

About Sacramentals

Q. 1052. What is a sacramental? A. A sacramental is anything set apart or blessed by the Church to excite good thoughts and to increase devotion, and through these movements of the heart to remit venial sin.

Q. 1053. How do the Sacramentals excite good thoughts and increase devotion? A. The Sacramentals excite good thoughts by recalling to our minds some special reason for doing good and avoiding evil; especially by reminding us of some holy person, event or thing through which blessings have come to us. They increase devotion by fixing our minds on particular virtues and by helping us to understand and desire them.

Q. 1054. Do the Sacramentals of themselves remit venial sins? A. The Sacramentals of themselves do not remit venial sins, but they move us to truer devotion, to greater love for God and greater sorrow for our sins, and this devotion, love and sorrow bring us grace, and the grace remits venial sins.

Q. 1055. Why does the Church use Sacramentals? A. The Church uses Sacramentals to teach the faithful of every class the truths of religion, which they may learn as well by their sight as by their hearing; for God wishes us to learn His laws by every possible means, by every power of soul and body.

Q. 1056. Show by an example how Sacramentals aid the ignorant in learning the truths of faith. A. Sacramentals aid the ignorant in learning the truths of faith as children learn from pictures before they are able to read. Thus one who cannot read the account of Our Lord's passion may learn it from the Stations of the Cross, and one who kneels before a crucifix and looks on the bleeding head, pierced hands and wounded side, is better able to understand Christ's sufferings than one without a crucifix.

Q. 1057. What are the Stations or Way of the Cross? A. The Stations or Way of the Cross is a devotion instituted by the Church to aid us in meditating on Christ's passion and death. Fourteen crosses or stations, each with a picture of some scene in the passion, are arranged at distances apart. By passing from one station to another and praying before each while we meditate upon the scene it represents, we make the Way of the Cross in memory of Christ's painful journey during His passion, and we gain the indulgence granted for this pious exercise.

Q. 1058. Are prayers and ceremonies of the Church also Sacramentals? A. Prayers and ceremonies of the Church are also Sacramentals because they excite good thoughts and increase devotion. Whatever the Church dedicates to a pious use or devotes to the worship of God may be called a Sacramental.

Q. 1059. On what ground does the Church make use of ceremonies? A. The Church makes use of ceremonies:

1. After the example of the Old Law, in which God described and commanded ceremonies;
2. After the example of Our Lord, who rubbed clay on the eyes of the blind to whom He wished to restore sight, though He might have performed the miracle without any external act;
3. On the authority of the Church itself, to whom Christ gave power to do whatever was necessary for the instruction of all men;
4. To add solemnity to religious acts.

Q. 1060. How may persons sin in using Sacramentals? A. Persons may sin in using Sacramentals by using them in a way or for a purpose prohibited by the Church; also by believing that the use of Sacramentals will save us in spite of our sinful lives. We must remember that Sacramentals can aid us only through the blessing the Church gives them and through the good dispositions they excite in us. They have, therefore, no power in themselves, and to put too much confidence in their use leads to superstition.

Q. 1061. What is the difference between the Sacraments and the sacramentals? A. The difference between the Sacraments and the sacramentals is: 1st. The Sacraments were instituted by Jesus Christ and the sacramentals were instituted by the Church; 2d. The Sacraments give grace of themselves when we place no obstacle in the way; the sacramentals excite in us pious dispositions, by means of which we may obtain grace.

Q. 1062. May the Church increase or diminish the number of Sacraments and Sacramentals? A. The Church can never increase nor diminish the number of Sacraments, for as Christ Himself instituted them, He alone has power to change their number; but the Church may increase or diminish the number of the Sacramentals as the devotion of its people or the circumstances of the time and place require, for since the Church instituted them they must depend entirely upon its laws.

Q. 1063. Which is the chief sacramental used in the Church? A. The chief sacramental used in the Church is the sign of the cross.

Q. 1065. What is a common fault with many in blessing themselves? A. A common fault with many in blessing themselves is to make a hurried motion with the hand which is in no way a sign of the cross. They perform this act of devotion without thought or intention, forgetting that the Church grants an indulgence to all who bless themselves properly while they have sorrow for their sins.

Q. 1067. How is the sign of the cross a profession of faith in the chief mysteries of our religion? A. The sign of the cross is a profession of faith in the chief mysteries of our religion because it expresses the mysteries of the Unity and Trinity of God and of the Incarnation and death of our Lord.

Q. 1070. What other sacramental is in very frequent use? A. Another sacramental in very frequent use is holy water.

Q. 1071. What is holy water? A. Holy water is water blessed by the priest with solemn prayer to beg God's blessing on those who use it, and protection from the powers of darkness.

Q. 1072. How does the water blessed on Holy Saturday, or Easter Water, as it is called, differ from the holy water blessed at other times? A. The water blessed on Holy Saturday, or Easter Water, as it is called, differs from the holy water blessed at other times in this, that the Easter water is blessed with greater solemnity, the paschal candle, which represents Our Lord risen from the dead, having been dipped into it with a special prayer.

Q. 1073. Is water ever blessed in honor of certain saints? A. Water is sometimes blessed in honor of certain saints and for special purposes. The form of prayer to be used in such blessings is found in the Roman Ritual—the book containing prayers and ceremonies for the administration of the Sacraments and of blessings authorized by the Church.

Q. 1074. Are there other sacramentals besides the sign of the cross and holy water? A. Beside the sign of the cross and holy water there are many other sacramentals, such as blessed candles, ashes, palms, crucifixes, images of the Blessed Virgin and of the saints, rosaries, and scapulars.

Q. 1075. When are candles blessed in the Church and why are they used? A. Candles are blessed in the Church on the feast of the Purification of the Blessed Virgin—February 2nd. They are used chiefly to illuminate and ornament our altars, as a mark of reverence for the presence of Our Lord and of joy at His coming.

Q. 1077. When are ashes blessed in the Church and why are they used? A. Ashes are blessed in the Church on Ash Wednesday. They are used to keep us in mind of our humble origin, and of how the body of Adam, our forefather, was formed out of the slime or clay of the earth; also to remind us of death, when our bodies will return to dust, and of the necessity of doing penance for our sins. These ashes are obtained by burning the blessed palms of the previous year.

Q. 1078. When are palms blessed and of what do they remind us? A. Palms are blessed on Palm Sunday. They remind us of Our Lord's triumphal entry into Jerusalem, when the people, wishing to honor Him and make Him king, strewed palm branches and even their own garments in His path, singing: Hosanna to the Son of David.

Q. 1079. What is the difference between a cross and a crucifix? A. A cross has no figure on it and a crucifix has a figure of Our Lord. The word crucifix means fixed or nailed to the cross.

Q. 1092. What do the letters I.H.S. on an altar or sacred things mean? A. The letters I.H.S. on an altar or sacred things mean the name Jesus; for it is in that way the Holy Name is written in the Greek language when some of the letters are left out.

Q. 1093. What is the scapular, and why is it worn? A. The scapular is a long, broad piece of woolen cloth forming a part of the religious dress of monks, priests and sisters of some religious orders. It is worn over the shoulders and extends from the shoulders to the feet. The small scapular made in imitation of it, and consisting of two small pieces of cloth fastened together by strings, is worn by the faithful as a promise or proof of their willingness to practice some particular devotion, indicated by the kind of scapular they wear.

Q. 1094. How many kinds of scapulars are there in use among the faithful? A. Among the faithful there are many kinds of scapulars in use, such as the brown scapular or scapular of Mount Carmel worn in honor of Our Lord's passion; the white, in honor of the Holy Trinity; the blue, in honor of the Immaculate Conception; and the black, in honor of the seven dolors of the Blessed Virgin. When these are joined together and worn as one they are called the five scapulars. The brown scapular is best known and entitles its wearer to the greatest privileges and indulgences.

Q. 1097. What is an Agnus Dei? A. An Agnus Dei is a small piece of beeswax stamped with the image of a lamb and cross. It is solemnly blessed by the Pope with special prayers for those who carry it about their person in honor of Our Blessed Redeemer, whom we call the Lamb of God, Who taketh away the sins of the world. The wax is usually covered with silk or some fine material.