

## Rituals and Sacraments

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It is difficult to open a book of systematic theology and not find reference to “the seven sacraments,” often capitalized for greater effect: The Seven Sacraments. They take their place in a list of other enumerated realities—the Seven Deadly Sins, the Seven Virtues, the Seven Corporal Works of Mercy, the Seven Spiritual Works of Mercy, the Seven Gifts of the Holy Spirit. They don’t all come in groups of seven. The list also knows of the Four Cardinal Virtues and the Three Theological Virtues. It is all very organized and tidy, like things filed neatly in a large drawer. Each of the Seven Sacraments can be further analyzed into three further parts, each Sacrament having the proper Form, the proper Matter, and the proper Intention. All three must be present, the systematic theology texts tell us, for the sacrament to be a real sacrament. Like I said, it is all very tidy.

Too tidy, in fact, because the Church bestows life from Christ, and life is never that tidy. If, as the proverb goes, a tidy desk is the sign of a cluttered mind, I suggest that a tidy theology is a sign of a church that has lost its way among the clutter of the world—or at least is guilty of a serious reductionism, for truly abundant life resists analysis.

Take for example, something as common as one’s love for one’s wife. If a husband tried to reduce his relationship with his spouse to The Seven Forms of Love, he would be guilty of reducing something rich to something immeasurably poorer. He would also probably spend a lot of time sleeping on the couch.

That is perhaps why the Fathers never bothered to define a sacrament, much less to offer a comprehensive list of them. Come to that, they never bothered defining the Church either, and for the same reason—the reality was too rich and overwhelming. It could be described (and they often did describe it), but never defined, so that one looks in vain for a clear and comprehensive Ecclesiology in the Fathers of the kind that could later be found among the Scholastics, the Reformers, and the Counter-Reformers. This omission is significant. The theologies of the Fathers were untidy, because they were true.

So, the first thing one must say about the sacraments from an Orthodox perspective is that one cannot properly speak about The Seven Sacraments as the West has traditionally spoken about them. We can talk about baptism, and the Eucharist, and ordination, and anointing, and marriage, and confession, and burial, and tonsuring into monasticism, and blessing Holy Water, and many, many other things. The one thing we can’t do is reduce it all to a tidy system, so that what applies to one ritual reality applies to them all.

Perhaps less misleading than talk about the Seven Sacraments is talk about the Church’s rituals and corporate actions. The Greek term for these is “the mysteries”, 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 Agatha Christie uses the word, is indeed a story about something we do not understand or know—such as whodunit. There are lots of characters in these mysteries, and no one knows at the outset who the villain of the piece is. His identity is thus “a mystery,” and we don’t find out until the last few pages that it was Colonel Mustard in the library with the lead pipe.

But 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 the Christians. In that sense, the Gospel itself is a mystery (see

Romans 16:25), for it is something the wisdom of which is opaque to the unbelieving world, but revealed and accepted by the Christians. A mystery is therefore a truth revealed only to the initiated—or, in Christians terms, to the baptized. The outsiders don't "get it." We insiders do.

These mysteries are rituals, but they are not just any rituals. One could, I suppose, use the term to describe a private ritual or practice, such as crossing oneself or saying the Lord's Prayer, and St. Augustine, for example, does use the Latin term *sacramentum* in just this way. But in this article, I use the term "sacrament" to refer to rituals of the Church that are done corporately and congregationally. Thus, in this definition, baptism is a *mysterion* and a *sacramentum*; saying the Lord's Prayer in one's private devotions is not.

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. Regardless of what certain television evangelists suggest, you cannot find sacramental healing by placing your hand on the television set, 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. Even drive-in churches (remember them?) are "iffy." One needs 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.

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