

Spiritual Realities and Symbolic Rituals: Understanding Sacraments Today

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Based on a presentation that was first developed in 1993 as part of a workshop for lay ministers in Louisville, Kentucky. It was received so well that it has been repeated dozens of times in parish and diocesan programs since then. The live version is highly interactive, and so the version printed here attempts to engage the reader by asking for examples from personal experience that relate to ideas being presented.

Defining Sacraments

Like many older Catholics,

I received my first religious training before the Second Vatican Council,
and the definition of a sacrament that I learned from the Baltimore Catechism was,
“A sacrament is an outward sign instituted by Christ to give grace.”

That definition was fine, as far as it went,

but developments in scripture and history before Vatican II
as well as theological developments during and after the Council
made that definition seem less accurate and less helpful than it used to be.

For instance, the words, “instituted by Christ,” gave the impression
that Jesus himself gave instructions on how to perform all seven sacramental rites,
but modern scripture scholarship finds no evidence for such a broad claim,
and early church history reveals gaps—sometimes centuries long—
between the ministry of Jesus and the first descriptions
of some of the Church’s sacraments.

Moreover, the Council itself referred to the Church as a sacrament of Christ,
and some contemporary theologians spoke of Christ as a sacrament of God,
thus undermining the traditional understanding that there are only seven sacraments
and introducing a notion that there could be non-liturgical sacraments
that do not fit the old catechism definition.

The definition of sacraments in paragraph 1131 of the Catechism of the Catholic Church
is to some extent a rewording of the older catechism’s definition,
and it has not gotten wide theological and catechetical usage.

So for this workshop I am going to give you a working definition of sacraments.
It does not pretend to be a definitive definition,
but it is one that we can work with to better understand sacraments today,
which is why it is called a *working* definition.

The definition is simple and straightforward:

**Sacraments are seven church rituals or ceremonies
that celebrate and help us to connect with
the most important realities in the Christian life.**

The definition states that it refers to seven church rituals,
and this is done in part in order to sidestep any theological dispute
about the number of sacraments.

Some Protestant churches have only two sacraments
but we Catholics make the claim that seven of our liturgical ceremonies
are properly called sacraments.

Orthodox and Anglican or Episcopalian Christians also have seven sacraments.

The traditional Catholic name for other prayer and worship practices
is sacramentals, which literally means sacrament-like, or like a sacrament.
Sacramentals include rituals and ceremonies
as well as things used in them, such as rosaries and holy water.
In our church, therefore, marriage and ordination are sacraments,
but ceremonies for entering religious orders are sacramentals.

The definition says that sacraments celebrate,
which does not mean that every sacrament is a party,
but that every sacrament refers to or points toward something
other than itself,
the same way that non-religious ceremonies
make reference to what they celebrate.

One aspect of religious or secular celebrations
is the way that they help us to connect with spiritual realities
such as relationships, values, ideals, and so on.
When a ritual or ceremony has an impact on us,
it enables us to experience or feel more intensely
the reality or realities that it is celebrating or drawing attention to.
Sometimes it also enables us to understand them better
and appreciate them more.

In the case of the seven sacraments,
what they celebrate and help us to connect with
are the most important spiritual realities in Christianity.
These are sometimes called Christian mysteries,
and they can also be understood as God's gifts to us.
One of the theological terms for gift is the Latin word *gratia*,
so these spiritual realities can also be called grace or graces.

Spiritual Realities

Although the working definition of sacraments is simple and straightforward,
this business of celebrating and connecting with spiritual realities
is somewhat elusive.
Because it is so hard to pin down,
it is best approached through personal experiences
that each reader can relate to in his or her own life.
Our approach will be to
(1) help you to identify something in your own life experience;
(2) show you that, by understanding some aspect of that experience,
you can understand something about sacraments.

To begin, think of some time in your life
when you had a personally significant experience,
not necessarily connected with religion.
It may be something that happened during childhood or adolescence,
in young adulthood (your college or early working years)
or later in life.

It might be something like any of the following:
falling in love;
experiencing a great personal loss;
having a best friend;
being present at someone's birth or death;
having a mentor, teacher, or special advisor;
being part of a team, orchestra, or theater production;
reading a work of fiction or non-fiction;
watching a movie or play;
learning a lesson from something that happened to you;
having a deep experience of the natural world;
or anything along those lines.

At any rate, it is something real that happened to you,
it is memorable and remains personally significant for you,
and it has had some sort of impact on your life.
It is something that affected the way you think or feel,
and maybe even the way you live your life.

Think of that now and, if it helps you to articulate it,
write about it in a few sentences on a piece of paper.

Here are examples of some of the things that people talked about
when they were asked to do this in a workshop:

- the birth of my child, or someone else's child
- being there when someone died
- coming close to death myself
- living through a car crash or natural disaster
- learning to accept myself for what I am
- being accepted by others
- attending gatherings of my extended family
- having to deal with mistakes and shortcomings,
my own or someone else's
- having to deal with an illness or injury
- a first kiss, or a first love
- finding the person I married
- being on a summer camp staff
- participating in a service project
- having a coach or teacher who believed in me
- doing something I didn't believe that I could do

- being on my own for the first time
- a play or movie that made me think
- visiting the Grand Canyon
- beholding the ocean, or mountains, or the starry sky.

Next, dig a little deeper and examine this experience.

What did you find in it?

What did you discover through it?

What did it put you in touch with?

What was the underlying reality that you became aware of?

What was the overarching reality that this experience represents for you?

These are all different ways of asking the same question.

Again, take some time to think about your experience and answer the question.

Remember that there may be more than one answer to the question,

that is, you may have derived more than one benefit from the experience.

If you find it helpful,

you may want to write your answer on a piece of paper.

Here are some of the things that people mentioned
when they were asked to do this in a workshop:

- | | | |
|------------------|-------------------|-------------------|
| • life | • support | • despair |
| • love | • hope | • uncertainty |
| • beauty | • trust | • death |
| • God | • service | • unfairness |
| • family | • self-acceptance | • shame |
| • community | • health | • guilt |
| • forgiveness | • healing | • loss |
| • reconciliation | • joy | • cruelty |
| • courage | • happiness | • selfishness |
| • goodness | • responsibility | • thoughtlessness |
| • growth | • peace | • fragility |
| • change | • freedom | • evil |

Looking at the two lists, you may notice some things about them.

The first is a list of particulars—individual people, unique events, and so on.

Every person's experiences and memories are unique to themselves.

If there are 20 people at a workshop,

there are 20 different stories to tell

about 20 different personal experiences.

This is not to say that there are not various *types* of events

that people talk about

and which get mentioned in one workshop after another.

But it is to say—and to point out—
that everyone's experiences are uniquely their own
in a way that is undeniably personal.

Also, behind the first list is a series of experiences that are concrete and particular—
concrete in the sense that they happened to real people
at actual places and at specific times in their lives;
particular in the sense that they happened once,
and in that sense they are unrepeatable
even though the same type of experience could happen again
to the same person
just as the same type of experience could happen
to a different person.

Even though the first list printed in this book is unavoidably general,
the experiences from which the list was developed
were all concrete and particular,
just as the experience you thought about, when you were asked to do that,
was unique and personal to yourself.
It was no one's experience but your own.

Looking now at the second list,
notice that it is filled with what are sometimes called abstract and general terms.
The items in this list are not concrete and particular
even though they are things that are found in individual and personal experiences.

Notice too that different people can discover the same thing
in different personal experiences.
Two people can have a strong sense of family, for example,
even though they grew up in different individual families.

A third thing to notice is that, although individual experiences are countless,
the items in the second list are relatively few.
Even though the list is not exhaustive,
it contains many if not most of the things
that people have mentioned in my workshops,
and it contains many things that could have a memorable and lasting impact
on people's lives.

An important question is:
Are the items on the second list real?

As just pointed out, these things are sometimes called abstract,
but we tend to think of real things as concrete and particular—
things that we can see, hear, touch, taste, or smell,
things that we can experience with one or more of the five senses.

How then can these other things be real?

One way would be to regard them as feelings—real feelings.

Certainly many of the positive things on the list can be thought of as feelings:

love, trust, hope, joy, peace, courage, and self-acceptance, for example.

As well, many of the negative things on the list can be thought of as feelings:

despair, uncertainty, guilt, shame, and selfishness, for example.

But some of the things cannot easily be thought of as feelings:

God, growth, service, health, death, loss, and evil, for example.

Let me suggest two ways to think about the items on the second list as real.

They can be thought of as spiritual realities,
and they can be thought of as mysteries.

They are spiritual realities in the sense that they are real
but they are not material or physical realities,
so they cannot be perceived by any of the five senses.

They can be perceived by the mind, however.

They can be thought
and this is why they are sometimes regarded as abstract thoughts.

And even though they cannot be perceived by the five senses,
they can be felt or experienced internally,
even sometimes viscerally.

We can say, therefore, that they are not feelings,
but they are realities that can be felt
and are felt.

Similarly, they are not experiences
—purely subjective experiences, as some might contend—
but they are realities that can be experienced
and are experienced.

They are experienceable
and they are experienced realities.

Thus, the love and hate that we feel are real.

The joy and despair that we feel are real.

The confidence and uncertainty that we feel are real.

And so on.

Likewise, the beauty and ugliness that we experience are real.

The community and selfishness that we experience are real.

The trust and shame that we experience are real.

And so on.

Here is another way to think about it.

You can see two people holding hands or kissing,
but you cannot see their love
even though their love is real.

You can see a man, a woman and some children walking in a park,
but you literally cannot see their family
even though they are really a family
and even though you can perceive that they are a family.

Likewise, you can witness acts of courage,
and you can perceive people as brave and courageous,
but you literally cannot see their courage
even if it is real.

Similarly, you can see people helping others,
but you cannot see their kindness or generosity
even though they possess those virtues
and are motivated by them.

Since things such as those on the second list are real—
even though they are not physical or material realities
that can be seen, heard, or otherwise sensed—
so they can be called spiritual or intangible realities.

Spiritual realities cannot be perceived by the senses,
but they are nonetheless real.
Spiritual realities cannot be weighed or measured,
but they are nonetheless real.

If honesty were not real,
no one could be really honest.
If happiness were not real,
no one could be really happy.
If guilt were not real,
no one could be really guilty.

At the same time, these realities are elusive and hard to pin down.
There is a song that asks, What is this thing called love?
And the same could be asked of any intangible reality.
Because spiritual realities are difficult to comprehend,
they can also be called mysteries.

Ask any Catholic to name a mystery,
and they will probably refer to something like the Blessed Trinity.
“I don’t understand it, but they say it’s true, so I have to believe it.
It’s a mystery!”

The popular conception is that a mystery is something that you can't understand at all.
But think about it:

 If you couldn't understand it at all,
 you wouldn't even understand that it's a mystery.
When people say they don't understand the Trinity,
 what they are really saying is that they have a problem with it.
 It's intellectually puzzling for them.

Properly speaking, a mystery is something that is experienced
 and only partially understood.

The experience of love is a mystery.
People who fall in love experience the reality of infatuation,
 but they understand little about it
 beyond the fact that they are in love.

The experience of hate is a mystery.
People who are the objects of other people's hatred
 experience the real malice directed against them
 even though they may find it hard to comprehend.

It has been said that a problem is something that you have,
 and a mystery is something that has you.
When you are in the grip of a mystery,
 whether a mystery of goodness or a mystery of evil,
 you experience the mystery directly
 but your mind struggles to comprehend it.

If you examine the second of the two lists presented earlier in this chapter,
 you will see that the items in the first two columns
 are positive mysteries, or mysteries of goodness,
 and that the items in the third column
 are negative mysteries, or mysteries of evil.

All of life's mysteries are equally mysterious,
 but some are pleasant and attractive
 while others are unpleasant and repulsive.

The pleasant or positive mysteries make our lives truly human,
 and they make life worth living.
In many ways, they are more important than material realities.

If we have a loving spouse and a happy marriage,
 we can put up with a lousy job and low pay.
If we have happy children and close family relationships,

we can do without a lot of the stuff that others may have.
If we are secure in our faith and our relationship with God,
we are less bothered by the ups and downs of the economy.

You can buy pleasure,
but you can't buy happiness.
You can buy a house,
but you can't buy a home.
You can buy companionship,
but you can't buy friendship.

In many ways, the best things in life are spiritual realities,
and the best things in life are free.

Material Signs

Money can't buy spiritual realities,
and although we can do things to increase the likelihood that they will happen,
we can't make them happen.

We can't make ourselves fall in love with someone
any more than we can make someone fall in love with us.
We can work to have a close-knit family,
but drug use and alcohol abuse can tear it apart.
We can try to stay in good health,
but an unexpected illness or accident could take it from us.
We want to be happy,
but despite our best efforts, happiness can elude us.

Because we don't have full control over spiritual realities,
when we reflect on them, we realize that in many ways they are gifts.

We can take relationships for granted
until they are broken.
We may not appreciate the gift of health
until we get sick.
We can think that freedom is a natural right
until we lose it.

When religious people reflect on this fact,
they see that spiritual realities are ultimately gifts from God.
Protestants tend to call them blessings.
"God blessed me with a wonderful family!"
Catholics call them simply gifts,
although an older theological term, as we have seen, is grace.

Every now and then, whether because one of these gifts gets taken from us,
or because something happens to make us more mindful,
we become more intensely aware of an experienced mystery
and we appreciate it more deeply.

One way this happens is through physical reminders.

In my basement is an old beat-up suitcase
containing all that is left of my days in Scouting.
I was a Boy Scout since the age of 11,
and I went to Scout camp for four weeks every summer.
At 16 I joined the camp staff and took positions of greater responsibility every year
until I was 21 and old enough to be the aquatic director.

Scouting gave me a lot.
It gave a city kid a chance to live in the country.
It gave a child of divorce good men to look up to.
It gave an adolescent many ways to grow into adulthood.

Scouting taught me always to leave a campsite in better shape than I found it in.
It taught me to be trustworthy, loyal, helpful, friendly,
courteous, kind, obedient, cheerful, thrifty, brave, clean, and reverent
—the 12 points of the Scout Law.
It taught me to do my best,
and to do a good turn daily.

Every now and then, I have to go look for something in that old suitcase,
maybe because we're leaving on a camping trip and I want to take my old canteen
or something like that.
But when I open the lid and see
neckerchiefs and slides, many of which I made myself,
medals and patches (Scouts are hugely into colorful patches),
merit badges and other awards,
camping gear of all sorts,
and even a few uniforms that I can no longer fit into,
I am suddenly transported back to
the tents and the cabins,
the woods and the lake,
the adventures and disasters
that were such an important part of my life 40 years ago.
(God, was it really that long ago?)

Physical reminders can do that for us.
They can help us to mentally and emotionally connect
with people, places and events in our lives that were important for us,

and with spiritual realities that are still important for us
—the beliefs, values and ideals that still live in us
and guide our lives.

Things like souvenirs bought in a shop or picked up from the ground,
photographs or drawings,
articles of clothing or pieces of jewelry,
household items or furniture,
decorations or knick-knacks,
smells or scents,
sounds or noises,
melodies or songs
can have the power to stir up memories
and put us in touch with spiritual realities
that were significant to us long ago
and that are still precious to us now.

As you did twice before when reading this,
take a moment to examine your own personal experience.
This time, think of something tangible in your life
—something seeable, hearable, touchable, smellable or tasteable—
that has the ability to put you in touch with
a significant but intangible reality.
Think first of what that item is,
then think of why it is important to you,
and try to articulate what that importance is
in terms of the kinds of spiritual realities discussed earlier.
(Remember that the list presented earlier in this chapter
does not name all of the deeper realities that are important to people).

Reflecting now on what you have just done,
notice the fact that there are three elements related to one another.
On one side of the relationship there is yourself,
you who are doing the remembering and imagining and analyzing.
On the opposite side, as it were, there is a spiritual reality
that is of some significance to you.
And in the middle, connecting you in some way to that spiritual reality,
there is something tangible that reminds you of something
that is intangible but very real to you.

The technical name for a material reality that functions like this,
making you aware of a spiritual reality,
is *symbol*.

A symbol is a sensible sign of an unseen reality,
a visible sign of an invisible reality,

a tangible sign of an intangible reality,
an outward sign of an inner reality,
a material sign of a spiritual reality,
a physical sign of a metaphysical reality.
Symbols have been defined in all of these ways
(and these definitions have also been applied to sacraments).

Notice, however, that a symbol in this sense is not
an experienced sign of an unexperienced reality,
a familiar sign of an unfamiliar reality,
or a known sign of an unknown reality,
although a symbol is often taken to be that sort of thing.

Remember what was said above,
that spiritual realities or mysteries are experienced but only partially understood.
So if some icon or image or gesture or ritual
is a sign of some reality that can never be experienced,
then it is not a symbol in the sense we are using here.

The word “symbol” comes from the Greek, *symbolon*,
and its linguistic roots suggest being thrown together or put with.
In ancient Greece, a *symbolon* was a small piece of pottery
that was broken in two parts that could be fitted together along the ragged edge,
uniting to form a perfect whole out of the two halves.

If two people each held half of a *symbolon*,
sending a messenger with the *symbolon*
would prove to the recipient that the message truly came
from the person who held the other half.

A *symbolon* could also be used to claim a valuable possession
that had to be abandoned during a war or flood.
By tying half of the *symbolon* to the object
the owner could later prove his or her ownership of it
by presenting the matching half.

So symbols, properly speaking, have the power
to reconnect us mindfully and emotionally
with spiritual realities that they represent
and which we have already experienced.

If we have not already experienced the deeper reality represented by a symbol,
it functions as a mere sign
or something that points to that other reality in an objective way
but not in an affective way.

A good example of this is a country's national flag.
When U.S. citizens look at an American flag,
it can arouse feelings of patriotism, loyalty and other ideals
represented by that flag
because they have already encountered those spiritual realities
and seeing the flag causes them to reconnect with those realities
to a greater or lesser extent.

But Americans can look at a German flag, for example
and even if they recognize it as a national flag,
seeing the flag will not put them in touch with any felt realities
unless perhaps they spent some time in Germany
and have some memories associated with it.

The cross is a symbol of Christianity,
the six-pointed star is a symbol of Judaism,
and the crescent is a symbol of Islam,
but those symbols mean different things to the adherents of the three religions.
Generally, people will have positive feelings
toward the symbol of their own religion
and either neutral or negative feelings toward the other symbols.
And if they see the symbols of a religion with which they are not acquainted
—say, the wagon wheel that is sometimes used for Hinduism—
it may have no affective association for them whatsoever.

So symbols *can* connect us with spiritual realities,
but they *don't necessarily* do that.
This is important for Catholics to remember
because we have often spoken of sacraments as being automatically effective
and there are some effects of symbols that are not automatic.

Symbolic Rituals

While it is true that sacraments are symbols that help us
to connect with important Christian mysteries,
it is also true that sacraments are action symbols:
they are symbolic gestures,
they are rituals,
they are ceremonies.

The simplest definition of a ceremony is that it is a symbolic action.
It can be a very brief ceremony, like a handshake
or like making the sign of the cross.
Or it can be a very elaborate ceremony
like the inauguration of a president

or like the installation of a pope.

Our working definition of a sacrament says that it is
a church ritual or ceremony that celebrates something,
so at this point we have to ask:
What does a celebration celebrate?

One thing we can be sure of:
Celebrations do not celebrate themselves!
Birthday parties do not celebrate birthday parties.
Fireworks displays do not celebrate fireworks displays.
Thanksgiving dinners do not celebrate Thanksgiving dinners.

All celebrations celebrate, symbolize and refer to
something other than themselves.
And all symbolic rituals, other than the simplest ones,
have three referents.
They point in three different directions, as it were.
They point to the past, to the present, and to the future.

What does a birthday party celebrate and refer to in the past?
The day on which someone was born, naturally.
What does it refer to in the present?
The fact that someone is another year older today
(or at least on a day close to today).
But it also celebrates relationships:
friendships and family relationships.
You could theoretically have a birthday party all by yourself,
but chances are, it wouldn't be much of a party.
And you could theoretically have a birthday party with nothing but strangers,
but something important would be missing,
wouldn't it?

And what does a birthday party refer to in the future?
The last verse of "Happy Birthday" says it all:
"May you have many more!"
You could theoretically throw a birthday party
for someone dying from cancer
or for someone sentenced to be executed the next day,
but the lack of a future to look forward to
would undoubtedly dampen the celebration.

Thinking of a larger-scale celebration,
what does a Fourth of July fireworks show celebrate and refer to in the past?
July 4, 1776, when the Declaration of Independence was signed,
and the winning of the Revolutionary War against England.
What then do the fireworks refer to in the present?

To the fact that America still has its independence,
and that we live in a free country.
If somehow the United States were ruled by a foreign government
that for propaganda reasons ordered us to hold
Independence Day celebrations,
the fireworks might light up the sky as ordered,
but most Americans would find little to celebrate.
Does a Fourth of July fireworks show have a future referent as well?
Certainly, because we expect our country to remain free,
and if its independence were really threatened,
we would probably be doing something else
than setting off fireworks on a summer night.

If sacraments are celebrations,
and if celebrations have three distinct referents,
then sacraments too have three distinct referents:
They point simultaneously
to the past, to the present, and to the future.

First, sacraments celebrate and refer to the past
and this past referent is always some aspect of the life and ministry of Jesus.
This is the historical ground and theological foundation
of the sacrament.

The Baltimore Catechism definition of a sacrament
drew attention to the past referent,
but it did so in a way that was somewhat misleading
because it suggested that Jesus himself had given instructions
about how to perform the sacramental rituals
and that he had ordered his followers
to do as he had instructed them.

Unfortunately, we have no evidence that Jesus did this
for any of the sacraments except baptism and Eucharist.
This is why many Protestant churches accept only these two sacraments
and reject the others as unscriptural.
Baptist churches even refuse to call them sacraments,
preferring to call them ordinances instead,
because Jesus ordered his followers to do them.

As we shall see, however,
each of the sacraments has a scriptural foundation
because each refers to some aspect of the life and ministry of Jesus
as recorded in the New Testament.

Second, sacraments always celebrate and refer to the present,
to something that is sacred, important and mysterious

that is going on in the life of the Christian community,
and very often in the lives of some of its members.

This is obvious in the case of weddings and ordinations
when members of the community are becoming married
or are becoming priests or deacons.

It is perhaps less obvious in the case of the Eucharist,
which is not a transition ritual or a rite of passage
as the other sacraments are.

But as we shall see,
it is nonetheless true.

Third, sacraments also refer to the future,
and the theological name for the hoped-for and anticipated future
is the kingdom of God,
or the reign of God.

This future is the time and place
—sometimes called the eschatological moment—
when all the things we celebrate in the sacraments
will be totally fulfilled and completely actualized.

You might think of it as heaven as it will be
after the Second Coming of Christ
and the resurrection of the dead,
when God's rule will be perfectly realized
and people will live completely according to God's will.

Let us see how this three-fold analysis applies to each of the sacraments.

Baptism

What does baptism celebrate in the present?
Fundamentally, it celebrates the entrance of a person or persons
into the Christian community and, in the case of a Catholic baptism,
into the Catholic Church.

One could say that it celebrates the cleansing of a soul
and the forgiveness of Original Sin,
but these ideas are theological interpretations of the rite
rather than its referents.

One could, however, say that it celebrates spiritual renewal,
moral conversion, new life in Christ, and so on,
because these may have been experienced by the new initiates
before or during their catechumenate,
and so they may be spiritual realities that come to be felt more intensely
during their baptism.

In the case of infant baptism,
one could certainly say that it celebrates the child's entrance
into the Christian community and parish family,
and it may also celebrate new or renewed spiritual realities
in the lives of the parents and godparents,
but these will probably vary depending on the people
and the circumstances.

When we look for scriptural referents for baptism,
people naturally think first about the baptism of Jesus
by John the Baptist in the Jordan River.
But this was hardly a Christian baptism,
and Jesus was certainly not joining the Catholic Church!

It is more accurate to think about the end of Matthew's gospel,
where, just before his ascension into heaven, Jesus says,
"Go and make disciples of all peoples
Baptize them in the name of the Father,
and of the Son,
and of the Holy Spirit.
And teach them to do
everything that I have commanded you."
(Matthew 28:19-20)

One can also find scripture referents in other books of the New Testament
that talk about new converts to Christianity
being initiated into their new community and new way of life
through the ritual of baptism.

But if we are looking for referents in the life and ministry of Jesus,
then we have to look not for the outer ritual but for the inner reality.
So if baptism celebrates a person's entrance into the Christian community,
we can ask:

Did Jesus invite people to be in community with him?
Did Jesus ever call people to come and follow him?

Sure he did.

And those who accepted that invitation are known in the scriptures
as the followers or disciples of Jesus,
especially those who are named as the Twelve
and are sometimes called the twelve apostles.

So the sacrament of baptism makes reference to and celebrates
the following of Jesus and joining the community of those who live
according to the way he showed them.

This then is the past referent.

But what about the future referent?

To get a handle on this

—now that we understand that the spiritual reality being celebrated
is that of community with Christ and other Christians—

we can ask:

What would it be like if everyone in the world
were in community with Christ and with one another?

What if the world were one large community
living the way Christ commanded his followers to live?

Wouldn't that be like heaven?

Wouldn't that be living in the kingdom of God,
where God's rules of right conduct would reign in all hearts?

Sure, it would be.

Catching a glimpse of this vision in your imagination

gives you a foretaste of heaven,

and seeing it truly but partially realized in Christian communities

—in families, in prayer groups, in religious orders,
on retreats, in parish events, and so on—

lets you know that what you look forward to in God's kingdom
is real.

Confirmation

What does confirmation celebrate in the present?

Today, that's very hard to say!

Confirmation has been called a sacrament in search of a theology,
a church ceremony that is in need of an theological explanation.

One reason for this confusion is that confirmation is performed
at different times in different places.

In some places, it is performed during adolescence
—any time during junior high or high school, actually.

In other places, it is performed shortly before children
make their first communion.

In Orthodox churches, it is performed after infant baptism
and it is called chrismation.

So it's hard to pin down any one thing
that is being celebrated in the sacrament of confirmation.

Those in favor of adolescent confirmation

say that it celebrates adult commitment to the faith.

But does it really,

when confirmed teenagers drop out of church?

Those in favor of childhood confirmation
say that it celebrates full initiation into the church.
But does it really,
if their parents stop bringing them to mass on Sunday?

Perhaps it would help
if we looked for the past referent of confirmation,
if we looked in the life and ministry of Jesus, and asked,
is there something there that we as a church
would want to celebrate?

Confirmation has always been associated with the Holy Spirit,
and in the New Testament this is the same as the Spirit of God
and the Spirit of Christ.

We can find places in the Acts of the Apostles
where people have hands laid on them
and they start speaking in tongues.

Catholic charismatics have argued
that this is what should happen when people are confirmed,
but the history of the church reveals that this happened only in the first century
and even then, it did not happen to everyone who joined the church.

Paul's letters to the Romans and to the Corinthians
speak not only about the gift of tongues
but also about other charisms or gifts of the Spirit,
but it would be hard to say that these are what confirmation celebrates
since Paul does not associate them with the laying on of hands.
And again church history does not show people suddenly receiving these gifts
when they are confirmed,
so it would be hard to say that the ritual refers to them
and celebrates them.

As we did in the case of baptism, therefore,
we need to look beyond what seem to be obvious scriptural referents
and take a closer look at the life and ministry of Jesus.

Reading through the gospels,
how would we characterize the spirit of Jesus?
Asking the same question in a more contemporary way,
how does Jesus come across in the gospels?

Certainly he is someone dedicated to doing God's will,
devoted to carrying out the will of his Father.

In this sense, he is always living in the kingdom of God
because he is always ruled by what God wants,
so he proclaims that the kingdom is at hand
because he himself is living it
and showing how it can be lived by others.

Jesus also comes across as a loving and caring person,
as someone who is courageous and willing to take risks,
as someone who is gentle and forgiving,
as someone who is truthful and direct,
as someone who realizes he has a mission
and does it.

Today we might call these attributes aspects of Jesus' personality or character.
In the ancient world, they would be called manifestations of his spirit.
The spirit of Jesus is the energy that drove him
to do the things that he did.

In the gospels, does Jesus ever communicate his spirit to his followers?
Certainly, he tries.

He tells them to love one another the way he loves them.
He explains that they should obey the spirit rather than the letter of the law.
He teaches them to pray to the Father.
He commands that they forgive even their enemies.
He sends them out to preach and heal.
He gives them the example of eating with social outcasts.
He confronts hypocritical religious leaders in their presence.
He lets himself be arrested and put to death rather than renounce who he is.

To some extent, Jesus the rabbi must have communicated something of his spirit
to the disciples or students who left their homes and jobs
to be with him and learn from him.

But it seems they did not really get it
because all of them except the women ran away when he was crucified.

John's gospel recounts that Jesus breathed the Spirit of God,
the spirit of forgiveness and discernment,
into the disciples,
but this was after his resurrection.

The Acts of the Apostles describes the breakthrough as occurring
in an upper room on the Feast of Pentecost,
after which the disciples began to act just as Jesus did
because they were energized with his spirit,
the Spirit of God,
the Holy Spirit.

Whether we believe John's account or Luke's,
it is pretty clear that Jesus eventually succeeded in communicating his spirit
to those who wanted to follow in his footsteps.

Now, entering the Christian community is something to celebrate
and the sacrament of baptism does this.

But just like Jesus' disciples during his earthly ministry,
not everyone in the church really gets the message.

They are part of the group,
but they have not begun to act like Jesus yet.

Sure, they are nice people,
but Jesus' message was not about being nice.

But at some point, church members may begin to realize
that being a follower of Jesus is not like being a member of a club,
that being a student of the master means taking his words seriously,
that being a disciple of Christ means doing what he did,
and what Jesus did over and over again,
many times and in many ways,
was care about and be of service to others.

Call it a conversion,
call it a gradual or sudden realization,
call it a decision to go beyond being ministered to
and instead minister to others,
whether in the church or outside the community,
but it is an inner change,
a spiritual change.

It is a change in direction,
whether slight or drastic,
but it is a change nonetheless.

It is in some way an appropriation of the spirit of Jesus,
the spirit of caring about and serving others.

It is in some way the completion of baptism,
for the goal of baptism is not membership but discipleship.

It is in some way the end of Christian initiation,
because now the church member has finally got the point
and is no longer a beginner.

Is this not something to celebrate?

You bet it is.

And Catholics already have a celebration for it:
it is called the sacrament of confirmation.

But because we have not appreciated the nature of celebrations
—that celebrations celebrate spiritual realities,
and that these realities must be experienced to be appreciated—
we have tried to theologize about the sacrament in a vacuum
and suggest that it means this or that,
when it might not really mean those things at all
to the people who are going through the ritual.

I cannot say that going through the rite of confirmation
refers to and celebrates in the present
the decision to follow Jesus in serving others,
or the acceptance of Jesus' spirit of service and care for others,
although for some who are confirmed as adolescents or adults
it may mean precisely that.

But I can say that the sacrament could have this meaning
—and the current rite could be adapted to support it—
if the Catholic Church decided to move in this direction.

What then would the future referent of this sacrament be?

To get a glimpse of this, we can ask:

What would it be like if everyone in the world
were committed to serving one another?
What if everyone had decided to care about and care for
those in need around them?

Wouldn't that be like heaven?

Wouldn't that be living in the kingdom of God,
where God's rules of right conduct would reign in all hearts?
Sure, it would be.

Catching a glimpse of this vision in your imagination
gives you a foretaste of heaven,
and seeing it truly but partially realized in people
who serve others gladly and selflessly,
and experiencing it in yourself when you feel the emotional reward
of reaching out to help others,
lets you know that what you look forward to in God's kingdom
is real.

Reconciliation

Although eucharist is the third sacrament of initiation
and is usually treated after baptism and confirmation,
it is a ritual of such complexity and diversity
that it will be best treated at the end,

after we have become familiar with the referents
of the other six sacraments.

Reconciliation, or the sacrament of repentance, as it is called in Latin,
easily displays the three-fold referents of ritual celebrations,
as does the anointing of the sick,
as we shall see presently.

Its past referents are easy to find.

Jesus forgives sinners a number of times in the gospels.
He tells a paralyzed man that his sins are forgiven.
He tells a sinful woman that her sins are forgiven.
He eats and drinks with sinners.
He asks his Father to forgive those who are crucifying him.

Jesus also tells his followers to forgive sins.
They should forgive seventy times seven times,
which is a way of saying, “Don’t even try to count the times.”
When they pray, they should ask God to forgive them
just as they forgive others.
They should forgive those who repent
and turn away from their sinful ways.
And they should be assured that the sins that they forgive
are forgiven also in heaven.

So it is clear that the forgiveness of sins has a foundation
both in what Jesus himself did
and in what he told his followers to do.

The present referent is what is going on
when a Catholic confesses sins to a priest
and when the priest offers words of forgiveness and absolution
in the name of Christ.

The prayers of the rite speak of God’s merciful love,
of repentance and thanksgiving for forgiveness.

The central actions of the rite are the confessing of individual sins
—personal moral failings and harm caused to others—
and the concluding words of the priest:
“Through the ministry of the Church
may God give you pardon and peace,
and I absolve you from your sins
in the name of the Father, and of the Son,
and of the Holy Spirit.”

What is happening is the confession and forgiveness of sins.

What is being celebrated is the penitent's repentance,
or turning away from the sins of the past,
and God's compassion and pardon,
regardless of the offense.

What is often felt by the penitent is relief from guilt,
reassurance of God's love,
and an ability to forgive oneself.

But even if these emotions are not felt,
the penitent walks away with the knowledge of God's forgiveness
and the awareness of having been given another chance.
Sometimes freedom from doubt is just as important
as the feeling of freedom.

Sin and guilt,
mercy and compassion,
forgiveness and pardon,
conscience and repentance
doubt and reassurance,
knowledge and freedom—
these are all spiritual realities.

And they can be experienced as real
through participation in this religious ritual.

Let us turn now to the future referent of this sacrament.

To get a glimpse of this, we can ask:

What would it be like if everyone in the world
repented of the wrong they had done,
and asked those they wronged for forgiveness?
What if everyone forgave those who admitted they had done wrong
and even those who did not realize
that they had done anything wrong?

Wouldn't that be like heaven?

Wouldn't that be living in the kingdom of God,
where God's rules of proper conduct would reign in all hearts?

Sure, it would be.

Catching a glimpse of this vision in your imagination
gives you a foretaste of heaven,
and seeing it truly but partially realized
when people see the wrong they have done
and admit it,
when people stop doing what is harmful to others

and ask for forgiveness,
when you are in need of forgiveness
and receive it,
when others ask you for forgiveness
and you find it in your heart to forgive—
experiences such as these
let you know that what you look forward to in God's kingdom
is real.

Anointing of the Sick

As with the sacrament of reconciliation,
the past referents for anointing of the sick
are easy to find.

Jesus interacts with sick people many times in the gospels.
He heals people who come to him,
and people who are brought to him.
He heals people who are blind and lame,
and people who are sick with fever and leprosy.
He heals people who are physically ill,
and people who are spiritually tortured.
He heals Jews and Gentiles;
he heals by word and by touch.

In each of the synoptic gospels,
Jesus tells his disciples to do as he has done:
to heal sickness and diseases,
and to cast out evil spirits.

And in the Gospel of John,
Jesus tells the disciples at the Last Supper
that they will work even greater miracles
than he has.

The New Testament tells us clearly then
that Jesus healed people
and commanded his followers to do the same.

In the Acts of the Apostles
both Peter and Paul heal people who are sick,
and writing to the Corinthians,
Paul refers to those who have the charismatic gift of healing.

The present referent of this sacrament
is what is happening when a person with an illness
is being anointed by a priest
and is being prayed for by him and others.

The scripture readings make reference to God's love for us
and to the healing power of Christ.

The litany asks for strength and healing,
for relief from suffering and temptation,
and for life and health.

The prayers over the oil speak of healing and salvation,
and of God's power to give strength in times of weakness
and comfort in times of suffering.

The prayers said during the anointing
speak of God's compassion and saving power:
"Through this holy anointing
may the Lord in his love and mercy help you
with the grace of the Holy Spirit. . . .
May the Lord who frees you from sin
save you and raise you up."

During this ceremony a person is turning to God and asking for help
with an illness or infirmity,
with a pain or discomfort,
with the anxiety brought on by a chronic condition
or an impending surgery.

What is being celebrated is God's love and mercy in the here and now,
God's ability to touch us through the ministry of others,
God's compassionate presence and power to heal us
spiritually, emotionally, and even physically.

What is often felt by those being prayed over and anointed
is a renewed ability to put themselves in God's hands,
a calming of anxiety,
a lessening of pain or discomfort,
a strengthening of purpose and resolve.

People also report being spiritually touched
by the attention of all those who are praying for them
and ministering to them, along with the priest,
in the sacramental ceremony.

Some may even find that their illness is cured,
or its symptoms are noticeably diminished,
but this is very rare.

Health and well being,
strength and courage,

sensing God's presence and power,
assurance of God's love and compassion,
acceptance and detachment—
these are all spiritual realities.

And they can be genuinely experienced
through participation in this religious ritual.

The future referent of this sacrament
expands on what is discovered in the present.

To get a glimpse of it, we can ask:

What would it be like if everyone in the world
were totally free of all sickness and disease,
all pain and disease,
all sorrow and sadness,
all anxiety and depression?

What if everyone were strong and healthy forever,
and no one would age and die?

Wouldn't that be like heaven?

Wouldn't that be living in the kingdom of God,
where God's plan for good living would be realized by everybody?

Sure, it would be.

Catching a glimpse of this vision in your imagination
gives you a foretaste of heaven,
and seeing it truly but partially realized
when people are made happier
through the ministry of others,
when people demonstrate courage
during serious illness,
when people find spiritual strength
in the midst of physical weakness,
when people get better
without any medical explanation—
experiences such as these
let you know that what you look forward to in God's kingdom
is real.

Marriage

For this sacrament, let us begin with the present referent.

What does a wedding celebrate?

At the bare minimum, it celebrates the legal union of a couple in marriage,
creating a family of two.

But most wedding ceremonies celebrate much more than that.

In our society, most people marry for love and companionship,
so except in rare cases, the wedding celebrates
a couple's devotion to one another,
their choice of each other as partners for life,
their decision to bind themselves publicly
instead of just living together,
their willingness to work hard
at maintaining and building their relationship,
and usually their desire to expand their family
by welcoming children into their relationship.

Since this is a Catholic wedding,
the ceremony also celebrates Christian beliefs and ideals
for marriage and family.

Christian marriage is a lifelong commitment
based on mutual care and respect,
a covenant of self-giving,
friendship and faithfulness.

Ideally it is a relationship in which one can see
the reciprocal love between Christ and the Church
as described in the Epistle to the Ephesians.

But any wedding—and don't forget the reception,
which extends the celebration—
also celebrates wider circles of relationships:
the immediate families of the bride and groom,
the creation of a new and larger extended family,
present friends and old friends,
whose good wishes contribute to the couple's joy
and who support this new marriage.

Looking for the past referent of marriage can be difficult
since Jesus wasn't married,
and although he condemned divorce
he never urged people to marry.

Pointing to the wedding feast at Cana as a referent
has the same problem as the baptism of John:
it was not a Christian wedding!

One clue is the passage in Ephesians 5 mentioned above,
where Paul (or someone writing under his name)
says that the relationship between husband and wife
should be modeled on the relationship between Christ and the Church:

That relationship is one of mutual self-giving:
as Christ loved the Church and gave himself completely for her,
so a husband should be dedicated to and care for his wife unreservedly;
and as the Church loves and serves the Lord whole-heartedly,
so a wife should love and give herself in service to her husband
without restriction.

Did Jesus himself ever talk about this kind of loving service
and self-sacrifice?

Of course he did,
although not in the context of marriage.

Three times in the Gospel according to St. John (chapters 13 and 15),
Jesus tells his followers to be like him,
to love one another just as he loves them.

In fact, he tells them, that their love for one another
is the way that people should be able to recognize
that they are his disciples (13:35).

But what kind of love is Jesus talking about?
John's gospel tells us that the greatest love
is to lay down one's life for others (15:13),
and Jesus did that literally in dying on the cross
for the sins of the world.

All Christians therefore are to practice self-giving love,
and although it is difficult to do this for a large number of people,
it is possible to do this in a family.

In fact, parents do it all the time
when they make sacrifices for their children.

But is this not also the kind of love
to which Ephesians calls Christian spouses?
Is this not also the kind of love
that is modeled on the love of Christ and the Church?
And is this not also the kind of love
that reflects that divine-human relationship?
So is this not also the kind of love
that is symbolic of that transcendent relationship?

Self-giving love is a mystery, for sure,
for it is something that we can experience
even though we understand it only partially.

But that mystery is a symbol of an even greater mystery:
the mystery that Christ experiences as his love for the Church,
and the mystery that the Church experiences in loving Christ.

Such a symbol can be rightly called a sacrament,
not because it is a church ritual,
but because it is a sign of a sacred reality,
which is a very ancient definition of sacrament.

Although it was not where we might expect to find it, therefore,
and although it was not an explicit command of Christ to marry,
we can say that the foundation of Christian marriage
is indeed found in the life and ministry of Jesus,
both in his example of self-sacrificing love
and in his command to love as he loved.

The future referent of marriage can be found
by reflecting on self-giving love.

To get a glimpse of it, we can ask:

What would it be like if everyone in the world
loved the way that Jesus loved,
not just their husband or wife,
not just their children or parents,
but everyone else in the world
—which is in fact what Jesus asked
his followers to do.

What if everyone cared about everyone they met,
and cared about everyone they heard about,
so that they were willing to give of themselves
for the well-being of others?

Wouldn't that be like heaven?

Wouldn't that be living in the kingdom of God,

where Christ's command to love would be practiced by everybody?
Sure, it would be.

Catching a glimpse of this vision in your imagination
gives you a foretaste of heaven,
and seeing it truly but partially realized
in the radiant joy of a young married couple,
in the comfortable fidelity of older spouses,
in a husband's tender care of a wife with breast cancer, or
in a wife's commitment to a husband with Alzheimer's disease,
lets you know that what you look forward to in God's kingdom
is real.

Ordination

Having seen that the past referent of Christian marriage is self-giving love,
understood in the context of family,
it is easy to see that the gospel referent in an ordination
is that same sacred reality,
understood in a wider context.

When men are ordained in the Catholic Church,
whether as deacons, priests or bishops,
they embark on a career of ministry and service
deeply rooted in the words and actions of Jesus.

In a certain sense, it would be foolish to search the New Testament
for specific passages in which to find
the gospel meaning of ordination,
because Jesus' whole life was one of ministry and service,
and he spoke about it often.

Whether preaching or teaching,
healing or forgiving,
leading or building community,
Jesus was always giving of himself in the service of others,
and he was always living a life of self-sacrifice.

Moreover, when he spoke to his followers,
he often addressed his closest disciples,
the twelve who would later be called apostles,
in the expectation that they would listen more closely
to what he said
and imitate his actions more closely.

Among other things, he told them
that the greatest among them must be the least,
that they should give up everything to follow him,
that they should expect to suffer when following him
in the service of others,
but at the same time,
his yoke is easy and his burden is light.

He called them to be preachers of good news
and indeed to *be* good news to others
in their service to them.

The words he spoke at his last supper
were addressed specifically to the twelve,
and so his command to love others as he had loved
is especially relevant to those who commit themselves
to a life of serving others in the church.

The present referent, therefore, in any ordination
is this commitment to a ministry of service,
whether as a deacon, priest or bishop.

This does not mean that those who are not ordained
—men and women in religious orders, for example—
are not committed to serving others
both within and outside the church.

It means only, as indicated earlier,
that the ceremonies celebrating these other commitments
are not called sacraments,
even though in a broader sense
they may be every bit as sacramental.

Nor does this imply that those who are not ordained or in religious orders
are free from having to think about serving others,
for being a Christian means being a follower of Christ
and it is impossible to follow Jesus
without being committed to the service of others.

This broader Christian commitment is celebrated
in baptism and confirmation,
which are sacraments of initiation into the Christian way of life,
and also in the marriage ceremony,
which is the sacrament of beginning a life of service to one's spouse.

The present referent of any ordination ceremony
is broadly this commitment to a life of service in the church,
but specifically it refers to the type of ministry
—diaconal, presbyteral, or episcopal—
into which the ordained are entering
through the performance of this liturgical ritual.

Even more specifically,
any ordination ceremony also celebrates certain aspects of
the lives of those who are being ordained:
the call to service to which they responded years before,
their lengthy preparation for their new ministry,
and the support of their family and friends.

A characteristic of symbolic rituals
is that they have not one but many referents,
some of which are more obvious than others,
but even those that are less obvious are still celebrated
by those for whom they are sacred realities.

What then is the future referent of ordination?

To get a glimpse of it, we can ask:

What would it be like if everyone in the world
ministered to others the way that Jesus did?
What would it be like if everyone
were as committed to a life of service, as he was?
What would it be like if everyone were dedicated
to living for the well-being of others
and sacrificing themselves on behalf of others?

Wouldn't that be like heaven?

Wouldn't that be living in the kingdom of God,
where Christ's command to serve one another
and lay down one's life for one another
would be practiced by everybody?

Sure, it would be.

Catching a glimpse of this vision in your imagination
gives you a foretaste of heaven,
and seeing it truly but partially realized
in the ministry of deacons and priests in your parish,
in the work of your bishop when he comes to visit,
in the self-sacrifice of ministers who are not ordained, and
in the joy that you experience when you serve others
lets you know that what you look forward to in God's kingdom
is real.

Eucharist

We are now in a position to examine the eucharistic liturgy,
which is popularly known as the mass.

Notice that when we examined the other sacraments,
we did not ask about their meaning in general or in the abstract.
Often when people ask about the meaning of a sacrament,
they are looking for a general answer such as may be found
in a catechism or theology book.

Such a meaning is abstract because it abstracts from actual celebrations
and relates what a sacramental ritual generally means
or is supposed to mean.

This abstract or ideal meaning may or may not correspond
to what people who are actually participating in a sacramental celebration
are thinking or intending.

In other words, the textbook meaning of a sacrament may or may not be
what a real-life sacrament means

to the people who are participating in it
or who are attending it as onlookers.

For example, one of the theological meanings of confirmation
is the completion of baptism
and full initiation into the church.

But to the parents of a teenager who is being confirmed
it may mean that they have done their duty to make sure
that their child “received the sacrament.”

And to the teenager it may mean
that she has completed her religious education,
and so her parents can no longer force her
to go to mass on Sunday.

This is one of the reasons why, in our discussion of the sacraments,
we have avoided talking about their meaning
and instead we have talked about their referents,
or what the sacraments refer to.

The rite, or the liturgical text of a sacrament,
sets forth a number of theological meanings
and presents what the ritual is supposed to mean
to those performing the ritual,
to those participating in the ritual,
and to those attending the ritual.

In this sense it can be said that the sacramental rite has a meaning
or, more precisely, a number of meanings,
in the same way that a sentence can be said to have a meaning
even though no one is uttering the words or thinking the meaning.

The written rite presents, in other words, an abstract expression of meaning—
meaning that is removed from any particular real-life situation.
But a sentence has actual meaning only when it is actually spoken,
and a rite has actual meaning only when it is actually enacted.

As we begin examining the eucharistic rite, therefore,
we will necessarily have to talk about it in general,
apart from any particular eucharistic liturgies.

When we talk about the past referents,
we will be talking about what the various parts of the rite
(readings, prayers, gestures, etc.)
make reference to in the scriptures, theology or history.

When we talk about the present referents,
we will be talking about a range of spiritual realities
to which the words and gestures of the rite abstractly refer,

all of which are possible referents of the rite
or of parts of the rite.
But which spiritual realities or mysteries are actually being referenced
in any particular mass
is going to depend on what the participants in that mass
are actually experiencing or intending or thinking about
during the performance of the liturgy.

And when we talk about the future referents,
we will do what we have done in discussing the other six sacraments,
that is, we will highlight some of the key spiritual realities
to which the rite abstractly refers
and to which it may actually refer
in the minds and hearts of the participants.

We will then imagine what our lives would feel like
and envision what the world would look like
if those spiritual realities were to be fully actualized
in the kingdom of God.

And we will affirm that those referents are in fact real
even though they are never fully realized
because we have in fact experienced them,
if only partially and incompletely.

The main reason for all these preliminaries,
as we begin to discuss the eucharistic liturgy,
is that this sacrament is unique among the seven.

First, it is lengthier and takes more time than any of the other six,
most of which can be done in five to ten minutes,
if one looks only at what is essential to the rites
or at the simplest forms of the rites.

This is one reason why some sacraments are often expanded, as it were,
by surrounding them with a mass—
a nuptial mass for a wedding,
an episcopal mass for an ordination,
and so on.

Second, it is the only sacrament that is repeated on a weekly basis,
and even on a daily basis for the religiously devout.

This increases its familiarity to most Catholics,
but at the same time this can increase its ambiguity
since masses are used to celebrate a wide variety of important realities:
theological mysteries,
events in the life of Christ,
patron saints, national holidays,
personal and institutional anniversaries,

the beginning and end of the school year,
and so on.

Third, it is the only sacrament that is not a transition ritual,
that is, its form or structure is not that of a rite of passage.

In transition rituals, the status one or more of the participants
is changed in some way.

Through baptism, a non-Christian becomes a Christian,
through a wedding ceremony, two single people become married,
through penance, a sinner becomes reconciled to God and the church,
and so on.

Participating in a eucharistic liturgy
may have a deep spiritual effect on one or more of the participants,
but the eucharistic rite is not structured in such a way
that some individuals are designated as those who are going to be changed
in a particular manner by the performance of the rite.

One might object that, during the eucharistic liturgy
bread and wine are changed into the body and blood of Christ,
but since this is not a change that happens to those attending the mass,
it is not, technically speaking, a rite of passage.

So eucharist is not a transition ritual
and this makes it formally or structurally different
from the other six sacraments.

Fourth, eucharist is the name of a sacramental rite,
but it is also the name of a sacrament within the rite.

Before the liturgical changes mandated by the Second Vatican Council in the 1960s,
when Catholics spoke about the eucharistic ritual,

they referred to it as the sacrifice of the mass, or more properly,
the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass, with capital letters
emphasizing the sacredness of the rite.

Similarly, when Catholics spoke about the eucharistic bread and wine
after they had been consecrated during the mass,
they referred to them as the Blessed Sacrament, or more simply,
as the Eucharist, again with capital letters
emphasizing the sacredness of the elements
and the divinity of the one who is present
in the sacrament.

Over centuries and decades, language tends to simplify,
and one of the simplifications in the English language has been
a reduction in the number of words that are commonly capitalized.

(If you don't believe this, read some American documents
from the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.)

Fifty years ago, the names of the sacraments were ordinarily capitalized,
whereas today they are usually not capitalized,

with perhaps the exception of Eucharist.
But since that word can refer either to the sacramental rite
or to the sacramental elements,
we will refer to the ritual as the eucharistic liturgy,
the eucharistic celebration,
the sacramental celebration,
the liturgy,
or the mass;
and we will refer to the consecrated bread and wine as the eucharist,
the sacred elements,
the sacrament that is received,
or communion.

This having been said, let us now ask about
the past referents of the eucharistic celebration.

The first referent that comes to mind is the Last Supper,
Jesus' last meal with his disciples before his arrest and crucifixion.
Although none of the gospel accounts
exactly matches the words of consecration in the eucharistic liturgy,
it is clear that the liturgical words hearken back to that scriptural event
and to Jesus' command to share bread and wine
in memory of him.

But the liturgical meal also calls to mind other meals in the New Testament:
meals of Jesus at the homes of Pharisees and other religious people,
meals of Jesus with outcasts and sinners,
meals at which Jesus taught or healed,
early Christian meals designated as the breaking of bread,
and the Lord's supper mentioned by the apostle Paul.

And let's not forget the meals that Jesus provided for the crowds
that went out to the desert to listen to him teach—
meals that started with a few pieces of fish and a few loaves of bread
and ended with baskets of leftovers.

All of these are scriptural precedents for, and therefore referents for
the eucharistic liturgy.

At any weekday mass there are two scripture readings,
and at every weekend liturgy there are three.

Given the great variety of these readings,
the past referents found in eucharistic celebrations
are also greatly varied:

- Old Testament figures such as Adam and Eve,
Abraham and Sarah,
Moses and the Israelites,
David and Solomon,

Isaiah and Jeremiah,
and dozens of others.

- Biblical events such as the creation of the world,
the great flood,
the exodus from Egypt,
the conquest of Canaan,
the fall of Israel and Judah,
the return from exile,
and many others.
- Narratives and parables from the four gospels.
- New Testament happenings in Acts of the Apostles.
- Moral and doctrinal teachings in the epistles.
- Prophetic visions in the Book of Revelation.

When we think about it,
the number of biblical referents available for eucharistic liturgies
is quite large.

The number of past referents increases even further
if we add prayers that refer to scriptural figures and events,
if we add passages from the book of Psalms
that are used as liturgical texts,
and if we add hymns and other religious songs that are sung
by a choir or by those assembled for a given mass.

Past referents for the eucharistic liturgy, it turns out,
include not only referents in the Bible
but also references to Christian doctrine and church history.

Moving on to present referents,
we find a similar multiplicity
and perhaps even a bewildering variety of referents.

First there are the referents mentioned in the rite itself,
and indeed in different versions of the rite
(Eucharistic Prayer I, II, etc.).

There are many references to the assembly,
a portion of the local church that is gathered for prayer and worship.
Reference is made to the larger parish community,
to the diocese and to the universal church.

There are acknowledgements of sinfulness in the penitential rite
and expressions of thankfulness in the eucharistic prayer.

Those participating in the liturgy are supposed to be mindful of these many referents,
but realistically speaking, we find ourselves pondering some of them at one mass
and thinking about others at another mass.

One way of talking about referents is to ask what a celebration celebrates.

As we saw earlier,
 celebrations do not celebrate themselves.
Although Catholics commonly speak of celebrating the eucharist,
 this is somewhat redundant.
Since eucharist is a sacramental celebration,
 celebrating the eucharist literally means celebrating the celebration.

We saw as well, however,
 that eucharist can name the consecrated elements,
 also referred to as the body and blood of Christ.
But this too is not quite satisfactory
 because what Catholics celebrate in the eucharistic liturgy
 is not the sacrament, the symbol, the external sign,
 but the spiritual reality designated in Catholic theology
 as the real presence of Christ.
That is to say, one of the primary referents of the eucharistic liturgy
—what the sacramental ceremony celebrates—
 is the presence of Christ.

Christ's presence can be experienced
 in the worshipping community,
 in the felt unity of the group gathered for prayer and worship.
Christ's presence can also be experienced
 in the Word proclaimed and explained,
 that is, in the scripture readings or the homily.
And Christ's presence can likewise be experienced
 in the sacramental elements,
 that is, in the consecrated bread and wine on the altar,
 in receiving them as communion,
 in meditatively communing with the Lord
 after receiving the elements,
 or even in contemplative union with God
 while praying before a monstrance or tabernacle
 containing the body of Christ.

This is not to say that the presence of the risen Lord will be experienced
 in all three ways by everyone at every mass.
Nor does it imply that Christ's presence will necessarily be experienced
 in all three ways by some people at every mass.
And it does not even imply that everyone will experience some type of divine presence
 at some point during any mass.

What the Catholic doctrine of the real presence of Christ in the eucharist declares
 is that the eucharistic liturgy and the consecrated bread and wine
 are always sacramental,

are always signs of Christ's presence,
are always symbols through which God's presence can be felt
and known through experience.

The risen Lord is therefore a primary referent of the eucharistic liturgy
and of the sacramental elements that are consecrated during the liturgy.
Christ's presence is a spiritual reality that is celebrated in every mass,
and his presence can be experienced in every mass.

But Catholics also use eucharistic liturgies to celebrate other things as well.

For better or worse, masses are used to celebrate
births and deaths,
visits by bishops and other church dignitaries,
anniversaries of weddings or ordinations,
the beginnings and endings of retreats,
anniversaries of membership in religious orders,
founders of Catholic institutions,
football and basketball victories,
and so on and so on.

You name it, and if Catholics want to celebrate it,
they will often celebrate it with a mass.

Let us turn now to the future referent of this sacrament.

To get a glimpse of it, we can ask:

What would it be like if everyone in the world
worshipped and gave thanks to God?
What would it be like if everyone
repented of their sins,
as is done in the penitential rite?
rendered God honor and praise,
as is done in the Glory to God?
listened attentively to God's word,
as is done during the scripture readings?
put that word into action,
as is encouraged during the homily?
stood up for what they believed,
as is done during the Creed?
offered themselves to God
and their treasure for the need of others,
as symbolized by the collection
and procession of gifts?
prayed for others and gave thanks to God,
as is done in the Eucharistic Prayer?
opened themselves to the experience of Christ's presence,
as is possible during the remembrance of the Last Supper?

prayed as Jesus taught
during the Lord's Prayer?
allowed Christ to be the bread of life for them,
as is possible through the receiving of communion?
and resolved to do God's work in the world,
as is encouraged in the rite of dismissal?

Wouldn't that be like heaven?
Wouldn't that be living in the kingdom of God,
where the whole world is assembled
to give God thanks and praise
and to rejoice in the divine presence?

Sure, it would be.
One of the biblical images of God's kingdom
is a great banquet where no one goes hungry
and everyone has enough to eat.

Catching a glimpse of this vision in your imagination
gives you a foretaste of heaven,
and feeling it truly but partially realized
when you deeply participate in eucharistic worship
and experience the spiritual realities
that such worship makes available
lets you know that what you look forward to in God's kingdom
is real.

Conclusion

We have come a long way from where we started.

We began with a working definition of sacraments as
seven church rituals or ceremonies
that celebrate and help us to connect with
the most important realities in the Christian life.

We then introduced the notion of spiritual realities
as things that are real but not physically real—
not things in the sense of material objects
but things in the sense of experienced realities
that can be known and talked about.

We noticed that for many reasons
spiritual realities are more important than physical ones.
Indeed, very often material things
such as clothes or jewels or cars or houses

are important not in themselves
but because of the spiritual realities that they symbolize
such as status or power or well-being.
People who do not understand the symbolic nature of material things
often get trapped into wanting more and more stuff
and more and more expensive stuff
in their attempt to experience the spiritual realities
that those things symbolize
to themselves and others.

The way symbols work, however, is quite simple
and quite familiar to anyone for whom a photograph,
a souvenir, a smell, a song or something else that is sensible
is able to reconnect them mentally and emotionally
with spiritual realities that are important to them.

Not only symbolic objects but also symbolic rituals or ceremonies
work this way,
and this is the way that the symbolic rituals that Catholics call sacraments
work when they are spiritually effective.
They experientially connect us and reconnect us
with the spiritual realities to which they refer,
not automatically, but when we are psychologically prepared
and mentally open to experiencing them.

Not all spiritual realities are celebrated in the Catholic sacraments,
for some are negative and destructive to human well-being
(hatred, envy, jealousy, selfishness, and so on)
and others are positive and good for people
(creativity, initiative, dignity, friendliness, and so on)
but did not become celebrated in Christian rituals
perhaps because they were not prominent
in the ministry and teachings of Jesus.

Nonetheless, the experienced mysteries that are celebrated in the sacraments
are central to living in the spirit of Christ
both individually and as a church.

To name some of the more prominent,
community, discipleship, forgiveness, healing, self-sacrifice and service to others
all need to be experienced and lived
if Christians are to be followers of Christ,
and if the Church is to be the body of Christ in the world.

Each of these is celebrated in one of the sacraments
and all of them are celebrated to one degree or another
in the sacrament which is the eucharistic liturgy.

This is not to say that they are the only spiritual realities
that are celebrated in the sacraments.

Symbols of their nature have many layers of meaning:
they can refer to many things simultaneously,
they can have overt meanings and hidden meanings,
they can evoke different realities for different people.

But it is to say that the things we celebrate in the sacraments are real,
they are spiritual gifts or graces for which we are grateful,
they are mysteries that we can experience and partly understand,
and they are participations in divine life
that make our own lives deeply spiritual and fully human.