



Seven Rivers by Joe Sixpack

A certain holy monk was taken in a dream by his guardian angel and shown a vast plain covered with many cities and men. On one side of the plain a rushing spring of water came forth from a hillside, and divided into seven clear streams, which flowed down into the plain. At the other side of the plain another fountain rushed up from a dark cave, and also spread out into seven streams.

He watched the streams that came from the cave and saw many people drinking eagerly from their waters, as the waters were sweet to taste. Soon after drinking the water, though, these people were seized with violent pains and vomiting, and many died.

“That is the plain of Self-Will,” said the angel. “And its seven poisonous streams and the seven deadly sins. Now look across the plain to where the seven rivers of life take their rise from the hill of Calvary.”

The seven rivers of life were not so sweet to the taste, but they had great powers. The sick who drank from them were healed, the old were being made young again, the ugly became beautiful, and in some of the rivers the dead were being brought back to life.

The seven poisonous rivers are the seven capital sins: pride, avarice, lust, envy, gluttony, anger and sloth. The seven rivers coming from Calvary are the sacraments: Baptism, Confirmation, Holy Eucharist, Penance (Confession), Anointing of the Sick, Holy Orders and Holy Matrimony. “The sacraments are perceptible signs (words and actions) accessible to our human nature. By the action of Christ and the power of the Holy Spirit they make present efficaciously the grace they signify.”¹

All seven sacraments were instituted by Christ, and all can have their basis demonstrated in Sacred Scripture. Over succeeding weeks, we are going to take a look at each sacrament individually. The reason I want to devote the time to this is, most of us take the sacraments for granted because we tend to forget what we were taught about them. As the old adage goes, if you don’t use it you lose it. And the sacraments are the very life giving blood flow of the Church. Without the sacraments we would all be doomed. They are as important to our spiritual life and eternal life as air, food, and water are to physical life. So for this installment of our column we will simply look at an overview of the sacraments and all that they have in common.

All of the sacraments either give or increase sanctifying grace, depending on the sacrament and the state of one’s soul at the time of reception. Sanctifying grace is best described as “God’s life in us”. In other words, one cannot get to heaven without sanctifying grace. If one dies with the absence of sanctifying grace in the soul, one goes to an eternity in hell. Sanctifying grace *cannot* be acquired after death in purgatory, because there are no second chances after death...and death never announces itself before it comes. Being in possession of sanctifying grace is to be in a *state of grace*. Not having sanctifying grace is to be in a *state of mortal sin*. Being in a state of grace is

¹ *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 1084.

absolutely necessary in order to receive Confirmation, Holy Eucharist, Holy Orders and Matrimony. The state of grace is ordinarily necessary for the Anointing of the Sick, if the recipient is conscious. Not being in a state of grace when receiving these sacraments is a sacrilege, which is a mortal sin that places that person in jeopardy of hell.

The sacraments are grouped into three separate categories: the sacraments of initiation, the sacraments of reconciliation, and the sacraments of vocation. As we look at this, we can easily see the Divine Logic behind the seven sacraments.

The sacraments of initiation are Baptism, Confirmation, and the Holy Eucharist. They are called sacraments of initiation because they are the sacraments through which we begin the Christian life.

The sacraments of reconciliation are Penance and the Anointing of the Sick. They're called sacraments of reconciliation because they reconcile us to God. The primary work of the Anointing of the Sick is to bring spiritual healing to the soul and often also the natural healing of the body.

The sacraments of vocation are Holy Orders and Holy Matrimony. They are vocational sacraments because the priestly state and the married state are life-long vocational commitments. (Isn't it nice to know that being married is the longest job you've ever had?)

Some of the sacraments can only be received once; Baptism, Confirmation, and Holy Orders, because they place an indelible mark (called a *character*) on the soul. This character is visible to God, His angels and saints in heaven, and the demons. Indeed, the mark of Christ mentioned in Revelation is the character on the soul from these sacraments, as opposed to the mark of the beast mentioned in the same book.

There are two elements necessary to constitute a true sacrament: *matter* and *form*. Matter is some sensible, concrete thing or action. Examples would be the water in Baptism or the bread and wine in the Holy Eucharist. Form refers to the essential words used by the minister of the sacrament. Examples here would be "This is my Body" in the Holy Eucharist, or "I absolve you from your sins" in Penance. Both the matter and the form must be used at the same time and by the same minister.

The minister of the sacrament is a person who has received from Jesus the authority to act for Him in giving that particular sacrament. The *ordinary* minister of a sacrament is usually a priest, which includes a bishop. Sometimes the ordinary minister can be a priest or a deacon. In Holy Orders the ordinary minister is always and only a bishop. In the case of Matrimony the ordinary minister is, believe it or not, the couple being married. There can be an *extraordinary* minister in the case of Baptism, but only under...you guessed it, extraordinary circumstances.

The effectiveness of a sacrament *is not* dependent upon the holiness of the minister. This is because the sacraments work *ex opere operato*; that is, by the work performed. The only limiting factor to the measure of grace Jesus imparts through a sacrament is the disposition of the person receiving the sacrament.

I try to keep this column interesting and exciting for those who have an active interest in our holy and ancient faith. I realize this installment fails to meet my goal, but this one is necessary to help the next several articles make more sense. This is done to help you know What We Believe...Why We Believe It.

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