

Dear Brothers and Sisters,

These weeks over the summer I will be dedicating my Pastor's Letters to some teaching about the sacraments of our church.

The word "sacrament" comes from the oath or covenant of loyalty and commitment made by Roman soldiers. It indicated a commitment on both sides and was sealed by a solemn ceremony. The word is also derived from the Latin word "sacra" meaning sacred or holy. This is the Latin form of the Greek word "Mysterion" or mystery. This is why we often refer to the sacraments as "these holy mysteries."

A mystery is something that can be experienced even if it cannot be explained. We enter into the sacramental life of the church through baptism, and baptism is the best and simplest sacrament we can use to explain a few basic principles about all sacraments.

For a sacrament to be effective it needs to be valid, and for it to be valid it must have a proper candidate, a proper minister, a proper form, and a proper matter. The candidate is any person who has not been baptized.

The minister of baptism is anyone who does what the church intends to do. This means a lay person or even a non-Christian could validly administer baptism. Of course, a deacon or priest is the ordinary minister of baptism, but so that God's mercy is as widely available as possible, anyone (in an emergency) can baptize.

The proper form of baptism is the simple words, "I baptize you in the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit." While the whole form of the baptismal service is ordinarily used, that basic formula is the minimum for a valid baptism. Most non-Catholic baptisms are therefore valid and accepted by the Catholic Church. If there is some doubt, the person is conditionally baptized.

The proper matter for the sacrament of baptism is water. You can't baptize a person by dumping sand or ashes on their head or some other silly ritual. Water is necessary or its not baptism.

This is the first of the three sacraments of initiation. Baptism washes away original sin and restores the person to God's grace and favor. It is, however, the first step in the person's walk with God, and the other six sacraments are given to help the soul continue on their journey of faith.

Your Pastor,
Fr. Longenecker