

# Dimensions of Sacrament

*A sacrament is primarily and fundamentally a personal act of Christ himself, which reaches and involves us in the form of an institutional act performed by a person in the Church who, in virtue of a sacramental character, is empowered to do so by Christ himself: an act ex officio.*

Edward Schillebeeckx, O.P.,  
*Christ the Sacrament of the Encounter with God*, 53.

## OUTLINE

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### **A. Signs and Symbols: The Human Dimension**

As human beings, we live our lives within a vast network of signs and symbols, some of which are given to us, some of which we create ourselves. That's simply because we are a unity of matter/spirit with a natural yearning to communicate, to express ourselves. Every word we speak, every gesture we make, every letter we read or voice we hear is a sign or symbol somehow designed to communicate, to express a message. In short, we humans by our very nature are makers and users of signs and symbols.

A *sign* generally means simply what it signifies and points to another reality. When someone in an auditorium yells out "Fire!" the exclamation itself is not the fire, but it is generally meant to point out the presence of that reality. An arrow on the highway pointing to the right with the words "U.S. 80" on it is not in itself federal highway 80, but if you follow the arrow you most probably will reach that reality.

A *symbol*, on the other hand, is a sign with more than one dimension, more than one meaning.

The single, fixed meaning of a simple sign is communicated clearly and distinctly and predominately intellectually. The many fluid meanings of a symbol are communicated confusedly, that is, fused together, not only intellectually but also affectively. A genuine human symbol permeates and grips and stirs the whole human person. It is for this reason that symbols are infinitely richer, both in meanings and power, than simple signs.<sup>1</sup>

A sign tends to affect us simply, and we tend to respond to it simply; a symbol tends to affect us complexly, and we tend to respond complexly.<sup>2</sup> Moreover, symbols tend to grow in complexity the more human experience of that symbol a person brings to it. Take, for example, the young man who presents his wife on their first wedding anniversary with a single perfect rose to symbolize his love for her and who adds a rose with each anniversary. The subsequent roses will still symbolize his love, but in subse-

quent years as the number of roses increases so will the complexity of this symbol for both husband and wife; its complex meaning will have developed with the couple's experience of one another through the years—the joys and sorrows, the heartaches and challenges.

“Waltzing Matilda” might be just a peppy campfire song to an American, but to an Australian it is also the national anthem, bringing to mind and heart the great heritage of that continent “down under.” As a song, it is a powerful symbol of all that is Australian. But here, too, the symbolism of that anthem will certainly have deeper meaning for a widow of an Australian soldier killed in war than it will for the Australian youngster singing it at school.

The use of symbol is so much a part of our lives and so deeply and authentically human that we might very well define the human person as *animal symbolicum*.<sup>3</sup> Or as the Jesuit theologian Karl Rahner put it: “Being is of itself symbolic, because it necessarily ‘expresses’ itself.”<sup>4</sup> Rahner maintained that we express ourselves and by doing so we possess ourselves—that we give ourselves away into the “other,” and there find ourselves in knowledge and love, because it is by constituting the inward “other” that we come to our own self-fulfillment.<sup>5</sup>

Symbolic activity is human activity *par excellence*.<sup>6</sup> And it is one of the fundamental activities for creating community. When people gather together they invariably do something of a symbolic nature: celebrate an anniversary or a birthday, Thanksgiving or the Fourth of July, a wedding or a funeral. Religious rituals, or liturgies as they are sometimes called, belong to this same form of human ritual celebration. The religions of the world bear eloquent testimony to many types of rituals: water rituals and rituals of initiation, ritual meals and ritual sacrifices, atonement and healing rituals, marriage, funeral, and ordination rituals.<sup>7</sup> And since these rituals often celebrate somehow the deepest of all human experiences, namely a person's realization of or contact with the invisible God, or as some would say “the Transcendent” or “the Other,” they are usually the most symbolic of all. The formal sacraments

of Christianity belong to this category of religious ritual celebrations. In the Catholic tradition these formal ritual celebrations, or *sacraments*, are called baptism, confirmation, Eucharist, reconciliation, anointing of the sick, holy orders, and matrimony.

In past generations—from the Middle Ages until about 30 years ago—Christians tended to watch while sacraments were done. The Mass, for example, was seen as a sort of “sacred drama” watched by the assembly as if by an audience. But today, notes sacramental theologian Peter Fink, S.J.:

In the wake of Vatican II...there are no watchers in sacraments, only doers, and the catechesis proper to doers, *mystagogy*, is intended to illuminate not only what one sees, but more deeply what one experiences with all the senses. The awareness to which sacraments aim to lead the participants is not the “I understand” or “I see” of a cognitive appeal, but rather the “Amen,” the surrender, of the whole person to the fullness of that in which we are engaged.<sup>8</sup>

## **B. The Term “Sacrament”**

All the religions of the world make use of sacraments, but only Christians call them sacraments.<sup>9</sup> That is primarily because the term itself comes from the classical and early church Latin word *sacramentum*, which has an interesting religious history tied to the Greek term *mysterion*.

In the world of ancient Greece, before Christianity even began, whenever people sensed the presence of a higher spiritual power in their lives, whenever somehow the divine seemed to overlap with the human, they called that experience *mysterion*. Indeed, it was a “mystery,” and still is today when people become genuinely aware of the presence of God. The use of the term *mysterion* for this phenomenon was also common in the Hebrew Scriptures and in the New Testament gospels and epistles, especially the epistles to the Ephesians and the Colossians.

When, in the late second century, Tertullian of Carthage (155-212 C.E.), father of Latin theology, sought a term to translate *mys-*

*terion*, he chose the Latin word *sacramentum*. It was a Roman military term for the “sacred oath” taken as one entered the Imperial army.

In a discussion on the meaning of baptism, Tertullian explained that it was similar to the *sacramentum* which was administered to Roman recruits when they entered the army. The *sacramentum* was a religious initiation; so was baptism. It marked the beginning of a new way of life; so did baptism. It was an oath of allegiance to the emperor; baptism was a promise of fidelity to Christ.<sup>10</sup>

Thus Tertullian was the first to extend the use of the term *sacramentum* to the Christian initiation rites—the water baptism, anointing with consecrated oil, and reception of the Eucharist.<sup>11</sup>

St. Augustine of Hippo (354-430 C.E.) employed the term *sacramentum* in a very broad sense, not only for religious rituals, but for any “sacred sign.” He listed, in all, 304 “sacraments”<sup>12</sup> among which were the Lord’s prayer, the Nicene creed, the sign of the cross, holy water, blessed ashes, and the oil of anointing, to mention a few.<sup>13</sup>

As time went on, church authorities distinguished between the administration of *sacraments* (i.e., basic religious ceremonies done to and for Christians), and the use of *sacramentals*, objects blessed by the church that assisted people in their personal piety—for example, the blessed palms that are given out on Palm Sunday, the ashes used in the Ash Wednesday ceremonies, or the Catholic prayer beads called the rosary.

### **C. The Number of Sacraments**

Still, for many centuries, it was not clear how many “official” Christian sacraments there should be. Baptism and Eucharist were generally accepted as coming directly from the Lord: “Go therefore and baptize all nations...” (Matthew 28:19) and “This cup is the new covenant in my blood. Whenever you drink it, do this as a memorial of me” (1 Corinthians 11:25). They were called the “dominical” sacraments—that is, those directly from the Lord (Latin: *Dominus*). Today

virtually all Christian churches accept these two sacraments. The other sacraments—confirmation, marriage, reconciliation (the formal forgiveness of sins after baptism), ordination (to formal church ministry), and the anointing of the sick—have a long history, a process of development, that we will be investigating in future chapters.

The thirteenth century, often called the Age of Faith, was a time of great discussion and prolific writing on the Christian sacraments, especially at the University of Paris where each of the great theological schools—Augustinian, Dominican, Franciscan—had their own experts on sacraments.

The best known of these experts were Thomas Aquinas of the Dominican school, and Bonaventure and, later, Duns Scotus of the Franciscan school. These were the Schoolmen or “Scholastics” of the Middle Ages. The Scholastics, particularly Thomas Aquinas, developed a whole new synthesis of theology, including a sacramental system, based on the dynamic philosophy of Aristotle—newly discovered and translated into Latin in the thirteenth century and then thoroughly baptized into the intellectual life of the great *Catholica* of the Middle Ages.

In 1215, the Fourth Lateran Council had been the first council of the church to list the official sacraments as seven, a list later confirmed by the Councils of Lyons II (1274), Florence (1439), and Trent (1547).

After the thirteenth century, the next era of great discussion and writing on sacraments has been our own. Over the past decades since the Second Vatican Council (1962-65), literally thousands of books and articles have been published on virtually every dimension of the Christian sacraments. A stunning example of this can be seen in the four volumes of a 1992 international bibliography on sacraments published by the Gregorian University in Rome. In 3,289 pages of bibliography and 450 pages of indices it lists 49,236 books and articles on sacraments published in German, French, Spanish, English, and Italian between 1960 and 1992.<sup>14</sup> There is no doubt that the last 30 years have seen a quantum leap in the development of sacramental theology in the Catholic church.

## **D. The Renewal of the Catholic Sacraments**

In the years before the Second Vatican Council (1962-65) dramatic breakthroughs in sacramental theology took place. The two theologians who contributed most to this were the German Jesuit Karl Rahner, and the Belgian Dominican Edward Schillebeeckx (Sk'll-ah-bakes).

Rahner's small book on *The Church and the Sacraments*<sup>15</sup> got people thinking about sacraments in a whole new way. He saw the church itself as the major or "fundamental" sacrament, and baptism, Eucharist, and the others as sacraments because they are the actions of that sacrament which is the church. And Schillebeeckx published, in 1960, *Christ the Sacrament of the Encounter with God*.<sup>16</sup> Building on Rahner and other German and French theologians, Schillebeeckx shows how in the broadest sense Christ is the sacrament of God, the "primordial" sacrament, the preeminent outward sign that comes from God and shows God's favor.

These two key ideas, namely that both Christ and the church are *sacraments in the broader sense* upon which all other Christian sacraments are based, were not original to Rahner and Schillebeeckx, nor did they claim them to be. Jesuit theologian Herbert Vorgrimler, has shown, for example, that a number of church fathers, church councils, and Protestant reformers had voiced similar sentiments, particularly Augustine, Aquinas, and Luther.<sup>17</sup>

What made the work of Rahner and Schillebeeckx so attractive and potent was the timing; it came as a breath of fresh air. By the late 1950s the Catholic thinking on sacraments had become very rigid, frozen, static. Grace was seen by the average Catholic as a quantity rather than a quality. Grace was something that you "get" or "gain." The teaching from the *Baltimore Catechism* was that "the sacraments give grace." But people conceived this almost in terms of a slot machine. You put in what needs to be done and out comes the grace. What the great theologians had been saying all along, however, was that grace is qualitative, like the quality of a friendship that grows as persons get to know one another better. Very often people were too busy "gaining grace" to even consider it in terms of the relational.

## E. Sacrament in Broader Perspective

Rahner and Schillebeeckx, among others, presented the church at Vatican II with a broader, more flexible vision of sacrament. Drawing primarily on the church fathers, they showed that, despite the Council of Trent's limiting the number of formal sacraments to seven, there exists nonetheless, on a different plain and scale from the seven ritual sacraments, a number of primordial realities, "sacraments in a broader perspective" if you will, that give those formal sacraments both their history and their meaning. Among these, in addition to the two already mentioned (namely Jesus in his humanity and the Christian church), are creation itself and Israel.

### 1. Creation

Clearly, without the reality of our universe, no sacramentality would be possible. We need to admit that this vast cosmos in which we live is the most basic sacrament of God's favor for all of us humans. Both our earth and our cosmos exist and are very beautiful.

"The heavens announce the glory of God and the firmament proclaims his handiwork," proclaims Psalm 19. St. Paul expressed it less poetically to the Romans: "For all that can be known of God is clearly before them; God has shown it to them. Ever since the creation of the world, his invisible nature—his eternal power and divine character—have been clearly perceptible through what he has made" (Romans 1:19–20).<sup>18</sup>

In our own day, few have written so powerfully on the natural sacramentality of the world as has the Brazilian theologian Leonardo Boff:

As St. Irenaeus put it: "Nothing is a vacuum in the face of God. Everything is a sign of God" (*Adv. Haer.* 4:21)....

For those who see everything in terms of God, the entire world is one grand sacrament. Every thing and every historical event appear as sacraments of God and God's divine will....

The mystics offer us the best proof of this. St. Francis of Assisi immersed himself so deeply in the mystery of God that suddenly he found everything transfigured. Everything spoke to him of God and Christ: the worms along the wayside; the lambs in the field; the birds in the trees; fire, and death, which he came to call Sister Death. God comes to fulfill everything: immanence, transparence, and transcendence. As St. Paul put it: "There is only one God and Father of all, who is over all [transcendence], works through all [transparence], and is in all [immanence]" (Eph. 4:6)....

The transparence of the world with respect to God is what enables us to understand sacramental structure and sacramental thinking. It tells us that God is never reached in and by self. We always reach God together with the world and the things of the world, which are diaphonous and transparent with respect to God. Hence experience of God is always a sacramental experience. In things we experience God.<sup>19</sup>

## 2. Israel, Sacrament of God

Schillebeeckx, echoing St. Augustine, maintains that Israel with its visible religion, its faithful people, its cult, sacraments, sacrifices, and priesthood, was the first phase of the great church.<sup>20</sup> In the Hebrew Scriptures, Israel is called the *qahal* (assembly, church) of God, for it is deeply engrained in this people that it would not even exist were it not for God. Israel is before all the world a symbol of the living God. "I will be your God and you will be my people" (Exodus 6:7), says Schillebeeckx, is the quintessence of divine revelation in the Old Testament. Israel is a sacrament of God.<sup>21</sup>

Just as in Christianity, where the ritual actions of the fundamental sacrament, the church, are derivatively called sacraments, so also in Israel the ritual actions of the *Qahal Yahweh* can also derivatively be called sacraments. Judaism was and remains an enormously sacramental religion. The Hebrew Scriptures tell of all kinds of blessings, impositions of hands, baptisms, the ritual use of oil, bread, wine, water, washings, greetings, ritual meals (especially Passover), as well as numerous kinds of sacrificial offerings.<sup>22</sup>

Thus says H. Vorgrimler:

...the Jews remain the chosen people of God, whose gifts are never taken away, but also because the word of God given to human beings in and through Israel retains its validity for the Church, and because the liturgical assembly of Israel that calls on God's presence in its prayer remains, from more than one point of view, connected with the Church's liturgy.<sup>23</sup>

### 3. Jesus in His Humanity—Primordial Sacrament

Schillebeeckx has shown that the primordial Christian sacrament is, in fact, a person: Jesus the Christ, the risen Lord, still very much at home and at work in his own community, the church.

The second person of the most blessed Trinity is personally man; and this man is personally God. Therefore Christ is God in a human way, and man in a divine way...

That is not all. Because the saving acts of the man Jesus are performed by a divine person, they have a divine power to save, but because this divine power to save appears to us in visible form, the saving activity of Jesus is *sacramental*...

The man Jesus, as the personal visible realization of the divine grace of redemption, is *the* sacrament, the primordial sacrament, because this man, the Son of God himself, is intended by the Father to be in his humanity the only way to the actuality of redemption.<sup>24</sup>

Thus Schillebeeckx concludes that to have been "approached by the man Jesus was, for his contemporaries, an invitation to a personal encounter with the life-giving God" and that any "human encounter with Jesus is therefore *the sacrament of the encounter with God*"<sup>25</sup> (the title he gave his book).

The implications of this for the church and the other "formal" Christian sacraments are crucial. Franciscan theologian Kenan Osborne has made this abundantly clear:

Jesus as primordial sacrament means that all other Christian sacraments have their meaning *only* in and through Jesus' sacramentality. This means that the Church is fundamentally and only a sacrament because Jesus is a sacrament. Baptism is fundamentally and only a sacrament because Jesus is a sacrament. Confirmation is fundamentally and only a sacrament because Jesus is a sacrament, and so on.<sup>26</sup>

#### 4. The Church as Fundamental Sacrament

Karl Rahner's writings about the church focus on this community as the fundamental sacrament of Jesus himself, instituted and endowed by him with the mandate to grow and be his body in the world. Reflect for a moment on Rahner's own way of putting it:

Now the Church is the continuance, the contemporary presence, of that real, eschatologically triumphant and irrevocably established presence in the world, in Christ, of God's salvific will. The Church is the abiding presence of that primal sacramental word of definitive grace, which Christ is in the world, effecting what is uttered by uttering it in sign. By the very fact of being in that way the enduring presence of Christ in the world, the Church is truly the fundamental sacrament, the well-spring of the sacraments in the strict sense. From Christ the Church has an intrinsically sacramental structure.<sup>27</sup>

The Second Vatican Council in several of its documents also employed the term *sacrament* for the church, designating it especially "the universal sacrament of salvation":

For every benefit which the People of God during its earthly pilgrimage can offer to the human family stems from the fact that the Church is "*the universal sacrament of salvation*" simultaneously manifesting and exercising the mystery of God's love for persons.<sup>28</sup> (Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World [*Gaudium et spes*], no. 45)

This terminology is also used for the church in the Dogmatic Constitution on the Church, no. 48 and in the Decree on the Missionary Activity of the Church, no. 1.

Thus, in placing the Catholic understanding of sacrament into a much broader context, in helping people to “stretch” the concept of sacrament, so to speak, Rahner and Schillebeeckx paved the way for the twentieth-century renewal of sacramental theology, a renewal that has been continuing right down to the present day.

In the next chapter we will take a look at the sacramentality of Jesus and his ministry.

### **For Chapter Review**

1. How would you distinguish a sign from a symbol? Give a creative example of your own.
2. Where did the term “sacrament” come from?
3. How did St. Augustine use the term *sacramentum*?
4. What are the “dominical” sacraments, and how did the Catholic tradition arrive at “seven”?
5. What are the “sacraments in a broader perspective” that give the formal ritual sacraments their meaning and history? Explain.
6. Describe in your own words the contributions of Rahner and Schillebeeckx to the renewal of Christian sacraments.

### **For Discussion**

1. Life is a network of signs and symbols.
2. In your experience what are the most powerful symbols in our culture today? Why?
3. What does the statement that Jesus is the “primordial sacrament” mean to you?
4. Do you consider yourself a sacrament? Why or why not?

### Some Projects

1. Write down what the term "symbol" means to you. Compare your understanding of "symbol" with that in a dictionary and in an encyclopedia.
2. In an encyclopedia on world religions, look up: a) Buddhism, b) Judaism, and c) Islam and then describe a major ritual celebration of each.
3. Read in the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, Part Two, Section One, on "The Sacramental Economy" and summarize your findings.
4. Compose a brief personal statement to explain the notion of sacrament understood "in a broader perspective."

### Glossary of Key Terms

**Sign:** Something that means what it signifies and points to another reality.

**Symbol:** A sign with more than one meaning; a multiple-dimension sign.

**Mysterion:** Greek term used to express the experience of some higher, spiritual power.

**Sacramentum** (Engl.: sacrament): A Latin word of many meanings (military oath, sum of money held in escrow at a temple) that with, and after, Tertullian began to be used for the ritual celebrations of the Christians, especially baptism and the Eucharist.

**Sacramental:** Objects blessed by the church that assist persons in their religious devotion. For example, blessed palms (distributed on Palm Sunday), ashes (placed on the forehead on Ash Wednesday), the rosary.

### Suggestions for Further Reading

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