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The Luke E. Hart Series
Basic Elements of the Catholic Faith*

INTRODUCTION TO THE SACRAMENTS

PART TWO • SECTION TWO OF
CATHOLIC CHRISTIANITY

*What does a Catholic believe?
How does a Catholic worship?
How does a Catholic live?*

Based on the
Catechism of the Catholic Church

*by
Peter Kreeft*

General Editor
Father John A. Farren, O.P.
Director of the Catholic Information Service
Knights of Columbus Supreme Council

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Reverend Alfred McBride, O.Praem.

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Catholic Information Service
Knights of Columbus Supreme Council
PO Box 1971
New Haven CT 06521-1971

www.kofc.org/cis
cis@kofc.org
203-752-4267
203-752-4018 fax

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SECTION 2:

INTRODUCTION TO

THE SACRAMENTS

1. *What is a sacrament?*

A sacrament is 1) *a sacred sign* 2) *instituted by Christ* 3) *to give grace*. Also it is important to note that a sacrament is “entrusted to the Church” (CCC 1131).*

2. *Sacraments as signs*

First, a sacrament is a *sign*. A sign always signifies something, points to something real beyond itself. Like Christ’s miracles in the Gospels (which Scripture calls “signs”), sacraments teach by “sign language.” “Sacrament” means “sacred sign.” “Because they are signs, they also instruct” (CCC 1123). This instruction is an essential part of their purpose. Specifically, their purpose is to be *sacred* signs, to teach sacredness, holiness, sanctity.

“The purpose of the sacraments is [1] to sanctify men, [2] to build up the Body of Christ, and, finally, [3] to give worship to God” (CCC 1123).

*CCC = *Catechism of the Catholic Church*

3. *Sacraments give grace ex opere operato*

Sacraments sanctify men not merely by teaching, however, but also by actually giving the grace they signify (this is the third aspect of the three-part definition in paragraph 1 above). Thus another definition of a sacrament is “a sacred sign that actually effects what it signifies.” Sacraments “really work,” really give grace.

“Grace” (see paragraph 8) means the undeserved gift of God. It is the work of God himself. In fact, it is the very life of God himself, which he shares with us. In the sacraments we participate in God’s own life and work. “As fire transforms into itself everything it touches, so the Holy Spirit transforms into the divine life whatever is subjected to his power” (CCC 1127).

The sacraments give grace *ex opere operato*, which means “from the performance of the act itself,” rather than from the individual human soul, the feelings or experiences or spiritual energies of the person receiving the sacrament, or from the person administering it. It works “from the outside in” rather than “from the inside out.” It is objective, not subjective.

This means primarily that it comes from the other to the self, not from the self. But it also means that it is not usually subjectively felt or experienced. God remains an object of faith, rather than of feeling or experience. The sacraments do not usually *feel* miraculous. (For God’s reason for remaining hidden, see Part III, Section 4, paragraph 3).

Though the sacraments give grace *ex opere operato*, from God rather than from our own souls, and from the performance of the act itself, yet God works in ways appropriate to the human soul. He plants “seeds” of grace, which grow gradually, rather than all at once.

4. *Christ's presence in the sacraments*

This third aspect of the definition of a sacrament – that it actually gives grace (paragraph 3) – is due to the second aspect – that it is instituted by Christ and is his action.

For Christ is present not just at the *origin* of the sacraments, two thousand years ago, but really present and active in them now. Christ is not passive, but active. He is not merely *signified*, but *acting*. He does not sit still, like an artist's model, but works, like the artist.

That is why the sacraments do not merely signify grace, but actually give grace. As the *Catechism* explains, the sacraments are “efficacious” (i.e., they actually “work”) only because “in them Christ himself is at work: it is he who baptizes, he who acts in his sacraments in order to communicate the grace that each sacrament signifies” (CCC 1127).

5. *The consequences of Christ's presence and acting ex opere operato*

This doctrine is not only *true*, it is also *powerful*: it makes a great difference to our lives, in at least six ways.

- 1) Since in each sacrament Christ is really present – the same Christ in different ways and different actions – *we are not alone* in any sacrament; we are with Christ.
- 2) We are also with the whole Church, his Body. For where he is, his Body is. Though the recipient of each sacrament is always the individual person, each sacrament is public and communal, since it is administered by the Catholic (universal) Church as a whole, by the authority of Christ her Head. In each of the sacraments, “the whole Christ” acts, Head and Body.

3) “This is the meaning of the Church’s affirmation⁴⁹ that the sacraments act *ex opere operato* (literally: ‘by the very fact of the action’s being performed’), i.e., by virtue of the saving work of Christ, accomplished once for all. It follows that ‘the sacrament is not wrought by the righteousness of either the celebrant or the recipient, but by the power of God’⁵⁰ [Saint Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae* III, 68, 8]. From the moment that a sacrament is celebrated in accordance with the intention of the Church, the power of Christ and his Spirit acts in and through it, independently of the personal holiness of the minister” (CCC 1128). So when we look at the priest we should see the perfect Christ, not the imperfect minister.

4) Because the sacraments are the work of Christ and work from God, not from us, we are free to focus all our attention on God, not on ourselves, and to invest all our faith and hope in him, not in ourselves.

The sacraments are invitations to forget our own limitations and problems, to lose ourselves in God (and thus find ourselves: see Matthew 10:39). This is rehearsal for Heaven, where we will be in eternal joy precisely because we will be looking at God, not at ourselves. Even here, our moments of greatest joy are always when we are “taken out of ourselves,” of our needs and plans and worries, by some truth, or goodness, or beauty that is a tiny appetizer of God.

5) We can thus be freed from concern with our imperfections: of ourselves, of our worship, and of our fellow worshippers. Since Jesus Christ is really present in the sacraments, in celebrating them we are celebrating

him, not ourselves, not even our human community. Though all sacraments are communal and public rather than individual and private, their focus is no more on the human community than on the human individual. Our focus should not be on what we are doing for Christ, but what Christ is doing for us. So it should be irrelevant to us whether our fellow worshipper is wearing ugly clothes, carrying a crying baby, or singing off key – or even whether we think he is a great sinner, or even a hypocrite. When in the presence of God, we do not judge and criticize, we simply adore and love.

- 6) Because Christ is really present in the sacraments, they are a “highway to Heaven,” a meeting place between earth and Heaven, time and eternity. They are “eschatological;” they are a foretaste and veiled preview of our eternal destiny. They are like an engagement gift from our divine Lover. If we understand this, we will not complain that Church is “boring.”

6. *How sacraments are not like magic*

A sacrament is indeed supernatural, and indeed efficacious (that is, “really works”). In those two ways it is like magic. But in at least one essential way, a sacrament is just the opposite of magic: it is *free gift*, and therefore must be freely accepted in order to be received. It is not automatic or impersonal. Though it does not come from the soul of the recipient, yet it can be blocked by the soul of the recipient, wholly or partly; and the degree of grace we receive depends on the degree of our faith, hope, and love.

Receiving a sacrament is like turning on a water faucet whose supply is the whole ocean but whose handle can open more or less.

The power and grace of the sacraments is infinite, since its source is God, but “the fruits of the sacraments also depend on the disposition of the one who receives them” (CCC 1128). It is like the fruits of a rain depending on the softness of the soil. Or like sunlight: though we receive it rather than generating it, yet we can receive more or less of it as we open our eyes more or less. The theological formula for this is that the sacraments work *ex opere operantis*, as well as *ex opere operato*.

7. *The relation between the sacraments, faith, and tradition*

Though we receive grace from the sacraments in proportion to our individual faith, even that private and individual faith in turn depends on the Church’s public and collective Tradition, i.e. what Christ “handed over” or “handed down” (the literal meaning of “tradition”) to her. Thus Saint Paul’s formula in defining the Eucharist in 1 Corinthians 11:23: “I received from the Lord what I also delivered to you.” “The Church’s faith precedes the faith of the believer who is invited to adhere to it. When the Church celebrates the sacraments, she confesses the faith received from the apostles. . . . Liturgy is a constituent element of the holy and living Tradition”⁴⁶ (CCC 1124). “For this reason no sacramental rite may be modified or manipulated at the will of the minister or the community” (CCC 1125).

8. *What is grace?*

The sacraments “give grace.” But what is “grace”?

Grace has been defined as “an undeserved gift of God.” It is undeserved for two reasons: first, because God is our Creator and therefore can owe us nothing; all good things we receive, beginning with our very existence, are gifts from God’s generosity, not owed to us in justice. Second, God’s grace is doubly undeserved

because we are sinners; we have broken our covenant relationship with him and disobeyed his law.

Yet our disobedience cannot change God's nature. "God is love," and therefore God continues to give grace. Sin stops us from receiving it, but not God from giving it.

For grace is not some "thing" God gives, as if grace were like gasoline and the sacraments were like filling stations. Rather, God's grace is God himself, God's own life in our souls. For God is love, and the lover's primary gift to the beloved is the gift of himself. That is what a lover wants above all else: to give himself to his beloved. Therefore God's grace is God's gift of himself.

Why does the lover always want to give himself to the beloved? Because the essential aim of love is intimacy, closer union. Therefore grace is essentially a love-relationship of intimacy between Christ and the Christian, Christ and his Body (cf. CCC 2003). An increase in grace means an increase in intimacy with Christ.

9. *The freedom of God's grace*

Because love is necessarily free – freely given and freely received – therefore we obtain grace by freely cooperating with God (CCC 2002), not by automatic "deposits" to our accounts. We cannot be passive like piggy banks. God demands we act, and choose. God will take the initiative and seduce our souls, but he will not force himself on us. When he accomplished the most tremendous deed in history, the Incarnation, he first *asked the consent* of Mary before giving himself to her. She *co-operated* in the redemption. And so must we.

The sacraments work in the same way. First, God takes the initiative in making the free offer of grace to us in the sacraments,

ex opere operato (CCC 1128). But then we must freely accept God and open our souls to his grace, *ex opere operantis*. Thus all the initiative is God's, yet the sacraments are not magical or automatic or impersonal. They work *ex opere operato* because, as Christ assured us, "without me you can do nothing" (John 5:5). They work *ex opere operantis* because, as Saint Augustine reminded us, "the God who created us without us will not save us without us." We can't do it without him, and he won't do it without us.

10. *Sin and the need for sacraments*

Man needed no sacraments in Eden, for he knew God with face-to-face intimacy. And we will need no sacraments in Heaven, for the same reason. But our weak and fallen human nature needs them now. Doubt about the need for sacraments often comes from loss of the sense of sin. For each of the sacraments is designed in some way to heal our sin and bring us closer to our lost innocence and our future perfection. It is pride that refuses to use the humble physical means God so graciously stoops to give us in the sacraments (see the story of Naaman the leper in 2 Kings 5:1-14). God tells us we need sacraments; who are we to say we don't?

We need sacraments also because we are not purely spiritual beings. Bowing the knees of our bodies helps us to bow the knees of our souls, because body and soul are not two things, like a ghost and a house, but two dimensions of the same thing, like the meaning and the words of a poem. That "same thing" is our selves. Each of us is a single self. For this reason, receiving the Eucharist into our mouths is the visible dimension of receiving Christ into our hearts. Our mouths (bodies) and our hearts (souls) are not separate, like two bodily organs.

God designed our bodies as an essential part of our nature, and he designed the Catholic religion for the embodied souls he designed. Our goal is not “spirituality” but *holiness*; not freedom from bodies but freedom from sin.

11. *Why does the Church have seven sacraments?*

Because Christ instituted seven sacraments. A sacrament must be “instituted by Christ.” The Church did not invent them, it only defined and defended them.

“There are seven sacraments in the Church:

- 1) Baptism,
- 2) Confirmation or Chrismation,
- 3) Eucharist,
- 4) Penance,
- 5) Anointing of the Sick,
- 6) Holy Orders, and
- 7) Matrimony”³⁰ (CCC 1113).

This doctrine was defined by the Council of Trent in the sixteenth century: “[a]dhering to the teaching of the Holy Scriptures, to the apostolic traditions, and to the consensus...of the Fathers,’ we profess that ‘the sacraments of the New Law were...all instituted by Jesus Christ our Lord”³¹ (CCC 1114).

How does the Church know this to be true, and why did it take her 1500 years to define it?

As with the other dogmas of the Faith, it is God who revealed this truth, but he revealed it gradually, in accordance with humanity’s way of learning. We learn to understand and appreciate great truths only gradually, and divine grace uses human nature and its learning style rather than setting it aside.

All the important doctrines took time to be defined, including the canon of the Bible, the two natures of Christ, and the Trinity. “As she has done for the canon of Sacred Scripture and for the doctrine of the faith, the Church, by the power of the Spirit who guides her ‘into all truth’ (John 16:13), has gradually recognized this treasure received from Christ.... Thus the Church has discerned over the centuries that among liturgical celebrations there are seven that are, in the strict sense of the term, sacraments instituted by the Lord” (CCC 1117).

The Church never adds new doctrines to the original “deposit of faith” received from Christ, but she is led by the Holy Spirit gradually and increasingly to understand that “deposit of faith” better.

12. *Why did Christ institute seven sacraments?*

“The seven sacraments touch all the stages and all the important moments of the Christian life”¹ (CCC 1210): birth (Baptism), maturing (Confirmation), strengthening by food and drink (Eucharist), repair and restoration (Penance), service to others (Matrimony and Holy Orders), and preparation for death (Anointing of the Sick). “There is thus a certain resemblance between the stages of natural life and the stages of the spiritual life” (CCC 1210). Every important transition, from birth to death, is sanctified; for our supernatural life is built on the basis of our natural life, since nature is a kind of training program for our supernatural destiny.

“The sharing in the divine nature given to men through the grace of Christ bears a certain likeness to the origin, development, and nourishing of natural life.

- 1) “The faithful are born anew by Baptism, strengthened by the sacrament of Confirmation, and receive in the Eucharist the food of eternal life....”³ (CCC 1212). The three sacraments of Christian *initiation* – Baptism, Confirmation, and the Eucharist – lay the foundations of every Christian life, as birth, maturing, and strengthening by food and drink do for our bodily life.
- 2) Holy Orders and Matrimony prepare us for lifelong *service*. The two are similar, for the priesthood too is a form of marriage – marriage to the Church – and marriage too is a form of priesthood – the “priesthood of all believers,” which the sacramental priesthood serves (see Part III, Section 7, paragraph 9).
- 3) Finally, there are two sacraments of *repair*. Penance and the Anointing of the Sick repair and strengthen souls and bodies. Anointing of the Sick, together with reception of Holy Communion, is also preparation for our final journey of death, our “viaticum,” from the Latin word referring to provisions for a journey.

13. *What is required for a valid sacrament?*

Four things:

First, *valid matter*, i.e., “the right stuff.” For instance, the Eucharist must be made of wheat bread and grape wine, and Baptism must be in water.

Second, *valid form*. The essential words cannot be changed: for instance, “This is my body...this is my blood” and “I baptize you in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.”

Third, *valid intention*, the intention to do what the Church does.

Fourth, a *valid mind*, i.e., faith and understanding on the part of the recipient. The recipient must be a Christian (have faith in Christ) to receive Christian sacraments. He should also understand what is being done. In the case of infant Baptism, it is the parents whose faith and understanding “stands in” for the baby.

This fourth requirement is not to be taken for granted. Many Catholics have been “sacramentalized” without having being evangelized or catechized; that is, the basic, minimum faith in Christ and understanding of his sacraments is missing. Those who receive the sacraments of Christ should surely be able to say, “I know whom I have believed” (2 Timothy 1:12).

14. *Who administers the sacraments?*

Baptism can be validly administered by anyone in case of necessity, as long as there is the intention to baptize according to the intention of the Church; but a priest or deacon is the usual minister.

Confirmation and Holy Orders are administered by a bishop, in the Western Church.

Matrimony is administered by the man and the woman, to each other. The priest or deacon is the Church’s official witness.

The Eucharist and Penance are administered only by a priest or bishop.

The Anointing of the Sick is administered only by a priest or bishop.

15. *How often can we receive the sacraments?*

“The three sacraments of Baptism, Confirmation and Holy Orders confer, in addition to grace, a sacramental *character*, or ‘seal’ by which the Christian...is made a member of the Church

according to different states and functions. This...is indelible;⁴⁰ it remains for ever in the Christian.... Therefore these sacraments can never be repeated” (CCC 1121).

Matrimony cannot be repeated while both spouses of a valid sacramental marriage are living.

The Anointing of the Sick used to be called “Extreme Unction.” This designation derives from the Latin words *in extremis*, meaning “at the point of death,” and the expectation was that it would be administered before death as a final preparation for crossing over into eternity. This is still done, but the sacrament is also given earlier in life in hope of healing and recovery from a life-threatening illness, and so it can be received as many times as needed.

The Eucharist and Penance are the two ongoing and oft-repeated sacraments. They are to the soul as eating and washing to the body. The Church highly recommends daily reception of the Eucharist, but she mandates weekly Mass attendance, and reception of the Eucharist at the very least once every year during the Easter season for all adult Catholics. Penance is also mandated at least once a year, but reception at least monthly is the practice which has helped many on the road to holiness.

16. *Sacramentals*

“Sacramentals” are “sacred signs which bear a resemblance to the sacraments...”¹⁷¹ (CCC 1667) but are not sacraments in the strict sense for two reasons. First, they were not instituted by Christ but by the Church (“Holy Mother Church has...instituted sacramentals...”¹⁷¹ – CCC 1667). Second, they do not work “*ex opere operato*” to produce the effects they signify, but only “signify effects...which are obtained through the intercession of the

Church...”¹⁷¹ (CCC 1667). “Sacramentals do not confer the grace of the Holy Spirit in the way that the sacraments do, but by the Church’s prayer, they prepare us to receive grace and dispose us to cooperate with it” (CCC 1670). Also, sacramentals vary much more with time and place than sacraments do. They “respond to the needs, culture, and special history of the Christian people of a particular region or time” (CCC 1668).

17. *The purpose of sacramentals*

“By them...various occasions in life are rendered holy”¹⁷¹ (CCC 1667). “For well-disposed members of the faithful, the liturgy of the sacraments and sacramentals sanctifies almost every event of their lives with the divine grace which flows from the...Death and Resurrection of Christ. From this source all sacraments and sacramentals draw their power...”¹⁷⁴ (CCC 1670). “This is why the Church imparts blessings by invoking the name of Jesus, usually while making the holy sign of the cross of Christ” (CCC 1671).

“There is scarcely any proper use of material things which cannot be thus directed toward the sanctification of men and the praise of God”¹⁷⁴ (CCC 1670). This is not just a matter of interior or spiritual intentions; the spiritual power of the Church’s prayer flows into material things like waves onto a beach. In the Catholic tradition, much more than the Protestant, there is a “sacramental sense” which unites, rather than divides, matter and spirit, secular and sacred. Thus sacramentals “sanctify” or make holy material things, times, and places – such as relics, holy days, church buildings, altars, statues, holy water, rosaries, medals, processions, religious dances, and pilgrimages, and even “secular” things such as houses, busses and fishing boats.

18. *Church authority regarding sacramentals*

Sacramentals often arise from “grass-roots” popular traditions. “Pastoral discernment is needed to sustain and support popular piety and, if necessary, to purify and correct the religious sense which underlies these devotions....”¹⁸⁰ (CCC 1676). But the Church is much more prone to approve than to correct these popular devotions. For she believes that “[a]t its core the piety of the people is a storehouse of values that offers answers of Christian wisdom to the great questions of life. The Catholic wisdom of the people is...a Christian humanism that radically affirms the dignity of every person as a child of God, establishes a basic fraternity [sense of brotherhood], teaches people to encounter nature and understand work, and provides reasons for joy and humor even in the midst of a very hard life....”¹⁸¹ (CCC 1676).

19. *Exorcism*

Its meaning: “When the Church asks publicly and authoritatively in the name of Jesus Christ that a person or object be protected against the power of the Evil One and withdrawn from his dominion, it is called *exorcism*.... Exorcism is directed at the expulsion of demons or to the liberation from demonic possession through the spiritual authority which Jesus entrusted to his Church....”¹⁷⁷ (CCC 1673).

Its power: “Jesus performed exorcisms, and from him the Church has received the power and office of exorcising”¹⁷⁶ (cf. Mk 1:25-26; 3:15; 6:7, 13; 16:17; CCC 1673).

Its forms: “In a simple form, exorcism is performed at the celebration of Baptism. The solemn exorcism, called a ‘major exorcism,’ can be performed only by a priest and with the permission of a bishop. The priest must proceed with prudence,

strictly observing the rules established by the Church.... Illness, especially psychological illness, is a very different matter; treating this is the concern of medical science. Therefore, before an exorcism is performed, it is important to ascertain that one is dealing with the presence of the Evil One, and not [merely] an illness”¹⁷⁷ (CCC 1673).

20. *Funerals*

Funerals are by nature sacramental, and even a kind of consummation of all the sacraments, for “[a]ll the sacraments...have as their goal the last Passover of the child of God which, through death, leads him into the life of the Kingdom” (CCC 1680). They are the Church’s business because they are “family business”: “The Church who, as Mother, has borne the Christian sacramentally in her womb during his earthly pilgrimage, accompanies him at his journey’s end, in order to surrender him ‘into the Father’s hands’” (CCC 1683).

Funerals center on the Eucharistic sacrifice because “[i]n the Eucharist the Church expresses her efficacious communion with the departed...¹⁹⁰ It is by the Eucharist thus celebrated that the community of the faithful, especially the family of the deceased, learn to live in communion with the one who ‘has fallen asleep in the Lord,’ by communicating in the Body of Christ of which he is a living member...” (CCC 1689).

Thus, Christian funerals are positive expressions of faith and hope – “the sure and certain hope of the Resurrection.”

“For even dead, we are not at all separated from one another...we will find one another again in the same place. We shall never be separated, for we live...in Christ”¹⁹² (CCC 1690).

Notes from the Catechism in Order of Their Appearance in Quotations Used in this Section

- ⁴⁹ Cf. Council of Trent (1547): DS 1605; DS 1606.
- ⁵⁰ St. Thomas Aquinas, *STb* III, 68, 8.
- ⁴⁶ Cf. *DV* 8.
- ³⁰ Cf. Council of Lyons II (1274) DS 860; Council of Florence (1439): DS 1310; Council of Trent (1547): DS 1601.
- ³¹ Council of Trent (1547): DS 1600-1601.
- ¹ Cf. St. Thomas Aquinas, *STb* III, 65, 1.
- ³ Paul VI, apostolic constitution, *Divinae consortium naturae*: AAS 63 (1971) 657; cf. RCIA Introduction 1-2.
- ⁴⁰ Cf. Council of Trent (1547): DS 1609.
- ¹⁷¹ *SC* 60; cf. CIC, can. 1166; CCEO, can. 867.
- ¹⁷⁴ *SC* 61.
- ¹⁸⁰ Cf. John Paul II, *CT* 54.
- ¹⁸¹ CELAM, Third General Conference (Puebla, 1979), Final Document, § 448 (tr. NCCB, 1979); cf. Paul VI, *EN* 48.
- ¹⁷⁷ Cf. CIC, can. 1172.
- ¹⁷⁶ Cf. *Mk* 1:25-26; 3:15; 6:7, 13; 16:17.
- ¹⁹⁰ Cf. *OCF* 57.
- ¹⁹² St. Simeon of Thessalonica, *De ordine sepulturæ*. 336: PG 155, 684.

