Sacraments
Sacraments of Initiation

Introduction
Symbols, signs, and rituals have always been part of human life. With them human beings find meanings that cannot be expressed in common language. We use symbols. A ring in a pawn shop has a different meaning than a ring that a person wears. A bouquet of roses in a flower shop conveys a different statement than the bouquet of roses I present to someone to declare “Thank you for all you have done for me,” or “I love you.” Religious communities make use of symbols to penetrate deeper into the mysteries of life and reflect the understanding that the divine is part of human life. In the Catholic Church we find such symbols, signs, and rituals, particularly in the Church’s sacraments. This outline reflects on the significance of them for the believer and pays special attention to their use in the Sacraments that have become known as the Sacraments of Initiation: Baptism, Confirmation, and the Eucharist. These notes address the issues of the nature of sacraments in general and focus on the sacraments of Baptism and Confirmation.

I. Common Symbols and Rituals in Ordinary and Religious Ceremonies.

A. Symbols and rituals in ordinary life.

In everyday life we use gestures and actions that convey a message. A handshake can be an extension of friendship or expressing forgiveness for a sustained insult. The custom in Asian cultures to greet a person by bowing for him or her underscores the recognition of that person’s dignity.

Symbols try to say things that cannot be expressed in a “matter of fact” way. The word symbol has its root in the Greek word symbolon (συμβολον) which literally means: “token of identity verified by comparing its other half.” And so, the picture of a heart has a much different meaning for the lover than it does on the chart in the cardiologist’s office.

Even in secular society we take notice of special events and mark them with special ceremonies. Even if no divine images are conjured up, often they reflect realities that transcend the here and now and reflect aspirations, hopes, and intense experiences which all human beings share. Opening and closing ceremonies at the Olympic Games do much more than honoring athletes. They reflect an ongoing, deep desire in all humans of unity and harmony among all nations. Even though we know we will never achieve it by our own efforts, we still dare to celebrate this unity. We have seen glimpses of it and we dream of the possibilities for it. And so, the opening and closing ceremonies are like liturgies with standard ritual features (that is: actions that are almost formalized and follow a protocol. The most prominent of these rituals is the lighting of the Olympic flame.

Even though no religious elements are explicitly invoked, one could argue for a sacramental moment, even in these rituals. Paul Tillich put it this way:

“Any object or event is sacramental in which the transcendent is perceived to be present. Sacramental objects are holy objects, laden with divine power.” (quoted in Doors to the Sacred by Joseph Martos, p.9)

B. Religious symbols and rituals.

As the example above shows these Olympic rituals have something sacred but are not necessarily supernatural or divine. Yet, there is something mysterious to events and places that moves them outside the limitations of time and space.
For the non-believer they could represent sublime moral and cultural values, for
the believer they shed a light on the sacred and how what is holy does permeate
the world in which we live. For the believers they could be considered
sacramental in nature and show God's presence in them because they are
sacred and mysterious. In this sense one could say that the world is full of
sacraments. (*Doors to the Sacred*, p 12)

In this latter sense too they transcend time. Those participating in these events,
places, and rituals can sense the blending of the past with the present with an
anticipation of the future. They help them remember past events, be part of
them again, and look forward to a future in which they will remain. (*Doors to the
Sacred*, p 17, *Update, What Are Sacraments*, p 1) This understanding too would
allow for an understanding that the world is filled with sacraments. (*Doors to the
Sacred*, p 12)

In all religions sacraments are "doors to the sacred" according to Marcea Eliade.
Often mythical language and images are used to show how a sacred place,
object, or ritual is connected to divine power. They are hierophanies, highlights
of religious experiences. The word hierophany is derived from the Greek: hieros
(ἱερός) meaning sacred or holy and phaino (φαίνω). Sacraments, therefore
bring one an experience of entering into a new world of meaning. Space becomes
a sacred space, time becomes a sacred time. (*Doors to the Sacred*, p 16)

Sacred rituals and recitations move the participants of these rituals into a
different world. The tribesman who chants his history of the world's creation
transports himself there and is part of that beginning. The Jewish participants
of the Passover Meal who act out in a symbolic way the hardships of their
ancestors' suffering in slavery become participants of that suffering by sharing
bitter herbs and are present at the first eating of the unleavened bread by
sharing the unleavened bread that is part of the ritual re-enactment. What was
"then" becomes "now" and promises hope for the future. In these ritual acts time
has been suspended; we are dealing here with an eternal presence. This
explains the Catholic tradition of understanding that at the consecration in the
Eucharist Christ's sacrifice on the cross is brought into the present. This
explains as well why in a sacred place like the church no clock should be visible.
Church architecture has, from the early beginnings of the Church, managed to
inspire the sense of the sacred. Entering a church building should give one a
sense that he or she has left the hustle and bustle of the world around it. In
Tilburg, the Netherlands, one can find a small chapel-like building right in the
middle of a shopping mall. The serenity of that place is amazing. In Amsterdam
one can experience a similar thing in the noisiest shopping street, de
Kalverstraat. Right in the middle of that street is a plain door that allows one to
enter a small courtyard, a leftover of a medieval convent. Here too, the serenity
of the divine presence envelops the visitor. (*Doors to the Sacred*, p 18)

II. Catholic Symbols, Rituals, and Sacraments.

A. Catholic Symbols and Rituals.

As in other religious systems the Catholic Church makes use of material things,
gestures, and formulas that have a deeper meaning. Some are an essential part
of rituals we call sacraments, others are part of devotional practices and remind
us of God's presence in this world.

The Catholic Church identifies seven specific sacraments, some of which became
more clearly identified in the course of the Church's history like the sacrament
of Reconciliation and Matrimony. These sacraments make use of elements and
actions that became the core of these sacraments. The most obvious of these are
water, bread, wine, anointing, and laying on of hands. Other elements and actions reflect devotions in the Church that are not essential for sacraments. Receiving ashes, sprinkling with holy water, reciting the Rosary, pilgrimages, palm branches, and the veneration of relics are part of such devotions. They apparently could be easily confused with actual sacraments. And so it happened that in the Middle Ages some could count a total of 120 "sacraments" or even 365. Ever since the Protestant Reformation theologians have refined their understanding of the concept "sacrament." (Sacraments and Passages, Gerard Fourez, SJ, pp. 21,31) They made a distinction between "sacraments" and "sacramentals".

B. Sacramentals.

The Second Vatican Council in its Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy, identifies clearly the Church's seven sacraments in its directives for the renewal of these sacramental rites. In it the Council distinguishes sacraments from sacramentals. It declares:

"The Church has, moreover, instituted sacramentals. These are sacred signs by which, somewhat after the manner of the sacraments, effects of a spiritual nature, especially, are symbolized and obtained through the Church's intercession. By them, people are made ready to receive the much greater effect of the sacraments, and various occasions in life are rendered holy." (Sacrosanctum Concilium, #60)

Sacramentals sanctify certain ministries in the Church and certain states of life. The rituals that accompany them always include prayers and specific signs like the laying on of hands, the sign of the cross, or sprinkling of holy water. (Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy, Sacrosanctum Concilium, [SC] #60-82, Catechism of the Catholic Church, [CCC] 1667-1668)

C. Sacraments

The definition for the concept "sacrament" could be: "a visible sign of God's presence." In this sense the Church itself is a sacrament. The Second Vatican Council applies this meaning when it declares:

"Since the church, in Christ, is a sacrament - a sign and instrument, that is, of communion with God and of the unity of the entire human race - it here proposes for the benefit of the faithful and of the entire world, to describe more clearly, and in the tradition laid down by earlier councils, its own nature and universal mission. The present situation lends greater urgency to this duty of the church, so that all people, who nowadays are drawn ever more closely together by social, technical and cultural bonds, may achieve full unity with Christ." (Dogmatic Constitution on the Church, Lumen Gentium [LG], #1)

The Catechism puts it more succinctly:

"The Church in this world is the sacrament of salvation, the sign and the instrument of the communion of God and men." (CCC, 780) (see also CCC, #774-780)

The sacramental nature of the Church is refined in its sacramental rituals. These sacraments have traditionally been defined as:

"The sacraments are efficacious signs of grace, instituted by Christ, and entrusted to the Church, by which divine life is dispersed to us. The visible rites by which the sacraments are celebrated signify and make present the graces proper to each sacrament. They bear fruit in those who receive them with the required dispositions." (CCC #1131)

The Catechism adds:

"The Church celebrates the sacraments as a priestly community structured by the baptismal priesthood and the priesthood of ordained ministers." (CCC, 1132)

It is this second, more delineated description of sacraments that guide the remainder of these notes.
D. The Communal Nature of the Sacraments.

"Sacraments are visual signs that give the grace they signify." The understanding that the sacraments "deliver grace" had become a prevailing concept after the Council of Trent. It resulted in a rather mechanical understanding of the sacraments and scholars wanted to identify the essence of each sacrament. It had another negative effect. Theologians clarified how much of the ritual one had to attend for the sacrament to still "count". The result was an objectification of the sacraments and of grace as something that could be measured as a quantity. One received a sacrament and did not participate in celebration. The view that sacraments "give the grace they signify" is not a wrong one. It received a rather limited interpretation.

Grace is a gift freely given by God but that does not mean that it is like common currency. The more I have, the more I get. Grace is a relationship of friendship with God and therefore the Church community and even with humans beyond that community. It is that relationship we celebrate in each sacrament. Since the Church is the Body of Christ, and itself a sacrament, its sacramental action is efficacious to give and increase grace. This concept is conveyed in the understanding that a sacrament acts ex opere operato (by the very fact of the action being performed). The sacrament is not brought about by the righteousness of the celebrant or the recipient, but by the power of God. (CCC, #1127-1128)

By looking at the sacraments in this way, we become less preoccupied with trying to find out what happened to the "thing" we call "sacrament" and "argue" about the "real presence" or the exact moment when sins are forgiven. We now need to do some "soul searching" and reflect on how Christ can become a "real presence" in me and how I need to accept forgiveness and extend it to others.

In this approach each of the sacraments represent a challenge and a hope for the future. As the definition declares: sacraments give the grace they signify. Our task is to live out the grace that each sacrament gives:

- **Baptism** is a call to conversion and renew that conversion throughout our lives. It calls upon us to help others in their baptismal conversion.
- **Confirmation** reinforces the baptismal conversion in the commitment to live the Christian life. At times the image is used to see the sacrament as a call to be "soldiers" for Christ.
- **Holy Orders** reflect the special call of committed service. All baptized believers share in a common priesthood. Some are called to a sacramental commitment as ministers in the Church.
- The **Eucharist** challenges us to weekly renewal in our sharing in the Lord’s Supper. Out communion with the Lord shows in our communion with one another and the call to support one another, especially those who have special needs.
- **Reconciliation** calls upon us to forgive one another and practice forgiveness for those who fell short. It also reminds us that we need forgiveness and that we can pick ourselves up and recommit to the Christian life when we fall short in our commitment.
- The **Sacrament of the Sick** strengthens us in our weakness, spiritual as well as physical. It challenges us to be present to the weak and sick in our community and extend God’s love in an active support of those who need that support.
- **Holy Matrimony** challenges those who commit themselves to mutual love to remain faithful throughout their married life and shows God’s life sustaining love in this mutual love and in the love that supports the children that result from this love.
E. Some Things to Keep in Mind about Sacraments.

Catholic theology distinguishes two “kinds” of sacraments. The sacraments of Baptism, Confirmation, and Holy Order confer a sacramental character or seal. By it Christians share in Christ's priesthood at different levels. The gift given by the Spirit in each sacrament is indelible and remains in the believer for ever as protection, a call to worship and commitment, and service to the Church. Therefore these sacraments can be received only once and cannot be repeated. (CCC, #1121. See also CCC, #1272-1274, 1295-1296, and 1582)

The Eucharist, Reconciliation, the Sacrament of the Sick, and Holy Matrimony could be called “sacraments of support”, sacraments that continue to strengthen us in faith or help us to pick up when we fell short. These sacraments, therefore, can be received as often as needed.

One might be inclined to refer to the sacraments of Baptism, Confirmation, and Holy Orders as initiation sacraments and the sacraments of the Eucharist, Reconciliation, Anointing of the Sick, and Matrimony as “maintenance” sacraments.

Such a distinction does not fit with the early Church practice, which has been reinstated after the Second Vatican Council in the Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults (RCIA). In this practice Baptism is immediately followed by the anointing of the newly baptized [Confirmation] and culminates in the participation of the neophyte (newly converted and baptized) in the Eucharist. And so the Church identified the sacraments of initiation as Baptism, Confirmation, and the Eucharist. In these notes we will follow that practice. In this section we pay attention to Baptism and Confirmation. The next section reflects on the Eucharist, both as a sacrament of initiation and a sacrament of spiritual renewal. (See CCC, 1229-1233)

III. Sacraments of Initiation: Baptism and Confirmation.

A. Baptism and Confirmation: a call to conversion

Baptism and Confirmation are intertwined as aspects of one sacrament. Thomas Richstatter observes that becoming a Christian involves conversion, a “turning around” (metanoia, μετανοεῖν). That conversion finds its beginning in the sacrament of Baptism where we “take the plunge”. One joins the Christian life from which there is no return. We cannot “un-join”. Baptism cannot be repeated.

This plunge is a plunge into the life, passion, death, and resurrection of Christ and it changes our lives. (Romans 13:14) Especially Mark’s gospel emphasizes our call to participate in Christ’s suffering and shows how difficult it is to understand this. In his gospel the disciples did not quite get it. Once one takes this plunge he or she becomes a member of Christ’s body and receives the Spirit who guided and directed him. In practice the bishop would “seal” oneness with Christ by anointing him or her in his unity with Christ and his Church.

Now, united with Christ’s Church and anointed by the Spirit one is invited into the heavenly banquet, the Eucharist which sustains this ongoing conversion and one’s journey in faith and increased unity with Christ. (See Sacraments of Initiation: Sacraments of Invitation, p 1-2)

B. The Historical Development of Baptism and Confirmation.

For a long time in the Church’s history infant baptism became the standard practice. Its effect was that “washing away original sin” ended up to be a central feature of the purpose of this sacrament. It reflected the understanding that we
all inherited the inclination toward evil and recognizes the evil in this world. St. Augustine refined this doctrine and reasoned that the sacrament of Baptism supplies the grace to fight this inclination. (Sandra DeGidio, *Sacraments Alive*, p 40)

The practice did have a negative side effect. Often baptism came to be seen as an official registration of a child into society forgetting the call for conversion and the commitment to a Christian life. (William J. Bausch, *A New Look at the Sacraments*, p45)

The Second Vatican Council revised the liturgy of the sacraments and restored the historical administration of the sacrament of Baptism of adults. It brought back the preparation period for Baptism by reintroducing the catechumenate and the instruction of the newly baptized known as mystagogia. (SC, #64,65,66)

**The Rite of Baptism in the Early Church during the Time of the Persecutions.**

A quick review of the baptismal rites during the early Church can help us to appreciate the renewal that the Council introduced.

**The pre-catechumenate.**

This could be called the period of inquiry. Persons interested in joining the community of believers asked preliminary questions on what was involved in becoming member of the Church.

**The catechumenate.**

The period of preparation often lasted up to three years. The candidate for baptism was presented to the bishop by a sponsor. This was very important and serious. The bishop wanted to know that the candidate was serious about his intentions and that he was not a secret spy who could report the believers to the authorities. This was a period of instruction, of prayer, of scrutinies, and exorcisms. Toward the conclusion of this period the catechumen's name was placed in the baptismal book, the "book of life". It was a rather risky business. Should this book be found it would mean the death of all those listed in it.

**The proximate preparation.**

During Lent the catechumen went through repeated exorcisms. They reflected the teachings found in the Sunday reading during the Lenten season.

**The culmination during Holy Week and the Rite of Baptism.**

Toward the end of Holy Week those about to be baptized prepared themselves thoroughly. On Holy Thursday they took a bath as a sign of ritual purification. On Good Friday and Holy Saturday they fasted and prayed.

For the actual baptism they gathered in the evening at a designated room. Men and women were separated. The men and boys, wearing a woolen garment faced west, the place of darkness and declared: "I detach myself from you, Satan, from your pomp, your worship, and your angels." Then they turned around to the east and declared: "I attach myself to you, oh Christ."

The bishop then approached each of them and anointed their heads with the seal, a sign of their total commitment to Christ. Now they moved to the baptistry. They dropped the woolen robe (a symbol of evil because wool comes from animals which are unclean and a sign of death). Deacons rubbed their bodies from head to toe with the ointment of life and strengthening. They became athletes for Christ ready to wrestle with the power of evil. For the women and girls deaconesses took on this anointing.

Then they descended into the water up to their chests. The bishop approached each of them individually and asked: "Do you believe in the Father?" "Do you believe in the Son?" "Do you believe in the Holy Spirit?" After each question he was dunked into the water.

The newly baptized received an anointing with perfumed oil (chrism) and a prayer that he/she may receive the Holy Spirit. He now get dressed in a white linen robe and a lighted candle signifying the new life. (Linen comes from vegetation, plants and therefore is a sign of life)
The newly baptized (the neophytes) now join the community to celebrate their first Eucharist. This sequence of events shows how three sacraments were integrated in this ritual: Baptism, Confirmation, and the Eucharist. (See William J Bausch, *A New Look at the Sacraments*, pp. 49-60)

It is the understanding and appreciation of the early baptismal rites that was the basis for the Church reformation of the baptismal rites at the Second Vatican Council. The American bishops therefore directed liturgical committees to reform the baptismal rites according to the Council's directives. The RCIA (*Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults*) has become the standard for the administration of the sacrament of Baptism. A quick overview of the essential elements of the renewed baptismal liturgy shows the historical roots of this renewed rite.

C. The Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults (RCIA)

In the restoration of the Rite of Baptism a few things stand out:
1. The RCIA is a process, a journey toward faith and in faith.
2. The RCIA is a community event. The neophyte is welcomed into the community of believers.
3. The RCIA is a ministry that involves many parishioners in various ways: sponsors, spiritual advisers, catechists, etc. Everyone in the community shares in the responsibility of ministering to the converts.
4. The RCIA is an ongoing process that requires a continued commitment to the gospel throughout one's life and the life of the community. It calls for a change of heart.
5. The RCIA restores the baptismal focus on Lent and reestablishes the Easter Vigil as the time honored event for the sacrament of initiation (Baptism and Confirmation).

The process of the initiation journey that is part of the RCIA goes through four steps or stages:

**Stage One: The Precatechumenate.**
This is the period for inquirers to search for answers to their questions and to become more acquainted with the Word.

**Stage Two: The Catechumenate.**
The enquirers are now referred to as catechumens. They have now adopted the life of a Christian even though they are not full members of the Church. They are now joined by sponsors who serve as guides, companions, and models of faith. This period can last from several months to three years. The catechumens are instructed in the faith, reflect on the Scriptures and join the community in prayer. During the Eucharistic celebration they participate in the Liturgy of the Word and leave at the beginning of the Liturgy of the Eucharist to reflect on the Scriptures under the guidance of their sponsors. When the catechumens are ready for their commitment the ritual known as the *Rite of Election* marks this readiness. Normally his rite takes place on the first Sunday of Lent.

**Stage Three: The Lenten Period before Initiation.**
The catechumens now enter the stage of a forty-day preparation in prayer and fasting. Several rituals of “scrutiny” are part of this deepening reflection. The community prays that the catechumens will have the strength to withstand evil and grow in their commitment. This stage culminates in the rite of Baptism during the night of the Easter Vigil. They now become full members of the Church and participate for the first time in the Liturgy of the Eucharist.
Stage Four: The Post-Initiation Phase.
This is the concluding part of the journey known as mystagogia (mystery). It is the time of on-going instruction, reflection, and growth in faith. It is a continuing process for all believers. Conversion is not a once-for-all kind of thing. It is an on-going call to respond to God's call to turn around our lives and improve our relationship with Christ.

The reformed rite clearly shows the communal involvement. Baptism is not just a ritual for the one baptized. It is a ritual that continues to call us to conversion and help others and ourselves to grow in faith. (Sandra DeGidio, Sacraments Alive, pp. 26-34, See: Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults, The Roman Ritual revised by decree of the Second Vatican Ecumenical Council and Published by Authority of Pope Paul VI, #36-251 CCC, 1229-1245)

D. The Baptism of Infants.

With infant baptism the unity of the initiation sacraments became separated in the Latin Church. In the Eastern Orthodox Church infants were baptized, confirmed, and received the eucharist in the form of a drop of consecrated wine, placed on the lips of the infant.

In the Western, Latin Church there existed the understanding that the bishop was to confirm the baptism. Also the infant did not receive the Eucharist at the conclusion of the baptismal rite.

At first communion was delayed until age 14 or 15 which gave a bishop the opportunity to confirm the child by that age and in a sense the sequence Baptism, confirmation, Eucharist was maintained.

After Pope Pius X lowered the age for First Holy Communion to age 6 or 7 Confirmation took place long after the child participated in the Eucharist. All too often it happened that Catholics did not receive the sacrament of confirmation at all. Separate meanings became attached to these sacraments. Baptism was the sacrament that washed away original sin and Confirmation became a sacrament of “strengthening” of becoming a “soldier for Christ” symbolized by a “slap on the cheek”.

The Eucharist continued to be seen as God nurturing the faithful in their life in the Church.

In this practice the parents and godparents (equivalent to the sponsor) made the decision for the child and took on the responsibility to guide and instruct the child into the Christian faith and guide him/her into a life of faith. The communal responsibility and participation was less evident there. Therefor the Second Vatican Council stresses that aspect of the sacrament. (Sacraments of Initiation: Sacraments of Invitation, pp. 3-4, CCC, 1253-1255, SC, 67)

IV. Biblical Images in the Sacraments of Baptism and Confirmation.
A. Water and Baptism.

Water has great symbolic meaning in the Scriptures. The destructive force of water appears to be the clearest image. Water is death dealing, but under the power of God it becomes a source of life.

The dark chaos of the waters opens the Book of Genesis. It is God’s mighty breath (wind, ruah) that bring order, light and life out of that chaos.

In the account of the Flood it is the evil and sin of mankind that makes God decide to open the flood gates in heaven and on earth to eliminate this evil. Only Noah, who is not sucked up in the evil of his society, can stay afloat and “ride the waves” so to speak.

In the Exodus, God is with his people and again his mighty wind separates the waters and he guides them through the pitfalls of evil by a protecting cloud and a pillar of fire. It is the Egyptians, who are the image of all that is evil in this
account, get overtaken by the destructive forces of the water that comes crashing down on them.
Again the Israelites manage to conquer the chaos of evil when they cross the Jordan river into the promised Land.

The Christian Scriptures continue this image. Jesus addresses the storm and wild waves and actually addresses the devil that is in them in Mark’s gospel (Mk 4:39)
In Matthew’s gospel Jesus invites Peter to come to him and walk on water. But Peter’s faith is not strong enough. Only by grabbing Jesus’ hand can a manage to stay above the chaos of the water and the sinfulness it represents. (Mt 14:28-31) (Monika Hellwig, The Meaning of the Sacraments, p. 8-10)
In this last account we find a message for all believers. Only when we remain united with Christ can we expect to rise above the evils of greed, lust, and power hunger. Jesus was willing to plunge into the evil of our society, to share man’s condition, but not his sin, he dared to drown in this storm of evil to rise above it with the promise of new life for all believers. Therefore, in baptism we plunge into the “watery grave” of the Lord and with him walk on water and remain above the fray of evil of society while remaining in the world. This reflects also the theological understanding of the sacrament of Baptism that the Second Vatican Council emphasized. Baptism is an ongoing conversion. As Christ pulled us up to be able to walk on the waters of evil, so we, as members of the believing community have the task to assist our fellow believers to continue to walk on water and not give in to attractions that suck us back in.

B. The Spirit (wind, ruah) and Confirmation.

Another image that often returns in the Scriptures and shows a unique affinity with God’s life giving power is the image of wind.
In the Creation account it is God’s wind that hovers over the chaotic waters and brings life.
In Exodus a mighty wind separated the waters to let the Israelites cross on dry land. (Exodus 14:21)
Moses meets God at the top of a mountain in a mighty storm. (Exodus 19:18)

Wind and spirit become associated images. This wind is seen as the life giving breath of God. It is the spirit, breath of Christ, that continues to be with us. This concept may important to remember when we read John’s account of Jesus’ death: “When Jesus had taken the wine, he said, ‘It is finished.’ And bowing his head he handed over the spirit.” (Jn 19:30) Some translators suggest that the statement could read: “he sent his spirit into the world.” It is that spirit that is central to the sacrament of Confirmation. The presence of his spirit get reinforced when Jesus appears to the disciple and said: “Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you.” And when he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, “Receive the holy Spirit.” (Jn 20:21-22)

In this last statement we again can recognize the communal aspect of the sacrament of Confirmation and of our faith. Sacraments are not private “things”, just between God and me, they are communal.

(Notes assembled by Tony Verhallen, 5/6/09)
Review questions

1. What are some typical characteristics of symbols and rituals. How often have you experienced the effects of symbols and rituals and what do they mean to you?

2. What is the difference between sacraments and sacramentals? What kind of sacramentals have you used and/or do you use?

3. What possible definition can we give for a sacrament and what more limited definition do we use for the seven sacraments of the Church?

4. What is the meaning of grace and how is grace related to each individual sacrament?

5. What are the unique challenges that the sacraments place before us?

6. Which sacraments can be labeled as sacraments that place a sacramental seal on us and what does that mean in practice?

7. Which sacraments can be called "sacraments of support" and what does that imply?

8. What insights in the meaning and implications became clearer with the renewed Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults (RCIA)?

9. What is the sequence of stages in the RCIA? How do the terms inquirer, catechumen, scrutinies, "book of life" fit in this sequence?

10. What does the call to conversion expect from us and how does it relate to the sacrament of Baptism?

11. What biblical images relate to the sacraments of Baptism and Confirmation and what do they teach us?

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