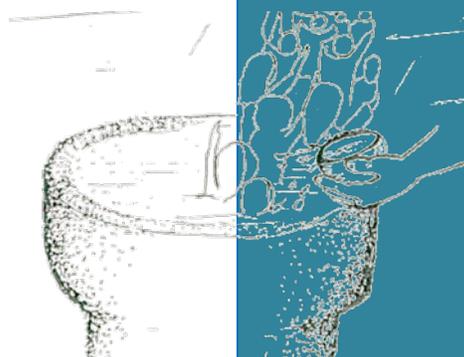
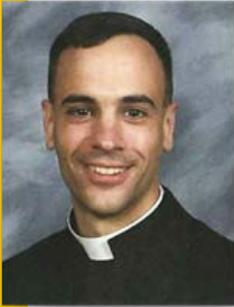


# Sacraments



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## *Information about the author*

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Father Marques began his theological studies for priesthood in 2000 at the Catholic University of America located in Washington, DC. He was ordained as a priest in the Catholic Diocese of Richmond in 2006.

From 2006 to 2008, Father Marques served as the vicar at Blessed Sacrament parish in Harrisonburg, Virginia. In 2008, he was administrator and then the parish priest at Saint Timothy parish in Tappahannock, Virginia. In 2011, he was assigned as parish priest at Sacred Heart parish in Danville, Virginia.

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By Father Anthony Marques  
Special to The Catholic Virginian

We Are Being Saved:  
the Seven Sacraments of the Church

When Catholics are asked the dreaded question — “Are you saved?” — the answer must be this: “We are being saved.”

Two grammatical changes in the reply are necessary. First, the pronoun “I” must become “we,” since salvation is always through the Church. For the Church is the “assembly” of those who believe in Christ (Hebrews 12:23), who live according to his teaching, who are strengthened by his power, and who are thereby saved (*Catechism of the Catholic Church*, nos. 751, 759, 771). While Vatican Council II teaches that someone can be saved without formally belonging to the Catholic Church, nevertheless that person is joined to the Catholic Church in some way (*Catechism of the Catholic Church*, nos. 836, 838–843, 847–848).

Second, the present tense of the verb “to be” (“am”) must be shifted into the progressive tense (“being”). This is because salvation is the continuous process of responding to God’s grace. It is not a one-time event in our lives. Thus, for example, St. Paul writes that, “The message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God” (1 Corinthians 1:18). Salvation is completed only when our lives have been completed. For this reason, the Church teaches that at the moment of death we must be found in the grace of God in order to go to heaven (*Catechism of the Catholic Church*, nos. 1023, 1989–1996, 2000–2003).

The key aspects of the Catholic view of salvation are at work in the seven sacraments. These encounters with God in the Church lead Catholics along the path to eternal life. Each sacrament enables a person to experience the event of salvation: the “Paschal Mystery” or Death and Resurrection of Jesus Christ (*Catechism of the Catholic Church*, nos. 1084, 1088, 1090, 1129–1130).

The Acts of the Apostles provides a good illustration of the process of salvation. There, after the descent of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost, the Church begins to celebrate the sacraments: “Every day they devoted themselves to meeting together in the temple area and to breaking bread in their homes. ...And every day the Lord added to their number those who were being saved” (2:46–47) (*Catechism of the Catholic Church*, no. 1076).

As Catholics, we generally know that the sacraments are important. Many are milestones in our lives, which we celebrate with fanfare, but we do not always know why they are important. This series of articles will explain the significance of the sacraments. The articles are not meant to provide a systematic instruction — we have the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* for that — but rather to address particular items of interest or concern.

This article will explain the role of the sacraments in salvation. According to the *Catechism*, “The seven sacraments touch all the stages and all the important moments of Christian life: they give birth and increase, healing and mission to the Christian’s life of faith” (no. 1210).

The setting for the “life of faith” is the Church, where we meet God most profoundly. This understanding contrasts sharply with an attitude prevalent in our society: “I’m spiritual but not religious.” For Catholics, spirituality is religion; our most important encounters with God — the sacraments — take place in the Church.

A remarkable passage in the New Testament shows that Christ’s saving work continues in the Church. According to the Passion narrative of the Gospel of John, “One soldier thrust his lance into his side, and immediately blood and water flowed out” (19:34).

John’s point is that the Paschal Mystery has “overflowed” into the Church: Water and blood symbolize Baptism and the Eucharist. When the Church celebrates these and other sacraments, the recipients participate in the dying and rising of Christ. The “overflowing” of water and blood means that the Paschal Mystery is renewed — although never repeated — in the Church’s sacraments (*Catechism of the Catholic Church*, nos. 1104).

In the Gospel of Matthew, Christ concludes his public ministry by commissioning the Apostles. The Lord shares his power with the Twelve, who are to exercise it through the administration of Baptism (and by extension, the other sacraments): “All power 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, until the end of the age” (28:19–20).

Christ is now active in the Church; his work continues in the sacraments. We are being saved each time we receive these precious gifts.

**DISCOVERING WHAT WE DO NOT REMEMBER:  
THE TREASURE OF INFANT BAPTISM**

According to the Rite of Baptism, once parents have named their child, the priest or deacon questions them: “What do you ask of God’s Church for N.?” The typical reply is, “Baptism.” However, other responses may be used, such as, “Eternal life.”

In his encyclical letter on Christian hope, Pope Benedict XVI explains that this reply captures the goal of Baptism: “It is not...simply a welcome into the Church. The parents expect more for the one to be baptized: they expect that faith, which includes the corporeal nature of the Church and her sacraments, will give life to their child—eternal life” (*Spe salvi*, no. 10). Baptism, therefore, marks the beginning of eternal life (*Catechism of the Catholic Church*, nos. 1213, 1263).

Most Catholics are baptized as infants, and so we do not remember this momentous event. Among non-Catholics, there is sometimes confusion, misunderstanding, and even controversy surrounding the practice of baptizing infants. This article will clarify the meaning and purpose of infant Baptism, so that its inestimable value can be better appreciated.

Based on Christ’s own declaration (Mk 16:16; Jn 3:5), the Church teaches that, “Baptism is necessary for salvation for those to whom the Gospel has been proclaimed and who have had the possibility of asking for this sacrament” (*Catechism of the Catholic Church*, no. 1257). For this reason, parents have the obligation to baptize their children “in the first few weeks” after birth (*Code of Canon Law*, canon 867 § 1).

The word “baptism” means “immersion.” In this sacrament, a child is immersed into the event of salvation—the Death and Resurrection of Jesus Christ: “Or are you unaware that we who were baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? We were indeed buried with him through baptism into death, so that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might live in newness of life” (Rom 6:3–4) (*Catechism of the Catholic Church*, nos. 1214, 1227).

The practice of baptizing infants indicates the magnitude of the sacrament: It is so important that parents should give it to their children as soon as possible (*Catechism of the Catholic Church*, no. 1250). The *Catechism* notes that the earliest evidence for infant Baptism dates from the second century; however, “it is quite possible that, from the beginning of the apostolic preaching, when whole ‘households’ received baptism, infants may also have been baptized” (no. 1252; Acts 16:15, 33; 18:8; 1 Cor 1:16).

Baptism places an infant on the path to eternal life; but it is not the destination. Rather, the manifold grace of the sacrament is meant to flower in the child’s life. This requires that the child be educated in the Catholic faith, and eventually receive the other Sacraments of Christian Initiation: Confirmation and the Eucharist (*Catechism of the Catholic Church*, nos. 1213, 1231, 1233).

When we receive these sacraments—First Holy Communion around age seven, and Confirmation around age 15—we recall our own Baptism. Thus, according to the Rite of Confirmation, the bishop asks those to be confirmed to first renew their baptismal promises.

Regarding Holy Communion, we remember our Baptism by blessing ourselves with holy water upon entering the church for Mass. Then, we call it to mind again during the Creed: “I confess one Baptism for the forgiveness of sins.” Significantly, Baptism has always been tied to the profession of faith, in the New Testament (Mk 16:15–16) and throughout the history of the Church. Indeed, both the Apostles’ Creed and the Nicene Creed developed within the baptismal rite (*Catechism of the Catholic Church*, nos. 186, 189).

In the case of infant Baptism, the parents and godparents profess the faith of the Church on behalf of the child. Later, when we can recite the Creed by ourselves, we do so at every Sunday Mass. Therefore, the Creed is more than just a matter of mechanical recitation. By professing it, we come to discover the grace given to us in Baptism. We also pledge ourselves to live by that faith (*Catechism of the Catholic Church*, no. 185).

Thus, St. Paul’s exhortation to Timothy applies to us: “Compete well for the faith. Lay hold of eternal life, to which you were called when you made the noble confession in the presence of many witnesses” (1 Tm 6:12).

**CONFIRMATION:  
A SACRAMENT FOR THE NEW EVANGELIZATION**

Recently, Archbishop Charles Chaput, the archbishop of Philadelphia, said that, “Philadelphia, like so much of the Church in the rest of our country, is now really mission territory again—for the second time.” The archbishop was commenting on the fact that fewer and fewer Catholics are practicing their faith. At the same time, society is becoming increasingly secular.

Attuned to this worldwide problem during his pontificate, Pope Blessed John Paul II repeatedly called for a “New Evangelization”:

There is... [a] situation... where entire groups of the baptized have lost a living sense of the faith, or even no longer consider themselves members of the Church, and live a life far removed from Christ and his Gospel. In this case what is needed is a “new evangelization” or a “re-evangelization” (*Redemptoris missio*, no. 33).

The Church is equipped for this task since, by her nature, she is missionary (*Catechism of the Catholic Church*, no. 767). From the beginning, the Holy Spirit has been the prime mover in this sacred enterprise. When, as Christ promised, the Spirit came upon the Apostles at Pentecost, the Church began to proclaim the Gospel (Jn 20:21–23; Acts 2:1–12). Thus, the Holy Spirit is the “power from on high” (Lk 24:49) who emboldened the first disciples to bear witness to the Resurrection of Christ.

The Pentecost event is the essential frame of reference for understanding Confirmation. According to the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, “It is evident from its celebration that the effect of the sacrament of Confirmation is the special outpouring of the Holy Spirit as once granted to the apostles on the day of Pentecost” (no. 1302). Thus, Confirmation bestows a gift of the Holy Spirit so that the Church can fulfill her mission: to proclaim and make present the saving work of Jesus Christ in the world.

As the name suggests, Confirmation strengthens or “confirms” the grace of Baptism—the beginning of Christian discipleship—by giving it a missionary orientation (*Catechism of the Catholic Church*, nos. 1285, 1289, 1303–1305, 1316). Whereas Baptism, among other things, incorporates one into the Church, Confirmation empowers one to carry out the Church’s work (*Catechism of the Catholic Church*, no. 1267).

Significantly, the Rite of Confirmation includes a renewal of baptismal promises that highlights the connection between these sacraments (*Catechism of the Catholic Church*, nos. 1298, 1321). However, Confirmation should not be understood as an adolescent rite of passage whereby a person definitively affirms his or her Baptism (*Catechism of the Catholic Church*, no. 1308). Rather, the sacrament confers the power of the Holy Spirit so that the person can live according to the grace of Baptism—throughout life.

(While Confirmation is given at age 15 in the Diocese of Richmond, Church law permits, and even presumes, that the sacrament will normally be given around age seven. In the

case of an emergency, Confirmation can and should be given even to an infant [*Code of Canon Law*, canon 891; *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, no. 1307].)

The meaning and purpose of Confirmation become clear when we consider the role of the Holy Spirit in the life of Christ. Here, it should be noted that the term “Christ” (in Hebrew: *masia*; in Greek: *Christos*) is not Jesus’ last name. Instead, it is Jesus’ title: He is the One whom the Father “anoints” (chooses) to accomplish salvation (*Catechism of the Catholic Church*, no. 436).

Now, the Son of God was always divine, but at a given moment he became human. This is when the Father “anointed” the Son’s sacred humanity with the Holy Spirit. Consequently, Jesus, in carrying out his mission as the Christ, did not rely on his own divinity; rather, he relied on the power of the Holy Spirit that had been given him (*Catechism of the Catholic Church*, no. 695).

From the instant when Son of God was conceived by the power of the Holy Spirit in the womb of the Virgin Mary (Lk 1:35), to when he “handed over the spirit” on the Cross (Jn 19:30), he was filled the Holy Spirit. Likewise, the Spirit raised Christ from the dead (Rom 1:4; 8:11) (*Catechism of the Catholic Church*, no. 695). The anointing of the Son of God was visibly and symbolically manifested at Christ’s Baptism, when the Spirit appeared as a dove (Mt 3:16; Mk 1:10; Lk 3:22; Jn 1:32) (*Catechism of the Catholic Church*, nos. 438, 535).

Similarly, we become “Christians”—disciples of Christ—when the Father anoints us with the Holy Spirit in Baptism and Confirmation (*Catechism of the Catholic Church*, nos. 1265, 1274, 1304). The formula used to administer Confirmation is derived from the Pentecost scene in the Gospel of John, which emphasizes the continuity between Christ’s mission and ours: “Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you. ...Receive the holy Spirit” (20:21–22). As in the case of Christ, our anointing with the Holy Spirit is simultaneously our commission to proclaim the Gospel.

Given the diminishing role of God and the Church in society, it is urgent that we put the grace of Confirmation to work. In the New Evangelization, personal testimony is imperative, since it will ensure the credibility of our message: We must know what we are talking about.

We can draw inspiration from St. Paul, the great missionary. The Apostle proposed the Gospel as a truth that had transformed his life and given it full meaning. In 1 Corinthians, for example, he explains that the Gospel is a paradox: The Death (and Resurrection) of Christ has wrought salvation (1:18–25; 2:1–8).

It is difficult today, as it was then, for the world to accept this truth. Nevertheless, “This God has revealed to us through the Spirit” (1 Cor 2:10). That Spirit, “who scrutinizes even the depths of God” (1 Cor 2:10), enables us to truly know the Lord, and not simply about him. This is the power and promise of receiving the Holy Spirit in Confirmation—we become Apostles for the New Evangelization.

**THE SACRAMENT OF PENANCE:  
GRACE IS WAITING ON THE OTHER SIDE**

Each week, scores of Catholics approach God with humility. Sitting quietly, they wait their turn to receive the Sacrament of Penance. Here are heroes of our faith: men, women, and children who know that they are not perfect, and who wish to become better disciples of Jesus Christ. Here, on a Saturday afternoon, is a beautiful profession of faith and a marvelous experience of God's grace.

The reality of sin is the starting point for understanding the Sacrament of Penance. Sin blocks us from God and ultimately deprives us of the happiness that only the Lord can give (*Catechism of the Catholic Church* [CCC] 1718, 1850).

The purpose of the Sacrament of Penance is to forgive sins (especially grave ones) committed after Baptism (CCC 1456, 1458, 1486). While this might seem to be a simple transaction of grace—God removes our transgressions—it includes something positive and profound: our conversion (CCC 1427–1429).

In this regard, it is instructive that Christ's basic proclamation is twofold: "Repent, and believe in the gospel" (Mk 1:15) (CCC 1427). We tend to think of repentance and belief as separate actions. Yet the call to conversion—the term literally means a "turnaround"—indicates that the first action leads to the second: We turn away from sin precisely so that we can turn toward God (CCC 1431).

The ancient rite of Baptism provides a good illustration of the meaning of conversion. St. Cyril (318–336 AD), the bishop of Jerusalem, explained to the newly baptized the significance of what they had done: "You faced westward...and renounced Satan as though to his face...When you turned from west to east...you symbolized this change of allegiance. Then you were told to say: 'I believe in the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit, and in one baptism of repentance.'" The candidates for Baptism literally turned away from sin and toward grace.

Returning to the Sacrament of Penance, the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* refers to it, among other names, as the "sacrament of conversion." This is because "it makes sacramentally present Jesus' call to conversion, the first step in returning to the Father from whom one has strayed by sin" (1423).

If conversion is the purpose of the sacrament, then penance is the spiritual tool that helps to bring it about: "The interior penance of the Christian can be expressed in many and various ways. Scripture and the [Church] Fathers insist above all on three forms, *fasting*, *prayer*, and *almsgiving*, which express conversion in relation to oneself, to God, and to others" (CCC 1434).

The name "Sacrament of Penance" affirms the importance of this practice (CCC 1423). By accepting a penance, the one who receives the sacrament seeks to repair the damage

caused by sin (to oneself and to others). This expiation or “satisfaction” deals with the effects of sin; it is distinct from the guilt of the sin that has been forgiven, and the relationship with God that has been restored, through the sacrament (CCC 1459).

By way of summary, the *Catechism* explains that, “The sacrament of Reconciliation with God brings about a true ‘spiritual resurrection,’ restoration of the dignity and blessings of the life of the children of God, of which the most precious is friendship with God” (1468).

This wonderful movement of the soul from sin to grace takes place within the brief liturgical celebration that is the Sacrament of Penance (CCC 1480). Even still, we are nervous about going to Confession, since we have to confront our sins. Consequently, we tend to postpone the sacrament, which only makes it more difficult to return.

Here, we might draw strength from the parable of the prodigal son, which Christ uses to describe how God deals with our sins. It is notable that the father does not wait for his son to return: “While he was still a long way off, his father caught sight of him, and was filled with compassion. He ran to his son, embraced him and kissed him” (Lk 15:20). Even as we wait our turn in the confessional, God has already welcomed us home; the rest is accepting that perfect love.

So, perhaps Reconciliation is the sacrament that we like the least before we receive it, but the one we love best afterward. After all, grace is waiting on the other side.

**THE EUCHARIST:  
A SACRIFICE WE OFFER, A SACRAMENT WE RECEIVE, A LIFE WE LEAD**

The account of the Last Supper in Matthew, Mark, and Luke states that Christ took the bread, said the blessing, and gave it to his disciples etc. The version in John, however, is different. The Fourth Gospel narrates the washing of feet, which is itself a poignant description of the Eucharist. By stooping low, the Son of God anticipates his Crucifixion; he also leaves behind a permanent sign of that loving sacrifice, a love “to the end” (13:1) (*Catechism of the Catholic Church* [CCC] 1337).

The action at Last Supper fulfills Christ’s earlier teaching on the Eucharist, which is found in the sixth chapter of John. We heard this splendid “Bread of Life Discourse” proclaimed at Sunday Mass throughout the summer.

There, Christ declares: “I am the living bread that came down from heaven; whoever eats this bread will live forever; and the bread I will give is my flesh for the life of the world” (6:51). But the Lord’s teaching results in “murmuring” (6:41, 61), and in quarrels among the crowds (6:52). There is even division among his disciples, because some of them do not believe: “As a result of this, many [of] his disciples returned to their former way of life and no longer accompanied him” (6:66) (CCC 1336).

This passage shows that, fundamentally, the Eucharist is a way of life. The Eucharist lies at the heart of Christian discipleship because it is Jesus Christ himself—his whole person, and all of his saving work (CCC 1336).

Since the Eucharist is Christ, its meaning is inexhaustible (CCC 1328). Nevertheless, through the ages the Church has come to a more profound understanding of the Eucharist. To grasp its basic features, we can use the handy frame that the doctrinal tradition has crafted: The Eucharist is both a sacrifice and a sacrament.

The Eucharist is a sacrifice because its liturgical celebration makes present the Death and Resurrection of Christ (CCC 1366). The terms “Holy Sacrifice” and “Mass” designate this aspect of the Eucharist (CCC 1330, 1332).

According to the Council of Trent (1545–1563), the sacrifice of the Eucharist is the same sacrifice as offered once on the Cross (CCC 1367). Thus, the Mass brings about a renewal—although never a repetition—of Calvary (CCC 1104, 1366).

Vatican Council II (1962–1965) developed this teaching by extending the sacrificial nature of the Eucharist to include daily life. In the Mass, the laity offer their entire lives—marriage, family, work, and recreation—with and through the priest (CCC 1368). This reflects St. Paul’s exhortation: “I urge you therefore, brothers, by the mercies of God, to offer your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God, your spiritual worship” (Rom 12:1).

The Eucharist is also a sacrament because it is the Real Presence of Christ, contained in the consecrated bread and wine that are his Body and Blood (CCC 1374). The term “Holy Communion” refers to the sacrament when it is received; the term “Blessed Sacrament” designates the Eucharist when it is reserved in the tabernacle (CCC 1330–1331, 1379).

According to a classic formulation, the Council of Trent taught that, “Immediately after the consecration the true body and the true blood of our Lord, together with his soul and divinity, exist under the form of bread and wine” (CCC 1374). This means that all of Christ—not just a part of him—is present in either the smallest particle of the consecrated bread or in the tiniest drop of the consecrated wine (CCC 1377). The same Council used the term “transubstantiation” to explain the change of bread and wine into the Body and Blood of Christ, since the very substance of the elements is altered (CCC 1376).

The two basic dimensions of the Eucharist that we have discussed converge in the Mass. There, sacrifice leads to sacrament: that which is offered on the altar is subsequently received as Holy Communion (CCC 1382). This movement finds a notable expression in Eucharistic Prayer III: “Look, we pray, upon the oblation of your Church<sup>[L]</sup>and, recognizing the sacrificial Victim by whose death you willed to reconcile us to yourself,<sup>[SEP]</sup>grant that we, who are nourished<sup>[SEP]</sup>by the Body and Blood of your Son<sup>[L]</sup>and filled with his Holy Spirit,<sup>[SEP]</sup>may become one body, one spirit in Christ.”

The Eucharist, with all of its power, is meant for us: “Take this, all of you, and eat of it...” Filled with Christ himself, we can live like him (CCC 1394). In this regard, it is significant that the common name for the Eucharistic Celebration—the “Mass” (in Latin: *Missa*)—should be derived from its brief ending (CCC 1332). The concluding formula, in Latin, is *Ite missa est*: literally, “Go forth; you are sent.”

These words indicate that the Dismissal is no mere announcement that the liturgical celebration has ended. Rather, it is a sending forth: Jesus Christ commissions us as he did the Apostles. The Lord, who is present among us at the Mass, sends us into the world to testify to his saving work (CCC 1332). The additional forms of the Dismissal highlight our task: “Go and announce the Gospel of the Lord”; or, “Go in peace, glorifying the Lord by your life.”

**“FATHER, COME QUICKLY”:  
THE ANOINTING OF THE SICK AND THE LAST RITES**

The phone rings. It’s an urgent request: “Father, come quickly to give the Last Rites.” Often, the priest is brought in at the last minute, even though he could have administered the sacraments earlier—if he had known.

In these circumstances, it may seem that the prayers of the Church are like magic, without much of an apparent response of faith. Perhaps, on some level, the family and friends of the dying person believe that if the priest can arrive in time, heaven will be assured. To others, it might seem unfair that a person who has been away from the Church for years can now “slide” into heaven in the nick of time. Such is the abundance of divine grace and mercy that flow through the sacraments...

Historically, the term “Last Rites” designated the three sacraments given on the verge of death: Extreme Unction (now called Anointing of the Sick), Penance, and the Eucharist. As the name implied, Extreme Unction was considered to be the primary sacrament of the dying; it was to be received *in extremis* (the Latin term meaning “at the point of death”).

Vatican Council II renewed and revised the Church’s pastoral care of the sick. The most notable change concerned the terminology and practice of Extreme Unction. According to the Council, “‘Extreme Unction,’ which may also and more fittingly be called ‘Anointing of the Sick,’ is not a sacrament for those only who are at the point of death. Hence, as soon as any one of the faithful begins to be in danger of death from sickness or old age, the fitting time for him to receive this sacrament has certainly already arrived” (*Sacrosanctum Concilium*, no. 73).

Thus, Anointing is primarily the sacrament of the sick. By uniting a person who is ill to the Passion of Christ, the sacrament enables the recipient to bear the sickness with patience and courage, and to cooperate in Christ’s saving work (*Catechism of the Catholic Church* [CCC] 1521–1522). The Anointing of the Sick also forgives sins if the person is unable to go to Confession (CCC 1520). In some cases, the sacrament can bring about the restoration of physical health (CCC 1520). Finally, the Anointing of the Sick prepares a soul for death (CCC 1523, 1532).

By contrast, the Eucharist is the primary sacrament of the dying (*Pastoral Care of the Sick: Rites of Anointing and Viaticum*, no. 175). When death is near, the Eucharist is given as Viaticum, a Latin term meaning “food for the journey” to eternal life (CCC 1524).

While there are distinctions among the sacraments that comprise the Last Rites, the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* explains that they remain interconnected: “Just as the sacraments of Baptism, Confirmation, and the Eucharist form a unity called ‘the sacraments of Christian initiation,’ so too it can be said that Penance, the Anointing of the

Sick and the Eucharist as Viaticum constitute at the end of Christian life ‘the sacraments that prepare for our heavenly homeland’ or ‘the sacraments that complete the earthly pilgrimage’” (CCC 1525).

As a practical matter, the Anointing of the Sick is often the last sacrament that a dying person receives. Given the advances in medicine and life-support technology, a person may still be alive, and therefore able to be anointed, even though he or she cannot consume the Eucharist. The Church teaches that the dying person should be anointed in the event that he or she is unable to receive Viaticum (*Rites of Anointing and Viaticum* no. 30; CCC 1523).

So, when should the priest be called? The answer: as soon as a person becomes seriously ill, even if death is not imminent. In this way, the priest can hear the confession of the sick person, anoint him or her, and administer Holy Communion—all of which will help the sick person to draw closer to God. As death approaches, the priest should administer the same sacraments—which now become the Last Rites—once more.

In spite of continuing instruction on the pastoral care of the sick, there will be unforeseen circumstances and last-minute phone calls. Here, it should be noted that the faithful have a right to the sacraments, assuming that they are properly disposed (*Code of Canon Law*, canons 213, 843 § 1). Therefore, the priest should administer them gladly: “In such a situation of emergency the priest should offer every possible ministry of the Church as reverently and expeditiously as he can” (*Pastoral Care of the Sick*, no. 260).

Conversions can be a long time in the making; or, they can be sudden. In either case, dire circumstances can dispose a person to God’s grace. Here we can recall the urgent request of the good thief who was crucified alongside Christ: “Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom” (Lk 24:42). The Lord’s reply echoes in the sacraments of his Church: “Today you will be with me in paradise” (24:43).

**HOLY ORDERS:  
THREE DEGREES OF SERVICE TO THE CHURCH**

With his great rhetorical skill, St. Augustine of Hippo (354–430 AD) reflected on his work as a spiritual shepherd: “With you I am a Christian; for you I am a bishop.” This marvelous insight captures the meaning of Holy Orders, which is a sacrament of service to the Church.

Whereas the Sacraments of Christian Initiation are bestowed upon all in the Church, Holy Orders is conferred upon some. Baptism, Confirmation, and the Eucharist establish a uniform foundation of grace to live as a disciple of Jesus Christ; by contrast, Holy Orders imparts a special power to help the Church’s members achieve salvation (*Catechism of the Catholic Church* [CCC] 1533–1534).

Those in Holy Orders—the clergy—make the Word of God and the grace of the sacraments available (CCC 1535). This service strengthens the laity—members of the Church who are not in Holy Orders—to consecrate the world and its affairs to God (CCC 898). Thus, Holy Orders primarily serves the Church, so that the Church can transform the world.

The name “Holy Orders” is derived from the Latin term *ordines*, which historically designated particular groups within the Church (CCC 1537). Even during the public ministry of Christ, there were various “orders” among the disciples. Chief among these was the Apostles, the twelve disciples whom Christ chose to share in his work in a particular way. The Lord constituted the Twelve as the leaders of his Church; he also commissioned them to preach, baptize, celebrate the Eucharist, and to forgive sins in his name (CCC 858).

The Apostles, in turn, shared this power and authority, in various ways and in varying degrees, with others in the Church (CCC 861–862, 1562). Consequently, a system of service and leadership—the two have always gone together—began to emerge in the early Church. While the situation was fluid, and there was overlap, three Greek terms consistently appear in the New Testament to describe those who assisted the Apostles: *episkopoi* (“overseers” or “bishops”), *presbyteroi* (“presbyters” or “elders”), and *diakonoi* (“deacons” or “ministers”). In time, these terms came to designate three specific offices in the Church: bishops, presbyters, and deacons.

After 150 AD, bishops and presbyters began to be called “priests.” The bishop was understood to represent Christ, the “high priest according to the order of Melchizedek” (Heb 5:10) (CCC 1544). For their part, presbyters shared in the bishop’s ministry and exercised the priesthood with him (CCC 1567). Still later, the term “priests” came to be applied to presbyters alone (although bishops were still understood to be priests). Therefore, those whom we call “priests” today are in fact presbyters.

By way of summary, the *Catechism* explains that, “There are two degrees of ministerial participation in the priesthood of Christ: the episcopacy and the presbyterate. The diaconate is intended to help and serve them. For this reason the term *sacerdos* [“priest”] in current usage denotes bishops and priests but not deacons. Yet Catholic doctrine teaches that the degrees of priestly participation (episcopate and presbyterate) and the degree of service (diaconate) are all three conferred by a sacramental act called ‘ordination,’ that is, by the sacrament of Holy Orders” (1554).

There is one priesthood—that of Jesus Christ (Heb 8:4)—but different ways of sharing in it. All of the baptized exercise the common priesthood. Bishops and presbyters exercise the ministerial priesthood in service to the common priesthood (CCC 1547, 1551). Once again, we see that Holy Orders exists for the sake of others in the Church.

In addition to teaching and governing the Church, ministerial priests offer the Eucharistic Sacrifice and forgive sins through the Sacrament of Penance. In such sacramental celebrations, bishops and priests act in the person of Christ as Head of the Church (Eph 5:23; Col 1:18). They also act in the name of the whole Church when presenting the people’s prayer to God (CCC 1548, 1552, 1563).

The diaconate, a term that means “service” or “ministry,” serves the ministerial priesthood. Holy Orders configures deacons to Christ, who “made himself the ‘deacon’ or servant of all” (Mk 10:45; Lk 22:27) (CCC 1570).

Consequently, “It is the task of deacons to assist the bishop and priests in the celebration of the divine mysteries, above all the Eucharist, in the distribution of Holy Communion, in assisting at and blessing marriages, in the proclamation of the Gospel and preaching, in presiding over funerals, and in dedicating themselves to the various ministries of charity” (Acts 6:2–3) (CCC 1570).

Concluding his homily on the anniversary of his ordination as bishop, St. Augustine offered an exhortation that rings true for the Church today: “In all the vast and varied activity involved in fulfilling such manifold responsibilities, please give me your help by both your prayers and your obedience. In this way I will find pleasure not so much in being in charge of you as in being of use to you.”

**MATRIMONY:  
A HOLY COMMITMENT, A SACRED ENTERPRISE**

Dating services like EHarmony emphasize that compatibility is the key to successful relationships that lead to marriage: “After studying thousands upon thousands of couples, we discovered that compatibility across 29 key areas were the best predictors of happy and long-lasting relationships.”

Without a doubt, compatibility plays a role in marriage. But the emphasis on compatibility reinforces a distorted view of love that we see in movies and hear in songs: Love is basically a feeling—romance. If the feeling is there, things are great; but if someone “no longer has feelings” for the other person, then the relationship ends.

The Church’s understanding of love and marriage is different. Love is more than a feeling; it is a decision. And marriage is based on more than compatibility; it is the lifelong commitment of a man and a woman, who promise to love one another in response to a calling from God (*Catechism of the Catholic Church* [CCC] 1603).

The wedding vows express this view of marriage: “I take you to be my wife / husband. I promise to be true to you in good times and in bad, in sickness and in health. I will love you and honor you all the days of my life.” Significantly, the recitation of the vows establishes the bride and groom as husband and wife (CCC 1623, 1626).

The notion of marriage as work, embedded in the wedding vows, is found in the second creation story in the Book of Genesis (2:18–24). There, God says: “It is not good for the man to be alone. I will make a helper suited to him” (2:18).

The woman (Eve) is given to the man (Adam) as a complementary and equal partner, to support and help him. Recognizing this marvelous gift, the man exclaims: “This one, at last, is bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh; This one shall be called ‘woman,’ for out of man this one has been taken” (Gn 2:23). The *Catechism* notes that the creation of woman “represents God from whom comes our help” (1605).

Together, man and woman form a union and a partnership—a marriage—that supersedes all previous familial bonds: “That is why a man leaves his father and mother and clings to his wife, and the two of them become one body” (Gn 2:24).

This biblical verse also connects the two purposes of marriage: the wellbeing of the spouses and the begetting of children. Accordingly, the love between husband and wife is not limited to them; it overflows to the procreation of children, or, when this is not possible, to other forms of charity, hospitality, and sacrifice (CCC 1652, 1654).

As the spouses’ love for one another mirrors God’s love for humanity, so their procreation of children reflects and cooperates with the Lord’s creative power. Here, we see another aspect of the “work” of marriage, as the *Catechism* explains:

“Since God created him man and woman [Gn 1:27], their mutual love becomes an image of the absolute and unending love with which God loves man. ...And this love which God blesses is intended to be fruitful and to be realized in the common work of watching over creation: ‘And God blessed them, and God said to them: ‘Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and subdue it’ [Gn 1:28]” (1604).

The saving work of Jesus Christ has elevated marriage beyond its original goodness. Thus, marriage “between baptized persons has been raised by Christ the Lord to the dignity of a sacrament” (*Code of Canon Law*, canon 1055 § 1; CCC 1601).

First, Christ reaffirms two key properties of marriage stemming from creation, which sin had obscured: fidelity and permanence (CCC 1614, 1643–1644, 1646). “So they are no longer two, but one flesh. Therefore, what God has joined together, no human being must separate” (Mt 19:6). Furthermore, “Whoever divorces his wife (unless the marriage is unlawful) and marries another commits adultery” (Mt 19:9).

Second, Christ transforms marriage into a sign and instrument—a sacrament—of his presence (CCC 1617). This is the significance of the miracle performed at the wedding feast of Cana (Jn 2:1–11). The Church views it as “the proclamation that thenceforth marriage will be an efficacious sign of Christ’s presence” (CCC 1613).

St. Paul makes this point explicit: “Husbands, love your wives, even as Christ loved the church and handed himself over for her to sanctify her... This is a great mystery, but I speak in reference to Christ and the church” (Eph 5:25, 32) (CCC 1616).

Marriage is not easy—it takes work—but it is sacred. The Sacrament of Matrimony bestows the grace to love one’s spouse after the example of Jesus Christ, who loved us to point of offering his life on the Cross (*Code of Canon Law*, canon 1134; CCC 1615, 1638). The holy commitment and the sacred enterprise of Matrimony flow from this perfect act of charity.