

Sacramentals Help the Faithful Encounter the Divine

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My mother often expressed her Catholic faith in ways that were subtle but sure. For example, whenever a piece of food that had been blessed fell on the floor, she would pick it up and reverence it with a kiss. Whenever we would drive by a Catholic Church, she would make the sign of the cross. Whenever Palm Sunday arrived, she would loop a palm around the crucifix that hung in her bedroom. These small acts of devotion told us that the church building was not the only place where God was found. God was revealed in the smallest piece of blessed food, in the sign of the cross, and in a palm branch that had been sprinkled with holy water. These actions and objects are part of what the Church calls sacramentals.

SACRAMENTALS

Like sacraments, sacramentals are sacred signs. They too point to a spiritual reality beyond what meets the eye. Sacramentals prepare the faithful to celebrate the sacraments, and many sacramentals are instrumental to those very celebrations. For example, holy water is used at baptism. Blessed oil is used at confirmation, at ordination, and in the anointing of the sick.

Blessings

Blessings are assurances of God's presence and protection. The Old Testament is filled with stories of God's favor bestowed in the form of a blessing. The Bible begins with God creating the earth and blessing all living creatures. In the New Testament, Jesus often blesses others, especially children.

Entering the church, we bless ourselves with holy water. This is only one of several blessings at Mass. The deacon is blessed before he proclaims the Gospel. At the end of Mass, the entire community is sent forth with a blessing. Oil is blessed at the chrism Mass, and a newly married couple is blessed after they have bestowed the sacrament on each other.

The *Book of Blessings* contains a compilation of blessings pertaining to people, objects, and various occasions, as well as blessings and services connected with official parish events. There are blessings for students and teachers, blessings for

travelers, blessings for homes and offices, even blessings for boats and fishing gear.

Many blessings, such as the blessing of children by their parents or the blessing of a meal, may be performed by laypersons. As the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* states, "Every baptized person is to be a 'blessing' and to bless" (1669).

That same idea applies to objects that are blessed. Incense that is blessed is used to venerate the faithful, the Book of the Gospels, the altar and the gifts, and the deceased at a funeral. The fire at the Easter Vigil is blessed, and from that fire, the paschal candle is lit, and from the paschal candle, the candles are lit and carried in procession by the faithful.

All objects that have been blessed are treated with reverence, so it is customary to dispose of items such as palms, rosaries, and liturgical books by either burying them or burning them.

Types of Blessings

Some blessings are more formal, such as the consecration of a person who is dedicating their life to God through a particular religious order. Objects reserved for special use, such as a church altar, are also consecrated.

An exorcism too is considered a blessing. It is bestowed upon a person struggling with the powers of evil. A simple exorcism is performed at baptism. Catechumens may also experience a minor exorcism as they journey to the sacraments of initiation.

Sacramental Actions

Sacred actions such as making the sign of the cross, genuflecting, kneeling, bowing the head, and sprinkling with holy water are also sacramentals.

Sacramentals teach the faithful, as my mother taught her children, that no person or thing is outside the grace of God, that everything has the potential to encounter the divine, that every morsel of life is holy.



Palms and other sacramentals point to an invisible reality.