

# Refreshing Our Faith 4: Sacraments

Let me put this talk into context with the other talks. Our first presentation was about God, the source and destiny of everything we are. We talked about how important it was to experience God before anything else could gain traction in our faith lives. Next we talked about two ways in which people have documented their experience of God: the Scriptures and Tradition. Both of these focus on past experiences of God, but we Catholics believe that God is always engaging us as His people, bringing us into new experiences that point towards Him. Tonight's talk, then, is about the core ways in which God engages His people, the Church. Our next talk will be about understanding who God's people are, what His Church is. And the last talk will bookend the first talk by reflecting on the core action of God: His Love or what is called "grace".

Tonight's talk is about the core ways in which we continue to experience God as a people, the sacraments, and I had to make a decision as I was preparing it. Should I focus on the theology of the sacraments or should I try to make them come to life? I chose the latter, so I hope that as a result of tonight's talk, you will be better able to engage in the lived *experience* of God loving His people, because the experience will speak more convincingly than theology about the power, and what's called the efficacy, of the sacraments. And if this doesn't happen, then I've failed miserably...

I'm going to divide tonight's talk into a three key sections:

- First, I want to connect you with your attachment to the things of this world and to show how this is an important part of our spirituality.
- Along with this, I want to help you understand that this is not just something we experience as individuals, but as communities as well.
- Second, I want to show how human beings have always taken those meaningful things and have combined them with meaning actions in order to continue to make those things alive with meaning.
- I'll show how this is part of our faith history of the Old and New Testaments, and of how it even is evident outside of just our faith, as part of cultures like the ancient Greeks.
- And third, I want to explore this dynamic of meaningful things and meaningful actions as the basis of our celebration of the Sacraments.

So, first let me connect us with the positive aspects of our attachment to the things of this world.

One year, while I was in graduate school, I had the opportunity to spend the summer in the middle of the Rockies, working at a camp for inner city kids. Camp was a little less spectacular than I had hoped for, and the highlight of my time there was the two days breaks we'd get between every 10 day camp session. On one of these breaks, I traveled up to Rocky Mountain National Park, drove across the Continental Divide from the East and down into a valley. At the base of the valley was a trail leading up to a place called Timber Lake on the map. I hopped out and hiked the 5 miles up to a place more beautiful than I would have imagined. It stood at the base of a 50 foot high reddish tan cliff, which was the Continental Divide at that point. Above the cliff was a cerulean blue sky and a full moon on the crest of the cliff. This magnificent scene reflected off the still waters of the lake. I soon dubbed the lake "Trinity Lake," for instead of being one single lake, it was actually 3 smaller lakes, the water from the first flowing into the second, and the water from the second flowing into a third, and the water from the third flowing into a stream that flowed into the world. The place was so profoundly spiritual, touched a space so deep in my heart, that I sought to remember it. I found some deer bones on the edge of the second lake which I put into my backpack as a memory of the place. Upon my return home later that summer, those bones held such significance for me that I fashioned them into this cross. Ezekiel asks, "can these bones speak?" In my case, they certainly do. They speak of how the ordinary things of this world remind us of God's awesome love for us.

Something about that place called me out of myself. I don't know if you've ever had the privilege of a deeply moving religious experience, but I suspect you have – The Gallup Polls show that 90% of Americans have had an experience that convinced them that God exists. The core criteria for the

experience is handing yourself over to something outside of yourself. Have you ever had an experience of

- the power of God's created beauty overwhelming your senses in nature, or
- the overpowering experience of being loved at a time when you feel unlovable, of having to accept someone else's view of yourself as worthy rather than being caught up in your own negative perception of yourself, or
- the comfort of feeling part of a world which is essentially good, with resultant joy, vibrancy and expression?

All these things involve handing yourself over to something bigger and outside of yourself.

The same holds true for each of us not simply as individuals, but as members of the human race. When our religious experiences are affirmed by being shared with individuals across generations and communities, we enter into recognition that we are a part of something bigger than ourselves – we belong to God's people, His creation. Communities, too, have religious experiences, and the dynamics are the same as those for the individual: when they, as a community, can hand themselves over to something outside of themselves, they can experience God in their midst. Now, we might not hear about these often, but the Bible is full of stories about groups of people being transformed by their shared experience of God. Think about the apostles at the Transfiguration, or at the Resurrection, or at Pentecost. Haven't you ever had an experience of awe that you've shared with at least one other person, be it watching the sun set and holding someone's hand a little tighter, or watching a loved one die surrounded by their family, or hearing a powerful song powerfully sung at mass.

As religious people we not only believe that some lived experiences are common among people of all ages, but we further believe that those lived experiences call us back to our roots in God. God is present in our lives through the lived experience, and we are present in God's creation through our participation in the lived experience. We reach God through the finite and visible, just as God reaches us through the finite and visible. The point at which this occurs is called "the point of sacramental encounter." Everything is capable of embodying and communicating the Divine. All reality has a "mysterious" dimension insofar as it is imbued with the hidden presence of God. When God is made present to us through our experiences, we call that "grace." Grace is God's freely given presence of Himself to human life. And that grace is mediated through created reality.

Now, on to my second point, where I said I wanted to show how human beings have always taken those meaningful things and have combined them with meaning actions in order to continue to make those things alive with meaning.

Just like I ritualized my experience on the mountain top by using death as a symbol of God's continued life, so, too, do communities need to ritualize their experiences. Ritual serves two purposes, first it brings the community together, encouraging individuals to suppress their desire to act individually, allowing them to act as a single, living organism. And second, it serves to create the environment in which that organism can orient itself towards its goal. In the case of the Catholic Church, those rituals are the sacraments, and that orientation is toward God. And as rituals are celebrated again and again, they not only *orient*, they begin to *form* the community, eventually helping it accomplish what it celebrates: bringing the community to become the Body of Christ. Let me give the first of several definitions of Sacrament: Sacraments can be seen as a festive action in which Christians assemble to celebrate their lived experience and to call to heart their common story. The action is a symbol of God's care for us in Christ. Enacting the symbol brings us closer to one another in the Church and to the Lord who is there for us.

In the sacraments God uses the common things of this world as the vehicles by which He communicates His loving grace with us.

We can probably guess that the earliest communities had experiences of God in nature, but they left no written record. Instead, what they've left is the concept of using the objects of this world to commune with God. In pre-biblical times, for example, two kinds of people lived in the Mediterranean basin: shepherds and farmers. Each, in their own way, experienced the goodness of God, and independently created springtime rituals which attempted to encourage that goodness for the coming year. Shepherds sacrificed a baby lamb as a way to take the purity of that which sustained them, and to bring it to God. Farmers baked a batch of unleavened bread, which had no flavor, as a sign of the pureness of a new beginning. These people were taken into exile by the Egyptians, and while there, intermarried with each other not only in familial life, but also in tradition, creating a shared identity and becoming known as the Hebrew people. Their celebrations were brought together in the Berakah, or thanksgiving prayer of the Passover in which lamb and unleavened bread were eaten before the Jews escaped from the Egyptians – a celebration of their imminent liberation. This unique form of celebration, which recalls the past but which also looks to the future being made whole in the present, emphasized and renewed the covenant relationship of the Hebrew people and their God.

All rituals incorporate time, place, objects and people.

- Regarding place: For the Hebrew people, their core celebration took place in the Spring, on the first full moon after the vernal equinox.
- Regarding time: It took place in the home, not the temple.
- Regarding objects: It used basic objects: an immolated lamb, its blood or lifestream, unleavened bread, cups of blessing and bitter herbs. These objects each have meaning, be it ties to the earliest rituals of those people in the Mediterranean, or of the new, though difficult, liberating life God grants us and the recognition of its blessings; but they do not need to be explained, they just are.
- And of course, the celebration has people: the family, who eat standing, ready to strike off on their liberating journey.

And so, it was into this world of ritualized celebration that Jesus brought forth his ministry, bringing people together in powerful experiences of God, and pouring the foundation for their further remembrance and celebration of those moments in their lives when He powerfully touched them. He took the legacy of Jewish ritual, and charged it with new meaning through things like taking the elements of the Passover celebration and transfiguring their meaning into a memorial of his death and resurrection, what's called the Paschal mystery. It was natural to celebrate the experiences of God which Jesus brought to his community in the ritualistic manner that their Jewish heritage had taught them.

When people were with Jesus, they experienced life, and their relationship to God, in a new way. In the presence of Jesus, they felt 7 things:

- people felt like they belonged (we celebrate this as Baptism),
- they felt affirmed (we celebrate this as Confirmation),
- they felt a sense of fellowship, unity and bondedness (Eucharist),
- they felt incredibly loved (Marriage),
- they felt destined and called (Orders), and
- they felt healed and forgiven (Anointing and Reconciliation).

And it was not long before each of these core experiences were solidified into rituals that called these different experiences of God into communal memory. In the Scriptures themselves, and in the earliest writings of the Church, we have some basic descriptions of some rituals, these liturgical expressions, which leverage the things of this world to call to mind things beyond this world.

Let's take a moment to understand how this dynamic works: how things of this world can help us call to mind things that are bigger than this world.

The ancient Greeks believed that there were 4 basic elements, or atoms, that made up all other things. These were water, air, earth and fire. And they used these elements as the basic symbols to express the meaning they found in the world. Nowadays we tend to separate ourselves from the elements. We control the climate in our houses, our cars, our workplaces, our marketplaces, our worship places. Basically, it's possible for a 21<sup>st</sup> century person to spend most of their lives totally out of touch with what is going on in the natural world. But for the Greeks, and in fact, for all people up until the last 100 years, the elements were *the* controlling factors in life. People not only *understood*, but were intimately *involved with* the nurturing nature of a spring rain, the destructive power of the north winds, the safety and warmth of huddling around a night's fire. Oftentimes those symbols were used to describe things that were beyond simple words, like the symbols used for the Holy Spirit, for example. Scripture describes the Holy Spirit as the "breath of God on the waters," a dove in the sky at Jesus' baptism, and as tongues of fire at Pentecost. These symbols, which use things of this world to call to mind something larger than this world are common to our Jewish and Christian faith history.

Let's look at why fire is a good symbol for the Spirit. Indians used fire to rejuvenate the plains. In fact, many pine trees, like the lodgepole pine only releases its seeds when exposed to extreme heat. Fire used to be used to cauterize wounds – St. John of the Cross talks about the Spirit cauterizing his soul. Fire was used to sterilize medical instruments, and if you're a camper, you know it is the force, through boiling, that kills off impurities in water. Fire gives warmth and light. It purifies. And it destroys. The Spirit purifies our soul, destroys our impure ambitions, warms us in the love of God and guides us through the darkness of this world.

And so there are experiences in which symbols come to represent the core meaning of an experience, and in fact conjure up memories of deeper experiences simply through reference to the symbol. Think for example of firecrackers at the Fourth of July, candles adorning cakes on birthdays and anniversaries, and that picture of the firefighters raising the flag over the rubble of the World Trade Center. See, symbols are more powerful than simple signs. Signs merely call to mind some thing outside of themselves, like a stop sign calls to mind the law. But a symbol not only calls to mind something outside of itself, but it actually makes that thing present while remaining distinct from it. This is important, so let me say it again: a symbol not only calls to mind something outside of itself, but it actually makes that thing present while remaining distinct from it, like how the act of looking at the picture of a loved one can sometimes bring forth a rush of emotion as you encounter the spirit of that person, or when you are looking at the activities of family and friends and somehow rise beyond it as you realize the wonderful grace that is part of all the world. So another definition: Sacraments are those symbols which arise from the ministry of Christ, and are continued in and through the Church, which, when received in faith, are encounters with God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

For centuries, the Church celebrated its rituals and felt the mysterious power of God's grace rushing through to them via sacred symbols. In fact, in the eastern Churches, the term "mystery" is still used instead of the word "sacrament." But the western mind is a mind that thirsts for clarity, and shies away from mystery. So debates arose as to how exactly the core sacraments of the Church worked. Experience told people that God communicated with them in a special way through the sacraments, but people wanted to know how it worked.

About 400, Augustine gave us the classic definition of a sacrament as "a visible sign of invisible grace." As we discussed in our talk on Tradition, the Crusades brought about a rediscovery of the thought of Aristotle, and Thomas Aquinas masterfully leveraged Aristotle's system of thought to provide greater clarity for all manner of things in the Church. Perhaps most enduringly, he showed how, in the sacraments, basic elements of this world could be both created and Creator at the same time. Aristotle saw the things of this world as composed of two parts: matter and form. Matter was the potential of something. Form was its actuality at a particular moment. For example, imagine that you are holding a piece of clay in your hands which isn't formed into anything except a blob. It is simply matter. Now, if you mold that clay into something, it suddenly takes on meaning. It has form. You can't have form without matter, and you can't have meaning without form. Each sacrament is defined in terms of its matter and its form in order for it to convey its meaning, its power.

Let me spend the rest of this talk on my third point: this dynamic of how we combine meaningful things and meaningful actions as the basis of our ritual celebration, or to use Aquinas' words: how matter and form are the basis of our celebration of the sacraments. Let's look at the sacraments of initiation: Baptism, Confirmation and Eucharist.

First, let's talk about our lived human experiences – what's called the existential aspect of our lives. Sometimes we can feel a bit alienated. Even though it goes against our theology and beliefs, it is sometimes possible to feel a bit alienated even from a loving and accepting God. We feel an inner reality that our being human makes us imperfect. We feel that the evils present in our society somehow have a bearing on our souls. We feel separated from God.

Everyone feels a need to belong, not separated. Whether it's a need to feel like people in this room want me to be here, or that my family loves me, or that I can make a valid contribution to a cause. The need for belonging is built into our human psyche. Most established groups formalize their initiation ceremonies. Be it the Raccoon Lodge on the Honeymooners with its "woo woo" greeting or the Catholic Church. There's a desire to formalize and celebrate the inclusion of a new member into the community of Faith.

And furthermore, there's a desire to say that on such and such a day, I began to do one thing or another. We want to mark our beginnings. This is especially true for those things that are significant to us. And there are few things more significant or true to ourselves than the beginning of our Faith History. It's important to mark that event with a special celebration.

Now, while we bring these existential experiences *into* the Sacrament of Baptism, the Church tells us that the effect of Baptism, or what we get *out* of it, is that it

- both gives us grace and takes away original sin.
- It removes the punishment of this *temporal* life and brings us the promise of *eternal* life.
- It changes who we are by marking our souls with the sign of Christ.
- It incorporates us into the community of the Church, and
- it marks the beginning of a new state of our faith-history.

But how does it take what we bring into the sacrament and transform it into what we get out of the sacrament? Through the rite itself. First, like all sacraments, the community of the Church needs to be involved. While a baptism is valid if only the baptizer and the baptized are present, the fullness of the sacrament calls for a larger community, just like to achieve the fullness of an experience, you are compelled to have to share it and its impact upon you with someone. You sure feel more welcome into the Church if the Church is there to welcome you.

The matter of the sacrament is water, into which the person is submerged or which is poured over the person.

The form of the sacrament is the Trinitarian Formula, "I baptize you in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit," recited concurrently with dunking the person in the water 3 times. These words and actions give the matter a focus and a meaning.

But how do matter and form combine in a sacrament to give it new meaning? Let's look at one symbol in Baptism to find out: water.

Water is a sign of death.

- Every year, we're reminded of floods that decimate river towns,
- blizzards and ice storms that close cities down for days on end,
- hurricane downpours that rip apart coastal towns,
- and tsunamis that kill hundreds of thousands.

But water is also a sign of life.

- Rain helps things grow.
- Still pools reflect the world.
- Water is drinkable and sustains life.
- It's a large component, 65%, of our bodies.

The dunking of a person under water until their lungs are about to burst and the subsequent raising them out of the water to gasp for air is a symbol of both death to our old ways and new life in Christ. And when each dunk is combined with part of the Trinitarian formula, we're reminded of our oneness with the death and resurrection to eternal life of Jesus Christ.

And we shouldn't forget that Baptism includes a number of other symbols.

- We take on a new name in Baptism, as Abram and Sarai became Abraham and Sarah, Simon became Peter, and Saul became Paul.
- We're blessed with oil,
- given a candle and
- clothed in a new white garment.

Each sacrament is full of symbols which layer meaning upon meaning to leverage the experience, if only we open ourselves up to it.

Confirmation is a good example of this layering. It builds upon the experiences of Baptism and takes them further. Again, dwelling on our lived experience, we want to do more than simply belong. A life of pure observation is not a lived life. We feel a need to involve ourselves in those things which we feel are important to us. We want to do more than belong. We want to join in with the group in their mission.

But we also know that in the life of faith, joining in on the mission is no easy task. We need sustenance and a spirit that buoys us above the waves of life. We need something more than simply the community of faith to carry us through, because oftentimes we are outside that community when we're at work or in a store, or heaven forbid, our car. Somehow we need to know that God is with us.

We also need to celebrate our coming into adulthood. We want to stand up and say "this is what I believe, not what my parents wanted me to believe." We want to take responsibility for our belief, not simply or passively accept who we are. We want to mold the clay, not just hold it. The adult faith needs to move from reacting to the world around it, to forming the world around it.

So again, while we bring these experiences into the Sacrament, the Church tells us that what we get out of Confirmation is that

- it furthers the grace given in Baptism by infusing us with the Holy Spirit in a special manner.
- The Council of Trent saw it as arming us for our mission in the world and strengthening us by the Holy Spirit.
- Vatican II saw it as emphasizing our baptismal mission and a confirmation of our infant baptismal promise. Two modern theologians see it this way:
- Karl Rahner says it *effects* our participation in the Church's mission.
- Edward Schillebeeckx says it is our incorporation into the complete mystery of Christ, the Church.

So how do matter and form get us from our lived experience to the effects of the sacrament? The matter of the sacrament is the anointing with oil, and the laying on of hands. The form of Confirmation consists in the words which the minister speaks when he anoints the forehead with oil and imposes his hands on the recipient. Again that gives the matter a focus and meaning. Oil is a very interesting sign because it is so diverse.

- Oil removes friction, like the oil in your car's engine.
- Oil restores softness, like baby oil on the skin.
- Oil beautifies in scent like perfume.
- Oil used to be seen as giving strength, like Sampson in the Old Testament, the gladiators in Rome, and professional body builders and wrestlers today.
- And most importantly, oil was used to anoint kings.

Combined with the form of the sacrament, the oil is a symbol of

- Removing any friction in our commitment to God,
- revitalizing our life in the mission of Church,
- beautifying our soul with the changing of its character,
- giving us strength through the infusion of the Holy Spirit,
- and bringing us to greatness through our full inclusion in the body of Christ.

Hopefully, you've got the flow of *how* the sacraments mean. But let me offer one criticism of the approach I've just talked about.

An old hillbilly and his wife and son took their first trip to the big city. When they got to their hotel, the man said to his wife, "Mama, you just wait in the truck. Junior and I will go in and be sure this is the right place."

When they stepped into the lobby they both thought they had died and gone to heaven. There were indoor streams and water fountains, polished marble and gleaming brass everywhere. But the most amazing thing of all was the elevators.

A stooped over little lady who was 90 if she was a day approached the elevators and pushed the "Up" arrow. The door opened and she got on. The door closed. The lights above the door flashed. They flashed some more and the door opened. The most stunning woman you've ever seen stepped off and went into the lounge. The son looked at his dad.

The dad looked at his son for just a second and then said, "Son, go git yer Ma."

The moral of that story is that if you don't understand something, it's easy to attribute magical qualities to it. The risk of the "matter and form" approach is that it focuses in on the action of God in only one part of the sacramental ritual, and tends to minimize the rest of the ritual. It focuses on a tangible object and sees how it becomes a symbol, calling into existence the profound realization of God's grace. But it can sometimes border on seeing sacraments as some sort of magic: get the right object, say the right words with the right actions, and presto chango, you have something that you didn't have before. A fuller understanding of sacraments realizes that each object, each symbol, is also wrapped up in a liturgical experience which involves a whole community as well as the form and matter. Thomas Merton likened the mass to a ballet, with similar prescribed movements and gestures. Let's expand our exploration of how the sacraments mean by looking at the entire experience of the Liturgy of the Eucharist.

The Eucharist picks up on the existential themes we've talked about in Baptism and Confirmation. We often find ourselves in some sort of isolation in the modern world. Our American society emphasizes the individual, but our experience of God the Trinity makes us realize that individuals are only whole when we are in *relationship* with others. We seek to belong, and while baptism *initiates* us into the community, our belonging needs to be acted out by *gathering* with that community.

We also realize that we are born into a world where we cannot excel equally well in all areas. We are limited creatures. Furthermore, as we grow older, we become more aware that even those limited gifts we *do* have cannot all be shared to their fullest extent – we are limited by time and energy just as we are limited by talent.

This limitedness emphasizes our separation from God, who is *limitless*. When we are at our best, we seek to maximize those gifts we are given, but in so doing, we must acknowledge that our talents are not our own doing, they are gifts of a superior being. Again, we are reminded of our subservience.

And when we do seek to leverage those talents that we have been gifted with, we find it hard to know where they can best be applied. The need is so great, the world is so big, and we are so small in comparison. Our isolation comes to the fore again.

And lastly, in our isolation, we come to grips with our failures and frailty. We cannot perfect our individual talents, and we cannot perfect ourselves as a whole. If we take the time to truly reflect, we realize that daily we fail to be the person we have been called to be. We are fallen creatures.

Again, we bring these experiences into the Sacrament, and the Church tells us that what we get out of the sacrament of the Eucharist is the core expression of God's sanctifying grace.

- It brings us *out* of isolation and *into* community. Even in small celebrations, it brings us face to face with the community of the Trinity, and includes us as a member of God's family.
- It acknowledges the fact that we sometimes fail, and provides strength in reconciliation with God.
- It takes our individual gifts and combines them with the further gifts of the Church, as Paul says, making us into the Body of Christ.
- It gives those gifts focus and mission through touching again the example of the experience of Jesus Christ, body broken, blood poured out.
- It takes our human condition of separation from God and celebrates a mystical union with God.

The wonder of the Eucharistic Liturgy is that it does so many things in such a rich variety of ways. The structure of the Eucharist articulates its theology: Introductory Rites are followed by the Liturgy of the Word, the Preparation of the Gifts, the Liturgy of the Eucharist, and the Concluding Rites. Let's talk through each of these actions to understand their power in making present that which they celebrate.

The purpose of the Introductory Rites is to gather the assembly into one place, as one body, to give praise and thanks to God in the name of Jesus Christ. It begins when the first person leaves the isolation of their house in order to gather as community in the house of God. God's people find their places in the Church. The gathering builds to a crescendo as the ministers process to their places within the church. Music and singing help to focus us on a common activity and calls us to recognize our unity in the Lord Jesus Christ. Our singing takes away our individual voice and gives us a communal voice. The presider puts this recognition into words as he greets not us, but *the Lord in our midst!* As we become aware of God's presence in our lives, with awe and fear of the Lord we are aware of our inadequacies, and we confess our sinfulness to almighty God and our brothers and sisters. However, we are reminded of God's love for us as a people and as individuals as we sing out "Glory to God in the highest" and are united in purpose through the opening prayer.

Wow. It's kind of hard to realize what a roller coaster ride that Introductory Rite is. We leave the isolation of our homes for the welcoming of community. With God at the center of that community, we seek the isolation of the periphery again when we realize our human foibles, inadequacies and sinfulness. But we are called back to the center as God's free flowing grace encourages us to bring all that we have and all that we offer to His community.

The Eucharist quickly moves on to the Liturgy of the Word, and the pace settles down as we take time and our seats to become aware of the incredible heritage that precedes this gathering. We are reminded of our forebearers in faith, their failings as human beings, and their accomplishments through God. And we see ourselves as standing on their shoulders, closer to God for all their efforts. The Hebrew scriptures remind us of God's ongoing covenant with us. In response, we sing a psalm, a poem of the heart, open before God in all its humanity and all its emotions. The New Testament scriptures remind us of God's *new* covenant with us, and brings us closer to the core experience of our faith: Jesus Christ. Brought to the brink of that encounter at the sharing of the Gospel message, we can no longer sit by idly, we stand in exaltation, singing "Alleluia" in anticipation of the stories of his wondrous deeds.

We take to heart the Word of God as proclaimed in the 3 year cycle of the lectionary and, by means of the homily, we're led to a living explanation of the Word, present and active in our midst. It is also important to note that the Liturgy not only follows a 3 year cycle in order to cover most of the Scriptures, but within each year, we remember certain holy men and women on their feast days, reminding us that the meaning of the life and death of Jesus for the world must also be read and understood in the light of the difference it has made in history since that time. When we link this process with our Eucharistic celebration, we are also recalling these lives and see in them, in retrospect, the wonderful works of God in order to be able to more clearly to discern the call of God in the present. God's Word is indeed alive, not confined to a book, and is applicable to the world from which we came.

We are more tranquil than when we first arrived, more receptive to the Word of God as we sit and listen, and are reminded of the larger world, our individual lives outside this gathering, and are given a hint of our mission. In response to the challenge of God's Word, the Profession of Faith presents us the opportunity to renew our baptismal promises. This is a communal action, so we stand, united in our beliefs, proclaiming the creed that makes us one. We remain standing, as together we pray for God's saving activity through the lives of the assembly of the baptized.

The Preparation of the Gifts is a transitional rite from the Liturgy of the Word to the Liturgy of the Eucharist. The pace again slows, the gifts are brought up by representatives of the assembly. It used to be that the gathered community was small enough that all could bring up gifts, but the post-agrarian world shares symbolically by all giving of their selves monetarily through the collection, so that the charitable work of the assembly can carry on outside of the Eucharistic celebration. I'm not the pastor nor am I on the Finance Committee, heck, I'm not even in the parish, but if you don't join in the contribution, you miss out on your ability to experience the power of the gifts and the mission of the Church. At best, it becomes a *theoretical* experience for you, not a *lived* one – and the point of the sacraments is the *lived* experience. Ideally, all these gifts are brought forth as the shared fruits of the community. Core are the gifts of bread and wine that process up through the heart of the assembly, are received by the celebrant, and are laid on the altar of God, newly prepared for the agape meal, the love feast. See, the Word of God is never enough. Action makes the Word come alive. The Word evokes a response, the sharing of simple gifts, bread and wine, which will in return be shared back, giving nourishment and refreshment to the very ones who brought it forth. We gather for a purpose. We are hungry, thirsty people. Nothing will satisfy our hunger or quench our thirst but this bread and wine, transformed. The bread of life and the cup of eternal salvation enable the assembly to *proclaim* the Word, to *live* the Word, to *be* the Word.

The Liturgy of the Eucharist calls for the involvement of the whole community again, not symbolically, but truly. So we all arise again, in dialog with the celebrant and prepare for the central act of remembrance. Together, we all give thanks for the gifts we are privileged to share. As we bring together the simple gifts and the remembering of Christ's core mandate, "do this in memory of me," a spirit of intense reverence pervades the assembly. We kneel in homage to this sacred moment, this asking of God to send His Holy Spirit upon the gifts we just shared, this remembering of the words of Christ at the paschal table, this past and future remembering of the passion, resurrection, glorification and return of Christ. We pray for all those around the world and those who have gone before us, in whose spiritual community we are now a part. We pray in thanksgiving for the Eucharist we now celebrate, for all that was, all that is, and all that will be. We engage in a special moment in which we realize that *this* is that central experience that transcends generations and communities. We stand not on the shoulders of, but united with all believers in all times.

In recognition of that unity, we can no longer be spectators, we must be engaged. We stand and pray the prayer that perfects our posture before God, the Lord's Prayer. We recognize Christ in the breaking of bread and sharing of the cup, and turn to those around us, sharing the peace of Christ and solidifying our unity, bringing us closer to unity as the Body of Christ ourselves. The apex of the Liturgy is Communion. We walk forward in procession, accompanied by music and singing, to be nourished by the Bread of Life and refreshed by the Cup of Eternal Salvation. The gifts we have given have come back transformed, with the power to transform. We're now connected in a solemn bond of unity, peace, trust and faith. We're nourished and refreshed. This is indeed a sacred moment. Words and gestures fail to express the richness of the meaning of this moment.

The Concluding Rites mark the transition between the Liturgy of the Word and Liturgy of the Eucharist to the work of being Christians in the world. The rite itself is very simple, for little needs to be said. We have been transformed into what we are called to be: the Body of Christ. The sacrament has brought to reality that which it seeks to symbolize: the Body of Christ, the grace of God present in His people. Rich, poor, young, old, healthy, sick, all are brought together as one in the Body of Christ Jesus, the Church here on earth. The presider cries out our mission "Go in peace to *love*, and *serve the Lord*." We have gathered, the Word has been proclaimed, the bread has been broken and shared, the wine poured out. But the work is not done. We are now more aware of who we are and what God calls us to be. We are bread for the world. Our lives are broken, but they can be mended again and again and again. In the words of the Second Vatican Council:

"It is the liturgy through which, especially in the divine sacrifice of the Eucharist, "the work of our redemption is accomplished," and it is through the liturgy, especially, that the faithful are enabled to express in their lives and manifest to others the mystery of Christ and the real nature of the true Church... The liturgy daily builds up those who are in the Church, making of them a holy temple of the Lord, a dwelling place for God in the Spirit, to the mature measure and the fullness of Christ. At the same time it marvelously increases their power to preach Christ and thus show forth the Church, a sign lifted up among the nations, to those who are outside, a sign under which the scattered children of God may be gathered until there is one fold and one shepherd."

In the Eucharist, more than any place else, the fullness of Christ is revealed in us so that we can preach the Christ who gathers all people into a communion of love and service. The Eucharist enables us as a community to be the Body of Christ.

In the end, the power of sacraments is that they bring about that which they symbolize: sacraments bring about the *experience* of God's love, His saving grace, and as a result, they have an ethic about them: if we are to be at all sincere in our worship, then we must live in accordance with the demand that our lives be motivated by love just as God's life is. Christian worship has practical implications in that it compels us to work for the spread of God's kingdom of justice, love and peace in such ways as will be just and fair to all, bringing harmony and integrity not only to the community of faith, but also to our environment and all creation.

Sacraments can precipitate exceedingly powerful experiences of God's grace. They remind us that God's grace is always raining down on us. Not solely in the objects, transformed into symbols of God's grace through form and action, but in the action of God through the community itself, the Body of Christ – all bringing into being that which they symbolize. All sacraments are communal for good reason: *we* are the people of God and God expresses himself and his Grace *through* us. We minister to each other just as God ministers through us. The "principle of the sacramental encounter" emphasizes that God's creation is charged with God's sacred power. All created reality, though finite, is capable of embodying and communicating the Infinite, the Divine. To be Catholic is to recognize that *all* reality, including you, has a "mysterious" dimension insofar as it is imbued with the hidden presence of God. God's grace can burst forth upon us from all things in this world, even the smallest of us, especially when, as exemplified in the Trinity, we enter into relationship with one another.

Have you ever had an experience of God as a community? It can come from the most common of places and leave the most profound and lasting impact. That's what sacraments are all about.

My wife and I went on our honeymoon in kind of the opposite direction of most people – we went north to Canada instead of south to the Caribbean. We were attending mass at a parish in a small town, called Sydney, in upper Nova Scotia. 4 pews ahead of us sat a man, a father, a lone adult, harried and overwhelmed by his 3 children. You could tell he had just gotten out of the shower before coming to mass because his hair was still wet. And you could tell he was overwhelmed and at his wits end by the squirming and fidgeting of his 3 children. All throughout mass you could tell that he was frustrated in his attempts to pay attention to the liturgy while keeping his children calm. You could tell that he desperately needed to get something out of the mass. The whole congregation had gone to communion and the last people were just sitting down. The priest returned the hosts to the tabernacle and sat down in the presider's chair. The church was perfectly silent. And from the depth of that silence the harried man's young daughter began to sing: "Twinkle twinkle little star, how I wonder what you are..." from start to finish she sang to a captive audience, priest included. At the beginning her father was beside himself trying to figure out what to do to silence her at this most embarrassing of moments. Yet by the time she had finished the entire song in her wonderfully sweet, innocent and pure child's voice, her father was no longer harried but accepting. And the congregation was not restless or resentful, but were transfixed to another place. And the priest was not begrudging to have the liturgy disturbed, but appreciative that the reception of the Lord had just been brought to its rightful conclusion, as everyone in that church accepted the Lord into their hearts thanks to the precociousness of a preschool girl.