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What are Sacramentals?

by Marcellino D'Ambrosio, Ph.D.



Rosaries. Scapulars. Miraculous medals that we wear, and crucifixes that we hang on the wall. What do all these things have in common? They are blessed objects that Catholics often call **sacramentals**. But actually, it is the ceremony by which these objects are blessed that are the sacramentals. Let's look at a



technical **definition of the term "sacramentals"**: *Sacramentals are liturgical ceremonies instituted by the Catholic Church that bear some resemblance to the seven sacraments and dispose the Christian to receive and cooperate with grace. Each includes a prayer of blessing accompanied by a sacred sign representing benefits obtained through the intercession of the Church.*

Historical Background: So where did this concept of "sacramentals" come from? The rich liturgical life of the Catholic Church has always included a wide variety of ceremonies. From the beginning it was recognized that some of these, such as Baptism and the Eucharist, were more important than others. But it was not until the twelfth century that consensus was reached among Western theologians that seven of these ceremonies stood head and shoulders above the rest since they had been instituted by Christ himself. From this time, it became customary to restrict the term "sacrament" to these seven. The noun "sacramental" was coined to designate all other liturgical ceremonies of blessing instituted not by Christ, but by the Church. Some examples of this would be the dedication of a church building, the consecration of its altar, or the acceptance of a nun's perpetual vows.

While the terminology is medieval in origin, the practice of imparting blessings goes much further back, even to the Old Testament. In *Ex. 40:9-11*, for example, all the furnishings of the sanctuary were consecrated through an anointing with sacred chrism. In *Genesis*, on the other hand, we read of the great importance attached to the blessings given by the patriarchs to their children. Such blessings were considered efficacious and even irrevocable (see *Gen. 27:27*).



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There is no indication that Jesus or the apostles regarded this Old Testament tradition of blessing as superseded by the new dispensation. Indeed, Jesus himself blesses little children through the sign of the laying on of hands (*Mk 10:16*) and instructs the apostles to bless the homes that receive them (*Lk. 10:5; Mat. 10:12f*). In the patristic era, formal blessings were part of the liturgy and interest in blessings was keen. Two of the earliest Christian commentaries on Scripture, written by St. Hippolytus around the year 200, were *On the Blessings of Jacob* and *On the Blessings of Joseph* (*ANF 5*). The same author also describes the liturgical blessing of such things as baptismal water, the oil used in baptism and confirmation, and even produce such as cheese, fruits and olives. (*Apostolic Tradition*, 5-6, 21, 28).

Images and Religious Articles: Many, especially before the Second Vatican Council, were accustomed to equating sacramentals with blessed objects used in private devotion such as rosary beads, scapulars, and religious images. It would be more accurate, however, to call these “devotional articles,” if we wish to follow the language used in official documents of the Magisterium since 1962. When such articles are blessed by an ordained minister according to the liturgy of the sacramentals, they are closely linked to the Church’s public, official prayer, but are nonetheless distinct from it. Non-liturgical prayers like the rosary and stations of the cross are not called sacramentals, but rather “popular devotions” or “expressions of popular piety” (*SC 13* and *CCC 1674-6*). The term “sacramental” is applied to the rite of blessing itself, not the object blessed.

The fact that the Church formally blesses such visible aids to devotion flows from her appreciation of what the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* calls “the Sacramental Economy.” She understands that God, who created us body and soul, communicates his truth to us not only through ideas and words but through sensible signs as well. Through his Incarnation, the Eternal Word has forever ennobled matter, endowing it with the potential to be an instrument of his life-changing power. In commenting on the sacramental blessings of the Church, Vatican II says “There is scarcely any proper use of material things which cannot thus be directed toward the sanctification of men and the praise of God” (*SC 79*). Therefore, even when a sacramental blessing does not consecrate a particular visible item for religious use, it still employs some visible sign such as outstretched hands, the sign of the cross, holy water, or incensation (*Book of Blessings 26*, abbr. *BB*).



Ceremonies and Ministers: Normally, an ordained minister (bishop, priest, or deacon) presides over the sacramental blessings of the Church. Since Vatican II, a lay person may preside over many of them, particularly those having to do with family life, such as the blessing of a newly engaged couple (*CIC 1168-9*). The formula and visible sign of blessing is different, however, when a layperson presides. Instead of imparting a blessing saying “I bless you”, etc. with outstretched arms or making the sign of the cross, the layperson, with hands joined, says “may God bless us” thus preserving the distinction between ordained and non-ordained ministry. The official blessings of the Latin Rite of the Catholic Church can mostly be found in the *Book of Blessings* and the two volume work published in the U.S. as *The Rites*. The various Eastern Catholic Churches have their own distinctive sacramentals such as those found in the Byzantine book of blessings, the

Euchologion (Trebnik).

Structure, Purpose and Efficacy: The first purpose of the sacramentals is to prepare for and extend the grace of the sacraments. In the sacraments, it is Christ himself who is acting and so grace is objectively conferred *ex opere operato*, that is, by virtue of the performing of the rite by a valid minister acting as Christ's instrument. As acts of the Church, the sacramentals may also be occasions for grace *ex opere operantis ecclesiae*, that is, by virtue of the intercession of the Church. They are not efficacious in the same way nor to the same degree as the sacraments, but are more powerful than the private intercession of Christians precisely because they represent and make present the intercession of the entire Church.

The direct relationship between some sacramentals and a particular sacrament are easy to see: the blessing of meals is connected to the Eucharist, the blessing of homes relates to Matrimony, while the sprinkling of Holy Water recalls baptism. The second purpose of sacramentals is the sanctification of every occasion of life. Hence the *Book of Blessings* contains blessings of work places, tools, schools, athletic events, etc. There are generally two parts to any liturgy of sacramental blessing: 1) proclamation of the Word of God through Scripture readings and an optional homily and 2) praise of God's goodness followed by petition for his help and protection (*BB 20*). Since it is in Christ and especially



through his death and resurrection that God pours out his blessings upon us, virtually all the sacramentals contain the name of Jesus and the sign of the cross (*Eph 1:3; SC 61, CCC 1671*). In requiring that proclamation of God's Word never be omitted from the celebration of the sacramentals, the Church wishes to make clear that these rites depend on and are intended to strengthen faith. Superstition, the idea that certain rituals properly performed automatically obtain certain benefits from God (*BB 10, 18, 23, 27*) is alien to this perspective of faith and must never be confused with the truly Catholic use of the sacramentals. The Church's intercession, made present by the sacramentals, can bear fruit only in the lives of those who are properly disposed (*SC 11 cited in BB 15; SC 61*).

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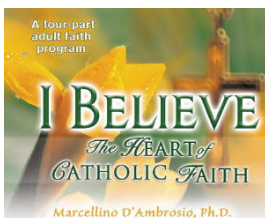


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