

Why do Catholics believe in seven sacraments, while Protestants believe in only two? Exactly what is a sacrament, and what does it do for a person?

Catholics believe in seven sacraments because Christ instituted seven; because the Apostles and Church Fathers believed in seven; because the second Ecumenical Council of Lyons (1274) defined seven; and because the Ecumenical Council of Trent (1545-1563) confirmed seven. In short, the enumeration, seven, arises from the perpetual tradition of Christian belief--which explains why that enumeration is accepted not only by Catholics, but by all of the other ancient and semi-ancient Christian communities--Egyptian Coptic, Ethiopian Monophysite, Syrian Jacobite, Greek Orthodox and Russian Orthodox.

To understand what a sacrament is, and what it does for a person, one must know the correct, the traditional Christian, definition of a sacrament. Properly defined, a sacrament is ``an outward sign instituted by Christ to give grace" (holiness) to the soul . . . that is to say, it is a divinely prescribed ceremony of the Church in which the words and action combine to form what is at the same time both a sign of divine grace and a fount of divine grace. When this special grace--distinct from ordinary, inspirational grace--is imparted to the soul, the Holy Spirit of God is imparted to the soul, imbuing the soul with divine life, uniting the soul to Christ.

As the Scriptures point out, this grace is the grace of salvation--without it man is, in a very real sense, isolated from Christ. And as the Scriptures point out, Christ gave His Church seven sacraments to serve as well-springs of this ineffable, soul-saving grace, the grace which flows from His sacrifice on Calvary:

BAPTISM--the sacrament of spiritual rebirth through which we are made children of God and heirs of Heaven: ``Amen, amen I say to thee, unless a man be born again of water and the Holy Ghost, he cannot enter into the kingdom of God." (John 3:5. Also see Acts 2:38, Rom. 6:2-6).

CONFIRMATION--the sacrament which confers the Holy Spirit to make us strong and perfect Christians and soldiers of Jesus Christ: ``Now when the apostles, who were in Jerusalem, had heard that Samaria had received the word of God, they sent unto them Peter and John. Who, when they were come, prayed for them, that they might receive the Holy Ghost.... Then they laid their hands upon them, and they received the Holy Ghost." (Acts 8:14-17. Also see Acts 19:6).

The **EUCCHARIST**--the sacrament, also known as Holy Communion, which nourishes the soul with the true Flesh and Blood, Soul and Divinity of Jesus, under the appearance, or sacramental veil, of bread and wine: `` And whilst they were eating, Jesus took bread; and blessing, broke, and gave to them, and said: Take ye. This is my body. And having taken the chalice, giving thanks, he gave it to them. And they all drank of it. And he said to them: This is my blood of the new testament, which shall be shed for many." (Mark 14:22-24. Also see Matt. 26:26-28, Luke 22:19-20, John 6:52-54, 1 Cor. 10:16).

PENANCE--the sacrament, also known as Confession, through which Christ forgives sin and restores the soul to grace: `` Receive ye the Holy Ghost. Whose sins you shall forgive, they are forgiven them; and whose sins you shall retain, they are retained. " (John 20:22-23. Also see Matt. 18:18).

EXTREME UNCTION--the sacrament, sometimes called the Last Anointing, which strengthens the sick and sanctifies the dying: `` Is any man sick among you? Let him bring in the priests of the church, and let them pray over him, anointing him with oil in the name of the Lord . . . and if he be in sins, they shall be forgiven him." (James 5:14-15. Also see Mark 6:12-13).

HOLY ORDERS--the sacrament of ordination which empowers priests to offer the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass, administer the sacraments, and officiate over all the other proper affairs of the Church: `` For every high priest taken from among men, is ordained for men in the things that appertain to God, that he may offer up gifts and sacrifices for sins.... Neither doth any man take the honor to himself, but he that is called by God, as Aaron was." (Heb. 5:1-4. Also see Acts 20:28, 1 Tim. 4:14). Also: `` And taking bread, he gave thanks, and broke; and gave to them, saying: This is my body, which is given for you. Do this for a commemoration of me." (Luke 22:19).

MATRIMONY--the sacrament which unites a man and woman in a holy and indissoluble bond: `` For this cause shall a man leave father and mother, and shall cleave to his wife, and they two shall be in one flesh. Therefore now they are not two, but one flesh. What therefore God hath joined together, let no man put asunder." (Matt. 19:5-6. Also see Mark 10:7-9, Eph. 5:22-32).

There you have it, the Word of Christ and the example of the Apostles attesting both to the validity and the efficacy of the seven Sacraments of the Catholic Church. In truth, every one of them is an integral part of Christ's plan for man's eternal salvation.

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The Augustine Club

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