

## GOD'S INITIATIVE TOWARDS MAN THE SYMBOL-MAKER

Three points may be suggested in order to exploit in some measure the subject of this seminar. God's initiative towards man the symbol-maker may be seen in:

1) the affirmation or validation by God of man as symbol-maker (in the order of salvation)—this in the institution of the Church and sacraments but also, and more radically and decisively, in the Incarnation itself.

2) the determination of the character of man's symbol-making—this in the creation of man with his permanent nature or structure as "spirit in the world" (to use the phrase made current by Karl Rahner).

3) the determination of particular symbols or constellations of symbols, with their cosmic, historical, and depth dimensions—this by the consecration, in the order of redemption, of certain basic situations in which man's symbol-making activity comes into play in the religious sphere.

### I. THE INCARNATION AND MAN AS SYMBOL-MAKER

In commenting on each of these three points, I shall be brief on the first and third, in order to dwell more fully on the second. Under the first heading, namely, God's affirmation, in the Incarnation, of man as symbol-maker, three comments are in place.

1) When we speak of the Incarnation, at least in the present context, the "human nature" in the union should be regarded quite concretely. The Incarnation is not simply the union abstractly considered nor considered as something totally accomplished in the initial moment of union; it is the Word's whole becoming-man-in-Christ, a becoming that embraces His life, death, and continuing existence in His risen state.

2) It is in speaking of the Incarnation (taken in the concrete

sense indicated) that the question of God's transcendence in relation to man the symbol-maker has its proper point of insertion. I am using "symbol-maker" in its broadest comprehension: man as communicator with others, with God, with himself. The question of God's transcendence is properly placed just here, because the Incarnation is the Incarnation precisely of the Logos, of God's intra-Trinitarian and exhaustive self-communication. He speaks this Word into the finite reality of a concrete human nature, through which He communicates Himself to men and in which as man He communicates with Himself.

3) What is affirmed or validated, when we speak of God affirming man as symbol-maker is the capacity of man's symbols for, and their historical orientation to, the expression and mediation of the covenantal relationship between God and man: its expression and mediation by God to man and by man to God. God's affirmation of this capacity of man's symbols has its ontological expression, its radical point of insertion, its fullest, qualitatively unique, and primatial form in the Incarnation itself: God has Himself become man the symbol-maker. To this covenant effected in Christ by God's initiative in the Incarnation and by Christ's answering human initiative in His life, death, and heavenly existence—to this Christ, all our salvational symbol-making looks as to its model, tends as to its center of gravity; in this Christ it participates and has its goal (the formation of the whole Christ).

## II. MAN AS SYMBOL-MAKER

The second main point to be developed is the character of man's symbol-making as determined by his permanent structure as "spirit in the world."

1) If Christ is the primatial symbol-maker, being the prime analogue of man in the order of redemption, we can nevertheless understand this very fact only by an analysis of our experience and by philosophical reflection on it. "Our own experience" embraces, of course, a good deal: internal as well as external experience; the experience of others which becomes in a measure ours through the very process of symbol-making with which we are concerned. Our experience is initially and permanently the point of reference and

ultimate verification; in philosophical reflection on it, we seek to know the necessary conditions of its being and intelligibility.

In certain respects the words "symbol" is, at the present time, not a happy one. Like "mysticism," it is, in many mouths, a prestige word, and has suffered the same kind of fate: either being so vague as to be useless, or being given a more precise meaning but one which is constructed without reference to the sacraments and then used to draw inferences about what a sacrament ought to be, about how it and its liturgy should function, about loss of symbol-awareness, and so on.

I am not questioning the value, in our present context, of much work done in the study of "symbol." Indeed, it can be of great help in understanding the sacraments and in the development of sacramental liturgy, *once* the specific character of sacrament and sacramental liturgy has been grasped. What is quite open to question is whether conclusions drawn from one area of the study of symbol are *a priori* to be extended to other areas (even assuming their accepted validity in the original area). A symbol is not a thing "out there," a univocal datum to which one can point as to a common possession of all and therefore as to a locus for at least elementary kinds of verification (as, when discussing "man," we can point to the being we all agree to call "man").

I would suggest, then, that a more profitable if less exhilarating procedure would be to take the actual sacraments as our datum and to attempt to understand them as symbols by analyzing man's sign-making activity in general and by situating the sacraments within this activity. The idea of sign-making is both a more comprehensive field within which "symbol" can be located and a more elementary and more accessible notion from which we can proceed to more specialized ones.

2) The fundamental concept to be explored, then, is that of sign or, more properly, of sign-action or signifying-action (just as, at a later point, it would help to a correct perspective if we were to speak of symbolic or symbolizing action rather than simply of symbol). The exploration, which has been carried on with subtlety and with fruitful results, by psychologists and philosophers, is an exploration into the structure of man as agent. The basic lines of analysis, in the

area that immediately concerns us, were indicated briefly and schematically in one of the classical "arguments of suitability" for the existence of a sacramental order of redemption: namely, that man is being who understands and communes with spiritual realities through the medium of the corporeal world.

Man in his action reveals himself as a composite being, with a spiritual and a material principle existing in an essential unity and in a hierarchical relationship. He has a properly spiritual activity, but, though this transcends the material, it is also in every direction bound up with matter. There is in man a spiritual principle which enables him to enter into the material world (and this means, in the first and permanently necessary instance, that part of the material world which is his own body), and to fill it with meaning. Not as though he first possessed himself, cognitively and affectively, and then by way of supererogation expressed this self-possession in the dimension of the corporeal and in the material world. The corporeal and its extension, the material world, is the place where man rather comes to self-possession. The corporeal is humanized, spiritualized, by being given new meaning; thus man's world is not a simple manifestation of himself but the medium wherein and whereby he enters into his own personhood. Correlatively, man's becoming what he is, namely a person, because of the specifically human manner of this becoming, is a continual giving of meaning to the material world.

Here we are at the foundation for sign-activity. In fact, all of man's activity *is* sign-activity, the embodying of spiritual meaning in a material medium. Through this sign-activity (which can already be seen to possess an almost unlimited range), we make our world a specifically human world of human relationships, whether to things or to other human beings; through it we become members of a community of human beings and bring into existence in a continual process of incarnation our relationships to ourselves, to others, to God, and make these relationships knowable to ourselves and to others.

Our religious experience is subject to the same law, and because of this we have no mode of conceptualization that is directly and properly suitable to God.

3) The pre-given things of man's world thus become signs in the

human sphere only as taken up into human activity, that is, activity penetrated with that spiritual intentionality which precisely makes it human. Material things are constituted as signs by a signifying act of man, in which they are infused with meaning, so that sign and signified become one, and the signified can be grasped in the material reality.

On the other hand, man is not purely creative in his sign-making. He starts as one already inserted into the world as spirit-related-to-matter. Consequently, anterior to man's sign-making activity there are grounds of relationship or likeness between spiritual intentions and signifying realities. There is always the fundamental reference to man of the material as potential bearer of meaning, and there are often what we can only call pre-given analogies between corporal actions and spiritual intentions, such that man can with a certain immediacy and non-arbitrariness (as far as his experience goes—even if it be difficult reflectively to ground this "non-arbitrary" character) express to himself and to others certain states and processes of personal being which are (again, in his experience of himself) of a rather fundamental character. Thus in his action man is continually determining the manifold and ambivalent potentialities of material things as bearers of meaning. Consequently, too—and here is the justification for speaking of sign-action rather than simply of sign—"sign" is in the last analysis always a human corporeal action, whether or not using a further material thing which, if used, becomes a prolongation of man's body.

4) At this point it is clear, I think, that, whatever be the signified reality to which a sign-action introduces the one to whom it is directed, this sign-action is always an expression of the "intentional" on the part of the sign-maker and consequently always, in some degree, makes known the sign-maker himself.

Within the vast range of signs, we need some further precisions (made indeed with our eye on the sacraments) which will enable us to set off the sacraments. We can look, then, not simply to sign-actions generally, to the human being acting and inevitably expressing himself in some degree, but more specifically to such sign-actions as are freely and deliberately enacted in order to enter into communication with others: to sign-actions, therefore, which call for

a response and have thus a certain "dialogue" quality or orientation, and which are, in a broad yet literal sense, "inter-personal" actions.

Common to the whole range of such sign-actions directed to others is a double-function: [1] a cognitional and, inevitably (as indicated above), a self-revelatory function; and [2] an effective, community-creating function. In that area of sign-actions with which we are concerned, these two functions are inseparable: making known and knowing (included is the whole gamut from the most abstract thought to the most concrete and affective kinds of knowledge) is the specifically human and personal form of communication, and the means and measure of community.

Within the range of other-directed sign-actions, a final discrimination can be made, broad indeed and doubtless leaving a wide area on the spectrum where the lines cannot be clearly drawn, but a discrimination that will be helpful nonetheless. There are sign-actions directed to another and calling for a response, but in which the community sought is a community of effort towards a common goal and in which the making known and knowing is of an appropriate kind. The often appealed-to example of the policeman directing traffic shows with clarity what is meant. The goal of his communication is collaboration between himself and the motorist in making traffic run smoothly; the goal is not personal communion, in which the policeman reveals his own inner life, his attitudes, his unique self, and invites a similar response. Rather the cognitional function is in terms of the end pursued; there are a few simple ideas, conveyed in as rationally stylized a way as possible, so as to remove all unnecessary and complicating overtones of meaning; conveyed, therefore, in gestures the meaning of which the other already has or should have a clear and distinct knowledge. The severe limitations on the cognitional and community-creating functions becomes clear from the fact that the sign-maker can build the necessary sign-gestures into a machine, which prolongs his intention yet continues to function without eliciting in the person who responds to it any conscious reference to the sign-maker. In fact it is even possible to program the required response itself into another machine and thus to eliminate the here-and-now human factor completely.

There is, however, another whole area of sign-action where the

cognitional function is one of self-revelation in a qualified sense of the word: not an impersonal communication of objective knowledge but a communication of the person as such; and the community sought is a personal communion, not simply a community of effort towards a common goal though this latter may well flow from such communion and will be colored by it. In this kind of sign-action that embodies and seeks personal communion, three characteristics can be observed: first, the irreplaceable role of the human gesture (verbal or other); second, the sufficiency, in many instances, of such gestures without the need of any material thing to complement and prolong the gesture; and, third, though such material objects if used can be chosen on a purely arbitrary basis, yet to privileged place is had by objects which enter into actions based on the kind of pre-given analogy noted earlier (we may think here of ritual washing and ritual eating in the religious sphere). This privileged place is due to such objects or, rather, such actions having a greater suggestive power and being as it were more highly charged conveyors of spiritual intentionality.

5) To this area of sign-action we can give the name "symbolizing actions." The choice of term is not arbitrary. At least, an examination of the responsible use of "symbol" in psychology and literary analysis would, I think, evince an understanding of the term which is often quite close to our use of it here.

The sacraments fit clearly enough into this area, even if, inevitably, there are discontinuities as well as continuity between the sacraments and other such symbolizing actions. The sacramental signs are the human sign-actions of one who acts in the name of Christ and whose actions are informed by the meaning given them by the instituting will of Christ. They are the actions of the invisibly present Christ, directed to another. They are actions whose goal is personal communion between Christ and the other, the believer. They are actions which, against their historical background in the history of redemption and as the crown of often highly elaborated liturgies, are rich in suggestive power and in complexity of meaning (controlled though not exhausted by the interpretative sacramental words which clarify the ambivalent religious and secular significations which these actions—ritual washing, ritual eating, imposition of hands, anointing

—already possess. They are actions in which the human gesture (whether speech alone or action and speech) is irreplaceable, and in which the gestures, whether using further material things or not, can (at least in ideal circumstances) awaken such depths of quasi-intuitive comprehension and such depths of spiritual feeling, as to show that pre-given natural analogies are here exerting their pressures.

### III. THE DIMENSIONS OF SACRAMENTAL ACTION

The third main point which I proposed was that God's initiative is shown in the determination of particular symbols or constellations of symbols, with their cosmic, historical and depth dimensions—this by the consecration, in the order of redemption, of certain situations which are basic in human life and in which man's symbol-making has almost always come into play.

That the sacramental actions are such a consecration is a thesis I need not elaborate. It is the thesis which in varying forms and despite surface differences of formulation and viewpoint, has been found fruitful, throughout the history of theology, for understanding the meaning of each sacrament and for grasping the depth of insertion of the whole sacramental system into human life.

What I should like to dwell on for a moment is the cosmic, historical, and depth dimensions of the sacramental actions. (Here I should advert explicitly to the necessary distinction between the core sacramental actions and the more or less peripheral actions of any given liturgy.) By the cosmic dimension I mean simply the rootedness of religious symbolic actions in man's experience of the sensible world: of ritual washing or more broadly the ritual use of water in man's experience of the functions and values of water; etc. The fundamental religious sign-actions show a great similarity around the world and across history. This is inevitable, given a common human existence with its limited resources for sign-making, and given, in addition, the limited number of basic spiritual aspirations and of their analogues in man's experience of himself as a material being. What is distinctive, from one religion to another, is the faith that is expressed in materially similar forms. When Christ and the Church took over, for example, the baptismal rite, they were taking over not



only an action that could suggest a spiritual process, an action with a number of cosmic symbolisms clustering around it, but also an action that in the history of mankind was already a religious sign-action. This complexly significative action is then put at the service of a new belief about the initiative of God towards man and about man's capacity for response to God.

In mankind's religious sign-action or symbolizing action there has usually been also a "historical" dimension, whether the mythic history of many pagan religions or the history of Judeo-Christian religion. For example, in the initiation rites of many pagan religions there is present the idea of the initiand repeating, in symbolic fashion, and thereby sharing in, the exemplary action of the founder of tribe or nation (so at least we are told in many books of Mircea Eliade, in particular in his *Birth and Rebirth*). There is an historical dimension to the Christian sacraments, too, and it is the most important of the three dimensions named. This history provides the antecedents that serve as types of the spiritual processes which the sacraments mediate. More importantly, this history is a history of the symbolic actions themselves or, more properly, a history of the God of revelation communicating Himself to man in symbolic action and of man responding in symbolic action to the God of revelation.

A third dimension of these basic, more or less universally recurring religious symbolisms is what, for want of a better word, might be called their "depth" dimension. I am referring to the affinity of the great religious symbolic actions and objects to the forms of self-expression which the human psyche seems spontaneously to evolve (manifesting them especially in dreams) along the way to its self-realization. (Cf. Louis Beirnaert on the striking parallelisms between the complexes of meaning which the Fathers of the Church, partly on the basis of the cosmic symbolisms of water, partly on the basis of Scripture, perceived as centering on baptismal immersions, and those which the psychologist finds recurring in dreams and centering on water.)

#### IV. OBSERVATIONS AND QUESTIONS

What I have said thus far suggests, I hope, various directions which the general doctrine and theory of sacraments can take, and

indeed has taken, in theology past and present. For example: the dominant importance of our Lord as the primordial sacrament and of the Church as the sacramental presence of Christ in the world, with the seven sacraments as moments, so to speak, in which the relationship of Christ through the Church to the believer reaches a special density; or the sacramental action as essentially involving the recipient in its very structure, so that the language of "encounter" or "meeting" provides one tool, with advantages and limitations like any other tool, for exploring such action; or the necessary involvement of liturgy with its own past and especially with the Scriptures.

I would like here rather to make some observations and raise some questions, on the basis of what I have said, concerning the much spoken of "crisis of our sacramental symbolism."

A first question is suggested by the fact that the sacramental symbol is not properly a thing at all but man-in-action or, more fully, man-acting-upon-man. One may ask, then, whether the question "Are our symbols outworn?" is itself a well-placed question? For it looks at symbolic objects in their generality rather than as incorporated into a sacramental action which derives much of its significance from other sources than the cosmic dimension of the symbol "water": from an understanding of the basic Scriptural message of God redeeming the world in Christ, from the manner of God's action in the Scriptural history of His dealing with men, from the sacramental action as an action focused not on the material action, important though that be, but upon Christ present and acting. Putting aside for the moment the question of whether and to what extent an awareness of the symbolic values of water has been lost and of whether and how it can be recovered, I think that the decisive question is not there. The decisive question concerns rather the viability of the idea of Christ cleansing, Christ blessing, Christ feeding, etc., through symbolic actions which He now accomplishes through the visible mediation of others.

Some further questions arise on the basis of what I spoke of as the historical dimension of Christian sacraments. For, to speak of such a dimension is, to my mind, necessarily to imply the need of an education of our sensibilities when dealing with the sacraments. And this demands that we raise several questions. One would con-

cern the matter, just bracketed, of the loss of awareness of symbol. To what extent is the *basicalness* and permanent validity of a symbol to be gauged according to its spontaneous appeal, according to the spontaneity with which it, so to speak, "hits" the recipient and generates almost automatically both insight and feeling? We have, I think, often too romantic a notion of earlier ages and of rural society, and of their supposed spontaneous openness to the symbolic values of water, of bread and wine, of the oil of healing, and so on. Yet it is demonstrably false that the country-dweller as such is automatically more open to and aware of these values. What is rather true is that the majority of men have, in differing measure, the capacity for awareness of and response to such values. We have sensibilities and spontaneities, but they need to be awakened and educated. The problem set us is like the problem that faces the teacher of poetry. It is also different in important ways, since, as I indicated, liturgy, while an instrument of education, also lives within, and supposes, a milieu in which other educational factors are also at work; in addition, we are dealing not with symbolic things but with symbolic actions which each individual experiences antecedent to his contact with them in the sacraments. We need only look back to the catechuminate of the early Church to see the need of education and something, too, of the kind of education needed. To think that we can and must find other basic symbolic actions which will be more spontaneously grasped and appreciated by the mythical creature "modern man" is inevitably to end up with what is superficial and a matter of momentary excitement. Sacramental symbols cannot be burdened with a task they were never meant to accomplish. And if man is a symbol-making being, this is not an automatic process but a matter of self-education and of his reflective discovery of the capacities for meaning of his bodily self and his surrounding world.

A final question, also suggested by the historical dimension of the sacraments and by the need of education into symbolic awareness, would concern the "history of salvation." There are several problems here. One would be the possibility of awakening most people to a sense of the biblical history as *their* history. For the average man history begins in his father's life-time or in his grandfather's, if the latter was long-lived. The sense of biblical history

as one's own was strong in St. Paul, a "Hebrew of the Hebrews." But most people would perhaps say today: what's Abraham to me or I to Abraham? Again education is needed and possible. But its goal would have to be modest: some sense of the unique place of Abraham (for example) and of his paradigmatic significance for those who want to take their faith seriously.

A more difficult and serious problem lurks in the very idea of the "history of salvation," and it is one which bears strongly on the sacramental liturgy. What is the reality of this "history" if the "events" were not genuine historical events? An imperfect example of the point I am trying to make would be the typological use of Gen 1:2 and the "Spirit of God hovering over the waters" of creation. This typology occurs in the solemn blessing of baptismal water and is the starting-point for many expositions of the event-types in the Old Testament, the particular typology here being the relation between the Spirit and the creation of the world, on the one hand, and the Spirit and the re-creation of man, on the other. But an at least equally acceptable translation of the Genesis verse would speak of "an awesome wind blowing over the waters"; if such a translation be acceptable, what has happened to the "historical" basis of the "type"? More difficult still to handle is the re-interpretation that goes on within the Old Testament of such events as the exodus from Egypt, with writers adding imaginative details and perhaps giving the crossing-of-the sea a character it did not originally have. If "historical fact" is presumably the backbone of the "history of salvation," how do we come to grips with such matters? This does not mean that the rich symbolism of the baptismal liturgy, developed by the Father on the basis of Scripture, is hereby invalidated. It means only that "history of salvation" is too simple a rubric under which to handle such symbolism.<sup>1</sup>

MATTHEW J. O'CONNELL, S.J.  
*Fordham University*  
*Bronx, New York*

<sup>1</sup> In this last paragraph I have used some sentences from a review in *Theological Studies*, 26 (1965) 331-33.