

We Believe: **Sacraments** / 4

The Church and The Sacraments



Mysteries in the Church

The Bible, both Old and New Testaments, is full of stories about God coming into his world and changing it, and making himself known in it.

Read these Old Testament passages to see some ways God did this:

Exodus 14:10-29 1 Samuel 17:38-50

Judges 6:11-24 Jonah 3:1, 4:11

In a way, each of these Old Testament happenings is mysterious. God's hand works in each of them, in a way we can't understand.

The New Testament is also full of such mysteries of God's grace at work — you've already read the story of the Transfiguration. Look also at these passages:

Matthew 8:23-27 Luke 1:30-36

Mark 5:1-13 Acts 5:12-16

The Church expresses this mystery, this

change that God makes in our lives, through ritual and reverent worship. In your Divine Liturgy book, look at the pages noted. See how the Church expresses something of this kind in each place (make a few notes on each):

Read the prayer on page 24a (starting with "Lord God of Hosts..."). What mystery is described here?

The curtain is closed during the liturgy at certain times. One of these is the time before Holy Communion. What is the closed curtain meant to show us?

On page 61, at the top of the page starting with the words "O Lord, have compassion...", is a hymn we sing during the service for the Repose of Souls of those who have died. What mystery is described in this first verse?

service of ordination as one of the sacraments, will also emphasize that the Christian community grows and is built up only when we all serve in the many capacities open to us.

Materials Needed

- Bibles
- Pens
- Paper
- Banner

Procedure

1. Opening prayer. With the class, read these passages: 1 Corinthians 12:4-26 and Ephesians 4:11-16. Discuss these questions:

- Does Paul say one kind of service is more important or more prestigious than others? (No.)
- Does he see some people in the church as having more responsibility than others? (No—we are all equally responsible.)
- Why must we all work together? (Because, like a body, we can only function at our best if all the parts are co-operating and doing their share.)

Ask the class to think about the kinds of service needed to have the church ready for a Sunday morning liturgy. (Someone needs to clean the building, open doors and put lights on, get wine and candles and flowers; there are the priest, choir, and servers with their responsibilities, and the congregation has to be there and ready to take part.)

How do all these jobs relate to the idea of a body with its members? What kinds of service are expected from Christians outside of the liturgy? (We are to help others, especially those in need; we are supposed to pray and fast; and most of all, witness to the truth of our faith in our daily lives.) Stress again that these kinds of service are asked of *all* of us, not just the priest. (10 min.)

2. Together, do the exercise in the student text, "The Laying On of Hands." (The answers should be evident from the Biblical texts. In general, the laying on of hands signifies the passing on of a gift, the gift of God's grace to heal or to lead.) (10 min.)

3. Tell the class that one kind of service in the church is that of the sacramental priesthood. Those who serve at the altar and handle the consecrated gifts are prepared for such service in a special way through the sacrament of ordination.

Ask students to think of times during the liturgy when the priest represents us to Christ (when he offers the consecrated gifts of Holy Communion to God) and times when he represents Christ to us (when he gives a blessing).

Because this kind of service is such a heavy and sacred responsibility, a man must have God's grace. This is asked for in the sacrament of ordination, as

the bishop lays his hands on the man being ordained. (5 min.)

4. Following the above discussion, have students take a closer look at the ordination service in the "As a Priest Is Ordained" exercise in the student text.

Let students give their own answers to the question at the end of the exercise. (10 min.)

5. Work on banner. (20 min.)

6. Let the students look at "My Chance to Serve" in the student text, page 56. They can begin it now, or just look it over and do it as homework. (5 min.)

Close with a prayer.

Session 4—The Church and the Sacraments

Key Concept

The Church is, in the fullest way, a gift of God's grace.

Objective

Students will

Recognize the Church as not just a "place" made by man, but a divine and mysterious gift from God.

Background for Teacher

What does it mean to call the Church, herself, a sacrament? It means that by giving us the Church, God has come intimately into our life and changed its character. Our lives are now the beginning of eternity. We are restored to being what we were meant to be—in communion with him, just as we were before we fell away from him through our willful sin.

Through the Church and her worship, God shows himself to us in his love and power. He invites us to be with him in the closest possible way, through Holy Communion. All of this is indeed a "mystery," as St. Paul says.

We want to show students what a special privilege it is to be members of the Church, and how great a gift God has given us by making our lives—broken by our sin—whole again, and eternal.

Materials Needed

- Bibles
- Pens
- Paper
- Divine Liturgy books
- Banner

Procedure

1. Opening prayer. Talk with the class about what the story of Adam and Eve means. Read together Genesis 1:26-31 (this tells of the immeasurable gifts of God to mankind). Now read Genesis 3:1-13. Note

how close the man and woman's relationship with God is—he walks in the Garden with them. But because they are not content to let him be God, and want to be their own gods, they turn away from this closeness, and freely destroy it. It is they, not God, who break the close tie he wanted with them—the communion he offered them. Too late they find that the serpent (the Devil) has lied—they do not become God-like, but instead become subject to death.

Now read I Corinthians 15:21-22. Here we see that Adam brought death into the world through sin, but Christ restores life by taking our death and destroying its power.

How is this gift of life given? Read Ephesians 5:25-33. Christ gives this life through the Church, which he loves so deeply. He has saved the Church, given his life for her, made her holy so that she can again share eternal life with him. And as Paul says in verse 32, this is a mystery, as are all the sacraments.

Who is the Church? Of course, we are. It is we to whom this gift of restored life is given. So the Church is another gift of God's grace, and that is what we mean when we say that the Church herself is a sacrament. The Church changes our lives by restoring

them to what God meant them to be, and brings his grace upon us. (15 min.)

2. With this idea that the Church is not just a "place" but a gift of grace from God, look over students' answers in the exercise "My Chance to Serve" from last week. Point out that *any* kind of service in the Church is very special because, no matter how menial a task it might be, it still is part of our eternal life in God's Kingdom, which begins here and now if we are in the Church as his followers. (10 min.)

3. Have the students individually complete the exercise called "Mysteries in the Church" from the student text. Talk about it afterwards, using these discussion guidelines:

- The Biblical passages should be fairly easy for the students to understand.

- In the liturgy, the prayer on page 24a reverently thanks God for letting us be "ministers of" the mystery of his Holy Communion.

- Finally, the hymn in the Requiem Service speaks of the mystery of our resurrection and the Judgment ("tribunal") at the end of earthly time. (20 min.)

4. Finish the banner. As in Unit II, try to have the students take part in having it put up somewhere.

Close with a prayer. (15 min.)

Notes
