

Introduction to Sacramental Theology

Read and Reflect

As your parish implements ***Encounter with Christ***, your leaders are committed to giving you a comprehensive and personal experience in Sacrament preparation. Ongoing formation assists you in preparing and accompanying the children and families you serve.

Prior to completing the following reflection activity, read the essay titled *Introduction to Sacramental Theology* on pages CG3-CG5 from the Catechist Guide (included at the end of this document). Record your responses for this reflection activity in the spaces provided or on a separate sheet of paper. Refer to your responses for later discussion or complete as instructed by your catechetical leader.

For Reflection

The introductory essay about the Sacraments on pages CG3-CG5 invites or perhaps even challenges us to consider the Sacraments in a new way. Below are some passages from the essay. Write a response to each passage. Your response might tell about a new insight or something that challenged the way you have thought about God, the Church, or the Sacraments. It could be a question you have after reading the passage. You may even want to write a one- or two-line prayer that has been inspired in your heart.

- “Through the Church, the Holy Spirit invites us to encounter our Savior Jesus Christ. In the Sacraments, we can hear, see, touch, and taste the love of God given to us in his Son.”

- “If we are not open to what God is offering us, he will not force his grace upon us. How much we are able to change has everything to do with how open we are to this change.”

- “Think about the most intimate relationship and the care it requires in order to grow. God is waiting for you. He wants you to look into his eyes and know how much you are loved. He wants to look into your eyes and see your desire and willingness to love him in return.”

- “Christianity is not simply a doctrine: it is an encounter in faith with God made present in our history through the incarnation of Jesus” (Pope Saint John Paul II, *We Wish to See Jesus*, 3).

Introduction to Sacramental Theology

“The Sacraments express and realize an effective and profound communion among us, for in them we encounter Christ, the [Savior] and, through him, our brothers and sisters in faith.”

Pope Francis, *General Audience*, November 6, 2013

In our human experience, the word *encounter* can summon a multitude of memories and feelings. It can mean a challenge when we face a new situation or a problem that needs a creative solution. It can describe a surprising moment with another person. Yet, the most intimate of all encounters happens when we look into the eyes of another and see into his or her heart. Whether we see grief, joy, struggle, or love, we experience a connection of the most profound kind. We experience a communion, an intimacy that in some way changes us. We will never again be what we were before that moment. We are shaped and transformed by the encounter.

It is no wonder, then, that Pope Saint John Paul II chose to speak about God's invitation to relationship and our response as an encounter: "The most beautiful and stirring adventure that can happen to you is the personal meeting with Jesus, who is the only one who gives real meaning to our life."² He explains that "only in the encounter with him, the Word made flesh, do we find the fullness of self-realization and happiness."³

As we hear the story of our salvation told in God's Word, we can understand how the disciples encountered Christ. They could hear, see, and touch Jesus. They came to know him and to believe in his mission to bring about his Father's Kingdom. We see how their encounter with Christ transformed their lives. If we want the happiness that only comes from knowing Jesus, how do we encounter him in our lives? We meet Christ in prayer, in Scripture, in others, and most especially in the Sacraments. Blessed Mother Teresa often spoke about encountering Christ in the face of the poor and vulnerable.

Pope Benedict XVI observes that in the Seven Sacraments, we experience a "grace-filled encounter with the Risen Lord" (*Sacramentum Caritatis*, 6). As Catholics, we profess that Jesus' saving words and actions in his public life announced and prepared for what he was going to give to the Church—the Sacraments.

"Sacraments are 'powers that come forth' from the Body of Christ,⁴ which is ever-living and life-giving. They are actions of the Holy Spirit at work in his Body, the Church. They are 'the masterworks of God' in the new and everlasting covenant" (*Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 1116). We are given so much to ponder in these words.





The Seven Sacraments are gifts given to us by God through the power of the Holy Spirit. Through the Church, the Holy Spirit invites us to encounter our Savior Jesus Christ. In the Sacraments, we can hear, see, touch, and taste the love of God given to us in his Son. We look into the eyes of Jesus and see his heart, and he looks into our eyes and sees our heart. In this *divine encounter*, we are offered an experience of intimacy that can change us forever.

What a mystery of love—a mystery of relationship that begins in God’s graciousness and begs a response of openness and faith. Yet, even our capacity to respond is a gift from God given to us at our creation. For in Baptism, “through the power of the Holy Spirit we take part in Christ’s Passion by dying to sin, and in his Resurrection by being born to a new life ...” (CCC, 1988). We are immersed in the Paschal

Mystery and given the grace of God. *Grace* is the free and undeserved help God gives us to respond to his call and a participation in the life of God.

The Sacraments are efficacious signs of grace because Christ himself is at work through the ordained ministers of the Sacraments (in Matrimony it is the bride and groom). The life of God that flows through his Son by the power of the Holy Spirit flows through the Church in liturgical rites that express and realize profound communion with Christ and one another.

So in water, we die and rise. Anointed with oil, we are strengthened and called. Through bread and wine that are transformed into the Body and Blood of Christ, we are given the only food that will truly satisfy the hunger of our hearts. In the signs, symbols, actions, and words of the rites, we encounter Christ.

Saint Thomas Aquinas reminds us that while the power of the Sacraments flows from God and cannot be altered, our dispositions affect how much we will allow God's grace to transform us. In any relationship, openness to the other is what allows intimacy. If we are not open to what God is offering us, he will not force his grace upon us. How much we are able to change has everything to do with how open we are to this change.

And God wants us to change. Jesus gave his life for that purpose. In becoming his disciples, we embark upon the lifelong journey to contemplate the mystery of our faith through living a full sacramental life and studying and reflecting upon Scripture. "The fruit of sacramental life is ... life for God in Jesus Christ," and this allows the Church to love ever more like Christ and witness to the gift of salvation (CCC, 1134).

Relationships are hard work. Whether in a marriage, friendship, family, or neighborhood, these kinds of relationships require attention and openness to each other. Think about your most intimate relationship and the care it requires in order to grow. God is waiting for you. He wants you to look into his eyes and know how much you are loved. He wants to look into your eyes and see your desire and willingness to love him in return.

In his message on World Youth Day in 2004, Pope Saint John Paul II said, "Allow this ardent desire to see God emerge from the depth of your hearts, a desire that is sometimes stifled by the distractions of the world and by the allurements of pleasures. Allow this desire to emerge and you will have the wonderful experience of meeting Jesus. Christianity is not simply a doctrine: it is an encounter in faith with God made present in our history through the incarnation of Jesus" (*We Wish to See Jesus*, 3).

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