Before knowing how we have to prepare ourselves to receive the Sacraments and what benefit we should derive from them, it is necessary that we understand the nature and the effects of the Sacraments.

The Sacraments are, so to say, the channels through which God comes down into us, just as through prayer we throw ourselves into God. In fact, prayer is nothing else than an uplifting of our spirit into God. Each Sacrament has its own effect, even though all of them have but one aim and purpose, which is to unite us to God.

By the Sacrament of Baptism we unite ourselves to God like a son is united with his father. By the Sacrament of Confirmation we unite ourselves to God like a soldier is united with his captain, deriving strength to fight and overcome our enemies in all temptations. By the Sacrament of Penance, we are united to God like friends who are reconciled. By the Sacrament of the Eucharist, we become one with God like food with the body. By the Sacrament of the Last Anointing we are united to God like the child who returns from a distant country, and puts one foot inside his father’s house so as to be reunited with him, his mother and all his family. These are the different effects of the different Sacraments, but all of them require the union of ourselves with our God.

In this talk, I shall deal only with the Sacraments of Penance and the Eucharist. It is very important for us to understand why, after receiving these two Sacraments so frequently,
we do not receive the graces which they usually bring to those who prepare themselves well, since these graces are joined to the Sacraments. It is true that these graces are joined to the Sacraments and, provided we receive them in the state of grace (this concerns Confession which requires that we do not retain any attachment to any mortal sin), we always receive the particular grace which flows directly from the Sacrament, that is, hatred for sin and the determination not to sin again.

But we do not receive the graces which are directly dependent on our preparation. These graces are: the strength to undertake the correction of our evil inclinations, the courage to take up the practice of virtues and finally to seek perfection. Therefore, we should know how to prepare ourselves well to receive these two Sacraments as well as all the others. The first preparation is purity of intention, the second is attention, and the third is humility.

Regarding purity of intention, it is something absolutely necessary, not only for the reception of the Sacraments, but in everything we desire or do. Now, the intention is pure when we receive the Sacraments or do anything else, whatever that may be, in order to unite ourselves to God and to become more pleasing to Him, without any mixture of self-interest. You can know this when you ask to receive Communion and the permission is refused to you, or when you receive Communion and find no consolation, and in spite of it you remain in peace, and do not give in to anxiety. I say that you do not give in, because it is quite possible that you feel disturbed. But if you give in to anxiety because your Superior has refused you permission to receive Communion, or because after receiving it you feel no consolation, it is clear that your intention was not pure and that you have not been seeking to be united to God but only seeking consolations. In fact, our union with God is realized through the holy virtue of obedience. In the same way, if you seek perfection with a desire full of restlessness, it is clear that it is self-love which does not want any imperfection to be noticed in us. If it were possible for us to be as pleasing and united to God, in spite of being imperfect, then we should desire to be without perfection.

The second preparation is attention. Indeed, we have to approach the Sacraments with great attention, just as much because of their sublime action as of what each Sacrament requires from us. For example, when we go to Confession we should have a lovingly sorrowful heart and when we go to Communion we should have a heart filled with fervent love. When I speak about this great attention, I do not mean that we should have no distractions at all, for this is not in our power. But I do mean that we should take special care not to dwell on them willingly.

The third preparation is humility. This virtue is extremely necessary if we are to receive abundantly the graces which flow through the channels of the Sacraments. In fact, waters usually flow faster and more forcefully when the channels are in places that are low and sloping.

Besides these three preparations, I would like to add that the most important preparation we should make for the reception of the Sacraments is the total abandonment of ourselves
to God’s will, submitting without any reserve our will and all our affections to God’s dominion. I say without reserve, especially because so great is our wretchedness that we always keep back something. People considered to be deeply spiritual reserve to themselves the right to possess virtues and when they go to Communion they exclaim: “Lord, I abandon myself entirely to you, but be kind enough to give me prudence to live honourably”; but they do not ask for simplicity. Another person will say: “I submit myself entirely to your divine will, but please give me great courage to do very great work for you”; but not a word to ask for grace of gentleness to live peacefully with their neighbour. Some other persons will pray: “Give me the humility I need to give a good example to others”; but it appears that they do not need the humility of heart which makes us love our own abjection. Then again: “My God! Since I am all yours, let me always feel consolations in my prayer”. Indeed, what we need is to be united to God, and this is our only desire. But never a word asking for patience in troubles or mortifications.1 This is not the way to realize our union with God, by reserving certain desires to ourselves, no matter how good they may appear. Our Lord having given himself totally to us, expects in return that we give ourselves totally to Him and thus forge a deep and strong union of our heart with Him. We must be able to say sincerely with the great Christian, St. Paul, It is not I who live, it is Jesus Christ who lives in me. (Gal. 2:20).

The second part of this preparation consists in emptying our heart of all things, in order to enable our Lord to fill it with Himself. The main reason why we do not receive the grace of holiness (since one single Communion made well is enough to make us holy and perfect) is that we do not let our Lord reign in our hearts, as He desires. He comes to us, and he finds that our hearts are filled to capacity with desires, attachments and selfish yearnings. He wants to be the Lord and Master of our heart, and to show us how much he desires this, he tells the Bride of the Canticle to place Him as a seal upon her heart (Song 8:6), so that nothing should enter inside it without His approval and consent. Now, I am quite aware that the centre of our hearts is empty, otherwise it would be too great an infidelity on our part. What I want to say is that we have detested and rejected mortal sin as well as all sorts of evil attachments. But alas, all the nooks and corners of our hearts are cluttered with thousands of things unworthy to be seen in the presence of our Supreme Lord. It seems that we thus tie His hands in order to prevent Him from giving us the gifts and graces which He is ever ready to shower on us if He finds us prepared. Let us, then, on our part, do what we can to prepare ourselves well to receive this Bread of Life (Mt 6:11), abandoning ourselves completely to divine Providence, not only as regards material things but especially as regards the spiritual. Let us pour out in His presence all our affections, desires and inclinations, conscious of His divine will, so as to submit ourselves completely to Him. Let us be sure that our Lord on His part will fulfil His promise to transform us entirely into Himself. He will raise us up from our lowliness until He makes us one with His greatness.

1[1] The words in square brackets are not in the original text. They have been added because St. Francis de Sales never advises us to pray for troubles and mortifications. – Editors
We can receive Communion for different reasons: for instance to ask God to be freed from temptation or trouble, either for ourselves or for others; or else to ask for a virtue, provided that we ask for it only to unite ourselves more closely to God. But this does not very often take place, because I can perhaps be more united to Him in times of affliction as I would then think more of Him. As for virtues, it would be a good thing sometimes for me not to have them than to have them. Why would I ask God for virtues which I have no occasion to practise? The repugnance that I would feel to practise this virtue, if I had an occasion to practise it, serves to humiliate me. Humility is worth more than anything else.

Finally, all the prayers and supplications you make to God should not be limited to your own personal needs. So, when you pray you should always use “us”, as our Lord has taught in the Lord’s Prayer, in which there is neither “I” nor “my”. What it means is that when you pray for virtues or graces for yourself, you ask the Lord to give them also to all those who have need of them. Our aim should be always to unite ourselves more closely to the Lord. Apart from this we should neither ask for nor desire anything, neither for ourselves nor for others, since that is the purpose for which the Sacraments are instituted. We have to respect that purpose, and receive the Sacraments with that end in view.

We should not think that by receiving Communion for others or praying for others we lose something, unless we offer our Communion and prayer for the reparation of their sins, in which case we would not make reparation for our own sins. Nevertheless, we would benefit from the merit of the Communion and prayer. We cannot merit graces for one another. Our Lord alone could do so. We can implore graces for others, but we are not able to give them merit. The love by which we pray for others increases our own merit, both for the reward of grace in this life and of glory in the life to come. And if a person did not pay much heed to make reparations for her sins, but gave all her attention to doing whatever she did for the pure love of God, would by that very fact be making reparation for her sins. Indeed, it is certain that one who makes an act of pure charity, or an act of perfect contrition, would make reparation for all one’s sins.

You probably would like to know how you can find out whether you are drawing profit from the reception of the Sacraments. You can find it out if you are making progress in the virtues which are proper to them. For example, if you learn from Confession to love your abjection and grow in humility, for these virtues are proper to Confession. It is always by the measure of humility that we can know our progress. You are aware that our Lord said, **whoever humbles himself will be exalted** (Mt. 23:12). To be **exalted** means to have advanced. If by means of Holy Communion you become very gentle (since it is the virtue proper to this Sacrament which is all gentleness, all honey and all sweetness), you will draw the fruit which is particular to it and thus you will make progress. If, on the contrary, you do not become more humble, or more gentle, you deserve to be deprived of the bread since you do not want to work (2 Thess. 3:10).