

Sacraments: God Uses the Material World to Sanctify Us

*You were washed, you were sanctified, you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ
and in the Spirit of our God. ~ 1 Corinthians 6:11*

WATER, OIL, BREAD, WINE, the touch of a hand, words, the consummation of a marriage. These things, these very material things, are the ways God has chosen to flood the world with grace through the seven sacraments of the Catholic Church: Baptism, Confirmation, Eucharist, Reconciliation, Anointing of the Sick, Holy Orders, and Matrimony.

The material world, all that we can experience with our senses, is God's creation. It is, all of it, as God himself said when he had completed making it, "very good" (Gn 1:31). And we humans, part spiritual since we have God's own breath animating us are also part material, made of the very clay of the earth (see Gn 2:7).

The heresy of hating the material world arises again and again in human history. Often, the idea arises that there was a second god, perhaps an evil god, that made the material world, and that there is

an eternal struggle between the spiritual and material.

But this is to attribute the terrible effects of sin — the war within our own nature following the disobedience of our first parents, and our abuse of our own passions, each other, and the world we live in — to the world itself. It is to blame desire for the existence of sinful desire, to blame love of home and wife for the existence of greed, theft, and rape, to blame the fruit of the forbidden tree of which Adam and Eve ate for the seductive whisper of the Serpent. The material world that was made for us by God is good; it is we, through the abuse of our free will, that have caused the problems, difficulties, and confusions that we must contend with daily.

As spiritual-material beings, signs and symbols are important to us; we both experience and express spiritual realities through physical things. "God speaks to man through the visible creation" (CCC

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“The sacraments honor our human nature by making the material world the means to sanctify us.”

1147), and we understand both God’s greatness and his nearness through his use of the material world. Throughout salvation history, God uses the material world and physical things as symbolic of his relationship with us, from circumcision that was a sign of God’s covenant with his Chosen People, Israel (see Gn 17:9-14), to the blood of the perfect lamb that protected the Israelites from death (see Ex 12:13) and the blood that sealed God’s covenant with his Chosen People at Mount Sinai (see Ex 24:8), to the sacrifice of animals (see Ex 20:24), the burning of incense (see Ex 30:1), and the use of holy water (see Nm 5:17).

When God came to visit his people, he did not disdain human flesh (see Jn 1:14; Lk 1:31). Jesus, having taken upon himself our humanity, knew the importance of physical things in our consciousness. In his public life, Jesus often used physical means to heal. He touched the eyes of two blind men to heal them (see Mt 9:28-30) and even touched lepers for the same purpose (see Mt 8:2-3). But he went further in showing us that the material world is not to be despised. There are three stories in the Gospels of his using his own spittle to heal. In curing a deaf and dumb man, he put his fingers into the man’s ears and touched the man’s tongue with spittle (see Mk 7:32-35). To cure a blind man, “*he took the blind man by the hand, and led him out of the village; and when he had spit on his eyes and laid his hands upon him, he asked him, ‘Do you see anything?’ And he looked up and said, ‘I see men; but they look like trees, walking.’ Then again he laid his hands upon his eyes; and he looked intently and was restored, and saw everything clearly*” (Mk 8:22-25). Another cure of blindness is, if anything, even more physical: “*he spat on the ground and made clay of the spittle and anointed the man’s eyes with the clay, saying to him, ‘Go, wash in the pool of Siloam’ (which means Sent). So he went and washed and came back seeing*” (Jn 9:6-7).

Jesus also told us of how he would use material things to sanctify and save us. He told the Pharisee Nicodemus, who had sought him out by night for instruction, “*unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the Kingdom of God*” (Jn 3:5), a description of the sacrament of Baptism. He told a synagogue full of people: “*I am the living bread which came down*



The massive dome of the Cathedral of Florence, Italy constructed from 1420 to 1454

from Heaven; if any one eats of this bread, he will live for ever; and the bread which I shall give for the life of the world is my flesh.... Truly, truly, I say to you, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of man and drink his blood, you have no life in you; he who eats my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life, and I will raise him up at the last day. For my flesh is food indeed, and my blood is drink indeed. He who eats my flesh and drinks my blood abides in me, and I in him” (Jn 6:51, 53-56). (The Greek word the Gospel uses for “eat” is very physical, meaning something close to our English “gnaw.”) His hearers were horrified and “*many of his disciples drew back and no longer went about with him*” (Jn 6:66); only the apostles remained (see Jn 6:67-69). In this way did Jesus introduce the sacramental understanding of the Eucharist, which he instituted the night before his death by consecrating bread and wine into his body and blood (see Lk 22:19-20). Jesus makes not only the elemental things of creation, such as water, but also the things we ourselves have made from God’s gifts, such as bread and wine, as signs of his invisible grace poured

*“We worship with our entire being,
not our mind or spirit alone.”*



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*The Holy Oils: Sacred Chrism, Oil of Catechumens,
and the Oil of the Sick*

out upon us. The sacraments he instituted are clear indications of his intent to honor our human nature by making the material world the means to sanctify us. And they are given to us at all the moments and stages of the Christian life, tracking and spiritually elevating our natural lives. The sacraments of initiation — Baptism, Confirmation, and Eucharist — lay the foundations of the Christian life by giving us birth into the Christian community, strengthening us in faith and virtue, and giving us spiritual food and drink. The sacraments of Reconciliation and Anointing of the Sick heal us, spiritually and physically, and the sacraments of Holy Orders and Matrimony sanctify the human community and the building up of the Kingdom through the generous service of life.

God is aware of our human frailty; he knows the troubles that arise between the spiritual and physical elements of our nature. We live in a material world but are called to a spiritual, a supernatural, goal. Jesus founded a Church as his earth-bound instrument to bring us to holiness and our eternal home with his Father, making use of readily-recognized material things with the spiritual means to reach eternal happiness. The Church’s seven sacraments — gifts to us from the heart of God himself — are the sources of grace, making it possible to rise above the purely

natural to the supernatural. Each of the sacraments rests upon an outward material sign that was designated by Christ as a way to gain an outpouring of God’s own divine life. Through the sacraments, we can become “*partakers of the divine nature*” (2 Pt 1:4) and “*share his holiness*” (Heb 12:10). Our human nature can, with God’s grace, become elevated to a super-humanity — a supernatural state into the very fullness of the life of God.

The visible sign of each of the sacraments exemplifies the gift of grace that Christ pours out in the sacraments that are the means, through the liturgical actions of the Church, which Christ ordained for saving his people and bringing them to life eternal. Water for washing, oil for anointing and healing, bread and wine for food and drink, the imposition of hands to grant authority and power, the spoken words of contrition and absolution to restore us to God’s friendship, the consent between the man and the woman to enter in to Holy Matrimony — all accomplish what they signify. The signs of the sacraments of themselves give grace. This does not mean that sacraments are instruments of magic, but that they work, when lawfully and properly administered, through the direct action of Christ. For this reason, they work *ex opere operato* (Latin for “by the very fact of the action’s being performed”), regardless of the holiness of the minister of the sacrament. Human failure and sinfulness is no barrier to the outpouring of sacramental grace from the heart of our Savior. However, to receive the graces and other good effects of a sacrament, the recipient must desire them and not be in a state of mortal sin. “Going through the motions” does not make the sacrament invalid, but it does block its effects.

Just as God uses the material world to sanctify us, we use elements from creation and human culture as part of the way we worship God. The liturgical actions of the Church use spoken prayers, music, candles, incense, vestments, and bells to lift the heart to the things of God; we worship with our entire being, not our mind or spirit alone.

A Catholic’s outlook on life is a product of God’s use of the material world to sanctify us. Everything Jesus touched, said, and did he made holy, and we see the world as St. Francis of Assisi saw it, as the visible reflections of God’s glory and splendor and a prefigurement of the glory of Heaven. We Catholics cannot despise the material world, the home God has given us in which we seek and find our salvation.

(CCC 344, 1127-1128, 1145-1152, 1155, 1210-1212)