

Symbols, or Sacraments?

Whether the Signs of the New Covenant Do What They Signify

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I. The Question Between Us

Every Christian communion baptizes, and nearly every one celebrates a supper of bread and wine. The dispute this essay takes up is not whether these things should be done but what happens when they are. The Catholic Church teaches that the sacraments are instruments: that in baptism God actually washes sin away, that in absolution He actually forgives, that grace is truly given through the sign and not merely pictured by it. A large part of Protestantism teaches that the signs are exactly that—signs: ordinances, acts of

obedience, testimonies to a grace that was given elsewhere and otherwise, through faith alone.

The word for the first view is sacramental; for the second, the usual word is memorialist, though it must be said at once—and section III says it properly—that Protestantism is not of one mind here. The question beneath the vocabulary is simple and old: does God use matter to give grace? Or does matter, at most, remind us of grace? Bread, wine, water, oil, the laying on of a hand, words spoken aloud by one man to another—are these things God works through, or only things we respond with?

II. What a Sacrament Is

The Catechism defines the term in one sentence: “The sacraments are efficacious signs of grace, instituted by Christ and entrusted to the Church, by which divine life is dispensed to us.” Every word is load-bearing. Signs: they signify, as the memorialist says. Efficacious: they effect what they signify, which is where the dispute lives. Instituted by Christ: the Church did not invent them and cannot add to them. By which divine life is dispensed: the grace is God’s, not the rite’s.

Behind the definition stands a principle that is really the Incarnation continued. The God of the Bible has never dealt with mankind except through matter. He made a material world and called it good; He chose a people by circumcision of the flesh; He healed Naaman through the waters of the Jordan and the blind man through clay and spittle; and when He came in person, He came as a body, and saved us by what happened to that body. A purely spiritual religion, in which matter is beneath God’s use, is not a purified Christianity. It is the ancient instinct the Church fought under the name of Gnosticism, wearing newer clothes.

Water is the standing example. When Jesus met the Samaritan woman at the well He did not disparage the water; He promised a better water: “the water that I shall give him will become in him a spring of water welling up to eternal life” (John 4:14). The sacramental claim is that He kept the promise literally—that the water of baptism is where that spring is opened.

III. What the Reformers Actually Said

Honesty requires a distinction most polemics skip: the Reformation did not speak with one voice about the sacraments, and the strongest forms of the objection are not held by all Protestants. Luther kept baptismal regeneration and the baptism of infants all his life, and taught the Real Presence against the Swiss with a vehemence Catholics might envy. The Reformed confessions call the sacraments true means of grace, though grace sealed rather than contained. The purely symbolic view descends from Zwingli, and its clearest

modern statement is confessional Baptist. The Baptist Faith and Message puts it exactly: “Christian baptism is the immersion of a believer in water in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. It is an act of obedience symbolizing the believer’s faith in a crucified, buried, and risen Saviour, the believer’s death to sin, the burial of the old life, and the resurrection to walk in newness of life in Christ Jesus.” An act of obedience symbolizing: the definition is the doctrine.

Three arguments carry the symbolic view, and they are serious. First, from justification: if we are saved by faith alone, a rite cannot confer what only faith receives, and a sacrament that “works” threatens to become a work. Second, from the pattern of the New Testament: every baptism narrated there is the baptism of a believing adult, and the command is “repent, and be baptized”—repentance first, which an infant cannot do. Third, from the fear of magic: a rite said to work *ex opere operato*, by the doing of the deed, looks like the very superstition the prophets condemned—as though God could be obligated by a ceremony performed over an unknowing head. These deserve answers, not dismissal, and the sections that follow attempt them.

IV. What the New Testament Says Baptism Does

Start where the dispute is sharpest: what does the New Testament say baptism does? Not what might it symbolize—what does the text say it effects? The witnesses are many and their verbs are strong.

Baptism, which corresponds to this, now saves you, not as a removal of dirt from the body but as an appeal to God for a clear conscience, through the resurrection of Jesus Christ.

1 Peter 3:21, RSV

“Baptism... now saves you.” Peter says it and immediately guards it from magic—not the removal of dirt, but an appeal to God, effective through the resurrection. The other witnesses agree. Peter at Pentecost: “Repent, and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins; and you shall receive the gift of the Holy Spirit” (Acts 2:38)—baptized for the forgiveness of sins, not baptized to announce a forgiveness already transacted. Ananias to Saul: “Rise and be baptized, and wash away your sins” (Acts 22:16). Paul to Titus: God “saved us... by the washing of regeneration and renewal in the Holy Spirit” (Titus 3:5). Jesus to Nicodemus: “unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God” (John 3:5). And Paul to the Romans: we were “buried with him by baptism into death,” so that we might walk in newness of life.

A reader meeting these texts fresh, with no controversy to defend, would not conclude that baptism pictures a salvation given elsewhere. He would conclude what the ancient

Church concluded, and what Luther still concluded: that baptism is where God applies the death and resurrection of Christ to a particular person. Nothing in that competes with faith. The sacrament is not a rival to faith but faith's object in action—God doing, visibly and at a nameable moment, what faith trusts Him to do. The memorialist reading must take “saves you,” “wash away your sins,” “regeneration,” and “born of water” as four figures of speech for the same absent thing. The sacramental reading takes them as descriptions.

V. Are Catholics Born Again?

The question deserves a section of its own, because it is usually asked as though it were a trap: are Catholics born again? The answer is yes. Every baptized Catholic has been born again, in the only sense the phrase carries in Scripture. When Jesus tells Nicodemus that “unless one is born anew, he cannot see the kingdom of God” (John 3:3), Nicodemus asks how a man can be born a second time, and Jesus answers by specifying the birth He means: “unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God” (John 3:5)—one birth of water-and-Spirit together, not a physical birth followed by a spiritual one. The context is baptism on every side. Jesus has just come from His own baptism, where the water and the descending Spirit met (Matt. 3:16); and the evangelist's very next scene has Jesus baptizing—“After this Jesus and his disciples went into the land of Judea; there he remained with them and baptized” (John 3:22). Paul closes the circle by calling baptism “the washing of regeneration and renewal in the Holy Spirit” (Titus 3:5): rebirth, water, and Spirit in a single verse.

The early Church knew no other reading. Justin Martyr, about A.D. 151, describes converts “brought by us where there is water, and ... regenerated in the same manner in which we were ourselves regenerated,” and gives the reason: “For Christ also said, ‘Except ye be born again, ye shall not enter into the kingdom of heaven’” (*First Apology* 61). Irenaeus draws the same doctrine from Naaman's sevenfold washing in the Jordan; Cyprian and Augustine cite the verse for baptismal regeneration as a matter of course. Nor did the Reformation's first generation read it otherwise: Luther's *Small Catechism* teaches that baptism “works the forgiveness of sins.” The born-again-at-the-altar-call theology that asks the question is the newcomer in the room.

One escape route is sometimes attempted: that the water of John 3:5 is the amniotic fluid of natural birth, so that Jesus meant only “born physically, then born spiritually.” No instance of *hudōr* meaning amniotic fluid has been produced from ancient Greek, the Septuagint, or the New Testament—the standard Protestant theological dictionary's long entry on the word contains none. It is a reading invented to relieve the verse of its sacramental sense. So the question may be returned with charity: are you born again the way the Bible describes the new birth—of water and the Spirit?

VI. The Baptism of Infants

The concession first, because it is real: every baptism narrated in the New Testament is the baptism of a convert, and the command in Acts 2:38 puts repentance before the water. If the Church had been born yesterday, believer's baptism would be the natural reading. But the New Testament is a missionary document; its narratives are of first-generation conversion, where adults are of course the subjects—as they are on any mission field today, Catholic ones included. The question is what happened to the children of the converted, and here the evidence points the other way.

The households, first. The jailer at Philippi “was baptized at once, with all his family” (Acts 16:33); Lydia “was baptized, with her household”; Paul baptized “the household of Stephanas.” The texts do not say whether infants were present, and honesty forbids pretending they do. What they show is that baptism was administered by household, the way the covenant had always run—which is the second and stronger point. Paul calls baptism “the circumcision of Christ”: “you were circumcised with a circumcision made without hands... and you were buried with him in baptism” (Colossians 2:11–12). Circumcision was given to infants on the eighth day, by God's command, a millennium and a half before any infant could assent to it. If the sign of the new covenant is the fulfillment of the sign of the old, the burden of proof belongs to those who would narrow it—who must explain why the new covenant, everywhere else wider than the old, is at this one point meaner. Peter's Pentecost sermon speaks the covenant idiom exactly: “the promise is to you and to your children” (Acts 2:39).

And the practice is ancient. The explicit discussions we have from the early centuries—Origen calling infant baptism a custom received from the apostles, Cyprian's council debating not whether infants should be baptized but whether they must wait eight days as circumcision had—treat it as established, not as innovation. The Council of Trent defined the point against the Anabaptists, and Ott grades it flatly: “The Baptism of young children is valid and licit,” *de fide*. What of infants who die unbaptized? The Church commends them to the mercy of God, and the Catechism draws the boundary with a sentence worth memorizing: “God has bound salvation to the sacrament of Baptism, but he himself is not bound by his sacraments” (CCC 1257). The sacraments are where God has promised to act. They are not a fence around His freedom.

VII. Confession: Why Tell a Priest?

Why confess to a priest what God alone can forgive? The Protestant objection often quotes David: “Against thee, thee only, have I sinned” (Psalm 51:4). But the psalm's own setting answers it: David spoke those words after the prophet Nathan confronted him, face to face, and it was Nathan who pronounced God's judgment and God's pardon—“The Lord

also has put away your sin.” Sin against God only; confession and absolution through a man sent by God. The pattern is not an invention of the Middle Ages. It is 2 Samuel 12.

The New Testament makes the pattern an office. On Easter evening the risen Christ said to the apostles: “As the Father has sent me, even so I send you... Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained” (John 20:21–23). The sentence has no natural meaning unless the apostles are to hear sins: forgiving or retaining requires knowing what is confessed, and a commission to do what God was already doing without them would be a commission to do nothing. Paul says the same in his own vocabulary: God “gave us the ministry of reconciliation... So we are ambassadors for Christ” (2 Corinthians 5:18–20). James tells the sick man to call the elders—not the congregation, the elders—and adds, “confess your sins to one another” (James 5:14–16). None of this makes the priest a rival mediator. He is the ambassador the one Mediator sent, and the absolution he speaks is Christ’s. The Catholic who hears “I absolve you” is not trusting a man instead of God; he is hearing, with his ears, the promise of God spoken through the office God established—and he walks out knowing he is forgiven, rather than hoping he has felt sorry enough.

VIII. The Priesthood of All Believers

“You are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God’s own people” (1 Peter 2:9). The Reformation read that sentence as the end of the ministerial priesthood: if all believers are priests, a separate priesthood is superfluous. But Peter is quoting, and the quotation decides the question. The words are God’s to Israel at Sinai: “you shall be to me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation” (Exodus 19:6). Israel was a kingdom of priests—and had a ministerial priesthood, the sons of Aaron, established by the same God in the same covenant. The universal priesthood and the ordained priesthood coexisted for fifteen centuries in the very text Peter cites. His words cannot abolish in the new covenant what they described alongside a ministerial priesthood in the old.

The New Testament’s own vocabulary confirms the both/and. The word “priesthood” (*hierateuma*) is applied to all the baptized—Peter here, and the Book of Revelation. The Church’s ministers are called by another name: *presbyteroi*, elders, the word that became “priest” in English. The baptized offer the spiritual sacrifices of prayer, work, and witness; the ordained are set apart to minister the sacrifice of Christ to the community. The Catholic Church teaches both priesthoods and grades neither as a metaphor—the Catechism’s treatment of the common priesthood of the faithful (CCC 784–786, quoting *Lumen Gentium*) could be read aloud in most Protestant churches without objection. The dispute is not whether all believers are priests. It is whether Christ also set some apart, and Scripture’s answer—in the Twelve, in the elders appointed city by city, in the laying on of hands—is the subject of this site’s page on apostolic succession.

IX. Ex Opere Operato, Honestly Stated

The charge of magic deserves a precise answer, because the phrase *ex opere operato*—“by the work worked”—is easy to caricature and impossible to caricature honestly once defined. It does not mean the rite compels God, and it does not mean the recipient’s state is irrelevant. It means the sacrament’s validity does not depend on the holiness of the minister: that Christ, not the priest, is the true actor. The doctrine was forged in the Donatist controversy, when the question was whether baptisms conferred by clergy who had failed under persecution were worthless. Augustine’s answer became the Church’s: when Peter baptizes, Christ baptizes; when Judas baptizes, Christ baptizes. The alternative is pastoral terror—a Christian who could never know his baptism or absolution was real without first auditing the soul of the man who gave it.

That answers the magic charge; the works charge deserves its own answer, because it is really the *sola fide* dispute in sacramental dress. “A sacrament that works is a work” assumes the sacrament is something the believer performs to earn standing. It is the reverse: a sacrament received is something done to the believer, not by him. The infant at the font contributes nothing; the penitent in the confessional brings only his sins; the communicant opens his mouth. If salvation by works means man achieving his own rescue, nothing could be further from it than an act whose whole grammar is receiving. The objection lands on the wrong end of the transaction.

What the recipient brings still matters, and the Church says so as plainly as any Reformer: the sacraments “bear fruit in those who receive them with the required dispositions” (CCC 1131). An adult who approaches without repentance receives the sign without its fruit—validly baptized, not thereby saved. Paul’s warning about unworthy reception of the Eucharist assumes exactly this. So the memorialist’s instinct guards something true: religion that manipulates is superstition, and the Church condemns it too. The line between sacrament and magic is the line between receiving from God on His terms and obligating a power on ours—and it is the sacramental view, not the symbolic one, that keeps God the actor throughout.

X. Worship in Spirit and Truth

The verse most often set against everything above is John 4:24: “God is spirit, and those who worship him must worship in spirit and truth”—read as Christ’s own verdict against ritual, ceremony, and sacrament. The reading collapses on its context. The Samaritan woman had asked a question of geography—this mountain or Jerusalem (John 4:20)—and Christ’s answer abolishes the where, not the how: “the hour is coming, and now is” when true worship will be tied to no mountain, because the true temple is His own body (John 2:19–21). Nor is “spirit” in John’s Gospel a synonym for the merely interior. In the

same conversation Christ offers the woman living water (John 4:10), and when the image returns at the feast, John glosses it himself: “this he said about the Spirit, which those who believed in him were to receive” (John 7:39). Worship in spirit is worship in the Holy Spirit; worship in truth is worship in Him who is “the way, and the truth, and the life” (John 14:6). And the speaker is the same Christ who, on the night before He died, took bread and said “Do this” (Luke 22:19)—instituting the most concrete act of worship the Church possesses. A verse cannot be a verdict against ritual when the Lord who spoke it instituted one.

XI. Indulgences, Briefly

No honest page on this subject can skip the word that lit the Reformation. The indulgence trade of the early sixteenth century—Tetzel’s preaching being the notorious case—was a genuine abuse, and the Council of Trent said so, abolishing the office of the indulgence-seller and condemning “all base gain for securing indulgences.” A Catholic who pretends otherwise forfeits the argument before it starts. But an abuse defines nothing. What an indulgence is, in the Church’s teaching, is a remission of the temporal consequences of sins already forgiven—the healing that remains owed after the guilt is gone, as a nail’s hole remains after the nail is drawn. It presupposes forgiveness; it has never been forgiveness, and it has never legitimately been for sale. The doctrine stands or falls with purgatory and the communion of saints, which have their own pages on this site; it is mentioned here so that its shadow does not fall silently over everything else.

XII. Why Seven

Why seven? The number was not decreed in advance; it was counted. The Church, reflecting over centuries on what Christ instituted, recognized seven acts in which the pattern holds—an outward sign, instituted by Christ, giving grace: baptism (Matthew 28:19), confirmation (Acts 8:14–17), the Eucharist (Luke 22:19), penance (John 20:22–23), the anointing of the sick (James 5:14–15), holy orders (2 Timothy 1:6), and matrimony (Ephesians 5:31–32). Trent defined the number against the Reformers’ reduction to two or three, and Ott grades the definition *de fide*. The deeper point is not arithmetic. The seven track the shape of a human life—birth, growth, food, fall and restoration, sickness, office, and love—because grace does not visit life at one door only. A sacramental system that stopped at two would leave most of a life outside.

XIII. What Is at Stake

The Church’s teaching, with its notes: the sacraments of the New Law were instituted by Christ and there are seven, *de fide*. The sacraments work *ex opere operato*, *de fide*. The baptism of young children is valid and licit, *de fide*. These are not opinions within

Catholicism; they are the faith itself, defined at Trent against the very objections this essay has answered.

What is finally at stake is where a Christian may look for assurance. The memorialist locates grace in an interior transaction and leaves the signs outside it; the believer is then thrown back on the quality of his own faith, his own sincerity, his own remembered conversion, for confidence that the transaction occurred. The sacramental Christian is given something outside himself: a date on which he was baptized, words of absolution spoken to him aloud, bread placed in his hands. Grace located where Christ located it can be found again in the dark. That is not superstition. It is the mercy of a God who knows what we are made of—who has always stooped to matter, because matter is what He made us from, and what His Son became.

Endnotes

1. Catechism of the Catholic Church 1131: “The sacraments are efficacious signs of grace, instituted by Christ and entrusted to the Church, by which divine life is dispensed to us.” The closing sentence of the same paragraph—fruit “in those who receive them with the required dispositions”—is quoted in section VIII.
2. The Baptist Faith and Message (2000), Article VII, quoted verbatim; the spelling “Saviour” is the document’s own. Luther’s retention of baptismal regeneration and infant baptism, and the Reformed confessions’ “means of grace” language, are matters of published record summarized here rather than quoted.
3. Scripture quotations are RSV: 1 Peter 3:21; Acts 2:38–39; Acts 22:16; Titus 3:5; John 3:5; John 4:14; Acts 16:33; Colossians 2:11–12; Psalm 51:4; 2 Samuel 12:13; John 20:21–23; 2 Corinthians 5:18–20; James 5:14–16; 1 Peter 2:9; Exodus 19:6.
4. On Origen (Commentary on Romans 5.9, infant baptism as a tradition received from the apostles) and Cyprian’s council of 253 (Letter 64, debating the day, not the practice), the patristic record is summarized here; both texts are widely available in the standard collections.
5. Ludwig Ott, *Fundamentals of Catholic Dogma*, trans. Patrick Lynch (1955; TAN reprint, 1974): “There are seven Sacraments of the New Law. (De fide.)”; “The Sacraments work ex opere operato. (De fide.)”; “The Baptism of young children is valid and licit. (De fide.)”
6. Catechism of the Catholic Church 1257: “God has bound salvation to the sacrament of Baptism, but he himself is not bound by his sacraments.” Cf. the International Theological Commission, *The Hope of Salvation for Infants Who Die Without Being Baptised* (2007).

7. Augustine's anti-Donatist principle—Christ the true minister of every sacrament—is stated across the treatises on baptism; the formulation “when Peter baptizes, Christ baptizes” summarizes In Iohannis Evangelium Tractatus 6.7.
8. Council of Trent, Decree Concerning Indulgences (Session XXV, 1563), condemning “all base gain for securing indulgences”; the office of quaestor had been abolished by Session XXI. On what an indulgence is, Catechism of the Catholic Church 1471–1479.
9. On the common priesthood and the ministerial priesthood, Catechism of the Catholic Church 784–786 and 1546–1547, quoting Lumen Gentium 10; the two “differ essentially and not only in degree” while ordered to one another.
10. The institution texts for the seven are given in section X; the fuller cases for the Eucharist and for holy orders are made on this site's pages on the Eucharist and on apostolic succession, and are not repeated here.
11. John 3:1–22; Titus 3:5; Matthew 3:16, RSV. Justin Martyr, *First Apology* 61, quoted in the Ante-Nicene Fathers translation and checked against the library's copies; Irenaeus, Fragment 34; Cyprian, *Letter* 71(72):1; Augustine, *Letter* 98:2, summarized. Luther, *Small Catechism*, Part IV, on baptism. The Catholic Answers tract “Are Catholics Born Again?” (imprimatur 2004), which assembles this evidence, is held in the site's reference library; the lexical point on *hudōr* is summarized from its citation of Kittel.

For Further Reading

Catechism of the Catholic Church, §§1131–1134—the definition of a sacrament, in brief. Free online at <https://uscce.cld.bz/Catechism-of-the-Catholic-Church2/313/>.

Council of Trent, Session VII, the canons on the sacraments in general, against the Reformers' objections. Free online at <https://www.papalencyclicals.net/councils/trent/seventh-session.htm>.

Fundamentals of Catholic Dogma, by Ludwig Ott—the defined propositions on the sacraments, with their theological notes.

The Baptist Faith and Message, Article VII—the symbols-only position, stated by its own confession.

The Hope of Salvation for Infants Who Die Without Being Baptised, International Theological Commission (2007)—on the boundary CCC 1257 draws. Free online at https://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/cti_documents/rc_con_cfaith_doc_20070419_un-baptised-infants_en.html.

Tractates on the Gospel of John, by Augustine—Christ the true minister of baptism, against the Donatists. Free online at <https://www.newadvent.org/fathers/120106.htm>.

but whoever drinks of the water that I shall give him will never thirst; the water that I shall give him will become in him a spring of water welling up to eternal life.

John 4:14

* * *

*Glory be to the Father, and to the Son, and to the Holy Spirit,
as it was in the beginning, is now, and ever shall be,
world without end. Amen.*

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A Note on Authority

This essay represents the author's articulation of *the Catholic doctrine of the sacraments, in answer to the view that they are symbols only*, drawing on Scripture, the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, the Church Fathers, and the major theological tradition. It is offered as a personal defense, not as an official statement of the Church's teaching. Where this defense is fortunate enough to align with the magisterial teaching of the Church, the credit belongs to the tradition that formed it. Where it falls short, the responsibility is the author's alone.