



SACRED WINDOWS

An invitation to gaze into heaven's stained
glass windows
Beauty, Truth, and Goodness

Sunday, February 5, 2023

Why Are There Seven Sacraments Not Six or Eight?

"This is the sweet mystery of life: the Sacraments."

~Abp. Fulton J. Sheen

Dear Thomas,

Cradle Catholics take it for granted that **the number of sacraments is seven**. It just is. "It has always been thus," as the saying goes. But has it?

Well, not really. Or, maybe it's better to take the lawyer's position and say, "**Both Yes and No**" or "It depends." Let me explain.

Rooted in Scripture

The Yes part of the answer is that the number has always been seven. Above all, it's not hard to find evidence for the **seven sacraments in the Bible**. Here is the basic rundown (the citations below are only a selection. Many more could be added):

- **Baptism:** Matthew 28:18-20; Mark 16:15-16; John 3:1-7.
- **Confirmation:** Acts 19:3-6; Acts 2:1-13; Hebrews 6:2.
- **Eucharist:** John 6:30-71; Matthew 26:26-29; 1 Corinthians 11:24-27.
- **Penance:** Matthew 16:19; John 20:21-23; James 5:16.
- **Anointing of the Sick** (Extreme Unction): Mark 6:13; James 5:14-15.
- **Holy Orders:** John 20:21-23; Acts 6:3-6; 1 Timothy 3:1, 5:22.
- **Matrimony:** Matthew 19:4-6; Ephesians 5:31-32; Revelation 20:1-3.

In other words, the sacraments are **all scripturally based**, so we should never let anyone tell us that they are non-biblical "inventions" of the Catholic Church. Keep in mind that the sacraments were around from the very beginning of the Church – *even before the New Testament was written!* They have been guarded in the heart of the Church **for twenty centuries**.

In essence we are saying that **sacraments are the Church's holiest possessions** – more accurately, gifts – because they are of divine origin, and we must always remember that when we receive them. They are the most sacred of all the *sacred windows* of our faith.

Pope St. Leo the Great said that **the presence of God in this world** has passed into the sacraments. They are a pretty awesome realities when you think about it.

Altarpiece
depicting the
7 Sacraments
1445-50

Artist: Rogier
van der Weyden
(Flemish)



Number Depends on Definition

Historically, the core problem for the Church was not figuring out the number. The issue was *how to define a sacrament*, namely, how to determine what qualified as a sacrament and what *did not*. And **that is the No answer**: if you don't know what a sacrament is, just about anything holy can be a sacrament, and that number isn't limited to seven.

One very clever theologian in the early middle ages, for example, thought that there were *thirty sacraments*!

His name was Hugh of St. Victor, and please don't blame him for his theology because he just thought that other holy things such as holy water, blessed ashes, the sign of the cross, and the taking of religious vows, among others, were also sacraments.

It was an honest mistake. We take the seven sacraments as a given, but it wasn't always so. Such a saintly man as St. Peter Damian thought the consecration of kings was an **eighth** sacrament. The famous theologian, Peter Abelard, believed the number of sacraments was **six**, and other theologians of the day thought there were **five or twelve**. (Old Hugh takes the cake with **thirty**, however.)

This diversity of numbers came about because the Church hadn't settled on a clear definition of a sacrament, **as distinct from a random holy thing**.

The issue was finally settled in the year 1213 when the Fourth Lateran Council **fixed the number** of sacraments at seven; the Church reaffirmed the number seven again at the Council of Florence in 1439; and then definitively at the Council of Trent (1545-63).

Now, I know what you must be thinking: "*You mean it took 1,200 years to define the number of sacraments?!*" I get your dilemma. It seems like the Church was a little slow on the uptake! This was not an easy matter for the Church to get right.

But why, exactly, did it take so long?



Baptism | Penance | Confirmation | Eucharist | Matrimony | Holy Orders | Anointing

An Organic Process

First of all, since the Church didn't invent the sacraments, the full understanding of them took place through an organic process of development, which of course, **like any natural process, took time**. Joseph Martos, in his book *Doors to the Sacred*, says that one reason it took so long is because the Church was *pretty busy* for a few centuries. For example:

- From the time of Christ to the Roman Emperor Constantine (313 AD) the Church was fending off **one violent persecution after another**. During these centuries, the Church took for granted that the sacraments had been handed on to them by the Apostles.
- **The Fathers of the Church** (roughly 200 to 700 AD) then spent a good deal of time on doctrinal controversies and on clarifying critical doctrines like the divinity and humanity of Christ. But they didn't define the sacraments because these were *lived realities*, not disputed matters.
- After that, the Church was too busy **evangelizing and converting all the pagan tribes** of Europe in the centuries following the Fall of Rome (roughly 500-1000 AD). Finally,
- **The Crusades happened**: there were as many as eight Crusades from 1096 to 1270 AD, and, needless to say, it's hard to write books when the majority of a nation's youth are off conquering and defending foreign lands.

Martos goes on to say that **the rise of several new religious orders** in the Middle Ages, particularly the Dominicans and the Franciscans, together with the establishment of universities, led to a precise definition of what a sacrament is.

Here again we have another Catholic marvel. The great **medieval universities** grew out of Catholic cathedral schools: **Oxford** was established about 1096; University of **Paris**, 1150; University of **Padua**, 1222, among others. These centers of culture and faith systematized higher learning and allowed scholars to get into the depths of teachings that had formed the foundation of the Church's life for a thousand years.



That's when the real smart churchmen of the Middle Ages (men like St. Albert the Great, **St. Thomas Aquinas**, and St. Bonaventure) began to make the necessary distinctions that solidified our concept of what a sacrament is.

Greater Precision

A precise definition of a sacrament came from a scholar at the University of Paris named **Peter Lombard (1096-1160 AD)**, whose collection of ancient writings, *The Sentences*, was read by everyone who got a higher education. He was the first one to make a certain crucial distinction about holy things which was critical to defining the number of sacraments. He said,

- A holy thing can be either a *sign* of holiness, or
- It can be both a sign of holiness and a *cause* of that holiness.

Bingo! This distinction has come down to us as the difference between a *sacramental* (just a sign) and a *sacrament*, which is **both a sign and a cause of grace**. (With distinctions like that, I would have thought Lombard was a Jesuit, but the Jesuits wouldn't come on the scene for another 300 years. He was a Franciscan....)

Did you also notice the dates? Lombard died in 1160, and the first formal definition of the number of sacraments was at the Lateran Council in 1213. In other words, once the Church got clarity on the very essence of what a sacrament was, it was not hard then to formalize it into doctrine.

This, in fact, is the way things operate: whenever the Catholic hierarchy *defines* something, it's not because the Church "invented" it! It's usually because **the Mystical Body of Christ had mulled it over** for a few centuries to get clarity on its deeper meaning for our souls.

A Crucial Distinction

This also brings us right back to the ever-reliable, **crystal clear definition** of the [Baltimore Catechism](#):

"A Sacrament is an outward sign instituted by Christ to give grace."

That distinction, for example, shows the difference between holy water and the sacrament of Baptism. **Holy water is a holy thing** because of its blessing by a priest, but it is not a sacrament; yet, it **can be used in the action** of the Sacrament of Baptism to actually give us grace.

The same goes for the different oils used in Baptism, Confirmation, Holy Orders, and Anointing as well as for other material elements such as bread and wine.

Sacramentals **may also consist of words and gestures**, not only physical elements. For example, the sign of the Cross is a reminder of Christ's Crucifixion, but a priest making the sign of the Cross over a penitent and pronouncing the words, "I absolve you..." is a sacrament.

Whole courses can be taught on the sacraments, so we will have to limit ourselves to the question of why there are seven sacraments, and not six or eight (or thirty!) But **look for more articles to come** on these wonderful sacred windows.

Symbolism of the Number 7

Finally, as to the number, seven is often called **the "perfect number"** in scripture, and there is a reason for that:

Four symbolizes the natural world (four corners of the earth, four directions, four winds, etc.), and **three**, of course, symbolizes the life of God (the Trinity).

Seven is the sum of those two numbers and thus represents a fusion of the natural and supernatural, the human and the divine, indicating that **anything which bears that number** is able to transcend heaven and earth.

That's another way of saying that the sacraments came down from heaven – and more importantly – **raise us up** to the very life of God.

*Fulton Sheen, *Life is Worth Living*, Audio CD set, #25 – "The Seven Rivers of Life," St. Joseph Media, 2019.



Feature Article

Speaking of being rooted in scripture, the Church herself has been the guardian of **ancient biblical manuscripts** called Codices (singular: Codex) for centuries. Two articles on Sacred Windows will open a window for you into the extraordinary life of the most valuable Bibles in existence today: the Codex Sinaiticus and the Codex Vaticanus (see articles below). Truly, the Church's treasury of spiritual gifts is inexhaustible.

[**Not Just Any Old Codex
\(Sinaiticus\)**](#)

[**The Incomparable Codex
Vaticanus**](#)



Update on the New Project

As I mentioned in previous Newsletters, I'll be launching my new "Sacred Windows Vignettes" on the Substack platform...**next Sunday!**

Substack is a new social media forum that lies somewhere in between Facebook and a full business website. It is kind of like a mini-website for writers.

The Substack forum will be a place for me to publish **short, single-subject pieces** to illustrate our three main Sacred Windows themes: Beauty, Truth, and Goodness. Here are the types of things you are likely to see on the "Sacred Windows Vignettes" page:

- short, inspirational, and fascinating videos
- insights into the most inspiring art
- stunning views of architecture and stained glass
- quotes, anecdotes, and (very) short stories
- awesome nature scenes, and...
- ...a bit of humor mixed in.

It's all part of the Sacred Windows mission: to help **raise our souls from the daily rat race** and refine our senses to see the life of God breaking through our world. I think you'll enjoy them!

Everyone on the Sacred Windows list will automatically be listed on the forum, but you can unsubscribe at any time (with no hard feelings because I know we all get too much email.) Look for an email from me next Sunday.

God bless you and your family!

Peter Darcy

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