

SACRAMENTALS

And God did extraordinary miracles by the hands of Paul, so that handkerchiefs or aprons were carried away from his body to the sick, and diseases left them and the evil spirits came out of them. ~ Acts 19:11-12

THE CHURCH DESIRES TO GIVE US every possible aid for increasing in holiness in the Christian life. The greatest aids at her disposal are the Scriptures and the seven sacraments. God's Word shows us the Father's plan for our sanctification and each of the sacraments brings us into the life of the Trinity through the supernatural working of sanctifying grace.

In addition, the Church has other means by which we can be strengthened in the Christian life, all of them intimately related to Scripture and the sacraments. These are the sacramentals. They are sacred signs meant to prepare us for the sanctifying grace received in the sacraments and to remind us of the call to holiness in the sacraments. From the earliest days of Christianity, the Church has bestowed blessings upon men and women, their activities, and the things they use on a day-to-day basis. The Church has this authority to administer the treasures of grace because they were given to her by her founder, Christ himself. The Church is the "servant of Christ" and the "steward of the mysteries of God" (see 1 Cor 4:1).

Sacramentals can be either sacred objects (such as holy water, and blessed candles, rosaries, medals, etc.) or sacred actions (like blessings and exorcisms). Whether an object or an action, every sacramental's purpose is to put each Christian in closer relationship to Christ by helping us cooperate with the grace of the sacraments. The blessed object is not the cause of grace but is merely a means to remember and reflect on the constant help of special graces which impel us toward Christ and his saving love. Thus, a sacramental is not a magic charm.

"Sacramentals remind us of the call to holiness in the sacraments."

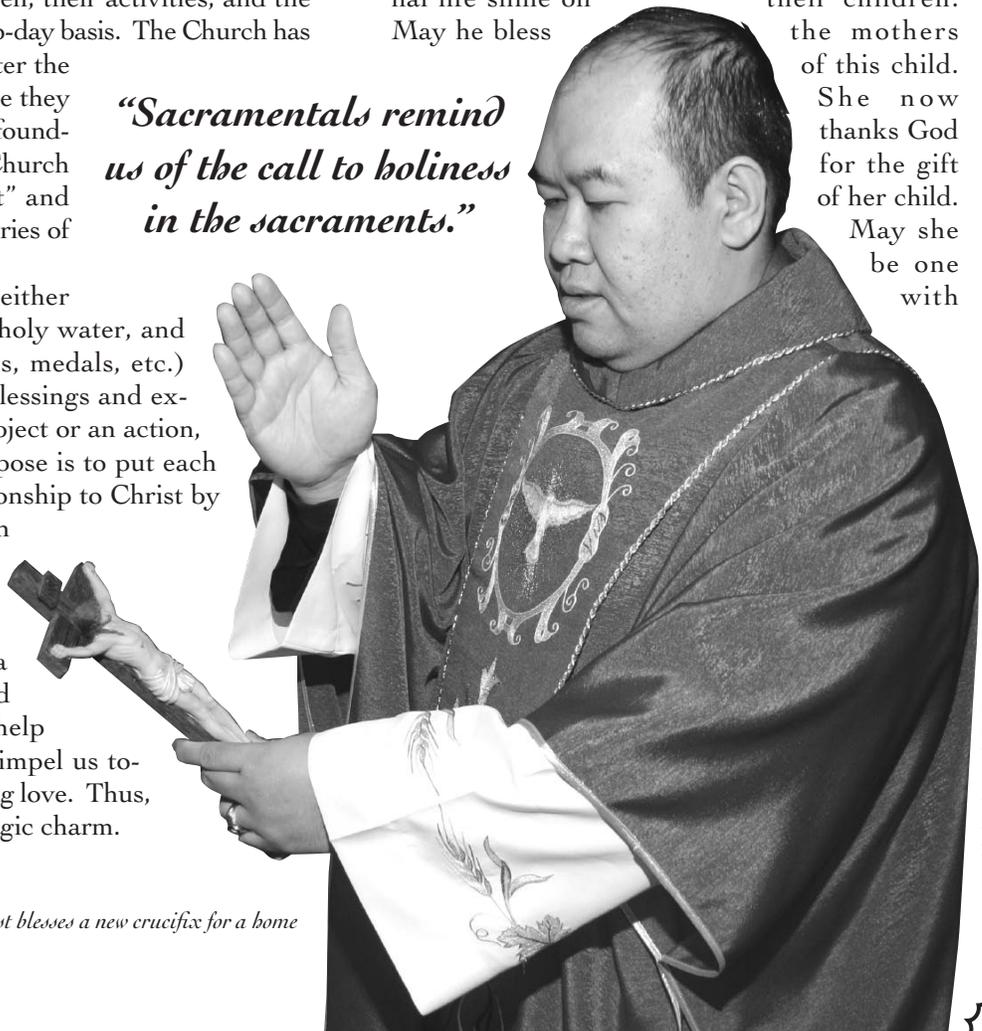
A priest blesses a new crucifix for a home

The primacy among sacramentals belongs to the **blessing**. A blessing is a holy action that places a person or a thing directly under God's care and protection and brings about what is intended in the words of the blessing. The blessings of objects include homes, churches, cathedrals, rosaries, and other sacred images and objects, and the blessings of persons may be bestowed upon bishops, priests, deacons, seminarians, nuns, parents, children, families, engaged couples, pregnant mothers, birthday blessings, travelers, students, teachers, and many more.

At the Baptism of children, the fathers and mothers both receive a blessing individually:

Blessing of mothers: God the Father, through his Son, the Virgin Mary's child, has brought joy to all Christian mothers, as they see the hope of eternal life shine on their children.

May he bless the mothers of this child. She now thanks God for the gift of her child. May she be one with



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him (her) in thanking him for ever in Heaven, in Christ Jesus our Lord (*Rite of Baptism for Children* 105).

Blessing of fathers: God is the giver of life, human and divine. May he bless the father of this child. He and his wife will be the first teachers of their child in the ways of faith. May they be also the best teachers, bearing witness to the faith by what they say and do, in Christ Jesus our Lord (*Rite of Baptism for Children* 105).

Both the Old and New Testaments are filled with the sacred action of blessing. God blessed our first parents. Moses blessed the tribes of Israel. Jesus blessed the loaves and fishes, the children who gathered close to him, and the apostles before his Ascension. The bishop, priest, or deacon is the primary

venerated sacramentals within the Church. They are symbols and reminders of the suffering and Passion of our Savior by which humankind was redeemed and saved from sin. Indeed, the cross on Golgotha was the very instrument of our salvation. Countless millions of Christians through the centuries have found the crucifix or cross to be a source of consolation as they are reminded of the suffering love of Christ. Many Christians today choose to wear a crucifix or cross as a reminder to be faithful to Jesus, who instructed his followers, *“If any man would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me”* (Lk 9:23).

Holy water is ordinary water that has been made holy through the blessing of the Church. When we are sprinkled with holy water, or when we dip our

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Palms to be blessed with Holy Water on the Sunday prior to Easter

dispenser of blessings. By the grace of the sacrament of Holy Orders, the blessing of one who is ordained is the only blessing which actually makes something a blessed object. But it is also possible for persons who have been entrusted with the care of others to give blessings — parents may bless their children just as those preparing to come into the Church may be blessed by their catechists.

A special form of blessing is the **exorcism**, a prayer in the name of Jesus by his ordained ministers to protect us from the Evil One or to drive him from someone.

Crucifixes and crosses are the most commonly

dispenser of blessings. By the grace of the sacrament of Holy Orders, the blessing of one who is ordained is the only blessing which actually makes something a blessed object. But it is also possible for persons who have been entrusted with the care of others to give blessings — parents may bless their children just as those preparing to come into the Church may be blessed by their catechists.

“Father, you give us grace through sacramental signs, which tell us of the wonders of your unseen power. In Baptism we use your gift of water, which you have made a rich symbol of the grace you give us in the sacrament.... Father, look now with love upon your Church, and unseal for her the fountain of

Baptism. By the power of the Spirit give to the water of this font the grace of your Son. You created man in your own likeness: cleanse him from sin in a new birth to innocence by water and the Spirit. We ask you, Father, with your Son to send the Holy Spirit upon the water of this font. May all who are buried with Christ in the death of Baptism rise also with him to newness of life. We ask this through Christ our Lord (*Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults* 222).

Once the water has been blessed, it becomes holy water. Holy water is not only used for Baptisms but also to bestow God's blessing on people and objects that are blessed with it. The blessed person or object is then provided with a reminder of the Church's prayer for protection against danger and temptation.

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Another important sacramental is the **blessed candle**. A candle gives light and warmth and can stir the human soul with extraordinary force. The Church has always used lighted candles as part of her liturgical celebrations. Jesus said, *“I am the light of the world; he who follows me will not walk in darkness, but will have the light of life”* (Jn 8:12). This is the primary significance of blessed candles used during times of prayer. Christ is the light of the world, and he asks us to be light in the darkness as well, *“that [men] may see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in Heaven”* (Mt 5:16).

During the Easter season, a special candle called the **Paschal candle**, or Christ candle, is used as the principal symbol of the Resurrection. The Paschal candle is a tall candle, with some very significant symbols adorning it. A cross is cut into the wax. The Greek letters alpha and omega are traced above and below the cross. Because Christ is *“the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end”* (Rv 21:6), all time belongs to him. In a special way, the current year is consecrated to him as the numbers of the year are

also traced into the candle. And finally, five grains of incense are pressed into the candle as a symbol of the five wounds Christ suffered during his Passion. This special candle remains lit from the Easter Vigil throughout the fifty days of the Easter season. After Pentecost, the Paschal candle is used at Baptisms and funerals as a symbol of the Resurrection.

Rosaries are a sacramental that many Catholics carry with them. While it is possible to say the prayers of the Holy Rosary and to meditate on its mysteries (which many Catholics have memorized) without holding a rosary, slipping beads through the fingers during prayer is an aid in concentration and eliminates the necessity of keeping track, allowing

better focus on the meditative act of this highly-recommended form of prayer.

Wedding rings are a very popular tradition among all Christians. At a Nuptial Mass, the rings are blessed by the priest and then exchanged between the couple. His simple blessing, *“May the Lord bless these rings that you give to each other as a sign of love and fidelity”* (*Rite of Marriage* 27) makes each ring a sacramental which will serve to remind the couple that they are bound to one another in the sacrament of marriage.

Finally, many Catholics wear **blessed medals** out of devotion to the Lord, his mother Mary, or other saints whose images are depicted thereon. They can aid in prayer by virtue of their visible presence that is a constant reminder of the call to holiness. There is no power that can be ascribed to the medal in itself — it is merely a simple sign of faith in Christ. Even though medals may reflect a wide variety of persons and events, they all point to the necessity of a greater love and devotion to Jesus Christ.

(CCC 1667-1676)

