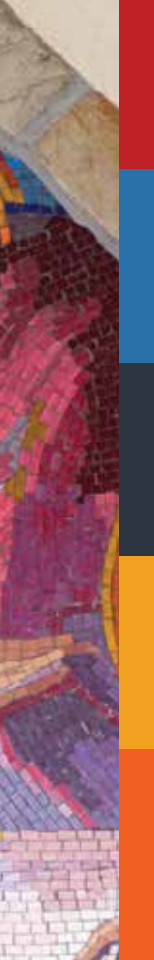


Describing and Defining Sacraments

By Jay M. Hammond



Like signs and symbols, the sacraments are about the mystery of a threefold communication: from God to humans, from humans to God, and among humans in community. The very idea of communication implies relationship and interpretation. Thus, when one reads or hears the word *sacrament*, for example, at the Liturgy of the Eucharist during the Mass when the bread and wine are elevated, broken, distributed, and so on, one should ask: **“To what do the signs/symbols point? What do the signs/symbols communicate? How do the signs/symbols cultivate relationships?”** These may seem like simple questions, but if they are overlooked and left unanswered, then the meaning of the sacraments will remain individually and communally obscure, confusing, and boring.

Moreover, signs and symbols provide the “content” for sacramental rituals, and those ritual actions, communally celebrated, supply the “context” for interpreting and understanding the significance of the sacraments. Such an understanding of the sacraments parallels the idea that the signs and symbols we use involve both our individual interpretations and the communal contexts that shape our perceptions. Thus, fuller participation in the sacraments requires that we understand both because to miss either the “content” of the sacraments’ symbolism or the “context” of their communal celebration is to decrease their ability to convey meaningful communication.

Roman Catholics call their symbolic rituals “rites” (content), which they celebrate during the liturgy (context). While a rite describes the prescribed actions and words needed for administering a sacrament, the liturgy is the actual celebration of a sacrament by the community. Since all relationships require the work of the participating members, the liturgy, communicated through and in its symbolic rituals, is a special and significant locus for the reciprocal “work” that unveils the mystery of the divine human encounter. In this relationship, **the work is primarily God’s action, but it also involves the participatory work of the community to love and serve God and neighbor.** A better understanding of how “sacramental language” describes and expresses these relationships can open up a greater appreciation of and participation in the sacramentality of all created reality.

Defining a Sacrament

All world religions have sacraments, but only Christians call them sacraments¹. Most Christian churches celebrate sacraments, but there is a wide spectrum of understandings on the number and meaning of the sacraments.

Historically, while the term *sacrament* comes from the Latin word *sacramentum*, the concept has much to do with its Greek equivalent, *mysterion*. *Mysterion* means “something hidden or secret,” which has been retained today with the word mystery. Thus, even before Christianity began, **the term *mysterion* described an experience of the divine or God’s activity in human affairs.**

Thus, *mysterion* was also closely linked with the idea of revelation; that is, God’s revelation is a mystery. These two concepts of mystery and revelation are common in both Hebrew and Christian Scriptures, especially Ephesians and Colossians. However, it was not until the third century that theologians Clement and Origin explicitly applied the meaning of *mysterion* to Christian ritual practices. Today, *mysterion* points to the fact that the core meaning of the symbolic rituals we now call sacraments involves mystery and revelation of God’s self-communication.

An important development in this discussion happened in the third century when the theologian Tertullian sought to translate *mysterion* into Latin. He chose the word *sacramentum*, which means a “sacred oath” taken by a recruit joining the Roman army. In the same way the soldier uttered *sacramentum* to the emperor, who was considered a deity, the Christian pledges a sacred oath to

Christ. Thus, Tertullian used *sacramentum* to mean a religious initiation into the Christian community via baptism and Eucharist, which were both a sign of initiation and the means of sanctification. Today, *sacramentum* points to the fact that the core meaning of the symbolic rituals we now call sacraments involves an initiation into a community of believers that seek experience of God’s mystery.

Following Tertullian was the fifth-century Augustine of Hippo. He developed the notion that a *sacramentum* is a sign that sanctifies because it is efficacious, meaning that the sign produces an intended effect or that it is effective. For example, Christ and the Spirit make effective, through grace, the cleansing that water signifies. Thus, for those with faith, baptism purifies by grace. Augustine did not only consider religious rituals to be *sacramenta* but he listed over three hundred sacraments. The church would gradually pare back the number of sacraments by distinguishing between those celebrated as symbolic rituals by the community, which were retained as sacraments, and those that came to be identified as sacramentals, that is, signs and practices that assist persons in their devotion and prayer (e.g., genuflection, crossing oneself, and a rosary). Nevertheless, **Augustine’s towering influence on Western Christianity framed the understanding of the sacraments as sacred signs.** Thus, when the twelfth-century theologian Peter Lombard (France, d. 1160) devised the technical definition that states, “A sacrament is a sign of a sacred thing that is capable of conveying the grace of which it is a sign” (*Liber Sententiarum* IV, d. 1 c. 4),



he was largely following in the footsteps of Augustine. Today, the medieval technical definition of a sacrament points to the fact that **only those symbolic rituals that confer the grace they signify are called sacraments.**

The history of the terms *mysterion* and *sacramentum* demonstrate that sacraments involve (1) the mystery of the divine-human encounter wherein God reveals the divine presence, (2) the initiation of a believer into a communal participation of that divine-human

encounter, and (3) the faith community's active celebration of those symbolic rituals that confer the grace they signify.

With these three points in mind, a sacrament can be theologically defined as a symbolic ritual comprised of words, gestures, and material signs (bread, wine, water, oil, etc.) that points to and manifests Jesus' own actions, for the purpose of communicating God's grace to those who, by faith, perform and participate in their action.

1. Martos, Joseph. *Doors to the Sacred: A Historical Introduction to Sacraments in the Catholic Church*. Revised and updated. Liguori/Triumph, 2001.

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