

Signs as Symbols: Towards Understanding the Sacraments

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Abstract

Lumen Gentium calls the Church “the universal sacrament of salvation.” But the “sacrament” is a sign! Effectively then, the Church is a “sign” of the World’s salvation. In this same Church, signs are never in short supply, from the magnificent ancient art of the Roman world to the Medieval painting and sculpting brilliance of Michelangelo. Catholic Churches are adorned with signs that are pleasant to the eyes and beautiful to behold, which evoke reverence and adoration from the pious and the devout. Even tourists are left enchanted at the marvel of such signs. What do these signs mean for the Church? Statues, and paintings, and artifacts abound, of our Blessed Lord, the Virgin Mary, and the Saints. But there are signs of a special kind, which are celebrated in the Church and which since the time of Peter Lombard have been streamlined to seven. These signs form the fulcrum of the life of worship of the Christian Church. This paper is an introduction to these signs in respect of their uniqueness and their special status as symbols.

Introduction

Both signs and symbols transmit meaning. A study of the sacraments as signs and symbols, is a journey into a profound understanding of not just what these concepts represent, but the various forms of meaning they convey, in relation to the sacraments, and their role in our salvation economy. The sacraments are called signs, and have variously been defined as such, and such definitions hold sway even to this day, like the famous Augustinian definition of the sacraments as outward sign of inward grace. But in a more profound sense, the sacraments are not just signs but symbols. What does this mean? This discourse shall look at the various definitions of both signs and symbols, the biblical usage of signs and symbols; the fathers’; medieval perspectives and Aquinas; and contemporary outlook.

What is a Sign?

A sign is “that by which a thing is made known or represented; that which furnishes evidence; a mark; a token; an indication; a proof.” In the second instance “something serving to indicate the existence, or preserve the memory, of a thing; a token; a memorial; a monument.” And then any emblem which prefigures, typifies, or represents, an idea; a type; hence sometime a picture.” For Bernard Cooke, “signs are that kind of reality, which in being

themselves known lead us to know about something beyond themselves. Smoke functions naturally as a sign, because ‘where there is smoke, there’s fire.’ So too, water often naturally functions as a sign of death; if a friend of mine dives into a lake and after some time has not surfaced, the meaning is unavoidable” (45). Humans have used a lot of signs to convey meaning and/or even intentions from one consciousness to another. But signs are known for their conventional use of pointing to something else or some meaning, and this is “grounded in agreement or convention” (Cooke 45). For Lawler a sign suggests, indicates, and announces its meaning (14). Commenting on Aquinas, he maintains that “sacraments are signs: signs of Christ’s saving action, signs of grace, signs of glory” (34). And Piault submits that “a sacrament is a sign before it is an encounter with Christ and God” (87). But the sacrament is a sign, it is however “not a simple sign, and its meanings are not simple meanings. It is rather a specialised kind of sign called symbol” (Lawler 54).

What is a Symbol?

A symbol is generally defined as a sign included in the idea it represents. Thus, a symbol participates/shares in the reality it points to. Lawler isolates four points for understanding a symbol from his paraphrase of Ernst Cassirer’s work, “a sensible thing or action, which on the physical level is merely a sensible reality, and on the human level is a symbol connoting conceptual meaning; a relation this sensible reality–symbol. And this meaning which is perceived by; a human subject who account of these meanings when faced with this symbol” (Lawler 14). In a different guise, he maintains that “the meaning of a symbol is not grasped with exact scientific precision; it is vague but insistent” (13). While being signs, symbols are signs in a deeper sense. “A symbol points to something relatively unknown and therefore mysterious but postulated as existing. A sign communicates abstract objective meaning whereas a symbol communicates living, subjective meaning” (Lawler 18–19).

A symbolic representation of the sacrament may drive this point home because sacraments are also symbols of reality. “The word ‘symbol’ has a very wide use, but what seems to be essential is that when we speak of symbols, we are visualising a situation in which one thing stands for another thing and throws some light on some aspect of that other thing” (Macquarrie 23). Thus, in a sacrament “there is something visible, this may be a substance such as water or bread or wine or oil, or it may be some kind of ceremonial action such as laying on of hands. But these visible signs are normally accompanied by words. The words help to interpret the visible signs and together the words and signs direct our attention to the invisible realities which constitute the heart of the sacrament” (Macquarrie 24).

Cooke maintains that “all symbols (whether words or other symbols) can be classified as signs. Signs that are a kind of reality which in being themselves known, lead us to know about something beyond themselves” (45). But symbols go beyond signs because of the rich consciousness they

effect. Not only do they impart information and understanding, but they also touch our imaginations, emotions, desires, and loves, and they affect our decisions and activity. Accordingly, symbols have the power to resonate with deeper levels of our consciousness (Cooke 46). Through symbols then we know. Symbols are a way of knowing, but the knowledge communicated through symbols are not objectively defined and detailed, but subjective and a bit confused. Hence, knowledge resulting from symbols seems vague and opaque. Not because it is empty of meaning but because the meaning communicated through symbols in its depth, is unfathomable. “A human mind can never get to the bottom of it, a true symbol must be lived into, that is how its meaning is to be found” (Lawler 19).

Differences between Signs and Symbols

- A sign represents a thing on a one-to-one basis, a symbol on a one-to-many basis.
- Signs do not need reflection; symbols require further reflection for clarification.
- Simple signs announce what they signify, symbols make concretely present what they symbolise.
- Religious symbols particularly, participate in the reality they symbolise, signs do not.
- A sign points to a known thing, a symbol points to something relatively unknown and therefore mysterious.
- A symbol is known for its versatility and not uniformity as with signs, a symbol is not rigid or inflexible but mobile.
- Symbols make present what they signify, signs only point to, they don't make present.
- A symbol points beyond itself—God is light!
- A symbol opens up new levels of reality.
- Symbols bring transcendence within the range of human understanding.
- A symbol is implicit rather than explicit (Lawler 9–51, Macquarrie 30-33).

Sacrament: Definition

A Sacrament is from the Latin *Sacramentum* which translates the Greek *Mysterion*. *Sacramentum* referred to a military oath of fidelity taken by all soldiers, and in an extended sense to mean all oaths in general. Important here is that both the oath and the soldier under oath were seen as consecrated to the gods (Lawler 31). Its Greek variant meant a secret. From the meaning secret, it refers to what is put aside, kept secret, or forbidden. “Extending this meaning, *mysterion* came to be used for religious initiations whose secret must be kept; it was forbidden in fact, for meaning of rites to be disclosed to non-initiates” (Piault 41). *Mysterion* came to be understood in three different senses, God's secret about men's salvation is hidden in dream, name, or in

action not yet manifested (Piault 41). Lawler posits that such use of *mysterion* has persisted in both testaments of the bible. “In the book of Daniel, *mysterion* refers simultaneously to the plan of God for the end times and some revelation of this plan. In Paul, *mysterion* refers to the divine plan to save all people in Christ, a plan determined by God from the beginning and kept secret, but now revealed through the Spirit, through the prophets, through the apostles...this *mysterion* is made known to those of mature faith...because only those who are spiritual, spirit filled, accept the knowledge which the Spirit gives” (29). It was not until the third century that the Alexandrians, Clement, and Origen, began adaptation of mystery language to Christian ritual practice, given their knowledge of both Neo-Platonism and Gnosticism from where they borrowed those usages. Thus, with them, *mysterion* came to expressly applied to Christian rituals. But even in this new sense *mysterion* retained its biblical meanings and acquired new cultural and philosophical ones (Lawler 30–31). *Sacramentum* as stated earlier, was not a theological invention, it was in common use. But, since it translates the Greek *mysterion*, naturally disposes it to theology. “It is, therefore, to be understood in the sense of a secret which is revealed in part” (Lawler 31). Tertullian, a Church Father of the third century is credited to being the first to use the word *Sacramentum* for both baptism and the Eucharist, referring to them as being analogous to a soldiers’ oath. As a soldier takes the oath of loyalty to his commander and thereby becomes consecrated, so in baptism the Christians pledges his allegiance to Christ, and he is thereby consecrated to Christ and his God (Lawler 31).

Biblical Doctrine of Signs and Symbols

Jeremiah presents an action that will pass in modern parlance for a prophetic symbol. Jeremiah buys a porter’s flask, destroys it before a shocked assembly and prophetically proclaims what he is doing, “thus says the Lord, thus I will break this people and this city...so that it is never mended” (Jer. 19.11). Ezekiel similarly carries a brick, draws a city on it, and siege works round the city, and then lays siege to the city, and proclaims that this city is “even Jerusalem” (Ez. 4.1). And his action is a sign for the house of Israel (Ez. 4.3). The same prophet using a sharp sword, shaves his hair, then divides it into three bundles, he burns one, scatters another to the wind, and the third he carries around Jerusalem while shredding it all the more with the sword. To explain his action, he says “this is Jerusalem” (Ez. 5.5). In the New Testament, Agabus the prophet, takes Paul’s belt, ties his hands and feet with it, and explains it thus, “so shall the Jews at Jerusalem bind the man who own this belt and deliver him into the hands of the gentiles” (Acts 21.11).

Each prophet explains the meaning of his own action to his people, which also explains for us the meaning of a prophetic symbol. As Jeremiah dashes his pot to the ground and scatters it into pieces, as Ezekiel cuts and burns and scatters and shreds his hair, so God will dash and scatter and burn and shred Jerusalem for its faithlessness. As

Agabus binds his hands and feet, so will the Jews in Jerusalem bind Paul's hands and feet and deliver him into captivity. The prophetic action, which I am calling prophetic symbol, is a human action which proclaims and celebrates in representation the action of God (Lawler 5).

The meaning conveyed in Jeremiah is the shattering of Jerusalem, and that in Ezekiel is the same. The captivity of Paul in Agabus is seen as the will of God. These prophetic actions are representative symbols.

Such representations were not limited to these prophets alone. Israel itself was presented as a prophet and did perform some prophetic symbolic actions, like the celebration of the Passover (Ex. 12.14). This Jesus will replace with the sacrifice of himself in the New Testament feast of the Passover. Such that instead of all the explanation that goes with the bread of affliction of the Exodus, Jesus took the bread and said, "this is my body which is given up for you, do this in remembrance of me" (I Cor. 11.23–24, Mt. 26.26, Mk. 14.22, Lk. 22.19). Thus, Christ's use of the word body at the last supper, signifies his entire self, and the same could be said of the chalice. In point of fact, to the first century Jew, "this is my body" meant "this is me" (Lawler 7). What could be more symbolic or representative?

Similarly, the bible is not silent on signs. As earlier observed, the word that would designate the Latin *sacramentum*, is the Greek *mysterion*. In the OT it is used about 30 times. In its use, it always conveys an aspect of hiddenness, especially regarding the unfolding plan of God for salvation. Wisdom uses it to show that God's knowledge is hidden from the wicked (Wis. 2.22, 6.2). Same word is applied in Nebuchadnezzar's cryptic dream (Dan. 2.18–19, 21–22, 28) (Nutt 51).

In the NT, Jesus uses *mysterion* to identify the hidden knowledge of the Kingdom of God, which the disciples were privileged to know but not the outsiders (Mk. 4.11). Paul uses it severally in his epistles to show the way God's hidden plan of salvation manifests in Christ (Eph. 1.9–10). In a "blockbuster" example Paul uses *mysterion* in the context of marriage between a husband and a wife (Eph. 5.32). Of the use of *mysterion* in the NT, it must be said "that God's hidden or mysterious plan of salvation, is unfolded through events or mysteries that have both a visible, and an invisible dimension. This 'sacramental economy' or plan of salvation culminates in the visible incarnation of the Word, who is himself a *mysterion* of the presence of the kingdom of God on earth" (Nutt 51–52).

There is more profound theological connection between the biblical use of *mysterion-sacramentum*, and the sacraments of the Church. Paul for instance speaks of his office as that of a minister of God's word, and of the mystery of God's plan and goes on to extend the meaning of mystery to the reality of Christian's participation "in Christ" (Col 1.24–29). The sacraments stand as the meeting point between the *mysterion*, and the life of the Christian *in Christ*. Thus, baptism becomes the insertion of the Christian into Christian

life, “for in Christ Jesus you are all sons of God through faith...” (Gal. 3.26–27). In the same way Paul develops this theme concerning the Eucharist (I Cor. 10.16–17). The Christian lives in Christ as member of his body as an effect of his participation in Christ, by means of his presence in the Eucharist. “The blessing cup that we bless, is it not a participation in the blood of Christ...because there is one bread, we who are many are one body, for we all partake of the one bread” (I Cor. 10.16–17).

The fourth gospel brings a very unique insight to the understanding of signs as symbols. “Indeed, the declaration that the ‘word was made flesh,’ is sacramental in a fundamental sense” (Nutt 53). John in a distinct way presents the story of the Word made flesh, centred around seven dynamic miracles which he calls “signs”: the Cana wedding, three healings, walking on water, the multiplication of loaves and the raising of Lazarus. The power operative in the seven sacraments can be likened to the “signs” of Jesus in John’s gospel. These signs will help believers see the dynamic sacramental connection that exists between the signs of Jesus, the Church, and the sacraments. “The hidden mystery of God’s plan of salvation is, therefore made manifest and brought to completion in Christ. This mystery extended through history in the Church, in which Christ’s members are joined to his saving mystery through the sacraments” (Nutt 54).

Sacraments as Signs in Tertullian, Augustine, and Beyond

As earlier presented, “Clement and Origen opened the way for the application of mystery terminology to Christian rituals, and by the fourth and fifth centuries, the use of mystery language was fully established” (Lawler 30). It was also earlier observed that “Tertullian, who lived in the third century, is the first to use the word *sacramentum* for both baptism and the Eucharist” (Lawler 31). Piault quotes Tertullian who,

Started from the classical meaning of “military oath,” *sacramentum militia*. He applied it to baptism, which is supremely an *engagement* and an *oath*, for in it, idolatry is renounced for the service of Jesus Christ, since it involves engagement in a new life the ‘sacrament’ requires initiation analogous to that of the military oath. Lastly the word acquired the idea of *mystery*: the sacred realities of the faith are contained in it. Thus, we are led from the rite of initiation to the thing itself and to the practice of a way of life (Piault 43–44).

What the sacrament embodies produces spiritual effects, a faith to be confessed, a doctrine to be believed, an engagement to follow a new way of life and a discipline that is derived from the sacred reality that has been given/received (Piault 44).

Cyprian of Carthage also of the third century, followed Tertullian’s derivative definition from oath, concentrating more on the rite as producing grace, while bringing one of Christ’s mysteries to mind. In Hilary of Poitiers,

the sacrament is a sign productive of grace and spiritual effects, baptism procuring a new birth, and Eucharist the unity of the Church. Ambrose of Milan names sacrament as all the feasts of the Christian religion, truth of belief and the sacred rites. Leo the Great sums up the ambiguity surrounding the word sacrament when he said, “that which was visible in our Redeemer has passed over into the mysteries.” Thus, the Redeemer remains visible to us in the rites of the Church, which for Leo are the feasts of the Church, and in these rites, he communicates the mystery of his invisible and manifold grace (Piault 44).

St. Augustine’s contribution to this discourse is of paramount importance. It was he who developed a “philosophy of sign.” Consequently, he envisages the sacraments of the Church as signs; “If all the sacred signs used by the Church are considered, their number is infinite, but only a few can be counted as of maximum importance. All of them, however, are channels of divine realities and they all share a common purpose, that of uniting men together and with the sacred mystery to which they refer: belief in Christ whom they manifest” (Piault 46). Lawler maintains that it is Augustine who sowed the seeds of certain doctrinal elements, which will be used in the subsequent development of the precise and technical definition of sacrament (31). Augustine’s major contribution to sacramental theory is his definition of the sacrament as a “sacred sign.” Sign and what it signifies are related in various ways, in the sense of what is seen and what is believed, what is seen and what is understood, what is seen and what it is. “What is signified is effected by Christ and the Spirit. Water is the eternal sacrament of grace, the spirit effects inner grace. A man baptizes and Christ baptizes, washes and cleanses. It is this efficacy worked by Christ and Christ’s Spirit that separates a *sacramentum-mysterium*, from mere figures and symbols, a sacrament is an efficacious sign” (Lawler 32).

Lawler is quick to point out that Augustine never defined sacrament in the precise terms of later manuals and catechisms, and also never included efficacy in his own definition. Nutt gives Augustine’s definition this way; “the word ‘sacrament,’ therefore, identifies a sign given by God for a sacred purpose. In a famous passage in the *City of God*, Augustine joins a ‘sacrament’ and ‘sacred sign’ into an overlapping definition of a common reality: ‘a visible sacrifice,’ Augustine explains, is ‘the *sacramentum*’ of an invisible sacrifice, that is a sacred sign (*sacrum signum*)” (59). Nutt avers that Augustine in his presentation of signs that are appropriated by God for sacred purposes, did not just transpose his philosophical doctrine of sign into Christian tradition. Rather his understanding of scripture and of Church practices, led him to an understanding of, “a category of specifically sacred signs that had been revealed and that this revealed doctrine was the foundation for the practice of the Church” (59–60).

After Augustine, there was little in terms of development on the notion of sacrament. But by the 7th century, Isidore of Seville, came up with a definition of sacrament, not in terms of signs as in Augustine, but in the

category of secret, and sacred power concealed under visible actions. This definition gave birth to an understanding of the sacrament as a vessel of grace. By this understanding, all Christian mysteries will pass for sacraments. For centuries, this definition held sway and prevailed over Augustine's. It only came to an end in the 11th century, when Berengar of Tours, revived and appealed to the Augustinian definitions, to sustain his theory of the Eucharist (Lawler 32–33). Lawler states Berengar's position as follows: "A sacrament is a sacred sign. But a sign is not the thing signified; the symbol is not the thing symbolized; the sacrament is not the reality. The Eucharist, therefore, the sacrament of the body of Christ, is not the true body of Christ" (33). This position precipitated controversy concerning Berengar's misuse of Augustine. Despite the controversy however, this position prevailed over Isidore's and will gradually pave way for a more precise and technical definition of sacrament.

Lawler gives this summation, the first definition is a derivative from Augustine's presentation, "a sacrament is a visible form of invisible grace." Abelard in keeping with the "sign" of sacrament altered the formula to read as, "the visible sign of invisible grace." Hugh of St. Victor gave the first precise definition of a sacrament as "a sign of sacred thing... because by a visible reality seen externally, another invisible, interior reality is signified...while a sign can signify a thing but not confer it, a sacrament not only signifies but efficaciously confers. A sacrament simultaneously signifies by institution, represents by similitude, and confers by sanctification" (33). With this the search for a definition for a sacrament has come to an end, what remains now is what are those signs that can properly be called sacraments (Lawler 33).

Macquarrie maintains that Peter Lombard in his *Sentences*, taught the seven sacraments as we have them today, marriage being the last to make the list, and this teaching was ratified by the council of Trent in 1546 (44). Aquinas will also lend credence to the specification of the number of sacraments as seven:

We may likewise gather the number of the sacraments from their being instituted as a remedy against the defect caused by sin. For Baptism is intended as a remedy against the absence of spiritual life; Confirmation, against the infirmity of soul found in those of recent birth; the Eucharist, against the soul's proneness to sin; Penance, against actual sin committed after baptism; Extreme Unction, against the remainders of sins—of those sins, namely, which are not sufficiently removed by Penance, whether through negligence or through ignorance; Order, against divisions in the community; Matrimony, as a remedy against concupiscence in the individual, and against the decrease in numbers that results from death (ST. III, 65, 1).

St. Thomas Aquinas on Signs and Sacraments

Aquinas treats his understanding of signs as they relate to the sacraments in Question 60, of the third part of his *Summa Theologiae*. In response to whether the sacrament is a kind of sign, he declares:

A thing may be called a “sacrament,” either from having a certain hidden sanctity, and in this sense a sacrament is a “sacred secret”; or from having some relationship to this sanctity, which relationship may be that of a cause, or of a sign or of any other relation. But now we are speaking of sacraments in a special sense, as implying the habitude of sign: and in this way a sacrament is a kind of sign (ST. III, 60, 1).

Not every sign however is a sacrament, but “Signs are given to men, to whom it is proper to discover the unknown by means of the known. Consequently, a sacrament properly so called is that which is the sign of some sacred thing pertaining to man; so that properly speaking, a sacrament, as considered by us now, is defined as being the ‘sign of a holy thing so far as it makes men holy.’” (ST. III, 60, 2). As such, for Aquinas a sacrament is not just a singular sign but,

Properly speaking is that which is ordained to signify our sanctification. In which three things may be considered; viz. the very cause of our sanctification, which is Christ’s passion; the form of our sanctification, which is grace and the virtues; and the ultimate end of our sanctification, which is eternal life. And all these are signified by the sacraments. Consequently, a sacrament is a sign that is both a reminder of the past, i.e. the passion of Christ; and an indication of that which is effected in us by Christ’s passion, i.e. grace; and a prognostic, that is, a foretelling of future glory (ST. III, 60, 3).

The idea that the sacraments effect what they signify has been consistent in catholic tradition, “sacraments effect what they signify, cause, by signifying, are efficacious signs of grace” (Lawler 34). Aquinas has specified as we have it above the different causes of man’s sanctification. Passion of Christ, grace, and eternal life. So too words are important in sacramental signification, and Aquinas gives this detailed threefold explanation for this:

...and in each way, it is fitting for words to be added to the sensible signs. For in the first place, they can be considered in regard to the cause of sanctification, which is the Word incarnate: to whom the sacrament has a certain conformity, in that the word is joined to the sensible sign, just as in the mystery of Incarnation the Word of God is united to sensible flesh. Secondly, sacraments may be considered on the part of man who is sanctified, and who is composed of soul and body: to whom the sacramental remedy is adjusted, since it touches

the body through the sensible element, and the soul through faith in the words. Thirdly, a sacrament may be considered on the part of the sacramental signification. ...because words can be formed in various ways for the purpose of signifying various mental concepts, so that we are able to express our thoughts with greater distinctness by means of words. And therefore, in order to ensure the perfection of sacramental signification it was necessary to determine the signification of the sensible things by means of certain words. For water may signify both a cleansing by reason of its humidity, and refreshment by reason of its being cool: but when we say, "I baptize thee," it is clear that we use water in baptism in order to signify a spiritual cleansing (ST. III, 60, 6).

To do justice to our study of the sacraments we must keep in mind that as realities the sacraments are always signs. "The holiness that they effect is and through their signification, so to appreciate the sacraments and their sanctifying effects, an awareness that the sacraments are unique signs instituted to confer holiness through their signification must be preserved" (Nutt 65).

Signs as Symbols: Sacraments, Signs, and Symbols in the Church Today

The data of history shows that "there has never been a religion, pagan or otherwise, that did not use material signs, rites wherewith to approach God" (Piault 10). In this wise, Joseph Martos identified various rites, and rituals used by different peoples across the world, like water rituals, initiation rites, rituals meals, ritual sacrifices, atonement rituals, healing rituals, marriage rituals, funeral rituals, ordination rituals and many others, these he likened to the sacraments whether they are called sacraments by those who practised them or not (11–16). In the same work Martos observed that:

The most important of these features is that sacraments in all religions function as "doors to the sacred," that is, as invitations to religious experiences... having such experience is like entering another dimension of space and time and discovering a whole new world of meaning. The space is sacred space, the time is sacred time, the meaning is sacred meaning...but the experience as a human experience is objectively real (7).

Clearly then, we see the import of signs or physical realities in our cultural realities and exigencies. In contemporary catholic theology, the sacraments are not only actions of Christ but also of God and the Church. the action of God is mediated in human history through his gamut of visible intermediaries, in the first place, he sent Jesus Christ his son, his only begotten son, and thus the son could say, he who has seen me has seen the father (Jn. 14.9), and also through his Church, a communion of all who believe (I Cor.

6.12-20, 10.17, Rom. 12.4-5), and finally, through those solemn ritual actions of the Church we know today as sacraments. “The sacramental tradition is more than human symbolic tradition extended to the religious sphere” (Lawler 46). This then brings home the reality of fusion that rests with a sacrament.

In the sacrament there is usually a fusion of the verbal and known verbal... and from the ways in which words and actions are combined. In a typical sacrament, there is something visible. This may be a substance, such as water, or bread or wine or oil, or it may be some kind of ceremonial action, such as laying on of hands, but these visible signs are accompanied by words. The words help to interpret the visible signs, and together words and signs help to direct our attention to the invisible realities which constitute the heart of the sacrament (Macquarrie 24).

Consequently, in the sacraments, faith makes the symbols known and understood, and through them unites men to Christ. There is no part in the mystery of the sacraments that is not faith bound, faith alone teaches the initiate to understand and interpret all the signs/symbols. Sacraments remain “tangible signs that produce various effects all of which are signified in some way in the very nature of the sign itself” (Piault 60).

Necessity of the Sacraments

Vatican II makes it clear that the purpose of the sacraments is to “sanctify men, to build up the body of Christ, and finally to give worship to God; because they are signs, they also instruct, they do not only presuppose faith, but by words and objects, they also nourish, strengthen and express it; that is why they are called sacraments of faith” (Flannery SC 59). We need the sacraments because through them grace is symbolically-mediated to all believers, the Church teaches as follows; “There is only one ‘salvific economy,’ of the One and Triune God, realised in the mystery of the incarnation, death and resurrection of the son of God, actualized with the cooperation of the Holy Spirit, and extended in its salvific value to all humanity and to the entire universe: no one therefore can enter into communion with God except through Christ by the working of the Holy Spirit” (Nutt 91–92).

This said, the working of God’s power is not just limited to the sacraments, for all men are called to the fold of those who believe. Again, the necessity of the sacrament is not the result of some misguided Christian exclusivity, on the contrary God’s love for all people is the impetus for the Church’s mission drive, and this mercy of God is available in the sacraments. By this same mercy “God has blessed the Church with his sacraments that integrate people into the communion of the Church to which they are called and illumine them with the inner light of grace: the seven sacraments are the

signs and instruments ...by which the Holy Spirit spreads the grace of Christ the head throughout the Church which is his body” (Nutt 92–93).

Taking up the issue of the necessity of the Sacraments, Aquinas is quick to point out that such necessity does not negate the sufficiency of the incarnation and the paschal mystery; “Christ’s passion is the sufficient cause of man’s salvation. But it does not follow that the sacraments are not also necessary for that purpose: because they obtain their effect through the power of Christ’s passion; and Christ’s passion is so to say applied to man through the sacraments...all we who are baptized in Christ, are baptized into His death” (Nutt 94).

The sacraments are necessary also “because they are means by which those who are temporarily separated from Christ’s life, death and resurrection can encounter him. The sacramental signs are not in competition with Christ’s saving work; rather through them the faithful are incorporated into Christ’s saving mission” (Nutt 94). For Aquinas, God himself gave an indication of the sacraments by the incarnation of his son, because “human beings are led to higher spiritual things through the senses, divine wisdom fittingly provides man with means of salvation in the shape of corporeal and sensible signs that are called sacraments” (Nutt 94).

Using man’s inclination to idolatry, materialism, superstition, and false worship, Aquinas opines, so that it should not be too hard for man to be drawn away entirely from bodily actions, bodily exercise was given to him in the sacrament. “In short, in his love and wisdom, God bestows salvation on humanity through the sacraments in a way that corresponds perfectly to its fallen nature and deepest spiritual needs” (Nutt 95).

Again, a second look at salvation history lends credence to the necessity of the sacraments, “God does not bestow salvation abstractly, original sin is a state of existence lacking divine intimacy of grace, and every personal sin is an offense against God with consequences that must be remedied for justice to be realised.” Aquinas goes on to maintain that “the necessity of the sacraments stem from the fact that they are sensible signs of invisible things, whereby man is made holy,” we thus “need sensible signs in order to reach spiritual things and this is the province of the sacraments” (Nutt 95–96).

Evaluation

This discourse on signs and symbols have been a sincere attempt to understand what sacraments are especially when words like signs and symbols are applied to them. Thus, sacraments can be said to be signs in the ordinary sense of the word but are much deeper than ordinary signs in meaning. Consequently, all the discourses from the OT and NT about signs and symbolic actions were aimed at giving us a better impression of what the sacraments are. Almost all the symbolic actions of the prophets conveyed what they signified. Hence, they were more than signs. And the fathers continued this discourse, especially Augustine with his doctrine of signs, and Aquinas with his usual classical explications. Examined also, are what the Church

thinks of the sacraments even today, and the necessity of the sacraments for salvation, which for any catholic shouldn't be in question.

Conclusion

From the foregoing, it can be safely asserted that it is the will of God that there should be sacraments in his Church, not because he cannot save the world without them, but in respect to the laws of nature and our constitution as body and soul, he wished that his sacraments should be taken from things that have human worth and meaning, to be incorporated by faith, so that man can realise that he is a created being in the universe of God's creation (Piault 61). "Sign and symbol, composed of things and words of faith united in ritual celebration, makes the sacrament a social and complete sign of the Church. It gathers men together in unity of belief and in the mystery of Christ, and bestows on them, the rewards of redemption, the sacred reality from which the Church draws her life" (Piault 61–62).

Finally, a sacrament is a rite of the Church that works efficaciously. It does the very thing it signifies. The seven sacraments are a sevenfold way to the realities they embody. That reality is ultimately Christ and "mediately" the Church, leading the way to union with the living God. A sacrament being a sign for men is for their union and sanctification. Giving all Christian people the grace necessary for a new life in Christ.

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