

Catholic sacraments

The things that really make Catholicism Catholic, more even than candles in church and fish on a Friday, are the sacraments.

The sacraments are the main way in which Christians receive God's grace, using rituals that can be traced right back to Jesus himself, and the practices he taught his disciples.

There are seven sacraments. Three are only performed once in a lifetime and two only in very specific circumstances.

But the last two, Eucharist and Reconciliation, form the fabric of everyday Catholic life. You couldn't be Catholic without them, really, just like you couldn't be the Pope without wearing that hat.

Eucharist, also known as Mass, or Holy Communion, is a ritual that's essentially a re-enactment of Christ's Last Supper. That doesn't mean sitting around a big table with someone dressed up as Jesus. It means eating bread and wine in the same way that Jesus told his disciples to do when he said, *"This is my body, which is given for you. Do this in remembrance of me."*

The bread symbolises Christ's body, and the wine symbolises his blood. In fact, they're more than just symbols, as Catholic doctrine teaches that at the moment of consecration, they're literally transformed.

Catholics are required to attend Mass at least once a week, on Sundays, though some may attend every day.

Just as important is Reconciliation, or Confession, which is all about sin and forgiveness. The problem is that everyone's relationship with God is constantly being damaged by sin.

Most sins are only minor, or venial sins – thinking about taking one of Auntie Madge's biscuits, say. But Jesus taught that all sins will be forgiven by God.

Even mortal sins – acts committed intentionally – such as locking Auntie Madge in a cupboard, and using her credit card.

But that forgiveness isn't automatic. It can only be obtained through the Sacrament of Reconciliation, in which all sins must be confessed to a priest. If the sinner feels regret, confesses honestly, and accepts some form of penance, which could be returning stolen goods, or saying a thousand Hail Marys, then God, acting through the priest, bestows forgiveness, and that achieves reconciliation, which means repairing the damage caused by sin.

Sacraments, then, for Catholics, are rather more than just a bit of mumbling in Latin. They're the most important tools in the religious toolbox.