



SACRAMENTAL CHURCH: A Narrative

The Catholic Church can be viewed in different ways as an institution, a mystical body of Christ, as sacrament, as herald, or as servant. Whatever point of view is used, the Church is a free and beautiful gift from God, an act of love that Catholics call grace. The word catholic means universal; where there is Jesus, there is the Church. Because the mission the Catholic Church has inherited from Jesus is to the whole human race, to the whole world, no one is excluded. That is what makes it catholic.

The Catholic Church is a community of disciples of Christ, often described as the body of Christ because every member, by virtue of their Baptism, is called to give witness to the life and teaching of Jesus. Christians are called to work for *right relationships* with God and with all creation so that Christ continues to be present in the world, animated through works of justice and unity. More than being a mere building, the Church is a community of people who, since the time of Jesus, has shared his mission to bring about the Kingdom/Reign of God. Over the centuries, Christians have expressed their beliefs by incorporating signs and symbols into their rituals and their worship. The way the Church celebrates points to something greater, something about the mystery of God. This is particularly true when we consider the sacramental nature of the Church and the Church's seven official sacraments.

The Term Sacrament

The term sacrament comes from the Latin word sacramentum. In pre-Christian times sacramentum implied some sort of ceremony, possibly around a pledge of allegiance. Early Christian writers used it to help explain the ceremony of initiation. By the fifth century it was primarily used in connection with the Christian initiation ceremony but the Church also applied it to blessings, feasts and objects. By the 12th century, use of the term narrowed to mean the rituals connected with the seven sacraments of the Church (Martos, 1991).

Today, we accept that the word sacrament refers to a sign or symbol that points to something sacred and mysterious. In this broad sense, the term could be applied outside a religious framework or in other religions. The Catholic Church teaches that Jesus is the sacrament of God, the perfect sign of God active in the world. Jesus is not physically present now, but Catholics believe he is alive and active in the world, encountered through the sacramental life of the Church. As sacrament, the Church illuminates the life of Jesus through liturgy and teachings; in fact in everything it does. For Church is Jesus and Jesus is Church.

The Church is a Sacrament

The Church is missionary by its very nature, not just in the work it does in the world, but because mission IS the Church. Without its mission, it is not Church. The mission of Jesus Christ was entrusted to the apostles. Through the gift of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost, the early Christian community was empowered to continue this mission in the world. Enlivened by the Holy Spirit, the community of disciples continues to make Jesus Christ visible in the world today.

From its tiny beginnings in Jerusalem through the centuries until today and on into the future, Church leaders guide, encourage, and nourish the faith of followers of Jesus. Over the centuries the structure of the Church evolved to meet the needs of each age. Today, the Catholic Church is led by the Pope and supported by the Magisterium in Rome. The Church has a rich Tradition (that includes Scripture) built over its two-thousand-year history. The Catholic Church has not been without challenges such as the East West Schism and the Reformation. These two historical events divided the Christian Church.

Since Vatican II the Church has actively tried to build inter-faith dialogue with other Christian traditions and religions of the world. In every era and every continent, the Church has faced contextual problems and, no doubt, will continue to do so. The story of the Australian Church is a staggering saga filled with people dedicated to building the Church in a land fraught with hardship and opposition.

Throughout history, members of the official Catholic Church hierarchy, such as the Pope and bishops, may speak or provide written works such as encyclicals to guide Catholics and give insight into current thinking and theology. Together with the lived experience of generations, the worldwide Church is able to draw on literature in every field to be as fully informed as possible. When the official Church speaks out about issues, especially when the dignity of the human person is not respected, it does so from an informed perspective guided by its mission. Therefore, the Church is also seen as a sacrament or sign of Christ in the world that points to something greater; God. As a sacrament, or sign of God, the Church must be active in the world. It must speak out and act when necessary. Postmodern society often calls for the Church to stay out of politics or economics, but given its mission and nature this is impossible. It cannot work to bring about the Kingdom/Reign of God unless it is fully involved in society.

Large gatherings called Church Councils have taken place throughout the Church's history. Vatican II (1962 – 1965) gathered two thousand eight hundred members and produced sixteen documents, including four constitutions of major importance and nine decrees of which three were declarations. The Catholic Church is a large worldwide institution and therefore system change takes time. Some say the impact of Vatican II is only beginning to be felt today and that its effect will be ongoing for many years. Various authoritative bodies called Congregations carry out work under the guidance of the Pope. Every diocese (archdiocese if it is a capital city) across the world is led by a bishop appointed by the Pope. Every bishop is responsible for the clergy and the parishes in his diocese.

Sacraments, Liturgy and Ritual or Rites are interconnected

The word 'liturgy' comes from the Greek 'Leitourgia' which referred to any public service or function exercised by the people as a whole. The people who do the work of liturgy are the people of God, all the baptised – the Church. Liturgy is worship, but not all worship is Liturgy. Liturgy of the Catholic Church is always a communal activity. Put simply, Liturgy is the official, public, worship of the Church. Every Liturgy has its own specific ritual form or rite, consisting of specific symbols, words and actions. A prayer service is not an official Liturgy, and there is no such thing as a Paraliturg (para liturgy). It is either official Liturgy or it is not. In schools, celebrations that incorporate prayer, reflection and Scripture are best described as prayer services.

The Mass (or celebration of the Eucharist) follows a three-year cycle of readings for Sundays and two-year cycle for weekdays. This gives the community the opportunity to hear readings from every Gospel, thus providing a fuller picture of the historical Jesus and his message from different perspectives. There is a rhythm to the liturgical year which begins with Advent and builds through Lent to Easter, the most important time of the year. Ordinary time could be considered extraordinary time for Christians because this is when being a Christian is consolidated and deepened. Throughout the year, there are various feasts such as Pentecost, and Saints are acknowledged particularly in weekday Masses.

The Seven Sacraments

The seven official sacraments of the Catholic Church gradually evolved over the centuries. They were instituted by Christ but not fully formed in the ritual or liturgical format we know now. It was Jesus Christ's mission, his teaching and his life, death and resurrection that gave birth to the sacraments. The format for the rituals took shape over hundreds of years. When we talk about the official Liturgy of the Church, this includes the sacraments which are celebrated liturgically. The Catechism groups them into *Sacraments of Initiation*: Baptism, Confirmation and Eucharist. *Sacraments of Healing*: Anointing of the Sick and Reconciliation. *Sacraments of Commitment in the Service of Communion*: Holy Matrimony and Holy Orders.

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