

# The sacraments – disappearing wells?

## A sketch towards a theology of the sacraments

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THESE IS A BEAUTIFUL SYMMETRY between the structure of the mind and the depths of the world. Thought seeks to portray the alternating rhythms of this symmetry. It moves between knowing and unknowing, light and dark, fact and possibility, word and silence, finite and infinite. The labour and light of thought derives from the desire of this endless, inner transcendence. We are perennial guests and participants in a huge and generous Becoming. This ontological perspective invites us to re-cast our fixed images of identity and destiny. Individual identity and presence remain largely unmeasurable and resist every category. Personal experience is but the variable and simple surface of vast uncharted depths. Words, symbols and actions carry more than they could ever directly express. Consequently, there is a profound sense in which all experience is potentially sacramental. There are moments when experience becomes luminous; we can glimpse the vast inreach of latent presence become visible for a moment.

The classical definition of sacrament states that a sacrament is a visible sign of invisible grace. Sacramental presence, then, describes the threshold where the invisible seeps through in what we see, where the eternal surfaces in time. As expressions of grace sacraments are active and eventful. A sacrament is not simply a neutral door through which an adjacent or parallel background world dispenses some of its power. A sacrament is never neutral. A sacrament is not a thing or an object. It is a dynamic event which opens presence. Suddenly the co-presence of the depth and the surface is focused as one event. The sacrament is the action in which these two worlds come into rhythm.

Life itself is the great sacrament. It is both the source and the locus of all presence. Life is infinite in depth and dimension.

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Individuality is limited by its unique form. Consequently, no individuality can become a vessel for the full force or content of life. Yet it is always the charge of life that illuminates and intensifies individuality. There is no separation of life from individuality; yet there is a distinction between them. Individuality is the place where the unknown becomes personal, where anonymity becomes intimate, where the future engages memory and where possibility becomes incarnate. In its deepest nature individuality is the prism of creativity. There is a profound necessity at the heart of individuality. Ontologically, the uniqueness which makes individuality solitary also enables it to mirror, reflect and incarnate dimensions of life's plenitude that hunger to enter presence.

Each individuality brings a different dimension of life's diversity to presence. In this sense, there is a profound and continual sacramental activity taking place in individuality. This is a depth dimension to individuality which we rarely notice. Most discussions of sacrament and presence confine themselves to the dynamics of human dialogue and encounter. They tend to ignore the fact that dialogue and encounter are always dependent on and subsequent to the inner ontological conversation between life and individuality. The real energy and depth of the sacramental is to be sought not in the outer dynamics of psychology, sociology or mythology, but at the ontological level where essence and identity converse, reinforce and define each other. It is this subtle yet active depth-unity which grounds all outer encounter and dialogue and infuses it with immediacy, passion and attraction.

### *Grace*

Grace is one of the most majestic words in theology. It suggests the sublime spontaneity of the divine which no theory or category could ever capture. Grace has its own elegance. It is above the mechanics of agenda or operation. No one can set limits to the flow of grace. Its presence and force remain unmeasurable and unpredictable. Grace also suggests how fluent and seamless the divine presence is. There are no compartments, corners or breakages imaginable in the flow of grace. In a sense grace is the permanent climate of divine kindness. It suggests a compassion and understanding for all the ambivalent and contradictory dimensions of human experience and pain. This climate of kindness nurtures the sore landscape of the human heart and urges torn ground to heal and become fecund. Grace is the perennial infusion of springtime into the winter

of bleakness. Without the oblique but perennial presence of grace, there could be no such thing as sacrament or sacramentality. Sacraments are living events which coax invisible grace to become visible and tactile. In sacramental moments the latent divinity of the human heart becomes explicit and existentially active. Grace is always there. The action of the sacrament is to awaken, focus and realize the presence of grace in a particular context of experience.

### *Sacraments and time*

A sacrament always engages and embraces us in the full particularity of our experience. Though the context of the moment or its minister may be banal and mechanical, the essence of the sacrament is meant to serve refreshment and creativity. A sacrament always meets us on the new ground where time and memory have brought us. In this sense, a sacrament is never repeated. A sacrament is not a formulaic framing fixed on to an experience from the outside. A sacrament has a definite autonomous ritualistic structure, but like a poem it constellates experience from within. There is no such thing as sacrament in abstraction. Every sacrament is an actual indigenous and irreducibly particular event. This corresponds with the nature of consciousness and experience. Sacraments somehow give graced structure to the connection between self and world.

A sacrament is not posited on to time. A sacrament lives from within time. There is nothing that brings the depth and inner texture of the present to expression in the way a sacrament does. To open real presence is the intention of sacramental celebration. We are gathered into a deeper level within time, a place where the endlessly alternating surfaces do not reach. Issuing from this deeper level of time, the sacrament lives from that inner artery where memory anchors and nourishes time.

A sacrament is also internally connected with the future, the time that is still empty and untextured. In terms of temporal placing, a sacrament opens a presence that is permanently a threshold where past and future, memory and possibility embrace to create the Now. In its depths time is structured in a more sophisticated way than we often imagine. Expressed in other terms, in sacramental celebration normal time opens up to reveal its secret eternity. In a sacrament we come to glimpse the fact that time is eternity in disguise.

### *Sacraments and space*

Together with time, space is the other essential condition of the possibility of our perception and view of the world. As humans we have become so familiar with space that we hardly notice how it contributes to and grounds presence. We tend to consider space either as confinement – be it office, room, house, shelter, i.e. too close to be visible – or as endless vast expanse, too immense and anonymous to be known. All individuality and identity is directly dependent on the category of space. Space is the hospitable embrace which provides room for an object to be present, visible and available for encounter and relationship. It is important to acknowledge, however, that space enjoys its own generous and wild autonomy. It is not to be reduced to being a mere passive background which bestows relief and contour on objects and persons. It is again a testimony to the arrogance of human perception that our sense of the presence of an object focuses exclusively on its form, immediacy and effect and never notices the willing generosity of space which allows it to ‘stand forth’. Space is reduced to providing the invisible backdrop which permits the empirical contour and rim of the object to be fixed and identified.

The reductionism which we have exercised on space contributes in no small way to the loss of the sacred. To relegate or confine all significant presence to the objects or person is to lose all sense of the vast presence which informs space and of which space itself is an expression. A real reflection on the divine, on human origin before life and human life after death demands a richer concept of space which can ground presence and not confine or reduce it to the mode of its current form. The very activity and force of a sacrament already demands a vigorous and thorough ontology of space. The concept of sacrament focuses and balances the creative tension between the object or event and its indwelling in space and, furthermore, how space comes to expression and form in it.

Each sacramental act is *sui generis* and irreducibly individual. Yet the individuality of a sacramental act is not to be confined within the activity of its form. The sacrament creates its own ‘field’. It may be helpful in articulating this theory to employ the notion of field as used in physics. Thus understood a field is an expanse of energy and resonance emanating from an object or event, yet continuing to embrace and include it. A sacrament awakens or creates a field of spiritual energy and resonance. This emanates from and infuses the sacramental, yet it is not confined to these boundaries. This means

that sacramental activity is not limited by location. Its intentionality can reach through empirical space and bring energy, awakening and light to places and individuals who are factually distant from the place where the sacrament is happening. In this sense a sacrament is not limited by distance. In other words, the sacrament suggests that in spiritual space there is no distance. It also restores extra-human creation, i.e. landscape, the animal and the world of spirit to the kingdom of sacramental activity. Maybe the ripple of sacramental energy reaches shores that can neither be predicted nor imagined.

### *Sacrament and nature*

Nature is the great artist of individuality. The expanse of Nature is vivid with original forms; its imagination teems with creativity. Silently and generously over millennia Nature has continued to grow into ever new and more exploratory forms of being. Thanks to the generosity of the ever enriching continuum of nature, a creative species eventually emerged which would articulate and incarnate the inner and concealed reflexivity of Nature. We are the species who are being formed and created from the spiritual passion of Nature's imagination. We have profound duties to our earth ancestry that we have unlearned and forgotten. We have separated ourselves from the ancient and eternal liturgy of the earth. Our greed and arrogance is evident in our cosmological élitism which selfishly considers sacraments as means of dispensing grace and healing to our myopic human need. No mention is ever made of how sacraments bless and heal the earth and perhaps intercede for forgiveness for us for all the damage we have done to the earth. It is a great theological blindness to direct sacramental activity exclusively to earthlings and ignore the Great Mother Earth.

Our sacramental celebration has also lacked imagination in bringing to full expression the elemental aspects; earth, air, fire and water. When one considers how classical music created such beauty around the structure of the eucharist, it becomes evident that there is a huge potential to bring out the elemental Nature adverted to in sacramental ritual. This would ensure that sacraments actually reflect their own incarnational intention. Abstract or dis-incarnational sacramental activity feels empty and distant precisely because it betrays its duty of inhabiting and articulating the threshold where visible and invisible are one.

Nature as artist of individuality is the mother of all sacramental possibility. Without the uniqueness of form which individuality has,

there would be neither the requisite space of difference between things nor the passion for awakening luminosity and unity which a sacrament activates. Considered from a primal viewpoint, sacramentality is nature's way of awakening presence and making belonging explicit. A sacrament is never still or neutral; it is always full of energy and movement, viz., the activity of becoming present. A sacrament is a happening, an event with its own unique origin, structure and effect. During the sacramental event experience deepens and heightens; new levels and dimensions constellate and unify. Presence opens and the happening becomes a focus and vehicle of spirit. In Christian terms this is what the notion of 'creation' signifies.

In a world split and governed by dualism, sacraments would not exist in any real sense. In such a context, a sacrament would be marooned in a limbo between matter and spirit, finite and infinite; it could not partake in or articulate the substance or content of either finite or infinite. The sacrament would be a strained vehicle of false and forced unity between levels linked by no other bridge. To isolate sacramental activity to such a no man's land would be to remove sacramentality from experience. Rather than articulating the creative tension between finite and infinite within experience, it would be tantamount to a *deus-ex-machina* visitation attempting to lock into experience from the outside. The intentionality of the attribution 'creation' pre-empts and precludes dualism. Creation signifies an order where there is a creative and continual tension between infinite and finite. Within creation sacrament brings this tension into the open as an event of presence. The huge, implicit sacramentality of creation becomes explicit in the sacramental event. Without the implicit, under-surface gestation of presence, there never could be explicit, overt sacraments.

### *A new methodology*

This perspective could help ground a new methodology of sacramental activity. It would offer the possibility of an inclusively embracing and articulating of the whole trajectory of rhythm in sacramental activity from the most secret moments in the life of nature to the most ecstatic points of the divine-human encounter. There is some secret way in which the birth of a river, the subtle passion of animal contemplation, the intimacy of human encounter and the restless invisibility of the divine all belong at different levels within the one sacramental rhythm. Such a methodology would be faithful to

the inclusive hospitality of creation and align its different orders in the one embrace. It would also deepen and extend the notion of the sacramental event beyond the dynamics of encounter and dialogue. It would afford a large place to the activity of the imagination and its work in the transfiguration of the negative dimensions of experience.

All of this I have entitled 'a sketch towards a theology of the sacraments'. It demands, of course, further exploration. In future work I would want to consider the epistemological structures behind this methodology. The crucial question is how such a methodology can remain faithful to the axiom of the incarnation. The secret of the origin, structure and destiny of creation can be wonderfully illuminated through exploring the implicit, the explicit and the realized sacramentality of the presence of Jesus – for Jesus is precisely that prism of creation in which all difference is sourced and unified.

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