

Religion, Ritual and Sacramentality*

Catholics have long prided themselves on their seven sacraments—baptism, confirmation, eucharist, penance or reconciliation, anointing of the sick, marriage or matrimony, and ordination or holy orders. Protestants for the most part have only two sacraments, baptism and eucharist, which they call communion or the Lord's supper. Other religions, non-Christian religions, do not have any sacraments.

Or do they?

During and after the Second Vatican Council, the Catholic Church expanded its notion of sacramentality so that Christ could be understood as a sacrament of God, and the Church itself could be understood as a sacrament of Christ. Sacrament here means a symbol that represents and even incarnates the reality that it symbolizes. Jesus says in John's gospel, "Anyone who sees me, sees the Father." And the Church has been traditionally referred to as the body of Christ. Naming both of these as instances of sacramentality made it possible to regard sacraments as something more than church rituals.

After Vatican II, ecumenism was in the air, and Catholics had more encounters with non-Catholics than ever before. Discussions between Catholics and Protestants, and between Protestants and Protestants, were going on officially and unofficially, at the church, parish, and interpersonal levels. I myself became involved with the charismatic renewal movement, which drew together Protestants and Catholics for pentecostal prayer experiences—praising God with uplifted arms, praying in tongues, being slain in the spirit, and many other untraditional religious practices. At the same time, I was attending evangelical prayer breakfasts, in which we shared our religious experiences and discussed Catholic and Protestant beliefs and practices.

Slowly I began to suspect that Christians had more in common with one another than I had been led to believe as a boy growing up in the Church before Vatican II. I was particularly impressed with the way that devout Protestants seemed to be in touch with spiritual realities such as God's presence and power, divine healing and forgiveness, marital fidelity and ministerial service—despite the fact that they had only two sacraments, and we Catholics regarded only their baptisms as valid.

Shortly after that, I was asked to teach courses in world religions, first at the high school and then at the college level. This was my first real encounter with the beliefs and practices of Hinduism, Buddhism and Islam, and it also expanded my appreciation of Judaism. This vicarious encounter through books and films led to meetings with Hindus and Buddhists, Muslim and Jews, and even to attending services at temples and synagogues in which I could experience first-hand the sincerity and religiosity of non-Christians at prayer. Again, it seemed to me that people of other faiths were in touch with many of the same spiritual realities that we Catholics approached through our sacraments.

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One of the foundations of ecumenical dialogue is the acknowledgement that there is ultimately only one God because the universe is not able to contain more than one infinite being or transcendent spiritual reality. Despite the various representations of God in different religions, the One who is represented is actually transcendent, that is, beyond any human words or concepts or pictures. This means that all images of God fall short of the reality of God; they can perhaps symbolize and point to God, but they do not capture all that God is.

This recognition of the limits of human imagination is the reason why Judaism and Islam forbid making images of God in painting or sculpture. It is the reason why traditional Buddhism avoids even talking about God. And it is the reason why Hinduism depicts the divine reality in hundreds if not thousands of ways—images that are commonly referred to as gods.

Christianity is more like Hinduism than like Judaism and Islam in that it allows for multiple representations of the divine. Anyone who is familiar with the history of Christian art realizes that there are hundreds if not thousands of different images of Jesus, God the Father and the Trinity, and all of them are doctrinally acceptable. Moreover, the vast majority of these images are by Catholic artists, since the Protestant Reformation in the sixteenth century emphasized the Bible and favored churches that were free from the “distractions” of paintings and statues.

What Protestants rediscovered, however, was the sacramentality of the Bible, if we might call it that. Scripture stories present pictures of the divine through which the mind can perceive God’s reality, God’s power and God’s justice, and through which the heart can feel God’s presence, God’s mercy and God’s love. The words of the Bible, whether read silently or heard aloud, are symbols that refer to and allow us to experience in some measure the same spiritual realities that Christian art, including the crucifix, represents.

Many of my early ecumenical conversations occurred when I was working in a parish as a religious education director in what could be called a one church town: it had one Catholic church, one Lutheran church, one Methodist church, one Presbyterian church, and so on, which made for great interfaith dialogue. As a DRE, of course, I had been asked to coordinate the parish’s sacramental programs, preparing children for penance and first communion, and preparing adolescents for confirmation. (This was before the days when parishes had RCIA programs preparing adults for baptism and confirmation.)

Because of this familiarity with at least some of the sacraments, when I got my first college teaching job I was asked to teach the course on sacraments, which every Catholic college offers in one form or another. I decided to use a historical approach, which had been very helpful to the bishops at the Second Vatican Council. The history of the sacraments had been unearthed by scholars during the first half of the twentieth century, and some of these same scholars were advisors to the bishops who were attending the Council. Understanding that the sacraments had a history, and that they had evolved into the form that pre-Vatican II Catholics were familiar with, enabled the bishops to approve new changes in the sacraments such as performing them in modern languages and revising the rites themselves.

All of this historical information was available in books that had been written by scholars, but many of those books were now out of print. Moreover, no one had gathered all of that scholarly

work into a single book, so I taught the course without a textbook, using my own notes instead. In the process, I began gathering materials for the book that eventually became *Doors to the Sacred: A Historical Introduction to Sacraments in the Catholic Church*.

While researching the book, however, I discovered something for which I was not prepared. We Catholics had been taught that the seven sacraments had all been instituted by Christ, but the history of the sacraments clearly showed that not all of our sacramental rituals could be traced back to Jesus himself. Baptism and eucharist clearly could, but the earliest mention of liturgical reconciliation is in the second century, Christian ministers were first called priests in the third century, confirmation did not appear until the fourth century, anointing of the sick became a priestly ritual only in the ninth century, and there was no official rite of marriage until the twelfth century. How then could one write a Catholic history of the sacraments if they could not all be traced back to the life and ministry of Christ?

Fortunately, this question had been wrestled with by those same scholars who had been advisors to the bishops at Vatican II, most notably Karl Rahner from Germany and Edward Schillebeeckx from Holland. Their writings helped me to develop a broader understanding of sacraments than the one we Catholics were most familiar with, namely, ecclesiastical rituals or liturgical rites. After all, we called the eucharist a sacrament, and the Blessed Sacrament was not a ritual. But Rahner and Schillebeeckx also showed the bishops how Jesus himself could be regarded as a sacrament, and how even the Church could legitimately be called a sacrament, as has already been mentioned.

This broader understanding of sacraments fit in quite nicely with my earlier charismatic and ecumenical experience, in which I had found myself encountering God at prayer meetings and through scripture readings. It also enabled me to see how non-Christians might encounter the divine through their own culturally diverse practices if they were sincerely seeking to touch the transcendent. For if there is ultimately only one transcendent reality, then it does not matter what we call it or how we picture it. What matters more is that we seek it, and converse with it, and experience it, and allow ourselves to be transformed by it.

The ancient Greek word for this transcendent reality was *mysterion*, from which we get the English word, mystery. The pre-Christian Greeks recognized, however, as do all early religions, that there are many different experiences of mystery. There is the mystery of life itself, the mysteries of birth and death, the mysteries of love and forgiveness, the mysteries of health and healing, the mystery of divine presence and supernatural power.

All of these are or can be experienced mysteries, although sometimes we experience them and do not notice them, such as the mysteries of life and health. Because of the importance of these mysteries, however, all religions find ways to point to those mysteries. We call those pointers symbols. Moreover, all religions develop practices which invite people into the experience of mystery. We call those practices rituals.

Christianity grew up in a world of many religions, a world of many religious symbols and rituals, a world in which people were used to encountering the divine through sacred rites. Some of the liveliest practices in the ancient world were the so-called mystery religions, which derived their

name from the fact that they invited people into the experience of mystery at a time when the more traditional ceremonies of Greek and Roman religion were too often felt to be formal rituals and devoid of mystery.

Moreover, Catholicism was fortunate in that it developed in a world that spoke not only Greek but also Latin, and the Latin word for a religious symbol or ritual was *sacramentum*, from which we get the English word, sacrament. Early Catholic theologians therefore could call their religious symbols and rituals “sacraments,” and they could call the spiritual realities that were symbolized and ritualized “mysteries.” Sacraments were understood to be visible signs of invisible realities, material representations of spiritual realities, tangible symbols of intangible realities.

Saint Augustine in the fourth century was the first Father of the Church to develop this idea at any length. Taking the idea that a sacrament is a sign of a sacred reality, he argued that everything in the world is sacramental since all of creation is a sign of God. Indeed, early lists of sacraments include not only baptism and eucharist but also Christmas and Easter, ashes and icons, holy water and blessings. Early in the Church’s history, then, the term “sacrament” had a much broader meaning than the meaning that it later developed, restricted to designating seven specific ecclesiastical rituals. Sacramentality in this broad sense is found in all religions, and it is at the heart of many religious practices or rituals.

Human life is more than biological life: it has a spiritual dimension. But this spiritual dimension is by definition immaterial, that is, it cannot be seen or perceived by any of the senses. It is nonetheless real, and it can be experienced or felt.

Take friendship or companionship, for example. Without companionship or acceptance by others, life is lonely and empty. Yet friendship is not a material reality. Companionship cannot literally be seen or heard. You can look at a group of people, and you can know that some of them are your friends, but you cannot see their friendship. You can feel it and experience it, but you cannot literally see it.

Sometimes we call words such as friendship and companionship, acceptance and community, trust and fidelity abstractions because they are not as tangible as people and trees and mountains and buildings, all of which are very concrete realities. But most of these so-called abstractions are indeed realities, spiritual realities. And they are important realities, even sacred realities.

Imagine a life without friendship and community, without honesty and trust, without courage and compassion, without forgiveness and healing, without love and hope. A life devoid of such spiritual realities is an empty life, almost a non-human life.

Human beings instinctively recognize this fact, and so since the dawn of time they have developed stories that illustrate these realities, and they have developed practices that express them. These stories and practices introduce the young to these realities and they remind adults of their significance and importance. The technical name for such stories is myths, and the technical name for such practices is rituals. And the system of myths and rituals that illustrate and express sacred realities for human beings is called religion.

Religion, then, in its most basic sense is a system for connecting and reconnecting with sacred spiritual realities—those ideas and ideals, values and virtues that make life significant and meaningful. The Latin word, *religio*, is derived from *re*, which means again, and *ligare*, which means to bind or tie. Religion is fundamentally a matter of periodically reconnecting with spiritual realities through story and practice, through myth and ritual.

How many religions have there been in human history? Hundreds of thousands, although if you take a course in world religions you probably learn only about a handful that are called the great religions or the most widespread religions. How many religions are there in the world today? Tens of thousands, if you count denominations and sects as slightly different types of religions. There are over 30,000 Christian denominations alone.

Despite the multiplicity of religions, however, despite the multiplicity of stories and disputes about their interpretation, and despite the multiplicity of practices and disagreements about the way they should be done, there is a remarkable unity and simplicity to all religions, in that they all try to connect and reconnect people with foundational spiritual realities such as love, family, friendship, community, honesty, fidelity, courage, trust, forgiveness, compassion, humility, hope and so on. And all theistic religions (Buddhism, remember, is a non-theistic religion) also try to connect and reconnect people with that transcendent spiritual reality that we Christians call God. In this broad sense of religion, stories and myths are sacramental when they connect listeners and readers to spiritual realities. Think of when you listened to Bible stories as a child, or when a scripture passage has spoken to you as an adult. What you got in touch with, and what touched your soul, was more than just a narrative; it was an ideal, a value, a meaning, a purpose, a way of life.

Likewise, practices and rituals are sacramental when they connect participants to spiritual realities. Think not only of the seven liturgical sacraments, but also about pilgrimages and retreats, prayers and devotions, fasting and meditation, as activities that have opened up a sacred space in which you found meaning and purpose, ideals and values, and even perhaps God. This broader understanding of sacramentality is what made it possible for me to write a history of the sacraments that was both historically accurate and faithful to the Catholic teaching that seven sacramental practices could be traced back to the early Church and indeed to the life and ministry of Christ in one form or another.

Even though liturgical reconciliation or a ritual of penitence is first mentioned in the second century, the experience of the mystery of God's forgiveness certainly goes back to Jesus' own practice of forgiving sinners and exhorting his followers to forgive each other. Even if it is not experienced through an ecclesiastical ritual, divine forgiveness can be experienced whenever we are told that God forgives us, if we truly believe what we are told.

Even though church leaders were first called priests in the third century, Christian ministers were functioning in a priestly fashion, bringing people to God and bringing God to people, ever since the beginning of the church. Just as Christ's ministry was a priestly ministry, mediating between the divine and the human, so all Christian ministry is, in a broad sense of that term, a priestly ministry. As the first letter of Peter puts it, we are a priestly people.

Even though confirmation as a separate sacrament, distinct from the baptismal ritual, did not develop until the fourth century, the long baptismal process—modernized today as the Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults—undoubtedly confirmed people in their faith and bestowed the blessing of church leaders upon them. Jesus himself shared his spirit with his disciples, strengthening their faith and confirming their belief in him during his lifetime, and not only by sending the Spirit down upon them at Pentecost.

Even though anointing of the sick became a priestly ritual only in the ninth century, priests and bishops were informally anointing the sick for healing for centuries before that. Lay people also performed healing rituals using oil or water or the laying on of hands, and we find records of this as far back as Christian records go. The letter of James instructs those who are sick to ask the elders of the church to pray over them. And clearly this ministry of healing is grounded in the healing ministry and example of Jesus himself.

Probably the hardest sacrament to trace back to the life and ministry of Jesus is the sacrament of marriage. When I ask students where we find marriage mentioned in the gospels, they invariably point to the wedding feast at Cana—but that was a Jewish wedding, not a Christian wedding. Or they bring up Jesus' condemnation of divorce—but those words of Jesus are really about divorce, not about marriage, and certainly not about a Christian church ritual.

How then can we say that the sacrament of marriage goes back to the time of Christ? As mentioned earlier, Christian wedding rituals did not appear in the Latin church until the twelfth century. Again here, however, a broader understanding of sacrament comes to the rescue. If a sacrament in the broad sense is a sign of a mystery, a symbol of a sacred reality, what then is the mystery or sacred reality to which all wedding rituals point, even those that were in use before the development of the Catholic rite of marriage?

We get a strong clue as to the answer from the letter to the Ephesians, probably not written by Saint Paul but by someone in the Pauline tradition, but still written in the first decades when Christians were being united in marriage through what we might today call secular ceremonies and family rituals. The author of Ephesians argues, in effect, that Christian spouses should lay down their lives for one another, that they should give themselves in service to each other, and that they should model their marital relationship on the relationship between Christ and the church.

But did not Jesus minister to others? Sure, he did. Didn't he lead a life of service to others? Sure, he did. Didn't he say that there is no greater love than laying down one's life for another? Sure, he said that. And didn't he go beyond saying that to actually giving his life that others might live? He did that as well.

Now, if the mystery of Christian marriage is a bond of unity in service, an experience of mutual self-giving that leads, as the paschal mystery always does, to fuller and richer life, it becomes clear that Christian marriage is deeply rooted in the kind of person that Jesus was, and the kind of person that Jesus called all his followers to be.

Moreover, this experienced mystery of marital love is on the one hand a very human mystery, experienced by Christians and non-Christians alike. But for Catholics, this mystery is also a sacrament, for it points to a deeper mystery, namely the relationship between God and people. As the letter to the Ephesians puts it, the mutual self-giving that exists between a loving husband and wife is a reflection of the mutual self-giving of Christ and the Church.

Bernard Cooke, another great sacramental theologian of the twentieth century, first recognized this link between marriage and the paschal mystery in his book, *Sacraments and Sacramentality*, in which he argued that marriage, as a sign of true friendship, is in a way the prototype for all the sacraments, for all seven of the Catholic sacraments are meant to lead us into an experience of deeper friendship with God and one another.

So there you have it. By understanding sacraments in a broader sense than in the past, it was possible to retrieve the past and write a history of the sacraments that is both honest and Catholic, as I tried to do in my book, *Doors to the Sacred*. It was also possible, in an ecumenical age, to appreciate the rituals of other Christian denominations, and indeed of other religions, as functioning the same way that the Catholic sacraments do, as doors to the sacred, as practices that open people up to the experience of the divine.

In our own age, which appears in many respects to be a post-ecumenical age, such an understanding of ritual and religion is becoming extremely important and even necessary. In our own age, which likes to emphasize differences rather than similarities, it is important to look beyond external differences and acknowledge essential similarities. And in our own age, which seems to stress division over unity, it is necessary to recognize that at the heart of our humanity there is more that unites us than divides us.

For if, as I said earlier and as the Judeo-Christian tradition asserts, there is only one God, then no matter how we think of God, and no matter how we picture God,

the God to whom we all pray is the same God,

the God who speaks to us is the same God,

the God we open ourselves to experiencing is the same God,

and the God that we encounter is the same God.

As the Muslim call to prayer puts it, there is no God but God!