THE LOYOLA INSTITUTE FOR MINISTRY

Church, Sacraments, and Liturgy

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Table of Contents

Chapter One

Introduction

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To gain pastoral insight into God's gracious, salvific presence in the community called church, in its sacraments, and in the manifold ways that our human gifts minister to God's work in community.

Soteriology

One of the ways of understanding the church, liturgy, and sacraments is through an area of theological reflection called soteriology. *Soter* is the Greek word for "savior," and soteriology asks two interrelated questions: "What do we need to be saved from that we cannot save ourselves from; and what does God do in our world and our history that actually 'saves' us?"

Soteriology has come to the fore in exciting fashion during the past few decades. It embraces such things as sacramental theology, reconsideration of "grace" and "the supernatural," Catholic social teaching, liberation theology, and a new approach to "providence" in terms of divine presence. As a matter of fact, soteriology is at the heart of today's theological enterprise. However, precisely because soteriology is so all-embracing, this course will focus on only several aspects of the divine saving action, namely the manner in which the church and its sacramental life, its rituals, and its liturgy share in God's work of bringing about a new creation, a new humanity.

Present-Day Question: What is God Doing?

Considering today's emphasis on soteriology, it is strange that a little over a half century ago there was very little explicit attention given to it. Theologians, as they had been for centuries, were most concerned the questions that came out of Greek philosophy: What kind of being is God? What kind of being is Christ? What kind of reality is the church? What are grace and the supernatural? The more functional question, "What is God doing?" received little conceptual attention. Under the surface, however, this question was central to modern experience. Science seemed to explain away the need for God's activity; the worrisome issues about "divine providence" and predestination were still unresolved, and the gross evils of two great world wars, the Holocaust, and genocidal civil wars made people ask if it was possible to believe that a good God really existed and was doing anything to better human life. More specifically, many asked whether Christianity had any

purpose, any role, in addressing the concrete reality of human life in this and subsequent centuries. Perhaps the future would be not only "post-modern" but "post-Christian."

Response to the Question

Questions about Christianity's purpose and role are, then, not only relevant, they demand a careful and honest response if Christianity is to continue its integral mission of proclaiming the Good News of God's salvific plan for humankind. Christian theology today is responding very explicitly to such issues. Critical research into the scriptures and historical study aided by dialogue with the social sciences have fed into a more functional approach to theology, since they have allowed us to understand more broadly what has been happening in those agencies — the church, the Bible, and the sacraments, among others — through which presumably God has been working salvifically.

Fundamental to this theological shift is the growing realization that God's activity does not take place "behind the scenes," in some mysterious middle ground between sensible reality and God. Rather, whatever it is that God is doing is happening in and through created reality and, above all, in and through humans. The divine gracing of Christians and through them of their fellow humans occurs in believing Christians' activity, activity that is empowered by God's own creative Spirit. This empowerment obviously affects individuals, but does so because they form a community of faith, the church. Vatican II is helping us recover and deepen our social sense of human destiny and Christian identity: "He [God] has, however, willed to make [women and] men holy and to save them, not as individuals without any bond between them, but rather to make them into a people who might acknowledge him and serve him in holiness" (Lumen #9). Martin Buber has said something similar: "We expect a theophany of which we know nothing but the place, and the place is called community" (117).

The Greek word *ekklesia* is the root word for church, but it also means assembly and community — in fact it meant those things before Christians began to use it to name an institutional structure, and it still means those things for the church. church/community is a privileged "place" where Christians expect to experience God's theophany.

In our exploration of church, we will investigate how in the Catholic lifeworld, worship and the sacraments (in both a broadly "sacramental" and a more concrete sense) are among the community's most precious modes of experiencing God's saving work. We need to understand how the wider notion of sacramentality undergirds the Sacraments, that is, how the world mediates God's effective love, which is why Gerard Manley Hopkins knows that "[t]he world is charged with the grandeur of God."

New Insight into Sacramentality

As we will see in more detail later, this insight into the fact that God's saving activity takes place in and through human activity marks a basic shift from the view that had prevailed for many centuries. Even though Christians always believed that God had revealed to humans what God is for them and, therefore, what human life was all about, there was an overemphasis on the hiddenness, the distance, of God. Paradoxically, although the divine reality we call "God" is beyond human comprehension, beyond the grasp of our thought or imagination, the heart of the Christian meaning of "mystery" as applied to God is that in creation and distinctively in Jesus as the Christ, God's self becomes known to us. The mystery is not only the transcendence of the divine, but also the intimacy with humans that, Christians believe, centers on Jesus as the embodiment of God's word of self-giving love.

However, this self-revelation of God did not stop with Jesus' dying and rising; it continues in those who remain open to the activity of God's Spirit in their lives. The openness of those lives to the Spirit in faith makes possible the presence of God and the saving influence of God's works in human history in the saving activity of believers empowered by God's Spirit. This means that human lives, in proportion as they are grounded in faith and commitment to a concerned love for their human sisters and brothers, are sacramental, a notion that we will be stressing and explaining throughout these pages. "Sacramentality" is not an easy idea to grasp; while by no means is it a new insight in Christian belief, it has come to the fore in recent decades as a breakthrough in our soteriology.

Church as Community

Today's world is one in which people have come to seek and treasure human community as seldom before, perhaps because they do not often experience it. Increasing urbanization and its resultant anonymity, value placed on persons in proportion to their productivity in a competitive society, unprecedented mobility that has made traditional extended family a thing of the past, and the paradoxical effect of communication technologies to both connect and isolate us— such influences have brought for many persons a painful isolation.

Much is at stake in this situation, for without community, humans cannot thrive and become what they are capable of becoming. It is in genuine communities, where people truly share their lives and dreams and experiences and questions and themselves, that women and men and children can discover their true identity, where they can grow to maturity by developing their relationships to one another, where the limitations intrinsic to any one individual's experience can be transcended by sharing vicariously the experiences of others. Paradoxically, we search for such community today in a world of unprecedented

means of communication, yet one in which true communication seems more and more difficult.

Enter the Christian community, the church, as a God-given response to the disunity of society. From its earliest years, Christianity has been a challenge and a promise that life, through the saving power of the risen Christ, can be shared in genuine concern of people for one another. Unfortunately, the church has often been viewed as a huge religious organization that people joined, or were born into, so that they might obtain "eternal salvation" through a minimal fulfillment of certain practices. In recent times, however, the church as envisioned and revitalized by the Second Vatican Council awakened the Christian community to its true mission and called it to be the "sacrament" of unity and of "union with God" so that it might become a "sign and an instrument of such union and unity" (*Lumen* #1).

Church as Body of Christ

At the foundation of this revitalized vision of church lies the deep mystery of the church as "Body of Christ." This way of speaking about the church, which goes back as far as Paul's early epistles, came to prominence once more in the latter half of the twentieth century and continues into the present century. Perhaps the principal reason why this model of the church has regained attention after centuries of neglect is the accompanying realization that the resurrection of Jesus does not mean that he left the earth to go up to some distant heaven, but that he remains present to believers throughout human history — as the end of Matthew's Gospel says, "even to the end of the age" (NABRE, 28: 20).

Because the risen Christ remains present to those who accept him in faith, these believers function for him somewhat the way our human bodiliness does for each of us. Somewhat the way our bodily features "translate" in visible fashion the individual person each of us is, the Christian community serves as "the face of Christ" in the world.

By its shared faith, which provides the "receptacle" that makes divine presence possible, the Christian community provides a distinctive context for the divine, saving activity to become part of human history by influencing people in their awareness, their decisions, and their actions. As their awareness of God's loving presence to them in Christ and their Spirit transforms their individual and community life, Christians are meant to be "a light to the world," a paradigm of what human existence can and should be, a source of hope that evil need not triumph, a proof that the power of the gospel can lead to a world of justice and peace. Explicit verbal witness to Christ is and will remain intrinsic to evangelization, but that witness becomes credible only if Christian communities themselves are living witnesses to the gospel that is being preached, that is, when the church itself is a convincing sacrament of the Good News.

The Institutional Church

From time to time in Christian history, groups of people who recognized the importance of the church's inner life have advocated complete abandonment of ecclesiastical structures, leaving people only their shared faith and the Holy Spirit as sources of Christian unity and identity. Ideal as this might sound, it is impossible, for the simple reason that the church is made up of human beings, and human community cannot exist without some external means of communication, some social structure, and shared activity, that is, without institutions.

Unless Christian beliefs had been institutionalized in the scriptures and formalized teaching, they could not be shared in community, nor passed on from one generation to another. Unless worship of God was institutionalized in ritual, it could not become a shared activity that expresses and shapes Christianity's community existence. Unless the church's life and activity as a community were ordered by appropriate governance, there could be neither peaceful sharing of faith experience, nor effective ministry. The absence of order is disruptive and dissipating chaos.

Which Institutions are Appropriate?

So, some institutionalizing is inevitable; indeed, it is desirable. Institutions come into existence precisely to be in the service of maintaining very important values and very serviceable arrangements. To do this, they must often be quite insistent about their *raison d'être* and their survival. But those elements are also the very features of institutions that at times create a temptation to become preoccupied with their structure and their survival. The institutional life of the church must function to serve the mission and *communio* of the whole (*Lumen* #20).

There are several key questions to consider: Which institutions are appropriate to the church as a distinctive kind of community? What is their source? How are they to function? How are they empowered? Social institutions by their nature tend to become established and promote their survival; they tend to become ends in themselves instead of subordinate to the life of the group. This is particularly true whenever possession and use of power enter the picture. The church itself is not immune from this danger; history is replete with instances where papal or episcopal authority became oppressive domination instead of evangelical service. Liturgy, at times, grew rigid and became a means of control, and the Bible itself was sometimes used with fundamentalist interpretations that froze it into a dead message, to be selectively quoted as legitimization for evils such as slavery. However, the response to such abuses is not to abolish institutions, but to keep them alive, which means always changing, for life is always changing. The pilgrim church, as Pope Paul VI often repeated, is *semper reformanda* (always reforming itself) through the guidance of the Holy Spirit. The church grows through ongoing reflection and through its responses to the promptings of the Spirit.

Instituted by Christ

There is a growing consensus in New Testament study that, in his lifetime, Jesus did not order his community of followers in any specific structured way. He offered three major metaphors for how leadership and power should function: stewardship, a shepherd's care, and the servant. The church's structure has varied in many ways, with ministry roles that have evolved over its two thousand years of history. Yet the call to remain faithful to the Good News has remained as a constant. In what sense is the church instituted by Christ? First, it is clear that Jesus of Nazareth is central to the initiation of Christianity. Without his life and work, his dying and his resurrection, there would have been no church, no Christianity. But does that mean, as was for many centuries assumed, that Jesus in his lifetime planned the church with its structure and rituals and commanded his close disciples to establish such a church? Careful study of the evidences leads to the realization that the institutional aspects of the church, its structure, rituals, and sacred scriptures were not necessarily established by Jesus himself in the forms we know them today, although they are grounded in what he was and did, and are responsive to the work of God's Spirit. They only gradually emerged in the decades after his death; indeed, they have been taking shape throughout Christianity's history.

Careful reading of the New Testament indicates that Jesus lived and died a convinced and dedicated Jew. He saw his public mission as a task of fulfilling the activity his Abba had been carrying on for centuries in the history of Israel. Enigmatic as his death on Calvary was, despite the appearances of complete failure in his prophetic ministry as it ended in crucifixion, Jesus died in the hope that in him the reign of God begun in Israel would come to realization. There seems to be no evidence that he thought of himself, either in his public ministry or in his death, as beginning a new religion or a new religious organization. Rather, he sought to embody the fullness of his tradition.

Apostolic Origins of the Church

As there is a profound link of Jesus' Baptism by John with Christian Baptism, and an even more profound link of what Jesus did at the last supper with Christian Eucharist, Jesus' activity was the foundation of later Christian rituals. Christian rituals are a commemoration of what Jesus did; his founding role was to be and do that which is commemorated. In that way, he "instituted the sacraments."

The Acts of the Apostles and Epistles show that actual forms of Christian rituals and the actual forms of church order (bishops, deacons, presbyters, and other ministerial roles) came into existence after Jesus' death and resurrection through decisions and actions of his followers in the apostolic period, under the guidance of Christ's Spirit. This explains why the criterion of authenticity in the early church's judgments about scriptural canon and liturgical practices and claims to official power was "apostolicity." The creeds we still recite express belief that the church is "one, holy, catholic, and *apostolic*."

Conjunction of "Divine Institution" and "Human Institution"

There is great practical importance in discovering the process by which the earliest Christians brought into being the externals of Christianity, for we now understand better that process did not end with them. It continues throughout the church's history, and the changes taking place today in Christianity are a stage in the process. What Jesus' immediate disciples did during those early decades to shape Christianity, they did in the context of their particular cultural situations. They were influenced by the forms of worship and community organization that they knew from their experience of a Jewish and Hellenistic and Roman world. That context is no longer the world of Christians today who are faced with the inescapable need to express Christianity in ways that honor and challenge the multiple cultures of the baptized. The basic question of inculturation is, "What can and should be changed and what cannot be changed if the church is to be a community united in a common faith?"

Recent theological reflection, drawing from careful historical research, has not rejected the notion of "divine institution"; instead, it has seen it as intertwined rather than opposed to or separated from "human institution." (See, for example, *Lumen* #8 and *Sacrosanctum* #2). The classic distinction between *de jure divino* (by divine right) and *de jure humano* (by human right) needs to be rethought as a both/and. If the church is people who make up a community which develops as history proceeds, people guided and empowered by the presence of God's own Spirit, then nothing that comes to be in the life of the church is purely from God nor purely from humans. Christianity is an ongoing divine/human creation; the church has not yet been fully instituted, nor have its sacramental rituals, nor forms of worship. In subsequent chapters, we will examine in more detail this process of Christianity emerging. It will be important in this study to keep in mind that God's Spirit works constantly in the historical developments we will be describing.

Authority and Power in the Church

Central to the institutional unfolding of the church's life has been the question of authority and power in the church. At times the discussion stresses the need to broaden the possession of authority, from Pope to bishops, bishops to presbyters, and beyond that to the laity. While such distribution of power is relevant, the more fundamental issue is: what kind of authority and power is appropriate to the life of the church, a community made up of believers in Jesus as the Christ who have freely chosen in Baptism to express that belief by existing in community. What kind of power does Christ exemplify and with what kind of power does Christ endow his body, the church, so that it can accomplish its mission in history?

The basic power at work in Christianity is God's own power, the power of God's Word and God's Spirit working to bring creation to its fulfillment. All power possessed and exercised by humans in the church is meant to be at the service of that divine power

and goal. To enable divine power to influence human history, God's Spirit endows people with ministerial power, that is, with the abilities (*charisms*) needed to carry out one or more aspects of the church's mission. The church needs to measure its institutional life against the Good News of Jesus Christ, remembering always that Jesus called for model servant leadership among his disciples.

Over the past two millennia, a number of structures have emerged or re-emerged in the church, brought about by the influence of both God's Spirit and the cultures in which Christians lived. Today, with radical and rapid cultural changes taking place in the world, the structures of Christianity are being appraised to see if they are intrinsic to the church's life and so should continue to exist, or whether they derived from cultural situations that no longer exist and so are irrelevant or even counterproductive today. Judgments in this area are clearly difficult and fraught with risk, but the basic principle of judgment seems rather clear: the institutional structures of church are meant to support and further the faith life of the people and to enable the advance of the reign of God.

Sacramentality

Very close to the model of the church as "Body of Christ" is that of the church as "sacrament." Both designations are used by Vatican II in its *Constitution on the Church (Lumen Gentium)*. In the following chapters, we will discuss at length the various aspects of those rituals we call "sacraments" and speak also of the Christian community as the fundamental sacrament. Before doing that, we take a quick preliminary look at the notion of "sacramentality."

Sacramentality, or the idea that created reality in general and humans in particular possess a symbolic character that reflects the creative power and presence of God, is not a new idea. The opening chapter of the Bible says that humans were made "in the image and likeness of God" (Gen. 1:27). In about the year 180, Irenaeus said that human beings fully alive are the glory of God. Medieval writers speak of two books that humans can read to discover God, the book of the Bible and the book of nature. Sacramentality, however, says even more about the presence of God who can be known through the world that is God's handiwork and is present to humans in and through that world. Creation, in its sacramentality, expresses the divine loving self-gift that transforms human life because it transforms human awareness.

Interpreting Symbols

Over the centuries, Christians have strived to discover the meaning that God wishes to reveal through creation and human life. While a certain immediate level of that meaning is rather obvious — food is meant to nourish humans' bodies and so points to the divine concern that humans live — this "literal" meaning of things and events seemed too ordinary

to be what God was actually trying to reveal. Influenced by the Hellenistic culture of early Christianity, people sensed that there must be a more spiritual and hidden meaning. Indeed, there is a further meaning in food for the body: providing food is a sign of the provider's love and personal concern, but this is not exactly a hidden meaning, a mystery message. There must be something more.

Searching for such a mysterious level of revealed meaning occupied the imaginations and efforts of Christian thinkers for centuries and led to an entire theory of interpretation. What needed to be interpreted first of all was the Bible. It was God's own word, much more than an ordinary human record of Israel's history or of Jesus' life and teachings. Some, like Clement of Alexandria, said that beneath the literal sense of the text, there must lie a spiritual meaning that could be discerned only if one could discover the secret figurative sense of the text. What was devised to aid this discovery was an *allegorical* method of interpretation that treated the literal sense of the text as a symbol that pointed to a meaning other than itself.

There is abundant evidence of symbolic language in the scriptures; the parables of Jesus are one striking example. However, such instances are rooted in *metaphor*, as is all true poetry. The reader of the text is invited to reflect more deeply on the implications that are intrinsic to the text, implications intended, at least in germ, by the author. Consider, for example, Jesus' parable of the Good Samaritan, which evokes reflection on the deeper meanings of neighbor and of compassion. By way of contrast, in allegorical interpretation, the text is a code that conveys the intended divine meaning but needs to be decoded. For example, what is important in the scene of the extraordinary catch of fish by Jesus' disciples is the number of fish, a number that is linked to the number of days in the week, plus the number of Jesus' disciples, and so forth.

It was not only the Bible that one had to read with an eye to the hidden meaning; the whole of creation was a complicated symbol that one needed to decipher in order to discover the divine message. Truth lay beneath surface of things, and since ordinary people had neither the training nor the special inspiration of God required for this, their path to truth and God lay in accepting the authoritative voice of church leaders. Linking both the meaning of scripture and the meaning of life is Christian liturgy, itself densely symbolic. Here again the allegorical interpretation prevailed for centuries. When the Eucharistic presider at the offertory washed his hands, and this evoked the image of Pilate washing his hands at the condemnation of Jesus. The immediate and critically important symbolism of Christians gathered in the name of Jesus was often overlooked, though. But, as we will see, much of the transformative effectiveness of the Eucharistic action depends on this "literal" meaning of the action being realized in the consciousness and commitment of the assembly.

Current Study of Symbol

Much of what we refer to as "modernity," particularly the critical rationalism associated with the Enlightenment (in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries), reacted against the omnipresent symbolic (allegorical) mentality of preceding centuries, but in doing so, it tended to lose all sense of the symbolic. Scientific thought often became imperialistic and disdained anything that smacked of "mystery" and that could not be reduced to mathematical clarity and verification. However, for some time now, there has been a reaction against this excessive abstractness of "modern" critical thinking and its rejection of symbol in favor of mathematics. Important philosophical figures like Ernst Cassirer and Suzanne Langer have even gone so far as to define humans as "symbol making beings," and the past few decades have seen an explosion of writing about the nature and function of symbols. As a result, we now have a clearer and more sophisticated grasp of the way symbols function to express and shape human experience. Because insight into the function of symbols is so basic to a theological investigation of Christian sacramentality, a brief explanation of symbol seems necessary at the beginning of our reflection.

The Symbolic Process

Philosopher Paul Ricoeur describes the process through which symbol works. Something has a first literal meaning, for example, water cleanses; it gives us the experience of washing dirt away. Water can also carry a myriad of secondary meanings when evoked symbolically. For example, when Lady Macbeth committed murder, she walked around the palace acting as if she were washing her hands, for she was trying to wash away her guilt, trying to become clean once more. Her evil deed felt like stain, and she invoked water symbolically to take it away. This wasn't "mere" symbol, for Lady Macbeth's ghastly hand-washing told a stunning truth about the state of her mind and her soul, and told it powerfully. Washing with water (even without real water) mediates and symbolizes the secondary meaning of the attempt to wash guilt away, only because there was first the literal experience of water cleansing and washing dirt away.

Now, Shakespeare probably did not sit down and ask, "What symbol shall I use?" Hand-washing may well have shaped the character of Lady Macbeth for Shakespeare. True, some symbols are invoked after the fact. But some symbols belong to the heart of an experience when it arises as experience. Such symbols belong to the way that something comes to be a fact in the first place. These symbols mediate and actually help create our experience.

Ricoeur says that symbol works because there is some way in which the second symbolized meaning is really like the first literal meaning. Therefore, the first meaning is able to "give away" the second meaning. He makes a point that is very important for our sense of how sacraments mediate God's grace in our lives. Ricoeur says that someone has to "live in" the first meaning or the symbol can't communicate a second meaning. He

means that first meanings have to be part of the world we know well and understand immediately. The second or symbolic meaning, which participates in the first meaning, can't really occur without our understanding (especially buttressed by real experience) of the first meaning. There's no second meaning to give away if we do not understand the first meaning, that is, really "live in" it.

In their document *Art and Environment in Worship*, the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops (USCCB) says that sometimes, when liturgy isn't working well, the fault is not in God's availability, but that we have not handled well the symbolic structure essential to all good ritual. This is a profound truth. We are symbol makers. We may be many other things besides. But we are symbol makers, and that is how human beings encounter and/or create meaning. God is present to us in keeping with the natural ways that presence happens to and among human beings who just happen to be symbol makers.

Stated briefly, a sacrament's ability to mediate the experience of God is lessened whenever sacramentality is encumbered by weak symbolism. God's availability is not at stake, but our ability to access it is!

Presence

We tend to associate the experience of presence (and therefore the word presence) with some person, thing, or event close to us in space and time. But our families who shaped our being over years and years and years are more present to who we really are than 50 people close to me in a room who I am meeting for the first time. The French philosopher Gabriel Marcel says that presence corresponds to whatever has a hold on our being, whatever has effects on us. What is most important, perhaps, is not the difference between absence and presence (for God's gracious self-gift is always "there"), but what the Dutch theologian Edward Schillebeeckx calls "density" of presence: how much hold do we allow God to have on our becoming? Sacramentality gives God a hold on us through the symbolic process. This is, to be sure, actual presence and, thereby, actual grace. Again, presence names whatever exercises any kind of hold on our becoming as community and as individuals; sacramentality names our world's capacity to mediate God's presence.

Symbols and Society

Symbols are at the very heart of human community. People's dealing with one another in a group, whether it be a family or a neighborhood or the church, is rooted in their communication with one another. The character and depth of any community's life depends upon the sharing of ideas, interests, hopes, and goals that takes place through various means of communication. All communication occurs through the use of symbols, whether that be through language, gestures, art, or actions of various kinds. No wonder,

then, that intense interest in symbols has accompanied the modern growth in communications media.

That interest extends to the church, especially to the major developments in catechetical instruction and liturgical revival of the past few decades. For the church, a true community of believers and a community where Christians share their faith and their lives, symbols must be found that can enable such intimate sharing. To put it very simply, we need to learn how to truly talk and listen to one another. Actually, the key symbols, particularly the Eucharist and other sacramental rituals, are already part of the church's life, but we face the task (which is the principal objective of this course) of making these symbols function as effectively as possible in touching our consciousness and transforming our communities.

Signs and Symbols

Symbols are a distinctive kind of sign, and like all signs, they point beyond themselves. In being known, they tell us about something else as well. But unlike simple signs, they have greater "depth." A simple sign, like a notice posted on a bulletin board announcing a change in classrooms, conveys that message and nothing else. Signs tell us something, but they do not participate meaningfully in the reality that they signify. A "stop" sign, for example, tells us to stop, but it is not a "symbol" of stopping. In and of itself, it does not function as an entity decreasing its speed. Much of our conversation is this direct sign use of language ("it's a cold day today"), and our words have only denotation. This is the kind of communication in which we attempt to be as precise as possible, to search a dictionary to find the exact meaning of words. Of course, we do this because we seek clear and exact understanding of things.

However, reality is not always simple and clear, nor are our understandings of it. It is not that we are confused or ignorant, but there are many things for which we cannot find words. How do I console a close friend who has just lost a child in a tragic car accident? The words of a sympathy card are so completely inadequate as communication of my feelings. It is in this area of human sharing, where one is dealing with imagination, emotions, and personal relationships, that symbols function to signify with a richness of meaning that goes beyond definition. They participate in the reality that they signify. It is here that we reach for gestures like a hug or let our actions say what words by themselves cannot. A hug gives warmth and comfort as it symbolically communicates deeper emotions of warmth and comfort.

Natural and Conventional Symbols

Explanation of symbols usually distinguishes between symbolism that is rooted in the nature of things (in the causal relationship between things) and symbolisms that have

been agreed upon by people. These latter conventional symbols, for example, the US flag, do not in themselves carry the meaning they convey. The US flag would be quite meaningless to a person living in the sixteenth century, However, as conventional symbols become linked with people's experiences and memories, they are associated with the emotions and awareness those experiences evoked, and they acquire symbolic resonance. Natural symbols, on the other hand, do not depend upon any human agreement to acquire their significance; no one need tell me that frost on the window means that it is cold outdoors.

The kind of symbols we will be studying are mixed; they are events or things or persons whose natural significance is incorporated into a broader symbolism because of some human convention. In the United States, the eagle was adopted as the national bird to symbolize that nation's self-understanding and ideals, because it already signaled dominance, loftiness, and grandeur. The lion plays a similar role in Scotland and England. A drum in Africa richly symbolizes communication and celebration. While natural symbols require no explicit explanation (the experience of frosted window panes is enough to make the link with cold), mixed symbols require some explanation of the conventional meaning absorbing and transforming the natural symbol. We will see this at greater length when we study the Eucharist as a meal.

Effects of Symbol

Symbols affect our consciousness on several levels. Whereas abstract language touches only our rational understanding, symbols touch imagination, emotions, intuitions, and decision-making as well. Memory plays a major role because it preserves and then brings again to the surface the experiences that first created emotions and insights. But this role of memory can be ambivalent; memories can become distorted; persons and things can be given a false meaning, or memories can gradually fade, so the symbols linked with them can become empty and ineffective. That is why in communities such as the church, there is need for careful historical study to ensure the accurate remembrance of past happenings; rituals that engage people are needed to keep memories alive.

Symbolic Persons

Things and events can serve as symbols, but perhaps the symbolic reality most affecting people is other people. From infancy on, we encounter persons who have special meaning for us, who represent safety or threat, concern and understanding for us, achievements that inspire us. Being with such persons or reading about them stirs emotions in us that others do not, and sometimes leads us to actions we would not otherwise undertake. This is especially true of those who are truly heroic figures, who symbolize all that is best in human beings.

Clearly, this symbolism of persons is of great importance in Christianity, in which for two millennia Jesus of Nazareth has represented the epitome of human character and been the enduring object of imitation. Moreover, there have been countless women and men whom we call "saints," whose lives and persons have guided and inspired others. However, in the case of Jesus and of those who beyond this life are already sharing risen life, we are dealing with more than the symbolic power of history's great people. We are dealing with their presence to us, a presence that makes their symbolic impact immediate and much more powerful. That brings us back again to the topic of sacramentality.

Sacramentality = Meaning + Presence

"Sacramental," means more than merely "symbolic." It means that the divine saving activity takes place in the very symbolizing that occurs in human communication. Human words and gestures can, in certain contexts, function as special words of God. Because of this sacramentality, this distinctive meaning of some human use of symbols, God can become present to those who in faith are open to hearing this divine-to-human word. Karl Rahner, for one, has highlighted this sacramentality when he speaks of Christians as "hearers of the word."

We humans become present to one another as we use symbols, ordinarily language, to communicate. We are most present when the words or gestures have greater meaning, as when, for example, a person says to another "I love you." But some of this communication can go beyond making humans present to one another; it can make God present to them if the symbols being used include a "God meaning." This deepening of symbolism by God's presence is what we call "sacramentality." Sacramentality is difficult to understand because the divine presence is at the heart of the Christian mystery, at the heart of what we call "salvation." It is even more difficult to live in an awareness that our persons and our activities are sacramental.

Most importantly, of course, sacramentality has to do with God's self-giving revelation to humans. However, it does also have a major and positive impact on the way in which humans as individuals and as communities are valued. If human life is truly the "dwelling place" of God, if Emmanuel — "God with us" — truly names the presence of the divine in history, then women and men and children have an importance and ultimate value beyond what society can otherwise recognize. Moreover, this sacramentality of human life means that people's shared daily experience is a fundamental "word of God," and a starting point for profound theological reflection. While religious rituals are only part of this experience and do not by themselves absorb the notion of "sacrament," they should play a most important and essential role in highlighting and developing life's fundamental sacramentality.

Christian Sacramental Rituals

Human experience is basically sacramental because of the indwelling presence of God to all those who do not, explicitly or implicitly, reject it. Like all personal presence, this divine presence is grounded in open communication, honest openness on the part of the one "speaking" and openness in the hearer — God communicating unconditionally in Word (the risen Christ) and Spirit and humans receptive to this communication by their faith. However, on the human side, there is need for some external "words" that can make faith an experience that people share with one another and symbols that can transmit shared faith from generation to generation, that can allow faith awareness of divine presence to interact explicitly with the rest of life's meaning. This is the role of ritual.

Nature and Function of Ritual

Anthropological study of ritual has clarified, to a large extent, the manner in which a culture's rituals express, name, shape, and either reinforce or revise the basic elements of a people's life and culture. Rituals, when their symbolism is appreciated by those performing the rituals, are the "motors" of a culture. Because rituals are ceremonies whose pattern is formalized and repeated, they become familiar to people who can then participate in them with understanding. Because they are made up of word and gestures that remain much the same over time, new generations can be initiated into them at the same time that their meaning is explained. Rituals can then have a number of effects that create and strengthen community.

Ritual and Group Identity

It is in its rituals that a group discovers and accepts its identity and that individuals within the group discover their identity as members of the group. When families celebrate birthdays or weddings or gather for Thanksgiving dinner, there is a heightened awareness of what they mean to one another, how they bear not only the same name, but a common history. Not only is there increased understanding of what they are as a family, the celebration helps each of them accept more deeply their identity as a member of that family. In some instances, they may have been unwilling previously to accept that identity.

Neighborhoods find that, by celebrating block parties or gathering for parties in people's homes they have much in common; they are neighbors and think of themselves as such. On a broader scale, national celebrations like the Fourth of July remind people of their identity as citizens of this country and contribute to people proudly accepting that identity. By people gathering to say who they are, they reinforce the realization that that is who they are.

This is meant to apply also to Christians gathering for religious rituals like Baptism or the Eucharist. Every liturgical celebration is a profession of faith, a profession that is made in common, a public witness that they are Christians. Even when no words profess our faith explicitly, although usually there are such words in the liturgy, the very fact that these people have gathered for a sacramental ritual says that they identify themselves as Christian. Experience teaches us that such repeated ritual gatherings are needed for Catholics to continue thinking of themselves as such; when people drift away from participation in the Eucharist, their self-identification as Catholic begins to lessen.

Rituals Shape Communities

Rituals do more than declare a group's identity; they shape that identity because they shape the character of the group. Let us take an imaginary example. In St. Pertonilla's parish years ago, the women's spirituality group was a vibrant group, engaged in a number of activities that made a major contribution to the life of the parish. To ensure that activities were connected with the prayer life of the members, each week the group met for the recitation of the rosary. Praying the rosary together helped cement the bonds and the motivation within the group, and the women, as they gathered and prayed, were aware of being this active ministerial group. Over the years, the spirit of the women's spirituality group gradually dimmed; there was less and less activity and less contribution to the broader life of the parish. All that remained was the weekly recitation of the rosary. Now, however, this ritual was a different human experience. No longer did it express and nourish the ministerial involvement of the women. Instead, the identity of the women's group had changed so that now this weekly ritual had shaped them into simply a rosary reciting society. On the surface, the ritual of reciting the rosary remained the same, but the reality of the ritual was changed because the character of the group changed, and the ritual itself became part of shaping the group's new character.

Rituals Transmit Tradition

In any cultural group, family, or enduring human community, there is a group story, their history, which unites them and is part of their shared identity. Telling that story over and over again, passing on the traditions of the group, is central to their maintaining that identity. If the group is a community in which the members truly share with one another, the story told is not only a recollection of the past, but it also continues into and absorbs people's present life experiences. Tradition is not a dead memory; it is a force that gives meaning to the changed context of the present.

Naturally, this group story is told in many ways and on many occasions, but it is told most effectively in rituals, if those rituals act out in word and gesture the meaning that is at the heart of tradition. In genuine ritual, members of the group are not spectators or auditors; they do the ritual. They themselves are actors who express the group's inherited

wisdom, and as they do so, the ritual inevitably interacts with the meanings of their own lives. Later in this course, we will discuss this point in greater detail, but for now we can simply state that this is precisely the way in which the Eucharist as a ritual is meant to operate: as Christians gather for the Eucharistic liturgy, the meaning of life contained in the proclaimed gospel should interact with the ongoing meaning of the lives of those who are assembled and actively sharing in the ritual action. Eucharist is the primary instrument in the church's life for the transmission of Christian tradition.

Ritual and Group Relationships

Rituals express, create, reinforce, or change the relationships that exist among persons in the group. The rather elaborate rituals attending the inauguration of a US president formally and effectively change the relationship of that person to others in the country and empower him to exercise that relationship. Within families, the celebration of a wedding is a clear instance in which a ritual places persons in a new relationship — not just the couple to one another, but as a couple to the wider community. The precise way in which the ritual is celebrated, particularly when an accepted ritual is changed, makes for a different relationship. For example, after Vatican II, the altar at Eucharist was moved away from the back wall and, as a consequence, the ordained presider now faces the assembly. This makes for a very different relationship. The presider now can relate more personally with the people, is a part of the assembled community, and can actually join with them in praying.

Almost always involved in the ritual celebration of roles within a community is the matter of power. Even in something as simple as a family gathered around a table at Thanksgiving, there is a subtle statement of power if grandparents must always preside.

Again, the change in wedding vows in which "obey" has been dropped from "love, honor, and obey" reflects the recent shift in power alignments in the family. The ritual for the ordination of a bishop brings about a changed relationship of that person to others in the church: he is not only placed in an office, but also he is empowered to exercise it. Rituals function as a major source of order in any community, because it is through ritual celebrations that a community identifies and establishes the ever-changing relationships among the members of the group. Rituals celebrate and, thereby, interpret those aspects of human life that are most basic, enduring, and value-laden for those participating in (and not merely attending) the ritual.

Friendship as Basic Sacrament

Personal relationships, especially the various forms of friendship, are central in people's experience. In a Christian context, nothing is a more fundamental metaphor or sacrament of the divine than is human friendship. What meaning would be given a person

by the words “God loves you,” if that individual had never had the experience of loving or being loved?

It is in friendships that we are known by others as the person we are, and at the same time, it is when we most discover ourselves as persons. If one is a friend, I am able to communicate with her or him in a way that I cannot with a stranger or casual acquaintance. True community among people cannot exist unless it is rooted in friendship among persons; the level of community will depend on the extent of genuine friendship.

One can be minimally present to a stranger one greets with “Good morning” as he or she passes on the street, and somewhat more present to an acquaintance when, at a party, that person discusses the latest news. It is only with a friend, however, that one can share things that are really important, things that reveal who one is, for such sharing requires a degree of trust that can come only in friendship. Presence in the full sense can occur only when each person is truly for the other, when conversation is a self-giving, when there is genuine listening to another.

This experience of sharing life and oneself with friends mirrors the mystery of God’s friendship with humans as does nothing else in human life. But it does more than mirror, for it is in the exchange of love and concern which people have for one another that the divine love itself and divine presence occurs. Divine love, God’s own Spirit, empowers human love and gives it a person-creating and person-transforming effectiveness it could not otherwise have. That is why friendship is one most basic and important sacramental reality in human life.

Scripture is filled with reminders of this link between divine and human loving. When Jesus was asked, “What is the first of all the commandments?”, his response was, “‘You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your mind, and with all your strength.’ The second is this: ‘you shall love your neighbor as yourself’” (Mark 12:28, 30-31). Again, the first Epistle of John is unmistakably clear: “If a anyone says, I love God,” but hates his brother, he is a liar” (1 John 4:20). Finally, Jesus’ last parable, a symbolic description of the final judgment, ends with the words “. . . what you did not do for one of these least ones, you did not do for me” (Matt. 25:45).

Marriage as Sacrament

Truly, friendship is the basic sacrament, and within that broader experience of human love, a distinctive sacramental role is played by marriage and the family. In what is perhaps the clearest example of how ritual plays a role but is not the entire sacrament, the wedding ceremony does recognize publicly the relationship of the two persons and so establishes marriage as an effective social force. But the Christian sacrament is something more extensive; it is the two persons in committed relationship to one another, something

that is never fully realized, but remains in process throughout the shared life of the two persons.

Marriage has, of course, its public and social dimension. It places the couple in a perceptible situation in which their loving fidelity can be an exemplar of human relatedness. It grounds the family structure that is so essential to society as a whole and provides for the movement into adulthood of a new generation, and it provides a basic principle of regulation for human sexual behavior within a given culture. As a social institution, marriage has about it a certain either/or aspect: in the eyes of society, people are married or they are not.

However, on the more personal level — and so on the sacramental level — there is to marriage, especially to Christian marriage, a dimension of the more-or-less as well. Two persons are never completely wed to one another. Over the years, they are meant to become more deeply bonded, more firm in their fidelity, more intimate friends to one another. It is in their love for one another that God's presence happens (or at least is meant to happen) with increasing depth, for their growing openness to one another in friendship opens them also to God's Spirit. The indissolubility of their marriage is not just a matter of contractual permanence, it is more importantly the increasingly strong bond between them which makes the dissolution of the marriage inconceivable.

Human Experience as Sacramental

In somewhat similar fashion, all the major experiences of people's lives — growing into maturity and establishing one's individual identity, living together with inevitable conflict and the need for reconciliation, pain and suffering of all kinds and the need for healing, the inevitability of death and hope in life beyond — form the warp and woof of people's lives and create a need to find a meaning and purpose. Christian rituals, what we have ordinarily referred to as "the sacraments," are intended precisely to express and celebrate the meaning and ultimate purpose of human existence that has come with the life and dying and rising of Jesus of Nazareth.

As we will see in later chapters, a given sacrament, for example reconciliation, extends beyond the ritual and embraces the entire experience of reconciliation in people's lives. It is this broader sacramental reality, including the ritual that "gives grace," that is, transforms the meaning of persons' lives and thereby transforms them. However, the ritual has a distinctive and indispensable role; it invites believers into the Paschal Mystery, makes Christians aware of the new Christ-meaning to which they must assent, and it gives them an opportunity within community to embrace that meaning and the divine presence that roots it and then translate them into practical decisions and activity.

Early Christian Community Rituals

Almost instinctively, the earliest Christians, after Jesus' resurrection, gathered together in small communities, some of them recognizable as "house churches," to remember their Master, to share with one another the new approach to life that was theirs, and, above all, to express their gratitude to Jesus' "Abba" for what had happened in Jesus as the Christ. Because these worshipful gatherings took place regularly and soon acquired a common shape, they very quickly developed into the ritual meals that were the earliest form of the Christian ritual of Eucharist. At the same time, entry of new members into the Christian community required some public recognition; the basic ritual of baptizing was adopted from Judaism, but given its distinctive Christian meaning of initiation into the mystery of Christ.

Although existing as everyday practices from the beginning of the Christian community, supporting the sick, healing alienation within the communities or of individuals with God, and the marriage of Christians received no distinctive *ritual* expression. That would gradually come later. However, one can notice in the Gospel of Matthew, around the year 85 CE, the beginnings of a patterned reconciliation of sinners to the community and thereby to God. Jesus is described as speaking to his disciples and giving them a procedure for reconciliation. This procedure involves a series of steps: Try first an individual admonition; hopefully the sinner will listen, amend his or her ways, and you will have won back the sinner. If however, the person is recalcitrant, let a delegation of two or three admonish that person, and see if that will lead to reconciliation. If that is not successful let the whole community become involved in the attempt at conversion and reconciliation. Only then, if the sinner remains obdurate, is that person to be considered alienated from the community, "let him be like a heathen or a publican" (Matt. 18:18). No doubt, the need to deal with sinful behavior that was disruptive to the community arose very early and almost inevitably; the Matthean passage reflects the community's attempts to deal with the situation. By the second century, this led to a more formal ritual of reconciliation.

Ordination as a ritual recognition of ministerial charisms emerged early. Such recognition would have been necessary to maintain an orderly exercise of governance in the communities, but there is no clear historical evidence of formal ordination until well into the second century. The earliest indication of such recognition, though not yet clearly in the form of a community ritual, occurs in the Pastoral Epistles that date from the first half of the second century. In the First Letter to Timothy, the disciple of Paul is exhorted to be mindful of the gift that was given him when the council of presbyters laid their hands on him. The text clearly points to the existence in at least some communities of a designated group of elders (presbyters), and it mentions very briefly a ritual by which, in prophetic blessing, they laid their hands on him (1 Tim. 4:14). This admonition is repeated in the Second Letter to Timothy (2 Tim. 1:6), though here it is Paul who is described as laying

hands on Timothy. What is not clear in either passage is whether the gift referred to in the passages is the charism of governance and leadership or the charism of prophecy.

What is clear is that this "laying on of hands" is closely associated with the Holy Spirit. Even earlier, the Acts of the Apostles (sometime around the year 80 CE) describes the scene in which the leaders of the church of Antioch, under the direction of the Holy Spirit, laid their hands on Paul and Barnabas as they commissioned them for their apostolic journey (Acts 13:3). In this passage, the more general use of the gesture of blessing, the laying on of hands, is indicated, but that gesture rather quickly became the heart of a ritual of ordination.

Close Link in Early Christianity of Ritual and Life

What is relatively clear from historical witness is that, in the earliest Christian decades, there was little, if any, separation of rituals from the rest of Christians' lives. Most likely, what later came to be seen as "religious rituals" were viewed as part and parcel of the daily reality of living as Christians. Indeed, one wonders if these earliest Christians even thought of themselves as involved in a new religion, or whether instead they thought of Christianity as a new way of being human, a fullness of life, one that certainly involved public rituals, but that also embraced the entirety of life.

Today, we are recovering some of that early Christian outlook; we are realizing once again that "sacramentality" is not confined to discrete ritual moments, but imbues people's whole existence. However, we are not simply going back to those early decades in our outlook or in our activity; even if that were desirable, which it is not, it is impossible. Instead, we are learning from those early days even as we learn from the two millennia that have since passed. What those two thousand years represent is both an enrichment and clarification of the church's sacramental life.

Historical Evolution of Sacramental Rituals

In the following chapters, we will spell out in greater detail this relationship of Christian rituals, particularly the public rituals we refer to as "liturgy," to Christians' lives and saving role in history. What must be kept in mind as we do this is that, throughout those centuries, a central current of continuity endured, a continuity that basically concerned the rituals making believers present to the Paschal Mystery, and recalling and proclaiming the gospel of God's salvation in Jesus as the Christ. Yet Christian rituals have not been static and rigidly unchanging, even though it is the nature of ritual to be conservative.

Diversity of cultures and the ongoing course of history have both altered sacramental rituals, sometimes in quite drastic ways. One of the more obvious changes is

that of the ritual for reconciliation of sinners. For centuries, the formal reconciliation ritual (called the *exomologesis*) dealt only with major offenses (murder, apostasy, idolatry, and adultery). In those instances, after the guilty party admitted the sin before the community, or at least to the community's leader, a stiff penance lasting several years was imposed. During that period of penance, the sinner was denied full access to the community's life and Eucharistic celebration. Only when the penance was completed was there a solemn ritual of reconciliation, presided over by the community's leader, in which the sinner was readmitted to full Christian community. In the early Middle Ages, however, a different discipline of reconciliation gradually became dominant, one in which a penitent confessed sins to a confessor who then granted absolution and imposed a penance. By the twelfth century, this ritual of "going to confession" had completely replaced the earlier *exomologesis*.

Baptism and Eucharist, Continuity amid Change

Over the centuries, two sacramental rituals maintained a clear continuity of ritual: Baptism and Eucharist. However, noticeable changes occurred over the centuries. In the West, the original liturgy of Christian initiation included baptism, multiple chrismations, and celebration of Eucharist as one ceremony by which a neophyte became a Christian. Gradually these were delayed and separated from one another and eventually split into two rituals, forming the rites of of Baptism and Confirmation. With the establishment of Christianity as the official religion of the Roman Empire at the end of the fourth century, baptizing infants rather than adults eventually became the common practice of the church, changing the timing and order of these rites of initiation. Today's RCIA (Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults) retrieves and re-animates the adult catechumenate from the early church practices, and provides a parallel model to the ongoing practice of infant baptism.

Gradually over the centuries, the ceremonies of Eucharist, especially episcopal liturgies, became more extended and ornate, so that by the Middle Ages, the simpler meal structure of the ritual tended to be obscured. In addition, increasing focus on the consecration of the elements took away from the unity and centrality of the Eucharistic prayer as a whole. Besides, the widespread practice of private Masses from the early Middle Ages onward shifted ritual attention from the community as a whole to the role of the ordained celebrant and the Eucharistic species.

Today, we are witnessing yet another shift in the sacramental rituals of the Christian churches, perhaps most noticeably in the Catholic Church. Influenced by historical study of liturgy and scholarly study of the New Testament, official decisions and pastoral practice have, since Vatican II, opened up the church to renewal in liturgical practice. This has not represented any abandonment of tradition; rather, it has been largely a matter of regaining some of the more deeply traditional insights into sacramental liturgy. Fleshing out this process of continuity and discontinuity in the sacramental life of the church will be the task of the next few chapters.

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