still another anointing, called chrismation. The forehead was anointed with perfumed oil, often in the form of a cross. A ritual kiss of peace followed. Then the newly baptized were led to the Eucharistic table for the final stage of initiation into the church. This was the ordinary ritual in Rome in the year 215.

Eventually this second anointing was seen as distinct from the baptism ritual. It became associated with the coming of the Holy Spirit, a reliving of the Pentecost experience originally associated with baptism itself. During the first generations of Christianity baptism had often been accompanied by signs of the Spirit's presence: speaking in tongues, prophesying, and healing. By the time the church had gained her religious freedom in the early 4th century, these gifts had all but disappeared.

When it became the usual practice in local churches to baptize infants as soon as possible after birth, the bishop could not always be present for the special anointing and welcoming ritual. Also, in barbarian lands of Europe there were no bishops at first, only missionary monks and priests who baptized adults and children. Where the Western Catholic church was well established, this special anointing was postponed until the bishop was able to visit the parish. This ritual of welcoming by the bishop was, consequently, no longer experienced as a natural progression in the initiation ritual from the waters of baptism to the table of Eucharist. In this separated condition, the

anointing took on its own character. The laying on of hands was replaced by the bishop's special anointing of the forehead in the form of a cross, sealing the person's baptism. This anointing has been called "confirmation" in the Western church since the mid-5th century.

Outside of the city of Rome, this separate anointing by the bishop was slow to catch on in many areas. Often, the baptized either did not receive the second anointing or the ritual was done by the local priest. Finally, between the 9th and 13th centuries the Roman tradition spread throughout Europe with the understanding that the purpose of confirmation was to strengthen the faith of the baptized person. The bishop's caress of the cheek, a sign of welcome and peace, was replaced with a slap to symbolize the spiritual battles facing the believer.

Until the 13th century it was expected, and even mandated by local church authorities, that infants and children be confirmed early in life, usually before the age of two. Then the ideal age began creeping upward because children did not need to defend their faith. Soon it was seven, then twelve, fourteen.... After the Council of Trent, young people between the ages of seven and twelve were to be confirmed.

Until modern times confirmation still occurred before first Eucharist, which was normally received during the early teens. The original order of initiation sacraments was preserved. At the beginning of the 20th century, however, it became popular to receive communion at an earlier age. This practice was encouraged by Pius X in 1910. After that, pastoral practice saw confirmation slipping out of the original sequence of initiation sacraments, coming sometime after the receiving of first Eucharist, when the bishop could visit the parish, often in cycles of up to five years.

In 1972 the American bishops settled on early adolescence, between the ages of ten and twelve, as the proper age for confirmation. In more recent times, however, confirmation tended to become the sacrament of Christian maturity, received in the mid to late teens, at a time when persons could freely and maturely make a commitment to their baptism.

Order of Initiation Restored

Today, however, the age of confirmation in the U.S. varies greatly from diocese to diocese. Following the popularity and importance of the restored initiation process, begun with the publication of the *Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults* in 1972, some dioceses have restored the original order of the initiation sacraments: baptism, confirmation, and Eucharist, with confirmation celebrated at the age of reason (about 7) and before first Eucharist, often at the same Mass. This is in keeping with the preference expressed in the church's official rites. Other dioceses have decided on ages varying from nine or ten to the late teens. When adults and children of catechetical age come for baptism, all three sacraments are always celebrated in the original order as part of one ritual.

EUCHARIST

It was the smell of Catholicism—a sweet smelling odor of incense that permeated all Catholic churches until recent times. The smell was a leftover from lavish incensing of the Blessed Sacrament during Benediction. A large consecrated host was always kept in the tabernacle. Every week, sometimes more often, this host was placed in a special container, called a monstrance, and exhibited for all to see and adore. To the tunes of *O Salutaris hostia* and *Tantum ergo sacramentum*... this sacred host was devoutly incensed. Then the congregation was blessed with it.

Many Catholics tend to think of the Eucharist as separate or a combination of separate sacred objects: consecrated bread received in communion, consecrated bread exhibited to be adored and be blessed by in Benediction, and consecrated bread to be visited and kept vigil with in the tabernacle. This attitude evolved in the Middle Ages and prevailed until recent times.

In reality, however, from the time of the apostles, Eucharist (Greek *eucharistein*, "to give thanks"), has referred to the entire combination of rituals that hold the assembly of believers together for worship. It includes, therefore, the sharing of the Word of Scripture, offering of prayers, and keeping alive the memory of Jesus by remembering the Last Supper. This concludes naturally in the sharing the bread that is his body broken for us and the cup that is his blood poured out for us. The Eucharist is the whole ritual that has come to be known as the Mass. The word "Mass" comes from the Latin *missa* or "dismissal" of those assembled; first the catechumens after the Service of the Word and the whole congregation at the end.

The Eucharist, therefore, is not only a holy bread and a holy cup, it is a holy moment—a saving action. It has been the faith of Catholics from earliest times that Jesus Christ is present during this Eucharistic

ritual. Those who share the bread and cup with each other become one with Christ and one with each other, because it is the one Christ whom they share.

The sacrament of Eucharist is first of all associated with the evolution of the Lord's Day, Sunday (see pages 19-25), and was celebrated only on Sunday for the first centuries. The Eucharist evolved rather quickly from a fellowship meal to a ritual meal accompanied by other religious activities: a Scripture service, an offering of gifts of bread and wine, a thanksgiving prayer over these gifts, a praying of the memorial words of Jesus from the Last Supper, a breaking of bread, and finally the sharing of this holy bread and cup by those present. From early times a portion was always saved to send to the absent and the sick.

Eucharistic Sacrifice

The Letter to the Hebrews in the Christian Scriptures interpreted this Eucharistic experience as a holy sacrifice. It proclaimed Jesus as priest, offering himself as the perfect victim to the heavenly Father. This belief quickly became popular. Prior to this, sacrifice had been closely identified with animal sacrifice in both pagan religions and Judaism—and Christians at this time did not want to be closely associated with either tradition. In fact pagans sometimes accused Christians of being atheists because they did not offer sacrifices to gods. When the notion of sacrifice became legitimate, however, it quickly caught on. Communion came to be experienced as a sacrificial meal. Later on the Eucharistic bread came to be called a host (Latin *hostia*), a term originally referring to an animal sacrifice.

Distancing from Laity

When Christianity gained its religious freedom in the early 4th century, the Eucharist, or Mass, gradually evolved into a more complicated and more standardized ritual, and became even more lengthy when Sunday became a day of rest in 321. Soon, in many cities, Mass was celebrated by ranks of clergy in the presence of the laity, whose level of participation was gradually diminishing. The adoption of Latin as the official language of worship, while peoples' languages were rapidly evolving into new tongues, further separated the Eucharist from the living experience of the people.

Eucharistic attitudes and practices continued to change during the Middle Ages. More and more people withdrew into their own private devotions, being physically present at Mass but not participating in it. It was a ceremony to attend and watch, a drama that unfolded with

pomp, incense, and glitter of priestly robes. All this added to the mystery of what the laity no longer understood. Their spirituality no longer depended upon participating in the Mass.

Deterioration of Meaning and Practice

As centuries passed, churches became larger. Cathedrals and basilicas and churches replaced the house churches of early Christianity. A simple wooden altar was replaced by stone and marble. By the 6th century the altar was moved to the far end of the church building. The priest, offering the sacrifice, presided with his back to the people. The mysterious Eucharistic prayers, especially the words of consecration, were whispered softly. Emphasis was placed on adoration. Eventually the consecrated elements of bread and wine were elevated above the priest's head so that the people could see and adore. Bells were rung by assisting ministers to inform the people that important things were happening in the ritual (such as the consecration), with little bells in the sanctuary to get the attention of the congregation and big bells in the tower to notify the neighborhood. To *see* the Eucharist became more important than to take and eat. In the 14th century it was common for people to rush from church to church to see elevations, believing that a glimpse would give good luck or protect them from a sudden death.

Emphasis on the holiness of the consecrated bread escalated. Priests were required to genuflect every time they touched it, and had to keep their fingers joined until rinsed after communion. Touching the sacred vessels was reserved to the ordained. A crucifix became a fixture on or above the altar to emphasize the sacrifice of Jesus; the altar backdrop was filled with statues to remember the saints. By the year 1000 the consecrated bread, considered too holy to be touched by the laity, was placed on the tongue. This emphasis on the divinity of Christ and the holiness of the consecrated bread prevented people from receiving communion. They felt unworthy to do so. Finally the church had to legislate that communion be received at least once a year, leading to the church law of the Easter Duty in 1215. These customs and attitudes continued until recent times. An exaggerated devotion to the real presence, along with a mixture of discipline and preparation, resulted in a Eucharistic fast. All who wished to receive communion in the morning had to abstain from all food and drink, including water, from midnight. This included the priest. Beginning in the early 1950s water was permitted. In the mid-1960s food was permitted up to one hour before communion, with special consideration for the sick.

In the 12th century, tabernacles with reserved consecrated bread were becoming elaborate locked safes, placed in the sanctuary area. (In the 16th century, it became popular to place the tabernacle on the altar itself.) The tabernacle, along with the monstrance, became a center for Eucharistic devotions. Side altars became popular so that private Masses could be celebrated, often simultaneously with Mass at the "high" altar. Stained glass windows and multiple statues attracted the attention of the people, ancient visual aids promoting religious devotion.

For many centuries, a great variety still existed in how the Mass was celebrated in the Western church. In Gaul (western Europe), a multiplication of private prayers recited by the priest was introduced in the late Middle Ages, along with multiple signs of the cross over the bread and wine. Later, Rome, in a state of deterioration, had to look north to the land of Charlemagne for hand-copied books detailing the celebration of sacraments. In this way these new additions became part of the Roman books and *the* way of doing things throughout the Western church.

In 1570 Pius V issued an official edition of the Roman missal, and made it mandatory for all of Western Catholicism. It included exact detailed rubrics. The invention of printing made it possible for every priest to have a copy. For the next 400 years the Mass would change little throughout the Western Latin Catholic church.

Renewal of Eucharist

From the Middle Ages into modern times Eucharistic piety had little connection with the original meaning of the Eucharist. People continued to do their own thing with devotional books and rosary while the clergy did theirs in front in Latin. Worship outside of Mass, associated with the tabernacle or Benediction, became more effective than the Mass itself for people's spirituality.

All this began to change with the liturgical movement that began in the last years of the 19th century. The Second Vatican Council (1962-1965) in its first decree, the Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy (1963), turned the entire church back toward the original meaning of Eucharist. Rapid changes followed: emphasis on the people's active participation, the ritual simplified, flexible, audible, and in the language of the people. The altar, looking more like a table once again, moved back among the people. The priest once again presides facing the people, inviting their response and participation. Preaching of homilies, communion of Word, is again as important as the communion of bread and cup. Lay leaders have become involved as ministers and members of liturgy commissions. Today most people who assemble take Jesus at his word: "Take and eat...Take and drink!"

RECONCILIATION

Sin: Human Experience

Humans have always found something lacking in their personal behavior. Moral conduct has always been guided by codes, taboos, and laws within families, clans, or tribes. Some moral codes were very elaborate, for example the Code of Hammurabi, king of Babylon in the 18th century B.C.E., and the moral legislation found in the books of Leviticus and Deuteronomy of the Hebrew Scriptures. Some process of making amends for violations, sins, has always been part of human experience, too. Since proper behavior was considered legislated by the gods, atonement for violations was a religious matter. This varied from temporary exclusion or excommunication from the clan, rituals of purification, special sacrifices as sin offerings, fasting, prayer, and, in extreme cases, death.

Gospel of Reconciliation

Jesus himself and the earliest of Christians were used to penitential rituals prescribed by the Hebrew Scriptures and Jewish traditions. The chief one was the Day of Atonement when the high priest ritually confessed his and the people's sins to God. He then transferred the sins of the nation to a goat, called Azazel, which was then driven into the wilderness. This is the origin of the term "scapegoat." The high priest then offered the required sacrifice in the Temple in Jerusalem as a sign that all would change their lives. Locally, rabbis recommended penitential acts, such as the wearing of sackcloth and ashes.

Jesus preached a gospel of God's love and forgiveness. He was comfortable in associating with sinners, showing them his sincere love and companionship. Sinners flocked to him. Later, however, his church would find it difficult to deal with the matter of sin and forgiveness. The earliest Christian communities continued their Jewish penitential practices. They expelled members in extreme cases until they repented. The apostle Paul urged this (see 1 Corinthians 5:1–13). Baptism was considered *the* means of repentance and response to Jesus' invitation to a new life—the Kingdom of God. Early Christians presumed that all would wait in baptismal innocence for a quick return of Jesus Christ in glory.

Beginnings of Ritual Penance

These early Christians were not blind to the reality of ordinary sins. So they confessed their sins to one another and prayed for healing (see James 5:16). When Christ's Second Coming did not happen as quickly as they had once thought, and church communities had to deal with members who had not lived up to their commitment, there evolved a need for some kind of absolution ritual. At a very early date, a penitential formula was included when Christians gathered for the Eucharist: "On the dominical day of the Lord (Sunday) come together to break bread and give thanks, *after having also confessed your sins so that your sacrifice may be pure" (Didache,* 4:14, end of 1st century, emphasis added).

Intermittent persecutions by Roman civil authorities accelerated the need for a ritual of penance and absolution. Some Christians weakened and denied their faith. Should they be allowed back into the community? And how about murderers, adulterers, and idolaters? Rigorists wanted to deny any absolution and readmittance. Others insisted that forgiveness be quick and complete, the kind modeled by Jesus.

Public Penance

By the 4th century a public ritual had evolved to deal with the most serious of sinners. This included a confession of sins to the local bishop and readmittance to the worshipping community after proof of conversion and extensive penance. The priestly authority to represent the church in absolving from sins was reserved first to the bishop and later to all priests. Sinners were publicly identified as penitents, a distinct group in the local parish. Centuries later, remnants of this public ritual identification would be preserved in our Ash Wednesday service. These penitents were often dismissed from the assembly after the liturgy of the Word, just as the catechumens were. Penances were harsh and often public, sometimes lasting for years or even a lifetime. Some common penances were: total abstinence from wine, meat, sexual relations with spouse, business dealings, bathing, shaving, or having one's hair cut. It was common to wear sackcloth, ashes, and even chains.

At Mass these penitents were prayed over by the presider and congregation. In some places penitents had to stand at the doors of the church, begging for the prayers of those who entered. Absolution and readmittance to the community occurred before the Easter Vigil, often on Holy Thursday. A common conviction was that there was only one opportunity for repentance after baptism. It was not unusual, therefore, for serious sinners to postpone entering the ranks of penitents until old age.

Private Penance

This public form of the sacrament of penance was not very popular because of the rigorism associated with it. It was common that serious sinners asked for absolution only at the time of death. A private form of confession and penance, repeated frequently, evolved in monasteries because of the conviction that all are sinners to some degree. When these monks evangelized Ireland in the 5th century, they carried this form of the sacrament with them, making it available to Catholics in the neighborhood of their monasteries. For the sake of uniformity, priest monks used small books listing common sins according to degree of seriousness and recommended penances for each. Effort was made to ensure that the punishment (penance) fit the crime (sin). Priest confessors had to become "judges" to do this. Ordinarily absolution was given when the penance was completed, except in the danger of death or the impossibility to return later. Priest confessor and penitent would prostrate themselves before the altar as part of the ritual.

Early in the 6th century, monks from these Irish centers carried this private form of the sacrament to the mainland of Europe. For a while there was tension between the old and harsh way of doing this sacrament and the more practical form developed by the monks. Momentum was on the side of the repeated private form, although it was still somewhat unofficial. By the end of the 10th century, absolution was commonly given before the penance was completed. In the 11th century the use of books of penances were discontinued, and penances become lighter.

Already in the 8th century, people were urged to confess at least three times each year. Later, confessing once a year, joined to the Easter duty of receiving communion, was mandated for all by the Fourth Lateran Council in 1215.

By the 13th century this unofficial private form of the sacrament of penance had become the official sacrament of repentance. A change in attitude also had evolved: forgiveness of sins occurred through the absolution by a priest rather than through the sorrow and penance of the penitents. A distinction between mortal and venial sins also occurred. Originally, mortal sins referred to the kind requiring public penance. Now they described the kind that, unforgiven, would merit eternal punishment. Venial sins, on the other hand, could be easily pardoned on both sides of death.

Purgatory and Indulgences

The conviction that something still had to be done after death became popular once penances became easier and absolution readily available. The penance received in the sacrament was meant to shorten one's time in purgatory (see pages 129-130) rather than cancel all effects of sin. Because some punishment due for sins always remained, even after death, some method of dealing with it had to be designed. The practice of indulgences (see pages 131-133) evolved as a consequence. According to this tradition, bishops and then priests had the authority to cancel part of the public penance required of penitents. This authority, associated with their power to bind and to loose (see John 20:22–23), allowed them to apply the infinite merits of Christ to a particular individual. During the 13th century it became popular to transfer these indulgences to souls in purgatory. Unfortunately, these indulgences often were attached to the offering of funds for the building and repair of churches. Eventually this practice was the catalyst for Martin Luther's challenge to the Catholic church and to the Protestant Reformation.

Most Protestants rejected this sacrament of penance. The Catholic church, on the other hand, reemphasized its importance as it had evolved in the Middle Ages, with its stress on private confession and its association with indulgences.

These private confessions usually took place before the altar. After the Council of Trent (1545-1563), however, St. Charles Borromeo designed a confessor's chair boxed in by screens, a design that lasted for hundreds of years. In 1614 the official ritual mandated this style for the sake of anonymity and to protect women from solicitation. This anonymity was also protected by the seal of confession, which forbade the revelation of any confessed serious sin under pain of excommunication. Until the 20th century, the sacrament of penance was ordinarily received once a year as a preparation to receive communion at Eastertime. When Pius X emphasized frequent communion, the conviction still continued that pious Catholics always confess first.

Contemporary Practice

By the middle of the 20th century, it became harder to justify the extreme legalism that had been associated with the sacrament of penance right into modern times. Shifts in moral thinking occurred. Sin in the truest sense came to be associated more with internal choices about fundamental options rather than with external actions. And

the gospel message rather than traditional moral laws once again became *the* effective guideline for morality.

In 1973 the church responded to new insights and emphases. It issued a new ritual for the sacrament of penance, one that would highlight its communal dimension and call to conversion. It contained three rites.

The first rite is a private form that encourages priest and penitent to converse face to face, sharing prayer and Scripture together, and including spiritual counseling and meaningful penance. This has led to the designing of reconciliation rooms to replace the small traditional confessionals.

A second rite is a semi-private form, popularly called communal penance. It begins with an assembly devoted to song, prayer, Scripture reading, and preaching. Then penitents are invited to approach one of the priest confessors for a brief private confession and absolution.

A third rite, a public form, popularly called general absolution, is available in situations of emergency or when too many penitents are present for private confession. Sins absolved in this latter way are still to be confessed privately later.

Finally, there is a form of penitential celebration without absolution. Its purpose is to encourage a sense of conversion.

This sacrament is still in a pattern of transition. Communal penance services have become very popular, especially during the seasons of Lent and Advent, often with several parishes cooperating. Private confession is still available in all parishes, often in connection with spiritual direction. Some parishes provide communal services with general absolution, even though cautioned not to do so by church authorities.

People have not denied that they are sinners. There is no absolute consensus, however, on what to do about conversion and the consequences of sin.

ANOINTING OF THE SICK

Shamans and medicine men and women have struggled with sickness and pain since the dawn of history. Making use of such sacramentals as dances, chants, incense, and masks, they bore witness to the power of evil associated with people's physical and spiritual limitations. They believed that the gods controlled health and sickness.

The Jewish people were just as holistic in attitude. While using the best of known medicines and cures, they confessed that healing was controlled by God (see Psalms 32, 38, 88, 91). They looked to a messianic age when all physical and moral evil would be eliminated.

Christians believe that Jesus did everything the prophets foretold of the messianic age. He was lavish in his healing of every kind of sickness and disability, even bringing the dead to life. Often he would join to this healing a forgiveness of sin. This ministry of healing was practiced also by his disciples whom he sent out on a kind of internship (see Luke 9:1, 10:9; Mark 6:13). Later, after Jesus left them, the apostles continued this healing ministry (see Acts 3:1–10, 14:8–18). Charismatic healing flourished in some communities (see 1 Corinthians 12:9) and enjoys a revival today.

The Letter of James describes clearly the practice of physical and spiritual healing in early Christianity: "Are any of you sick? Then call for the elders of the church and have them pray over them, anointing them with oil in the name of the Lord. The prayer of faith will save the sick, and the Lord will raise them up; and anyone who has committed sins will be forgiven" (see James 5:14–15).

During early centuries Christians privately used oil blessed by the bishop or priests as an internal and external healing remedy. In this form it was used as a kind of medicine or ointment or salve. In some localities blessed oil was also used publicly to anoint penitents as part of an extensive reconciliation process. Only with the 5th century is there evidence that priests rather than the laity used oil to anoint the sick. Church authorities encouraged this official use of oil as a healing sacramental, probably to counteract the people's temptation to seek pagan remedies.

Transition to Anointing of the Dying

Until the Middle Ages people continued to use oil privately as a practical means for physical healing. If they were dying, however, they received absolution and communion, instead of anointing. This Eucharist was called Holy Viaticum, Latin *viaticus*, "way," "journey." When people started to postpone their request for absolution from sin to the time of dying, because of the harsh penitential demands by the church, a reconciliation ritual soon became associated with the deathbed. This ritual, always conducted by a priest, began with a confession. Then there was an anointing, not for healing but because an anointing often was part of the official public penitential practice. This ritual ended with prayer for forgiveness and absolution.

During the time of Charlemagne in the 9th century, this deathbed absolution ritual found its way into the official books in the section that included the ritual for the anointing of the sick. Later generations of bishops and priests presumed that this ritual had come from Rome and was, therefore, official. In this way the anointing of the sick for healing purposes was taken out of the hands of the laity. From then on the anointing was performed only for the seriously ill and was joined to the ritual for a final absolution from sin and Viaticum. The ritual still prayed for healing, however, and parts of the body most in pain were anointed in the form of a cross.

By the end of the 9th century the ritual had become the Last Rites and had become well established in Catholic customs and traditions. For a while the ritual was performed by many priests concelebrating, often in the local church, with multiple sprinklings with holy water, incensing, litanies, and laying on of hands. Because this elaborate ritual called for a large financial donation, common people had little access to the final anointing. Celebration by a single priest eventually became the norm.

Gradually, prayers for physical healing were dropped. The spirit of the ritual was one of preparation for death only. No longer was a hurting part of the body anointed—only the senses, feet, and hands with a prayer that sins committed by them be forgiven: "Through this holy anointing and his tender mercy, may the Lord forgive whatever sins you have committed by sight..." And the anointing followed absolution and communion. It had become the last anointing (Latin *extrema unctio*, Extreme Unction). In this form it was finally listed as one of the seven sacraments in the Middle Ages.

Because the ritual included absolution from sin, followed by the Eucharist, what purpose did the anointing have, since sins were already forgiven? Medieval theologians concluded that the anointing cleansed a dying person from the remnants of all her or his sins committed during life, a final preparation needed to enjoy the glory of heaven. Therefore, the sacrament should not be given to someone who might recover and thus prevent the very purpose of the sacrament! It had become the transition from this life to the next instead of from sickness to health.

Current Practices

The Council of Trent returned to more ancient understandings by teaching that this rite of anointing both forgives sins and also heals the sick. Unfortunately, however, this particular teaching of Trent had

little effect on pastoral practice or popular understandings of the sacrament. In the 1950s a gradual change in thinking evolved because of research into the ancient practices related to the use of oil to anoint the sick for healing. The sacrament once again was offered to those who were seriously ill and not necessarily dying. The notion of applying the name "Last Rites" to this anointing was challenged. Communion or Viaticum, properly speaking, should be the last ritual. Contributing to this conviction was the practice in the Eastern church of anointing the sick publicly in churches.

The Second Vatican Council supported this direction in thinking. The renewal of the sacrament, now called the Anointing of the Sick, was completed in 1972. Several forms of this ritual are now available. If it probably is the final anointing, then it should be accompanied by Communion or Viaticum and, if desired, confession. Those with less serious illness may receive the sacrament alone or with others in a more public fashion, for example in the parish church. Once again the emphasis is on healing rather than absolution from sin. Only the forehead and hands are anointed with the prayer: "Through this holy anointing may the Lord in his love and mercy help you with the grace of the Holy Spirit. May the Lord who frees you from sin save you and raise you up."

MARRIAGE

There was no particular Catholic wedding ritual until after the 11th century. The civil government of the Roman Empire had always regulated marriages and divorce and continued to do so after the church gained religious freedom in 313. Only when the decaying empire lost its power to enforce its laws did bishops assume authority over marriage customs.

Early Christians married according to the popular ways of their culture. It was a civil, personal, and family matter. What was peculiarly Christian, however, was a new attitude toward the permanence of the marriage bond. Jewish tradition permitted many wives and permitted husbands to divorce spouses who were guilty of shameful behavior (and sometimes allowed divorce for even minor reasons). Jesus promoted a much higher norm to strive for: monogamy, no divorce (see Luke 16:18; Mark 10:1–12; Matthew 5:31–32, 19:3–9). Exceptions, however, were allowed already in the first generations of Christianity (1 Corinthians 7:12–16; 2 Corinthians 6:14–18).

Bishops continued to allow divorce but only on the grounds of adultery. A double standard often was evident; the wife, but not the husband, was usually prohibited from remarrying. Still, no consistent policy toward the absolute permanence of the marriage bond existed. Only with bishop St. Ambrose of Milan (d. 397) did the conviction of the absolute indissolubility of marriage begin to surface.

From the beginning, therefore, the church adopted as its own the current cultural attitude toward marriage, with the primacy of the husband evident. The apostle Paul, comfortable with this attitude, took pains to balance it with spiritual and symbolic insights into the mystery of marriage: it is a sign of Christ's union with and love for his body, the church (Ephesians 5:21–33). These spiritual insights did not enter into the ritual itself. Young men and women continued to marry according to local traditions. Generally in some symbolic fashion, the father "gave away" his daughter to the groom in her own home, usually placing her hand into that of her new husband. Many of the popular customs still associated with weddings came from the early Roman times and the Germanic tribes of Europe. Because fathers controlled the destiny of their children, the bride's father was compensated for the loss of a fertile member of his family by gifts of money or property. Later this became symbolic: in place of the "price for the bride" a precious ring was placed on the bride's finger. The marriage officially occurred when the woman's father brought her to her new home. There she was carried over the threshold by her new husband—possibly a ritual left over from ancient times when brides were "carried away" or abducted by raids on other clans. Once inside her new home the bride was fed a piece of sacred cake (originally done to introduce her to her new gods). Even the special bridal dress and garlands of flowers come from ancient Roman times.

In the East, a garland was draped over the couple to symbolize their union. In the West a veil frequently was placed over the couple. No formula or blessing by a representative of the church was necessary. Then there was a joyful procession to the husband's home for a big feast. When Christianity spread among the Germanic peoples, their traditions were adopted, too. It is interesting to note that their customs (for example, the popular custom of the engagement ring) were often very similar to those of other peoples.

Gradually it became a popular tradition to have a representative of the clergy, as guest of the families, give a special blessing to the newly married couple during the wedding feast. Sometimes the clergy would be invited to do what the father would do; for example, placing the

bride's hand into the groom's. In some localities the priest would drape the couple with a veil just as, in the Eastern church a garland of flowers was used. Until the 5th century, however, the only Catholics who had to have a special blessing at their wedding were priests and deacons! The blessing of the "bridal chamber" or bedroom was also common.

A Problem with Sex

Very early in the history of the church, religious leaders began to look upon the sexual dimension of marriage as a necessary evil, always tainted with some sin. This attitude was made popular by Manichean heretics who claimed that material things and sexual matters were sinful by their nature. Marriage was discouraged and allowed only for the procreation of children. This heresy was contrary to the teaching of Christianity, but shades of this attitude crept into Catholic tradition, promoted even by St. Augustine (d. 430).

The conviction that procreation of children was the first and most important purpose of marriage never left Catholicism entirely. The second, and lesser, purpose was to promote fidelity among adults. In the Middle Ages marriage was considered good only as a solution to concupiscence or "desires of the flesh." Only in recent times have the notions of love, companionship, and bonding been emphasized as equal to procreation.

Marriage Becomes Sacrament

No particular ritual was demanded by the church until after 1000. Then bishops began to insist that the exchange of consent be done before witnesses (often to ensure the woman's free consent) and be solemnly blessed by a priest. At first weddings were held in church only to make it more convenient to get the required blessing. The exchange of consent would be done at the church door, followed by a nuptial Mass and blessing. By the 12th century all was done in the same ceremony with the priest assuming responsibilities once carried out by parents or guardians, for example, placing the bride's hand into that of the groom. Even the tradition of kissing the bride evolved within this Catholic ritual. The priest would give the kiss of peace to the groom who in turn passed it on to the bride.

Finally, at the Fourth Lateran Council in 1215 marriage was included in the official list of the church's seven sacraments. Difficulties continued, however. How could an activity that involves material concerns and sexuality be a sacrament? Once marriage was recognized as a sacrament, it had to be admitted that it is a source of special grace and therefore good in itself.

The heart of the sacrament was finally determined to be the exchange of consent, completed or sealed in intercourse. Its indissolubility continued to be presumed unless it could be proved that the original contract did not exist for some reason. In the 15th century, the church developed its process of annulment of certain marriages through its church courts.

The Council of Trent (1563) summarized the church's teaching about marriage. It declared that in the future no Christian marriage would be valid and sacramental unless it was contracted before a priest and two witnesses. Later this requirement was limited to Catholics. Also, marriages had to be announced publicly three weeks in advance. These announcements, popularly called "the wedding banns," are, today, an optional practice.

Only in the late 1700s in France did churches, Catholic and Protestant, lose legal control over marriage. The Napoleonic Code of 1792 ordered all marriages to be civil. After that all countries began allowing civil marriages.

Current Thinking and Practice

At mid-20th century many Catholic theologians began emphasizing that sex had a more fundamental purpose in life than procreation and education of children. Marriage and sex, like love itself, were important in themselves. In sum: The primary purpose of marriage was the personal fulfillment and emotional growth of the spouses.

While the official church resisted this new emphasis, Vatican Council II adopted a more personalist interpretation of marriage. It maintained, however, the church's traditional teaching (Church in the Modern World, 48). Since then the ritual has been revised. Couples may now choose from a variety of Scripture readings and formulas for exchange of consent. In some places they have even greater freedom in designing their wedding: writing their own vows, choosing other favorite readings to accompany Scripture. In the case of an interfaith marriage, they may even invite the non-Catholic's pastor to preside with the Catholic priest.

The church has continued to support efforts to strengthen marriage. Adequate preparation is required by all dioceses. Some require a waiting period up to six months. Enrichment efforts are popular, notably the Marriage Encounter movement.

ORDERS

Priesthood as we know it in the Catholic church was unheard of during the first generation of Christianity, because at that time priesthood was still associated with animal sacrifices in both the Jewish and pagan religions. The first Christians continued to recognize the legitimacy of the Jewish Temple and priesthood at Jerusalem. In their local communities they continued a style of community leadership common in Jewish communities, looking to elders to provide leadership and to preside over their Eucharistic assemblies. These were chosen in a ritual that included being prayed over and having hands laid on them. In the Greek Scriptures, these elders are called *presbyteroi*. Other ministers were chosen in a similar ritual. (See Acts 13:1–3; 1 Timothy 4:14; 5:22.)

In 70 C.E. Jerusalem and its temple and Jewish priesthood were destroyed by Roman armies. Jews were scattered. Christians began to look to Jesus as *the* priest, a development in their thinking reflected clearly in the letter to Hebrews. All the baptized shared this special priesthood because all had become one with Christ.

A clearly defined local leadership in the form of elders, or *presbyteroi*, became still more important when the original apostles and disciples of Jesus died. The chief elder in each community was often called the *episkopos* (Greek, "overseer"). In English this came to be translated as "bishop" (Latin *episcopus*). Ordinarily he presided over the community's Eucharistic assembly.

Someone had to be responsible to preserve and preach the true beliefs when heresies began to evolve. Consequently, local leaders began to consider themselves the successors of the apostles in the sense that they preserved the teaching of the apostles. By the end of the 2nd century the local bishop was considered *the* source of true teaching.

Origin of Catholic Priesthood

When the Eucharist came to be regarded as a sacrifice, the role of the bishop took on a priestly dimension. By the 3rd century bishops were considered priests. Presbyters or elders sometimes substituted for the bishop at the Eucharist. By the end of the third century people all over were using the title "priest" (*hiereus* in Greek and *sacerdos* in Latin) for whoever presided at the Eucharist.

Ordination Process

For the first 150 years presbyters were usually chosen by the people in the local community whom they would serve. They chose the bishop from among presbyters. Later only the presbyters or neighboring bishops had a vote in choosing the bishop. People still had some voice of approval. Deacons were usually appointed by the bishop. All these ministers were ritually selected, or ordained by a laying on of hands. The ordination was to specific ministries. The bishop was given the authority to offer the Eucharist, bind and loose from serious sin, and to assign other ministers. Presbyters were given the authority to counsel members of the community and to govern. Deacons were chosen as servants to the bishop.

Expanding Orders of Clergy

When the church obtained legal standing in 313, it already had an organized system of ministers and community leadership: presbyters or elders, bishops or chief elders, and deacons. In some communities, especially in the East, deaconesses were also part of the local ministry system. The Council of Nicaea (325), however, mandated that deaconesses no longer be considered clergy.

It did not take long before even more ranks or orders evolved. Subdeacons helped deacons. Exorcists helped at rituals for initiation and repentance. Lectors were trained to read the Scriptures. Porters were responsible for janitorial and guard duties, the latter especially important during times of persecution. Acolytes served as secretaries and messengers of bishops. These special ministries were counted among the clergy by the 5th century. Eventually they were considered stepping stones to priesthood, advancing through the ranks, so to speak.

In some communities other ministries were very active. Widows and virgins organized to pray and to serve the poor and sick. Specially selected catechists or teachers instructed catechumens.

Christian communities grew rapidly, creating further need for leadership. Bishops emerged as the head of this local leadership. They were a sort of a father of a family, shepherd, administrator, judge, teacher, PR person with the non-Christian and often antagonistic neighbors, and the priest at the Eucharistic sacrifice. Ordinarily, they still ministered closely with the local elders or presbyters.

Deacons continued to be practical ministers within the local community, pretty much assisting the bishop. They served the poor, took care of financial matters, assisted at the Eucharist, and prepared catechumens for baptism.

Presbyters Become Priests

When Christianity became the official religion of the Roman Empire, large numbers of converts and multiplication of communities or parishes called for more ordained personnel. This was especially true of outlying areas. Presbyters were already available. They made ideal substitutes for the bishop. In this way presbyters, originally councils of elders or advisors, began serving alone in local communities. Their authority was seen as coming directly from the bishop. At first their delegated ministry was limited to presiding over the Eucharist and baptizing.

Soon all presbyters were considered priests because they offered the Eucharistic sacrifice. To keep a distinction between them and bishops, the latter were called "high priests." For a while a beautiful custom was practiced to maintain a symbolic union between the local bishops and the priests in the surrounding area. The bishop would send a piece of consecrated bread from his Mass to these priests in the outlaying parishes who would put it in their chalice at Mass.

Our word "priest" is directly related to the Greek word *presbyteros* and the Latin *presbyter*. This latter was shortened to "prester," giving us our English "priest."

A Different Lifestyle

The first hints of a distinction between the lifestyles of clergy and laity arose already in the 200s. Clergy were expected to live differently, especially in regard to sexual expression and marriage. The apostle Paul had recommended celibacy and virginity for community leaders, or at least that bishops be married only once. The Hebrew Scriptures (see Leviticus 22:3–6) mandated that their Jewish priests refrain from intercourse before serving at the altar.

Because Christians considered the priesthood of the New Testament to be greater than that of the Jews, the call to purity was considered greater, too. And since priests served at the altar all their life, shouldn't their abstinence be permanent? Early heretics, such as Manichaeans and Montanists, added a negative influence by proclaiming that sexual expression—including that of the laity—was impure. Catholic leaders, such as St. Augustine, taught that Original Sin was transmitted through intercourse. Therefore, abstinence and virginity was the ideal life and only the weak should marry. However, most bishops and presbyters continued to marry. In fact, the only marriages that had to have any kind of blessing were those of deacons and priests.

Priests continued to live in the same style as did the people they served. They farmed and worked at trades. They did not wear distinctive clothing. Only bishops, because of their extensive responsibilities, did not do ordinary work; and they wore a distinctive insignia. Beginning in the late 5th century, priests began wearing a long tunic to distinguish them from the laity, who wore a short one. This evolved into the modern alb (white) and the everyday dark cassock.

As Christianity swept through the Germanic lands, the church adopted the feudalistic structures of culture and politics that had evolved in Europe. Precise ranking, with exact privileges and responsibilities, was determined for kings, lords, knights, and, on the bottom, the peasants. A parallel ranking made clear distinction among bishops, abbots, priests, monks, and the laity on the bottom.

Clearly determined levels of authority gave rise to elaborate investiture with distinct insignia when clerics were ordained. Deacons were presented with alb and stole; priests' palms were anointed and they were then presented with chasuble and stole, along with paten, chalice, bread, and wine; bishops received the stole, ring, crozier, and eventually the miter; deacons received the Book of the Gospels; acolytes received a candle; lectors, the Book of Epistles; porters, a key.

The tradition of celibacy continued to evolve. In some places it was expected that priests not be sexually active after ordination. When monastic spirituality became popular in the fourth and fifth centuries, it promoted the ideal of celibacy as a model for all priests. However, the crisis in Europe following the barbarian invasions made it difficult for church leaders to enforce the discipline of clerical celibacy.

One way church authority enforced celibacy was by ordaining monks, who took the vow of chastity, to evangelize large areas of Europe. Church authority continued to mandate celibacy. The First Lateran Council (1123-1153) forbade those in orders to marry and ordered all those already married to renounce their wives and do penance. Later legislation declared the marriages of clerics not only illegal but also invalid. Widespread disregard of these laws continued until a reorganization of preparation for priesthood following the Protestant Reformation and the Council of Trent in the 1500s.

Post-Reformation Priesthood

As the Middle Ages gave way to modern times, there was wide-

spread scandalous living among priests and bishops, along with emphasis on the mere externals of worship and sacramental ministry. Consequently, Protestant reformers had little respect for the Catholic priesthood even though many of them, such as Martin Luther, were priests. They emphasized ministry rather than priesthood, except for the priesthood of all the baptized. The Catholic church responded with a Counter-reformation that included a more adequate and structured preparation for celibacy and ordination by way of seminaries, renewed discipline for those ordained, and separation from "the world." These efforts were very successful and continued into contemporary times.

Current Trends

Catholic priests do not fit any one definition. For almost 2000 years they have been at the center of the sacramental life of the church. But they have also been educators, counselors, administrators, theologians, and more.

In the *Decree on Priestly Formation* Vatican II called for more biblical, pastoral, and social science studies in seminary training. It also recommended more contact between seminarians and real society. A permanent diaconate, open to married men, was re-established.

Like so many other Catholic traditions, those surrounding the priesthood entered a crisis stage in the mid-1960s. Mandatory celibacy was challenged. Tens of thousands of priests worldwide resigned from the active ministry. Optional celibacy, the ordination of married men, and the ordination of women continue to be debated issues. A shortage of priests and vocations to religious life has encouraged the evolution of other parish ministries now filled by the laity.

Priest Garb

Until the 19th century priests wore no distinguishing clothes. The black suit and Roman collar is a more recent American custom and today is in a transition phase as clergy wear clerical shirts of different colors or lay clothes. Ironically, the traditional "turned around" collar was first worn by Protestant clergy in Europe.

19

SACRAMENTALS

It used to be easy to identify Catholics. They wore medals and scapulars. They did little rituals in the privacy of their homes, such as sprinkling holy water or burning a piece of palm when bad weather threatened. They faithfully fingered their rosary beads and prayed from prayer books and leaflets. They blessed themselves with holy water and genuflected when entering church. They knelt and prayed before burning vigil lights and votive lights. In fact, they seemed to kneel and make the Sign of the Cross often. Men tipped their hat when passing a church, and women wore theirs in church. They were faithful in attending Mass on Sunday and novena services with Benediction during the week. Holy pictures and statues were prominent in churches and homes. Parishioners were devoted to Mary, the Sacred Heart, to the presence of Christ reserved in the Blessed Sacrament, and to canonized saints. They tended to multiply religious activities and to visit grottoes and shrines.

In being faithful to these practices, and much more, Catholics believed they were in contact with divine presence and power. And they were.

Catholics have always been a people devoted to sacramentals. They clothe their religious faith and worship with a multitude of physical forms. There have been changes in the use of sacramentals since Vatican II. The principle of sacramentality, however, continues as a distinguishing feature of Catholicism.

At first glance, some Catholic practices seem far removed from the really sacred and from the heart of the church's worship and unfolding of the church year. The contrary is true. When men tipped their hats on the occasion of passing a church, they were imitating genuflections and bowing in the presence of the Blessed Sacrament. Private uses of holy water reflect the waters of purification and rebirth in the sacrament of baptism. Palms on the walls of homes and used as a sacramental were blessed and used in the Palm Sunday procession. Daily private prayer continues an ancient tradition among

Jews and early Christians. Even the rosary as a private prayer evolved out of the daily Liturgy of the Hours.

Definition

Sacramentals are associated with or imitate the church's official rituals as they unfold daily, weekly, monthly, and yearly. They include religious signs, symbols, public and private devotions, prayers, gestures, rituals, music, images, and natural or made objects. Some of them are found only in the church's official rituals, such as sacred oils. Others are common in parishioners' private lives, such as candles and holy water. In themselves they might not be religious (for example, a particular color, or form of things, or position of the human body). They become sacramentals and, therefore, sacred, in their religious purpose and use.

In one form or another, sacramentals have been part of Christian religious practice from the earliest centuries. Since the Protestant Reformation, most of them have been preserved only by Catholics.

Popular Devotions

An important category of sacramentals is popular devotions. They may be either private or public and usually support a particular religious theme. Consisting of special prayers, gestures, and rituals, they are performed to worship God, honor the saints, or to seek divine favors. They are not part of the church's official liturgy of sacraments and prayer. Praying the rosary or burning a candle in front of a crucifix are examples. So are litanies, novenas, and prayers in honor of the Sacred Heart or Precious Blood. Some devotions lend themselves to communal expression. These are called public devotions and are associated in some way with essential mysteries of Christianity. Examples are group participation in praying the Stations of the Cross in church during Lent or praying the rosary publicly in a group during October. Public devotions are practiced throughout the church and provide a great variety in Catholics' spirituality.

Private devotions, on the other hand, support an individual's needs or personal spirituality. Some Catholics pray the rosary privately or light a candle to seek some favor or give thanks for favors received. Others wear a religious medal or scapular as a testimony of personal faith or to obtain some spiritual or temporal favor. Private devotions may be only remotely related to faith, such as displaying a St. Christopher statue on the car dashboard for personal safety.

Reforms and renewal in the Catholic church since the Second Vatican Council have put sacramentals and devotional practices into a better perspective in relation to the church's sacramental liturgy. They remain, however, an important part of the church's living religious traditions. "Popular devotions of the Christian people are warmly commended, provided they accord with the laws and norms of the Church. Such is especially the case with devotions called for by the Apostolic See. Devotions proper to individual churches also have a special dignity if they are conducted by mandate of the bishops in accord with customs or books lawfully approved. Nevertheless these devotions should be so drawn up that they harmonize with the liturgical seasons, accord with the sacred liturgy, are in some fashion derived from it, and lead the people to it, since the liturgy by its very nature far surpasses any of them" (Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy, 13).

The earliest Christian sacramentals came out of the Jewish tradition where they were familiar features of religious life. They formed the sacramental core of Christians' religious life: bread, wine, purifying waters, oil, laying on of hands, etc. Ritual words were also borrowed: Amen, Alleluia, Hosanna. Rituals of feasts were borrowed and found pregnant with new meaning: Passover and Pentecost, or Feast of Weeks. Features of synagogue services and family Sabbath meals and other sacred meals would give structure to the early Eucharistic ritual.

The Hebrew first commandment prohibited the making of images of Yahweh-God. Symbolism of the presence, power, and nature of God, however, was common, and by the time of Jesus was rich in variety, decorating both the Temple and local synagogues. This symbolic art crossed over into early Christian decoration.

Principle of Sacramentality

The principle of sacramentality, found already in the Jewish religion, expanded rapidly in early Christianity. It rests on an attitude toward mediation. The invisible mystery dimension, or God dimension, of all of reality can be experienced in visible ways. The mystery of God is discovered, and God and people touch each other through the finite, through sacramentals. These might be actual events in personal or corporate history. They might also be objects, rituals, symbols, and in fact, the whole cosmos.

Early Christians scratched symbols on tombs of martyrs, walls of house-churches, and later on catacomb walls. They painted frescoes and created mosaics of those they held dear: Jesus, Mary,

and the saints.

The Jewish and pagan practices of blessing lights in the evening and eating sacred meals were continued by Christians. New seasonal sacramentals were adopted as the church year evolved (for example, blessed palms and ashes).

As centuries passed, a separation occurred between the church's use of sacramentals associated with its public rituals of worship and the people's use of them in a more private way. Popular spirituality, with emphasis on the veneration of saints, gradually drifted away from a biblical-liturgical center. This was caused in part by an ever-expanding chasm between the evolving vernacular languages of the ordinary people and the Latin language of church, education, Scripture, and worship. The cause was also theological. Church leaders continued to reflect upon the great mysteries of Christianity and to develop dogmas about them. The simple folk went about celebrating their religion in more earthy ways.

The church kept a vigilant, but not always successful, eye on superstitious attitudes related to the use of sacramentals. Poorly educated priests often promoted this superstition. Sacramentals were used to ward off evil and obtain good luck. Ritual incantations were recited a specific number of times for miraculous results. The Protestant Reformation challenged the validity of sacramentals partly because of abuses. Protestant tradition today reflects a continuing suspicion about the use of them.

The Catholic church after the Council of Trent unintentionally supported a tradition of devotions and other sacramentals completely separate from the church's liturgical life. It spelled out with precision the official forms of worship. This stifled future development and change. In the future the needs of people for new rituals and creative expression of religious faith would have to evolve outside of the liturgical life of the church. Church authorities tightly controlled official rituals connected with the sacraments and church year. As a result, these gradually entered a stage of fossilization. Popular devotions, on the other hand, went their own way and were quite free of official control. They often functioned separately from, or on the fringes of, important themes of Christianity.

An accident of language also supported the proliferation and popularity of unofficial devotions. Official worship was locked into Latin. Devotions, on the other hand, allowed worship, prayer, and singing in the vernacular.

Pre-Vatican II Catholic religious identity was characterized by popular use of sacramentals and practices of private devotions. Today's post-Vatican II church continues to defend their validity. The closer a sacramental and devotion approaches the church's official rituals, however, the more valid they are. "Way out" devotions are considered spiritually damaging because they remove a person from the core truths of Christianity.

The qualities of a valid use of sacramentals are: (1) They conform to revealed truth and are rooted in sound theology, Scripture, and tradition. (2) They are not smothered with sentimentality, becoming self-centered rather than God-centered. (3) They lead people to a deeper and effective spirituality.

Rituals that make use of sacramentals, often called paraliturgies, are popular today because laypeople can preside at them. (Note: Some devotions and uses of sacramentals are found in other chapters of this book; see Index.) Contemporary devotions and rituals exist alongside traditional forms in parishes. Charismatic prayer meetings and healing rituals are popular. American bishops have recognized the importance of contemporary prayers and blessings and approved a *Book of Blessings* prepared by the International Commission of English in the Liturgy. Some blessings are designed for use within liturgy or on more formal occasions. Many others, however, may be prayed outside of it, led by laity. This resource proves that Catholics believe in blessing everything for the glory of God. Another but more simple source is *Catholic Household Blessings and Prayers.* Both are published by the United States Catholic Conference, Washington, D.C.

St. Blaise and Blessing of Throats

Some sacramentals have become very closely associated with the church year, occurring on the same day each year. An example of one such popular sacramental ritual is the blessing of throats on the feast of St. Blaise, February 3. This bishop saint suffered martyrdom early in the 4th century. Legends say that he was a physician before becoming a bishop. While in prison he miraculously cured a young boy who was choking from a fish bone in his throat. St. Blaise became one of the most popular saints during the Middle Ages, being invoked as a helper in times of sickness related to the throat. The tradition of blessing the throats of parishioners with two crossed candles has been popular for centuries. The ritual prayer is: "Through the intercession of Saint Blaise, bishop and martyr, may the Lord free you from evils of the throat and from any other evil."