



Sacramentals

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The 1983 Code of Canon Law (CIC) defines sacramentals as “sacred signs by which effects, especially spiritual effects, are signified in some imitation of the sacraments and are obtained through the intercession of the Church” (1166).

If this definition seems broad, that’s because the world of sacramentals is equally broad. Sacramentals come in diverse shapes and sizes; materials and substances; gestures and acts of piety, which is why the Church correctly describes them as ‘signs’.

A few familiar examples of sacramentals are blessings, crucifixes, rosaries, candles, scapulars, holy water, anointing oils and the sign of the cross. According to the Catechism of the Catholic Church, “Among sacramentals, blessings (of persons, meals, objects and places) come first. Every blessing praises God and prays for His gifts. (CCC 1671).”

The following is from information contained on the website Catholic.com.

“All sacramentals share a dignity that commands our conscience to treat them with great reverence and respect. Certainly not limited to any of the rules or precautions included in this article, Catholics must be vigilant and responsible with them. The Code of Canon Law states that ‘sacred objects, which are designated for divine worship by dedication or blessing, are to be treated reverently and are not to be employed for profane or inappropriate use even if they are owned by private persons’ (1171).

The physical sacramentals are not playthings, fashion accoutrements, or ordinary decoration for our homes. A child handling rosary beads may be harmless and for sure could become a thing of joy and faith, but caution must be taken to ensure that the beads and crucifix are not carelessly broken, thrown, chewed and swallowed, or tossed in the trash. Although it might be popular and perceived as a means of acknowledging the Faith, adults should maintain their reverence by not dangling a rosary from the neck. They shouldn’t toss holy water in the kitchen junk drawer, or allow blessed medals to be scattered around like loose change. All sacramentals must be handled with care and a sense of purpose.

One might object, stating that wearing a rosary is a method of sharing the Faith. This may be a good intention, but it is more effective to demonstrate devotion than to display a static signal of one’s own beliefs. Catholics must be careful not to trivialize or exaggerate devotion with practices that may become a stumbling block to the use of sacramentals for other Catholics and non-Catholics, too.

We must also be conscious of our behavior and intentions with the non-physical sacramentals of blessing and exorcism. The sign of the cross must clearly be made as a true sign of faith and piety made intentionally, prayerfully, and uniformly, rather than quickly, sloppily, or chaotically.

Blessings at mealtime — hopefully not the only time families pray together — should be sincere. Genuflections and bows, also raised to the dignity of being sacramentals, should be made with the same inner sense of reverence.

These are the basics to handling and using sacramentals in a dignified way, but the Church has established other rules of which every Catholic should be aware. Also, in making or administering sacramentals, the Church’s law dictates that the rites and formulas approved by the authority of the Church be observed carefully (CIC 1167, §2).

The preference of the Church is to bless sacramentals, ordinarily through a cleric. This should be promoted and welcomed. Since the sacramental’s power is through the Church’s intercession, the proper blessing naturally adds to the **sanctification** of the object.

Truly, the primary reason for blessing any sacramental is to set it aside for holy purposes, but an accompanying motive, is to ensure that it is freed from any demonic possession and otherwise remove the effects of profane use.

No blessed sacramental should ever be sold or purchased. Simply put, after a blessing, the Church does not condone the trafficking of spiritual things. Nor does it allow the sale of blessings or exorcisms: although we might offer a priest a stipend for an exorcism or the blessing of a house, this is not done for profit.

Sacramentals that are useful but no longer desirable should be given away to a parish, person, or place where they may be returned to use. Eventually, sacramentals wear down. Crucifixes break, as do rosaries. Candles burn out, and scapulars tear. If a sacramental reaches a state where it is beyond repair or its effective use, the object should be disposed of properly. Even in a tattered state, the object has been blessed by the Church and should be treated correctly, even in private possession.

The proper way to dispose of a sacramental is to burn it or bury it. Not only do these methods of disposal show the correct reverence, they also prevent the sacramental from falling into the wrong hands and from desecration. Sacramentals are desecrated by abusive behavior, crude use, or destruction to the point of being unusable. Even desecrated sacramentals, to maintain the reverence due to them, should be disposed of in the ways laid out above.”

“Sacramentals do not confer the grace of the Holy Spirit in the ways that sacraments do, but by the Church’s prayer, they prepare us to receive grace and dispose us to cooperate with it (CCC 1670). They excite good thoughts, increase devotion, and through these movements of the heart, remit venial sin. The Sacramentals of themselves do not remit venial sins, but they move us to truer devotion, to greater love for God and greater sorrow for our sins, and this devotion, love and sorrow - bring us grace, and the grace remits venial sins.” (CNA Website, Q and A)