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## By visible signs, rites extend Christ's love

**EDITORS' NOTE** — The following article is the first installment of an eight-part series that will focus on the Catholic Church's seven sacraments.

This article explores the historical development and meaning of the church's sacramental nature. Each of the subsequent installments will examine one of the seven sacraments in detail.

**By Rob Cullivan**  
Staff writer

To understand the need for sacraments in the life of a Catholic, Father Benedict A. Ehmann likened the seven rites to the desire of sweethearts to kiss each other. Two people in love need physical contact with each other to affirm their love, he said.

Any attempt to dismiss the sacraments as irrelevant in Christian life is comparable to one of the sweethearts saying: "Honey, don't expect me to kiss you; I don't like that stuff," observed Father Ehmann, a member of the international circle of liturgical reformers who paved the way for the sacramental changes wrought by Vatican II.

Father Ehmann's assessment mirrors that offered by Father Joseph A. Hart, director of the diocesan Office of the Synod and associate professor of theology at St. Bernard's Institute. Referring to sacramental celebration, Father Hart said the rites are "my life, my spirituality, my joy."

Much like exchanges of affection between spouses, relatives and friends, the seven sacraments — baptism, confirmation, Eucharist, reconciliation, anointing of the sick, matrimony and holy orders — manifest through rituals that can be seen, heard tasted and touched the unseen love Christ has for his people.



The sacraments have been a particular preoccupation for Father Ehmann, who has published several articles on liturgy and music. A former member of the diocesan Liturgical Commission, during the 1960s he wrote articles for the former *Courier-Journal*, explaining and advocating the reforms of Vatican II.

Father Ehmann explained that "the sacraments are an extension of the incarnation" — a "re-enactment" of Christ's life on earth. This understanding of the rites, Father Ehmann noted, echoes the teaching of fifth-century Pope Leo the Great, who

observed: "What was visible in the Lord has passed over into the sacraments."

Through the sacrament of baptism, for example, Catholics share in Christ's death and resurrection, Father Ehmann said, citing comments St. Paul made in the sixth chapter of his letter to the Romans:

"Or are you unaware that we who were baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? We were indeed buried with him through baptism into death, so that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might live in newness of life."

Roger van der Weyden's altarpiece "The Seven Sacraments," (c. 1450) hangs in the the Musée des Beaux Arts in Antwerp, Belgium. The center panel of the triptych focuses on the Eucharist. The left panel depicts baptism, confirmation and penance, and the right panel illustrates holy orders, matrimony and extreme unction.

### Doubting Thomas?



Observers predict tough Senate confirmation hearings for former Catholic seminarian Clarence Thomas, President George Bush's nominee to succeed retiring Supreme Court Justice Thurgood Marshall (shown at left). Page 4.

### SACRAMENTS

Sacraments can be found to varying degrees in many Christian denominations. But the sacraments form the very core of Catholics' encounter with Christ, said Father Richard P. McBrien, syndicated columnist and chairman of the University of Notre Dame's theology department.

"When you think about it, (sacramental theology) is perhaps the most essential thing one can reflect on when one's a Catholic," he remarked in the 1986 catechetical videotape, "What is Sacrament?" produced by Tabor Publishing.

Sacraments construct a bridge between God — pure, unlimited, eternal spirit — and people, who are limited and earthly, Father McBrien said in the video presentation. In the seven sacraments, "God has chosen to meet us half way."

Of course, God's greatest effort "to meet us half way" was the incarnation of Jesus Christ, Father McBrien added. Indeed, many theologians have noted that no greater sacrament exists than Jesus. Ultimately, it is *he* who Catholics experience through the seven rites formally declared sacraments of the church.

Yet aside from baptism and Eucharist, many scholars acknowledge that Scripture provides little *explicit* direction for the establishment of the rites. How did the Catholic Church settle upon seven sacraments?

To understand the origin of this number, it is best to first consider the nature and origin of the sacramental concept. Derived from *sacramentum*, an oath of allegiance Roman soldiers made to their commanders and gods, the word "sacrament" stems from the experience of the early church.

To explain the faith to their Roman contemporaries, Christian writers in the second century likened the initiation ceremonies of baptism and confirmation to the *sacramentum*, according to Dr. Joseph Martos, author of the 1981 book, *Doors to the Sacred — A Historical Introduction to Sacraments in the Catholic Church*.

Martos and other writers state that for  
**Continued on page 2**

