"A sacrament is… an outward sign of inward grace that it bears its image and is its cause."
-St. Peter Lombard, (IV Sent., d.I, n.2), c.1150

"The liturgy then is rightly seen as an exercise of the priestly office of Jesus Christ…from this is follows that every liturgical celebration, because it is an action of Christ the priest and of His Body which is the Church, is a sacred action surpassing all others. No other action of the Church can equal its efficacy by the same title and to the same degree."
-Vatican II Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy, Sacrosanctum Concilium, 7 § 2-3

1. Ends of the Liturgy

The liturgy is the public worship of the Church and the context within which all of the sacraments are meant to take place. When we speak of the "ends" of the liturgy, we refer to the ultimate reason for its being. Liturgy, in general, has a primary end (1) and a secondary end (2). They are:

1) The worship and adoration of God
2) The sanctification of the people.

Liturgy, then, is primarily the worship of God; but not the private worship of an individual that can fluctuate based on many factors. Rather, it is the public worship of the Church as a whole and as such is unchanging in its essentials and fixed by certain norms of practice called "rubrics." The rubrics indicate how the liturgy is to be done. Many of these rubrics come down from remote antiquity (i.e., the Apostles) and are intimately connected with the validity or invalidity of the sacraments themselves.

2. The Liturgy is a Work of Jesus Christ

Whether we are referring to a baptismal liturgy, an ordination, or the liturgy of the Eucharist[1], every genuine liturgical action is a work of Jesus Christ. Christ is the one who gives the liturgy its efficacy.

Herein is the difference between the Catholic liturgy and every other religious system of worship. In the Catholic liturgy, Christ Himself is present and performs the liturgical action. Every act of liturgical worship, therefore, is not only directed towards God as an act of adoration but is a work of God with regards to the faithful. It is a mystical encounter with Christ the High Priest through sacramental signs.

The liturgy is a divine action where God and man meet, where the temporal nature of this world is transcended, and where man adores God in union with the angels and saints with whom he is one in the Spirit.

[1] When the term "liturgy" is used without modification, it refers to the Liturgy of the Eucharist, in the east called the "Divine Liturgy."

It is because of the divine nature of the liturgy that liturgical worship is not subject to the spirit and creativity of the times. To purpose to alter liturgical worship according to any passing fancy is to meddle in the divine worship of God Himself. Though the Church can lawfully alter the liturgy in its extrinsic elements, it ought to do so only with extreme moderation because it is aware that the liturgy is the work of God. Not even the Church has the authority to change the essential elements of the liturgy and the sacraments. It is not the private action of any one priest or congregation but belongs to the Church Universal.

3. Origin of the Liturgy

Worship of God is fundamentally part of man's nature. The Catechism calls man a "religious being" (CCC 28) insofar as a desire to worship is built into man's very being. Man desires to prostrate himself before something greater than himself. Therefore, all religions have employed liturgical, ceremonial worship in some way or another throughout history.

In Old Testament times, all worship was liturgical, from the simple ceremonies of Abel upon stone altars to the elaborate ritual of the Jerusalem Temple; indeed, perhaps no people ever had a more profound insight into liturgical worship than the Jews of the Second Temple. Nevertheless, the liturgies of all the nations, ancient Israel not excepted, were but "a copy and a shadow" of the heavenly worship (Heb. 8:5), man still not having a direct access to God's life. Until Christ came, they could but "search for God and perhaps grope for Him and find Him" (Acts 17:26-28). The Israelite worship had accurate symbols and signs of the coming covenant, but lacked the realities.

In the New Testament times, we see the radical transformation of worship brought about by the gift of the Holy Spirit given on after Christ's Ascension. Because of Christ's abiding presence in the Church through His Spirit, the rituals of the Church (some continuations of Old Testament rituals, all instituted directly by Christ) become efficacious. They not only symbolize heavenly realities, but also make the realities present which they symbolize. Thus, in Israel circumcision represented a cutting away of sin. Christian baptism, however, not only symbolizes the washing away of sin, but actually accomplishes this by the very performance of the act.

The forms the Christian liturgy takes come directly from Christ and the Apostles. With Christ we see the institution of several liturgical actions (the institution of the Mass, the command to baptize, etc.); with the Apostles and the period of the Early Fathers we see the explanation of how Christ's commands are to be carried out (for example, the Didache). Thus, we know from early antiquity how the liturgy is supposed to be performed. As the Canon of the Mass says, it is the worship and faith that "comes to us from the Apostles" (Eucharistic Prayer 1). From the beginning, the Church saw its liturgy as a participation in the heavenly worship of God.
The core of the liturgy has remained unchanged since apostolic times, though the externals have developed since then in a slow and organic manner. Liturgical worship is what binds Catholics together and provides the context for the sacramental life of the Church.

4. What are Sacraments?

The prayers and ceremonial actions of the liturgy are meant to be the ritual context in which the sacraments of the Church are carried out. What are the sacraments of the Church?
Word sacramentum means sacred oath in secular Roman literature and corresponds to the Greek word mysterium, which denotes the secrets of God. The sacraments are still sometimes referred to as "mysteries."

By simple definition a sacrament is a sensible sign instituted by Christ that gives grace. The Roman Catechism of the Council of Trent taught that a sacrament is "a thing perceptible to the senses, which on the ground of the divine institution possesses the power both of effecting and signifying sanctity and righteousness" (RC II 1, 8). Thus, we have three elements in the concept of a sacrament:

1) The external; a sensibly perceptible sign of sanctifying grace – the sacramental sign
2) The actual conferring of grace
3) Its institution by God; or more specifically, by the God-Man Jesus Christ

We will spend the remainder of this lesson looking at these three elements. Things proper to individual sacraments will be gone into in later classes.

5. Sacramental Principle

All of the sacraments demonstrate what the Church calls the "sacramental principle", sometimes also called the "incarnational principle." This is the idea that as creatures of sense and intellect, body and soul, God engages both of these faculties to effect our salvation in order to sanctify the whole person. The sacraments are, in a way, extensions of the Incarnation. Christ was Almighty God, but He came as a man in a form that veiled His power. Nevertheless, through His taking on human likeness He was able to communicate His life to men by being made like them. Likewise, sacraments are visible, everyday signs (water, oil, bread) that, like Jesus, are a lot more than what they appear to be.

The sacramental principle affirms the goodness of the material world and of matter in general. It was through matter that our salvation was effected (the wood of the cross, the flesh of Christ) and Jesus did not shrink from using matter in His ministry (John 9:1-12). The goodness of matter is rooted in its very creation by God, who declared the world to be "very good" (Gen. 1:31). This is against the Manicheans and the Platonists who asserted that matter was evil, and against the Protestants who see in the religious use of material objects a type of superstition.

6. Matter and Form

A sacramental sign has two parts: the **matter** and the **form**. The matter consists of what is perceptible to the senses, and is either a physical substance (water, oil) or a perceptible action (consent given in marriage). The matter can be thought of as the stuff of the sacrament; whatever is perceptible to the senses is the matter. In Baptism, the matter is water. In Penance, it is the audibly expressed contrition of the penitent.

On the other hand, the form (Latin: formula) refers to the words that are spoken in prayer. When the proper matter is joined to the proper form, then a sacrament is present. As St. Augustine taught, "Take away the words, what then is the water but water? The words are added to the element, and the Sacrament emerges" (In Ioan. Tr. 80,3). In Eucharist, the form is the words, "This is My Body…this is My Blood." In Baptism, it is "I baptize you in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit." Both the matter and the form of the sacraments come from Christ and the Apostles; because of this divine origin, the Church teaches that if either matter or form is lacking there is no true sacrament.

Because man is made up not only of a soul, but of a body also, it is fitting that the sacraments be a unity of visible sign and interior grace.

7. Validity & Invalidity

When the proper form and matter are used, as St. Augustine says, "the Sacrament emerges." When the sacrament is actually brought about it is called "valid." To say a sacrament is valid is to say that it has truly and really been brought about. Besides matter and form, a valid sacrament needs two additional elements: a validly ordained minister[2] and the intent to do what the Church does when administering a sacrament.

When a sacrament is "invalid", there is not real sacrament. For example, an invalidly performed baptism means that no baptism actually took place; the person in question would need to be rebaptized (or more precisely, baptized validly). An invalid marriage means no marriage actually took place.

Invalidity can be brought about several ways: defect of form (wrong words), defect of matter (wrong material), lack of the properly ordained minister (no one with the power to confect[3] the sacraments) or lack of intent (not wishing to do what the Church does). A person who receives an invalid sacrament does not receive the sacrament at all. The sacraments vary as regards to what can invalidate them, but we shall look into this in the classes on the individual sacraments.

8. Licit & Illicit

Besides the question of validity, sacraments are also deemed to be licit or illicit. When a sacrament is licit, this means it is valid and was performed properly according to all of the correct rubrics. An illicit sacrament is one that, while still valid, is done either against the norms of Canon Law or outside of regular circumstances. An example of a valid but illicit sacrament would be a priest who has been suspended from his faculties deciding to offer the Eucharist or hear confessions anyways; the sacraments remain valid, but the action is illicit. The question of whether a sacrament is performed licitly or illicitly is akin to asking whether or not it was done legally.

[2] The exception being Baptism, for which any person with matter, form and intent can administer.
[3] From the Latin prefix con- (with) and fect, from facio, to do or make, demonstrating that the sacraments are something the priest does with Christ.

9. The Conferring of Grace

The sacraments are called "means of grace" because they act as channels through which the grace of God is mediated to us objectively. Grace is given to all of us subjectively according to our ability to receive it, but in the sacraments it is given objectively. There are two elements to how the sacraments give us grace. We must understand that though the sacraments are efficacious symbols through which grace is given, a person who receives grace through the sacraments still receives it from Christ directly, Who acts in all the sacraments. To cut oneself off from the sacraments is to deny ourselves an abundant amount of grace.

10. Ex Opere Operato

"Ex opere operato" is a Latin phrase meaning "by the very nature of the work." This is the grace that is objectively given every time a sacrament is received, regardless of the state of the person receiving it or the person offering it. In the early Church some believed that the sacraments given by priests in a state of mortal sin were invalid, but the true teaching is that the worthiness or unworthiness of the minister does not affect the validity of the sacrament. Also, the person receiving the sacrament cannot, by their holiness or lack of it, deter from the true fact that the sacraments contain and give grace. The sacraments are efficacious by the very nature of their being performed properly.

It must be stressed that the Catholic teaching of the sacraments *ex opere operato* must in no wise be interpreted in the sense of mechanical or magical efficacy. The reason they work *ex opere operato* is because Christ is the primary agent acting through the sacrament; the rites are efficacious because Christ promised that whoever, for example, was baptized in the Name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit would be born again by water and the Spirit. The efficacy of the sacraments rests in Christ and His promises. The sacraments of the New Covenant contain the grace which they signify, and bestow it on those who do not hinder it.

11. Ex Opere Operantis

"Ex opere operantis" is the flip side of how the sacraments confer grace and means "by the nature of the worker." This refers to how much grace a person is subjectively disposed to receiving. We know, for example, that in one offering of the Eucharist there is enough grace to redeem from sin every single human being who was ever born or who will ever be born However, we do not receive that much grace subjectively when we receive the sacrament because we are not capable of containing it, nor are we ever perfectly disposed so long as we are in the flesh. Persons receive more or less grace from the sacrament according to their disposition. A person who receives the sacraments fewer times but with better dispositions is in a better case than those who receive frequently but with poor disposition.

When a person is in mortal sin, they do not receive any grace from the sacraments (except from penance, of course). Therefore, we cannot be tempted to view the sacraments as mechanical rituals that will sanctify us against our will. We must strive to grow in holiness so that we can receive more of the grace contained in the sacraments.

12. An Indelible Mark

Some of the sacraments (the ones that can be received only once) confer what is called an "indelible mark" or an "indelible character" on the soul of the recipient. This means that the very soul of the recipient has been irrevocably altered; Tradition refers to this as the "sealing" of the person with the mark of Christ. The sacraments that confer this indelible mark are Baptism, Confirmation and Holy Orders. Even in hell a person with this mark will be distinguishable from someone without it. Not even mortal sin is able to obscure this indelible character.

"The seal is a symbol close to that of anointing. "The Father has set His seal" on Christ and also seals is in Him. Because this seal indicates the indelible effect of the anointing with the Holy Spirit in the sacraments of Baptism, Confirmation and Holy Orders, the image of the seal (sphragis) has been used in some theological traditions to express the indelible "character" imprinted by these three unrepeatable sacraments." -CCC 698

The Council of Trent taught, "This character is, as it were, a distinctive impression stamped on the soul which perpetually inheres and cannot be blotted out." It is because of their indelibility that they are unrepeatable.

Look up the following Bible verses for references to believers being sealed or signed with the Spirit: 2 Cor. 1:21; Eph. 1:13, 4:30

13. Instituted by Christ

All of the sacraments of the New Covenant are directly instituted by Christ, just as the sacraments of the Old Covenant (circumcision, the Passover sacrifice) were instituted directly by God. The seven sacraments are:

1) Baptism
2) Confirmation
3) Penance (Confession, Reconciliation)
4) Eucharist
5) Holy Matrimony
6) Holy Orders
7) Anointing of the Sick (Extreme Unction)

What do we mean that Christ instituted the sacraments directly? This means that Christ determined the specific operation of grace and the outward sign for distinguishing and producing this grace. Scripture mentions the institution by Jesus of Baptism, Eucharist, Penance and Holy Orders; though it does not mention the origin of Confirmation or Anointing of the Sick, we see these being practiced in the Book of Acts. Marriage is unique, as it was not instituted originally by Christ but was elevated by Him to the level of a sacrament.

Because the sacraments come from Christ, their substance is fixed and the Church has no power to alter them. Thus John Paul II's declaration in his 1994 Ordinatio Sacerdotalis that "the Church has no authority whatsoever to confer priestly ordination on women" (OS 4). It is not in the

Church's power to alter the substance of the sacraments, which were given by Christ and fixed for all time. This is why John Paul said he didn't have the authority to change the matter of the sacrament of Holy Orders, which is an eligible male candidate.

However, the Church always has authority to make changes in the administration of the sacraments, "preserving unimpaired their substance", as taught by the Council of Trent.

14. God is not Bound by the Sacraments

Though the sacraments are the means of grace instituted by Christ for our salvation are the normative means for Catholics to encounter Christ, God does not restrict his grace to the channels of the sacraments exclusively. Peter Lombard (c. 1160) said that, "God did not bind his power by the Sacraments" and St. Thomas Aquinas said "It belongs to the excellence of Christ power, that He (Christ) could bestow the sacramental effect without conferring the exterior sacrament" (STh, III, Q. 64 Art. 3). God is able to affect the grace of the sacraments in a person's soul without the exterior sign of the sacrament. This flows from God's goodness and His desire that all men be saved. However, when God does this is a Divine prerogative and cannot be presumed upon. For most of us, the sacraments remain our channels of grace under regular conditions.

For Further Reading:

Catechism of the Catholic Church §26-30,698,1077-1209
Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger, The Spirit of the Liturgy
Didache ("The Teaching of the Twelve Apostles")
John 9:1-12
2 Cor. 1:21
Eph. 1:13, 4:30
St. Augustine, In Ioan. Tr. 80,3
St. Thomas Aquinas, STh, III, Q. 62,Art. 1-6; Q. 63, Art. 1-6, Q. 64 Art. 3)
Pope John Paul II, Ordinatio Sacerdotalis, 1994
Second Vatican Council Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy, Sacrosanctum Concilium