

SACRAMENTAL PREPARATION

GENERAL INTRODUCTION



Sacraments, as the *Baltimore Catechism* said, are “outward signs” of the living presence of God (grace). Christ then is the first sacrament. In Christ, we come face to face with God (Col. 1:15), and Christ is the living Word of God (Jn 1:1).

The Church exists to further the Reign of God as proclaimed by Christ. The Church is the Body of Christ continued in time. In this sense then, the Church is the Sacrament of Christ; it makes the presence of Christ both visible and touchable. In thinking about the nature of

sacramental preparation, these two realities (an encounter with God and the Church’s mission) must be kept uppermost in mind.

Each sacramental experience is a celebration of an encounter with the God of life. In Christ, all are sons and daughters of God. Preparation for sacraments must begin by developing the awareness that sons and daughters of God can approach God to receive things needed. Each person who presents themselves for sacraments in the Church needs to be enabled to develop the proper disposition (attitudes/openness). The proper disposition changes for each sacrament but the function of any good preparation program is to help people, especially children, develop the disposition necessary for an encounter with God.

The dispositions desired for the Sacrament of Penance are self-awareness and contrition in an environment of loving acceptance. Catholicism demands that we walk a very fine line. This line is the difference between guilt and shame. Catholicism is always interested in the reality of guilt because to believe in a just God is to believe that God cares about how we conduct our lives. When our lives fail to live up to our calling than feelings of guilt are both appropriate and healthy.

Catholicism however, has no interest in shame. Shame is an essential humiliation, whether self imposed or imposed by others, which causes a person to believe that they “are” bad as opposed to having “done” something bad. Some Christian denominations do not make this distinction. It is essential for Catholic educators because Catholics believe that creation is essentially good and that we are never far from the love of God (think Prodigal Son). Leading people to an awareness of their poor choices (whether serious or not) is the medicine of growth. Setting someone on a path of humiliation leads only to destruction.

SACRAMENTAL PREPARATION, CONT'D

Another important responsibility is to avoid an overly individualistic approach to this Sacrament. It is certainly true that my omissions and my commissions are in fact mine, and I need to own them. It is equally true that we are a covenant people and therefore tied to one another. The consequences of my sin are not just mine alone - something between me and God. Sin can become embedded in the life of a community and it is our responsibility to root out sin wherever we find it. Racism, sexism militarism are all forms of sin in which I may personally participate but they are also examples of sin that have sewn themselves into the fabric of a community's life. This notion of social sin is very difficult for young children to grasp but needs to be nurtured as children grow toward adulthood. This sense of the social nature of sin helps to avoid an overly self-centered understanding of our relationship to God. This is especially difficult in the American culture because we highly prize "individualism."

The dispositions required for the proper reception of Eucharist would include but not be limited to the following: reverence, thankfulness and graciousness. The disposition of reverence suggests that the person is aware that what is going on in the Eucharist is bigger than them as an individual. This is a sacred encounter and reverence demands humility (God is present in this and I am not God); respect (a recognition that what I am being given is to be honored) and openness (a willingness to open myself to the movement of God in my life).

These elements of reverence can lead us to an attitude of thankfulness. Thankfulness is the awareness that everything that is happening is a gift and as a gift it is neither deserved nor warranted. God does not need to love us but in fact does; Jesus did not have to offer us salvation but gave his life for it; and if that is not in itself enough God continues to support our efforts through the work of the Holy Spirit. If we are open to all that God has done and is continuing to do in our lives it calls us to be thankful.

The awareness that we are so gifted by God is in itself the challenge to live as God lives for us. We are called to become God's gift in the world offering his love to all those who are in need. We are to live gracious lives which reflect God's loving generosity.

SACRAMENTAL PREPARATION, CONT'D

The Sacrament of Confirmation is one of the sacraments identified by the Church as leading to full discipleship in Christ. **Confirmation, as currently celebrated in the Diocese of Erie, requires two key dispositions.** The first disposition could be described as an attitude of “Yes” or affirmation. This affirmation is about both the past and the future. The Confirmation candidate must first acknowledge that they have been on a journey of faith largely directed by the love of their parent(s)/guardians. This affirmation acknowledges the gift of faith that has been sown in their life by those who love them and at the same time offers an affirmation to continue the journey of faith into the future. This affirmation does not need to romanticize the past as perfect or to project some ideal future that may or may not happen. It only needs to offer an honest openness to the faith received and the possibility of continuing growth as a disciple.

The second disposition, because Confirmation is celebrated in the 11th grade, is a genuine sense of personal ownership for their journey. Again, because the sacrament is being celebrated with young adults there is no expectation that this possession of the faith is somehow complete or final only that living the life of faith is now to some degree their choice. The candidate should be able to express that they intend to live out their Baptism and take some rightful role in the Church’s ministry based on their giftedness and the needs of the community.

Finally, it must be kept in mind that all sacraments are for the mission of the church. We are continually called to celebrate the presence of God in order to make the Reign of God both real and visible. Preparation programs then must help people, especially children, understand that once baptized, all are responsible to make Christ present. Each sacramental encounter in life is about how to become better outward signs of Christ in the world. The proper mission of the laity in the Church is to take Christ out into the marketplace so that all of life is transformed.

Sacramental preparation programs should evaluate their effectiveness against whether these particular dispositions are apparent and obvious. While information is certainly necessary to form appropriate dispositions (why would you be thankful if you know nothing of what God is doing in your life) they are more related to practices and habits than knowledge. One must develop the habits of self-awareness and graciousness not merely understand that they are important. Our assessment of readiness for sacraments must include dispositions and not just information.