

## NOTES ON THE SACRAMENTS OF INITIATION

### Introduction

The Sacraments of Initiation are Baptism, Confirmation & Eucharist. We'll begin here with Eucharist, and a key concept which is necessary to understand the nature of all the sacraments, in Jesus' words at the Last Supper: "Do this in memory of me."

To "remember" and to "forget" in the Hebrew Scriptures (or what we call the Old Testament, the foundation established with the Israelites and fulfilled with Jesus) mean something different than their meaning in our speech today. In our everyday speech, to "remember" means to simply hold a mental image of an event that happened in the past, it is not really present again; to "forget" is to lose consciousness of it. Let's look at what these words mean in the Old Testament, in the context of God "forgetting" or "remembering" his people.

In the OT, the Israelites often prayed that God would not "forget" them. They believed in an all-knowing God, so it would be impossible for God to "forget" them in our sense of the word. In OT context, to be "forgotten" by God meant for God to let someone go out of existence, to die.

For to be "remembered" by God meant to be held in being, to exist, for we only exist by being held in the "mind" of God. The OT says that God "remembers" his covenant, love and mercy. This means he continues to make these things real and present, and in doing so keeps his people alive, saving them from death.

A good example of this from the OT is Genesis 8:24—"The waters maintained their crest over the earth for 150 days, and then God remembered Noah." It is not that God suddenly said, "Oh yeah, that Noah guy is floating around in that ark, maybe I'd better check on him." "Remembering" Noah meant God manifested his presence to Noah, and in doing so held him in life and saved him from death.

This understanding of "remembering" also shows up in the New Testament. In Luke 23:42 the "good thief" asks Jesus to "remember" him when he

comes into his kingdom. He is not asking Jesus to just think about him once in awhile—he is asking for eternal life in Jesus' presence, which Jesus promises in his response.

St Paul tells the Galatians to “remember” the poor. He is not telling them just to think about the poor once in awhile, but to be present to them.

This concept of “remembering” as God making himself present was central to Jewish ritual celebrations, particularly the Passover. The saving event that happened once in the past was “remembered” through the Passover meal, meaning God made the saving event real and present again so that subsequent generations could participate in it, not just symbolically but actually, because salvation was offered to them as well.

Jesus established the Eucharist in the context of Passover, instructing the Apostles to celebrate this meal to “remember” him. They clearly understood—maybe not that night, but certainly after the resurrection and after all the time Jesus spent instructing them before his ascension—that the same principle firmly established in the Passover applied to this meal. When the Apostles took bread and wine and “remembered” the Last Supper, Jesus would make his body and blood truly present, so that future generations could participate in this saving event, not just symbolically but actually.

What did animal sacrifice mean to the ancient Israelites? It was recognition of God's sovereignty over creation. It was an act of thanks: what can man give back to God except what he has received? It served as a way of solemnly sealing an agreement or oath. It could also be an act of renunciation and sorrow for sins.

What was pivotal to the Jews about the sacrifice of the Passover lamb? What are the parallels to the sacrifice of Jesus on the cross? Here God did not merely rescue the firstborn sons of Israel; he also consecrated them as a “kingdom of priests, a holy nation.” This nation he now called his own “firstborn son.” Through the Paschal Mystery of Christ we are not merely saved from our sins--we, too, are consecrated as a kingdom of priests, and are made coheirs with Christ the Son.

Why was it so important that the sacrificial lamb be eaten, and not merely sacrificed? By eating, one became a participant in the covenant, not merely a spectator. We, too must eat of the Lamb to claim our participation in the New Covenant.

This concept of actually participating in the Paschal Mystery (suffering, death and resurrection of Jesus) applies to the other sacraments.

### **Baptism**

In Mark 10:38-39 Jesus says: “Are you able to drink the cup that I drink, or to be baptized with the baptism with which I am baptized?” After the Apostles replied “We are able,” Jesus said: “The cup that I drink you shall drink; and you shall be baptized with the baptism with which I am baptized.” In Luke 12:50 he says: “I have a baptism to undergo, and how distressed I am until it is accomplished.” Jesus is calling his impending death on the cross “baptism,” and says his followers must be baptized in it.

St. Paul teaches this in Romans 6:3-4—“Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus have been baptized into his death? Therefore we have been buried with him through baptism into death, so that as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the father, so we too might walk in newness of life.”

Baptism being an actual participation in the death and resurrection of Jesus—a “remembering”—it gives to the baptized “newness of life” that these events produce, free from the debt of sin which our ancestors owed (“original sin”) but was paid by Jesus. We are configured to Christ with a permanent seal, and receive from him the grace we need to live as a light of Christ. For those who live true to their baptismal calling nothing remains that can separate us from God the Father.

### **Confirmation**

There is a long tradition of a separate ritual following upon baptism for the full outpouring of the Holy Spirit.

It started with Jesus being anointed by the Spirit after coming out of the water after his baptism by John.

Even after Jesus had commissioned the Apostles—sending them with the authority to act in his person—and after he ascended into heaven, he sent the anointing with the Holy Spirit at Pentecost to complete their commissioning.

In Apostolic times baptism in water was followed by a laying on of hands and anointing. In the Acts of the Apostles we read:

**Now when the apostles in Jerusalem heard that Samaria had accepted the word of God, they sent them Peter and John, who went down and prayed for them, that they might receive the Holy Spirit, for it had not yet fallen upon any of them; they had only been baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus. Then they laid hands on them and they received the Holy Spirit. (Acts 8:14-17)**

This laying on of hands after baptism is the beginning of the sacrament of Confirmation. In the first three centuries of the Church, adults and older children were brought into the Church through Baptism, Confirmation of Baptism/the anointing of the Holy Spirit through a laying on of hands, and Eucharist—all at once.

Once the Church experienced a population explosion beginning with the 4<sup>th</sup> century, Bishops (who were until that time the only ministers of baptism and Confirmation) began to delegate Baptism to the local parish priests, but the confirmation/completion of Baptism/full outpouring of the Holy Spirit was reserved to the bishops, since they are the true pastors and authority in the Church. So adults and older children were baptized and given Eucharist by their parish priest, and then confirmed by the bishop when he visited every three years or so.

Once the theology of original sin began to be developed at about this same time, the practice of bringing infants for baptism began to emerge, further separating the time between the reception of Baptism, Confirmation and Eucharist in the life of a believer.

Today, when an infant is presented for baptism in the Catholic Church, the Reception of Eucharist often follows around age 8, and Confirmation sometime in adolescence—although local bishops conferences and individual bishops do have the freedom to call for Confirmation before Eucharist. For adults and older children, the original process of initiation is required—reception of all three sacraments of initiation given at the Easter Vigil, with the bishop delegating the authority to administer confirmation to the parish priest.