



THE SACRAMENTS

*“He will glorify Me, for He will take of what is Mine and declare it to you”
(John 16:14, 15).*

Our Lord Jesus Christ, on the eve of His suffering and redeeming sacrifice on the Cross for the salvation of the world, prayed saying, “...that they may be one as We are” (*John 17:11*). This unity with Christ and with each other in Christ’s body (compare *Ephesians 1:22-23; Colossians 1:18*), occurs in a mystery. It is not just a mental state or a way of behaving. This type of unity is not one of human understanding that relates to some people having a common goal or beliefs. It is a mystery that unifies each of us to our Lord Jesus Christ and thus with each other.

HE IS SALVATION

This becomes important since our salvation depends on this unity with Christ and becoming one in His Body. The Holy Bible is very clear that our Lord Jesus Christ IS Salvation. He does not just teach us about salvation or give us directions – HE IS SALVATION. When Simeon the Elder held Christ in his arms, he said, “... **for my eyes have seen Your salvation...**” (*Luke 2:30*). Isaiah the prophet also writes, “For YAH, the Lord, is my strength and song; He also has become my salvation” (*Isaiah 12:2*; compare *Psalms 118:14*). Therefore, we pray and confess this faith that Christ is our Salvation in the Holy Week Doxology, “Thine is the power..... my Lord Jesus Christ, my good Savior; the Lord, Who is Holy, is my strength, my praise, and **has become my salvation**”.

HE IS THE WAY, THE TRUTH, AND THE LIFE. “I am the way, the truth, and the life. NO ONE comes to the Father except through Me” (*John 14:6*). So for any person to be saved, that person must become ONE WITH CHRIST.

For example, how can the Cross be salvation for me unless I become unified with Christ Who died for me on the Cross? Or how would I ever have resurrection unto life unless I become unified with Christ Who rose from the dead? I therefore must die with Him and rise with Him in order to be unified with Him for salvation to be fulfilled for me.

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How is this mystery of union fulfilled? Through the Holy Spirit Who acts in all of the sacraments of the Church and takes of what is Christ’s and declares it to us (*John 16:14, 15*). **The Holy Spirit transfers all the saving effect of the Cross to the believers through the sacraments.** For example:

Baptism – I am buried with Christ and risen with Him (*Rom. 6:4-5*). I become a new creation and a new temple that has put on Christ (*2Cor. 5:17, Gal. 3:27*).

Confirmation – I become a sanctified temple (*1Corinthians 3:16-17, 6:19*) sealed by and filled with the Holy Spirit in order to live a holy life that is full of good fruits that can be presented to Him in the last day (*2Cor. 1:22, Eph. 1:13, 14; 4:30*).

Eucharist – Christ abides in me and I in Him. I receive forgiveness of my sins and He grants me eternal life by becoming unified with Him Who is everlasting (*John* 6:53-58). We all become unified with each other through Him since we all partake of that one Body (*1Cor.* 10:16-17).

Repentance and Confession – The Holy Spirit cleanses me and continues to grant me life by turning me away from the sin which is death to repentance which is life (*John* 20:22-23; *James* 5:14-16).

Priesthood – Our Lord Jesus Christ gave the priesthood to the apostles by giving them the Holy Spirit in order to continue His priesthood in the Church and administer the sacraments to fulfill that union with Him (*John* 20:22-23).

Unction of the Sick – the Holy Spirit grants me forgiveness of sins and healing of body, soul, and spirit (*James* 5:14-16).

Holy Matrimony – a man and woman become one flesh through the Holy Spirit in order to sanctify their relationship and make their home an extension of the Church producing spiritual sacrifices. This is a mystery after the type of mystery of Christ's union with the Church, the body of Christ (*Mat.* 19:5, 6; *Eph.* 5:22-32).

WHAT IS A SACRAMENT?

Each of these actions of the Holy Spirit in the Church in the believers was called in Greek *mysterion* which means “mystery” with the meaning of something beyond comprehension. In the Holy Bible, the word *mysterion* is used to indicate the plan of salvation eternally hidden in God and revealed in and by Christ. However, this then takes on many meanings that are beyond the scope of the sacraments.

Mysterion was translated into Latin as *sacramentum*. “Etymologically, *sacramentum* expresses a religious thing (*sacer*); later it took on a legal nuance. The two elements (sacred and legal bond) recur in *sacramentum*, which therefore meant ‘an initiation by an oath’. It primarily designated initiation into military service, and military service itself. Employed in a baptismal context, the term simultaneously expressed enlistment into Christ's service, the oath of initiation which sealed the commitment made, and finally the initiatory rite itself, where *sacramentum* replaced the Greek *mysterion*” (Berardino, *Encyclopedia of the Early Church*, p. 751).

The word “sacrament” began to take on a more specific meaning in relation to these rites of the Church and the action of the Holy Spirit through them. St. Ambrose gives a definition for baptism that could be applied for any sacrament: “the neophyte has seen all that can be seen with human eyes, but not all that has been produced. Now that which is not seen is much greater than that which is seen and which is temporal, because that which is not seen is eternal” (*De sacr.* I, 4; quoted in Berardino, *Encyclopedia of the Early Church*, p. 750). With this same understanding, the early Christian writers described the sacraments as **“efficacious signs” or as an invisible grace that occurs through something visible.**

For example, baptism is the new, spiritual, birth that occurs as a result of the action of the Holy Spirit on the water and the oil. Therefore, one is born of “water and the Spirit” (*John* 3:5). One becomes sealed and becomes a temple of the Holy Spirit through confirmation through the anointing with the Holy Myron, the laying of hands, and the breath that is given by the priest. In the Eucharist, the bread and wine become Body and Blood of Christ through the action of the Holy Spirit. It is the same principle with all of the sacraments.

THE ACTION OF THE HOLY SPIRIT IN THE SACRAMENTS:

The action of the Holy Spirit in the sacraments is a real one. So those who are baptized really receive remission of their sins and become a new creation entering into a new life (*Romans* 6:3-9; *Didasc.* II, 39, 4). St. Basil the Great assures us that water, in itself, produces nothing: the presence of the Holy Spirit is necessary (*De Spir. Sancto* 15, 35). St. Cyril of Jerusalem teaches that the invocation of the Trinity consecrates the oil and confers its efficacious power on it (*Cat. Myst.* III, 3-4). This is how one becomes born of “water and the Spirit” (*John* 3:5). Also, the bread and wine become true Body and true Blood of Christ (see *John* 6:53-58; *Matthew* 26:26-27; *Mark* 14:22-23; *Luke* 22:19-20; *1 Corinthians* 10:16; 11:23-29) through the invocation of the Holy Spirit.

THE RITES OF THE SACRAMENTS:

The use of rites in the Church, the understanding of which is termed ritual theology, is particularly important in the liturgies and prayers in the sacraments. The rites, in general, are used in the Church to express heavenly and spiritual things on a physical and external level. In the Law of Moses, it was clear that God gave specific instructions and rites for the people of Israel to follow as St. Stephen testified to, “Our fathers had the tabernacle of witness in the wilderness, as He appointed, instructing Moses to make it according to the pattern that he had seen” (*Acts* 7:44). St. Paul teaches us that these were physical representations of spiritual and heavenly things: “Then indeed, even the first covenant had ordinances of divine service and the earthly sanctuary” (*Hebrews* 9:1).

The use of different substances like water, oil, bread, wine, etc... in the various sacraments are for different reasons:

- 1) The hidden mystery that occurs through the sacrament is better sensed and appreciated. Since we are physical beings, God uses His material creation to show His work in our lives.
- 2) There is a symbolism in each of the materials used in the different sacraments that expresses the grace that occurs in the sacrament. For example, just as wheat is gathered from many different stalks and grains and wine is prepared from many different grapes and vines, so are we gathered together to be one in the Body of Christ when we partake of His Body and Blood.

ARE THE SACRAMENTS FOR ALL THE BELIEVERS?

There are some sacraments that are necessary for all the believers for salvation. These are baptism, confirmation, the eucharist, and repentance and confession. However, there are some sacraments that are specific to one group of people and not to another. The priesthood is necessary because it is by the hands of the priest, who received his authority through the Holy Spirit by way of the Church, that the sacraments occur. But the priesthood is only for those who are called (*Hebrews* 5:4) which becomes a very specific subset of the believers.

Another example is the sacrament of holy matrimony. Marriage is not for everyone, but for the family to be a holy one and live in accordance with God’s commandments, the two must become one as ordained by God. This occurs by the grace of the Holy Spirit in the sacrament of matrimony.

HOW MANY TIMES CAN THE SACRAMENTS BE PERFORMED FOR AN INDIVIDUAL?

The answer to this question differs depending on which sacrament and will be discussed in further detail as the different sacraments are discussed in upcoming lessons, God willing. Briefly, baptism and confirmation only occur once: “one Lord, one faith, one baptism” (*Ephesians* 4:5). Also the priesthood and the crowning in holy matrimony are only given once. (The second marriage is allowed in some circumstances, however, it is a permission and absolution from the Church, not a crowning.) The other sacraments, such as the Eucharist, repentance and confession, and the unction of the sick can be repeated for an individual.

THE EUCHARIST IS ASSOCIATED WITH ALL OF THE OTHER SACRAMENTS:

As was mentioned in a previous lesson and, by the grace of God, as we will study in the lesson on the sacrament of the Eucharist, the Body and Blood of Christ in every Divine Liturgy is the same sacrifice of the Cross. The effect of all the other sacraments come from that one sacrifice since it is Christ, the Lamb of God, Who carries all of the sins, difficulties, and circumstances in our lives. Therefore, the Eucharist is called the “sacrament of sacraments”.

The sacraments of baptism and confirmation precede the Eucharist and the newly baptized must take communion on the day of their baptism. The forgiveness that occurs in the sacrament of repentance and confession is an extension of the forgiveness that occurred on the Cross realized in the Eucharist. The consecration of bishops and the ordaining of priests and deacons occurs during the Divine Liturgy. The sacrament of holy matrimony in its original order should occur after the morning raising of incense and prior to the beginning of the Divine Liturgy. The unction of the sick, if prayed in association with the Divine Liturgy, should be before the beginning of the Divine Liturgy. And since this sacrament is also associated with repentance and confession and the forgiveness of sins, this forgiveness is an extension of the forgiveness that occurs through the sacrifice of the Cross.

FASTING PRECEDES ALL OF THE SACRAMENTS:

There is clear documentation in the early writers of the Church that there was a pre-baptismal fast and a fast prior to taking communion. For example, it is written in the *Didache*, the *Teaching of the Twelve Apostles*, (chap. 7): “But before baptism, let the baptizer fast, and the baptismal candidate, and whoever else can. But you will order the baptismal candidate to fast one or two days before [the baptism]”. These are twice prescribed in the *Canons of Hippolytus* (d. 236 A.D.) for the candidates and others (*ERE*, vol. 5, p. 768). It is also mentioned in the *Canons of Hippolytus* that no one is to taste anything before receiving the mysteries (i.e. the Body and Blood of Christ), especially on the days of the sacred fast (*ibid.*).

Moreover, since all of the sacraments are associated with the Eucharist, then fasting should precede all of them. The only exception to this rule is the sacrament of repentance of confession since the door for repentance is open to all people at all times.

By the grace of God, we will discuss the sacraments individually in subsequent lessons.



REFERENCES:

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- 4) Ishak, Fr. Shenouda Maher (formerly Ishak, Dr. Emile Maher), *The Stages of Salvation*, Al- amba Ruweis, 1997.
- 5) *ERE = Encyclopedia of Religion and Ethics*, ed. Hastings, J. (12 vols. and index, 1908-26).
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QUESTION:

How can one best explain that the sacraments are necessary for salvation?