

## **G. Worship, Prayer & Ritual | Sample Answer**

**Examine the role ritual plays in the lives of people today using the following headings (2014 Section G [a])**

### **i. the use of symbolic words and actions**

Rituals are experiences that we regard as significant. Rituals consist of one or many structured human activities that follow a set pattern and are made up of words, symbols, significant people, places and times. They carry meaning, they renew us and they often challenge how we understand ourselves and our lives. In the lives of people today, rituals address the great mysteries of human existence.

A symbol is an image, gesture, action or representation that can have many meanings depending on the context and is usually used to represent something that is difficult to put into words. Symbols are powerful entities involved in many secular and religious rituals. Water is a powerful symbol used in rituals in the five major world religions. In each religion, water has a different meaning and interpretation. In Christianity, water is used in the sacrament of baptism and symbolises the washing away of sins. In Islam, water is used during the washing ritual of Wudu before entering the mosque. In Hinduism, people bathe and cleanse in the holy waters of the Ganges. In Judaism, water is used during Mikveh, a ritual of washing which symbolises freedom. Finally, water is used in Buddhist festival of Songkan, a festival symbolising rebirth and renewal at the start of the New Year.

In terms of rituals, symbolic words can be very important and meaningful. The importance of symbolic expression in religion has been confirmed, widened and deepened on a local and global level. Symbols contribute to the maintenance and strengthening of the relationships between human beings and the realm of the sacred or holy. Symbolic expression is very important in Christian rituals such as the celebration of sacraments. Their symbol rich sacraments help express the moments of grace that mark our lives and celebrate receiving God's grace. In the sacrament of the Anointing of the Sick, the priest places both hands on the sick person's head, he anoints their forehead and palms with oil and says the following words 'Through this holy anointing may the

Lord in his love and mercy help you with the face of the Holy Spirit. May the Lord free you from sin and raise you up". The priest's 'laying on of hands' is symbolic and signifies god entering the body of the anointed person. The oil signifies that an interior action has taken place, this action is to shield the soul from the sufferings of the body, mind and emotion.

Ultimately, symbolic words and actions are extremely significant in the role ritual plays in the lives of people today, they help to enhance and deepen the experience.

## **ii. the positive and negative aspects of ritualism**

Ritualism is a term that is applied to regular and excessive use of ritual. Rituals involve set patterns of word, rite and symbol, yet if they are repeated regularly the practice can revert to ritualism, whereby those who participate become increasingly unconscious of the true meaning of the ritual. Ritualism is often viewed in a negative way; ritualism simply becomes empty ritual. Those who attend are unaware of what they are doing but attend the ritual through force of habit. For example, if a person attends Mass regularly, yet fails to listen or actively participate in the sacrament, then the experience won't be very fruitful. If rituals are repeated regularly, then they lack newness because they are a set pattern of activity and at times become tedious. The emptiness and lack of awareness and meaning constitute ritualism.

There are, however, some positive features associated with ritualism. Formal prayers, for example, benefit from the fact that they are part of a set pattern of words and actions, which are regularly repeated. In this way they are easily memorised and recited, The Rosary, for example, is regularly recited in many different contexts in Catholic worship, but it is this regularity and repetition that makes it easy for Catholics to remember the format of the prayer.