

GATHERING TO CELEBRATE

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A People Gathered



Whales live in pods, geese gather in gaggles, lions form prides, bison move in herds, and human beings create communities. You know this already. You can name your communities—family, school, town, church, and so on. You know that human connections are deep, complicated, interesting, and sometimes frustrating.

The church knows that God has created us with a deep-down need to be with others. The church always seeks to gather us together. It all began when Jesus gathered the first small community of disciples around himself. That small assembly became a church that shared in Jesus' life. In the sharing each member grew closer to the others and closer to the Lord.

This course, *Gathering to Celebrate*, invites you to see the Catholic church as a people gathered around its Risen Lord. With prayer and great rejoicing, the church invites its members into the life of Christ through the sacraments of welcome—baptism, confirmation, and the Eucharist.

The church prays and rejoices in the forgiveness and healing sacraments of reconciliation and the anointing of the sick.

The church gathers to celebrate its members who commit themselves to the service of communion through the sacraments of marriage and holy orders.

This course can help you see how to become an active member of this gathering, celebrating people. It can help you deepen your life in Christ as you become a welcoming, healing, and serving person.

The Sacraments Defined

Sacraments are



GOD'S BELOVED Sons and Daughters

In the desert the air crackled with excitement and anticipation as the people crowded around John the Baptizer. He announced the coming of the promised Messiah and offered a baptism of repentance. Many received this baptism and prepared to welcome the Messiah.

When Jesus left home to begin his lifework, he too went to John the Baptizer. He too stood among his people as one among many. He too was plunged into the waters of the river Jordan. But as Jesus came up out of the water, the sky opened. The Holy Spirit, soft as a dove, came upon him, and a voice echoed over the land: “Here is my beloved Son. In him I am well pleased.”

On that day Jesus, a little-known carpenter of Nazareth in Galilee, was identified as God’s beloved Son. On that day Jesus began the great work of his life.

From that day on, many people drew near Jesus and asked for healing and salvation. They sought to follow and stay with Jesus. A few disciples stayed with him throughout the brief years of his public life. They were gathered again with him after his death when he came to them as their Risen Lord.

Before Jesus returned to his Father in heaven, he passed on the gift that had been given to him—a share in God’s life. Jesus blessed the Apostles and said: “All power on heaven and earth is given to me. Go now, and make disciples of all nations. Baptize them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. And remember, I myself will be with you always, even to the end of all time.”

(Adapted from Mark 1:4–11; Matthew 28:18–20)

The Apostles did as Jesus commanded. Many people sought to become followers of Christ. They too wanted to be God’s beloved sons and daughters. The Apostles

baptized these people with water. They placed their hands on the newly baptized, who then received the Holy Spirit. The Apostles invited these newly baptized and anointed people to share in the breaking of the bread.

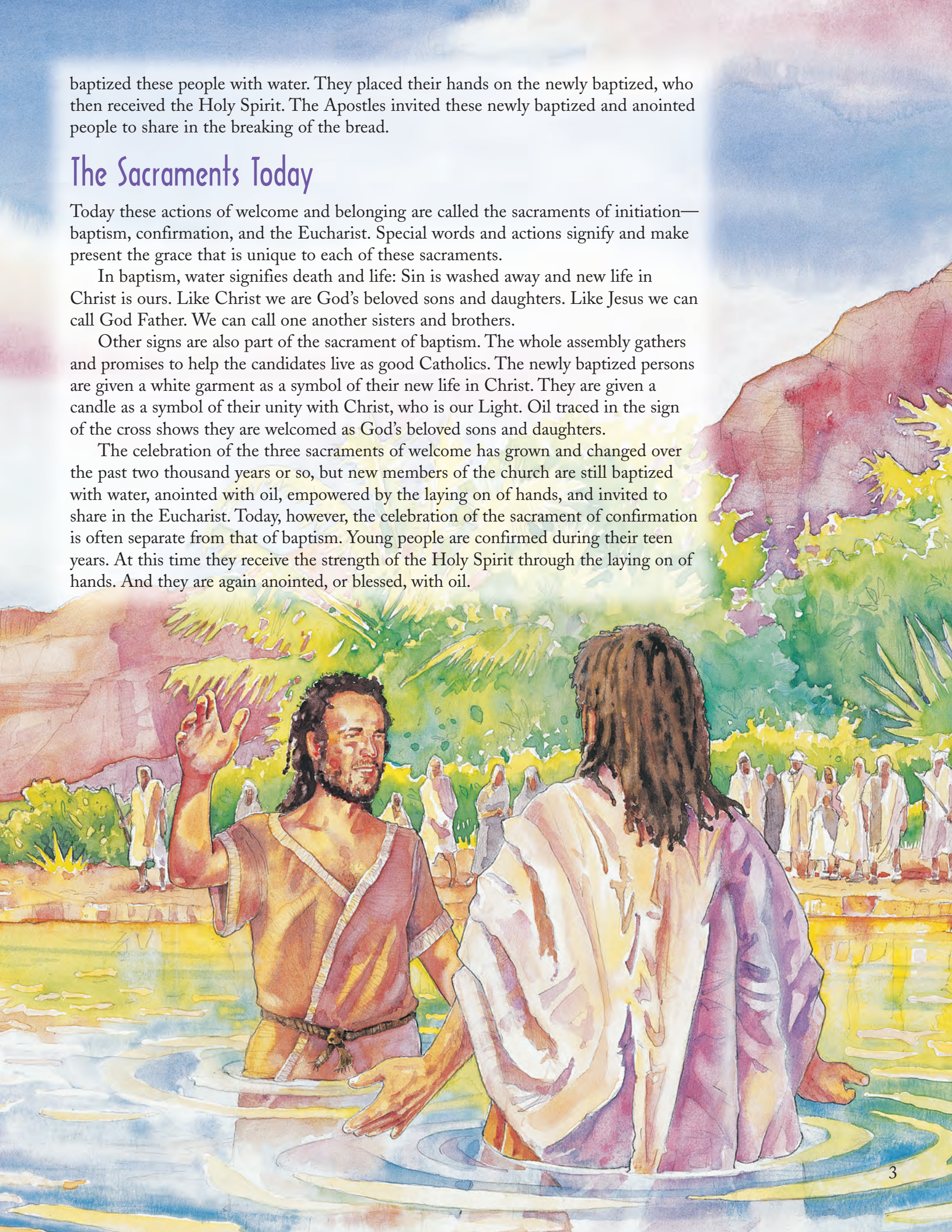
The Sacraments Today

Today these actions of welcome and belonging are called the sacraments of initiation—baptism, confirmation, and the Eucharist. Special words and actions signify and make present the grace that is unique to each of these sacraments.

In baptism, water signifies death and life: Sin is washed away and new life in Christ is ours. Like Christ we are God’s beloved sons and daughters. Like Jesus we can call God Father. We can call one another sisters and brothers.

Other signs are also part of the sacrament of baptism. The whole assembly gathers and promises to help the candidates live as good Catholics. The newly baptized persons are given a white garment as a symbol of their new life in Christ. They are given a candle as a symbol of their unity with Christ, who is our Light. Oil traced in the sign of the cross shows they are welcomed as God’s beloved sons and daughters.

The celebration of the three sacraments of welcome has grown and changed over the past two thousand years or so, but new members of the church are still baptized with water, anointed with oil, empowered by the laying on of hands, and invited to share in the Eucharist. Today, however, the celebration of the sacrament of confirmation is often separate from that of baptism. Young people are confirmed during their teen years. At this time they receive the strength of the Holy Spirit through the laying on of hands. And they are again anointed, or blessed, with oil.



A Welcoming People

You belong to a people gathered by Jesus and called to share in his life. You are among the newest members of a worldwide church that has existed for about two thousand years. Like all members of the church, you live by the same faith. You share the same baptism, the same Communion, and the same mission to serve.

Your baptism began your life as a beloved son or daughter of God. This grace-filled life must continue in your attitude, words, and actions. How does your baptism show? How can you act as a loving, open, and welcoming son or daughter of God?



Life-Giving Words

In the early church, the word the first followers used to describe themselves was the Greek word *ekklesia*. This word means "a people whose members are summoned or called together." The word *ecclesial*, meaning "related to the church," is based on this Greek word.



Life-Giving Words

It is a great value for you to have faith.
.....
You are a chosen race,
a royal priesthood,
a holy nation.
You are a people of God's very own.
You can announce the mighty acts of God,
who has called you from darkness to wonderful light.
For once you were not a people,
but now you are God's own.
You who had not received God's mercy,
now have received it.

(Adapted from 1 Peter 2:7-10)

