

RESPONSE TO PROFESSOR DIEKMANN—II

In his paper, Professor Diekmann has raised the question about the extent and symbolic role of the laying on of hand(s) in all the basic Christian liturgical celebrations of the New Testament and early patristic period. He tentatively concludes that the imposition of hand(s) was present and exercised an important symbolic function in all the basic rites of the various liturgical traditions at that stage of church history.

It is not clear to this reactor, from the data presented, that this thesis can be so universally maintained in the case of baptismal immersion and the Eucharist. It is questionable, for example, that the laying on of hand at the confession of faith of the neophyte before immersion, in the baptismal rite of the *Apostolic Tradition*, had the significance which Professor Diekmann attributes to it. Also more evidence is needed to substantiate the view that the rite of placing hands over the eucharistic *oblata* and its meaning, as found in the rite of Hippolytus, obtained elsewhere at this period to the extent that the thesis of Professor Diekmann seems to imply.

Finally, while the placing of hands over the *oblata* in the eucharistic rite and on the head of the candidate by the bishop after the baptismal immersion symbolize the bestowal of the Holy Spirit in the rite of Hippolytus, for the sake of accuracy it should be noted that "Spirit" refers to the Divine Logos at least in the case of the eucharistic rite¹ and most probably also in the rite of "Confirmation." The doctrine of the precise role of the Third Person of the Trinity in the active confirmant of sanctification in the liturgical celebrations of the Church had not yet been developed in the Great Church.

It is not my intention to enter further into a detailed discussion of this interesting thesis of Professor Diekmann or to comment on the many fine reflections which he makes on the symbolic value of the imposition of hand(s) for today's liturgy. Rather I will take this oppor-

¹Cf. E. J. Kilmartin, "Sacrificium laudis: Content and Function of Early Eucharistic Prayers," *Theological Studies* 35 (1974), 279-80. The concept of eucharistic incarnation through the activity of the Logos was popular in the second century (*ibid.*, 277-8, note 34).

tunity to try to advance the discussion by treating of the symbolic gesture of laying on of hand in the sacrament of Confirmation within a more general discussion of the internal structure of sacramental rites.

Professor Diekmann has spoken of a new sensitivity toward the Holy Spirit in the Western Church since Vatican II, which is reflected in the invocation of the Spirit accompanying the imposition of hands over the *oblata* at the beginning of the new eucharistic prayers. However he states that "the restoration of the laying on of hands has not been successfully accomplished in every instance: the sad compromise in Confirmation comes to mind." The rite of laying on of hands, according to Professor Diekmann, expresses best the confirmation of the Spirit. It should be found in all rites of the Church, all sacraments, which are the "chief Christ-derived visible signs by which he continues to send us his Spirit for the upbuilding of the Church . . ." Presumably when Professor Diekmann refers to the "sad compromise" in the case of Confirmation, he is speaking of the decision of the Apostolic Constitution, *Divinae consortes naturae*, of August 15, 1971, which gave preference to the unction and its brief formula in the Latin rite of Confirmation, but which, nevertheless, insisted on the importance of the imposition of hands and its accompanying prayer. Thus when he implies the desirability of the "restoration of the laying on of hands" in the case of Confirmation, I assume that he judges it should be given the place which the unction now has in the Latin Church, i.e., that it should be the ritual gesture singled out as the minimum necessary for confirmation of the sacrament.

In the following pages I will present my understanding of the function of the rite of imposition of hand and its prayer in the current Latin celebration of Confirmation. First some general remarks will be made on the structure of sacramental rites. Secondly this analysis will be applied to the sacrament of Confirmation. Thirdly the Apostolic Constitution, *Divinae consortes naturae*, will be discussed in some detail. Fourthly some conclusions will be stated about the approach which sacramental theology should take in the analysis of the structure of sacramental rites.

I

A liturgical rite directly signifies something which can be lived.² It is a practical gesture which, in turn, signifies something social and interpersonal situated on the level of human experience. What is thus signified directly through the "sensible" rite signifies for the eyes of faith, in its turn, a spiritual reality. This latter referent is not referable beyond itself precisely because it directs the whole project of symbolization: it is the experience of this spiritual reality which leads to its being symbolized since it is only accessible through symbols.

At the first level of signification, the sacramental rite appears as a system of elements linked structurally into a whole by a totality of signification. Some elements constitute the framework of the structure itself; others fill it out. The function exercised by an element within the totality determines whether it belongs to the framework or the periphery. All the elements which contribute to the sacramental signification belong to the structure: agents, context, message and mode of transmission of the message. Of course, in the case of the sacraments we are continually faced with the problem of changes in the external rites which can render certain elements obsolete, i.e., they no longer exercise an integrating function in the rite. Such "parasites" are frequently retained out of a false understanding of tradition. But they should be dropped since their only function is to obscure the signification.

Within the sacramental rite, conceived as a system, each element has a specific function in the whole. The structure, constituted by the mutual relations of functions, can change without a change in the total meaning by a mutual displacement of elements and functions at the interior of the structure. This can happen in such a way as to produce a new equilibrium either by the redistribution of functions among the same elements, or by the disappearance of an element whose function is taken up by another element, or by the introduction of new elements which share in the functions of the preceding ones. This idea of structure helps us to understand the phenomenon of expansion and contraction in the history of sacramental rites which theologians affirm has not effected the signification.

²Cf. M. Amaladoss, "Sémiologie et sacrement," *La Maison Dieu* 97, No. 114 (1973), 7-35 (esp. 23ff.). This article provides background for and development of what is stated in this first section.

This idea of structure also enables us to speak of a hierarchy of elements within the sacramental rite and to explain the disappearance of elements, in the phenomenon of condensation, according to a fixed order. A realignment of elements can be made around a fixed center the function of which remains unchanged. The choice of the element for this fixed center—and here we prescind from the cases of Baptism and Eucharist—can change from one moment of history to the next. An evolution in the context or change of perception, resulting from a change of experience, can demand a modification of the structure in general or of a fixed center in particular. Other more exterior influences, such as the desire to bring a sacramental celebration of one tradition more into harmony with that of another tradition, can induce modifications of structure in the external rite. The fundamental reason for such mobility of structure lies in the disjunction between expression and content: the expression can always become more adequate.

Within a liturgical celebration particular rites or symbols are capable of polarizing the signification normally transmitted by a whole system of symbols. Certain symbols are capable of assuming the signification or indicating or evoking the whole of which they are normally a part. However when they are located within the totality such a rite or symbol does not retain its power to transmit the whole of the signification.

Traditional scholastic theology has defined the "essence" of the sacramental rite as that symbol which is affirmed by the magisterium as capable of polarizing the signification normally transmitted by the whole system of symbols. As a result of focusing attention on this "essence," sacramental signification has been discussed almost exclusively from the viewpoint of this "essence" which has been determined by ecclesiastical practice and authoritative decisions of the magisterium. Moreover the causality of the sacrament has usually been treated by Catholic theology only with reference to this "essence." Hence this "essence" has been considered both as the strict minimum necessary for a "valid" sacrament from the viewpoint of signification and, at the same time, as the exact place where sacramental causality finds place even when this "essential rite" is made part of a whole system of symbols in the normal, more expanded, sacramental celebration.

Other rites and symbols which constitute the framework of the

normal structure of the sacrament are now being described as "integral rites" by Catholic theologians and the magisterium. Because they truly express the sacramental signification, theologians and the magisterium are unwilling to qualify them as "ornamental" or "non-essential." The term "integral" was employed by Pius XII in *Mediator Dei* to describe the relationship of the rite of Holy Communion to the sacrificial action of the Mass.³ The same term is used in *Divinae consortes naturae* with reference to the imposition of hands and its prayer in the rite of Confirmation. In this document, to which we will refer later in detail, an integral rite is described as that which is not essential for the validity of a sacramental celebration and yet contributes to the integral perfection of the rite *and* to the full transmission of the meaning of the rite.

The use of the term "integral rite" in these instances is ambiguous. First of all, every rite, whether it belongs to the framework of the celebration or to the periphery either has an integrating function or should be dropped as a "parasite." But more to the point, the use of the term "integral rite," for a rite which has the function described above, is open to the charge that it is conceived as only signifying but not causing when employed in the normal sacramental celebration. To use the term "integral rite" when speaking of a rite which pertains to the very framework of the normal celebration and consequently transmits sacramental signification in order to distinguish it from another rite called "essential," as a way of describing its function in the normally expanded rite and not its particular aptitude to polarize the total signification of the rite in case of necessity, can certainly give the impression that it signifies but does not cause. However such a disjunction between signification and causality in the case of the sacraments is not acceptable: *sacramenta significando causant*.

It seems clear that the choice of the Church regarding the particular rite or symbol to be used in case of necessity can in most cases—again we prescind from the problem of Baptism and Eucharist—be determined by a concern to emphasize what is ultimately signified by the sacramental celebration or what is directly signified by the "sensible" rite. However it is not within the power of the Church to limit the function of an "integral rite," as described in *Divinae consortes naturae*, to mere signification. By their very nature such integral rites are means

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of encounter with the Lord in the Church with reference to a specific human situation which is being proclaimed as time of grace and decision.

II

Let us now apply this theoretical analysis to Confirmation. This rite, though separated from Baptism in the Western Church, is part of the rite of initiation. The sensible rite signifies the full incorporation of the candidate into the eucharistic community. Hence in the early Church it was followed by participation in the eucharistic celebration. The ultimate gift of the bestowal of the Spirit is connoted by the more direct symbolic integration of the Christian into the community. As in the case of all sacraments, Confirmation symbolizes, on the first level of signification, a human and social situation: something that can be lived.

In this sacrament the gesture of imposition of hand and its extended prayer seem preferable to the unction and its brief formula as the polarizing rite in the case of necessity because in the normal celebration of the sacrament it has the key function of communicating the communitarian aspect of the rite. A decision in favor of the rite of imposition of hands harmonizes better with the structure of the sacramental rite in which the first and third level of signification is always linked through an intermediate level: a human and social signification which can be lived.

However when the rite of imposition of hands is linked with the rite of unction in the celebration of Confirmation, one should say that both rites transmit the sacramental signification and so exercise the causality peculiar to the sacraments. Indeed, if the unction and its formula is used to polarize the total signification, it can do so because it has the power to signify and evoke what is explicitly expressed in the rite of imposition of hands: integration of the recipient into a human communion which in turn signifies integration into the mystical body of Christ through the gift of the Spirit. Thus the use of the word "integral" for either rite in the expanded celebration seems questionable, a misleading choice of words.

III

The above consideration brings us to the Apostolic Constitution,

Divinae consortes naturae. Here three statements are made which are especially relevant to our subject:

1. In the *Praenotanda* the following statement is made: *Impositio vero manuum, quae fit super confirmandos cum oratione Deus omnipotens, etsi ad validam sacramenti collationem non pertinent, magni tamen fit ad integritatem ritus et plenioram sacramenti intelligentiam assequendam.*⁴

2. In the Constitution itself we read:

1) *Quapropter, ut ritus confirmationis recognitio ad ipsam etiam ritus sacramentalis essentiam congruenter pertineat, Supreme Nostra Auctoritate Apostolica decernimus et constituimus, ut ea, quae sequuntur in Ecclesia Latina in posterum serventur: Sacramentum confirmationis confertur per unctionem chrismatis in fronte, quae fit manus impositione atque per verba: Accipe signaculum doni Spiritus Sancti.*⁵

2) *Impositio vero manuum super electos, quaecum praescripta oratione ante chrismationem fit, etsi ad essentiam ritus sacramentalis non pertinet, est tamen magni aestimando, utpote quae ad ejusdem ritus integram perfectionem et ad plenioram sacramenti intelligentiam conferat.*⁶

The second quotation states that a practical decision is being made about the rite which is used in the Latin Church for a valid administration of the sacrament. However it does not say positively that the imposition of hand and its prayer could not also confer the sacrament of Confirmation in the Latin Church.

The first and third quotations do have something to say about the rite of imposition of hands: it does not pertain to the validity of the sacrament; (1) it does not pertain to the essence of the sacramental rite as now practiced in the Latin Church (3). Comparing these two assertions one sees that *essentia ritus sacramentalis* is conceived in terms of validity. In speaking of the minimum rite necessary for the "valid" sacrament in the Latin Church, the Constitution gives a privileged place to the rite of chrismation. At the same time, nevertheless, and in the perspective of the whole rite the imposition of hands and its prayer are

⁴O.C. 18, No. 9.

⁵AAS 63 (1971), 663.

⁶*Ibid.*, p. 664.

said to contribute to the integral perfection of the rite *and* to the fuller understanding of the sacrament (1, 3).⁷

This latter viewpoint leaves the way open for the conclusion that the rite of imposition of hands, when found in the celebration, is truly sacramental. And the theologian is forced to this conclusion when he attempts to apply the notion of structure and system, as understood in systems of communication, to the sacraments.

Moreover this conclusion is in harmony with the theology of Confirmation which lies behind the Byzantine rite which influenced the new formula attached to the unction in the Latin rite. During the patristic period Byzantium discarded the imposition of hand in the celebration of Confirmation, but it did not omit the long prayer which, with slight variations, accompanies that gesture in other traditions of the East and West. Its theology does not define certain brief formulas and concrete rites as alone necessary for a "valid" sacrament. It does not separate them from longer prayers. In the case of Confirmation Byzantine theology conceives the sacramental act as beginning with the long prayer, "Blessed be you, Lord all-powerful," which comes before the signation. Indeed if the Greeks reduced the sacramental act of Confirmation to the chrismation and its formula, they would be unable to distinguish it from the rite of reconciliation of heretics. It is the long prayer which specifies in both cases: it is therefore constitutive of the sacrament.⁸

This theology and practice of a church tradition, whose liturgical life was given high praise at Vatican II,⁹ can hardly be neglected by Western theologians. It can serve as an important aid in the rethinking of the liturgical structures of sacramental rites.

IV

The traditional model used in Catholic theology to shed light on the structure of sacramental rites has been the structure of material

⁷For further discussion of the Apostolic Constitution, cf. L. Ligier, *La Confirmation: Sens et conjoncture oecumenique hier et aujourd'hui, Théologie historique*, vol. 23 (Paris, 1973), pp. 25-38.

⁸*Ibid.*, pp. 37, 95-161, 233-5.

⁹*Decree on Ecumenism*, Nos. 14-15.

being conceived as constituted by prime matter and substantial form. The sacramental gestures are considered to be analogous to undetermined prime matter and the sacramental word to the substantial form. This model has the disadvantage of not being able to call attention to the symbolic power of the sacramental gesture. It is not sufficiently analogous to the sacrament where both words and actions are ordered to one another precisely because each contributes in its own way to a totality of signification which is not realized in the same depth through the word alone. Moreover while this model, if rigidly applied, has some application in the analysis of the structure of the strict minimum necessary for a sensible rite: an appropriate short formula (form) and ritual gesture (matter), it cannot be used to render intelligible the internal structure of the whole rite celebrated in its expanded form.

Another model, sometimes used, is that of the living organism.¹⁰ Here the heart is viewed as indispensable for the life of the organism and nevertheless requires arteries, channels of communication, for it to function in the totality. Correspondingly the sacramental rites have a central part which nevertheless needs channels of communication for it to function.

This model can bring some understanding to the internal structure of the expanded sacramental rite. It can be used to show how the eucharistic prayer, enclosing the narrative of institution, is the channel of communication by which the narrative itself is transformed into a ritual commemoration. This model can also point to the fact that, in the exceptional case, the mere recitation of the narrative of institution and the eating and drinking of the bread and cup would have to take place in a context which evoked the implications of the eucharistic prayer.

The model of the living organism can also be applied to a certain extent in the case of Confirmation. If one grants that the chrismation and its brief formula is the heart of the celebration, nevertheless this rite can only function in a context in which the imposition of hand and its prayer have a place or, at least, in a context in which what is implied in the rite of imposition of hand is clearly evoked. This is so because the rite of imposition of hand articulates the peculiar nature of the sacrament. It expresses and, consequently, realizes the ecclesial and

¹⁰Ligier, *La Confirmation*, pp. 234-5.

eschatological dimension of Confirmation.

Nevertheless the model of a "living organism" has its drawbacks when one comes to explain how the "heart" of the rite can exist by itself—in emergency cases—and so convey the totality of meaning of the rite. It is better to approach the internal structure of the sacraments with the aid of the science of semiology.¹¹ The notion of structure (= ordered unity of multiple elements) and system (= multiplicity of elements linked structurally in a totality), as it is understood in systems of communication, offer the best model for understanding the internal structure of a sacrament which pertains to the order of practice but which also supposes and contains a communication without which it would lose its identity.

It is the task of theology to formulate statements of a theological nature in such a way that one can see how what is really meant by them is connected with one's understanding of himself, as witnessed to in his own experience. In the matter of the sacraments the theologian must be sensitive to the necessity of explaining the dynamics of the rites in such a way that what mankind experiences in other systems of communication in daily living is given due consideration. Only thereby can sacramental theology create important principles for the doctrine of the internal structure of the sacraments and for understanding it.

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¹¹Semiology may be defined as the science which studies the symbol as means of communication. It seeks to explain what a symbol is, how it is structured, how it symbolizes, i.e., transmits its message (cf. Amaladoss, "Sémiologie et sacrement," p. 9).