



Celebrating the Sacraments

St Mary's, Paisley
150th Anniversary

Today's Mass is one of the celebrations marking the 150th anniversary of our parish. In recent months, we have celebrated with our African community, buried time capsules filled by our young people, and enjoyed a wonderful afternoon tea. And, Sunday after Sunday, we have been asking in our prayer what this anniversary means for us as a community.

In St Paul's and St Mary's primary schools, we invited the children to design a badge to mark this special year. They will be encouraged to wear it throughout the celebrations: a little reminder, to themselves and to everyone who sees it, that they belong to a parish with a story worth celebrating.

My hope is that, long after the events of this year have faded into history, some of those badges will remain. Perhaps someone will come across one in a drawer in thirty or forty years' time and say, "I remember that. I was there."

And suddenly, a whole world will come back: a teacher's face, a school friend, the sound of singing in this church. Perhaps even the memory of a priest who went on a little too long about badges!

Children love badges. Adults do too, although we sometimes give them more impressive names. We wear the crest of a football club, a charity ribbon, a little cross on a coat. They say something about us: whom we belong to, what matters to us, what we hope to become.

Today, as we celebrate the sacraments received in St Mary's over the last 150 years, I wonder whether we might think about another

kind of badge. Something we carry within us. A spiritual reminder that God has entered our story.

Of course, the image only takes us so far. **A sacrament is much more than a badge. It is a real encounter with the living Christ.** But perhaps a badge can help us remember what those encounters mean.

Think, first, of **Baptism**.

Some of us were carried to the font here, too small to know what was happening. Other people spoke for us. Other people held us. Before we could explain our faith, or do anything to deserve anyone's approval, we were welcomed.

What a beautiful beginning to a Christian life.

If Baptism were a badge, perhaps it would carry these words: **"You belong."**

You belong to Christ. You belong among his people. Whatever happens in your life, your relationship with God begins with his gift of love.

Then there is **First Confession**.

Perhaps you remember standing in a queue, nervously rehearsing what you were going to say. You may have been worried about forgetting the words. You may have discovered, with enormous relief, that the priest was there to help you.

And beneath all those childhood worries, something wonderful was happening. You were learning that you could tell God the truth about yourself and still be loved.

The spiritual badge of Confession might say: **"You can begin again."**

Some of us need to hear that today. We have carried a regret for years. We have allowed one mistake, one failure, one difficult chapter to become our whole identity. Yet Christ continues to offer us forgiveness and a way forward.

Then **First Holy Communion**.

We remember photographs, special clothes, family celebrations. But at the heart of that day was something very simple: we opened our hands, and Christ gave himself to us.

And he has continued to do so. Through ordinary Sundays and difficult weeks. When our faith felt strong, and when we came to Mass with more questions than answers.

That badge might say: **“You will be fed.”**

Jesus knows that we cannot sustain ourselves on good intentions alone. We need his presence. We need his strength. We need the bread of life.

At **Confirmation**, we were anointed with chrism and sealed with the gift of the Holy Spirit.

Perhaps we wondered whether we would feel different afterwards. More courageous, perhaps. A little wiser. Immediately better at explaining our faith.

Often, we recognise the Spirit’s work much later: in the courage to stand beside someone who is being excluded; in the patience to care for a sick relative; in the quiet decision to keep praying.

The badge of Confirmation might say: **“You have something to give.”**

God has entrusted you with gifts that someone else needs. Your kindness, your humour, your practical help, your willingness to listen: the Spirit can work through all of them.

And then **Marriage**.

How many couples have stood here, perhaps in this very place, and made their promises? How many hands have trembled as a ring was placed on a finger?

On a wedding day, the promises stretch out into a future that neither person can see. Over the years, they take shape in

thousands of ordinary acts: making a meal, earning a living, raising children, saying sorry, sitting beside a hospital bed.

The badge of Marriage might say: **“Love takes flesh here.”**

Here, in this particular home. Between these particular people. Through the daily, sometimes demanding work of loving another person.

Today we give thanks for those marriages. We remember spouses who have died. And we hold gently in our prayer those whose marriages have been painful or have broken down. Their stories, too, have a place before the Lord.

And yes, we can include **Holy Orders**.

This parish has helped nurture vocations and has been served by generations of priests. People here have encouraged them, prayed for them and, when necessary, helped them keep their feet on the ground.

For those of us who are ordained, the spiritual badge might say: **“Given for service.”**

It is a reminder to listen, to accompany, to celebrate the sacraments, and to help people recognise Christ at work in their lives. Please pray that we live that calling faithfully.

You may have noticed something about all these spiritual badges.

None of them says, “I have managed everything perfectly.”

They speak of belonging, forgiveness, nourishment, courage, love and service. They tell the story of what God has given us, and what his grace makes possible.

For 150 years, those stories have been unfolding here.

Babies have been baptised who later brought their own children to this font. Children have received Communion who returned, decades later, leaning on someone's arm. Couples have made promises. People have found forgiveness. Young people have discovered a vocation. And through it all, Christ has been present.

Today, perhaps, bring one of your own sacramental memories into prayer.

Picture the people who were there. Remember someone who helped you believe. Give thanks for the grace you received, even if you are only beginning to understand it now.

And ask the Lord: "How are you inviting me to live that gift today?"

One day, a child may find an anniversary badge tucked away in a drawer and remember this parish.

May they also remember that here they were welcomed. Here they were forgiven. Here they were fed. Here they discovered that their life mattered to God.

And may that memory help them take their next step with Christ.