

Sacrament

As members of the Church we were introduced to a vocabulary that included words like “sacramental” and simply “sacrament”. Derived as they are from the Latin language of the Church, we may end up mouthing them out of habit without fully understanding what they mean. So it’s those two terms: “sacrament” and “sacramental” that I would like to explore today – and especially: “sacrament”. But let’s begin with:

Sacramental

By sacramental the Church meant, according to the penny catechism, “anything set apart by the Church to excite good thoughts and increase devotion”. The list goes on and on: a crucifix, rosary, holy water, holy cards, relics and images of saints, candles, scapulars, palm branches, things so blessed by the Church to put us literally “in touch” with holiness – as when a pious Catholic “fingers” her way through a rosary – and its mysteries.

Implicit of course in all this is the idea that the whole of the material universe itself is holy, sacramental through and through – and not just some neutral thing called “nature”. Trees, rocks, the planets, mere grass and sunflowers (such as painted by Van Gogh) – even sand and squirrels are sacramental in some way, to be handled with reverence, to remind us of their sacred origin. Indeed science itself in its scrutiny and manipulation of nature should always handle it with care, reverence. But does it?

But now let’s turn to the word Sacrament

Our elementary school catechism, promulgated by the Bishops way back in 1885 defined “sacrament” as *an outward sign instituted by Christ to give grace*. When the good nuns tested us as to our understanding of a sacrament, this was the answer we were required to recite from memory.

Did we know what we were saying? Not really, but we were told it was important and to stow away the definition whose larger meaning would develop as we grew older. We were also told that there were precisely seven sacraments: Baptism, Confirmation, Penance, Holy Eucharist, Marriage, Priestly Ordination and Extreme Unction (now called The Anointing of the Sick).

But unlike sacramentals, which were “things”, these *seven* sacraments were more like “events” – happenings that gave grace. For instance Baptism – in the early Church and even today among Christians – is an *event*, a process, whereby a candidate for entry into a Christian community had to be literally immersed in water and raised out of it in recognition of and participation in those great biblical *events* of the Creation of the World out of a dark sea, the Exodus of the Israelites from Egypt by passage out of the Red Sea and their later crossing into the Promised Land out of the Jordan River and the Baptism of Jesus himself out of the same Jordan River and finally – the passage of Jesus from death to resurrection. There we have a

series of *events* condensed into one event designed to transform its participants into a new state of *being*. We have a sacrament.

As time went on the Church reduced the ritual of the sacrament of Baptism to a sprinkling of water on the head of the candidate – but it was still an *event* and not just a thing.

The same goes for the other sacraments. I remember Confirmation as my being anointed with oil and slapped on the cheek – an event that made me a soldier of Christ. The sacrament of Penance required my entering a confessional as into a courtroom where I appeared not only as the sinner I was but also as my own prosecutor while a priest closed my case judicially with a penalty and a pardon – and I issued from the confessional restored to a state of grace. Again an *event*, no matter how abbreviated it might be.

And so on with the Holy Eucharist, Marriage, Ordination and the Anointing of a sick person – all *happenings, events, moments* meant to effect a profound change in one's life.

Seven Sacraments? How about Tomato Soup

But why do we limit the term and idea of sacrament to a mere seven? Are there not other *events* in the course of one's life that are also transitional, whereby one's sense of oneself, one's sense of one's past gives way to a new, indeed unanticipated future, sometimes of grand or often quiet significance? I am not only referring to those more secular rites of passage such as entering and graduating from college or initiating a career or joining a club or taking an oath of office. I'm talking about moments so subtle as to be possibly forgotten among the incidents of one's life – in my case like the smell of tomato soup (at age five) served in the lunchroom of St. Cyril's elementary school which somehow relaxed me as the nervous child of a household become ultra tense due to a devastating economic depression and parental friction. The smell of tomato soup - a sacrament.

The aroma seemed to embrace me – warmly – physically – memorably - turning the whole environment of that Catholic school – along with its images of “saints” and stained glass windows showing Christ walking on the water and multiplying loaves and fishes – creating around me a home away from home – sending me off into my subsequent childhood never wanting to go to any other school than a Catholic one – with an alternative Mother and Sisters in strange garments and festive processions and “tabernacles” and later a biblical verse written in gold upon an arch of a chapel that said: *Those who instruct many unto justice shall shine as stars for all eternity* – which awoke in me a vocation I might one day undertake.

And then there was that day when I had reached ten years of age – living in a row house characteristic of Philadelphia neighborhoods. I was sitting one evening on our

front porch swing. It was summer. Kids were playing hopscotch and hide and seek up and down the long block of attached brick houses. Radios could be heard through screened windows playing dance tunes. My grandmother sat on a rocker opposite me, while my sister chatted with Peggy Dean on the front steps. The sun must have been about to set for there was a violet, twilight tone to everything. And then, suddenly, I burst into tears.

I mean really – tears – volumes of tears! I couldn't control myself. The sobs came from deep down. My grandmother, sister, Peggy Dean and other neighbors gathered around me curious, solicitous. "What's wrong?" they asked. "Are you sick?" The crying did not subside. I found myself taking deep breaths between the sobs, only to explode again with unfathomable grief. The episode must have lasted a very long three to four minutes. When it was over, I was asked again, "Why were you crying?" I was as bewildered as they; I said, "I don't know."

A moment that was in effect sacramental.

Some psychologist would trace the episode to a trauma of my infancy and would cure me of any similar outbursts by ferreting out the long forgotten experience that caused it. But I don't think there's any great mystery to solve. From where I later stood I think that boy fell apart because the boy somehow sensed his world was full of violence and loneliness.

It was what the philosopher Martin Heidegger would call the "everydayness" of media gossip, the controversy, the violence of "entertainment", the hurry, the litigation . . . and this well before our era of texting and Facebook and Twitter exchanges and trivia and never ending ads that require all ten fingers to delete per minute. There was my immediate experience of parental friction, of a grandmother bitter over the failure of two marriages and the need to house the family of her unemployed son. There was schoolyard bullying and the tension of classroom and marketplace performance and competition. War clouds overshadowed Europe and Asia. There was the economic violence manifest in the Great Depression. There was the prospect of a literal hell hereafter. Who wouldn't break down?

Time/Events as Cumulative

Of course at my young age back then I was in no way able to comprehend what was happening. I could only let loose some pent up need to cry. Still that breakdown was an intervention, a sacramental moment – an event to be remembered and to unfold. For such events are never to be filed away as transient records of the past. Such events retain a long fuse; they unfold slowly – as we experience more of everyday life – they acquire a cumulative power that over time reveals the essence of that moment, namely what the poet Wallace Stevens would call *the one thing that would suffice*: some underlying realm of absolute and inexhaustible grace out of which those tears (God's tears?) had emerged to assure me that I was welcome, that I "belonged" in some irrefutable way – that by simply existing I was already a miracle born to produce miracles of grace – no matter how the everyday world in its forgetfulness of grace might evaluate me.

As my life progressed and my understanding of human history and its toxicity became clearer I found my sacramental tears had already occurred in Sacred Scripture - in the plight of Israel's ancient exile from its true home - by way of a lamentation that says it all for every generation:

By the waters of Babylon, there we sat down and wept, when we remembered Zion. How shall we sing the Lord's song in a foreign land? If I forget you, O Jerusalem, let my tongue cleave to the roof of my mouth, if I do not remember you, if I do not set Jerusalem (that universal city of absolute mercy and mutual love and profound being) above my highest joy."

Life if lived thoughtfully – allows one to grow in wisdom and grace – as was said of Jesus in the Gospel of Luke

You'd be surprised by how many such sacramental moments have occurred in your life – if you were to pull off the road of everydayness for a while and review the changes you have undergone – triggered by events unanticipated. Novels written by gifted writers are plotted along a sequence of such moments whereby a character is startled – as in Dickens's story *Great Expectations* – by a lawyer from London entering his boyhood home to be told that a mysterious benefactor had arranged to make of him a "gentleman" – which leads to other unanticipated interventions that ultimately turn him rather into a generous, caring, concerned human being.

I'm at an age where I can remember more and more of such moments – too many to mention – like my noticing during a high school display, featuring the works of religious orders, a pamphlet depicting members dressed in the habit of St. Francis of Assisi and wanting to live in the world they inhabited – which I did for the next twenty two years of my life. A trivial event or sacramental?

And then when much later I was dragging my feet in graduate biblical studies to which I was unwillingly assigned – my professor calling me up one day regarding a sloppy term paper and telling me to drop out of the program and stop wasting his time and mine. A wake up call that led to a much more disciplined and therefore enlightening experience of Scripture – a sacramental moment I treasure to this day – as well as the memory of an otherwise very strict teacher.

But as I have indicated – our wealth of literature, biblical or secular, is a vast resource available to us that testifies to how sacramental life can be. Every story - to be a story (according to Paul Ricoeur) - follows a plot – selects and arranges *the events and actions recounted, which make . . . a story "complete and entire" with a beginning, middle, and end . . . No action constitutes a middle unless it instigates a change of fortune in the story . . . a final event that produces a cathartic (emotional) experience in the reader.*

As someone has said: literature is sacramentalist by its very nature and structure and purpose. Every story being like a rosary made up a decade after decade of events that propel its characters toward a finale that is fulfilling or tragic depending on one's

response to the interventions, to those moments of grace that so generously punctuate your life.

Like a shave and a haircut

I'm thinking of a 1993 film titled *Wrestling Ernest Hemingway*. Its budget was set at 4.5 million dollars and its release grossed only 300,000 dollars at the box office – proof perhaps that its message was too deep for modern audiences. It was a flop commercially. It centers around two Florida retirees one of whom is seventy-five years old, but won't admit it – played by Richard Harris. He does pushups, flexes his tattooed muscles. He is a loud ex-sailor, long-haired, unshaven, still a flirt. Even his son shows him little respect.

Then there is a retired Cuban-American with a pleasant accent – quiet, dignified, who dresses casually but neatly. He follows a set routine every day, picking up some coffee and always a bacon sandwich – and retires to a park bench where he carefully works out a crossword puzzle, pausing to carefully unwrap his bacon sandwich. The role is played by Robert Duvall.

(good casting!)

One day Harris intrudes on Duvall's ritual. Duvall patiently allows Harris to socialize in his unkempt and loud manner – and soon Duvall's graceful nature begins to impact on Harris. Duvall becomes a sacrament. Over time he offers to help Harris improve his appearance (and tendency to diminish himself by way of bravado). Having been a barber, Duvall offers Harris a shave and haircut. In Harris's rundown apartment Duvall has him sit down and puts a sheet around him. The camera then dwells upon his snipping Harris's hair, quietly, gently, combing and snipping around the ears, the back of the neck. You can sense Harris relaxing under the remote touch.

Then we see Duvall honing his flat razor on a belt, back and forth slowly, testing the sharpness lightly with his thumb. Then comes the lather, the brush stirring in the foaming cup, the lather applied to Harris's face, applied by hand to the upper lip. And then, with a quiet, "I won't hurt you," Duvall begins to run the razor down Harris's cheek, under the chin – in soft, sure strokes. It's as though Duvall were sculpting a new man out of the raw material of the old Harris, a work of art, bringing out the latent beauty of an old man who laments his age, misses his youth.

Having towed away the excess lather, Duvall then goes to his barber's kit and pours a generous amount of aftershave lotion into his cupped hand. He bears it dripping to where Harris sits entranced and applies it carefully, firmly, slowly, affectionately massaging his cheeks and neck, his whole face. You can almost sense the experience yourself as you watch, smell the aroma and feel the sting. It seems as though the scene lasts forever. And as Harris emerges from the experience, a fine looking, smooth, peaceful man instead of a loud extrovert, you realize you have just been mesmerized by the performance of an ordinary, everyday deed – a haircut and a shave - performed by a man of grace and majesty.

You have witnessed the performance of a sacrament, a ritual, a ballet, a moment of sanctifying grace – the extreme opposite of the shoot-‘em-up finale’s of those films whose profits surpass their budgets every time.

Parables

In the realm of biblical literature a prime example of stories to be not just read or listened to but experienced as sacramental are the Gospel parables. The word is traceable to the Greek word *παράβολή* whose fundamental sense corresponds to our term “to pitch” – as in tossing a ball or as in a sales pitch. A parable then might be fundamentally imagined as a curve ball thrown to make you think. Why? Because that parable has a turning point that you don’t want to swing at and miss.

As with the parable about the kingdom of heaven *buried in a field*. The treasure is buried. You can’t see it. A rich man fearing invasion buried it there perhaps a thousand years before – but it’s always been there – and it’s always there for you. And then the man applies his shovel, starts digging, thinking more deeply than ever before and it surfaces. An event that is sacramental – that makes of what the man once thought was wealth worth nothing compared to the wealth of grace, of God’s favor, of one’s real self that’s been revealed – as treasurable.

It’s the same with the parable of that precious pearl. A buyer attends a display of costume jewelry – fashionable, inexpensive rings, necklaces, earrings and the like. He ponders the items from counter to counter and suddenly pauses. Among some pearls one catches his eye. He bends, he picks it up, holds it to the light. His eyes open wide. He is holding not a cultured or imitation pearl but a natural one – of great value (The Internet tells me that the most expensive pearl in the world was discovered in the seas off the Philippine island of Palawan - an extremely large pearl valued at \$100 million dollars!). At any rate this buyer is so stunned, so awakened by this discovery that he will invest all he has to own it. What is that pearl that lies expectantly in your life – waiting for you to find it? It could be the authentic you.

I once was going along at a pedestrian pace morally, theologically, spiritually when something like that happened to me – in the classrooms of the Biblical Institute in Rome – that flip flopped my mind and supercharged my will – changed my understanding of my tradition, my world. Whereas I once felt quite poor, the world opened up to me like an oyster. A sacramental moment – and I want to emphasize again – a moment that forever remains present, enduring and magical over a whole lifetime.

Then there is the parable about a net thrown into the sea. An ordinary fishing exercise – day after day – familiar expectations – and then your net, your mind gets stretched to the breaking point, full of every kind of fish – everything around you a wonder to behold. Conversion.

Conclusion: The Sowers

Staying within the heading of Parables, I want to conclude with that of the Sower of seeds in Matthew and Mark. It tells of a farmer who scatters seed for a future harvest.

Some naturally falls beyond the cultivated ground – on paths, or on rocky or shallow ground, or among thorns – but some falls upon rich soil and produces fruit manifold.

So it is with those sacramental moments or occurrences strewn upon your own way through life, meant to awaken you to who and what you really are – cumulatively as time goes by. To ground you. Many such moments or events in your life get lost amid hard times when everyday issues preoccupy you or during which your mind is shallow, distracted, lazy, mesmerized by the transient news of the day or angry, heated up, biased or choking upon racism or politics . . . falling upon the soil of your soul when you are mindless of even what happened yesterday or last week – out of touch with real time.

On the other hand, strangely enough the soil of your soul is especially receptive to such sacramental seedlings or thoughts or grace when you are vulnerable, anxious, set up for an insight into a sense of who and what you really are – a miracle of being, capable of sowing miracles of grace yourself – in other words capable of blossoming, of bearing fruit, of being a sacrament.

Such moments need not be rare – especially if they linger, retain their weight to stay ponderable – as in the case of that boy who became a wellspring of tears or that now clean shaven sailor or the rich man who found something worth his whole commitment or that buyer of costume jewelry or that fisherman who drew up so much more out of a moment's casting of a net than he anticipated.

Time as a sacrament

All of which tells us that time itself is a sacrament from moment to moment – incrementally; your past moments of transition accumulating - to be with you always - to blend with the moments yet to come - your future calling you to advance even more into the fullness of time. The universe, like consecrated bread and wine, sacramental, holy through and through; and time, history also sacramental, laden with grace, inviting us to “take and eat”, to digest, to take your time - no longer a tale told by an idiot, signifying nothing – but holy, meaningful, emerging – toward a meaningfulness that picks up its pace even as your old legs weaken!

Whatever the poet Francis Thompson had in mind when he wrote this poem, it nevertheless relates to what I've been saying. Its title is:

In No Strange Land

*O world invisible, we view thee,
O world intangible, we touch thee,
O world unknowable, we know thee,
Inapprehensible, we clutch thee!*

*Does the fish soar to find the ocean,
The eagle plunge to find the air—
That we ask of the stars in motion
If they have rumor of thee there?*

*Not where the wheeling systems darken,
And our benumbed conceiving soars! —
The drift of pinions, would we hearken,
Beats at our own clay-shuttered doors.*

*The angels keep their ancient places—
Turn but a stone and start a wing!
'Tis ye, 'tis your estrangèd faces,
That miss the many-splendored thing.*