

G. Worship, Prayer & Ritual | Sample Answer

Examine the role that ritual and symbol play in the way ‘sacrament’ is celebrated within two Christian denominations. (2017 Section G [b])

The Christian Churches use symbol rich ritual in sacraments as ‘language’ that helps put expression to the moments of grace that mark our lives. Christians celebrate sacraments as a way of receiving God’s grace. Within these sacraments, symbols are like little ‘windows’ to God. They give us a glimpse into the mystery of the divine at the heart of life. Christian sacraments also involve rituals, a ritual is a structured human activity that follows a set pattern, using words and symbols to mark important events of transition. Rituals are made up of words, symbols, significant people, places and times. They often carry meaning, they address the great mysteries of human existence, they renew us and often challenge how we understand ourselves and our lives.

The two Christian denominations that I have studied are the Catholic and Methodist tradition. Both believe in a triune God, which means three persons - the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit - in one God. They share some core beliefs although they have significant differences in the role that rituals and symbols play in the celebration of sacraments. Christians celebrate sacraments as a way of receiving God’s grace. However, the different denominations celebrate different sacrament in different ways.

Catholics celebrate seven sacraments, Baptism, Eucharist, Confirmation, Holy Orders, Anointing of the Sick, Reconciliation and Marriage. While the Methodist tradition only celebrates two sacraments, Holy Baptism and Holy Communion. During Communion, bread and wine are given to commemorate the last meal Jesus ate with his disciples before he was crucified. In the Roman Catholic Church, communion is the most important sacrament. “The Eucharist is the source and summit of Christian life”, according to the Catechism of the Catholic Church. Catholics believe in transubstantiation, the doctrine that teaches when the priest consecrates the bread and wine, they become the true body and blood of Jesus. Communion brings believers closer to God and provides spiritual nourishment. Only Catholics in good standing are to receive communion in the Catholic Church.

In the Methodist Church, communion is believed to symbolize the body and blood of Jesus, helping believers to “be Christ’s body in the world today, redeemed by Christ’s blood”. Methodists commonly refer to communion as the “Lord’s Supper”. They teach that communion is “a holy meal of bread and wine that symbolises the body and blood of Christ”. For Methodists, communion is the time to remember the life, death and resurrection of Jesus; to experience gratitude for Christ and unity with other believers. Methodists have “open Communion”, given to all who come to the altar. Communion is viewed as a symbolic union with Christ.

The symbols of Eucharist include the cross, bread, wine and the ‘laying on of hands’. The Eucharist bread is the staple food of her spiritual life, representing Jesus’ body. The wine represents Jesus's blood, shed for the forgiveness of sins. The bread and wine are served as conduits to be infused with the spiritual body and blood of Christ. The ‘laying on of hands’ is done by the Priest who stretches his hands over the bread and wine to call upon the Holy Spirit to consecrate these gifts into the body and blood of Christ.

Similar to Eucharist, beliefs about Baptism vary greatly from one denomination to the next. In the Catholic Church, Baptism is “the Church’s way of celebrating and enacting the embrace of God”. During the sacrament, the minister of the sacrament (usually the priest) says “I baptize you in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit” while pouring water three times on the infant's forehead. These words and the pouring of water makes the “washing away” of original sin of the infant happen, which is to say the infant is no longer separated from God. The infant is in a state of grace. Methodists baptize people of any age with water by sprinkling, pouring or immersing them.

The symbols of Baptism are water, oil, paschal candle and the white garment. The water of Baptism symbolised the cleansing of our souls from original sin. The oils signify that we have been united to the spiritual body of Christ. The Baptismal candle is used as a sign of new life. It signifies the light of the world and opens the child’s eyes to the light of creation. The child is dressed in a white garment, this symbolises new life in Christ as well as reflecting purity, newness and innocence.

The sacraments of the Christian churches are believed to be the visible or physical instruments of the delivery of God's grace, which is divine favour and divine love aided by the active participation

in the traditions of ritual. Although the Catholic and Methodist Church share core beliefs it is obvious that clear differences exist in their sacramental celebrations.