

The Meaning of the Sacraments *

There was a time when we Catholics thought that the meaning of the sacraments was pretty well set. We could look in the old Baltimore Catechism and find a general definition of sacraments as well as particular definitions the seven individual sacraments. The situation is not so simple any more.

The problem is not the new 1994 Catechism, which gives explanations as well as definitions of the sacraments. The problem is that in the last half century of so, we have learned a lot about the nature of meaning from the study of language and ritual.

Locating Meaning

We all know that words have meanings. We also know that the meaning of a word is not in the word itself. Remember the last time you came across a word that you did not understand? Staring at the word did not help. The meaning was not in the word.

If the meaning of a word were in the word itself, we would never need a dictionary. In addition, we would never need to learn a foreign language. We could look at or listen to words in any language and understand their meaning, if the meaning were really in the words.

Rituals are like words, in this respect. The meaning of a ritual is not in the ritual itself. Do you remember attending a ceremony or watching a ritual and wondering what it meant? You did this because the meaning of the ritual was not literally *in* the ritual. This is true for religious and secular rituals alike.

If the meaning of a word can be located anywhere, it is in the minds of the people who understand it. The same can be said about the meaning of a ritual. Meaning and meaningfulness, like purpose and purposefulness, occur primarily in people's minds. It is only by convention that we say a ritual has a meaning or purpose. Actually, though, the meaning and purpose come from the people who design, plan and participate in the ritual.

Dimensions of Meaning

Locating meaning in the minds of people leads to an important realization, namely, that different people can be associated with a ritual. This raises the possibility that rituals can mean different things to different people. When you see someone crying at a wedding while you are happily witnessing the same event, it may be that the marriage has a different meaning for the other person.

For the sake of simplicity, we can say that rituals have three dimensions of meaning: the personal, communal, and institutional.

The *personal meaning* of a ritual is what it means for each individual person who is participating in or attending the ritual. This dimension of meaning is multiple, fluid, and hard to pin down.

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Theoretically, a ceremony can have as many meanings as the number of people who are watching it, and its meaning can shift over time. When a ritual lasts a long time, it can move from being interesting to being boring, at least in the minds of some of the people watching it. By the same token, a ritual can be meaningful for an adult but not for a teenager or child—and vice-versa.

The *communal meaning* of a ritual is what it means for the group of people who are attending it. A wedding is not simply a generic ceremony but the marriage of two specific people who are known by the people who are there: it is “Jack and Jill’s wedding,” for instance. The same can be said of a birthday party or an anniversary dinner. Each celebration has a dimension of meaning connected to the particular group of people who are present at it. A mass being said for disaster victims means something different than the same mass being said in happier circumstances.

The *institutional meaning* of a ritual is what it means for the larger social institution to which the ritual belongs. Very often, this larger institution is a society or culture. Thus the institutional meaning of Thanksgiving comes from American society (you don’t find it in Mexico), and the institutional meaning of a handshake comes from Western culture (in the East, people bow when greeting each other). Sometimes this larger institution is a tradition or an organization. Thus Masonic tradition determines the institutional meaning of Masonic rituals, and the Roman Catholic Church defines the institutional meaning of Catholic rituals.

Conflicts in Meaning

When people ask about “the meaning of a ritual,” they are usually asking about its institutional meaning. It is a mistake, however, to think that only the institutional meaning is real or important. All three dimensions are real, and the personal and communal meanings can be very important for the people involved.

We need to recognize this because sometimes conflict arises between the different levels of meaning. One institutional meaning of the Catholic Eucharist is unity with the Holy Father, but this meaning may be far from the mind of a teenager who has received communion at a Protestant service and in return invites her friend to mass. Liturgists who are planning weddings constantly have to balance between what the couple says is meaningful to them and what the Church says is appropriate for a nuptial mass.

If sacraments are rituals, and if rituals have three different dimensions of meaning, then it is impossible to specify *the* meaning of a sacrament. The Catholic sacraments have many meanings, not only to the Church but also to the individuals and groups who participate in them. Liturgists, catechists and pastoral ministers who recognize this should be sensitive to people who may not be thinking at the institutional level of meaning.

It is therefore never appropriate to insist that there is only one meaning for baptism or confirmation or any of the other sacraments. When a question about the meaning of a sacrament is raised, it is always appropriate to ask, “Meaningful for whom?”

Meaning and Reference

If the meaning of meaning suddenly seems complicated, it gets even more complicated when we think about meaning as reference. For the sake of simplicity, let's go back to the meaning of words again.

One way to understand the meaning of a word is in relation to what it refers to or points to—its referent. Thus the word “house” refers to a certain type of dwelling unit, the word “plum” can refer either to a fruit or a color, the word “jog” refers to something between walking and running, and so on.

Rituals also have referents, and again for the sake of simplicity we can say that they refer to things in the *present*, the *past*, and the *future*. What rituals refer to is what they celebrate.

Take a birthday party, for example, which is a familiar simple ritual. The party celebrates the fact that a person is a year older today, it points to the fact that that person was born on this date some time in the past, and it ritualizes the hope that he or she will be around in the future.

A Fourth of July parade is an example of a more elaborate secular ritual. The parade celebrates our country's independence, it points back to the signing of the Declaration of Independence in 1776, and it expresses the intention of the United States to remain a free country in the future.

Sacramental Celebrations

Like secular rituals, religious rituals also have referents in the present, past and future that contribute to their meaning. All of the seven sacraments, for example, celebrate something that is happening in the present, they make reference to the life and ministry of Jesus, and they express a hope or expectation for the future.

Almost all of the sacraments are transition rituals or rites of passage, and so they celebrate some change that is happening in people's lives in the *present*. In a baptism, someone is becoming a Christian; in a wedding, two people are getting married; in confession, someone is receiving God's forgiveness, and so on.

All of the sacraments refer to the *past* by pointing to something in the life and ministry of Jesus that gives them a scriptural foundation. The Eucharist points directly to the Last Supper and indirectly to the meals that Jesus shared with his followers and also with sinners. Reconciliation and anointing of the sick point to the many times that Jesus forgave and healed people, and invited his followers to do the same. Confirmation celebrates the spirit of Jesus and the way he shared his spirit with others.

The catechism says that Christ instituted the sacraments, and when it does so it is referring to these scriptural foundations of the sacraments. It is difficult to prove from the New Testament, however, that Jesus intended to start all seven of the rituals we call sacraments, and in fact historians know that some of them got started in the Church after Christ's death and resurrection. This is why it is better to understand the institution of the sacraments as having a foundation in the life and ministry of Jesus.

All of the sacraments also point to the *future* in two ways: they point to the immediate future and they also refer to fullness of the Kingdom of God. Thus a wedding points to the couple's future life together, an ordination points to a future in ministry, baptism and confirmation point forward to commitment and service in the Church, reconciliation points to a changed life, and so on.

At the same time, the sacraments suggest what life would be like if everyone were living what the sacraments celebrate. What would it be like if everyone in the world were all part of the same church family, if everyone were filled with the spirit of Christ, if everyone forgave one another, ministered to each other's needs, and so on? Wouldn't God be truly reigning on earth then? Wouldn't that be like living in the Kingdom of God?

Eucharistic Celebrations

Of all the sacraments, the one that is not strictly a transition ritual is the Eucharist. Like a Fourth of July parade that celebrates our country's independence, the Eucharist celebrates what is already real. Like a Thanksgiving dinner that celebrates a family's togetherness, memories and hopes, the mass brings us together to celebrate our life in Christ.

The *present* referent of the Eucharistic liturgy is the saving activity of Jesus Christ, for which we give thanks to God the Father. Since this activity continues in the local church, the body of Christ, it is a present reality that is lived and celebrated in the parish. The liturgy also celebrates the presence of Christ in the scriptures and in holy communion. The institutional meaning of the liturgy can be found in the Catechism, but the communal meaning for a parish mass usually comes from the celebrant or worship committee that plans its homily, prayers and commentary.

We usually think of the *past* referent of the Eucharist as the Last Supper, but the scripture readings and prayers provide a wide range of past referents, rooting the life of the community in revelation and tradition. The story of the Exodus, for example, reminds us that we are a pilgrim people, the parable of the Good Samaritan connects our service ministries with the message of Jesus, and Paul's teaching about the variety of charisms affirms the gifts of our many parish ministers both ordained and lay. The prayers referring to Christ's sacrifice remind us that as members of the body of Christ we are called to participate in the paschal mystery—and that a life of self-giving is something to celebrate.

The *future* referent of the Eucharistic liturgy is likewise manifold: God's continuing work in the world, the Kingdom of God in its fullness, the Second Coming of Christ, and so on, to mention some of the more generic meanings. But there are also future referents that are much closer to home, and that are to be found in the life of the parish and the lives of the parishioners. These future events are even referred to in the closing words of the liturgy, when we are commanded to go, love and serve the Lord.