

What are the sacraments?



The first question on the Confirmation exam was "What is a sacrament?" Claire had missed that class and hadn't bothered to get notes from anyone in the class, so she responded with the first thing that came to mind. "It's a city in California."

In some ways it's easier to find a city in California than to give a comprehensive and specific definition and explanation of a sacrament. Throughout history rivers of ink have been spilled trying to nail down the how, when and where of sacraments. Luther said one thing. Zwingli said another. The Anabaptists said one thing. The Roman Catholics said another. In our own day the argument has been made that children shouldn't receive Holy Communion until they can understand what's going on, while the opposite argument has been that no one really "understands" what happens in a sacrament. Others have countered by saying that if we don't want to commune infants then we shouldn't baptize them either.

Contemporary theologians, especially Edward Schillebeeckx, have said that Christ is the "primordial sacrament." The grace that is received in the sacraments is the grace of Christ. In the two sacraments of Baptism and Eucharist Jesus Christ is the content of the sacrament as well as the minister of the sacrament. In both sacraments it is the whole Christ who encounters us. The sacraments are wonderful ways in which Christ is present to us. This is not to deny that Christ is present to us in other ways as well, but if we look at Christ's command and Christ's promise it is obvious that two actions are central. Historically a sacrament was viewed as "an outward and visible sign of an inward and spiritual grace given to us, ordained by Christ himself, as a means whereby we receive the same, and a pledge to assure us thereof" (Anglican Catechism). Lutherans have traditionally tried for greater clarity in their definition by stating that a sacrament is an act that is commanded by Christ, uses a material or earthly element, and through connection with the Word is the bearer of God's promise. And Lutherans have quite clearly stated that using those criteria Holy Baptism and Holy Communion qualify as sacraments, and nothing else.

In recent years theologians and liturgical scholars have been working toward a richer and fuller understanding of sacraments. They have employed the best available biblical scholarship as the basis for expanding our understanding. The trend has been away from arguments about validity and efficacy. The emphasis has been more on the mystery and joy of Christ's presence rather than dealing with how, when and where. The starting point has been Christ as the sacrament of God's encounter with the world.

We live in an exciting time of ferment and new possibilities, and during these days while we search for greater clarity in our understanding, it is in the doing of the sacraments that we receive what is offered – forgiveness of sins, life and salvation – the presence of Christ in all his fullness.