

HANDS OF GRACE



The Catholic Sacraments
in American Sign Language

LEADER'S GUIDE

INTRODUCTION

Thank you for your ministry! The sacraments serve as the principal means through which Jesus communicates his life to his bride, the Church. They are precious gifts of our heavenly Father, who desires to share his own divine life with us in a manner that engages our whole person and deepens our communion with his Son, Jesus. For the deaf and hard of hearing community, there is a need for a more in-depth catechesis on the sacraments in a manner that reflects deaf cultural and linguistic values. Historically, the lack of such resources has left many hungry for greater understanding of the significance of the Church's sacramental life. *Hands of Grace* seeks to respond to this need. For many, this resource will be their first in-depth look at the essential role the sacraments share in the work of our salvation.

HERE ARE SOME THINGS TO KEEP IN MIND:

1. **Roll-out the welcome mat.** Faith enrichment should be an encounter with a vibrant community that radiates the love of Christ. The attitude of leaders can help bring people who are on the fringes of the Church into full, conscious, and active participation. This can start with a smile and a good cup of coffee.
2. **Learn the glossary terms.** For many, the vocabulary of the Catholic Faith may be entirely new. It is important for the leader to possess a basic mastery over some key terms. To assist you, a glossary of principal religious terms can be found on the DVD, as well as free at ascensionpress.com. Consider referring to it before beginning your session.
3. **Use closed captioning.** American Sign Language is very flexible. Many local deaf and hard of hearing communities develop their own signs for various terms ranging from “birthday” to “consubstantial.” You may experience some of these differences in the video series. Be prepared to adapt the signs to match the dialect of your community. Turning on closed-captioning can be helpful as well.
4. **Engage the participants.** This process should be both reflective and engaging. Simply delivering required information is usually ineffective. Consider ways to help your community apply their new understanding of the Catholic Faith in their relationship with God, the Church, their families, and each other.
5. **Review the features.** *Hands of Grace* intends not only to share the Church's teaching on the sacraments but also to expose the participants to the patrimony of the Church, such as the Bible, the Church Fathers and early Christian writers, various saints, and sacred art. The *Hands of Grace* Participant Guide has been designed with this in mind. Draw participants' attention to these features so that you might offer a more holistic exposition of our beautiful Catholic Faith.

ABOUT HANDS OF GRACE

Through the sacramental life of the Church, God transforms each of us into the triumphant Church described in the book of Revelation. We are purified from our sins, consecrated to the Father, made temples of God's dwelling, and participate in the very life of the Trinity. A goal of this series is to awaken among the deaf and hard of hearing an awareness of God's plan for our life and to inspire an intentional effort to engage these graces in our everyday experiences. How we welcome, mentor, and provide a space for real connection can move us toward that goal.

The *Hands of Grace* Participant Guide provides you with a roadmap for your sessions. It is divided into seven parts to reflect the seven sacraments, with each part containing three segments:

1. **Learn the Story** unpacks the Scripture passages and the writings of the Church Fathers that demonstrate Jesus' establishment of each sacrament.
2. **Discover the Sacrament** goes deeper by exploring the Church's teaching about a particular sacrament.
3. **Live the Grace** examines what it means to cooperate with the grace of the sacrament.

The simple format includes dynamic videos, clear instruction, and reflection, as well as fun facts to surprise and educate the user. Taking your time to view each segment and feature will better ensure each attendant experiences the full measure of what *Hands of Grace* has to offer.

Know that the work you are doing in your community is a great service to the Church. Ascension is committed to serving and equipping you in your labors in the Lord's vineyard.

CONSIDERATIONS FOR YOUR SESSION

1. Video

Hands of Grace's video resources can go a long way in engaging participants in the experience. Since technological glitches can hinder the overall experience, ensure that all media resources are prepared in advance and functioning. Consider lighting, sound quality, and Internet connection (if you will be streaming the video). In addition to the main program videos, remember there are supplemental videos to help participants learn Catholic signs (on the DVD and free at ascensionpress.com).

2. Participant Guide

Each sacrament has three corresponding videos. The Participant Guide draws from these segments to help revisit ideas presented in the videos, as well as lead the user more deeply into the treasury of the Church through resources such as saint quotes, sacred art, and brief teachings from the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*. Be sure to give attention to these features recognizing you are not just sharing the faith, but imparting to them the wealth of their Catholic heritage. In addition to the "Learn the Story," "Discover the Sacrament," and "Live the Grace" sections, there are full-page images at the beginning of each sacrament with corresponding discussion questions at the end of each sacrament. While engaging with the image discussions, you can direct the participants attention back to the image. Finally, there is a "Going Deeper" section that you can integrate into the session or ask participants to explore after.

3. Mentoring Interaction

The Participant Guide is designed to be highly interactive. Offering attendees opportunities for reflection and discussion is a key part of successful sacramental catechesis. Resist the temptation to simply “cover material.” Engaging the questions and prompts in the guide will make the experience personal, meaningful, and impactful for participants.

4. Pacing and Timing

Making your session work in your allotted time is both an art and a science. Discussion can vary the length needed. Due to the depth of the presentations, do not watch all three video segments before beginning the discussion, as this could cause participants to have an incomplete understanding of the content. It is more effective to break your program into seven sessions, each with the goal of completing the three segments of a particular sacrament. With that in mind, here are some tips:

- Make use of lighting. Channeling one’s attention entirely through the eyes puts a strain on viewers which at times leads some to feel drowsy. Turning the lights off during the video, then on again for discussion, will help keep viewers alert.
- Watch one segment, then engage with the content in the Participant Guide before beginning the next segment.
- Ask if participants have specific questions about the signs, concepts, or features used in the presentation. At this point, do not open the floor to general questions, as these may be answered in the Participant Guide.
- Depending on the size of your group, decide whether to go through the corresponding segment of the Guide as a single large group or in small groups.
- If possible, host one session a week for seven weeks, or every other week for fourteen weeks. This will help participants recall insights from previous sessions and build upon them.

5. Consider Your Particular Situation and Setting

The session format presented below is designed to help you to provide a powerful experience of the sacraments for your community. With that goal in mind, feel free to make any adjustments needed for your situation and setting. You might decide that another approach would be more helpful than the one provided below. The following session format is simply a guide to help you to design your session.

POSSIBLE 7-SESSION FORMAT (2 HOURS)

STEP 1: PLAN YOUR SESSION

- Have hospitality set-up in advance
- Distribute a copy of the Participant Guide to each person individually or place copies at each table

STEP 2: INTRODUCTION AND PRAYER (5-10 MINUTES)

- Introduce yourself, then ask the participants to introduce themselves
- Begin with an opening prayer. (*Note:* A prayer is provided for each sacrament in the Participant Guide. This prayer can be used before each segment within the respective sacrament).
- Introduce *Hands of Grace* by giving a brief description of the format
- Ask participants about their experiences
 - For the first session, ask:
 - » Why are the sacraments important to you?
 - » Who prepared you for the sacraments?
 - » What challenges did you face in learning the Catholic Faith?
 - » What do you hope to get out of this program?
 - For future sessions, ask them:
 - » What do you think God is doing in this sacrament?
 - » What meaning has this sacrament had in your life?

STEP 3: WATCH THE VIDEO (5-15 MINUTES)

Watch one segment at a time, separating them by discussion of the corresponding content in the Participant Guide. This will add variety to your session and will ensure better comprehension of the material.

Review the “Overview” section of the Participant Guide beneath each segment to help participants better understand the content of the video. Feel free to address the Overview either before or after watching the video.

STEP 4: DISCUSS THE VIDEO (15 MINUTES)

Either as a large group or in small groups, present the discussion questions. If participants divide into small groups, then regroup and have representatives from each group present a summary of their discussion.

STEP 5: REPEAT 3 AND 4 FOR EACH SEGMENT (75 MINUTES)

STEP 6: CHRISTIAN ART (15-20 MINUTES)

The Participant Guide has a full-page sacred image of each sacrament, as well as a smaller image of each sacrament with respective discussion questions. Engage participants in a visual search and reflection that highlights the truths of the Catholic Faith and helps them to acquire a uniquely Christian way of viewing sacred art. Suggested answers are provided at the end of this Leader’s Guide.

STEP 7: FEEDBACK (5-10 MINUTES)

- Briefly open the floor for first impressions or clarification questions people may have before closing the session
 - What surprised you?
 - What caught your attention?
 - Were any words unfamiliar to you?

HELPFUL INFORMATION

Many Catholics are unfamiliar with Scripture, Tradition, and the Church Fathers as a whole. *Hands of Grace* references the Church Fathers frequently, as they bear clear witness to the beliefs of the early Church and help contextualize what the Church continues to teach—that is, what the Church has consistently believed since the time of Jesus. The following information might help your group understand the foundation of these topics.

1. **Scripture and Tradition:** Inevitably, what we choose to believe rests upon the legitimate authority of the one from whom we receive it. This approach protects us from the varied opinions of others, whose authority on such matters does not exceed our own. For this reason, the Bible plays a critical role in the life of the Church because it is the word of God and therefore stands on his authority. The Bible, though, must be rightly interpreted. To this end, Jesus gave us the apostles and their successors, the bishops, to interpret the Scriptures correctly and to pass on Sacred Tradition, which is the totality of what Jesus taught his disciples. We can see this in the way the Church lives, in its liturgical celebrations, and in the writings of the Church Fathers. The truths offered in these presentations stem from Scripture and Tradition, so as to provide us with a powerful witness to the one true Gospel of Jesus Christ.
2. **The Church Fathers:** The term “Church Fathers” refers to the ancient and influential Christian theologians and writers of the first eight centuries of the Church’s life who were noted for their orthodoxy, antiquity, clear teaching, and holiness of life. They range from the time of the apostles, from St. Clement of Rome in AD 96, to St. John of Damascus, who died in the year 749. These authors write extensively on topics such as Church hierarchy, liturgy, articles of faith, and the sacraments. Not all of the early Christian writers are saints (e.g., Origin and Tertullian), and so the Church distinguishes between Church Fathers and early Christian writers.

GUIDE TO SACRED ART DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

BAPTISM

1. The directional flow the artist uses to connect God the Father from the water on earth to the person of Jesus Christ demonstrates how grace works. Grace has its origin in God because it is a participation in the divine life. The grace imparted to us in the gift of the Holy Spirit through Christ makes the waters holy and unlocks the font of Baptism.
2. The origin of the light is the Holy Spirit—that is, the life of God. Thus, we become the “light of the world,” as Jesus says, and “children of the light” in Baptism. We remain in the light as long as we live in communion with God.
3. In sacred art, blue is often used to symbolize humanity. Jesus puts on a blue garment, which shows that he took on a true human nature in the Incarnation. The color white signifies purity, grace, and holiness. The white garment speaks to the cleansing nature of Baptism and the new life of grace which begins through this sacrament.
4. The community of people visible through the clouds and the vision of this higher civilization shows that Baptism is the sacrament that connects us to the Kingdom of God. We are no longer citizens of this world; rather, our identity and new life ties us to the Kingdom of Heaven. Here on earth, we are simply travelers on our way to our heavenly homeland—a journey which begins at Baptism.

CONFIRMATION

1. Confirmation, like Pentecost, is the moment the Holy Spirit comes down upon us to empower us anew for the mission of proclaiming the Gospel to the world. The image of fire represents this new power, while the dove represents the Holy Spirit, the source of this power.
2. In this way, the artist demonstrates the need for our receptivity to sacramental grace. While the Holy Spirit comes down upon all, the position and lighting of the characters show that the effect of grace varies depending upon a person’s inward readiness and desire to receive it fully. Mary stands at the center to show that she receives the Spirit perfectly by her total commitment to God’s will.
3. We see that the Holy Spirit empowers the Mary and the apostles but not the angels. This highlights our need for each of the Holy Spirit’s seven gifts and the purpose for which he gives them; namely, to engage the struggle against sin in this life and win the crown of heaven. Because the angels are already in heaven, they do not need these gifts.
4. For Mary, one hand is held up and the other downward. The upright position is typical of prayer, such as when the priest holds his hands up at the altar during Mass while praying to the Father. In this way, the artist shows the central role of Mary as intercessor for the graces of salvation. The Holy Spirit comes to the disciples as a response to Mary’s prayer for them. Secondly, the downward hand represents a kind of giving, such that the graces the others receive are received *through* Mary, not just *by* her prayers.

EUCHARIST

1. The movement of the apostles reflect the intense psychological and emotional response to the revelation of Jesus' gift of the Eucharist. Some look utterly amazed, others inquisitive, some totally enamored in adoration, while one is on his knees in profound prayer. Judas, on the other hand, is turned away from the Eucharist, demonstrating a lack of belief and a scorn for Jesus' gift of himself in this sacrament.
2. By placing the ewer and basin in the foreground, blocking the point of approach of the viewer, the artist shows that one does not simply approach the Eucharist thoughtlessly. First, there must be a washing, a kind of purification. The first washing we receive in Baptism, but post-baptismal sins require cleansing as well, which we receive in the sacrament of Reconciliation—as much as we require it. Thus, the link between Reconciliation and the Eucharist is made clear.
3. Unlike the eyes of the apostles, Jesus' eyes peer into those of the viewer. As the apostles respond with intense belief to this newly revealed gift of the Eucharist, Jesus's eyes pose a simple yet profound question to the viewer: "Do you believe?"
4. Interestingly, all the knives face Judas, a quiet but threatening message. Judas, whose heart is marked by sin as he prepares to betray Jesus, is separated from the Eucharist by the knives. Here we see symbolized the danger of an unworthy reception of the Eucharist (see 1 Corinthians 11:27-29).

RECONCILIATION

1. The sinful son's feet are stained with the crimes of his travels, which emphasize his indulgence in sin. Those who remain members of the father's house have their feet placed on the porch, whereas the son who renounced his sonship has his feet off of the porch and in the world. The man dressed in gold, whose feet are both in the father's house and in the world, stands as a type of Christ who mediates between the father and son, heaven and earth, and restores the dignity of sonship to the young man by giving him the garments proper to a son.
2. The son's kneeling posture and desperate eyes show the heart of a truly contrite man. He performs here more than the external work of repentance; he seeks reconciliation and communion with his father. In this way, the son demonstrates an "encounter" approach and the dispositions essential for us in our relationship with God the Father.
3. The son's tattered clothes and pleading posture reflect a wounded conscience. The one to whom he pleads is his father, which shows the greatest and most important hurt sin causes is in one's relationship with God. His sinful escapades are represented by his feet resting in the world in contrast to those who remain standing in the father's house.
4. The father's hands reach out farther than the son's body leans in, symbolizing that God does most of the work in our reconciliation with him. The son kneels and barely begins his confession when the father, compelled by love, reaches out to embrace him. The father's hands are gentle and nonthreatening; they seek to pull in the son in the midst of his contrition.

MARRIAGE

1. The figures beside Joseph and Mary stand as a bridal party. The placement of the Holy Spirit on the left associates him with groom, which reflects the nuptial relationship between Mary and the Holy Spirit. By virtue of Mary's perpetual virginity, Joseph's fatherhood of Jesus is through the Spirit rather than the flesh—for Jesus was *conceived by the Holy Spirit*.
2. The placement of God, the priest, and Joseph and Mary show that the vocation of marriage is part of the divine plan. It is a gift from God, through Christ and the Church, and then to the world. The presence of the priest, whose hands bridge those Joseph and Mary, makes this clear.
3. Their garments demonstrate that, in marriage, heaven and earth come together. Within the sacramental bond, the presence of God (heaven) permeates and resides in the marital life of the spouses.
4. The eyes of the priest draw the viewer into this mystery in both its earthly and heavenly aspects. The power of this sacrament touches the lives of every person. Through this union, life is born, communities are made strong, the Church grows, and the plan of God continues to unfold. Likewise, this sacrament explains our destiny, our union with Christ the divine Bridegroom, and his bride, the Church, which awaits us in the wedding feast of heaven.

ANOINTING OF THE SICK

1. The trajectory of Christian life is an ever deepening relationship with God, beginning with Baptism. This relationship reaches new maturity in Confirmation and continues to unfold through a life lived in communion with God. Here, the artist connects the anointing of the man with the sacraments of Baptism and Confirmation he received in his youth, showing how the Anointing of the Sick completes our relationship with God his final illness.
2. The Church teaches that the sacrament of Anointing of the Sick conveys profound grace and healing to the recipient. Here, the open window shows that this man's soul is prepared to depart directly through it to heaven upon his death. The departing woman, who returns to the darkness, suggests a detachment from the lustful sins of his past life as the priest now claims him for God through holy anointing.
3. The priest is shown here anointing the eyes of the man, whose head is tilted toward the viewer, exposing his left ear. His mouth remains easily accessible to the priest, as do his hands and feet, which both protrude from the blanket. These artistic details suggest that the *whole person* is consecrated to God through anointing, in particular those members of the body by which we sin—that is, our eyes, ears, mouth, hands, and feet. In ancient times, it was also not unusual for a priest to anoint a man's loins.
4. The priest, clothed in gold, carries the power of God through which his gesture of anointing receives its power. The departing woman, however, merely carries a gold garment tucked under her arm, which conveys that she is only a pale imitation of God and does not ultimately satisfy one's desires.

HOLY ORDERS

1. Sin is the only thing capable of preventing one's entrance to heaven. Therefore, by giving Peter the authority to open and close the doors of heaven, Jesus is sharing his power to forgive sins with the apostles (and their successors, the bishops): "If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained" (John 20:23).
2. Those ordained to Holy Orders bear the responsibility of leadership in the life of the Church, whose mission it is to proclaim the Gospel. The violent response to Jesus depicted by those throwing stones shows that his message will often not be well received by the world—and that Jesus' ministers will suffer for preaching the Gospel.
3. If one must render to Caesar these coins because they bear his image, then who bears the image of God? As baptized Christians, we are remade in God's image and likeness and thereby ought to render the entirety of our lives to him in justice. Here, the artist highlights the truth that we obtain and deepen our divine identity in and through the hands of bishops, priests, and deacons, through whom the grace of the sacraments and the message of salvation flow.
4. The wealth of the Church is Christ present in the Gospel, the sacraments, and the people of God, by whom salvation has come to the world. In this way, the wealth of the Church surpasses in worth even the great riches of Solomon, who was the wealthiest man of his day.