

Sacramental Living

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The second decade of the third millennium can look like both the best of times and the worst of times to be thinking about sacramental living in the body of Christ. It looks like the worst of times because that body has perhaps never looked so battered, bruised and fragile in this country. We are living with the results of devastating scandal within the church and widespread contempt or indifference towards it from outside. Our national media and large parts of contemporary society are hostile to any mention of faith or religion, except as a barely tolerable private eccentricity among consenting adults. Numbers are falling within the worshipping community and when I recently asked an Irish vocations promoter how things were going over there, he answered, "Like a wake without the booze!"

New Age Spiritualities

At the same time, it is also the best of times. The proliferation of self-help industries, of new age spiritualities and of process-based theories of management and group dynamics shows that people are hungry for what helps them to connect to themselves, to one another, and to some higher purpose in life than a spiral of ever-increasing and pointless consumption. If many of our young people are impervious to the lure of organised religion they are often passionate and generous in their commitment to causes for the betterment of the world. Although they see little reason for regular attendance at liturgies which they experience as lifeless and devoid of meaning they may nevertheless spend hours in prayer and meditation once they understand their need and their innate capacity for it. If they are reluctant to sign up to the communities which we have formed in parish, religious life or national movements, they have a strong sense of belonging. They want to belong, even if they don't want to join.

Into this world come Catholic Christians, energised — even 50 years on — by the Second Vatican Council, trying to live our faith with positive energy. How do we build up the body of Christ within this context and become not just receivers of sacraments as religious commodities, but lovers of sacraments, outward signs of an inward grace, who have learned to make real what we signify? In sacramental forms of Christianity the story of salvation is mediated by means of signs and rituals through which we express our deepest religious convictions and longings. These signs articulate our prayerful search for God in a way that is "too deep for words". They are a way of communicating with God through an understanding that ordinary, everyday things can alert us to the deeper reality of God's presence among us. Bread, wine, oil, water — and the human body itself — can all speak of a greater mystery that shines through, and is encountered in everyday life.

A sacramental Church

The theologians Edward Schillebeeckx and Karl Rahner brought us back to an awareness of the sacramental nature of the church as rooted in the Incarnation. They reminded the church that symbolic expression is at the heart of human knowing and loving. Their insights transformed "the language of sacramental theology into more personal and dynamic terms, [challenged] the radical distinction between sacred and

secular, [reintroduced] the language of symbol, and [made] sacramental praxis the action of the whole church and not just of the clergy.”¹ On the other hand, in an article on the sacramental body Tina Beattie warns that whereas a sacramental understanding of the Christian faith “can give rise to a heightened sense of religious experience and responsiveness, it can also have an infantilising effect if it is not tempered with a mature and reasoned ethical awareness”.²

The reforms of Vatican II aimed to clear away the undergrowth of devotional accretions in order to make sufficient space for a faith based on the word of God and on patristic traditions to flourish. This made an important contribution to the development of a more adult, theologically-informed, Faith; but the conciliar reforms sometimes had an unintended effect in removing what was instinctive and intuitive in popular religion in the name of what was controlled by reason: by word instead of sign, by theology instead of devotion. This led in some instances to something dangerously Pelagian in its insistence on working



to redeem ourselves and our world. Sally McFague claims that “God’s presence is not only to be found in Scripture, or in the established sacraments of the church, but God is also present in each and every being in creation. From this incarnational base, the sacramental tradition claims that, in analogy with the body of Jesus Christ, all bodies can serve as ways to God, all can be open to and give news of the divine presence.”³

In the eco-feminist theology that McFague espouses traditional sacramental teaching is important because it is arguably the foremost way in which Christianity has preserved and developed an appreciation for nature, encouraging Christians to value the natural world and look upon it as holy. This stands in contrast to other perspectives on nature within Christian history which devalue the natural world and seek to secularise, dominate or exploit it.⁴

The understanding of sacramental faith described above brings with it moral consequences. There is no more room in Christianity for seeing the natural world as a resource to be used and manipulated for human purposes. This is described by Ross as a profoundly anti-sacramental attitude.⁵ A conscious return to traditional sacramentalism can be one way in which Christians might begin to change their exploitative, utilitarian attitudes toward nature, as well as toward other human beings.⁶ The Bishops' Conference of England and Wales affirms that creation "has value in itself", and "has its own relationship with God, in some measure independently of humankind and beyond human understanding". Such a perspective "challenges our narrowly economic view that the gifts of creation have value except as a 'factor of production' ".⁷

The Bishops add that each Eucharistic celebration is a reminder of the precious gifts of creation.⁸ If the Eucharist and other liturgical rituals are seen in this way, through such a sacramental consciousness, then human minds and hearts can more easily make the link with sacramental moments of everyday life.⁹ Therefore the sacramental principle that human beings can find God not by rejecting the world but by becoming immersed more deeply in it becomes more apparent. This is a direct consequence of the Incarnation. Once God chooses to dwell among us, sharing our human condition, all of creation is profoundly affected. St. Paul makes this clear in his letter to the Romans when he speaks of all creation groaning in one great act of giving birth to the new life of the resurrection, experienced as an eschatological sign of God's presence both here and now and not yet fulfilled.

The eternal creator

The doctrine of the Trinity has been said to preserve the otherness of God.¹⁰ In the Trinity, God is completely other to humans, unlike any created creature, in particular a male or female created creature. The Trinity is described as the eternal creator who chooses to be fully present in human history, to the point of taking flesh and dying on the cross, and continues to be fully present now in the Spirit who is with us always. This doctrine can only have been formulated by those who are convinced of the closeness of God to all of creation. The doctrine of the Trinity affirms the fundamental goodness and beauty of each human being. Jesus, the second person of the Trinity is fully human, and fully divine. This suggests that matter and humanity are not intrinsically evil or inferior (as some of the dualistic thinkers would have us believe) but that it is good with the potential to be an image of the divine. The doctrine of the Trinity as traditionally understood challenges us to embrace difference without hierarchy. The persons of God are different and distinct, yet one is not better or higher than the other, and there is a profound unity among them. This can enable us to understand that the diversity within creation does not need to lead to hierarchy, but can be a source of unity.¹¹

These arguments point to the Trinity as a model for humanity. If humanity follows this model of love then it will reject any form of hierarchy, and will celebrate the goodness of all created beings in their diversity while holding on to each other in unity. St. Paul understood this when he warned the Corinthians against eating and drinking their way to damnation through unworthy reception of the Eucharist. It is perhaps an indication of our genius for turning our attention into less threatening directions that generations

of Catholics have focused this unworthiness principally on questions of sexual morality, when the context to which Paul was referring was the introduction of social and economic differentiation into the *koinonia*, the community of Christ.

What we have above all, in the sacraments, is embodied forms of divine human encounter. In order to understand what sacramental living might mean, we need to look at our own bodies, at the way in which we personally embody the “hope that is ours”. It is part of the message of Catholic Christianity that matter matters, that there is — and needs to be — an embodied dimension to the faith we proclaim. The signs that we give, the signs we live need to be incarnated in the actual, physical lives of those around us. This is why Jesus himself took on human flesh, so that we could see and touch and know in our bodies the love that God has for us and the saving power that is at work in our lives.

My understanding of baptism is that it is the embodiment of a vocation built on an intimate, personal relationship of each one with God in Jesus Christ, incarnated within our own particularity. How does this work out in our lives? At one level it is fairly simple. We live in the dispensation of grace bought for us in the human life, death and resurrection of Jesus, brother of our blood and bone. This allows us to experience and understand the ordinary life of our work, skills, relationships and our capacity for playfulness and enjoyment as consecrated and as a means to holiness. In a communion which effects what it signifies the rhythm of conversion is constantly enacted by our small efforts to respond to the invitation of God to union with God’s self. This understanding of the Incarnation sees a huge importance in what is apparently insignificant.

Living a human life

Jesus didn’t just save the world by dying on the cross and rising again: he saved it by living a human life. Tradition tells us that Jesus lived until he was 33. We hear about his birth, there’s a fleeting appearance at the time of his Bar Mitzvah, then a period between 18 months and three years of his public life; otherwise, nothing. What was he doing all that time? He was saving the world by living and doing ordinary things well, and this is how we are called to share in his saving work.

We do not exist for ourselves as individuals or as a body as if that were an end in itself: we exist in order to be *sent*. That is the meaning of belonging to a body that



is one, holy, catholic and apostolic. It is also the meaning behind the final words of the Mass, "*ite, missa est*", which is not best translated as "Go, the Mass is ended" as if to say, "you've had the holy bit, now go off and get on with your real lives". It is best translated as "Go, you've been sent", or "Go, the *real* Mass, the sending, has begun". The incarnation, and being part of the body of Christ, means that we ourselves embody that presence of Christ in the world; we don't *have* a body, we *are* a body, so how we are in our bodies and in our human reality and context matters. In the grace of Christ and his Spirit all our wounded humanity is reordered to become genuinely what it was created to be and, in quiet ways, this is the heart of our religious understanding of reality.

In the secular world everything has to be supercharged and reinforced and artificially flavoured before we can begin to savour it. In the kingdom of God, however, the "ordinary is experienced as full of grace". In our One Third World our every need can be instantly satisfied. Christmas advertising asks: "What do you give to the person who has everything?" The only answer can be more nothing, more desire, a sense of wanting and needing something so badly that we cannot rest until we have it.

St. Augustine might be called the patron saint of desire. It was he, after all, who coined the honest prayer, "Lord, give me chastity, but not yet". In one of his sermons he also wrote: "The whole life of a good Christian is holy desire. What you desire you cannot see yet. But the desire gives you the capacity, so that when it does happen that you see, you may be fulfilled.... This is our life, to be exercised by desire."

It is ironic that so many in our world are *deprived* of their most fundamental needs while the West is *sated* with consumerism. The huge rise of depressive illness in the West has been related to our having too many choices, too much of everything. Our market-driven culture suffers from "affluenza", from inflating desire so that we are more conscious of what we don't have, rather than what we do have. This means that we have a permanent sense of lacking something that is vital to our happiness, welfare and security. "Affluenza" is one of the main reasons why we remain insensitive to the environmental consequences of our actions.

Our being Christians in the Catholic tradition requires us to live sacramentally, to understand that the ordinary tasks within our ordinary lives are signs that signify that life matters and that being human makes a difference. The mystery that lies at the heart of our Christian life hallows the ordinary and gives it its proper value without any false inflation. When we have learned truly to tell the difference between the kingdom of this world and the Kingdom of God it introduces a transformational power into all aspects of our lives: personal, domestic and social. This runs counter to the patterns of instrumentalisation that have become the hallmark of the kingdom of this world, because it has the vision to see all human persons, whatever their race, age, gender or ability, as of supreme value within an eternal perspective.

"This is My Body"

For many centuries now we have been in danger of turning the Eucharist into a holy fetish, an object of decontextualised adoration instead of a dynamic encounter with Christ who calls us always into a process of transformation. Today, more than ever, we are called to a deeper understanding of the words "This is my body". The life and death and teaching of Jesus point us towards a multiple understanding of those words which

will empower us to live justly, love tenderly and walk humbly with God.

In the first instance, of course, they point to the actual sacrifice which Christ made of his human life, embodied in flesh, for the saving of the world. He teaches us to see Him in a twofold perspective. Firstly, there is the identification with all distressed humanity: "Whatsoever you do to the least of my brothers and sisters, you do unto me". Then there is the identification with the One God: "Whoever sees me has seen the Father, for the Father and I are one". In that simultaneous divine and incarnate perspective the words "this is my body" point to the invitation, made at the prayer of the offertory, that we should share in the divine life of the one who humbled himself to share our humanity. Gerard Manley Hopkins says:

"—for Christ plays in ten thousand places,
Lovely in limbs, and lovely in eyes not his
To the Father through the features of men's faces."¹²

When we receive the body of Christ in the Eucharist we are invited into a transformative process which draws us into the divine life of the Trinity itself, but which by that token also draws us into a share in the way that the threefold God comes close to and identifies with our human reality and context. Through our participation in the sacramental signs of the divine presence among us God is transforming us into people whose deepest instincts are communicative, mutual, giving and receiving. This makes us radically one with all humanity in the incarnate Christ, and especially with humanity in distress. To deny that mutual solidarity — through indifference, apathy or the inability to see the sacred embedded within the ordinary — is to deny the meaning and value of this sacrament, the purpose of which is to enable us to live justly, love tenderly, walk humbly.

This transforming and transformative grace is not given for our personal satisfaction or fulfilment. It is given for the gradual transformation of the world. In India there is a greeting which, translated, means "the God in me greets the God in you". What an entire revolution in our way of thinking and acting could be brought about if we said and truly believed that each time we encountered other human beings whose outlook or mode of being we find alien? Sacramental, Eucharistic and reconciled living would become a reality capable of changing our entire reality.

We don't have to look half way across the world to find life diminished, opportunity denied, talent and energy wasted. I believe that it is at the point of the gathering disenchantment with market-driven capitalism and the degradation it has brought in its wake that Christianity intersects in a critical engagement with modernity. This offers not an outright condemnation of it but a fruitful synthesis which rejects a non-sacramental conception of human existence while appropriating the best fruits of modernity's understanding of humanity and its project. A sacrament, as anyone reared on the Catechism will remember, is an outward sign of inward grace — a signifier that says "God is here". A sacramental conception of human existence sees grace and nature as not alien from one another, but grace as being constitutive of human nature.¹³

The grandeur of God

This means that we need to learn to "greet Him the days we meet Him and bless when we understand".¹⁴ "The world", Gerard Manley Hopkins, the Jesuit poet, tells us, "is

charged with the grandeur of God".¹⁵ It is also charged with God's pain as the Christ who plays in ten thousand places is crucified again each day within the misery and degradation that we inflict on one another. The sacramental vision of reality means that if there are many opportunities for us to live Eucharistically there are also repeated moments each day for us to live reconciliation and healing and to exercise the priesthood of all believers through our confirmation in the Holy Spirit received at our baptism. Whether we are married or not there is also the invitation to live an intimate encounter in love with the Other who frames our lives as sexual, gendered people called to choose life at every moment.

There are multiple understandings of the primordial vocation to be fully human in baptism, to be reconciled reconcilers, to be healed healers and above all to see the body of Christ within all humanity: this is what it means to be a sacramental body of believers. The indigenous cultures of our world tend to appreciate far better than we do in the "sophisticated" West the radical closeness between human beings and the earth from which the Bible teaches us we are made. This is not just airy-fairy land, a green, bean-scene hippy survival representing another escape from the realities of the world. It lies at the heart of the Eucharist itself, where we are united to the powerful dream of the Creator God and invited to become co-sustainers of that creation, living justly and sustainably, loving tenderly and with intention, walking humbly and with purpose.

The world is in a mess — we know it. The systems we have created for understanding and conducting ourselves have brought great and wonderful advances, but at a terrible cost to the majority. What re-membrance into God in the body of Christ is all about is the transformation of our deepest desires so that we become



not consumers identifying ourselves by what we can acquire and possess, but creators of a world after the mind of God.

Notes

- 1 Susan A. Ross, "God's Embodiment and Women" in Catherine Mowry LaCugna ed., *Freeing Theology: the Essentials of Theology in Feminist Perspective*, (San Francisco, HarperCollins, 1993), p.191
- 2 Tina Beattie, "The Sacramental Body: Symbols of a Gendered Church" in *The Way Supplement*, 101, 2001, pp. 73-87

- 3 Sallie McFague, *The Body of God: an Ecological Theology* (USA: Fortress Press, 1993), pp. 183-4
- 4 Ibid, p.184. See also Lynn J. White's famous critique of Christianity and its role in sanctioning the domination of nature through a misinterpretation of Genesis.
- 5 Susan A. Ross, *Extravagant Affections: a Feminist Sacramental Theology*, (London, Continuum, 2001), p. 178
- 6 McFague, *The Body of God*, p. 185
- 7 Catholic Bishops' Conference of England and Wales, *The Call of Creation*, 2002
- 8 Ibid.
- 9 Christine E. Burke, "Globalisation and Ecology" in Denis Edwards, ed., *Earth Revealing, Earth Healing: Ecology & Christian Theology*, (Collegeville, Liturgical Press, 2001) p. 41
- 10 Janet Martin Soskice and Diana Lipton eds., *Feminism and Theology*, (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2003), p. 139
- 11 Ibid, pp. 139-143
- 12 Gerard Manley Hopkins, "As Kingfishers Catch Fire", see https://www.poets.org/media/pocket/pocket_dragonflies.pdf
- 13 Many of the ideas engaged with here are echoes of James Hanvey and Anthony Carroll, *On the Way to Life: Contemporary Culture and Theological Development as a Framework for Catholic Education, Catechesis and Formation*, (Heythrop Institute for Religion, Ethics and Public Life).
- 14 See Gerard Manley Hopkins, "The Wreck of the Deutschland", <http://www.poetryfoundation.org/poem/173668>
- 15 Gerard Manley Hopkins, "God's Grandeur", see <http://www.bartleby.com/122/7.html>

The Handmaid of the Lord

A poem for the Feast of the Annunciation

What wondrous gift to come to such a maid,
 And she unknown and all unknowing.
 Yet, in that moment when the angel spoke,
 The whole of human history changed its course
 Because she answered yes, whilst
 Pond'ring in her heart what it might mean.
 How could she know the greatness of the news
 Conveyed by Gabriel's words? Not only
 Hope of bliss in life to come, but in this world,
 If they would only heed her son-to-be,
 A transformation made from strife to peace,
 Peace grounded on His justice, truth and love.
 And only later would she understand
 That henceforth all would call her blessed
 For those great things that God had done to her.

John Mulholland, March 2014