

CHRIST, THE SACRAMENT OF THE ENCOUNTER WITH GOD*

BACKGROUND: ENCOUNTER PHILOSOPHY

The newness of approach which characterizes Father Schillebeeckx's work largely focuses on the notion of "encounter"—an insight deriving from the life philosophies of existentialism and phenomenology. There is some suspicion that the traditional categories used to express man's thought upon or experience of God have suddenly grown impoverished and contribute in some degree to contemporary man's sense of estrangement from God. Knowledge of God is excessively abstract and cerebral, and thus ineffectual in engaging the personality, in achieving a totality of commitment. Genuine encounter, however, is possible in experience that does not artificially separate the endeavors of the intellect from those of the will and emotive powers, in an approach to God that by-passes the process of abstracting and conceptualizing in favor of a more immediate contact emphasizing interpersonal subjectivity. Such experience is properly human, i.e., achieved in visibility, in bodiliness. In a word it is *sacramental*. Sacrament is the juncture where God and man meet in mutual availability. The theological use of this concept is preordained in a religion where God discloses himself, in the form of man, to man.

The insights here are actually very complex and for them Schillebeeckx is indebted to Buytendijk and de Petter, and more remotely to such thinkers as Husserl, Heidegger, Scheler, and Merleau-Ponty. Knowledge of things is here looked upon as consequent to and derived from prior self-consciousness and "the state of being in the world." Cornelius Ernst, O.P., in his introduction accu-

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rately characterizes encounter as "a fundamental mode of existence of the human existent."

So orientated, theological concern is much more towards the concrete, more focused upon man. Especially in dealing with the sacraments, anthropological considerations exercise a dominant role. Anthropology is used here not in the restrictive sense of a precisely located empirical science but in the European sense of an integral doctrine or metaphysic of man, and largely a phenomenological one.

THE WORK ITSELF: ITS THREE DOMINATIVE CONCEPTS

I. *Christ is the Primordial Sacrament of God*

Encounter with God is always sacramental, i.e., achieved in visibility, a visibility that points beyond itself thus involving sign-mystery. Historically there are three ascending levels on which this occurs for man—in creation, in Israel and in Christ.

1) *Creation itself* first offers a fundament for what St. Thomas refers to as "sacraments of nature." Pagan man discerns an implicit sacramentality in nature itself. The myths of heathen religion, focusing on natural phenomena, are projections of human experience, and in and through these, grace is somehow obscurely operative. The full implications of this are only recognized on the assumption that the present universal order of human existence is *de facto* a supernatural one. If fully human, every action has an implicit orientation not only to God but to the *Deus salutaris*.

2) *Israel*, secondly, is a sacrament of expectation whose rites contain and bestow grace, not the grace of a redemption achieved but a grace of open readiness for the Messiah, what Schillebeeckx calls an advent grace.

3) *Christ*, lastly, is the sacrament of realization. Here in the redemptive Incarnation is consummated man's personal meeting with God in visibility. Four considerations are noteworthy in the development here:

(a) *Christ as the Revelation of God's Love for Man in its Specifically Trinitarian Character*. A sacrament is first of all a sign, a revelation, and the entire Christ-event lays bare the extent of

God's love for man. It is as Son that God enters human history, divine Sonship consisting in a subsistent relationship to a Father whence he takes origin and to a Spirit who in turn takes origin from him. These eternally subsisting relations of nondependence are transposed by the Son to the human nature he assumes. In the humanity they become relations of dependence, involving the causal order. Even in his humanity Christ is the natural Son of God, now in dependence upon the first Divine Person. In this same humanity Christ becomes the sender of the Holy Spirit, in the causal context of a temporal sending. He is then the visible disclosure to us of God's love as the created extension of a Son eternally generated by his Father and through whom there is spirated forth the Person of Love who is the Holy Spirit.

(b) *Christ as Sacrament is Two-Directed.* Christ is at once sign and instrument of God's bestowal of grace upon mankind, and the expression and occasion of mankind's supreme worship of God. He is, in the first way, the sacrament of divine love for man; in the second way, the sacrament of human love for God.

(c) *This Sacramentality is Initially Perfected in the Pass-over.* The very being and the least action of Christ render possible a personal encounter with God but all of this reaches its culmination in his passion and death. These events reveal, in graphic fashion, the depths of God's will to save and the intensity of the Son's love for his Father. Not in need of redemption himself, Christ takes upon himself the condition of unredeemed mankind (*sarx*) and dies to sin in our stead. In so doing he both signifies and causes, with a causality at once moral or meritorious and physical or effective, the destruction of sin and the reconciliation of man with God.

(d) *This Sacramentality is Consummated with the Father's Response to Christ's Sacrifice—The Resurrection and Ascension.* The reciprocity of love between Father and Son is such that the Father responds to his Son's sacrifice by raising him from the dead to a position of glory at his own right hand. The Resurrection and Ascension are one salvific event, distinct only in mode; they are one event defined either in relation to the *terminus a quo* or the *terminus ad quem*. So established in glory, Christ is now the *Kyrios* and be-

comes (once again in his very humanity) the sender of the Holy Spirit. Obviously here, the sending is in terms of the temporal mutation of the rational creature to whom the Spirit is sent, and the causality on the part of Christ's humanity is instrumental.

II. *The Church is the Sacrament of the Risen Christ*

Encounter as a properly human confrontation can occur only in bodiliness, whereas the Resurrection and Ascension of Christ necessarily takes him over the horizon of visibility. Thus, the continuing activity of Christ as sacrament demands some sort of tangible prolongation of the Incarnation. This is the Church—here conceived of as brought into being by Christ's appropriation of earthly non-glorified realities to represent him symbolically, to function instrumentally in the bestowal of grace, to achieve in some sense a genuine presence of Christ among men. In and through this "bodiliness", a mutual human availability of God and man is made possible. It is important to note Father Schillebeeckx's insistence upon this sacramental presence as that of the risen Christ, of the *Kyrios* extending to men on earth in visible form the function of his bodily reality now glorious in heaven.

As the sacrament of God in this new, triumphant state, Christ manifests the same two-directedness—symbolizing divine love for men (bestowal of grace) and human love for God (perfect worship of the Father). Thus these two elements are discernible in a parallel way in the structure of the Church as the sacrament of Christ. The Church is at once a redeeming institution and the community of the redeemed and is both of these in a sacramental, i.e., visible, way. This distinction must not be misinterpreted as one between the visible and invisible elements of the one Church. Under the first aspect, the dichotomy between hierarchy and laity is involved; the Church here symbolizing both Christ's will to save (hierarchical acts) and Christ's will to offer perfect worship to the Father (acts of the layman as such, *in* the Church). Considered in her second modality as community of the redeemed, this dichotomy is non-existent and the sacramentality here resides in what Schillebeeckx calls the "charismatic" activity of Christians, the visible manifesta-

tion of an interiorly possessed holiness; the redeemed here sacramentalize Christ as the one in whom dwells the fullness of grace.

III. *The Seven Sacraments are Saving Acts of the Heavenly Christ in Ecclesial Visibility*

The life of the Church finds expression principally in her seven distinct but closely inter-related sacramental acts. Father Schillebeeckx conceives these as being primarily *acts* of the risen Christ. The symbolic nature of the rites necessitates their inclusion within the genus of "sign," and indeed, since the sacraments cause the grace they signify, "efficacious" or "practical" signs. There is, however, some difficulty in seeing how "efficacy" can be a species of sign. This inclines Schillebeeckx to envision *action* as the first or remote genus to which is subordinated the more proximate genus of *sign*. In a word, he prefers to see the sacraments as symbolic acts rather than as efficacious signs. Moreover, the absence of Christ from this world demands that his acts receive visibility within the Church. They are thus also the official acts of the Church as redeeming institution; ecclesial celebrations in mystery of the mysteries of Christ's human life. Certain characteristics of these Christological-ecclesial realities are worthy of note.

1) *They Demand the Presence of Christ and the Mysteries of His Earthly Life.* While explicitly rejecting the position of Odo Casel, which sees all the mysteries of Christ's human life really present in their very historicity in each of the sacraments in virtue of their metahistorical character, Father Schillebeeckx nonetheless defends a theory of his own that has considerable kinship to the *Mysteriengegenwart* of Casel and his disciples. Granted that a human event is subject to conditions of temporality so that no sooner is it actualized in time than it ceases to be, still a difference is to be noted if the action be that of a human nature personified by a divine Personality. In this case, the human nature and its activity is used instrumentally by God who, transcending the conditions of time and place, can apply the instrument to all times and all places. In this qualified sense, the human event itself perdures and is eternally actual, not in its historicity but in its instrumentality. The

present sacramental acts of Christ are the self-same acts of his earthly existence prolonged in the visibility of the Church's rites.

2) *They Work Ex Opere Operato Understood in a Christological Sense.* This traditional and technical phrase *ex opere operato* is to be understood as meaning the same as "by the power of Christ and God." The sacraments are ministerially an *opus Christi*, having an objective salutary power independently of the subjective religious intentions of either minister or recipient. The contrast is not between ". . . the bestowal of grace (the *res sacramenti*) and the subjective religious intention of the person . . . but only between the constitution of the sacrament or the outward sacramental sign and the subjective states of the minister or the recipient" (p. 87). In terms of the actual reception of sacramental grace the *opus operantis* of the recipient *does* play a significant role. The emphasis here is newly focused, somewhat removed from the more common understanding of *ex opere operato* in the juridic sense of a correct administration of the sacraments. This latter meaning is an authentic but entirely secondary one. Schillebeeckx notes that the phrase itself is used by St. Thomas twenty times in the *Commentary on the Sentences* and not once in the *Summa Theologiae* in a sacramental context; he concludes that the omission in the later work is a deliberate one, St. Thomas there preferring the more accurate formula *virtute Christi*. The author's own understanding is expressed as follows: "Because the sacraments are, in ecclesial embodiment, the mystery of the worship of Christ to which the Father always responds, they themselves also infallibly bestow grace, i.e., *ex opere operato*: by the power of Christ the Lord" (p. 71).

(3) *They Demand Four Basic Conditions:*

- (a) *A Two-Fold Liturgical Structure.*
- (b) *Intention on the Part of the Minister to Do What the Church Does.*
- (c) *Intention of the Recipient to Receive the Sacrament.*
- (d) *Institution by Christ.*

As regards the first of these conditions, Schillebeeckx notes that this structure is classically expressed in the matter-form relationship.

However, these terms were used of the sacraments long before they acquired their Aristotelian overtones of "hylomorphism." Their original sense was closer to the patristic understanding of a heavenly and earthly element, a *verbum* (or confession of faith) and an *elementum* (or thing). In time, the strictly analogical character of the Aristotelian terminology came to be forgotten. This solves certain problems concerning historical changes in the "matter" of the sacraments. The teaching of Trent that the essence of a sacrament cannot change, and that of both Trent and Florence that the essence of a sacrament consists in matter and form is resolved in the understanding that matter and form, as we now understand them, in contrast to the larger sense given them by the Councils, are merely aspects of ecclesial symbolic activity. The Councils could not have meant matter and form in a hylomorphic sense without contradicting the historical fact of alterations regarding both matter and form so taken. The substance of a sacrament then requires this liturgical structure of an action and of a word as each of these gives expression to sacramental spiritual meaning.

4) *They Establish Mutual Availability Between God and Man.* The sign-activity wherein the encounter of Christ and man occurs is not only the representation of his redemptive act and thus the manifestation of his will to save, it is at the same time the visible expression of the recipient's personal desire for grace and will to be saved. As the attestation to and symbolizing of a human act, such sign-activity of its very nature demands personal entry into Christ's ecclesial mystery of worship. Christ's redemptive act is performed for a particular man, receives its specification from this term, and thus the recipient is an essential element in the definition of an authentic sacrament. Authentic, in this context, means a sacrament that is a genuine encounter with the living God. The very concept of encounter demands two parties; a sacramental act not embodying the recipient's own worship, then, is something less than a genuine encounter. Obviously, since God's invitation of love precedes any human response, there is no question here of the latter being required for the validity of a sacrament. The non-placing of an *obex* (which the Council of Trent stipulates as a condition for the fruitful

reception of a sacrament) is the same thing as a positive religious response, at least where an adult is concerned. If there "is not also a personal prayer expressed in the ecclesial symbolic act, then the sacrament cannot possibly give an increase of grace; then the actual encounter with Christ does not take place" (p. 140). This worshipful response will understandably be quite different in the sacraments of the dead and in the sacraments of the living. Infant baptism is not a problem here because of the *fides Ecclesiae* adverted to by St. Thomas (*S.T.*, III, 69); however, Schillebeeckx sees the infantile manner in which alone the child can possess grace as occasioning a profound difference in the very grace itself. Only when the grace is personally, freely and consciously consented to can the mature person enter into full relationship with God.

5) *They Produce Immediately an Ecclesial Effect.* These immediate spiritual effects within the soul (*res et sacramenti*) are: a) commissions to carry out visible activities within the Church, and b) "sacraments" of the bestowal of grace. In three of these, there is an added aspect of permanency that merits for them the name "character," but such ecclesial effects are also realized in the other four sacraments, e.g., reconciliation with the Church in the case of penance, the very bond itself in the case of matrimony, and so forth. From this it follows that the seven-fold number of the sacraments derives primarily from the very nature of the Church and only secondarily from man's psychological needs and human crises.

6) *They Produce Secondarily Sacramental Grace.* The grace achieved is the very grace signified which comes in a visible fashion (extra-sacramental grace is by contrast anonymous) thereby making demands upon man. As participation in the grace of Christ, this brings us to personal communion with the Trinity. There is, then, a definite trinitarian structure to sacramental grace. The Word terminates (personifies) the divine nature in a real but relatively distinct way, eternally related in nondependent ways to Father and Spirit. These relations are transposed, in human form, to the humanity which he also terminates or personifies, with, however, the new note of causal dependence. Man, encountering the risen Christ in the ecclesial sacramentalization of his redemptive act, enters into parallel

relationships. He, too, is a son of the Father (*fili in Filio*), offering perfect homage thereto in virtue of his communion with the natural Son of God. Also, since Christ is constituted by the Father's initiative as sender of the Holy Spirit in his triumphant humanity, man is caught up into that same providential relationship deriving from the bestowal upon him of the Spirit. Suggestive as these insights are, Schillebeeckx fails to explicate whether anything more than the law of appropriation is involved. If they be mere instances of appropriation, his language emphatically implies very special modes thereof.

Apropos of this grace-effect, Schillebeeckx observes that the rites of many non-Catholic Christian communities involve genuine encounters with Christ, and are thus true sacraments, at least *in voto* or *in figura*. As such they possess more than a merely subjective religious worth, objectively containing and conferring the grace they imperfectly symbolize.

There is an objective orientation or tendency in these *vestigia ecclesiae* which is ultimately towards the Eucharist itself, giving them their objective religious value.

CRITICAL REFLECTIONS AND SUGGESTED DISCUSSION

1) The fulsome praise that Father Schillebeeckx's work has evoked is, in the large, a fully justified one. This is unmistakably an original and creative work, and one addressed to the religious needs of the times. At the same time, its traditionality marks it as not a personal envisionment but an intelligent docility to revelation, a work rooted in biblical and patristic thought. Moreover, it is authentically Thomastic in its order, its dominating conceptions, its breadth of vision. Its apostolic and ecumenical values are obvious. Regarding the former, it is the living of dogmas that give them their attractiveness, and this is achieved in sacramental encounter. The one irresistible motive of credibility is surely the love of God transposed visibly, sacramentally into brotherly love. Conversely, is it not the lack of a *visible* presence of grace that explains the non-Christian's diffidence towards Christianity? Again, the tangible embodiment of grace in the Christian life will itself spontaneously result in a renewed and authentic liturgy; liturgies, after all, "are not constructed;

they develop organically from a renewed spirit" (p. 211). The order from God through creation and Israel to Christ, and thence to the Church and from sacrament to sacraments, surely makes room for genuine religious encounter other than that which is proper to the Catholic and establishes meaningful relationships between the two. The Christological dimension given to the sacraments is of incalculable worth; it enables the sacraments to be studied not as isolated tracts but as integrated within the unity of theology as one science-wisdom; and within the context of a living contact with the mystery of Christ.

2) *Encounter Philosophy*. More critically, the indebtedness to phenomenological insights and language centering on the notion of encounter is not an unmixed blessing. The concept of "encounter" and such correlatives as "presence" is far less precise and intellectually satisfying than might be hoped. In fairness to the author, it must be noted that this book is only a summary, and a non-technical one, of a more detailed and scholarly work. Nonetheless, encounter is largely a matter of knowledge (including resultant volitional response), but the human person still knows through his nature and by way of the limited faculties of that nature. For man, that means sense activity restricted to the appearances of things, and then the processes of abstraction and conception orientated towards the essence of the material thing. The truths of faith have to be grasped in these same analogical concepts, reaching inferentially to God. In faith it is God himself Who terminates man's act, but only in and through the dark medium of analogical conceptions. This renders it somewhat difficult to ascertain what might be meant by suggestions of a more personal religious experience of God, immediate confrontations conceived of in terms of a sort of extension of self-consciousness. This is not to lessen the possibility of true encounter with God, but only that it not be made something other than what the human composite is capable of.

3) "*Mysteriengegenwart*." While disavowing any partisanship for the theory of Odo Casel, Schillebeeckx does opt for a new form of the "presence-in-mystery" theology. This he explains by the fact that ". . . all the mysteries of the life of Christ are personal acts of

God, (thus) they are eternally actual and enduring" (p. 57). There is no suggestion here of an historically past event being actualized anew in some mystical manner. In Christ's acts, however, ". . . there already was an element of something perennial; an enduring trans-historical element . . ." so that ". . . all the mysteries of the human life of Christ endure forever in the mode of glory" (pp. 56, 58). Schillebeeckx claims the patronage of St. Thomas for this theory, maintaining that for St. Thomas not only the *Christus passus* but the actual *passio* of Christ exercises now real, salvific efficiency. He is not alone among contemporary Thomists in this.¹ This, however, is only an interpretation of St. Thomas and one that parts company with the main stream of Thomistic commentators from Cajetan to Billuart. Two strong objections to Father Schillebeeck's theory must be brought forth here:²

(a) Since the instrument of the Word is a true corporeal humanity subject by intrinsic necessity to the conditions of time and place, it cannot be used as an instrument even by the omnipotence of God apart from those conditions. The reason for this is that something is elevated to the role of an instrument by the imparting to it of an instrumental *virtus* deriving from the principal agent. Of its very nature, this *virtus* is *transitory* and *incomplete*.³ Being nothing more than the application and elevation of the instrument to the effect, it cannot perdure longer than the time during which the effect is actually being produced. It is incomplete in its own being because it is nothing more than the transmission of action originating from the principal agent and ordered to the production of the effect by the instrument. Also, the instrument must have a prior, native operation attaining in some way to the patient in whom the effect is to be induced. Motion, though an action of the agent, is nonetheless

¹ Cf. M. Matthijs, O.P., "Mysteriengegenwart' secundum S. Thomam," *Angelicum*, 1957, p. 393; J. Hamer, O.P., "Bulletin de theologie dogmatique," *Rev. Sc. phil. et theol.*, 1959, p. 725; R. Tremblay, O.P., "Mystère de la Messe," *Angelicum*, 1959, p. 199.

² The following objections against "mysteriengegenwart" are developed in detail by Colman O'Neil, "The Mysteries of Christ and the Sacraments," *The Thomist*, Jan., 1962.

³ *S.T.*, III, 62, 4.

existent *in the patient*. The mysteries of Christ's life could hardly have attained to men other than those existing at that very historical moment. None of this slights the divine omnipotence; it simply means that God cannot choose to associate creatures to Himself in an instrumental role and at the same time violate the metaphysical principles of instrumentality.

(b) The extension of the saving events of Christ's life to all the predestined regardless of time or place is, in one sense, a fact. The eternity here, however, is that of the preexistence of all things in the divine essence; this is the order of God's eternal intentions and knowledge of vision. The actual efficient application of salvific grace demands the prior real existence of man which is, of course, temporal. God's presence to man at that moment is likewise a temporal one because the presence rests upon the temporal immutation (passively) of the creature. This means that the causality of God in producing grace (i.e., as the grace comes to be really outside of God as passively terminating the eternal creative act) is subject to conditions of succession and time. God can contact presently existing man through Christ's humanity, but only as that humanity is today, i.e., in glory, and not by way of past historical acts no longer actual.

These events of Christ's earthly life do, of course, at the very moment of their historical realization cause in a meritorious sense the salvation of all the elect. The question here is of physical instrumental efficiency. Further, Christ in glory retains the dispositions of soul which elicited his saving acts, but those very acts themselves, interior and exterior, are no longer actual and operative. Father Schillebeeckx, on the contrary, writes that this "... permanence is a quality of both the spiritual and corporeal aspects of the sacrifice of the Cross ..." (p. 59 note).

4) *Sign-Activity*. Father Schillebeeckx locates sacraments in the genus "sign" by seeing Christ as appropriating human elements to signify in visible embodiment the very grace he is causing. This accords with St. Thomas' observation that the instrumental cause can be a sign, unlike the principal cause, because it is also an effect of the latter.⁴ These symbols achieve a presence of Christ and even

⁴ *S.T.*, III, 62, 1, ad 1.

of the mysteries of his earthly life so that the sacramental acts are not *new* acts of Christ but the self-same acts of his human life now taking upon themselves a symbolic embodiment. Schillebeeckx is saying here, in effect, that sacraments as prolongations of Christ's mysteries are univocal with them.

This conception fails to take into account that, while sacraments do achieve a true presence of Christ and his mysteries, they do so in a manner proper to faith. The causality proper to sign is that of exemplarity, i.e., formal extrinsic causality. The efficient instrumentalization of the sacramental elements is another causality, and one extrinsic to "sign" as such. Christ's mysteries are present in virtue of man's symbolic re-enactment of them, the attestation of his belief. The communication of grace which occurs through these symbols is then a *new* act of Christ. This makes the relationship between sacraments and mysteries to be analogical, not univocal.

5) *Other Areas of Discussion.* These are numerous: Schillebeeckx's rich concept of the Church; his definition of the layman as included within the hierarchical Church; the trinitarian structure of grace; the validity of granting to Protestant sacraments an *ex opere operato* efficacy; the nature of encounter in infant baptism and in administration to the unconscious; the primary genus of sacrament—sign or action; the matter-form relationship where the substance of a sacrament is concerned. The re-opening of such discussions as these on a high theological plane attest to the fact that Schillebeeckx's work is a major instance of contemporary theologizing.

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