

Lenten pastoral letter 2017 from Bishop Harald Rein



Making the invisible visible. Meeting God in the sacraments.

Caption: The **Seven Sacraments Altarpiece** is a triptych by the artist Rogier van der Weyden. It was painted between 1445 and 1450 and is now housed in the Royal Museum of Fine Arts in Antwerp. Baptism, confirmation and confession are depicted on the left panel. The central panel shows a crucifixion scene, with the Eucharist in the background. The right-hand panel portrays ordination, marriage and the anointing of the sick.

To the parishes of the Old Catholic Church

Making the invisible visible. Meeting God in the sacraments.

„We believe in one God, the Father, the Almighty, maker of heaven and earth, of all that is, SEEN and UNSEEN.

(The Creed, Old Catholic Prayer and Hymn Book/ Christkatholisches Gebet- und Gesangbuch (CG) No. 107)

Dear Sisters and Brothers,

The Creed is used in almost every church service. When we recite it, we are affirming that we believe in a seen or visible and an unseen or invisible world! What do we mean by this? We are affirming that heaven and earth, the here and hereafter, the living and the dead do not exist in strictly separate compartments, but are constantly interacting or touching each other in a variety of ways. God intervenes in his creation and in our lives in many ways, including through miracles and guardian angels - but most especially through the sacraments of the Church. Sacraments symbolically make the invisible visible.

Even so we have to admit that in Western Europe the seven sacraments have lost their significance in everyday life. How many people still go to confession? How many find comfort in the anointing of the sick? Where are the couples wanting a church wedding? And there is a noticeable decline in church attendance on Sundays. Only Baptism, First Communion and Confirmation – the so-called rites of passage – are in demand; but even here the numbers are falling and the significance is changing. It is the same with funerals and burials. And the current lack of vocations means that there are fewer ordinations. In considering these developments I want to be very careful not to assign blame. The world has changed. It is one of the tasks of the Church to find new ways forward. A symbol that has to be explained is no longer a symbol. The point of a symbol is to make the mystery that it contains into something tangible, recognisable and visible. When that is not happening, then people see the symbols as mummified, obsolete rites. The language of sacraments does not convince by argument, it has to be experienced as an encounter between heaven and earth,

between God and humanity. So every church needs to ask itself a crucial question: is the present lack of interest in the sacraments caused by the way the Church presents them?

In writing this letter, I shall speak first about the seven sacraments, then about the blessings and other rites known as sacramental acts (or simply, sacramentals).

The Sacrament of Holy Communion / The Celebration of the Eucharist (also known as, The Lord's Supper or The Mass)

A central aspect in the life of the individual Christian and of the Church is regular worship, especially the Sunday celebration of the Eucharist. Being a Christian is not something to be done alone, simply for oneself. An essential element of the Christian life is gathering together for prayer and celebrations. Just as Jesus himself taught us: *Then he took a loaf of bread and when he had given thanks, he broke it and gave it to them, saying, "This is my body, which is given for you. Do this in remembrance of me."* And he did the same with the cup after supper, saying, *"This cup that is poured out for you is the new covenant in my blood"* (Luke 22.19-20 NRSV). But today, it is precisely this shared celebration of Holy Communion that is losing importance. The number of people attending continues to dwindle. In an emergency situation, a parish can manage without, or cut back on, many things. But without the regular Sunday celebration of the Eucharist, it ceases to be a church. It should not be necessary to have to remind those who are baptized, confirmed, have received first communion, and regard themselves as church members, that they are to attend worship and other church gatherings and events. However, I have to admit that the previous situation was no better: until well into the 20th century church membership was largely influenced by social pressures. In those days, baptism, confirmation and first communion were dispensed like oral vaccines. Today, things are very different; everyone is free to make their own decision on membership and how they stand in relation to the church. Family traditions no longer have the same importance as in the past.

So just what is 'going to church' all about anyway?

- We are strengthened in our lives as Christians in the world, by the Lord's Supper, the Bible readings, the sermon and by praying and singing together.

- We put into practice living as a community together and also with those beyond the boundaries of our parish. This happens in many and various ways, for example, in the intercessions which call us to service in the world, in the confession of our faith and in the sharing of the peace.
- Together, we grow in the knowledge that we owe our lives to God, that our lifespan begins with our birth and baptism, and that with our death and funeral we shall return it to our Maker and live for all eternity in fellowship with God.

We meet together on Sunday so that, with the help of God, we may encourage each other in our individual lives and in our service to the world. We do so in the sure and certain knowledge that Jesus Christ is risen from the dead. This certainty is fundamental to the way we live our lives and the way we view the world. We do not know whether our service to the world in which we live will be successful or not; this will certainly challenge us, but will not frighten or discourage us. Precisely because Sunday worship is so important and builds up the community, we need to get away from the focus on the priest. There are numerous possibilities for involving the community in the design of worship.

The Sacraments of initiation in the Church: Baptism, Confirmation and First Communion

At one time Baptism, confirmation and first communion formed a single unit (a single rite). This should be re-established, not only in the case of adult baptism, but also for infant baptism. It would not rule out having a special service for young people later on, when they receive first communion and confirmation (praying again for the Holy Spirit with laying on of hands and commissioning). But such services would then be celebrations of remembrance, renewal and commitment.

In the early Church, only adults were admitted to church membership; first communion, baptism (by immersion) and confirmation (anointing with chrism) formed a single entity. With the introduction of infant baptism, the service of initiation into the Church in the Western tradition was split apart and each part was allotted to a different age group. This provided the opportunity to stress and restore the possibility of affirming a personal choice in becoming a church member. In the Orthodox tradition the unity of all three parts is maintained in infant baptism.

In our church the order of these events was originally: baptism at birth, first communion in 4th grade, and confirmation on school leaving. However in many of our parishes the order of first communion and confirmation was effectively switched around – this was in response to the Roman Catholic practices of first communion and confirmation and the Reformed practice of confirmation. When the new prayer and hymn book (CG) was introduced some ten years ago, the options were refined and reorganised following an in-depth discussion process by the Synod. Now “the celebration of first communion” is placed between “baptism with chrism anointing” and “confirmation with laying on of hands and prayer for the gift of the Holy Spirit”. I would like to make the following points concerning the current practice:

- In the case of infant baptism, the priest should be more rigorous during the preparatory discussions with the parents and godparents. It is essential that they be made aware that infant baptism only makes sense, if they keep the promise they make during the baptism, to do their utmost to ensure that newly baptised infant will grow up in the Church. There is probably no other promise that is so lightly made and so rarely respected as this. But a young person can only decide for or against something if they are already familiar with it. Most problems arise from this. How can children or youngsters choose to be confirmed or receive first communion, if their parents and godparents have not provided any opportunity for them to get to know the parish and the Christian faith? Those who as children never prayed or heard Bible stories at home, or whose parents never took them to church regularly, are hardly likely to become active church members. This is how the knowledge and practice of faith becomes insidiously lost in so many families.
- Today confirmation is effectively seen as celebrating the coming of age of young people, and it offers an opportunity to discuss what this means. This is an aspect that should be made much more apparent by the choice of prayers, Bible texts, etc. It provides a context, in which the young people themselves can say YES to their membership of the Church. In this situation, it makes sense that the Bishop prays with the laying on of hands that the Holy Spirit will blossom in the youngsters’ lives, continuing to accompany and uphold them. Amongst all my duties and activities, I really appreciate my encounters with the candidates before their confirmation. Our

conversations are stimulating and interesting. The young people question everything and think seriously about how they want to live their lives; what is right for them, and what is not. They ask questions and discuss things openly. Clearly this is not simply pleasing for their parents and for the Church, but should lead to a commitment by the Church to walk with these youngsters; for example through our youth work. Religious education must be like an exciting cinema film, true to life and unsettling; and in its contents, demanding and challenging. According to polls, only one in three confirmation candidates believes that God created the world, that Jesus was conceived of a virgin or that Jesus rose from the dead. Church teaching must take up the issue of what these theological teachings mean in today's science-orientated world.

- It is essential to raise the basic requirements for baptism with chrism anointing, first communion and confirmation. For first communion and confirmation, this will, of course, affect the duration of the preparation courses and may require the involvement of parents and godparents. Being in a minority and diaspora situation is no reason for a reduced programme. The church's expectations of the first communion and confirmation candidates and their parents should be clearly formulated.

The Sacrament of Penitence

Jesus begins his public ministry with a clear call to repentance: "*The time is fulfilled and the Kingdom of God has come near; repent and believe in the good news*". (Mark 1.15 NRSV). And again, when the risen Christ commissions his disciples, he says: "*Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained.*" (John 20. 22 b-23 NRSV). In private conversations I often hear the view expressed: 'I am a decent human being. Live honestly. Never killed anyone. Not cheated anyone. I don't need any penitential rites or confession and absolution for my sins. Such things were invented by the Church to give people a bad conscience and keep them under control.' Today there is widespread ignorance of the general prayers of penitence that open our worship; and few people even realise that it is possible to make a private confession. This is largely because the underlying meaning is no longer seen or understood. While I do not see

this as indicating a need to change the wording of our rites, we do need to raise general awareness of the topic. The sacrament of penitence should be a source of support for new beginnings in life, a kind of stop sign, helping people to reshape their life story.

By "sin" we simply mean that we human-beings always fall short of our great ideals so that, consciously and unconsciously, we hurt other people. Our sins cause suffering to others, and sometimes to ourselves. The decisive element in penitence is repentance: the desire to do things differently and better. The lack of understanding of this sacrament is largely due to the complex history of penitential rites and the many related misunderstandings and abuses. In the early Church, there were two different traditions:

- 1 Early Christians were expecting the imminent return of Christ and the end of the world - with the last judgement - during their own lifetime. So after being received into the Church, they were permitted one single act of penitence or reconciliation with God and the church community; this would follow some serious sin which had caused them to fall away from the faith. The process involved a public confession of their guilt and a plea for forgiveness.
- 2 A confession of sins could be made during a form of pastoral conversation with one of the hermit monks who lived in the desert. The focus here was on a change of heart and specific practical help.

In the absence of the return of Christ, from the sixth century onwards the practice changed in that confession and repentance of sins could be more frequent. Accompanying this change, the public act of penitence was dropped in favour of private confession with a priest. Over time lists emerged with sins divided into categories as an aid to confession. And so began the abuses and misunderstandings, which finally led the sale of indulgences (remission of sins against the payment of money) which sparked the Reformation.

Today, the focus in the Old Catholic Churches is on the general prayers of penitence as a common rite "celebrating reconciliation". But there is also always the possibility for an individual confession with the priest.

These two forms of confession can only make sense if we recognize our shortcomings and our wrongdoings (sins) and in faith feel the need to be reconciled with God and our fellow human beings.

The Sacrament of Anointing the Sick

When people are suffering from ill-health they become very aware of their vulnerability and limitations. Christianity does not share the widespread belief that disease is a punishment from God. Many passages in the Gospels report that Jesus paid special attention to the sick, without explaining the meaning of illness; a problem that will not be answered until we are with God in eternity. The fifth chapter of the epistle of James is of particular importance in ministry to the sick: *"Are any among you sick? They should call for the elders of the church and have them pray over them, anointing them with oil in the name of the Lord. The prayer of faith will save the sick, and the Lord will raise them up; and anyone who has committed sins will be forgiven."* The apostle's commission is clear and is aimed primarily at the sick, rather than the dying. Consequently those who are ill can receive the anointing as often as they wish for it or need it.

There are, in my opinion, three reasons why the anointing of the sick is so rarely requested:

- **Misunderstandings:** Unfortunately, from the Middle Ages, anointing of the sick was delayed until the time of death – this arose from an erroneous understanding of the urgency and the importance – so the anointing became wrongly associated with dying, a sacrament of death. In popular parlance it even became known as the 'last rites'. However, the Biblical intention is just the opposite; the anointing of the sick is meant to be a sacrament to help and strengthen the living. Jesus himself repeatedly assured us that belief, or persistent prayer and faith, can move mountains. People working in the medical field can tell of numerous cases where a sick patient has improved after receiving anointing. For this reason, I think it is unfortunate that our rite for the anointing of the sick starts with a penitential confession of sin and links the laying on of hands and anointing with the forgiveness of sins. In this, the rite follows the disputed interpretation of the Bible text from Letter of James, cited

above. As a result it indirectly supports the misconception that links ill-health with sin and guilt.

- **Ignorance:** Many Christians simply do not know about the existence of the rite of anointing of the sick. This is a challenge for both clergy and members of the parish.
- **Too few services of healing and wholeness:** Our prayer and hymn book (CG) provides only for individual anointing of the sick, even so many congregations today are experimenting with 'services of healing and wholeness'. These special services respond to the need to receive anointing and the laying on of hands in a corporate setting in order to be strengthened in body, mind and spirit for life as Christians in the world. People who have experienced this type of service are more open to receiving individual anointing when it becomes necessary.

The Sacrament of Marriage

The marriage of a man and a woman is regarded as a sacrament in the Catholic tradition of the west and the Orthodox tradition of the east. After the collapse of the Roman Empire and its legal system, marriage became the responsibility of the Church changing the way it had previously been organised under the State. Emphasis was laid on reliability, permanence, sexuality and legal security with regard to the founding of a family. This also provided some protection for women and particularly for children; in the context, however, of a patriarchal society.

Today when the State in most countries has again assumed this responsibility, without the underlying Christian values, marriage, according to many, should be seen as a blessing or sacramental act rather than a sacrament. Thus it should be removed from the traditional list of seven sacraments. This trend is reinforced by the following lines of argument:

- There are those who take the line that a modern understanding of marriage should keep "marriage" and "family" separate and avoid the fixation on marriage being for the procreation of children. This line of argument has in mind both heterosexual couples who do not want or cannot have children, and same-sex couples.

- The other line of argument takes the fact that, for example in Switzerland today, every second marriage ends in divorce, and concludes that the theory and the practice of the past are no longer valid; marriage is now definitely a "worldly thing"

In my view, neither argument resolves the real issues:

- God's message is that he wants his creation to be as it should be, and not as it is because of our human weakness.
- The lifelong partnership of husband and wife within marriage with the aim of establishing a family is the form of relationship given by God in the Bible.
- In the understanding of marriage for many churches – including ours - the sacrament of marriage does not lie in the declarations, or the vows, or the contract, but in the blessing given by the Church. Thus the “civil” marriage ceremony always takes place first with the declarations and contract made in the presence of the people. When this has been done, Christian couples feel the need to have a special religious ceremony whereby their union is placed under God’s blessing. This is done voluntarily out of personal conviction. In doing so the couples are affirming the Christian values and attitudes on which they wish to base their married life. The reason why two people fall in love and want to spend the rest of their life together, despite all rational motives, defies explanation. For Christians, this inexplicable aspect has its being in God, who, for Christians, is love. But love is not something static; it is a task and a commitment to be there for each other in good times and in bad. The Church has a task here: to convince and encourage. Christian values of marriage and family life are to be practised, and by bringing up children with these values, the next generation is being prepared to shape and safeguard God's creation - even if this is a challenge with no guarantee of success. The main problem does not lie in the liturgy of the service for the blessing of a marriage, but in how marriage and family are seen and valued in society.

From my own experience I can understand that today the relationships of husband and wife in marriage and of parents and children in the family are changing. With the different life contexts (work, leisure, education, place of residence, etc.), the relationships are no longer

as close as in past times. At the same time, though, the importance of marriage and family, particularly in the small family, is growing. The family is the place where there is unconditional acceptance and affection, understanding and forgiveness for one another, the loyalty of sticking together in joy and in sorrow. We can assume that very many people get on well with each other in their marriage and family; helping and comforting one another, working as a team with each other, and enjoying fun and laughter together. In such a case, the family is the "Church in miniature". But that does not mean there are never disagreements, rows or rifts. It comes as a relief to realise that the Old Testament portrays a wide variety of ways of being family (the focus then was on the clan or extended family) and even the "Holy Family" (Mary, Joseph, Jesus) though holy, was not perfect.

On the question of the blessing of a partnership for same-sex couples

When the state introduces "marriage for all", that is a matter for the state. What conclusions the Church may draw, is quite another matter. The Church has a responsibility towards God and humankind and in that light must determine who and what can be blessed, and how. Marriage - a lifelong relationship entered into by a man and a woman with a view to establishing a family - is the biblical relationship created by God. But at the same time, God also designed his creation so that ten to twenty percent of humanity has no need of this relationship; they are by nature socially and/or sexually orientated differently. They are fully and equally created by God and are fully and equally members of the Church, without any 'ifs and buts'.

The way human sexuality is viewed is always closely linked to our image of humankind and our image of God. From a Christian viewpoint, sexuality is regarded as a gift from God. This means that a person's sexuality must be incorporated responsibly into their personal life and life-style. A partnership between two adults, based on voluntary participation and mutual respect, should include all aspects of life. As a result of changes in society over the past forty years, the Christian churches have to respond to the demands of same-sex people for full recognition of their orientation and way of life. Same-sex couples have the same needs and experiences in their physical and emotional relationship as mixed-sex couples have in their

marriage. Therefore, it makes sense that such a relationship should be blessed by the Church, if the couple desires this. There is historical evidence for a similar tradition, a "blessing of friendship", until the twelfth century.

Seen in this way, I can understand why many theologians today speak of both marriage between man and woman and the union of man and man or woman and woman, as sacraments. For them it is illogical to speak of marriage as sacrament, while referring to the blessing of a partnership as a sacramental act.

That does not mean, however, that the Old Catholic Churches, acting alone, can change the traditional seven sacraments (e.g. by regarding both rites as either sacraments or both as sacramental acts). Such change would require the decision of an Ecumenical Council. So it makes sense to retain the present theory and practice (sacrament of marriage and blessing of a partnership); and perhaps like the Orthodox churches to speak of *at least* seven sacraments. But the main issues here concern the design of the ceremony for the blessing of a partnership. Some of the liturgy released for pastoral trials no longer appears satisfactory, e.g., omitting the symbolism of an exchange of rings; or more generally the rather forced attempts to avoid parallels in the symbolism and the prayers of both rites.

The Sacrament of Ordination: Deacon, Priest, Bishop

This is not a topic that I wish to explore here; it falls outside the intended scope of this pastoral letter. I believe, though, that every ministry in the church should be commissioned and blessed. The distinction here between sacrament and sacramental act, or between ordination and commissioning/blessing, is a relative one and a topic in itself; but ultimately of secondary importance. The key issue is that the Church can only measure its authority in terms of the way it serves the people.

Sacramental Acts

In addition to the sacraments, many churches also recognise "sacramental acts" (small sacraments or blessings). Indeed, in one sense, every church or religious action is sacramental. In the 12th century, when the western Church began to place emphasis on the seven sacraments – at the time there were about thirty, such as ordination as a monk, consecration of a monarch, funeral - and to put them in order, the other rites became known as "small sacraments" or sacramental acts, or later blessings. In our Church, these include for example the blessing of candles, the blessing of homes, and the blessing of harvest gifts; and also the commissioning of a lector, the inauguration of a council or installation of a priest. Sacramental acts have always been for both people and objects. This is a fundamental difference between the Catholic and Reformed traditions. The latter limit God's blessing to people. My personal preference would be to call all sacramental acts that directly apply to people, sacraments; and to keep the name sacramental acts for those which apply to objects.

Summary and Outlook

By "sacrament" I understand an action (rite) in which Christians of their own free will both profess their faith and are strengthened in it. In both of these (confession and experience) sacraments are "signs of the presence of God".

Even if the action/rite is carried out by a person, it is ultimately God who is acting through that person. At the same time, it is deeply related to the fellowship of the church, since sacraments arise from the corporate spirit of a group and, within the group, their meaning needs no explanation.

According to church doctrine, a sacrament was instituted directly or indirectly by Christ. This is only strictly true of Baptism and the Lord's Supper, and to some extent for penitence as the "Biblical Sacrament". Otherwise, they all stem from ecclesiastical tradition. Changes, where these are possible, should be the responsibility of all Churches together and be subject to an Ecumenical Council. For that reason, I advocate maintaining the current situation and focusing on the practice of the faith. The sacraments and the sacramental acts should help people in their life and in their relationship with God.

I would like, through this pastoral letter, to invite you to share how you see and experience the sacraments of our Church. This involves two steps. The first step is to reflect on your own personal relationship with Christ and God. The second step is the related question, what significance you attach to the sacraments. The second step would be meaningless without the first. At the same time, I believe that the "crisis of the sacraments" does not arise simply from secularisation, but also from the way in which we present them. Jesus said that the Sabbath was made for humankind, not humankind for the Sabbath, and the same is true for the sacraments. They are rooted in the Bible, history, theology, and tradition, but they must be constantly re-assessed, as to whether they speak to the basic needs in the life and understanding of people in today's world.

+ Bishop Harald Rein

(Translation from German by The Revd Adèle Kelham)



Bishop Harald Rein preaching at the confirmation services 2015 in Bern, with a pair of 3-D glasses.