

Symbols and Sacraments: Their Human Foundations

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Abstract: *Sacraments are particular kinds of symbols, and symbols particular kinds of signs. Symbols, which differ from simple signs, function in human life to convey not only ideas but also feelings, values, beliefs, traditions and ideals. As such, they take persons beyond the surface of reality to its depth. The polyvalence of symbols makes their experience easier than their explanation. "Sacraments" in the general sense are signs of something sacred (St Augustine), 'vehicles for contact with Mystery,' or 'paths to an awareness of Mystery' (Shea). Thus, any human experience can function as a sacrament. Contact with God in a sacrament, including liturgical symbols, has its limits, for it is neither a full nor a direct face-to-face meeting with the divine. However, the sacramental principle remains valid and authentic. God, the Invisible One, is disclosed through something that is earthly, visible, audible, tangible: that which may be humanly experienced.*

Key Words: sacramentality; sacraments; symbols; signs; sacramental experience; Catholic liturgy; John Shea

In Christianity and in theology we call Jesus Christ a 'sacrament', the Church a 'sacrament', and the Eucharist a 'sacrament'. But the term 'sacrament' is much broader in meaning than its application to Jesus Christ as a sacrament, to the Church as a sacrament, and to any of the seven sacraments of the Catholic Church. St Augustine (354-430 AD) described the term 'sacrament' in several ways. He had both a broad understanding and a more particular and specific one. For now it's his broad understanding that concerns us. He said a 'sacrament' is 'a visible form of invisible grace', i.e. a visible or otherwise sense-perceptible form of the presence of God. More simply, he also said that a 'sacrament' is 'a sacred sign' (*signum sacrum*), i.e. a sign of something sacred, and that it is a 'visible word' (*verbum visibile*).

So our understanding of sacraments is not concerned simply with the seven rituals of the Catholic Church that we call 'the sacraments', but with an experience of the presence of God in a range of human experiences. Richard McBrien says: 'A sacramental perspective is one that "sees" the divine in the human, the infinite in the finite, the spiritual in the material, the transcendent in the immanent, the eternal in the historical.'¹ It will therefore be valuable to explore the general meaning of the term before going on to consider Jesus Christ as sacrament and the Church as sacrament, etc. This will involve an investigation of how a 'sacrament' is something within human experience, something that is earthly, visible or otherwise perceptible. It will involve the effort to discover within a range of human experiences what is variously labelled 'the more', 'the beyond', 'the transcendent', 'mystery', 'the ultimate', 'the sacred', 'the divine', 'God'. In short, we will be investigating the

¹ Richard McBrien, *Catholicism*, revised and updated edition (North Blackburn: Collins Dove, 1994), 9-10.

anthropological, the human basis of the idea of sacrament, i.e. what is sometimes called 'sacramentality'.

To delve into this, it will be useful to first examine the meaning of 'symbol' in general, since any 'sacrament' is a specific type of symbol.

A. THE MEANING OF "SYMBOL" IN GENERAL AND ITS ROLE IN HUMAN LIFE

A symbol belongs to the category of 'sign', i.e. it is a kind of sign. As sign, it points beyond itself to something else, something more, and is a means of communicating this more to those who experience it.

Signs in general give information, and frequently tend to have only one meaning - e.g. a car's indicator light; an 'exit' sign; a 'For sale' sign outside a house; mathematical signs such as +, -, =; a traffic policeman's raised hand. Signs which have a single meaning can also be explained.

A symbol is a more complex kind of sign. It tends to convey not one but a series of meanings. This is to say that a symbol has several associated connotations.² In the second place, a symbol does more than communicate ideas. It touches our imaginations and stirs up our feelings, such as joy, love, hope and fear. It touches our values, beliefs, ideals and traditions, as well as our insights and ideas. A symbol is very useful for sharing inner feelings and attitudes, e.g. candles lit on a cake to honour a child on her birthday; flowers sent to express grief and sympathy; a wedding ring to pledge lasting love and fidelity.

The kind of sign which a symbol is may be illustrated by comparing the difference in meaning an old photo album has for a stranger browsing through its pages, and for a member of the family who knows and appreciates the people pictured there. For the stranger, the photos will tend to say at most who the people in the pictures are, what they look like, and what they are doing. For the family member they are precious memories of what the subjects have meant to them personally, what their association with them has been like, the life and love and laughter they have shared with them. For the family member 'every picture tells a story', as we say. Whereas the stranger leafing through the pages may hurry to get to the end, the family member may have difficulty in putting the album down.

The implication is that a symbol tends to participate in the reality it signifies, that it realizes what it signifies, that it is what it means, and that it takes us beyond the surface of things to their depth. Thus, e.g. a naval wife holding the photo of her husband in her hand and kissing it, may feel that she is with him now, even though his ship is somewhere in the Persian gulf. Our national flag and national anthem are not just a piece of coloured cloth and a piece of music set to words, but put us in touch with our history, our beliefs, our hopes, our dreams, and our ideals.

Because a symbol tends to have a range of meanings, it is easier to experience it than to explain it, and because it touches the heart and not just the head, a symbol will tend to work more powerfully than logical explanation.

The appreciation of symbol involves the capacity to 'see more', to 'feel about', to reflect, to contemplate, and to wonder. To think symbolically involves something of the art of the poet, e.g. of a William Blake exclaiming with enthusiasm on the impact made on him by the sight of a tiger:

² The capacity of symbols to carry many meanings is referred to as their 'multivalence' or 'polyvalence'.

Tiger! Tiger! burning bright
 in the forests of the night,
 What immortal hand or eye
 Could frame thy fearful symmetry!

In Jesus we sense such a poetic cast of mind, the ability to think symbolically and to 'see more', as e.g. he speaks to his disciples of '*shining in people's sight*' like '*a city built on a hill-top*' and '*a lamp on a lamp-stand*'; about the sound tree producing good fruit and the rotten tree bad (Mt 7:17); about the sensible man who built his house on rock and the stupid one who built his on sand (Mt 7:24-27); about the sower who went out to sow (Mt 3:3-9).

To think and indeed to act in a symbolic way, tends also to require previous experience. The lack of this will e.g. lead a stranger to hurry through a photo album in which the people depicted are strangers. (Hence the risk of showing '*the slides we took in Germany last year*'). The appreciation of a religious symbol tends to pre-suppose some previous acquaintance with it.

B. A RANGE OF SACRAMENTAL EXPERIENCES

In his book *Stories of God: An Unauthorized Biography*,³ already something of a classic in the field, John Shea has discussed a range of human experiences, which, in the context of his discussion, he regards as sacramental, and which he calls '*vehicles for contact with Mystery*' (p.17), '*paths to an awareness of Mystery*' (p.25). It will be valuable to recall and further develop the range of human experiences he has discussed.⁴

1. Contingency

Shea mentions contingency,⁵ the awareness of the uncertainty of life, leading us to wonder, '*Why is there anything at all?*' At times we experience contingency in a positive way, when we experience the feeling that it's good to be alive, days when we are jumping out of our skin, so to speak.

Yet not all that far away from the '*exhilarating awareness that life is given, is the anxious awareness that it is not guaranteed*' (p.27). No insurance policy can save us from death and from its lesser indignities, sickness and suffering. In this precarious life situation, the meanings which things have for us are fragile and can easily crumble. In this situation, the love and friendships in our lives which we value, but tend to take for granted, can easily fade out or fade away. All too easily our hopes for the sort of future we have planned can be dashed.

When we come to wonder about all this, and when our wondering begins to take us beyond such uncertainties, it is then that we may possibly enter into '*Mystery*'.

³ See John Shea, *Stories of God: An Unauthorized Biography* (Chicago: Thomas More Press, 1978), esp. Ch.1, 'Exceeding Darkness and Undeserved Light'. Cf. Peter Malone, *Traces of God: Understanding God's Presence in the World Today* (Melbourne: Collins Dove, 1991). He discusses God in life stories, loving relationships, people, our daily lives, nature, imagination, music, words, theatre and film.

⁴ Cf. Shea, 'The Way of Revelation and Faith', in *Stories of Faith* (Chicago: Thomas More Press, 1980) 13-35.

⁵ Defined by *The Concise Oxford Dictionary* as 'uncertainty of occurrence; chance occurrence ... thing dependent on an uncertain event'.

2. Dialogue (Conversations) and Communion (Sharing and Caring Love)

A second path to Mystery, a second symbol/ sacrament of daily life, is when people enter into deep dialogue and communion with one another. Dialogue and communion have been skilfully presented by Gregory Baum⁶ as ways to both grow as persons to our potential, and as ways in which God is present to human beings everywhere in a redeeming way.⁷

In Baum's thinking, people mature through contact with other human beings. Of particular importance in the maturing process of learning to move away from self and to reach out towards others is the phenomenon of dialogue, i.e. genuine conversations we have with others. In the sharing which takes place, we listen and we respond. By means of the insights shared, we are assisted to grow and develop as responsible people.

Again and again if we are to make progress and change our ways of living, it may be necessary to hear from others things which are challenging, things which are perhaps even quite painful, but which turn out, at least in the long run, to set us free to become better people. In fact, through the course of a whole life, many challenges and many changes may be called for.

There is another dimension to all this. In the words of others, even unintended remarks and chance conversations, God's word may be addressed to us, God's word of saving truth.

As previously said, the word of God as it comes to us from others in conversation can be painful. We need strength to reply to the call (from God) addressed to us by others. To be addressed by others (and God) creates fears. Can we, e.g., take the risk of listening to them? Isn't there some danger that if we listen to others, our self-esteem may go down? Isn't there some danger that if we listen to the revealing word from another person, we will end up being psychologically dependent, even under that person's spell?

Faced with such threatening risks, it takes a lot of courage to engage in the kind of conversations which will challenge us to become more mature and more responsible. We find the courage to face the truth only if the other addresses us sensitively, i.e. with respect, with care, and with love. Love is the only way which works. Were we to be brutally confronted with what may be in us, e.g. superficiality, anger and resentment, self-rejection, we might crumble to pieces. But the gift of the accepting and encouraging love of the significant other creates in us the strength we need - to listen, to attain self-knowledge, to accept ourselves with our weaknesses, our strengths, and our possibilities. The gift of the other's love and care, the human communion, communicates freedom - freedom to become a better person, freedom to open up and share with others the love and care which has been given to us.

Faced with the risks involved, the freedom to take those risks and let ourselves enter into a life-giving dialogue and communion with others, is experienced as both a power and a gift. It is a gift, not something self-generated, a gift given to us by people who love us and care for us. Yet should we start to state what they have done for us and express our gratitude, this would be too much. For typically, those significant people we talk to and support us, simply don't realize just how much they mean to us. They may cut us short, or say something like this - '*it was nothing*'; '*think nothing of it*'; or '*what are friends for?*' The strength and support which they communicate to us goes beyond what

⁶ Gregory Baum, *Man Becoming: God in Secular Experience* (New York: Herder & Herder, 1970), Ch.2, 'Redemptive Immanence'.

⁷ An appreciation of the dynamics and processes involved will often be the factor which changes the sacrament of reconciliation from being something rather mechanical and impersonal to an experience which is personal, joyful, encouraging and liberating. The same can be said about pastoral counselling and spiritual direction.

they see themselves as giving. This fact takes us beyond them as God's instruments to God's self, the ultimate source of that understanding and support which another human being has communicated to us.⁸

The implication of this experience is that in the human dialogue and communion by which we grow as persons, God is present as the deeper dimension of that dialogue and communion. God is present as Word and as Spirit. Human dialogue and communion are therefore sacraments of the presence and activity of God, of the Word of God and of the Spirit of God. This is so true that we can truly speak of certain people who have been significant supports and sustainers in our lives as '*God-sends*'. So much so that Baum does not hesitate to assert, '*the locus of the divine is the inter-personal*',⁹ an insight shared by the author of 1 Jn 4:12: '*No one has ever seen God; if we love one another, God lives in us, and his love is perfected in us,*' and by James McCauley in the hymn, '*Where There is Charity and Love, There the God of Love Abides*'.

3. The Collapse of Our Ordered World

A third path to Mystery, another type of sacrament, is the collapse of our ordered world. When the people and possessions we prize most, when the things which are most important to us, are suddenly ripped away from us, and when there are no props and supports which help to make some sense of the senseless, it is then, and perhaps only then, that we may begin to see the face of Mystery.

I suggest that a particularly powerful symbol of this is the gospel picture of Jesus on the cross crying out to the Father in a loud voice the words of the twenty-second psalm. This is a psalm of trust, certainly, but one which begins: '*My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?*' (Mk 15:34) It is from the dark chaos engulfing his consciousness, from the sense of God's seeming absence and seeming neglect, that Jesus makes his confident and trustful plea for aid and deliverance (esp. in vv.19-20).

4. Our Failures to Live Up to Our Moral Standards

A fourth path to Mystery, a further sacrament, can be our failures to live up to our moral ideals. We adopt the standard of a Christian person given by Paul in the fifth chapter of his letter to the Galatians. We aim at living as loving, joyful, peaceful, patient, good, kind, faithful and self-controlled people. In practice, however, self-interest and various evil tendencies tend to come to the fore. We may think: '*What's in it for me?*' or '*Look after number one*'. We may manipulate others and use others to gain an advantage. What Paul said may be only too true: '*For I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I do*' (Rom 7:19).

The positive side of the internal war which goes on inside us is that it may direct us to God the Mystery, the God in whom "*we live and move and have our being*" (Acts 17:28), the God of our salvation, for both explanation and healing.

5. Disenchantment

A fifth path to Mystery, and yet another sacrament in the wider sense of the term, is the path of disenchantment. Disenchantment may occur when the symbols we once trusted to bring us closer to God, are swept away, or, at the very least, are de-emphasized. This has

⁸ Cf. the Bernard Cooke's discussion of the value and importance of human friendship in its different forms in his *Sacraments and Sacramentality* (Mystic, Conn.: Twenty-third Publications, 1983), 23ff.

⁹ Baum, *Man Becoming*, 58.

happened in recent Catholic culture. For many Catholics not so long ago, '*doing the right thing*' was doing what the Church approved or recommended. The goal of their lives was the Church's approval. When they were young they learned that the '*good*' things to do, the actions which their Church approved of, were daily Mass, bowed heads after Holy Communion, seriousness and silence in church, not eating meat on Friday, paying into the planned-giving project. In the message of the Church today, these ways of being Catholic no longer enjoy the same high ratings, and are therefore given less emphasis. What counts most now is being a loving person, developing a personal relationship with Jesus Christ, following him as a disciple. What counts too in the effort to follow Christ is prayer, and especially prayer based on scripture, and Sunday Eucharist. What also counts a great deal is social action for the poor and powerless, the broken and the abandoned.

For people who relied on the old group practices to be on side with both their Church and their God (often identified in their minds), the new ways can be disturbing, disorienting, even shocking. The new ways can evoke resentment and hostility. Not only is there the loss of the old securities (e.g. reliance on relics, indulgences, and First Friday practices), but also the painful feeling of having been misled and betrayed. The pain of discovering that what they were once told so forcefully in the past was either a wrong road, or, at least, a bit of a side-track.

Disenchantment, however, need not be a totally negative experience. It can lead to a positive evaluation of the worth of various church symbols and the discovery of genuine priorities among the range of symbols. It can lead to a heightened awareness of the pilgrim nature of the Church. It can teach people not to identify the symbols of God with God's self, and thus save them from a form of idolatry. It can lead them to a purer and more adult worship of God, who is ultimately beyond any finite representation of God's presence and power.

6. *The Nature of Birth, Life, Growth and Death*

For some people the path to Mystery is less round-about. Contact with the wonders of nature, the wonders of birth, life, growth, and death, are sacraments. John Shea paints such a sacramental word-picture:

An old man sits by the sea and knows that the waves he watches will crash on those shores long after he is gone. He is triggered into an awareness of the Mystery within which both he and the waves dwell. A young mother watches her child at the park and suddenly wonder seizes her and carries her into an awareness of mystery.¹⁰

William Bausch shows his appreciation of the wonders of nature as paths to Mystery when he writes:

A father looks down on his newborn son and in a precious moment he is caught up in the wonder of this small miracle. He catches a whole sudden insight into birth and life, harmony and meaning, and his own godlike creative powers. He knows that something greater than himself has been at work. A girl looks at a sunset and is pulled out of herself as it were. She suddenly grasps (or is grasped by) a sense of another dimension of reality and senses the mystery of a divine presence. There are experiences like this in the lives of many. In these special moments individuals and a whole people can look back. On reflection they sense that they had witnessed or felt or experienced in some way a golden moment; that in this or that experience they truly came alive, saw reality in a different way and felt a love born and a growth take place. In their minds there was

¹⁰ Shea, *Stories of God*, 25.

no doubt that something beautiful and meaningful happened. A Power was felt, experienced.¹¹

C. EVALUATION OF SACRAMENTAL PATHS TO MYSTERY

1. In Principle and Finite Experience can be a Sacrament

We have been exploring a range of human experiences which can be typical paths leading to the Mystery which Christians name as God. But the awareness that there are other paths to Mystery, other sacraments, leads us in the direction that, in principle, any human experience, any finite experience, can be a sacrament, i.e., a path to the Mystery which is God, since, as the poet Gerard Manley Hopkins expresses it, '*The world is charged with the grandeur of God.*'¹²

2. In Sacramental Encounter, God remains Mystery

In sacramental encounter, God remains Mystery, for God is incomprehensible. While in sacramental encounter God does emerge from hiddenness and makes himself known, this is only in part. Even as he is revealed, he remains concealed, baffling, transcendent, beyond, other, mysterious. The words of Paul come to mind: '*For now we see in a mirror, dimly, but then we will see face to face*' (1 Cor 13:12). There is no question of the sacraments of everyday life delivering God to us on a platter. God is not served up as an object, so that we can clearly say, '*he is this, he is not that*'. We do experience God, but in glimpses, traces and shadows. To confuse the signs of his presence and activity with himself in his full reality would amount to idolatry, Sacraments are signs of God which communicate God, but they are not God himself.

This is illustrated in a powerful scene in Exodus 33. Moses is deeply concerned that the Lord will refuse to travel with his people any further on their journey to the Promised Land. For they have displeased the Lord by making a golden calf and dancing around it. Moses is also concerned that his own leadership will be discredited if the Lord deserts them. In his concern about all this, Moses pleads aloud with the Lord, and the Lord relents.

Encouraged by this sign of the Lord's favour, Moses blurts out to the Lord: '*Show me your glory!*' God replies that he will make all his goodness pass before Moses, and declare to Moses his own name Yahweh, but he warns that Moses cannot see the face of God. For God says: '*you cannot see my face; for no one shall see me and live*' (v.20). But in answer to Moses' request, God will make one concession to Moses: '*while my glory passes by I will put you in a cleft of the rock, and I will cover you with my hand while I have passed by; then I will take away my hand, and you shall see my back; but my face shall not be seen*' (vv.22-23).

'*You shall see my back ...*' Moses may not encounter the Lord directly, in all his glory. What is permitted to him is to see the Lord's back, to glimpse the Lord from behind. This is to say in an indirect way, a sacramental way, a way that is a genuine way, but one that is less than clear, a mysterious way, a way that is both light and darkness, a way that is both reality and shadow.¹³

¹¹ William Bausch, *A New Look at the Sacraments* (West Mystic: Twenty-third Publications, revised ed. 1983, 1977), 13-14.

¹² This is the opening line of his poem 'God's Grandeur'.

¹³ For the germ of this idea developed in my own way, see Joseph Powers, *Spirit and Sacrament: The Humanizing Experience* (New York: Seabury, 1973), 1f.

The God whom we encounter in sacraments is, I have been saying, Mystery. Real though it is, the sacramental encounter is limited. Even as we experience the presence of God, within and through the signs of the presence of God, we experience also the absence of God. There can be no pretence that in any human experience, even in a special sacramental ritual like the Eucharist, we can capture the full reality of God. There can be no question of objectifying God, of delivering God in a packet or a package, as it were. And yet, one does not hesitate to claim that in sacraments of all kinds, God does meet us, and we do meet God.

D. A COMMON FACTOR IN A RANGE OF SACRAMENTAL EXPERIENCES

The question arises concerning whether, in the huge array of real and possible sacramental experiences, there is any common factor.

It seems that what is common to a variety of experiences is that they raise fundamental and significant questions. Questions about origin: - e.g. *Why does the world exist? Why is there anything at all? Where did I come from?* Questions about destiny: - e.g. *Where is the world heading? What will happen to me when I die?* Questions about the meaning of life now: - e.g. *Where does my sense of moral obligation come from? Why OUGHT I do anything at all? Why go on living? 'To be or not to be?' Why go on loving? Why be generous and compassionate and forgiving? Why bother? What's the point?*

I have said that such basic ultimate questioning triggered off by human experiences may lead to God. I am not pretending they will infallibly do so. Of their nature, symbols are somewhat ambiguous. Other interpretations, other answers, other conclusions, are possible, e.g. in the words of Frederick Langbridge (1849-1923): *'Two men looked out from prison bars; one saw mud, the other saw stars.'*

But when it happens that particular human experiences do lead to basic questioning, such experiences may well become *'an invitation to transcendence.'*¹⁴ They may offer an opportunity to transcend the limits of personal experience, i.e., as the word *'transcend'* suggests, to climb up and over the present experience, reach God, and embrace God as the ultimate source and meaning of one's whole life. In the process of discovering God, such experiences may also offer the opportunity to gain a whole new way of looking at life, a new heart and a new spirit.

It is out of a whole process of experience, questioning and vision that the reality of God emerges. But God does not emerge as this particular thing, this particular object. God is discovered as a background, as Being with a capital 'B', out of which, within which, and in terms of which, everything else is seen. It is out of this whole process that God is discovered as an active presence, a dynamism, the source and sustainer and destiny of all there is. Joseph Powers remarks: *'When we open ourselves ... in total self-transcendence ... we don't get the Answer. Hopefully, the Answer gets us.'*¹⁵

E. SACRAMENTAL EXPERIENCE NOT THE EXPERIENCE OF EVERYONE

In this treatment of the subject I have proposed that human experiences of one kind or another can be signs or sacraments of the presence and activity of God. The operative words are *'can be'*. We have to face the fact that apparently this is not the case for

¹⁴ Powers, *Spirit and Sacrament*, 12.

¹⁵ Powers, *Spirit and Sacrament*, 18.

everyone. For some people, God is more absent than present. Some do not see any shadows or traces or glimpses of God in their lives. Some even deny or doubt that God exists. Sandra DeGidio remarks:

A sunset, a period of quiet prayer, a storm, the birth of a child, an intimate conversation with a close friend all have the potential for revealing God to us in new and deeper ways. The phrase "potential for" is important here. Such experiences may not always be sacramental for all people. Some aspects of creation are more "charged" with God than others. And people vary in their capacity to see God in these sacramental manifestations because of their individual backgrounds and experiences. For example, a sunset or conversation with a close friend is a more poignant sacramental experience for me than a storm or the birth of a child. Storms frighten me, and I have never given birth.¹⁶

Is there anything more that can be said about this? Why does one person discern God and another fail completely to recognize God in any shape or form?

In answer to this question, nothing clear and indisputable can be asserted. We are stepping into the cloudy area of the gift and workings of faith. However, the following considerations are put forward to help illuminate the dimness and darkness about this.

1. *Everyday Awareness vs. Sacramental Awareness*

To discover God in and through human experience requires a particular kind of awareness, a particular kind of consciousness. Shea, in this regard, makes a useful distinction between '*everyday awareness*' and '*sacramental awareness*'.

Everyday awareness has two points of reference. For example, I (1) see a bird (2). Sacramental awareness has three points of reference. For example, I (1) see a bird (2), and in and through this interaction become aware of the dimension of Mystery (3).¹⁷

2. *Sacramental Awareness is not the Way of the Mystic or Philosopher*

'*The process of becoming aware of the dimension of Mystery,*' claims Shea, '*differs from both mysticism and rationalism.*' Mystics, looking for a pure, unencumbered communion with the divine, leave behind their everyday environment as an obstacle to the immediate, intense merger with the divine, which they are pursuing. They are looking for a special religious experience '*and not the religious dimension of ordinary human experience*'. The philosopher, beginning with some indisputable fact, proceeds by the stepladder approach of logical inference: If this is so, then that also must be the case, and may conclude e.g. that God is the Unmoved Mover.¹⁸

3. *Sacramental Awareness is the way of the Poet and the Novelist*

Sacramental awareness is the way of the poet, the novelist, and the artist. It is the way of feeling and sensitivity. Not in the way of blind emotionality, but in a way which is both cognitive and affective. It perceives Mystery by sensitively entering into and reflecting upon human experiences. It perceives by participation. Shea remarks: '*Sacramental consciousness does not desert the concrete, historical world but turns it into a symbol.*'¹⁹

¹⁶ Sandra DeGidio, *Sacraments Alive: Their History Celebration and Significance* (Mystic: Twenty-third Publications, 1991), 9.

¹⁷ Shea, *Stories of God*, 18.

¹⁸ Shea, *Stories of God*, 17f.

¹⁹ Shea, *Stories of God*, 21.

4. Sacramental Awareness is Difficult for People Today

It has been suggested that sacramental awareness does not come easy to people nowadays. For the modern person tends to be blocked, entrapped, in two-point awareness, unable to touch the dimension of Mystery. It is claimed that the cause of this blockage is the technological spirit, which encourages manipulation of the surface of reality but is insensitive to its depth.²⁰ For people who stay at the surface of reality, there is not much room left for getting to its depths, not much room for what Abraham Maslow has called '*peak experiences*' and others have called '*depth experiences*'. For a person with the mind-set '*what you see is what you get and all you get*', moving any distance into the depth of Mystery is barred by the narrow norms of scientific truth and method. Shea remarks that '*in this situation ... Being is forgotten.*'²¹ In this situation, the grace, the beauty and the poetry of life are edged out. With this mentality, sacramentality, sacramental consciousness, may be all but extinguished, in favour of what Shea has labelled '*the flat-earth impulse.*'²²

It doesn't have to be this way. Albert Einstein believed that the kind of consciousness Shea discusses is the source of all science as well as all art. He made the observation:

The most beautiful thing we can experience is the mysterious side of life. It is the deep feeling which is at the cradle of all true art and science. In this sense, and only in this sense, I count myself amongst the most deeply religious people.²³

Scientific advance, per se, ought to intensify rather than blunt our sensitivity to the sense of Mystery. One has only to contemplate e.g. the marvellous and intricate workings of the human body, with its extraordinary balance and co-ordination, in order to praise the Creator, for the emergence of that incredible combination of systems which is the human body.

F. THE ROLE OF SYMBOL IN LITURGY (INCLUDING THE SACRAMENTS)

The Constitution on the Liturgy of Vatican II speaks of the role of symbol in liturgy when it says: 'In the liturgy the sanctification of women and men is given expression in symbols perceptible to the senses and is carried out in ways appropriate to each of them.'²⁴ This implies that the words that we say, the things that we use, and the actions that we carry out, take us beyond ourselves and put us into contact with Mystery, i.e. with the God whom we cannot see and touch and hear directly with our human senses.

The liturgy is an extension of the Incarnation. The realities which liturgy expresses in celebration are embodied in objects and in human gestures and actions. By using water, oil, bread, wine, words, movement, music, singing, etc, we experience the presence of God and his love, and make appropriate responses of adoration, praise, thanksgiving, repentance, etc. We also experience one another as fellow Christians, and reach out to them in openness, acceptance, welcome and hospitality. Thus, e.g. in the celebration of the Eucharist the bread and wine which, as food, symbolize the human life they nourish, come to symbolize Christ giving himself to his community as '*the bread of life and the cup of*

²⁰ Shea, *Stories of God*, 21.

²¹ Shea, *Stories of God*, 22.

²² Shea, *Stories of God*, 24.

²³ Albert Einstein, cited in Shea, *Stories of God*, 24.

²⁴ Second Vatican Council, *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, §7.

*everlasting salvation.*²⁵ In the '*Liturgy of the Eucharist*' those taking part enact in symbol what Jesus did when '*he took bread, gave thanks, broke the bread, and gave to his disciples saying ...*' Thus through liturgy as a symbol system, our relationship with God becomes a concrete relationship, an embodied relationship.

G. SOME CONCLUSIONS

From what has been said on the topic up till now, we may conclude that the seven sacraments of Roman Catholicism are not the only sacraments or symbols of God's presence in the world, life, history, and Church. From the concrete examples considered, we may move to some statements of general principle about the anthropological or human basis of the notion of sacrament. That is, of how what we call '*sacrament*' is earthed in the visible, the tangible, and the finite. That is, of how sacrament is the point of contact between the visible and the invisible, the tangible and the intangible, or, to put it another way, how our human experiences function as '*doors to the sacred*.'²⁶

1. The Sacramental Principle

What is particularly distinctive about Catholicism is its commitment to '*the principle of sacramentality*.'²⁷ The sacramental principle means, in a nutshell, that the invisible God whom '*no one has ever seen*' (Jn 1:18) is disclosed through something that is earthly, visible, tangible, through something, in short, which may be humanly experienced. All sorts of experiences function as signs of the presence of God. So, for Richard McBrien, the word '*sacrament*' in its widest sense '*applies to any finite reality through which the divine is perceived to be disclosed and communicated, and through which our human response to the divine assumes some measure of shape, form, and structure*.'²⁸

This is to say that God, the source of all good and the ultimate depth of reality, is disclosed through signs of his presence - e.g. the universe, environment, movements, events, persons, communities, objects, places, words, and rituals. A sacramental vision '*sees*' God in all things (St Ignatius Loyola).

The '*sacramental principle*' has much in common with '*the incarnational principle*'. This is to say that God's way to us and our way to God is through the human, the fleshly, the historical, and the particular. Richard Gula remarks: '*There is no other way for us who are body-persons to experience the invisible except through that which we can touch, or to hear the inaudible except through that which strikes the ears*.'²⁹ People of faith don't stop at the appearance of things, but see through them to the deeper reality of God.

2. The Principle of Mediation

The related '*principle of mediation*' is summarized in the traditional maxim: '*Sacraments are not just signs of grace, they cause what they signify*.' This is to say that something earthly, something in human experience, not only suggests the existence and presence of God, but it also mediates or communicates that presence. Thus through their human

²⁵ First Eucharistic Prayer, Order of Mass.

²⁶ The expression was coined by Joseph Martos as the title of his work, *Doors to the Sacred: A Historical Introduction to the Sacraments in the Christian Church* (Tarrytown, N.Y. Triumph Books, 1981, 1982, 1991).

²⁷ Richard McBrien, *Catholicism* (East Malvern: Collins Dove, 1994), 787.

²⁸ McBrien, *Catholicism*, 788.

²⁹ Richard Gula, *To Walk Together Again: The Sacrament of Reconciliation* (Ramsey: Paulist Press, 1983), 72.

experiences, people of faith encounter God and enter into a personal relationship with God.

3. Implications of these Principles

Among the implications of the double principles of sacramentality and mediation, the following stand out:

- (1) In principle, everything we experience is capable of embodying and communicating the divine;
- (2) As a general rule, our relationship with the invisible God is an indirect relationship;
- (3) So grace (God as love) comes to us through various signs and instruments of God; and
- (4) Jesus Christ and the Church are special signs of God communicating his love for people, and drawing forth their responses. In his earthly existence he communicated through bodily signs. His own human nature was for people the sign and instrument of God and his love. In his present risen state, he has taken on his disciples (the Church) as his body. They are to be his face, hands, feet, heart and voice, to the human race. This is to say that the Church is the sacrament of Christ in the world today, the sacrament of the coming of the kingdom of God.

A Follow-up Discussion³⁰

- (1) How would you describe or define a 'sign'?
- (2) Make a list of six signs which are part of your everyday life and indicate which are natural, e.g. smoke, and which are artificial, e.g. 'exit'.
- (3) How would you describe or define a 'symbol'?
- (4) Name one symbol that is particularly personal, and state why you call it a symbol rather than a simple sign.
- (5) Recall an incident when you used some symbol, e.g. a letter or a gift, to communicate what you were thinking and feeling, but which went only so far to communicate all that you were thinking and feeling.
- (6) Can you name some symbol which means a great deal to you but means nothing to anyone else?
- (7) Has there been any occasion when some symbol, e.g. the playing of a song or hymn at a wedding or funeral, or a movie scene, triggered some reaction in you and even brought tears to your eyes?
- (8) Describe a situation in which you experienced awe and wonder.
- (9) In the light of your understanding of the meaning of a symbol, what is faulty about saying: - 'But X is only a symbol.'

³⁰ Adapted from Joseph Champlin, 'Discussion Questions,' *Special Signs of Grace: Sacraments and Sacramentals* (Collegeville, Minn.: Liturgical Press, 1986), 22-23.

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