

## RESPONSE TO PROFESSOR DIEKMANN—I

There are two aspects of Professor Diekmann's presentation which strike me as particularly noteworthy and fruitful. The first is the pneumatological focus of the paper, the emphasis on the Holy Spirit as the fundamental gift in every sacramental act. It has been my conviction for some years that the absence of a consciously functioning theology of the Holy Spirit has been a serious debilitating factor in theology. Hans Küng has remedied this lack in his brilliant study *The Church*. But this dimension still needs to be stressed in Christology and in the theology of sacraments. I have offered a sketch for this kind of concrete and humanizing theology in *Spirit and Sacrament*, but it still needs a serious broader development.

The second aspect which I find noteworthy in Professor Diekmann's paper is his emphasis on the fact that the spirit which is given as gift in the imposition of hands is the Spirit which dwells and is operative *in the community*. This ecclesial emphasis on the significance and power of sacramental life furnishes us with an opportunity for the kind of reflection on the meaning of the Church which moves away from the hierarchology which so much ecclesiology has become and concentrate on the sacramentality of the Christian community as a whole.

I would like to complement Professor Diekmann's remarks with a reflection drawn from a fundamental theological perspective. Theology has always been faced with the task of critical reflection on and meaningful re-articulation of the experience of Christian faith in a constantly changing and developing historical context. The symbols which are created in one cultural experience do not necessarily have the same power for communication in a different cultural context. Language, laws, social structures, ritual which are meaningful and effective at one period of time easily lose their power to integrate in a meaningful way a cultural experience which no longer exists. The social structures, rituals, language, etc., of Neolithic man, of medieval man, even of nineteenth-century man, simply do not have the symbolic power today which they had in their own times. In terms of the task of theology, specifically

systematic theology, this means that the systematician is faced not only with the task of the construction of an interiorly coherent system for the understanding of faith, the theologian must also bring Christian faith to an articulation which makes sense to the contemporary experience of human life, pointing out the meaning and implications of the gospel for *this* time in human history. In this sense, systematic theology is always an exercise in fundamental theology.

It seems that this is particularly true today. For, living as we do in a period of such rapid cultural change, we are living at a time of crisis, a crisis of meaning (Lonergan), of communication (R. May). Rather than simply trusting in the power of our symbols to integrate and communicate our experience, we need the kind of phenomenological prolegomenon which looks to the experience which our symbols have articulated and ask how that experience can best be articulated to this time in our history (L. Gilkey). And this project is a double challenge. It is a challenge to our comfort because it asks us to look rather dispassionately to the symbolic structure in which we have learned to feel secure. And it is a challenge to our honesty, a challenge to articulate as honestly as possible what our faith means to us and our world. Anyone who has engaged in this task is well aware of the rather ruthless opposition encountered from the self-appointed "guardians of orthodoxy."

Turning to a fundamental-theological understanding of sacrament, we would be served best by taking a page from Thomas Aquinas. For although he did not work out a systematic integration of the dimension of *signum* and *causa* in his theology of the sacraments, he did insist that the efficacy of sacraments was to be found in their capacity to articulate the faith experience of the community. "*Causae sacramentales significando efficiunt, unde efficiunt quod significant.*" (In *IV Sent.*, d. 27, q. 1, a. 2, sol. 3.) Later manualists paid some lip-service to the symbolic function of sacraments, but their treatments usually came down to a discussion of sacraments as efficient causes of grace. Aquinas, on the other hand, insisted on the symbolic function of sacraments, on their function as articulations of the faith-experience of the community which celebrates them, "...omnia sacramenta sunt quaedam fidei protestationes" (III, q. 72, a. 5, ad 2).

Thus, the richest appreciation of sacramental function is from the point of view of their structure as symbolic actions, actions in which

the community in its gathering together, its words, its gestures brings to expression its experience of Christian faith. It is this articulation in all its rich complexity which communicates faith and Spirit to the community itself as well as to the "subject of the sacrament."

In this context, when we question the "validity" of sacraments, we are not simply questioning their compliance with the legal ritual norms as public cultic acts of the Church, but we are basically questioning the actual power which sacramental acts have to communicate, to share, deepen the values, the faith, the Spirit of the community. This is what Aquinas calls the *veritas sacramenti* and this is what liturgical renewal is all about. It is a matter of judging the power of our sacramental symbolic actions to communicate, deepen and strengthen faith. And (something which cannot be achieved by the publication of liturgical books) it is a matter of looking honestly at what kind of faith, what kind of spirit lives and breathes in the community.

Certainly the imposition of hands has the *potential* for being a powerful and fundamental sacramental gesture. Parents and Godparents find the imposition of hands as they sign their child with the sign of the cross in Baptism a powerful sign of and challenge to their own Christian commitment and their commitment to being a Christian context for the growth of their child. An epiclesis which is done with force and dignity in Baptism, Confirmation, or Eucharist can be a powerful witness to and prayer for the Spirit out of which the community lives in Christ. The imposition of hands in Penance can be a powerful reminder of a community's call to be a context of forgiveness and healing for all its members. The gift and calling of ministry, the blessing of a marriage in the name of the community—all these are potentially powerful signs for the sharing and deepening of faith in the community as the place where, in one Spirit, the living Lord brings us to meet God in healing and grace.

But the important question which the theologian must ask in the service of the community of the Church is the question of truth, the truth of the presence of the Spirit of life in the community, the truth of the community's commitment to its members, the truth of the oneness of Christ's body. We must ask the question of the richness or poverty of the signs we use. Is this truly a charismatic touch, bearing the power of the Spirit of Jesus, deepening the presence of Jesus and of

God in him in the community? Or is this ritual without substance? Is this really an act of the community? Or is it a casual Sunday duty? Liturgical, religious, yes, even theological renewal is not a matter of more books. It is a matter of the renewal of the Spirit in the whole of the Christian community.

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