

Everyday Sacramentality*

Not long ago I attended a concert for peace given by youngsters from Israel and the Occupied Territories. The Israeli girls sang traditional and contemporary Jewish songs, and the Palestinian boys played Arabic music on Middle-Eastern instruments. The audience applauded this musical demonstration that Israelis and Palestinians can work together in harmony, and for an encore the two groups came together.

First the girls sang a folk song accompanied by the boys on their instruments, then the two groups stood together in the middle of the stage to do a number *a capella*. The song was John Lennon's "Imagine," written as a plea for peace during the Vietnam War, now being sung by children from an area wracked by years of violence.

Unexpectedly, a lump formed in my throat and tears welled in my eyes. I had come to the concert to support the Jews and Palestinians who support a two-state solution in the Holy Land, but long ago my heart had become hardened to the atrocities that both sides were committing, and I had lost all hope of seeing peace in the Middle East. Now suddenly my heart was melting and hope was bursting forth within me.

It was for me a palpably sacramental moment. Something that I was seeing and hearing had become for me a sign of a deeper reality, and indeed it was such an effective sign that I experienced the reality that it signified.

Spiritual Experiences

Not all spiritual experiences are so dramatic, to be sure. But when talking about everyday sacramentality, it is good to begin with moments that stand out in our memory.

Perhaps you remember seeing a movie or play that touched your heart, or hearing a piece of music that stirred your soul. For most Americans, "The Star Spangled Banner" arouses feelings of patriotism even when it is sung before a sports event, and since 9/11 "God Bless America" has become a symbol of unity with those who suffered and died on that tragic day. Reading a poem or essay or novel can sometimes have an emotional effect on us.

For many people, encounters with nature trigger spiritual experiences. Looking out over the endless expanse of ocean, or looking up and seeing countless stars can give rise to a sense of a larger reality, something that transcends our tiny, earth-bound existence. Walking alone in the woods, or examining the delicate intricacies of a flower can evoke a feeling of peace or beauty that is more intense than is usually experienced. Sunsets and sunrises, violent storms and sunny cloudless skies, birds and animals in the wild, mountain vistas and gurgling brooks can all precipitate spiritual experiences.

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Encounters with birth and death often occasion spiritual experiences. Whether it is the mother herself or a husband, friend or relative in attendance, many recall childbirth as an unexpectedly magical moment. At the other end of life's journey, being present at someone's deathbed is often a more intense experience than people thought it would be. In addition, near-death experiences—whether almost dying from a disease, or living through a tornado or walking away from a deadly car crash—are often recalled as being powerfully significant in people's lives.

In addition, certain sights and sounds and smells transport us back to an earlier time in their life or remind us of significant individuals from our past. Coming across a forgotten garment in a closet, hearing an old song on the radio, the smell of a certain perfume or house odor—all these can trigger memories of people and places and events that still somehow live within us even though we experienced them long ago.

Spiritual Realities

When people think about the kinds of examples we have just been talking about, they often categorize what they experience as feelings and thoughts, images and memories. They usually don't think about such things as realities because they are not real in the same way that people and places, objects and events are real when we are directly experiencing them. That is, they can't be seen and heard, touched and tasted and smelled right now. They don't seem to be in the world "out there." They are not available to our senses. They are not material realities.

Yet if we truly believed that the only real things in the world were material realities, we would be materialists. We would not believe in God or the saints, in heaven and hell, in the Trinity and the Incarnation, or in the spiritual dimension of the seven sacraments. If we are Christians and Catholics, we are definitely not materialists.

Moreover, if we were truly materialists, we also would not believe in love or friendship, acceptance or community, justice or honesty, mercy or forgiveness, beauty or goodness. None of these realities can be literally seen or heard or touched or tasted or smelled. Nevertheless, they can be experienced. They are real. They are spiritual realities.

It's been said that money can't buy happiness, and this is because money can buy material things and happiness is a spiritual reality. This is also why poor people who do not have many material goods can be happy, even joyful, if they experience trust and love, loyalty and belonging, accomplishment and satisfaction in their lives. It's also been said that the best things in life are free, meaning that they can't be bought with money.

When you think about it, all of the best things in life are spiritual realities. We sometimes call love, acceptance, fidelity, honesty, forgiveness, friendship and the like abstractions, or abstract realities, because we can think about them abstractly but we can't sense them directly with one of our five senses. But they are more than abstract realities; they are also experienceable realities. In fact, if we don't experience them, and if we have to live without them, our lives can be pretty miserable.

Feelings and What's Felt

Men are often accused of not being in touch with their feelings, but the feelings in question are primarily ones that they don't want or expect to feel. Tenderness, kindness, compassion, jealousy and so on are mistakenly categorized as feminine, so men often repress these feelings or deny that they have them. Little boys are taught, even by their mothers, that big boys don't cry, so they learn not to feel sorrow or fear.

At the same time, men are expected to have other feelings, such as courage, comradeship, loyalty, patriotism, pride, even exuberance for scoring a goal or winning a game. So men do have feelings, but they don't always value the same feelings that women do.

Most of the feelings just mentioned, however, are not feelings at all, but virtues and values and ideals. Like the abstract realities mentioned earlier, these rather intangible things are known not through the five senses but through the internal sense that we call feeling or, more broadly, experience. We know them by experiencing them, but what is important is not the feeling but what is felt.

Starting with the so-called feminine qualities listed above (and there are others), we can see that tenderness, kindness and compassion are not just feelings but human abilities that enable us to treat others the way we ourselves would like to be treated. We mentally put ourselves in the place of others, get a sense of how we would like to be treated, and act accordingly. It's actually quite a complex human reality called a virtue, a strength of character, or a personality trait.

A virtue is something that can't be seen, although it can be experienced from within if we have it. It can also be "seen" by others, but actually what is seen is our visible actions. Observing our behavior, people attribute it to a spiritual quality within us. Usually they are correct, but sometimes they may be wrong. Being able to act in certain ways so that people will think well of us, when actually we're not like that, is what makes hypocrisy possible.

Stereotypically manly virtues such as courage, comradeship and loyalty are likewise known from within. They are experienced or felt, and because they are felt, they are acted out. Again, though, what's important is not the feeling but what's felt: not the feeling of courage but the virtue of courage, not the feeling of comradeship but the fact of comradeship, not the feeling of loyalty but the ability to be loyal.

Spiritual Experiences and Spiritual Realities

If we can understand the difference between feelings and what's felt, then we are able to understand how spiritual experiences are related to spiritual realities. Spiritual experiences put us in touch with spiritual realities, and they are the means by which we come in contact with spiritual realities. But what is important is not the experience but what is experienced, that is, what is felt or encountered or known through the experience.

Take the experience of a transcendent reality occasioned perhaps by a starry sky or a magnificent landscape. True, the experience itself is more intense than our ordinary,

everyday experience. But what makes it intense is not the light rays hitting our eyeballs, for whenever we have our eyes open we are fully seeing, physically speaking. No, what makes the experience intense is what we are spiritually perceiving through the scene in front of us. When two people look at the same sunset, one may see only dazzling colors while the other perceives God's grandeur as well.

The same is true of sights and sounds and smells that remind us of people, places and things that were once important to us. In some way, they still live within us, not only as memories but also as spiritual realities. We visit the home of our childhood, and we can feel again what we first felt when we were young. We hear a love song on the radio, and we can feel the love we felt for the boy or girl we were in love with when that song was popular. We smell a blend of roasted turkey and baked ham, and we can feel the togetherness we felt long ago, when the family gathered for Thanksgiving or Christmas.

In all these cases, we experienced something real, something spiritual, and something that was important to us in the past. In a mysterious way it still lives within us, but we usually don't notice it until something reminds us of it.

Sacramental Experiences

When something reminds us of a spiritual reality, it enlivens or intensifies our experience of that reality. Both the reminder and what it reminds us of—both the visible and the invisible, both the material reality and the spiritual reality—are experienced at the same time. One is perceived by the senses, the other is perceived by the mind and heart. They are perceived simultaneously, but it is the spiritual reality that gives power and depth and meaning to the experience of the material or physical reality.

Think of souvenirs. To someone else, they may be just objects, but to you they can be treasures. A dried flower is just a dead plant unless it is also from the corsage you wore to the senior prom. An old pocket knife is just a tarnished tool unless it is the first knife your dad gave you when he thought you were old enough to use it. What souvenirs represent to you, what they mean to you, what they connect you with is something important, something meaningful, something precious to you. At times, we might even call it something sacred.

One name for what happens when a sign and what it signifies are experienced together is symbolism. A symbol is a sign (or anything that can be taken as a sign) of something that enables us to experience what it signifies. When we look at an American flag, our eyes see a red, white and blue cloth, but we spiritually connect with values and ideals that the flag represents to us. When we look at a crucifix, our eyes see a body hanging on a cross, but we simultaneously perceive what Christ means to us. The word "symbol" comes from two Greek words that mean to put or throw together. A symbol puts together sign and signified in one experience of heightened perception.

When what is signified is also something that is important or meaningful, and in that sense sacred, the symbol is a sign of something sacred. Now, "a sign of something sacred" happens to be the original meaning of the Latin word, *sacramentum*, from *sacra*

meaning sacred and *mentum* meaning related to the mind. A sacrament is often called a sacred sign, but what makes the sign sacred is actually the spiritual reality that it signifies. Since the sign and the signified are experienced together, the sacredness of the spiritual reality gets associated with the material symbol. This is why symbols are regarded as sacred objects, and why it is considered a sacrilege to deface a crucifix or to burn an American flag, for example.

How Many Sacraments?

Early Christians talked about baptism and Eucharist, about penance and ordination, but they never talked about sacraments. For centuries, the Church did not use a single word to designate a select few rituals. All of the Church's rituals and ceremonies, symbols and icons, were considered sacramental in the sense that we have been discussing. In this broad sense, the sacred signs of Christians included rites that are today called sacraments, but in those days Christmas and Easter, holy water and blessed oils, altar vessels and priestly blessings could also be called sacraments. The great Father of the Church, St. Augustine of Hippo, believed that anything could be a sacrament because anything in the created universe could be considered to be a sign of the Creator.

In the Middle Ages, scholastic theologians such as St. Thomas Aquinas focused their attention on seven church rituals that signified important spiritual realities. Not only did these rituals refer to or point to those realities, the scholastics observed, but they also made those realities really present, or as we might say, experienceable. In their language, sacraments caused what they signified.

Thus, baptism made the reality of salvation present and bestowed membership in the community of the saved. Confirmation was felt to strengthen that membership as well as one's willingness to defend the faith. In the confessional, people experienced God's forgiveness, and when they were anointed they could experience spiritual healing if not physical healing. Matrimony made people really married (a spiritual reality) and holy orders made other people really priests (another spiritual reality). The Mass made Christ really present on the altar, and receiving the Eucharist (also known as the Blessed Sacrament) made him present in one's soul. Through receiving Holy Communion, in other words, one could inwardly experience the real presence of Christ.

When the term *sacramentum* was restricted to the seven liturgical rituals with which we are familiar, other sacraments in the broad sense (blessings, ceremonies, symbolic objects and gestures) got spoken of as *sacramentalia*, or sacrament-like. But originally the seven were called sacraments because they were very much like other sacred signs and symbols—sacraments in the broad sense—that made spiritual realities present in peoples' experience. They were called sacraments, in other words, because they were very sacramental.

Everyday Sacraments

Most of us don't have intense spiritual experiences every day, but we all need some spiritually refreshing moments to keep us going. The alarm clock wakes us up, and through the mental fog we notice that we have been gifted with another day of life. We

choose among different breakfast foods to pick one that we associate with energy, or maybe we look for a comfort food. We greet a loved one with a hello or a kiss, and we faintly feel the love between us.

A short while later, out in the weather, we notice that it is sunny (or cloudy), and that says something to us. On our drive to work, trees and flowers, buildings and bridges occasionally catch our notice and silently speak to us of natural or man-made beauty. If it were not for these moments of grace, these little gifts that nourish our soul, life would be dreary indeed and we would wander through the day like robots.

At work, besides the usual frustrations, we encounter people and engage in tasks that enliven our spirit. Someone gives us a hand with a job, or we help someone else, and something feels real good about that. We get something done, and in that moment we experience a certain satisfaction, a certain sense of pride and self-worth. All the time we are paying attention to the things around us, and all the time we are seeing more than just things, for we are also perceiving significance and meaning. If we are lucky, we have a job that enables us to see that we are making people's lives better, even in some tiny way, and when that happens we feel good about it. The smile on their face or their thank you over the phone tells us that their spirits have been lifted.

Shopping for food or clothing or whatever, we come across items that we think will add to the lives of the people we love, as well as to our own life. We listen to the radio or watch TV, and every now and then we pay a little more attention, for something significant has just been said. We go out to a movie or a play or a concert, in part because doing that enriches us in some way that is at once experienceable and indefinable. We meet friends in a restaurant, not only for the convenience of not having to cook, but also for the fellowship we feel when we eat together. We read a novel or ponder a poem because the words on the page speak to us of things we cannot see with our eyes but only with our mind and heart.

At home with our family, their very presence is a sign of multiple relationships, memories stretching into the past and hope reaching into the future. Every conversation, whether it is pleasant or confrontational, reveals how we care about others and how they care about us. Every task, no matter how ordinary, says something about who we are, how we feel toward those we live with, and how they feel toward us. Setting the table, washing dishes, mending or ironing clothes, cleaning the house, repairing a broken toy—these and other daily activities symbolize who we have become and how we want to be.

Conclusion

Jesus too did ordinary things. He ate with people, listened to their complaints, helped them when he could, spoke to them from his heart. Some people saw and heard him, and they thought of him as just another rabbi at best—or as a threat to national security at worst. Others, however, allowed him to minister to them, and they felt something that seemed like the power and love of God. Or they allowed him to teach them, and they sensed in his human words the wisdom and understanding of God.

Jesus was, as theologians say today, a sacrament of God. That is, his words and deeds symbolized God and made God present to people long ago, and they have continued to do so through the centuries. Jesus embodied or incarnated the reality of God and made it available to people during his lifetime, just as he continues to do so during our lifetime.

But Jesus could not be a sacrament of God unless we ourselves were capable of sacramental seeing. It is because we can look at ordinary things and see the extraordinary, because we can listen to everyday words and hear things that are eternally important, because we can live in a physical world and perceive spiritual realities, that we can appreciate the sacramentality of Christ—or for that matter, the sacramentality of the seven sacraments.

It is everyday sacramentality that makes liturgical sacramentality possible.