

Fact of FAITH

Sacramentals

Catholicism has always been an embodied religion. Not just an intellectual construct, our faith has—in its best moments—encouraged the integration of body, mind, and spirit. For this reason, the practice of our faith has traditionally involved lots of “stuff;” the things that historians and anthropologists call “material culture.”

Our sacraments include materials like water, wine, bread, candles, fabric, oils, incense, books, and aesthetic additions like flowers, statues, and visual works of art. Not merely symbolic parts of our sacraments, these elements are often constitutive parts of our worship. Without water, there is no Baptism. Without wine and bread, there is no Eucharist.

But these material elements, these “sacramentals,” are often part of our life and culture apart from the liturgy. We pray with rosaries and chaplets. Holy cards with pictures of Christian art and icons bring

us inspiration. We use holy water to bless our homes and our children. Ashes on Ash Wednesday and palms on Passion Sunday are taken home from church as reminders that both our repentance and our joy connect our worship with our lives. In many parts of the world, votive candles act as a physical representation of our prayers, symbolizing light, warmth, and hope.

Even relics of the saints, venerated at church or at home, are part of our material culture, literally pieces of the holy people who are our examples and our intercessors.

To someone who hasn't grown up with these traditions, all these sacramentals can start to look superstitious or magical. But for us, these things aren't meant to manipulate the world but to draw us closer to God, who has created all things, and who transcends all the physical world.