LESSON 44: SACRAMENTALS

Instruction for Faith Educators		
For Basic Level / Age 9	:	Cover points 1 to 14
For Intermediate Level / Age 12	:	Cover points 1 to 14
For Advanced Level / Age 15	:	Cover points 1 to 16

Revision from previous lesson:
In the previous lessons, we learned about the seven Sacraments that were instituted by Jesus Christ and handed on to the Church for the People of God. We have come to understand that there are Sacraments of Initiation (Baptism, Confirmation, and the Eucharist), Sacraments of Healing (Penance and Reconciliation, as well as Anointing of the Sick), and Sacraments of Service (Holy Orders and Matrimony). In this lesson, we will learn about sacramentals, which are similar to but not the same as Sacraments.

Current lesson:

1. We have learned that the seven Sacraments are outward signs that give grace to those who receive them in a worthy manner. But the Church also has numerous sacramentals, which are different from Sacraments even though the two terms bear a common resemblance.

   Sacramentals are "holy things or actions of which the church makes use to obtain for us from God, through her intercession, spiritual and temporal favours" (*Baltimore Catechism 1891*). A sacramental is anything set apart or blessed by the Church to excite our faith and to help deepen our devotion. It is through the prayers of the Church offered for those who make use of these sacramentals, as well as through the devotion they inspire, that they convey and obtain God's grace and blessings.

2. Sacraments were instituted directly by Christ Himself, whereas sacramentals were instituted by Christ through His Church. Sacramentals cannot replace the Sacraments, but they are greatly helpful in securing heavenly help for those who use them properly and with faith.

   CCC 1667: "Holy Mother Church has, moreover, instituted sacramentals. These are sacred signs which bear a resemblance to the sacraments. They signify effects, particularly of a spiritual nature, which are obtained through the intercession of the Church. By them men are disposed to receive the chief effect of the sacraments, and various occasions in life are rendered holy."

3. Sacramentals do not confer grace directly in the way that Sacraments do, but they prepare us (by the Church's prayer) to receive God's grace in the Sacraments and to cooperate with that grace. Sacramentals prepare us to receive the fruit of the Sacraments and sanctify different circumstances of life. Sacramentals are, therefore, not Sacraments in themselves but resemble the Sacraments insofar as they increase our holiness and draw their power from the same source, which is the Passion, Death, Resurrection, and Ascension of Christ.

"This is why the Church imparts blessings by invoking the name of Jesus, usually while making the holy sign of the cross of Christ" (CCC 1671).

4. Sacramentals are not unlike the sacraments in that they are channels of grace. They help us to call upon God's blessings, and they help us to be a blessing as well. When received with the right disposition, sacramentals can obtain for us these benefits if we use those sacramentals *with faith*:

   A) Actual graces;
   B) Forgiveness of venial sins;
   C) Remission of temporal punishment;
   D) Health of body and material blessings;
   E) Protection from evil spirits.

5. Unlike Sacraments, sacramentals do not produce sanctifying grace, a power that belongs to sacraments alone. The power of sacramentals depends greatly on the devotion of both the cleric (bishop, priest, or deacon) who gives the blessing and the person who is receiving them. It depends also on the prayers of the Church, the prayers of the blessings that are imposed on them, and the merits of Jesus Christ, the Blessed Mother, and the Saints. Of themselves they do not save souls, but they are the means for securing heavenly help for those who use them properly.

6. Sacramentals provide means by which ministries of the Church, certain states of life (such as religious life), and situations in Christian life are made holy. They also provide for the use of many things helpful to man. (CCC 1668)

7. Sacramentals "sanctify" or make holy material things, times, and places – such as relics, holy days, church buildings, altars, statues, holy water, rosaries, medals, processions, and pilgrimages, and even "secular" things such as houses, buses, and fishing boats.

8. Sacramentals derive from the baptismal priesthood. Every baptised person is therefore called to be a "blessing", and to bless. Hence lay people may preside at certain blessings. However, the more a blessing concerns ecclesial and sacramental life, the more is its administration reserved to the ordained ministry (bishops, priests, or deacons). Blessings of ordained men have the power, so to speak, to turn objects such as a new rosary or statue into a sacramental. While the laity can bless, their blessings are more of a prayer or a plea to God.

9. Sacramentals always include a prayer, usually a sign or action such as laying on of hands or counting beads or making the sign of the cross or sprinkling with another sacramental, holy water or preparing the body, casket, and grave with incense. Again, sacramentals prepare us as we hope to next receive God's grace.

10. **Blessings**. "Among sacramentals blessings (of persons, meals, objects, and places) come first. Every blessing praises God and prays for his gifts. In Christ, Christians are blessed by God the Father 'with every spiritual blessing'" (CCC 1671). Some blessings consecrate persons to the service of God, for example religious professions or the blessing for certain

lay ministers (CCC 1672). Other blessings dedicate objects, buildings, and other material things to the service of God.

The blessings by clergy, such as the consecration of churches, the absolution contained in the "I Confess" at Mass, and the blessings bestowed on palms, candles, or ashes are all sacramental actions. Lay Catholics are free to bless objects such as their meals, their Advent wreaths, and even their children. However such blessings act as "mere" plea to God. Clergy alone have been given the power to bless with a guarantee, as it were, and it is they and they alone who can take a new crucifix or rosary and turn them into sacramentals with the power and prayers of the entire Church behind them.

11. **Exorcisms**. Interestingly, exorcisms constitute the second category of sacramentals. One of the most remarkable effects of sacramentals is their ability to drive away the influence or power of evil spirits (CCC 1673). They can be found in prayers or even placed upon other sacramentals such as the St Benedict medal. Exorcism takes place when the Church asks publicly and authoritatively in the name of Jesus Christ that a person or object be protected against the power of the Evil One and withdrawn from his dominion.

    CCC 1673: "In a simple form, exorcism is performed at the celebration of Baptism. The solemn exorcism, called a 'major exorcism,' can be performed only by a priest and with the permission of a bishop. The priest must proceed with prudence, strictly observing the rules established by the Church... Illness, especially psychological illness, is a very different matter; treating this is the concern of medical science. Therefore, before an exorcism is performed, it is important to ascertain that one is dealing with the presence of the Evil One, and not [merely] an illness."

12. **Blessed objects**. The Church blesses an untold variety of objects which the faithful use to inspire devotion. It would be impossible to list them all, but some of the main ones are holy water, candles, ashes, palms, crucifixes, medals, rosaries, scapulars, and images of Our Lord, the Blessed Virgin, and the saints. Some of these blessed objects, namely candles, ashes, and palms, are given to us directly through the liturgy. Others, such as the scapular, rosary, and Miraculous Medal have been instituted or directly propagated by Our Blessed Mother. Sacramentals such as these play a pivotal role in the devotion and spiritual life of any Catholic and should be treated with the respect and dignity they deserve.

13. **Rubrics and prayers**. Rubrics and prayers are all sacramentals, such as the bowing of the head at the holy name of Jesus during Mass, or genuflecting, or making the sign of the cross. Many of these actions are used so often that they are performed flippantly and without thought. All rubrics and prayers should be done deliberately and devoutly, since they were deliberately instituted by the Church to aid us in attaining a deep love of God.

14. When an object (a sacramental) becomes so worn that it can no longer be used as a sacramental, one should not casually discard it. To prevent desecration, the sacramental should be returned to the earthly elements. Holy water, for example, should be poured into the earth, in a spot no one would walk over. Combustible sacramentals, such as scapulars and holy books, should be burned and then buried. Larger sacramentals that do not burn should be altered so that their form no longer appears to be a sacramental (for example, a

statue should be broken up into small pieces) and then buried. Objects made of metals can be melted down and used for another purpose.

15. While you will not find people in the Bible praying with rosary beads, wearing scapulars, or using Miraculous Medals, there are a number of passages of Scripture that support the use of sacramentals. It is a fact that God has used physical objects as instruments to work grace. Below are just a few examples:

    God instructed Moses to build the Ark of the Covenant upon which His glory would eventually rest to establish His presence among the Israelites as they wandered in the wilderness. Upon the ark were statues of angels (Exodus 25:10-22).

    When the people of Israel sinned against God and Moses prayed for them, God instructed him to make a bronze serpent and put it on a pole so the people could be healed when they looked at it (see Numbers 21:5-7).

    Samson, one of the judges in Israel who lived a Nazirite life (meaning that he vowed his life to God), was given superhuman strength when he lived out his commitment by abstaining from alcohol drinks and leaving his hair uncut (Judges 13-16).

    When Naaman went to Elisha for a cure for his leprosy, Elisha instructed him to wash himself seven times in the Jordan River so that he would be healed (see 2 Kings 5:10).

    When the man came in contact with the bones of Elisha, which was actually a relic of a saint, he came back to life and rose to his feet (see 2 Kings 13:20-21).

    God instructed the prophet Ezekiel to mark a cross on the foreheads of those who detested immoral practices (see Ezekiel 9:4, 6).

    Jesus healed a blind man using mud (see John 9:6-12).

    A woman with haemorrhages was healed by touching Jesus' garment (see Luke 8:44).

    When face cloths or aprons that had touched the skin of Paul and were applied to the sick, diseases were healed and evil spirits released (see Acts 19:11-12).

    These objects did not work magic. Rather, they prepared their recipients to receive grace by exciting their faith. This is the exact principle behind a sacramental.

16. Some of these objects described above were later on used in idolatrous ways, which God detested.

    Samson believed that his superhuman strength came from his seven long braids of hair rather than from God. As a result, he fell at the hand of the Philistines (Judges 16).

    The bronze snake used to bring healing to the Israelites was later placed in the Temple and became an object of worship.

The Ark of the Covenant was used as a good luck charm to give military success. In fact, the Temple itself was profaned and became a cesspool of idolatrous practices.

Such abuses are not proof of error. If using these items were a bad idea in the first place, God would not have commanded for them to be used in this manner. Therefore, just because rites and objects can be abused and used superstitiously does not mean that the correct use of such rites and objects in itself should be prohibited. Remember that God never changes; He is always the same. And today, He continues to use rites and objects to communicate His grace.

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