

THE SACRAMENTS

Sacraments as Symbols

One of the most satisfying definitions of the sacraments is that they are signs of God's love. The sacraments of our faith are essentially symbols which reveal God's loving plan for all humankind.

Signs and symbols are all around us. Things, events and people can all be symbols. For example, the American flag is a symbol of freedom and independence. Abraham Lincoln, Martin Luther King and St. Vartan are symbols of equality and freedom.

By association, we see a symbol as something concrete that represents an intangible reality. Thus, things, events and people all have the capacity to make present something greater than themselves.

What is a Sacrament?

St. Paul provides us our first definition of sacraments. The word *sacramentum* in the Latin Bible is translated into Armenian as խորհուրդ *khorhoort* and in English means "mystery." In the epistle to the Ephesians (chapters 3-5), St. Paul uses the word "mystery" to refer to God's plan of always wanting to renew and unite all things in Christ. St. Paul also teaches us that it is through Christ Our Savior that the sacraments are most perfectly revealed. Jesus is mysteriously present in all sacramental blessings and is himself the officiate through the person of the priest. Because Jesus Christ is the author and bestower of these sacred signs of life, he teaches us that through them sin and death have been conquered and life restored once again.

Another way to understand the meaning of the word sacrament is to look at it as a way of living our lives in the presence of God. The things we do and say every day are, in a sense, sacrament.

Jesus is present today in the sacraments or blessings of the church. He comes to us in such visible signs as wine, bread, water and oil. He comes to make us whole and to take us to his loving Father. All we need to do is turn to him in faith.

What Does a Sacrament Do?

1. The sacraments recall the historical life of Jesus – the past.
2. The sacraments demonstrate how Christ is alive today – the present.
3. The sacraments prefigure Christ at the end of time – our glorious future.

The following chart provides a brief summary of these sacraments and their relationship to key moments in our lives as well as the particular teachings of Jesus they each celebrate.

Christ instituted the sacraments and he becomes the true celebrant of each.

The Sacraments

Sacraments are outward signs instituted by Christ to give grace. Historically, the number of sacraments was never formally canonized to be seven, as in the Roman Catholic concept of seven formal sacraments.

These ritual sacraments are signs that represent particular actions and teachings of Jesus. In a sense they re-live and re-present what has taken place in the past.

As noted earlier, the sacraments were instituted by Jesus Christ who is himself the bestower of those blessings from God which we call "graces" or *shnorhk շնորհք*. But what is it we receive by these graces? Very simply, we receive Jesus Christ, for he is grace. Grace is the gift of God's friendship and concern for us. It is truly the story of God's constant love for us and finally it is God's invitation to us to live in union with him.

Sacrament	Life Event	Teachings of Jesus
Baptism <i>Mugrdootyoon</i> <i>Մկրտություն</i>	Birth	The offering of oneself to God or the presentation of the child by the godparent sets us on the way to salvation
Chrismation (Confirmation) <i>Gunoonk or Troshm</i> <i>Կնունք կամ Դրոշմ</i>	Development and Growth	To be a committed Christian is to live a life of service to the Lord and continually reaffirm this life by the inspiration of the Holy Spirit.
Eucharist (Holy Communion) <i>Soorp Badarak</i> <i>Սուրբ Պատարագ</i>	Experiencing daily life together by sharing and partaking of abundant fruits of the earth.	By the grace of Christ we become united and bound together by his body and blood, as he commanded, to live a life of love.
Penance (Reconciliation) <i>Abashkharootyoon</i> <i>Ապաշխարություն</i>	The wayward life of sin and guilt.	Forgiveness is granted through repentance and reinstatement with the entire Christian community.
Marriage (Holy Crowning) <i>Soorp Busag</i> <i>Սուրբ Պսակ</i>	Two become one in heart, soul and mind. A kingdom is established and a family begins.	A life in Christ strengthens love between husband and wife.
Holy Orders (Ordination) <i>Tsernatrootyoon yev Odzoom</i> <i>Չերնադրություն եւ Օծում</i>	Service and vocation	God's love comes to his people through his specially chosen servants, called to care for his faithful flock.
Anointing* for Spiritual Healing <i>Odzoom</i> <i>Օծում</i>	Illness or despair	Healing of the spirit, soul and body gives us the grace and courage to endure.

**According to the Church fathers, the aim of this sacrament is to grant perfect health through penance. The service does not have any association with the preparation for death or "last anointment". It is strictly to be used as a sacrament for healing, and can be repeated. Today, the Unction of the Sick is not regularly practiced, but is still recognized as a Sacrament of the Church. In the administration of the Sacrament, the clergyman prays and reads the Gospel of healing, blesses the individual, then offers communion. Thus, both the body and the soul of the individual find peace and healing. (from www.armenianchurch.org)*

From *The Sacraments: The Symbols of our Faith*, Written By: Father Garabed Kochakian
On-line Resource: <http://www.armenianchurch.net/families/sacraments/index.html>

Holy Communion

A Family Guide for Meaningful Participation

Imagine inviting people you love to your home for dinner and when you invite them to the table, your loved ones decline! It's the same thing in Badarak: our Lord has invited us to His table, to share in His very essence – His Body and Blood as embodied in the bread and the wine. Only in this way do we become the Church: as we gather in His name and remember Him as He commanded His disciples to do more than two thousand years ago. Holy Communion is the most intimate encounter we can have with God in this life.

Here are some important things to know historically, theologically, and practically.

A historical overview

- ❑ At what is now known as The Last Supper, Jesus and his disciples were gathered for the Passover meal in the upper room of an inn. It is here, during this traditional meal, that Jesus did something completely different. *"While they were eating, Jesus took bread, gave thanks and broke it, and gave it to his disciples, saying, 'Take and eat; this is my body. Do this in remembrance of me.' Then he took the cup, gave thanks and offered it to them, saying, 'Drink from it, all of you. This is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins.'" Matthew 26:28-28; Luke 22:19*
- ❑ Based on Jesus' exhortation to share new life in Him by gathering to break bread and share a common cup, early Christian worship centered on a communal meal. Although ideas varied as to what was shared – bread, wine, water, cheese, fish, fruit, etc. – Christian documents from that time confirm that it was a literal meal, most likely in the evening, in someone's home with the food provided by those who gathered.
- ❑ Eventually, the meal became part of a ritual meal (depicted in Roman catacomb paintings as early as the second century) during which bread and wine were blessed and shared. These meals also featured Scripture reading, psalm singing, preaching, and a shared meal. While the fellowship meals continued, the ritual of bread and wine moved to a central place in Sunday worship. Believers understood that in receiving this bread and wine, they were sharing in the very body and blood – that is, the very essence – of their Lord. *"He who eats my flesh and drinks my blood abides in me and I in him." John 6: 56*
- ❑ Over the centuries, the form of this liturgy developed into a basic format with its local variations and influences. Because there was so much improvisation of prayers, etc, efforts to permanently "fix" the text began as early as the 4th century.
- ❑ Since 1177, when Nerses of Lampron wrote his commentary on the *Badarak*, the liturgy has remained unchanged with some minor exceptions, for example, modifications made as a result of contact with Roman Catholic Crusaders (the use of the bishop's miter and the final blessing), as well as the insertion of the popular "*Der Voghormya*" hymn in the 18th century.

A theological overview

- ❑ In the first part of the Divine Liturgy, Jesus comes to us through His Word, the Gospel reading. In the second, through His Body and Blood, or Holy Communion. In a very fundamental way, each of these is an "incarnation."
- ❑ When we fall short of the high calling of Christianity as we are bound to do, the sacrament of Holy Communion provides a way to express our remorse and our desire to return to the path that leads to God.
- ❑ It is an ancient tradition of the Church that even before receiving Holy Communion, the faithful have opportunities to examine their lives and confess individually to a priest. In America it has become the custom to offer a general confession and absolution immediately before Holy Communion is distributed. The people read a prepared examination of conscience and then the priest, not by his own authority, but by the very word of Jesus Christ, absolves the sins of all who have made confession.

Participating Meaningfully in Holy Communion

1. Prepare: Fast the morning of receiving communion and do your best to get ready and leave for church graciously and unhurriedly, with a minimum of family chaos. Make time to read the day's Scripture readings (*available at www.armenianchurch.net*) and discuss on the way to church.
2. Participate: Sing all the hymns, respond to the priest's blessings and the deacon's petitions, bow, cross yourself, kneel. The word Liturgy itself means "work of the people." We are called to actively participate in all aspects of the *Badarak*.
3. Follow the service by using the liturgy book: As time goes by you will become increasingly familiar with the words and their meanings.
4. Be thoughtful during confession: Spend time before church and during the confession recitation to prayerfully reflect on how you have fallen short in the ways enumerated. Commit yourself to working actively to "sin no more."
5. Be a conscientious Bible student: Read Scripture daily and join your parish Bible study. Follow the church calendar to read Scripture at family meals. Since the Bible is the foundation of our liturgy, look up all the Scripture references you find in the liturgy book.
6. Take home mas: Share the blessed bread of the liturgy with people who were not able to come.

Back in the 10th century, the great Armenian theologian Khosrov Antsevatsi eloquently described the importance of the Divine Liturgy when he wrote: "Since those who confess and show repentance receive atonement by means of the Holy Mystery [the *badarak*], and are re-united to Christ in order to become for Him body and members, we should be eager for the great medicine."

The Divine Liturgy is the great medicine that provides true meaning and direction for our lives. It offers the peace and solace that only God can give – a free gift no less – in an age when so many people are searching, and spending millions of dollars in vain to find personal stability and security. (*Excerpt by Fr. Daniel Findikyan*)