

Catholic

UPDATE

KEEPING CATHOLICS
UP TO DATE SINCE 1973

© 2025 LIGUORI
PUBLICATIONS,
A REDEMPTORIST MINISTRY.
800-325-9521
LIGUORI.ORG
PHOTOCOPYING PROHIBITED.

C2511A

NOVEMBER 2025

Catholic Traditions WHAT WE DO AND WHY WE DO IT

Sacramentals

CHANNELS OF GRACE IN EVERYDAY LIFE

A REDEMPTORIST PASTORAL PUBLICATION



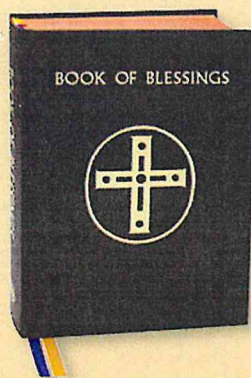
Sacramentals are a part of Catholic life, rooted in the “sacramental principle,” which affirms that God comes to us, speaks to us, and touches us through people and through all the good things of creation. From the moment Jesus was conceived in the womb of Mary, a physical point of contact was established between God and the human race—a point of contact that could never be broken. Because God became one of us in Jesus Christ, human beings could look upon the face of God, hear God’s voice, and feel God’s embrace.

Sacramentals are not the same as the seven sacraments: baptism, confirmation, Eucharist, reconciliation, anointing of the sick, holy orders, and matrimony. Christ was present at the inception of these seven sacraments and is present each time they are celebrated.

Sacramentals are sacred signs that resemble the seven sacraments, but they are not instituted by Christ, and they do not convey Christ’s grace in the same way the sacraments do. Instead, they are instituted by the Church, and the spiritual benefit is primarily through the prayer of the Church. In a special way, sacramentals dispose us to receive the grace of the sacraments and sanctify various occasions in human life. (See the Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy [*Sacrosanctum Concilium*], 60.)

Sacramentals are not magic. They do not have any power of their own. Sacramentals derive their value from the prayer of the Church, which is a participation in the prayer of Jesus Christ.

Blessings and the use of material things as signs of God’s presence and power are elements of Catholicism that have their foundation in Scripture. Inspired by Jesus and by the testimony of Scripture, the Catholic Church has recommended the use of sacramentals as additional signs of God’s care for us. Catholics embrace sacramentals because they fit into our natural human inclination to use material items as symbols of profound realities. Just as a gift of flowers is a sign of love, sacramentals express God’s love and grace to us through the intercession of the Church. Sacramentals are as relevant in our modern world as they ever have been.



The Book of Blessings

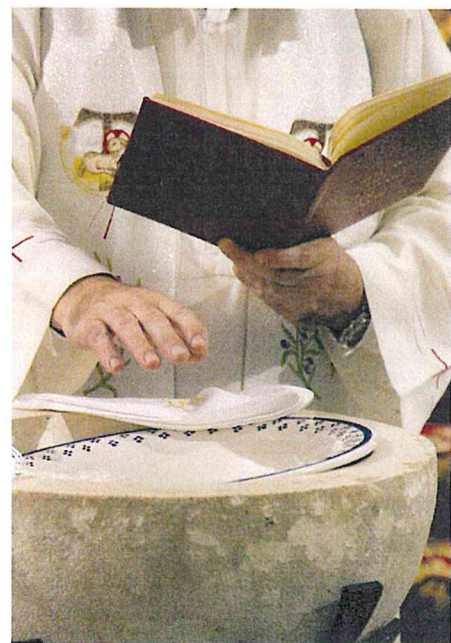
Most official blessings used in the Church today may be found in the liturgical *Book of Blessings*, revised by decree of the Second Vatican Council and published in the United States in 1989. This book is a treasury of prayers and blessings for all Catholics and a clear expression of the Catholic belief in the sacramental principle. The Church, in its prayers of praise and blessing, demonstrates its conviction that “there is hardly any proper use of material things which cannot thus be directed toward the sanctification of [humans] and the praise of God” (SC 61).

There is a blessing for almost everyone and for all stages of life, from womb to grave. There are blessings related to buildings, tools, and various forms of human activity. Most familiar are the blessing of ashes on Ash Wednesday, the blessing of throats on the feast day of St. Blaise, and the blessing before meals.

Because the prayers in the *Book of Blessings* are part of the Church’s liturgy, they are ordinarily celebrated with the community. Some blessings, like those of religious articles and those connected to a diocesan or parish function, must be celebrated by a bishop, priest, or deacon. But most liturgical blessings may be celebrated by any Catholic by virtue of Christ’s universal priesthood, shared through the sacraments of baptism and confirmation.

Sacramentals: Prayers of Blessing and Blessed Objects

There are two main classifications of sacramentals: prayers of blessing and blessed objects.



JOSE ESCUDERO / SHUTTERSTOCK

Prayers of Blessing

To **bless** may mean to grant some favor or gift, as when God blesses us with life and grace. It may mean to ask God, through prayer and ritual, to sanctify and show favor to someone or to make something holy, as when the priest blesses the congregation at the end of Mass or when we say “God bless you” to someone. This kind of blessing is also called a *benediction*. To bless may also mean to honor as holy by praising or glorifying, as when we bless the Lord. All good things come from God, the source of every favor and gift. Therefore, the blessing prayers of the Church bless people or things by invoking God’s grace and sanctification upon them, and these prayers also bless God with words of praise and thanks.

Blessing prayers are found throughout the Bible. There are many **Old Testament** blessing prayers that praise God, particularly in the Book of Psalms.

I will bless the LORD at all times;
his praise shall be always in my
mouth.

Psalms 34:2

The Blessing of Aaron is perhaps the best known of the Old Testament prayers that ask God's blessing on people:

"The LORD bless you and keep you!
The LORD let his face shine upon you
and be gracious to you!
The LORD look upon you kindly
and give you peace!"

Numbers 6:24-26

A blessing of people and objects is found in Deuteronomy, as Moses invoked this beautiful blessing over those who obeyed the commandments of the Lord:

"May you be blessed in the city,
and blessed in the country!
Blessed be the fruit of your womb,
the produce of your soil and the
offspring of your livestock,
the issue of your herds and the
young of your flocks!
Blessed be your grain basket and
your kneading bowl!
May you be blessed in your coming in,
and blessed in your going out!"

Deuteronomy 28:3-6

There are many **New Testament** prayers that bless God. The Cantic of Zechariah praises God for the gift of salvation:

"Blessed be the Lord,
the God of Israel,
for he has visited and brought
redemption to his people."

Luke 1:68

Saint Paul often blessed God, praising God for favoring us, and Jesus blessed both people and objects. He blessed the little children (See Mark 10:13-16.), and, before he fed the 5,000, he took "the five loaves and the two fish, and looking up to heaven, [Jesus] said the blessing over them, broke them, and gave them to the disciples to set before the crowd" (Luke 9:16).

Order for the Blessing of Food for Thanksgiving Day

(Fourth Thursday in November/USA)

This blessing may be given by a priest,
deacon, or a lay minister.

All make the sign of the cross.

Leader: Blessed be the name of the Lord.

All: Now and for ever.

Leader / Reader: Let us listen to the words of the first letter of St. Paul to the Corinthians:

Grace to you and peace from God our
Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.
I give thanks to my God always on your
account for the grace of God bestowed
on you in Christ Jesus, that in him you
were enriched in every way, with all
discourse and all knowledge, as the
testimony to Christ was confirmed
among you, so that you are not lacking
in any spiritual gift as you wait for the
revelation of our Lord Jesus Christ.
He will keep you firm to the end,
irreproachable on the day of our Lord
Jesus Christ. God is faithful, and by
him you were called to fellowship with
his Son, Jesus Christ our Lord.

Leader: God most provident, we join
all creation in raising to you a hymn
of thanksgiving through Jesus Christ,
your Son.

For generations upon generations
peoples of this land have sung of your
bounty;
we too offer you praise for the rich
harvest we have received at your hands.

Bless us and this food
which we share with grateful hearts.

Continue to make our land fruitful
and let our love for you be seen
in our pursuit of peace and justice
and in our generous response to those
in need.

Praise and glory to you,
Lord God, now and for ever. Amen.

*Adapted from the Book of Blessings,
Abridged Edition, © 1992 The Liturgical
Press*



THE REDEMPTORISTS

Sacramental Objects

Sacramentals declare the importance of spiritual realities. A cross or medal worn around the neck can prompt us to pray more often. Crucifixes and statues in the home tell of the presence of Christ and the communion of saints; they also proclaim to the world that this is a Catholic home. The use of holy water, blessed candles, and other sacramentals call to mind the sacraments we have received and the protection only God can give.

Blessed objects not identified with worship do not become sacramentals. For example, when a pet is blessed, it does not thereby become a sacramental. But the blessing shows that pets are gifts that in some way reflect the goodness and creative power of God. In similar ways, all blessed objects, places, and events proclaim that the proper use of material things directs them to our eternal salvation and to God's glory. They call to mind the advice given by St. Paul: "So whether you eat or drink, or whatever you do, do everything for the glory of God" (1 Corinthians 10:31).

Blessed Objects

Rosary One of the most recognizable symbols of Catholic devotion is the rosary. The prayers and their accompanying meditations are an offering of devotion to Our Lady and her Son. Rosary bracelets or rings (usually consisting of just one decade's worth of beads) can be used instead of the customary strand of five decades.

Chaplets Any devotion that uses a set of beads to keep track of a number of prayers is known as a chaplet. Some chaplets use a traditional set of rosary beads, while others have a special set of beads that varies with the number and kind of prayers being said. The Chaplet of Divine Mercy and the St. Michael Chaplet are two examples.

Medals Perhaps the most widely known medal is the Miraculous Medal, inspired by a vision of St. Catherine Labouré. There are numerous medals depicting many saints. You might choose a patron saint based on your name, your profession, or your hobbies and interests.

Garments At baptism, a white garment is placed on those baptized, symbolizing being clothed with Christ. The habits and special garb worn by many religious are outward expressions of how they “put on the Lord Jesus Christ” (Romans 13:14) through the vows of religious life.

Holy Cards A popular Catholic tradition is printing the image of Our Lord, the Blessed Mother, or a saint on a small card, often with a prayer or inspirational verse on the back. A godparent might present a godchild with a holy card at first Communion, confirmation, or another noteworthy event. The memorial cards we receive at a funeral Mass or visitation remind us that our loved ones are now a part of the communion of saints.

Scapulars Inspired by the habits worn by those who profess religious vows, some laypeople wear a scapular (*scapulae* in Latin)—two pieces of cloth connected by long strings that go over the shoulders so that one piece of cloth is worn in front and the other is worn in back.

Statues/Images Statues in churches and in our homes remind us of holy men and women and inspire us to seek their guidance and intercession. Just as one might carry photographs of loved ones, images of Jesus, Mary, and other saints can comfort us in times of need and help us grow closer to God.

Candles and Incense We light candles at baptisms, weddings, and funerals, reminding us of the paschal candle lit at the Easter Vigil and that Christ is the Light of the World. Most churches also have votive candles in front of statues. Lighting a candle for a particular intention is a time-honored tradition. We imagine that the burning flame continues our prayers. Many Catholics light votive candles in their homes to serve as reminders of God's presence in daily life.

The use of incense has its roots in Jewish liturgical practice. Psalm 141 describes our prayers rising before the Lord like incense.

Holy Water Holy water recalls for us the sacrament of baptism and our rebirth to new life in Christ. The water in the baptismal font is blessed at Easter and throughout the year when baptisms are celebrated or when a rite of sprinkling takes place. We bless ourselves with holy water and the sign of the cross when we enter and exit the church as a reminder of our own baptismal commitment. Most churches have holy water available for people to take home with them for use when blessing themselves or one another.

Palms The blessed palms we receive at Mass on Palm Sunday commemorate the triumphal entrance of Jesus into Jerusalem. Some Catholics display these palm branches in their homes along with another holy object, such as a crucifix or statue. The palms can even be woven into crosses. Like any blessed object, palms must be disposed of by burning. The ashes we receive on Ash Wednesday are made from blessed palms from the previous year.

Crucifix Almost every Catholic home or institution displays a crucifix. Unlike a simple cross, a crucifix includes an image of Jesus. Most rosaries include a crucifix, and many Catholics wear a crucifix on a chain as a sign of devotion.

Advent Wreath A popular home tradition during Advent is the Advent wreath. It is a circle of evergreens or holly and four candles—one for each week of the Advent season. Three of the candles are purple, and the candle lit during the third week of Advent is pink or rose-colored in observance of Gaudete (“Rejoice”) Sunday.

Relics Bits of cloth from a saint's habit and objects, such as a rosary or prayer book, used by the saint are considered second-class relics. First-class relics are bone fragments and other parts of a saint's body, which are often used to consecrate chapels or altars and are sometimes venerated in a special container called a reliquary.

Material in this issue of *Catholic Update* is adapted from *The Essential Catholic Handbook of the Sacraments: A Summary of Beliefs, Rites, and Prayers*, a Redemptorist Pastoral Publication © 2001 Liguori Publications (807817); and *A Treasury of Catholic Tradition* by Káthleen M. Carroll and Diane M. Houdek (C0213B).



Catholic.
Pastoral.
Trusted.

Imprimi Potest: Fr. Kevin Zubel, CSsR, Provincial, Denver Province, the Redemptorists. Liguori Publications, a nonprofit corporation, is an apostolate of the Redemptorists. To learn more about the Redemptorists, visit Redemptorists.com. Scripture texts in this work are from *The New American Bible, Revised Edition* © 2010, 1991, 1986, 1970 Confraternity of Christian Doctrine, Washington, DC. Editor: Paige Byrne Shortal