



I have heard it said that when a Bishop, Priest, or Deacon is validly ordained in the Apostolic Succession [receives the Sacrament of Holy Orders] there is an ontological change in him. Then in an Easter Vigil homily you referred to the ontological change that takes place in someone receiving the Sacrament of Baptism. What does “ontological change” mean?

Protestant theology recognizes two “sacraments” or “ordinances” – Baptism and the Lord’s Supper – generally holding that they are themselves merely symbols and that “it is the faith of the participant...rather than the power of the sacramental act that produces grace.” John Calvin defined the two sacraments as “visible sermons”; Evangelical Fundamentalists teach “Ordinance Theology” believing that even the word “sacrament” is too Catholic and that the two “ordinances” are merely “memorial moments.”

On the other hand, the Catholic Churches – Roman, Eastern Orthodox, Anglican, Old Catholic, and Oriental – teach that there are seven Sacraments which when validly celebrated “produce grace in the soul of the recipient by the very performance of the sacramental act (*ex opere operato*); the recipient need only have the right intention.”

As you know, the American Episcopal Church as well as Anglicanism worldwide officially defines the Sacraments (*Book of Common Prayer, 1979, page 857*) as:

outward and visible: that is, physical; they can be perceived by one or more of the senses

signs: a technical theological term for something that actually conveys and effects that which is signified, as distinguished from a symbol which merely represents something else

of inward and spiritual grace: power and strength which God gives to His people

given by Christ: the Sacraments are Christ’s; He instituted them, and it is He who acts in them through the power of the Holy Spirit. We do not perform them; we *celebrate* them, that is, we only “set the stage”; and we are not free to change them if they are to be “valid” or authentic.

as sure and certain means by which we receive that grace: the Sacraments are objective realities; and while they require a response on our part to be effective in our lives, they exist and act in their own right (*“ex opere operato,”* that is, they work objectively by means of their administration; they are not dependent on our subjective emotions to make them real or to convey their grace).

Anglicanism as well as the rest of the Catholic Church teaches that the purpose of the seven Sacraments is “human transformation, to make us sacramental. ... The Sacraments are the means by which the ‘fruits of Christ’s Paschal Mystery [His suffering, death, and resurrection] are made available to us.” In Salvation History we are now living in “the Age of the Church” – the period between Pentecost and the Second Coming of Jesus Christ – when the holy Catholic Church is the Body of Christ here on earth. The Sacraments validly celebrated are the principal means by which the Church on earth continues to make Christ’s Incarnation present to His people.

As the sacramental theologians point out, Jesus Christ Himself is the one perfect Sacrament. The holy Catholic Church is the Body of Christ on earth today; it is the foundational Sacrament which makes present the Kingdom of God and which administers the seven Sacraments. Sacraments are about transformation into the life of Jesus Christ. The goal of Christianity is *Theosis*, becoming a part of the life, the community, and the being of the Holy Trinity for eternity. One theologian has written, “The Sacraments are as much verbs as nouns: they *do* something.”

A key to understanding the Sacraments is *Anamnesis*, the New Testament Greek word used to record what Jesus said at the Last Supper as He instituted the Sacrament of the Eucharist: “This is my Body. ... This is my Blood. Do this, whenever you do it, for the *anamnesis* [making actually present again] of me.” The Sacraments are the *anamnesis* – in

the words of Jesus Christ Himself, *making actually present again* – of His life and His ministry, His presence – Body and Blood, soul and divinity – among us. As one theologian has said, this is Christ's presence which touches all the stages and all the important moments of Christian life: a presence that "gives birth and increase, healing and mission to the Christian's life of faith."

Through the centuries, theologians have categorized and talked about the Sacraments in different ways.

From the earliest days Baptism and the Eucharist were given special rank among the Sacraments, and the theologian Peter Lombard (c. 1100-1160) began the medieval Western use of the categories of:

- the "major" Sacraments: Baptism and the Eucharist, perhaps because of their "larger" role in individual salvation and/or because of the "larger" amount of text devoted to them in the New Testament
- the "minor" Sacraments: Confirmation, Penance (Reconciliation), Matrimony, Unction of the Sick, and Holy Orders, perhaps because of their "smaller" amount of text in Sacred Scripture

Another categorization popular at one time was:

- "the Sacraments of the dead": Baptism and Penance (Reconciliation), "because they are for the souls in a state of sin" (spiritual death)
- "the Sacraments of the living": Eucharist, Confirmation, Matrimony, Unction of the Sick, and Holy Orders, "because they are conferred on souls in a state of grace" (spiritual life)

Theologians have used the categories of:

- the Sacraments for the perfection of individuals: Baptism, Confirmation, Eucharist, Penance (Reconciliation), Unction of the Sick
- the Sacraments for the perfection of the Church: Holy Orders, Matrimony

The excellent contemporary *Catechism of the Catholic Church* talks about:

- the Sacraments of Initiation: Baptism, Confirmation, Eucharist
- the Sacraments of Healing: Reconciliation (Penance), Unction of the Sick
- the Sacraments of Communion: Holy Orders, Matrimony

The categorization about which you are asking is:

- the Sacraments which produce an ontological change in a person: Baptism, Confirmation, Holy Orders
- the Sacraments which provide grace for the support, strengthening, and development of the new life and being created by this ontological change: Eucharist, Reconciliation (Penance), Unction of the Sick, Matrimony

Ontology is the "study and analysis of what something is." This definition was expanded by the 20th Century philosopher Martin Heidegger's "existential analysis" to include the study of human existence. Thus an "ontological change" is a change in what someone is and the nature of his/her existence.

The Sacraments of Baptism, Confirmation, and Holy Orders, when validly administered, produce an objective, permanent, systemic change in what a person is and the nature of his/her existence. This is the reason that these three Sacraments can only be validly administered once to a person. It is also what theologically is at the center of the question of who can validly be the subject (recipient) of the Sacrament of Holy Orders and the Sacrament of Holy Matrimony.

It is because the Sacraments of the Eucharist, Reconciliation (Penance), Matrimony, and Unction of the Sick support, strengthen, and develop the new life created by this ontological change that this objective, systemic change in ones being and existence must have taken place (through the Sacrament of Baptism) in order for any of these four Sacraments to be effective in the recipient's life.