

# Fostering Faith Catechist Formation Insert

## Sacraments: 1 Hour



Completion of this study entitles the catechist to one hour of credit toward certification.

## SACRAMENTS: Catechesis on the Sacraments

### THEME

A study of the Church's teaching on the Sacraments

### CATECHIST COMPETENCIES

As a result of this study, the catechist will be able to:

1. Articulate briefly the meaning of each Sacrament.
2. Describe some of the ways sacraments are celebrated within the Church.
3. Demonstrate a deeper understanding of how the sacraments are celebrated with an eye toward inculturation.

### CATECHISM REFERENCES

#1066-1690

### FOCUSING THE STUDY

Any group that practices some form of initiation knows that initiating is not simply passing on *one's own* beliefs and rules but the beliefs and rules of *the group*. Catechists of children, youth, young adults, adults and the elderly know that their teaching is based on the teaching of the Catholic Church on the sacraments. It is indeed in this context that they prepare God's people for these extraordinary encounters with Christ that we refer to as the sacraments.

### INTRODUCTION

The word *sacrament* comes from the Latin word "sacramentum" which in the Roman Empire meant an oath of allegiance that a soldier would take upon joining a legion to pledge his services to this legion and to the Empire. Later on, Tertullian introduced this word to the baptized person's renunciation of evil actions and an engagement to live as Christ's disciple. It then meant a renewal and a commitment to live as a new individual, different from the person who originally approached the waters of Baptism.

### The Sacraments Today

Each year, when Catholics enter into the sacraments after a careful preparation by dedicated catechists, the Church celebrates its own renewal as these sisters and brothers receive God's grace through the appropriate rites, words and symbols in these sacraments. The renewal of the individuals and of the Church as a whole happens because in the sacraments these individuals receive God's grace and accept it by the act of faith. What does the Church teach about these seven sacraments to which individuals say yes in an act of faith? First, the word sacrament may be applied in a broader perspective than within the confines of what we traditionally refer to as the seven sacraments. For example, Jesus can be seen as the sacrament of God revealing to us in the form of human flesh, the mystery of the divine God. Also, the Church may be seen as the sacrament of Jesus: an earthly sign of the Lord's presence through which God reveals the unity of God's children.

The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* tells us that sacraments are "efficacious signs of grace, instituted by Christ and entrusted to the Church, by which divine life is dispensed to us," (CCC #1131). Author Michael J. Taylor, S.J. describes sacraments as "the symbolic or ritual acts of incorporation into the sphere of Christ's grace and mission," (*The Sacraments: Readings in Contemporary Sacramental Theology*, Alba House, New York, 1981). He further states that "in the sacraments, we demonstrate our receptivity to the Spirit and responsive readiness to worship and serve the Lord, who is both gathering and sending his priestly people into the world." These definitions of the sacraments are eloquent in describing how in each sacrament we receive God's grace. Thus, in the water of Baptism, we are incorporated into our Savior Jesus' death and resurrection. When we celebrate Eucharist, we eat and drink the body and blood of Christ; we then receive Christ in us as spiritual food for our faith journey. In Confirmation, we celebrate the life of Jesus present within us through his Holy Spirit, manifested in the gifts and fruits of the Spirit. In the sacrament of Reconciliation, we reconcile ourselves with others and with God by asking for our peers' and God's forgiveness. In Marriage and Holy Orders, the Spirit of the Lord consecrates us in our individual calls or vocations. In the anointing of the sick, we become assimilated into the suffering of Christ and encounter his healing presence.

### Sacraments: Matter and Form

The Roman Catholic Church has retained seven principal sacraments that the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* classifies in three categories: Baptism, Confirmation and Eucharist as Sacraments of *Christian Initiation*; Penance (Reconciliation) and the Anointing of the Sick as the Sacraments of *Healing*; and Holy Matrimony and Holy Orders as Sacraments *at the service of communion* (CCC #1211).

### The Sacraments of Initiation

- **Baptism** - This Sacrament of Initiation is administered either by pouring water on the candidate or by immersing her/him in the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. "It signifies and actually brings about death to sin and entry into the life of the Most Holy Trinity through configuration to the Paschal mystery of Christ" (CCC #1239). The



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other signs & symbols of baptism include a white garment (symbolic of “putting on Christ”), oil (representing the anointing of the individual into a priestly people) and a candle (signifying the light of Christ).

- **Confirmation** - This sacrament, closely linked to Baptism, is conferred through the anointing with chrism on the forehead by the Bishop. It marks the Christian with the seal of Christ’s Spirit by clothing her/him with the power to be witness to Christ by word and deed.
- **Holy Eucharist:** The sacrament that completes our initiation is the Eucharist, given under the form of bread alone or under the form of bread and wine. It is the most august sacrament – “source and summit of the Christian life” (CCC #1324) in which Christ himself is contained, offered and received, and by which the Church constantly lives and grows. It brings an intimate communion with Christ Jesus.

### Sacraments of Healing

- **Penance/Reconciliation:** The celebration of this sacrament of healing requires a contrition of sins in which the penitent feels sorrow for the sins she/he has committed, followed by the confession of sins to a priest. This confession of sins and the words of forgiveness uttered by the priest are the powerful outward signs of this sacrament which brings the forgiveness of sins and reconciliation with God and with the Church.
- **The Anointing of the Sick:** The minister of this sacrament of healing anoints the recipient with oil, a symbol of strength and healing, as described in the Letter of James (5: 14-15). In this sacrament, those who are sick associate themselves with Christ’s suffering and glory, so that the Lord Jesus will raise them up and save them.



### Sacraments at the Service of Communion

- **Marriage:** Spouses themselves confer this sacrament on each other as they express their consent before the Church. In this sacrament, a man and a woman freely give themselves to each other, thus representing the steadfast love that Jesus has for the Church.
- **Holy Orders:** This sacrament at the service of communion is conferred by the bishop, imposing his hands on the head of the person to be ordained and asking for God’s gift of the Holy Spirit upon the ordained. This sacrament consists of three levels: the episcopate (bishops), presbyterate (priests) and diaconate (deacons) in which degrees Christ’s mission entrusted to his apostles continues to be carried out by the Church.

### Inculturation and the Sacraments

The *General Directory for Catechesis* (#203-214) invites us, as church, to the task of inculturating our faith without defacing or falsifying its contents. The celebration of the sacraments in many cases around the world is an encounter between cultures that necessitates our work of inculturation so that the Good News takes flesh in our different cultures. Catechists have sometimes found it difficult to inculturate the teaching on the sacraments. Below is what the *General Directory for Catechesis* (#203) proposes on how to conduct the inculturation in teaching on the sacraments.

**“We can say of catechesis, as well as of evangelization in general, that it is called to bring the power of the Gospel into the very heart of culture and cultures. Catechesis...proposes the Gospel in a vital way, profoundly, by going to the very roots of culture and cultures of mankind.**

The General Directory for Catechesis #202, 204

- to know in depth the culture of persons and the extent of its penetration into their lives;
- to recognize a cultural dimension in the Gospel itself, while affirming, on the one hand, that this does not spring from some human cultural humus, and recognizing, on the other hand, that the Gospel cannot be isolated from the cultures in expression through the centuries;
- to proclaim the profound change, the conversion, which the Gospel as a “transforming and regenerating” force works in culture;
- to witness to the transcendence and the non-exhaustion of the Gospel with regard to culture, while at the same time discerning those seeds of the Gospel which may be present in culture;
- to promote a new expression of the Gospel in accordance with evangelized culture, looking to a language of the faith which is the common patrimony of the faithful and thus a fundamental element of communion;

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- to maintain integrally the content of the faith and ensure that the doctrinal formulations of tradition are explained and illustrated, while taking into account the cultural and historical circumstances of those being instructed, and to avoid defacing or falsifying the contents.

### **Suggestions and Questions for Reflection**

A catechist ministering to learners who are from a different ethnic group than their own is encouraged to learn as much as possible about the culture of those she/he ministers to. Knowing more about the learners' culture(s) will allow the catechist to know them better and build a program that encompasses the culture of the people she/he ministers to. What if the learners themselves represent various ethnic groups? While many of our parishes have only one ethnic group in their constituency, and most of the parishes that are multi-ethnic still have different programs for the different ethnic groups, there are still a few parishes that have catechetical programs that are attended by people from different ethnic groups. In this case, the catechist is encouraged to learn about the different cultures that her/his program represents and be able to make connections with the beauty of each of the culture in the program.



### **Examples:**

1. At their celebration of Christmas 2000, Holy Rosary Parish (351 E. 113<sup>th</sup> Street, Chicago) had a Caucasian Joseph and an African American Mary in the Crib. This gave the image of their parish that is multicultural and has all ethnic groups worshipping together and parts of the same programs found in the parish.
2. The Norwegian American Hospital celebrates each year, in December, Las Posadas (Hispanic celebration and Kwanzaa (African American celebration) in the same celebration that gathers mainly Hispanics and African American who are the main populations served by the hospital. Can these two examples help us come up with ideas on how to make a multi-ethnic catechetical program respectful of the cultures of the catechumens?

### **Reflection on Inculturation**

Do I know well enough the culture of the persons in my catechetical program? Is my catechetical program rooted in the culture(s) of the participants? If yes, what are the positive elements in such a catechetical program? (name them). If not, what are the difficulties for making the program acculturated in the catechumens' culture(s)? What can I do to make the program sensitive to the culture and experiences of the participants?

### **Sacraments and Metanoia**

The definition of the sacraments we referred to earlier as the "symbolic or ritual acts of incorporation into the sphere of Christ's grace and mission" implicitly suggests that in receiving the sacraments, Christians commit themselves to letting God's grace transform their lives and the world around. In recent years, several parishes have experienced a drop in the number of youth returning to church after they receive the sacrament of confirmation. This unfortunate situation could help us reflect on how we teach the sacraments. Youth who leave the church after confirmation may look at this sacrament as a graduation from parish life. If metanoia has to happen, it is important that the individuals who receive the sacraments commit themselves to being constantly fed by the Word of God and by the body and blood of Christ.

In other words, transformation is not something that takes place once for all. It is a process. When we get bathed in the baptismal waters, we receive an indelible mark on us as God's children. The transformation happens in the relationship we maintain from then on with God as our Father and Mother and with others who, like ourselves, are God's children too. As in the Holy Eucharist, we receive Jesus himself in us and are called to think like Christ, judge like him and act like him because Christ himself resided in us. In confirmation, the Spirit of the Lord strengthens us and calls us to witness to Christ himself everyday of our life.

In the sacrament of Reconciliation, we regret our sins, ask for forgiveness and commit ourselves to walk in Christ's light but not in darkness anymore. This process brings transformation as the commitment to become new people in Christ. In the Anointing of the Sick, individuals associate themselves with Christ's suffering and thus, do not let sickness become an opportunity for despair but make it an offering to God.

In Holy Matrimony, the two spouses are joined together and each of them renounces himself/herself to build their new life together in Christ. In Holy Orders, we continue Christ's mission entrusted to his apostles. This sacrament transforms the ordinands so that their own lives reflect Christ's presence among God's people.



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### **Conclusion**

The sacraments are symbolic actions which represent, effect and celebrate the salvation of Christ and the coming of the Spirit in the life of the Church and its members. Christian Initiation into the grace of Christ and the life of the Church is signified and effected through Baptism and Confirmation; this grace and life are continuously nourished through the Eucharist. The sacraments of Penance and Anointing of the Sick bring caused by sin and the brokenness of body caused by sickness. God's calling to a life of committed service to others is heard and responded to in the sacraments of Matrimony and Holy Orders.

The saving grace of God appeared in its fullness when the Word of God took flesh and gave new life to the world. Likewise God uses material means and human agency to bring the Paschal Mystery of Christ to all ages. This is the basis for the sacramental ministry of the Church. Sacraments are external, visible indications of the invisible Word; they both express and communicate grace through symbol, rite and word. Through them God both signifies and creates relationships of grace between ourselves, God and neighbor.

### **REFLECTION/DISCUSSION QUESTIONS**

In order to complete this study and earn one hour credit toward catechist certification, you must respond to the reflection/discussion questions in either of the following ways:

1. Write/type your responses (20-40 words each) and submit them to your catechetical leader;
2. Engage in a formal discussion of the questions (at least 30 minutes) in some forum approved by your catechetical leader; e.g. a catechist meeting, level meetings, team meetings, catechist pairings, etc.

### **Review Questions**

1. What are the origins of the word *sacrament* and what did this word mean in its original context?
2. How is Jesus the *sacrament* of God and how is the Church the *sacrament* of Jesus?
3. How does the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* define *sacrament*? Explain it in your own words.
4. What are the three "classifications" or categories of sacraments as outlines in the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*?
5. What are the primary signs & symbols of each of the seven sacraments.

### **Practical Application/Critical Thinking**

1. How does each sacrament commit a person to ongoing transformation?
2. A traditional definition of a sacrament was "an outward sign instituted by Christ to give grace." How does this definition compare with the definition in the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*? What does it mean to you that the sacramental signs are *efficacious*?
3. How can you as a catechist display the signs & symbols of the sacraments for all your learners to see? How would you explain what these signs and symbols mean?
4. What are practical ideas for helping individuals commit themselves to live according to the grace that a particular sacrament brings into their lives?

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