

Sacraments

Introduction

The sacraments constitute our life in Christ. We cannot be truly Christian if we treat them merely as mechanical rituals or as optional extras of the Faith.

Purpose of Sacraments

The main purpose of the sacraments is to impart to the believer the life of Christ. Through the sacraments, God shares His life with us, frees us from sin and death and bestows on us immortality. As the Paschal troparion says, “and to those in the tombs bestowing life.”

The Kingdom of God now becomes accessible to us through the sacraments.

How Many?

Customarily, in the Orthodox Church we speak of Seven Sacraments, although we must note that this is not fixed but an influence from Roman Catholicism via the Russian Orthodox Church in the 17th Century. The Fathers never bothered to define the sacraments, much less to offer comprehensive lists of them, for the most part. Why? The reality of a sacrament (like the reality of the Church, the Faith, Salvation...etc) was too rich and overwhelming. It could be described (and they often did describe it), but never defined. The Orthodox Church Fathers themselves disagreed as to the actual number. Some said two, some six, some ten, and there were even those who said seven, but differed among themselves as to what constituted that seven. Many other sacramental acts, such as the Blessing of Waters at Theophany, the Monastic Tonsure, the Burial Service, and the Blessing of Any Object, for example, possess the same criteria as the earlier definition of sacrament. In any case, the number seven has no absolute dogmatic significance in our Orthodox Theology, but is used only for teaching convenience.

Definition

A Sacrament is an outward, public/corporate act in which the grace of the Holy Spirit is mysteriously and inwardly present, transfiguring the material world.

The word “Sacrament” comes from the Latin “Sacramentum.” It means: something holy, a consecrated thing or act.

When talking about the Sacraments, it is probably more accurate to talk about the Church’s rituals and corporate actions. This is why we can’t really limit them to just 7. Rather than using the word “Sacrament” exclusively, the Orthodox Church speaks about the “Mysteries” of the Church and the Mystical Life in the Church, or as is otherwise known as the Liturgical-Sacramental Life in the Church. The term “Mysteries” is from the Greek word “mysterion.” A “mystery” of the Church is not so-called because it is mysterious in the sense of being incomprehensible and hard to understand.

A “mystery” as the Church uses the word is not about something which Christians cannot understand, but about something that Christians do understand, at least experientially. The element of mystification is for the world, not for Christians. A

Mystery is therefore a truth revealed only to the initiated, or in Christian terms, to the baptized. The outsiders don't "get it." We insiders do.

The reason why sacraments/mysteries are essentially congregational in their performance is that they are acts of the risen Christ. He is the one who bestows rebirth in baptism, and pours out His Holy Spirit through the blessed oil in Chrismation. He is the one who feeds us with His Body and Blood and offers forgiveness in the Eucharist. He is the one who by His Spirit gives men the ability to function as bishops, presbyters, and deacons when prayerful episcopal hands are laid on the candidate. All sacramental life comes solely from Him. And He has pledged His Presence to the Church when they gather together in His Name, even if the gathering is as small as two or three (Matthew 18: 20).

This is not to deny that He remains with His faithful people even when they are alone, but He promises a special kind of Presence when they gather together in obedience to His command. It is when Christ is present in this way that He acts to save and to transform. Thus all the Church's sacraments are corporate in nature.

This is why you cannot find sacramental healing by placing your hand on the television set (when people watch televangelists), nor have Holy Communion when alone in your house, even if you do have bread and wine (or more likely, bread and grape juice) on hand. We need to gather together in a single assembly to have Church and to experience the Church's sacraments. After all, "assembly" is what the word "church" (Greek: *ekklesia*) really means.

Who Can Receive?

Only Orthodox Christians may receive the sacraments (except for Baptism obviously as an initiation rite). This is sometimes misinterpreted as an exclusion of non-Orthodox. However, the tradition and practice stems from the deep conviction that sharing in the sacraments is essentially connected with membership of the Church.

What are the Sacraments of the Orthodox Church?

The Sacraments, as they are traditionally numbered, are:

1. Baptism
2. Chrismation
3. The Holy Eucharist
4. Repentance (Confession & Absolution)
5. Ordination
6. Matrimony
7. Anointing of the Sick

Baptism

First place among the Sacraments of the Orthodox Church is occupied by Holy Baptism, by which a person, who has come to believe in Christ, by being immersed three times in holy water in the Name of the Holy Trinity (Father, Son and Holy Spirit), is cleansed through Divine Grace of all sins and is reborn into a new holy, and spiritual life. This Baptism serves as the door through which we enter into the Body of Christ, the Church. Without it, we cannot be united completely with the Savior, become a member of His Church, receive the other Sacraments, and be the

heir to Eternal Life. As the Lord Himself said, in His conversation with Nicodemus, "Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the Kingdom of God (John 3:5)."

The Sacrament of Holy Baptism was instituted by Our Lord after His resurrection, when He appeared to His disciples and said, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to Me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you; and behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age (Matt. 28:18-20)." The necessity of this baptism was further stressed by the Savior when He said to them, "He who believes and is baptized will be saved; but he who does not believe will be condemned (Mark 16:16)." The Lord Himself also submitted to baptism by St John the Baptist. Not that He needed to be baptized, but to provide the example for us and also so that He could sanctify the waters and all creation Himself.

Chrismation

was established in apostolic times. In the early Church every newly-baptized Christian received a blessing and the gift of the Holy Spirit through the laying on of hands by an apostle or a bishop. The *Book of Acts* relates how Peter and John laid hands on women from Samaria so that they could receive the Holy Spirit, 'for it had not yet fallen on any of them, but they had only been baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus (Acts 8:16).' In apostolic times, the descent of the Holy Spirit was occasionally accompanied by visible and tangible manifestations of grace: like the apostles at Pentecost, people would begin to speak in unfamiliar tongues, to prophesy and work miracles.

The laying on of hands was a continuation of Pentecost in that it communicated the gifts of the Holy Spirit. In later times, by virtue of the increased number of Christians, it was impossible for everyone to meet a bishop; so the laying on of hands was substituted by Chrismation. In the Orthodox Church Chrismation is administered by a priest, yet the myrrh is prepared by a bishop. Myrrh is boiled from various elements. In contemporary practice only the head of an autocephalous Church (the Patriarch, Metropolitan or Archbishop) has the right to consecrate myrrh, thus conveying the episcopal blessing to all those who become members of the Church.

Through anointing we receive the 'seal of the gift of the Holy Spirit.' As Fr Alexander Schmemmann explains, this is not the same as the various 'gifts' of the Holy Spirit, but the Holy Spirit Himself, Who is communicated to the person as a gift. Christ spoke of this gift to the disciples at the Last Supper: 'And I will pray to the Father, and He will give you another Comforter, to be with you forever: the Spirit of truth (John 14:16-17).' Through Chrismation we become children of God, for the Holy Spirit is the 'grace of adoption as children.'

Communion – Holy Eucharist

Holy Communion takes place during the Divine Liturgy. The Divine Liturgy ought to be also known as The Sacrament of Holy Communion. We attend the Divine Liturgy to receive Holy Communion. It is the central Mystery of the Church. It was established by Christ at the Last Supper in the upper room with His disciples before

He was arrested (Matthew 26: 26 – 28; Mark 14: 22 – 26; Luke 22: 15 – 20; John 12 & 13).

Holy Communion consists of bread and wine which were and still are the basic food and drink produced by manual labour in the Mediterranean region. Jesus used these because they were readily available and suitable symbols of His Body and Blood.

When praying during the Divine Liturgy, the priest with the people pray that the bread and wine become the Body and Blood of Christ while outwardly they remain unchanged.

Receiving Holy Communion is the most holy event and important event in the life of an Orthodox Christian. It is not intended to be an emotional experience, but a realistic acceptance of Christ's words, "Whoever eats My flesh and drinks My blood lives in Me and I in him (John 6: 56)." In this way there is a deep sense of unity with Christ.

Confession

is the sacrament of repentance: a change of heart and mind leading to forgiveness and healing. It is based on Christ's promise to His disciples: "If you forgive the sins of any they are forgiven (John 20: 22)."

True repentance means a movement towards healing. The penitent turns away from 'having missed the mark' (the definition of 'sin' in Greek: harmatia) and towards the goal of the Kingdom of God.

The sacrament involves examining relationships with God and with other people, and seeking ways to improve. It is more than a dialogue between priest and penitent: the Holy Spirit is present in a mysterious way.

Marriage

One of Christ's first miracles that He performed took place while He was invited at a wedding feast in Cana of Galilee. When He turned the water into wine.

Through the sacrament of marriage two persons, a man and a woman, "become one flesh (Ephesians 5: 31)" yet also keep their individuality. They offer their coming together to be blessed by the Body of Christ, the Church, and taken into the Kingdom, because through Christ, love can become complete.

The blessing of the marriage is only the beginning of the sacrament, which the couple continues to develop during their entire life together.

The husband and wife are king and queen of their household and of their house-church. This is one of the symbolisms of wearing crowns during the sacrament. The crowns are also reminders that marriage involves denying oneself for the other. So the crowns are also crowns of the martyrs and show that the couple are to be witnesses (martyrs) to Christ.

Unction – Anointing with Oil

“Are any of you sick? Let them call for the presbyters (elders, priests) of the Church and let them pray over them, anointing them with oil in the name of the Lord (James 5: 14).”

Oil has always been a symbol of healing and reconciliation. Anointing with oil is an act of spiritual healing which prepares the way for physical, bodily healing.

Non-recovery is not viewed as a ‘failure.’ The primary purpose of this sacrament is reconciliation with God and therefore spiritual healing. Our life is in God’s hands, not our own.

Unction may be administered any time, not just on one’s death-bed as a “last rites.”

Seven Epistles and Gospels are read during the service (sometimes with a bishop and six priests), after which the person is anointed on the forehead, face, chest, and hands. Afterwards the open Gospel book is placed on the penitents head and a prayer of absolution is read.

Ordination

is the putting on of Christ, taking on a task for which some are specially chosen: “You did not choose Me, but I chose you (John 15: 16).” In the Orthodox Church, ordination takes place within the apostolic succession (ordinations can be traced back in spiritual-ancestral lineage all the way back to the apostles themselves), and within the living continuity of a worshipping community (the Orthodox Church).

All ordinations are conducted by a bishop, though the spiritual gift of ordination comes through the Holy Spirit.

The highest degrees of priesthood are bishop, priest, and deacon.

Deacon

The name comes from the Greek ‘diakonos’ which means servant, and the deacon is there to serve the clergy and the people. He does not perform the sacraments independently, but acts as the assistant and as a go-between of the main part of the church (the nave) and the sanctuary. Deacons in the early Church, and today, have a ministry to the people, serving especially those unable to come to church such as the sick, the elderly and the needy.

Priest

A priest is ordained by a single bishop to look after a parish or a monastery, since a single bishop is unable to oversee and manage all parishes and monasteries. The priest also celebrates the Divine Liturgy (in place of the bishop, and with the bishop’s blessing) and other sacraments except ordination. Only bishops can perform ordinations.

Bishop

The highest degree of priesthood. A bishop oversees the affairs of the diocese and is the shepherd of its priests and people. A bishop is ordained by 3 other bishops and

in exceptional circumstances by 2. A bishop is never ordained by a single bishop alone.

Other Sacraments not officially included in the list of Seven

Funerals

Monastic Tonsure

Consecration of Churches

Consecration of Myrrh

House Blessings

Making the Sign of the Cross

Venerating Icons (Making Icons)

The Blessing of Water, Oil, Cars, Planes, Boats, Farm Animals, Bee Hives...

Consecration of Emperors, Kings...etc

Prayer (before and after meals, upon rising from sleep or before sleeping...)

Everything that we do in our lives which are supposed to be for the Glory of God and for our salvation. Breathing!