

What is a sacramental?

A sacramental is any object set apart and blessed by the Church to lead us to good thoughts and increase our devotion. A sacramental is *like* a sacrament in that it is a means of grace and an outward sign of an invisible mystery of faith, but it is also *unlike* a sacrament – sacraments were instituted by Christ, while sacramentals are established by the Church. Sacraments convey grace directly in our souls, while sacramentals do so indirectly, by leading us to devotion and providing us an occasion to respond to God's grace.

These rites are indicated by the word *Sacramentalia*, the object of which is to manifest the respect due to the sacrament and to secure the sanctification of the faithful. They belong to widely different categories, e.g.: substance, in the mingling of water with Eucharistic wine; quantity, in the triple baptismal effusion; quality, in the condition of unleavened bread; relation, in the capacity of the minister; time and place, in feast-days and churches; habit, in the liturgical vestments; posture, in genuflection, prostrations; action, in chanting etc.

The number of the sacramentals may not be limited; nevertheless, the attempt has been made to determine their general principles or rather applications in the verse: "Orans, tinctus, edens, confessus, dans, benedicens".

- *Orans* indicates public prayer, whether liturgical or private;
- *tinctus*, the use of holy water and the unctions in use at various consecrations;
- *edens*, the eating of blessed foods;
- *confessus*, the general avowal of faults which is made in the Confiteor recited at Mass, at Communion, in the Divine Office;
- *dans*, alms;
- *benedicens*, papal and episcopal blessings etc., blessings of candles, ashes, palms etc.

Another distinction classifies sacramentals according to whether they are acts, e.g. the Confiteor mentioned above, or things, such as medals, holy water etc. The sacramentals do not produce sanctifying grace ex opere operato, by virtue of the rite or substance employed, and this constitutes their essential difference from the sacraments. The Church is unable to increase or reduce the number of sacraments as they were instituted by Christ, but the sacramentals do not possess this dignity and privilege. Theologians do not agree as to whether the sacramentals may confer any other grace ex opere operantis through the action of the one who uses them, but the negative opinion is more generally followed, for as the Church cannot confer sanctifying grace nor institute signs thereof, neither can she institute efficacious signs of the other graces which God alone can give. Moreover, as experience teaches, the sacramentals do not infallibly produce their effect.

All the sacramentals have not the same effect; this depends on the prayer of the Church which does not make use of the same urgency nor have recourse to the same Divine sources of merit. Some sacramentals derive no special efficacy from the prayer of the Church; such are those which are employed in worship, without a blessing, or even with a blessing which does not specify any particular fruit. This is the case with the blessing of vessels meant to contain the

holy oils: "Give ear to our prayers, most merciful Father, and deign to bless and sanctify these purified vessels prepared for the use of the sacred ministry of Thy Church". On the other hand, some sacramentals, among them one of those most frequently used, holy water, are the object of a benediction which details their particular effects.

Action: Sign of the Cross, genuflection, processions, bowing our heads at the Name of Jesus, fasting

Time & place: Feast days, fast days, holy days of obligation, Sunday Mass, pilgrimages, Holy Land, Rome, Fatima, Lourdes, etc.

Thing: Holy water, rosary, crucifix, candles, ashes, holy cards, medals, statues