The sacramentality of human relationships

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'FOR THE FIRST TIME IN MY LIFE I AM READY to explore a serious relationship,' said the person sitting across from me. He was a professional man in his early forties who had been celibate up to that point in his life. Does his situation mean that he had never experienced God because he had not been in a profound human relationship? No. Does it mean that he had not yet experienced God as is possible in an intimate human relationship? Yes. What bedevils the application of the insights of Christian sacramentality to our relations with each other, especially our erotic relations, is, in my view, the erroneous assumption that God's presence is known wholly and only in one or two ways. The article you are about to read will attempt to set out a rationale for the sacramentality of our relations with each other, as well as several scenarios in which such sacredness is known. It will also suggest the theological presuppositions without which Christian sacramental theology will continue to be a matter of dispensing commodities under the control of clerics.

What does it mean to say our human relationships are sacramental?

At the most basic level, we can say that relationships are sacramental because persons mediate being to each other. Realizing that, by definition, all beings participate in divine being, we find ourselves already deep in the mystery of grace. By Christian teachings on creation and incarnation we know that sacramental potential extends as far as all of nature and all of history. But the intellectual knowledge that God's presence is active in all things does not go very far towards taking us to religious experience. Intellectual perception (generalization, a necessary conclusion from premises) is a second-order reflection. Its power depends upon the first-order reflection that intense life-experiences provoke.

That a relationship with another person reveals a particular 'face' of God is easy to see when that person is dynamically present, exuding energy, expressing joy, peace, vitality, love. The face of God we

then see is the Creator Spirit, renewing the earth, connecting the dry bones, evoking freedom. But the potential of relations with others to connect us to the divine must be affirmed, whether the relationship is transparent to qualities we associate with God or not. Not only personal life, but all life, including plants and animals, has the capacity to reveal the divine Lover at the heart of the universe. 'The day of my spiritual awakening was the day I saw – and knew I saw – all things in God and God in all things' is a saying attributed to Mechtild of Magdeburg but descriptive of the possible future of every human being.

In classical sacramental theology, it is axiomatic that 'what you see' is *not* all you get. You see the outward sign (the *sacramentum*), the human action or cluster of material things that carry familiar meanings. What you get as an intermediary reality is the *res et sacramentum*, a new relationship that is intelligible but not evident to the senses. It is intelligible by faith, because faith tells you that the community in which you know and do these things is the people of God, an organic body whose soul is the Holy Spirit. That relationship is what mediates the divine presence and power through individual persons' actions, both their ritual (celebratory and communal) actions and the ordinary actions of everyday life.

At the time of ritual, people acknowledge their relationship with the divine Creator-Lover and say symbolically what they hope their actions will mean and accomplish; then they return bringing as gift the efforts that have accumulated. Ritual offers both thanksgiving and promises for the future. The content of the rituals, always, is relationship – with God as Origin, with Christ as first-born of all fully open to God, with Spirit as immanent Lover, with community as body in which God is explicitly known and received. Ultimately, the new relationship (*res et sacramentum*) mediates a final effect, a transformation of the person that has become known as the *reality* (*res sacramenti*) of the sacramental process, its grace, the personal transformation experienced as gift. The analysis of its three-step process affirms what we know today as psychological truth: while words inform, relationships *transform*. Through relationships grace is mediated. Through human relationships persons experience authentic mystery. Because human desire and response are in continuity with the divine dynamic of call and election, personal relationships further radiate the presence and action of God into history.

The sacramentality of absence

But what about abuse? What about manipulative and controlling relationships, those which use violence and produce fear? When a relationship carries with it the opposite of joy, vitality, peace and love, the 'face' of God cannot be seen through it. An abusive or exploitative relationship is not transparent to being. But by that fact alone a disfigured relationship does not cease to have the potential for revelation of the divine. Like any symbol (*sacramentum*) it does what it means; it conveys what it contains. The revelation of the divine is obscured in a destructive or hurtful relationship by a kind of 'defect of form' whereby the action mediates not being but non-being; it delivers diminishment. But God can still powerfully be revealed, now as the *absent* presence.

To the person or community who has developed 'symbolic competence', that is, who can read the many layers of meaning that inhere in things, it is not so difficult to remember a situation in which the absence of someone or something – a person, a hoped-for level of intimacy, a forgotten detail of the past – is almost palpable in its evocative power; what is experienced is the presence of an absence. The sign (*sacramentum*) delivers no relationship. It is an empty sign. That is the blasphemy of an unloving act when its context promises love. An abusive relationship offers a sign that means connection but empties it of its power and offers its contradiction – a stone not bread, a scorpion not a fish. I know a man whose experience of the absence of intimacy with his father was a more intense source of grief than the father's death. What 'should have been' their bond was most intensely felt in the last-ditch efforts of the son to forge a real connection during his father's last illness. Precisely by the father's chilling rejection, the younger man discovered the warmth he himself would thereafter put into his own parenting of his children. He was transformed by the absent presence of intimacy. The point is not that one takes a moral lesson from someone else's deficiency; the point is that the very meaning of the parental relationship, whether performed or not in a particular instance, is perceived to be intimacy.

As the sacramentality of the father–son relationship was affirmed in its absence, so might the act of sexual intercourse, deprived of freedom and devoid of mutual self-gift in the blasphemous form of a rape, affirm in the horror of its violation the deepest meaning of sexual relations. The *sacramentum* of intercourse signifies a mystery of love and union which is only completely fulfilled through divine

creativity and connection. Hence its effect – its *res* – is a person transformed slowly, gradually, by that love and union into one who experiences her power, her transcendence, her connection to life, her union with all things. Then her being is enhanced in the relationship with the other. She knows grace, divinization. That is why it takes a lifetime to make love. When a person is reduced to an object through an act that is emptied of its intrinsic meaning and conceals that being she feels dehumanized, emptied, defiled, used as a commodity. The sign is effective: it does what it says. It delivers what it contains. But it also contains, even when largely concealed, the absent presence. When sex is reduced to violence, it is an outrage and a desecration of the sacrality, the real meaning of sex.

These examples make one thing perfectly clear: the process of knowing relationships as sacramental and oneself as graced by them is practical, not theoretical. In theory one can say that all relationships are potentially sacramental. Through second-order reflection we can even say something about their varying degrees of 'effectiveness' – their transparency or their opacity to the great mystery. This understanding is founded on the theory of symbolic communication, and requires no special pleading or claims of mystical perception or special grace. In practice, the sacramental character of our relations with others is experienced only after – and sometimes long after – the raw deeds are done. We know the meaning of our lives as we compose them through the rear-view mirror of reflection. The organ of this perception is faith. When such reflection becomes habitual, the delay between the action-moment and the religious yield is shortened, and, I believe, the potential for living in everyday awareness of the presence of God the Spirit is heightened. The experience of the sacramentality of our relations with others is of the order of prayer, which is an opening of oneself to the power of God. Such a habit of conscious experience requires an enlarging of the imagination to encompass the full range of possibility that is present in an encounter. The symbol, wrote the theologian Roger Haight, 'transforms a person's responses to the world into simultaneous responses to God'.[1] Practically, what is experienced depends upon the qualities of both subjects of a relationship in their roles as sender (mediator) or receiver (open to various dimensions of being, open to revelation). A sour personality and a depleted environment, not surprisingly, conceal rather than reveal the range and intensity of objectively available being.

This article is not the place to rehearse the historical reasons for the intellectual losses that were suffered in the sacramental theology of the West in the last thousand years. We are now in a process of recovery. The field of relationships is being reclaimed for the life of the Spirit. Perhaps the greatest loss was the disappearance of the concept of the middle term, the human relationships in the community that mediate the divine power. By the power of the Spirit embodied in the community, personal transformation, healing and forgiveness are signified and accomplished. The sign that came to be thought of as the sacrament was the empirical element, the bread and wine, the anointing with oil, the words and actions. But the reality of the sacrament – the mediation of divine reality – came by way of the relationships. To the loss of that middle term we owe the intrusion of superstition into the process. When the normal relationships of everyday life are the intermediary realities, then the whole of life can be sanctified. Without a relationship which performs God's presence, one is left with the attempt to believe the impossible: that a human word on a natural thing (marrying couple, meal of bread and wine, confession of sin) produces a supernatural effect. The deeper recovery of the insight into the sacramentality of relations with others could go far toward reconstructing the whole of sacramental theory.

Erotic relationships

Eros is another name for God. It is a natural force which opens up one human being to another. Without Eros we would be locked in narcissism, unable to transcend our isolation. Eros is feared because it is revolutionary. The last can become first and the first become last. Living with awareness of the erotic dimension allows a person to glimpse the meaning of grace. The vision glimpsed is this. We cannot force love or ensure a meeting of hearts: love is sheer, powerful gift, that sweeps us away from ourselves and returns us to ourselves with fuller being.

'The mutual attraction of the sexes is so fundamental', wrote Teilhard de Chardin, 'that any explanation of the world (biological, philosophical or religious) that does not succeed in finding it a structurally essential place in its system is virtually condemned.'[2] On that ground Christian theology has a number of questions to answer. The tradition has claimed that sexuality is a divine gift, but then it has limited the human participation in divine creativity through sex to physical procreativity. Qualifiers and cautions are introduced

repeatedly, making nothing clearer than that the Christian ought to be suspicious of the erotic impulse. Only when used 'properly', that is, to assure the preservation of the species, is it understood by official teaching to help us to become more fully human. The face of God turned toward the world through the created and good sexuality of people need not be a scowling, scolding face. There is likeness to God, not only in physical creation, but also in play and comfort, mutual recharging of energies and discovery of an uncharted future.

The religious history of the West from Augustine onward has incorporated at least one error of interpretation. It has assumed the biblical text about God's image in humanity to mean the spiritual (bodiless) soul. The 'image of God' humanity carries need not be located in the individual human person. Rather, according to exegesis of the biblical story of creation, 'it is the human being together with other human beings'.[3] God created human beings in the divine image; 'male and female' God created them. Attending to the actual context challenges radically the tradition's conclusions about the value and meaning of human sexuality. We do not perform the continuation of the species when we make love; we perform the image of God in humanity. Sometimes new physical life is the result of the encounter. Such an image of sacred sexuality would revolutionize the way that human beings think about their sexual impulses. It would be possible to name one's sexual desires as a form of grace in the world, as the Great Mystery – of two in one flesh, of divine love in a human body. Eros, that is, the desire for union with the One, ought not to be seen as the contradiction of agape; it is rather the passion and connection without which agape would be inhuman.

The potential for transformation

'Love is a three term function: man, woman and God. Its whole perfection and success are bound up with the harmonious balance of these three elements.'[4] With this contention Teilhard de Chardin, more than forty years ago, called for attention to the evolutionary and creative power of human love, but his approach has not carried the field. God is assumed still to be absent from the erotic encounter, and men and women struggle in the midst of a complex and intense gender war. Sexual minorities are ostracized and persecuted. Sexual conformity has become the test case of orthodoxy, rivalling faith and all other baptismal commitments. The error made in western theology still needs to be corrected. Erotic relationships are

themselves mediators of grace. The experience of sexual love can itself be sacramental, carrying God's presence and activity into and through our lives.

What makes real 'falling-in-love' important also makes it dangerous. The intensity of it can swallow all other dimensions of a person's life. But in the service of that love there is a greater potential for transformation than in most life experiences. Transformation, as Rosemary Haughton describes it, involves the development of unused aspects of the personality. When two people fall in love there is more to both of them than they or anyone else suspect. Therefore the new experience is for them quite overwhelming. It is remembered as a 'salvation event'. The sense of freedom, of exaltation, of having almost discovered the secret of the universe is so intense that ordinary concerns and loyalties seem drained of colour. In fact 'they carry out their duties with increased devotion because of the release of spiritual energy that has occurred'.[5] Their relationship has called into play previously unused aspects of the personality. When my friend enters upon his first serious relationship he will not only discover a new face of God, he will discover a new terrain in his own soul.

A sacramental spirituality of relationships may be the most valuable contribution of Catholic Christianity to global religious awareness. In the proclamation of the sacramentality of Christian marriage since the twelfth century, the sacramental erotic relationship of the couple is affirmed as a privileged and public ministry, an official work of the Church. But this insight has not been integrated into the full theology of incarnation. Too often what is presumed to be sacramental is the wedding, the social ceremony of consent and celebration, rather than the full relationship in its establishing and its lived ambiguity. Even more frequently the holiness of marriage is assumed to be a by-product of the moral behaviour that characterizes it: fidelity, self-abnegation, lifelong commitment for 'better or worse'. The sacramentality of the marriage, its capacity to reveal the presence and activity of God in the community here and now, precedes the ceremony. As Leonardo Boff affirms, 'This reality [God's saving action] is brought about even when God is not explicitly or systematically involved in the human love. The structure of marriage itself, when it is lived with sincerity, naturally embodies permanent reference to and inclusion of God.'[6] Lest he be misunderstood to say marriage is made to be sacramental because of the ceremony, the sincerity, or the virtue of the participants, he makes abundantly

clear later in the same article that the reality of natural marital relation *in itself* expresses the love of God and not merely the loving union of the partners. 'Marriage as a human order possesses a sacramental character' and becomes 'of itself, a permanent sacrament, which makes present and communicates the love, grace and salvation that come to us from God'.[7]

And what about homosexuality?

It is not the act of the minister that makes the marriage of baptized partners sacramental. Rather the ritual recognizes the holiness of the marital union they form in faith. It must follow that same-sex partnerships should be affirmed as well – to the extent that they are entered in faith and lived in fidelity. The presupposition upon which this conclusion is based is the finding that homosexuality is the natural orientation of certain men and women. The biblical texts that condemn same-sex intercourse presuppose that all human beings are by nature heterosexual. Those texts repudiate homosexual acts performed by heterosexuals, but they do not offer ethical guidance to homosexual men and women who wish to be faithful in their lives. In accordance with the reality principle, men and women are called upon to follow the inner structure of their erotic inclination in accordance with the gospel teaching on truth, love and justice. Why should those for whom the natural impulse of sexual desire is oriented toward members of the same gender be subjected to a different moral measurement? Morality requires all to live out of the givens of their own sexual capacity. Human love between partners, faithful, just, truthful love, is in continuity with divine love. It is *faith* that detects and reveals the divine dimension that was already there in the movement toward union that we call love. The community has not been able to see these unconventional relationships with the eyes of faith until those who lived as sexual minorities were able to point out the 'unused portions' of truth, love and justice. These courageous witnesses to the sacramentality of gay, lesbian, bisexual and transsexual partnerships must be taken seriously, as seriously as the voice was taken by Peter in Acts 10 when it said to him three times, 'What I have made clean, you have no right to call profane' (Acts 10:15). If the sacrament is not something added to marriage but is marriage itself seen from the standpoint of Christian faith, why cannot these partnerships be seen to participate in holiness?

If one is not prepared to argue that the potential for reproduction is what makes marital love sacramental, then it would seem that

Leonardo Boff's analysis must hold also for gay and lesbian partnerships. 'Marriage does not become a saving action only where it is seen and identified as a sacrament by Christian faith; it is a sacrament whenever it is lived in the true human order of two in one flesh.' In this case the sacramentality may not be obvious, but 'wherever it is lived in a right order it achieves what the full and complete sacrament in the bosom of the Church achieves: the grace and communication of God'.[8]

Desmond Tutu, former Archbishop of Cape Town, South Africa, wrote these words for the introduction to a small booklet, *We're baptized too*:

> Why should we want all homosexual persons not to give expression to their sexuality in loving acts? Why don't we use the same criteria to judge same-sex relationships that we use to judge whether heterosexual relationships are wholesome or not? I was left deeply disturbed by these inconsistencies and knew that the Lord of the Church would not be where his church is in this matter. Can we act quickly to let the gospel imperative prevail as we remember our baptism and theirs, and be thankful?

This is the word of the Lord calling Peter in Jaffa and the contemporary churches in the modern world to let go of the old laws of pollution and taboo and trust God's Spirit to manifest itself where it will.

Friendships and work relationships

The world of friendship and the world of work seem superficially to be at odds with each other. Work demands individual effort and competition with other individuals. Its rewards are deposited, even when earned by team projects, in one person's checking account. But human individuality and solidarity are not factors to be balanced against each other, nor can they replace each other. Work can and has given people access to a communal experience of Spirit. It must be reiterated that mysticism is not a parapsychic phenomenon reserved for the very few, but a genuine experience of God emerging from the very heart of our existence.[9] One person does become the sacrament for another. Both the possibility of friendship and the opportunity to work are calls to spiritual adventure. They are catalysts for the transformation that happens when unused portions of the self are engaged.

There is a dark side of the mystery as well. God is felt in the excellence of these relationships, but also felt to be distant as veiled behind the symbol. As if to confirm that God is the ultimate content delivered in every fulfilled relationship, every love brings suffering, every relationship ends in parting, separation and death. In so far as we merge our identities, our care, our love, or even our hatred, the inevitable parting will wound us. We will be hurt. But that knowledge does not constitute a good reason for withholding oneself from life. It rather becomes a portal through which we enter into the mystery of death and resurrection. Relationships, I think, signify, better than the Easter symbols of rabbits and eggs or winter and spring, the paschal mystery celebrated by Christians. As John Brantner said in a conference on death and dying,

> *Therefore*, we must seek now, here, as large a number of relationships as we can stand; seek every diverse and varied relationship; seek with at least one other an intense, intimate, love-based, mutual, sexual, generative, and vulnerable relationship; seek a knowing, a vulnerable relationship with our own inner self; aware that all of these relationships begin with strangers, and that they all end in death separation, grieving and suffering; but also aware that these alone give life its meaning. (*emphasis mine*)[10]

We might say that in a full life there are three lessons to be learned. The first is the task of developing intimacy and vulnerability with our own innermost self, with our own interiority. It is learned through meditation and contemplation, reading and study, research and psychotherapy. We will thrive on our solitude, which is not lonely, but then our own death may be the more cruel as it brings about the final loss – the loss of that inner conversation. The second lesson is the task of developing intimacy and vulnerability with at least one other person – and perhaps with two. One is sufficient for a lifetime. This is done through the route of courtship, marriage, procreation. It is love-based, mutual, sexual, completing in the other. If we do this we will never know alienation, but the death of that special one will hurt more deeply. The third lesson is that of relating in a positive, intimate and vulnerable, risk-taking way with strangers. It is done by becoming as nearly as possible an open person, seeking out differences rather than similarities in acquaintances, admiring goodness wherever we find it; looking for others, numerous others, cultivating a large and wide love, doing so also at work

– but then death will wound more often, again and again. Friendship involves growing mutual trust, intensity, passion, vulnerability. These are the faces of the reality of God glimpsed at work and in friendships.

Theological presuppositions necessary for an adequate sacramentality of relationships

I believe that many people have the experience of the nearness of the holy in their relationships with others. But they are less likely to have the language by which to communicate that experience to others. Theology's task is not only to reflect on doctrine; more essentially it is the vocation of a theologian to reflect radically on the religious reality from which all doctrine must emerge. Theology might be called simply the 'afterthought' of faith. For various reasons, there are sins of omission, whole areas of life where belief has been tongue-tied. But there are also sins of commission, inadequate theological conclusions, such as the subordination of women or the mode of transmission of 'original sin', which have survived long after the premises that gave rise to them were refuted. It is especially tragic, I think, that in the area of sexuality, an erroneous and largely unexamined theology has created false guilt, pain, loneliness and a rejection of our human bodiliness as the most basic site of God's action.

Conclusion

To conclude, I propose three suppositions for a sacramental theology:

- an adequate theology of the Holy Spirit;
- a Catholic theology of marriage should be seen as the norm not the exception;
- moral action follows sacramental reality; it does not define it as such.

Firstly, when theologians say that God is everywhere, they mean to affirm not a distant but an intimate presence. God is everywhere *in particular.* When we talk about the nearness of God, we describe Spirit. To find transcendence, we look for what is most real in life. A sacramental theology which takes its starting point from the universal love of the Creator God or from the historical person and mission of Jesus can never connect the two poles of human and divine, history and myth. For that we need a theology of God the Spirit understood as the divine *immanence* present in, with and under

every encounter. The Spirit has been imaged as air, water and fire to suggest the commonness and ubiquity of the divine energy. The closest that theology comes to precision is when it refers to the Spirit as the love coursing between the other persons of the Trinity. A direct application to the concrete level of everyday relationships is long overdue, that is, the Spirit of God is experienced in the encounter between persons. Until we have an adequate theology of Holy Spirit it is not likely that we will be able to experience the power and presence of God in our relations with others.

Secondly, marriage is that sacrament of the seven which is usually treated as an awkward exception. It claims no sacramental character; it is conferred by the marrying couple, not the priest. The profound understanding of marriage as participation with God in the great mystery of love has been developed intuitively through the liturgy rather than explicated through articulations in canon law or doctrinal theology. What it claims should be recognized as the standard of sacramental theory, not its exception. *In sacramental marriage, the Church is acknowledged as present, not through the priest-minister, but through the contracting partners themselves.* The implicit holiness of marriage is made explicit on the level of public profession of faith. Just as the sacramentality of church knows various degrees of actualization and explicitness in its concrete local communities, so marriage expresses its sacramental character in various ways, from imperfect but real forms to those which profess fully and openly that sexual love makes present the mystery of God among us.

Finally, it is not true that actions are made sacramental through the correctness of their performance. Such is the fatal error of all forms of rubricism and legalism. An intelligent application of the sacramental principle shows that, on the contrary, ethical requirements follow from the religious reality of relationship. It is not true that ethical behaviour causes them to be graced. Nor is the difference merely one of words. It is one of meaning. The search for the perfect marriage or friendship, the one that reveals God by its moral superiority, should give way to the recognition that our mandate to act lovingly flows from the reality we are. Because our relationships are holy our lives must grow to express more interiority, more integrity, more ability to take risks for the sake of a bigger, more just love. The early Christian thinkers educated in Greek and Roman philosophy saw clearly the storm-tossed moral danger in the sexual impulse. We see God in the storm-tossed realities of life as well as

in the placid ones. The greatest threat to our twenty-first-century religious awareness may be lack of passion, not excess of passion. In any case, we get morality straight when we see that it is not a condition for a sacramental spirituality; moral action flows from a sacramental attitude.

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NOTES

1 Roger Haight SJ, *The dynamics of theology* (New York: Paulist, 1990), p 15.
2 Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, *The spirit of the earth*, J. M. Cohen (trans) (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, Inc., 1969), p 76.
3 Jürgen Moltmann, 'Human rights . . .' in J. B. Metz and J. Moltmann, *Faith and the future* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1995), p 183.
4 Teilhard de Chardin, *op. cit.*, p 76.
5 Rosemary Haughton, *The transformation of man: a study of conversion and community* (Springfield IL: Templegate Publishers, 1980), pp 51–52.
6 Leonardo Boff, 'The sacrament of marriage' in Michael J. Taylor (ed), *Readings in the sacraments* (New York: Alba House, 1981), p 27.
7 *Ibid.*
8 Boff, *op. cit.*, p 31.
9 Karl Rahner, *The practice of faith* (New York: Crossroad, 1986), p 22.
10 John Brantner, 'Positive approaches to dying' in *Death Education* (Hemisphere Publishing Corp., 1977), vol 1, pp 293–304, at p 304.