

SEMINAR PAPER

SACRAMENT AND SOCIETY

The link between sacrament and society is affirmed in various ways in a number of recent official church documents. As the fifteenth anniversary of the Dogmatic Constitution on the Church is celebrated (promulgated 21 Nov. 1965), a fitting place to look wherein one finds this link affirmed is *Lumen gentium*. At its core is the Church understood analogically—that is, as "... a kind of sacrament or sign of intimate union with God, and the unity of mankind" (no. 1, cf. nos. 9, 48). Central to this sacramental community is the sacramental structure, especially the sacrament of Eucharist (see esp. nos. 3, 7). This structure nourishes and guides the life of the Christian in the world. It also leads Christians to "... confess... manifest in a concrete way... contribute..." to the life of moral effort both within the Christian community and the larger human society (no. 11). Central, then, to understanding the life of the Church is the notion of sacrament, the principle of analogy and the relationship between sacrament and society.

The link between sacramentality and the concrete life of moral effort is taken no further in the document. There are no deductions made as to the specific contributions each of the sacraments might make regarding how one might understand one's moral life in society and ultimately, how to achieve the just structuring of society. The purpose of this discussion paper is to make some suggestions in this direction. That is, this paper will answer the following question: what reasonable inferences can be deduced from each of the sacraments concerning the structuring of society? As a prelude to this and as a way of giving a context to this undertaking, a short discussion on the nature of sacramentality as a form of symbolism is given. The paper concludes with a reflection on the doing of justice.

Sacrament and Symbol: Developing a Context

Recent cross-cultural studies in anthropology, sociology, the history of religions and other disciplines have made it common-place to talk about religion as providing persons with two fundamental commodities or provisions—meaning and community. What gives meaning and helps create and sustain community are symbols of various types. So, then, at the core of human personhood is the need to seek after, create and be sustained by symbols.

On a philosophical level, these basic insights have led many to elaborate what Karl Rahner calls an ontology of symbolism. This perspective has as its basic principle the following, given in the words of Rahner: all beings are by their nature symbolic, because they necessarily 'express' themselves in order to attain their own nature ("The Theology of the Symbol" in *Theological Investigations*, IV).

But what is a symbol? For our purposes, I will define a symbol as an extrinsic source of information that seeks to disclose some communication concerning the human situation and the world in which we live. Symbols thematize and shape experience so as to function as a map or grid. They give the world of experience coherence and order. They are transparent in that they always point beyond themselves to a reality they embody, but only in a partial manner.

From the viewpoint of Roman Catholicism, the sacramental principle and the sacramental structure are the classic places where this view is put forward and concretely developed. Sacrament, therefore, is a form of symbolism, and sacraments are best understood as symbolic realities. So then, the way of sacrament is the way of symbol.

Langdon Gilkey has pointed out how symbols and, by implication, sacraments have four levels of meaning. These are: the eidetic (the common core of meanings present within the tradition); existential (the meaning for us); ontological (meaning conceptualized in terms of our most fundamental ways of thinking of the world); ethical (the implications for praxis of the meaning). This last point—the ethical meaning—is the bridge to our next consideration.

The Sacraments and Society

The appended chart suggests what seem to me to be reasonable inferences concerning the need to structure environments where certain values and value orientations are affirmed, experienced and lived. In this sense, the sacrament is seen to be related to the life of moral effort and have an implication for praxis.

How might these values and value orientations be organized so as to give guidance to decisions from the most personal to the most complex? It is here where the way of story/symbol/sacrament makes room for its dialectical complement, the way of analysis. At this point, Catholic social theory and its various principles and concerns construct a mediating social and political philosophy. Important to keep in mind is that fact that this reflection is a reflection on the lived experience of sacrament, performed in ritual, communal contexts. What results from this experience is the critical reflection upon and understanding of it so as to prepare for responsible action (cf. Lonergan and cognitional structure).

Conclusion

Up to now, these reflections have suggested a link between the Roman Catholic sacramental structure and the life of moral effort. A further point needs to be made. It concerns the doing of justice.

Within the context of the perspective developed here concerning how one might begin to understand the demands of justice, the doing of justice takes on new meaning. If a sacrament effects what it signifies (*Sacramenta efficiunt quod significant et significant quod efficiunt.*), then to do sacrament is also ultimately to do justice. Partially, yes, but nonetheless to do it. So then, the sacramental imagination both creates ritual contexts within which justice is done so as to nourish our quest for

justice and fires our moral imagination as we critically try to discern what sacrament implies for the life of society and what it moves us to do in society.

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SACRAMENTS	{	Initiation Patterns	}	Need to structure environments where the following value and value orientations are affirmed, experienced and lived: +openness to change/conversion +fundamental dignity and equality +social nature of the person +relative autonomy and freedom to choose in public sphere +unity, fellowship, communion +partnership in love +intimacy and mutuality +sacredness and integrity of the human body +leadership as service +peace (shalom)/harmony +wholeness +forgiveness +concern for marginal people
		Baptism		
		Confirmation		
	{	Eucharist	}	
		States of Life		
		Marriage		
	{	Orders	}	
		Reconciliation Patterns		
		Confession/Penance/		
	{	Absolution	}	
		Anointing		

(As regards source material for the above interpretations, see the writings of Aidan Kavanagh and Karl Rahner. For the latter, esp. "The Sacramental Life," *Foundations of Christian Faith*.)